

Impact and outcomes claims and communications **Guidance**

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About ISEAL Alliance

ISEAL Alliance is the global membership association for sustainability standards. ISEAL is a non-governmental organisation whose mission is to strengthen sustainability standards systems for the benefit of people and the environment.

ISEAL is the global leader in defining and communicating what good practice looks like for these sustainability standards.

The four goals of ISEAL are to:

- › Improve the impacts of sustainability standards
- › Define credibility for these standards
- › Improve their effectiveness, and
- › Increase their uptake.

Further information about the ISEAL Alliance and its membership is available at www.iseal.org

Section 1 Why this guidance?

Sustainability standards are increasingly expected to communicate their positive impacts. Good impact communication improves accountability, leads to stronger buy-in from stakeholders, and secures and strengthens partnerships.

Yet impact claims are tricky, present distinct challenges and can seriously affect credibility when wrong. This guidance equips sustainability standards with practical tips on how they can make their impact claims more meaningful and effective with confidence and accuracy.

ISEAL's **Impacts Code** supports standards systems to measure and improve the results of their work and to ensure that standards systems are delivering the desired result. This document aims to provide ISEAL members with guidance on clauses of ISEAL's **Impacts Code** that particularly reference making substantiated claims about the outcomes and impacts of their work. (Clause 10.3)



Definition Impact claim

For the purposes of this guide, an impact claim is defined as **any written, visual or broadcast communication related to impacts and outcomes**

Misleading, false, meaningless or unclear information shared through claims can result in consumers, businesses, supply chains partners and even producers losing confidence in the difference that using or supporting a certain standard can make. It could also result in unfair business competition, over claiming of impact and can discourage truthful claims. Impact claims that are misleading, even if factually correct, can also contravene national and international legislation.

Consequently many standards systems are reluctant to make claims regarding their broad, high-level impacts or even the intermediate outcomes they achieve.

A sustainability statement such as *'this product was certified to a specified standard by a specified certifier'* is clearly bounded and backed by a verification mechanism. However, an impact statement such as *'the standards system has resulted in specified social, environmental or economic benefits'* presents particular challenges.

Particular considerations relating to impact claims

What is the **evidence base** behind this statement?

- › Specifically, how far can a standard system claim direct results from its own work?

What **context** does this statement apply to?

- › Is it applicable globally or only in relation to a particular country or even region?

Whose **results** are we referring to and for whom?

How to communicate **a reduction in negative impacts** (such as incidence of child labour or sexual harassment) **as against an improvement in positive impacts** (such as incomes or conservation)?

How long does this result hold and is it **time-bound**?

- › When does the data need to be refreshed?



Guidance in this document is based in part on dialogue with ISEAL members and in part on dialogue and research more widely within the international development community and other sectors

In addition, impact claims are liable to greater scrutiny, and even scepticism, by external reviewers and so careful thought, planning, drafting and review mechanisms are needed to ensure they are effective and credible.

Guidance in this document is based in part on dialogue with ISEAL members, who are sincerely thanked for their time and ideas, and in part on dialogue and research more widely within the international development community and other sectors.

There has been much research into the impact of the international development sector, but good practice in *communication* of impacts and outcomes is less well developed. Given the complexity of issues the international development and sustainability sector tackles, guidance on impact claims tends to be theoretical and model-based, as opposed to practical.

The sectors where guidance for impact claims is best developed are probably health, pharmaceuticals and medical devices. In such sectors however, claims are generally tightly regulated and based on laboratory research, or very large sample sizes with well-matched control populations. This makes much of their experience rather different to that of standards systems.

The guidelines and checklists in this document are not expected to cover all eventualities or eliminate all types of misrepresentation; they should be adapted to your context and used with discretion.

We hope however that it gives standards systems and their users, greater confidence on how to make credible and effective impact claims that are consistent with good practice.

Section 2 What's in this guide and what's not

This guidance document specifically covers impact claims, as defined in Section 1, but does not cover 'sustainability' claims related to specific individual products or services, or compliance with a standard: these are 'assured claims'¹.

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Who is this guide for?

This document is written primarily for staff working within standard systems who work in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and communications teams, as well as other staff who might be involved in making impact claims (such as product labelling teams).

It is intended to apply to communications made by standards systems themselves rather than secondary claims made by businesses, campaigners, funders or other users of standards.

Structure of this guide

This document is structured to provide guidance on two distinct but related aspects that go into making an impact claim:

- The first is about the substantive content of a claim and what makes it a good or bad one, illustrated through a series of examples. [See Section 3, The ingredients of good impact claims, page 5.](#)
- The second is about how teams can work together to make credible and effective claims on a regular basis, illustrated through a series of scenarios. [See Section 4, Working together for good impact claims, page 15.](#)

Sections 3 and 4 both offer key issues to consider, present a checklist, and give some illustrated examples of good and poor practice.

¹Assured claims are covered by ISEAL's [Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide](#), published in May 2015.

Terminology and interpretation

The terms **outcome** and **impact** are often used and interpreted very broadly. For example, impact is often used as a synonym for an effect or a result. The term **communication** can also mean different things to different organisations, from marketing or public relations to an approach for social change that aims to involve a multitude of stakeholders.

Some organisations choose to differentiate between outreach, communication, and advocacy activities, using each means as appropriate to achieve specific outcomes or goals with clearly identified audiences. Impact communications can, in this context, mean different things to different organisations.

The guidance in this document uses the definitions in ISEAL's **Impacts Code**.



Definition Impact

'Positive and negative long-term effects resulting from the implementation of a standards system, either directly or indirectly, intended or unintended'.

An **impact claim** therefore communicates an observed effect attributable to a standards system:

'we have made a change'



Definition Outcome

'The likely or achieved short-term and medium-term results from the implementation of a standards system's strategies'.

An **outcome claim** therefore communicates an observed effect related to a standards system:

'a change has happened'

This document is thus intended as guidance for **claims and communications regarding the overall effects of a standards system**, or a significant part thereof, as distinct from general claims and communications regarding the environmental and social aspects of a particular product or service that standards might be associated with.

The latter, which can be referred to as sustainability claims, are covered in ISEAL's **Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide**, and the accompanying **Introduction to Claims and Risk**, which is available from the members' section of the ISEAL website.

The source material for outcome and impact claims is most likely to be either standard systems' own performance monitoring data or outcome or impact evaluation studies, undertaken by standards systems themselves or by external researchers.



Definition Impact evaluation

'A systematic, objective and in depth, ex-post assessment of the medium or long-term effects; positive or negative, intended or unintended, of the implementation of a standards system.'

Impact evaluations employ methodologies that are designed to enable evaluation users to understand the extent to which an observed change can be attributed to the standards system or another intervention



Definition Outcome evaluation

'Systematic and objective in depth ex-post assessment of the short-term and medium-term results or effects from the implementation of a standards system.'

These studies seek to shed light on the extent to which standards system's desired changes are occurring as well as why the system is or is not working.

Unlike impact evaluations, outcome evaluations are not designed to draw conclusions about the extent to which an intervention can be attributed to the intervention of a standards system.



Definition Performance monitoring

'A continuing function that uses systematic data collection on specified indicators of the extent to which outputs and short and medium-term results can be achieved.'

Key audiences and what we mean by 'teams'

This guidance document uses:

- **M&E teams** as shorthand for monitoring and evaluation teams, impact teams and other technical staff, and
- **Communications teams** as shorthand for communications, marketing, media and PR and other outreach or public engagement staff.

Section 3

The ingredients of good impact claims

3 The ingredients of good impact claims

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Just as with all sustainability claims, impact claims need to be clear, accurate, relevant and supported by a robust and transparent system. But this involves understanding and addressing issues that are unique to impact claims, which are summarised overleaf.

3.1 Issues to consider

Take credit only where it is due

A standards system is rarely, if ever, the sole actor working towards long-term change and impact on a key sustainability or development theme in a particular place. Care must be taken to ensure that the claim made is within the bounds of the role the system has played in bringing about the change and to share credit fairly with others who may have contributed to the change. Who has actually made the change? Is it the standards system, the producers, businesses, or consumers, or others? Or some or all of these? Careful use of verbs such as ‘resulted’, ‘contributed’, ‘influenced’ is needed to bring this nuance through in an impact claim.

Through their contribution to—or even by leading—market and societal trends, many standards systems will have influenced non-certified producers to perform better or governments or businesses to work harder to address sustainability issues. As it can be hard to attribute such changes of ‘secondary influence’ to a standards system, even greater care must be taken.

Tell the whole truth

Greater exposure to information via multiple channels has led to increased levels of sophistication amongst audiences for analysing impacts claims.

- › If a claim is ambiguous, over-stated or unsubstantiated, it will likely be met with scepticism.
- › If there is an unintended negative impact, or the scope of the impact is restricted, for example, transparency is important.
- › Balance positive impact claims with any unintended and/or negative impacts.
- › Explain how the impacts contribute towards your vision and mission, or milestones.
- › Explaining the context of the claim, the challenges and any planned action to address them can overcome the risk of undermining the positives and serve to build trust.
- › Be honest about where the standards system is on its journey and what has, and has not, been achieved.

Important information needed to back up an impacts claim

The **time** when the source data was collected and the claimed impact happened

Evidence that the claim will continue to be accurate and if not, what the expected shelf-life of the claim is

Clarity on **who collected** and analysed the data (internal staff or external researchers) and the research methods used

Documentary evidence of research results

Contact details of any independent party involved in carrying out the research

A **description of the methods used** and any assumptions made, especially if the claim involves a comparison with other products or services or directly attributes change to the standard system

Consent to name organisations or individuals (if this is needed for claim) or clear rules and procedures for **anonymisation**

Be prepared to back up your claim

As scrutiny of impacts claims increases, it is becoming increasingly important to make sure that you are prepared to provide all information to substantiate a claim if challenged by a standards system's user, a watchdog NGO, or a regulatory body. Keeping a record of the studies or evidence that support your claim (and of specific information about that evidence – see 'Important information needed to back up an impacts claim' box) will help respond to challenges.

If some of the information needed to substantiate a claim is confidential, standards systems should consider whether there would be adequate evidence to verify the claim if that confidential information was excluded or made anonymous.

If confidentiality means that a standards system cannot publicly verify a claim, it may need to consider whether it should be making the claim at all. At a minimum, the standards system should be prepared to provide all information to substantiate a claim to an enforcement or regulatory body.

Remember that methodology matters

The methods used to generate data affect what sort of a claim can be made based on the resulting evidence. Understanding the importance of methodology is valuable not just for M&E teams but also for communications teams to consider to avoid 'over-claiming'.

As an illustration, to claim that an impact resulted from the work of the standard system requires more than just evidence that a change happened in a certified factory, farm, or landholding. Good 'impact' (as opposed to outcome) evaluations use specific methodologies and research designs to draw the conclusion that the change happened, at least in part because of the standard system. This is called 'attribution.' Studies that are designed to attribute impact to a specific intervention (like a standards system) should shed light on how much of any observed change would have happened anyway – *because* of other actors or factors, without the standards system. They also explore whether assumptions made about the causes of change are reasonable and backed up by evidence.

Most standards systems now seek professional guidance from a research design specialist to ensure that evaluations have the best prospects for measuring impacts a standards system seeks to achieve and attributing that change to the standards system (as opposed other actors or factors). Before claiming that an impact is caused by the standards system, it is important to have an outside expert or qualified M&E staffer carefully examine the methodology used.

Methodology affects what claims can be made in other ways too. For example,

- › If the source data is interviews with twenty farmers in one village, the claim needs to clarify that by making this explicit: *'Based on interviews with some farmers in...'*. If the source data is a statistically significant (i.e. representative of the population) sample of farmers in a larger area, then the claim can be more ambitious but still within the bounds of region or country context of the 'population' sampled, and giving the statistical confidence levels and intervals.
- › The indicator or question used to gather that data also matters. It is important to distinguish, for example, between perceptions of change (by farmers or workers or consumers – *'How much do you think productivity has improved in the last year?'*) versus actual change that has been measured through research.
- › Impact evaluations often involve data collection at multiple times, for example at baseline, interim and end stages of a research project. Claims of change or impact cannot be made after baseline research; change will become evident only after subsequent data collection which is when claims could be made.

Contextualise claims

The assumptions and caveats related to any claim should be clear. How well a standards system works may vary by context and be affected by many external factors. Impacts in one place may not be the same as impacts in another place. It is always important to be clear about the geographical, market, social, economic or environmental context behind reported results and claims.

Pay extra attention to explaining the value of reducing negative impacts

In some contexts it is assumed that 'impacts' are positive (e.g. higher incomes or more biodiversity). However, when it comes to some sustainability challenges, achieving a reduced negative impact (as opposed to a net positive impact) is a significant achievement (e.g. reduced illegal logging or incidence of child labour).

Claims about reduced negative impact will require particular care in presentation, as it is harder to explain why less of a bad practice is a good development. Especially when related to environmental impacts, the phrase 'low impact' or 'reduced impact' can also sometimes be used as a positive message. It can help to:

- › present results as a significant step on a journey towards sustainability, and make reference to a credible plan to make significant further steps; or
- › compare reduction in negative practices in certified areas to uncertified areas/sites/producers or national or regional averages, when the basis of the comparison is clear and valid.

3.2 The ingredients of good impact claims: checklist

ISEAL's **Challenge the Label** tool identifies five universal truths to sustainability claims.

The Impact claim ingredients checklist is a checklist of ten items that translate these five truths into action to keep in mind every time you wish to make an impact claim.

The 5 universal truths to sustainability claims

Credible sustainability claims are **clear, accurate** and **relevant**, and are backed up by systems that are **transparent** and **robust**

Robust and transparent systems

Good impact claims must be backed by systems that are **robust** and **transparent**.


This means:

- › In order for someone to check if the claim is **accurate, clear** and **relevant**, they should be able to access all the information that sits behind it.
- › If information needed to substantiate a claim is not already publicly available it should be made available on reasonable request.
- › Claims should be revised over time in response to learning from the M&E system and as new data comes to the fore.


Clear The impact claim should be easily understood and free from misleading details

✓ Checklist item	Explanation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Use clear, plain language that is not vague or ambiguous, or liable to misunderstanding or misinterpretation	<p>Claims that use vague and undefined terms are much more likely to be challenged.</p> <p>Also take care when using new and emerging terms that may not be widely or clearly understood.</p> <p>Avoid restating the same claim in different ways that could be misinterpreted as multiple benefits.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Ensure the scope and boundary of the claim is clear	<p>Ensure that claims do not omit significant information or stretch the scope of what the data and method allows.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> 3 Ensure all imagery (symbols, visuals, infographics, labels etc.) presented with the impact claim is directly relevant to the claim and its magnitude	<p>Imagery and icons can enhance the communicability of your claim but should not mislead or stretch the claim.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> 4 Support the claim with references and/or links to data sources it is based on	<p>All relevant supporting information that the reader needs to verify your claim should be clearly linked from all communications materials and be understandable by your audiences.</p> <p>Ensure that claims using the same source materials are expressed consistently across all communications.</p>

Accurate The impact claim must be truthful and based on substantiated evidence

 Checklist item	Explanation
<input type="checkbox"/> 5 Make a claim only if it is fully supported by M&E evidence that is recent, objective, clear and methodologically robust	Ideally impact claims will be made on the basis of evaluations conducted by independent, respected institutions using widely accepted standards of high quality research. Outcome claims can be made using internal performance monitoring data but this should be made explicit. Any level of uncertainty should be reflected in a claim.
<input type="checkbox"/> 6 If you are claiming impact, make sure your claim fairly represents the additional benefit of your standard/system and that its magnitude warrants the publicity	<p>A claim should not imply that an impact is exceptional when it is not. Assess if the claim is of sufficient magnitude to warrant publicity.</p> <p>When a claim is of small significance to the overall impact, consider whether it is worth making the claim public at all. If the claim involves a comparison to others, such comparison should be fair and meaningful and backed by your methods.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> 7 Make sure all context, assumptions and caveats related to the claim are also shared	The accuracy of an impact claim is set by its evidence base, method and by its context. It is always important to be clear about the geographical, market, social, economic or environmental context behind reported results and claims.
<input type="checkbox"/> 8 Make sure the claim differentiates between aspiration and evidence	<p>Standards systems may communicate about their 'theory of change' and the impacts their systems are designed to deliver. This is aspiration.</p> <p>Once evidence is available to prove that the standards system does actually deliver on this, the standards system may start to make impacts claims.</p>
<input type="checkbox"/> 9 Revise claims over time	A claim may become less accurate or less meaningful over time, so its validity should be considered before each new use and revisions made to reflect changes in data, context and other variables.

Relevant The impact claim should be about an issue that is material or central to what the standards system seeks to achieve and not intentionally distracting from other relevant or contradictory results

 Checklist item	Explanation
<input type="checkbox"/> 10 Make sure the claim is relevant to the main impacts of the standards system	A claim should be clearly tied to the impacts and outcomes levels of a standards system's Theory of Change. It should be clear how the impact furthers a standards system's vision and mission.

3.3 Illustrations of good and bad practice

Taking credit only when it is due



Claim

 Greenbarley posts a tweet on Twitter:

Greenbarley ups producers' yields by 25%

Background

Greenbarley is a standard and certification system for environmentally, socially and economically sustainable barley production. Greenbarley certification includes requirements related to soil management that intend to result in more sustained and dependable high yields.

A study carried out by Greenbarley has shown that certified barley producers' yields have increased substantially over a number of years. However, that period has coincided with new barley varieties being introduced that combine a higher vitamin content (now required by major purchasers) and better yields substantially over a number of years.

However, that period has coincided with new barley varieties being introduced that combine better yields and a higher vitamin content, which is now required by end users.

Analysis



The claim is **not a good claim**, for reasons including:

- The claim is **not clear** about most influence being outside the organisation's control. It is, in that sense, over claiming credit to itself.
- The claim is **not relevant** to what is actually in the standards system's control. Greenbarley is claiming the credit for the change observed ('**Greenbarley ups...**'), when the increased yields are the result of new varieties rather than soil management.

Also, credit should at least be shared with producers, and probably other stakeholders as well.

- The amount of supporting information is **not clear**. Indeed, in this case, there is no reference to how interested parties could find out more.

Recommendation

- Do not make an impact claim at this stage.
- Design and implement targeted research to establish the standards system's real impact and additionality.

All examples and scenarios shown in 3.3 and 4.3 of this guide are fictional, and provided solely to illustrate elements of the checklists.

Any resemblance to any historical, existing or planned initiatives is entirely accidental and coincidental, and no criticism whatsoever is implied of any initiative.

Telling the whole truth

**PRESS
RELEASE****CASSAVA
SUSTAINABILITY
COUNCIL**31 Doune Road
Edinburgh EH3

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Cassava Sustainability Council reveals
rise in certified farmers' average income**Contact: **Douglas Macpherson, CSC Press Officer****t** (+44) 0131 233 5656 **f** (+44) 0131 233 5658 **e** press@csc.com

The Cassava Sustainability Council is pleased to announce that it is helping smaller farmers in Malawi who have shown a 5% increase over the last 5 years (2010 to 2015) in income.

Claim

A press release from the Cassava Sustainability Council claims:

**Cassava Sustainability Council reveals
rise in certified farmers' average income**

The full press release gives some information on an initiative for small farmers in Malawi, a quote from the CSC CEO, and a quote from a large-scale local cassava farmer in Malawi but does not refer to any negative or unintended consequences.

Background

The CSC's objectives are 'to set the standard for, promote, and oversee certification of best practice, environmentally sustainable cassava cultivation'. CSC operates in 14 countries, mostly in Africa.

While CSC has had some success, to date this has mainly been with very large-scale producers who were already fulfilling most of the criteria anyway. In attempting to reach the CSC standard now demanded, many smaller-scale farmers have gone out of business as cassava prices have been falling.

Their businesses have been swallowed up by larger CSC-certified farmers who have consequently seen an increase in income.

Analysis



The claim may be factually correct but is **not a good claim**, for reasons including:

- It is **not relevant** to the main impacts of the standards system (which in this case may be better environmental performance and lost livelihoods for small farmers).
- It is **not accurate** as it does not set out the scope of the results (relevant only to Malawi) and reading the headline can easily give the impression of global impact.
- **Negative or unintended effects are not fairly addressed.** Indeed, they are not even mentioned.

Recommendation

Either:

- Do **not** make an impact claim at this stage, or
- Edit the press release title to:
 - avoid the possibility of misinterpretation, e.g. **Cassava Sustainability Council reveals widening gap in certified farmers' incomes: initiative for small farmers planned** and,
 - ensure the full text of the press release places the new initiative with small farmers in fair context of information regarding how they may have been adversely affected and makes the geographic scope of the results and initiative clear.

Backing up claims with evidence



Claim

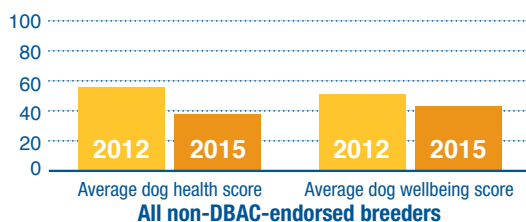
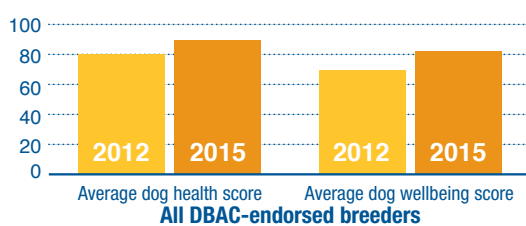
 Tweet from the Dog breeders Assurance Council (DBAC)

It's a record! Top health and welfare for UK dogs from #DBAC certified breeders: others on decline.
See bit.ly/1U3IBxE @dogwelfare

The tweet links to a webpage that clearly states that:

- › This conclusion is based on detailed scoring systems for health and wellbeing.
- › An estimated 50% of dog breeders in the UK are DBAC-endorsed.
- › DBAC continues to strive for ever better scores, and ever wider take-up.

The webpage also clearly links to a report that provides information about the research, its context and its results, including these charts:



Background

The Dog-breeders Assurance Council (DBAC) is an outcome-based standard, launched in 1955, with a mission to raise the standards of health and welfare for dogs bred

for commercial purposes. DBAC educates and provides support on canine health and well-being, promotes the selection of DBAC-endorsed breeders, and has become recognised as a major driver in a sector where regulations are relatively weak. In order to use the DBAC logo, breeders need to achieve consistently acceptable scores on random, spot-checks of dogs audited for health and well-being.

DBAC closely monitors trends in scores, and with the help of a government agency that conducts spot checks of all dog-breeders, is able to compare performance of DBAC-endorsed breeders with non-endorsed breeders, using the same metrics.

In partnership with a university research team, they have identified their main impacts in different areas, and ensured that comparisons are so far as possible with comparable 'control' populations (non-DBAC endorsed breeders in comparable locations, of comparable scale, and working with comparable breeds), and statistically valid.

Analysis



A good claim. It fulfils the requirements of the checklists. For instance:

- › DBAC has been studying its impacts for many years, and has a high-level **understanding of the main impacts** of its standards system and their extent.
- › **Negative** or unintended effects (such as DBAC endorsement only being viable for well-resourced breeders) have been researched and discounted, and so do not need to be addressed in this context.
- › The claim is **relevant** to the main impacts of the DBAC standards system, is tied to the impacts and outcomes levels of its Theory of Change, and clearly linked to its mission.
- › The basis for **comparison** with those not endorsed by DBAC is fair and meaningful and the basis for comparison is clear.
- › The claim has **avoided 'over-claiming'** the standards system's achievements – it is clear that it is DBAC certified breeders that have achieved the result, and the lack of strong regulations give an indication that in the absence of DBAC the results would not have been so good.
- › Information to **substantiate** the claim is publicly available, contained in a robust impact evaluation.

Being clear about 'additional benefits'



95%
OF RHI'S MEMBERS
HAVE COMMITTED
TO USING PEAT-FREE
COMPOST

The **Responsible Horticulture Initiative** is proud to report that many more wetland habitats are now secure for future generations. With most RHI members committed to buying only peat-free compost, they are now the 'go to' place for gardeners wishing to buy more environmentally sustainable compost and help protect peat wetlands, a sanctuary for plants and wildlife

Claim

Introductory text to the 2015 Annual Report of the Responsible Horticulture Initiative (RHI).

95% OF RHI'S MEMBERS HAVE COMMITTED TO USING PEAT-FREE COMPOST

The Responsible Horticulture Initiative is proud to report that many more wetland habitats are now secure for future generations. With most RHI members committed to buying only peat-free compost, they are now the 'go to' place for gardeners wishing to buy more environmentally sustainable compost and help protect peat wetlands, a sanctuary for plants and wildlife.

Background

The RHI launched in 2014.

It includes a standard for responsible horticulture that members must comply with. Most of its members had pre-existing sustainability policies that included commitments to reducing peat use by 2020.

Many non-members have similar policies with varying target dates, milestones, and levels of public disclosure.

Analysis



Not a good claim, for reasons including:

- The claim is **not accurate** as the comparison with others, i.e. non-RHI members, may not be fair, or at the very least the basis for comparison is unclear, given the differing targets, milestones and schedules.
- The claim is **not clear** as it does not clearly distinguish between aspiration and action. The phrase '**committed to buying only peat-free compost**' could easily be interpreted as action that has already been taken, rather than planned for the future.
- The claim is **not accurate** as it implies that an impact or outcome is exceptional when many products in the marketplace share the same characteristic.

Recommendation

- Edit the Annual Report introductory text to address the points made in Analysis above.

This might look like:

95% OF RHI'S MEMBERS ARE COMMITTED TO SWITCHING TO PEAT-FREE COMPOST

The Responsible Horticulture Initiative is proud to note that many more wetland habitats are set to become secure for future generations. With most RHI members committed to switching to only peat-free compost, they will become a safe bet for gardeners wishing to buy more environmentally sustainable compost and help protect peat wetlands, a sanctuary for plants and wildlife.

- Consider providing more information publicly about RHI members, their standards, goals and sustainability journey so readers can assess what has really changed over time.

Writing clearly and contextualising claims

Claim

News headline on the homepage of the Cruelty-Free Footwear Manufacturers' Union.

Good news for livestock as number of certified shoes from major exporting nation doubles.

The headline has a link to a brief report which describes CFFMU's activities in Indonesia along with an infographic and an explanation:

The percentage of shoes exported by Indonesia that are certified by the Cruelty-Free Footwear Manufacturers' Union has increased from 14% to 28% in the last 10 years.



Background

The CFFMU has established an international standard for cruelty-free footwear, aiming to improve welfare of livestock used in footwear manufacture.

CFFMU works in nineteen of the twenty largest shoe-manufacturing nations, promoting the standard and certifying manufacturers (it does not work in China). It has certified hundreds of manufacturer but data are not available on how many manufacturers there are in many exporting countries, so it has been difficult to CFFMU to gauge the level of its impact.

In 2006 it carried out a random sample of seven manufacturers in each of the nineteen nations where it works to assess the reach it had achieved, and has recently repeated that research.

A rise was only observed in one of the nations where CFFMU works. In all other nations the number of randomly sampled manufacturers was the same or less than in the 2006 study. In all the sampled countries there are in excess of 1,000 shoe manufacturers.

Analysis

Not a good claim for reasons including:

- > The claim is **not clear** in that the context of the claim is not adequately explained.
- > The amount of **supporting information** is **not clear**. The data and research methods are not presented.
- > **Imagery may be misinterpreted**. In this case the right hand shoe may be twice as long as the left hand shoe but it represents a solid object which would actually be eight times the volume.



- > The assumptions and caveats regarding the statistics are **not clear**. The figures given do not indicate the uncertainty in the data, and an assumption is made that increased reach (number of certified manufacturers) equates to increased impact (improved livestock welfare).
- > The context is **not clear**. Neither the headline nor the brief report mention that CFFMU has yet to start working in China, which manufactures over 60% of the world's shoes.
- > The claim is **not accurate**, for a number of reasons, such as a sample size of just five from a 'population' of 1,000 is insufficient to give much confidence in the results for each country. Also the claim has not been tested using the most appropriate, or standard methods. In fact it has used 'data mining', picking out the one good result from many neutral or negative results.

Recommendation

Either:

- > Do **not** make an impact claim at this stage, or
- > edit the headline to
 - **Indication of increase in certified manufacturers in one exporting nation**, and
 - edit the report to more accurately represent the results, and the caveats and assumptions, and
 - work to improve research methods.

Section 4

Working together for good impact claims

4 Working together for good impact claims

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Making a good impact claim is not only about getting the content right.

It also depends hugely on effective working practices between teams, especially M&E and communications teams, but also with assurance, policy and outreach teams.

Good impact claims are often the results of combined skills and knowledge of M&E and communications teams that can generate compelling and well evidenced claims. Working practices do differ according to the size, structure and nature of a standards system.

Nonetheless in this section we talk about issues for all systems to consider while generating and communicating claims.

4.1 Issues to consider

Developing a common understanding

Many organisations find that there is a significant gap between what technical staff want to and think they can communicate and what many of their communications colleagues think audiences can digest.

Dialogue between teams lies at the heart of addressing this gap and ensuring claims are not just clear, accurate and relevant, but also effective. M&E and communications teams should work together to achieve a common understanding of answers to the questions below.

A common understanding: issues for M&E and communications teams

What is the **problem** the standards system is trying to solve?

Present the context of the problem your standards system is trying to tackle. This means explaining what the problem is, who and what it affects and how widely, and what are the impacts on those affected.

What is the standards system **doing** to address it?

Clearly explain what your standards system does to create the impact. This means providing a coherent narrative clearly tied to your Theory of Change that captures the vision and mission through to a breakdown of the standards system's activities i.e. what it does and what it hopes to achieve.

What **results** is it achieving? Are there **challenges**?

Your standards system's results should be central to communications and include not only what is produced or delivered (outputs) but also a description of what is actually achieved for beneficiaries (outcomes and impact). This also means sharing negative results or challenges regularly with internal staff so they can account for them in their communications.

What are your **main messages**?

Spend time developing the main messages from the source data. Ensure they are clear and accurate, reflect the overall goals of the organisation, and complement other messages issued.

Who are your **audiences**?

List your standards system's audiences and discuss their expectations.

- › Do you know what sorts of impacts information they need, to what detail and with what frequency?
- › Is your approach going to meet their requirements?

How does your organisation **measure** results?

Your standards system must be able to back up claims of impacts and outcomes with evidence. How does the M&E system provide this? Even if most people will not seek detailed evidence of impact, knowing it is there is vital to building honesty and trust.

This means communications teams understanding the basics of what data the system generates and feeling confident that the data allows for claims to be backed up.

What is your organisation **learning**?

- › How is your standards system responding to what it learns about its work?
- › How does it continuously improve in order to meet its long term goals?

Good impact claims require an understanding of the process of change, embracing shortcomings and improving programmes as a result. On occasion the story of this journey may even take precedence in impacts claims.

Mutual training

It might prove beneficial for both M&E and communications teams to hold training sessions to improve mutual understanding of each other's needs and work goals.

For example, M&E teams may find that explaining the data and how to interpret it well can help communications and

other staff understand what lies behind a good impacts claim. Similarly, communications teams can find that, by explaining to M&E staff the audiences for their communications and key messages to share, they can help find the right information and craft better impact claims following the points below.

Mutual training: key aspects for M&E and communications teams

Communications teams

The main **impacts** of the standards system and their extent

How the **M&E system** is tied to the standards system's Theory of Change

The **challenges** faced in establishing baselines, attribution, additionality, etc

Any **external factors** that may influence (both positively and negatively) the achievement of intended impacts and outcomes

The need for any external evidence used to be **robust** and from a **credible and reliable source** (ideally, evidence should be peer-reviewed and come from a reputable institution or organisation)

M&E teams

The **main audiences** of the standard system – their information needs, attention spans and levels of knowledge

The **main impacts** of the standards systems (in terms of evidence and learning) that **key stakeholder groups** are interested in

The **relevance** of varied communication tools and mediums and challenges faced in presenting complex, highly caveated information in some of them (e.g. a Tweet or Facebook post)

The **timing and timeliness of communication** and particular deadlines to meet

Planning for when, what and how you want to make claims

Good planning will always lay the foundations for good impact claims. Drawing on both M&E and communications teams' skills sets will add quality to impacts claims, will avoid issuing conflicting claims, and will ensure source material is communicated consistently by all staff and across all communications channels.

Crucially, the more time that M&E and communications teams can work together to understand the needs and audiences for claims and available data in advance, the more robust and clear will be the claims that can be made. Time is needed to work through and develop a succinct, clear and accurate claim based on what can, at times, be very complex source material.

Larger standards systems might benefit from formulating some of the checklist items in [Section 4.2, page 21](#) into policies and procedures in order to ensure consistency of best practice, as well as to enlist support across senior management teams. They might also consider having dedicated staff to co-ordinate impacts claims communications, for instance, to:

- › ensure consistency of messaging across all claims,
- › provide pre-prepared sets of materials such as narrative summaries with key messages and learnings, statistics and graphs, and
- › provide briefings for all staff and/or senior management teams.

Liaison from the start for a good impact project that generates claims

M&E teams and communications teams should work together from inception to final delivery of a project that may involve an impact claim. This will ensure that needs of different teams are considered and that there is sufficient time before delivery to address those needs. It will also help address any differing priorities and expectations from the outset.

For instance, defining the target audiences for impacts claims can ensure their needs in relation to impacts data and information are met. It can therefore help determine what is important to measure, and subsequently whether a claim is of sufficient magnitude to warrant publicity.

Communications and M&E teams could consider holding an inception meeting at the start of each impact related project, i.e. at the research planning stage, covering the questions below.

Liaison from the start: questions to ask at the start of an impact-related project

Have you agreed the **scope and aims** of a project, the objectives of the research, including **what is important to measure** and to what level of detail?

Have you determined the **audiences** your standards system wishes to communicate results to?

Have you agreed on whether the **research** will be done **internally or externally**?

How would this affect your ability to communicate confidently to select audiences?

Have you agreed what **formats your research outputs** will be produced in?

Consider branding, authorship and other intellectual property considerations (linked to the point above on internal vs external research).

Have you agreed the level and nature of **ongoing co-operation** that will be needed between M&E and communications teams?

For example, have you set up a system to ensure smooth lines of communication, such as by identifying a point person for dialogue in each team, lines of responsibility and a sign off process by someone who understands the data and the audience? This may be particularly important where external copywriters are used.

Preparing staff before making an impact claim

Before making an impact claim the M&E and communications teams should work together using the action list below.

Preparing staff: an action list for M&E and communications teams

Run through the 'The ingredients of good impact claims: checklist' See **Section 3.2**, page 8

Make sure all staff who have contact with external stakeholders **understand the impacts claim and its context**, to help avoid misrepresentation

Provide staff in contact with external stakeholders with **a short summary of key information**

This includes:

- › The main messages and statistics,
- › The main elements of the source and nature of data and information,
- › An outline of the project's aims,
- › How it furthers the standards system's vision and mission,
- › What milestones the impact claim may relate to,
- › A set of suggested responses to common or complex questions (FAQs), and where they can access supporting evidence.
- › Necessary information to explain the context of the claim.

Ensure relevant stakeholders know that a claim is being publicised

Think about timing

Before any external communications of your impacts claim, it is worth checking that the timing of the claim is not only optimal, but also risk averse.

For example, if a serious event has taken place that might serve to undermine the influence of the claim, cause it to attract unnecessary criticism or render it irrelevant at that time, the communications team might advise delaying its publicity.

Translations

If impact claims communications are to be translated, consider which elements might be open to poor translation. This relates to phrases that rely on a cultural context for meaning, as well as to complex messages or evidence. Consider more reliance on statistics and infographics to present impacts claims that are to be translated, in order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation.

Data visualisation

'Infographics,' data visualisation or presentation of data in a pictorial or graphical format can be particularly helpful for communicating complicated concepts.

It may therefore be an effective way of presenting impacts claims to a broad audience. Any team creating impacts infographics should include both staff who understand the data and who appreciate how to present it effectively, to ensure it tells a visual story while capturing the point of the story concisely and accurately.

Making claims through social media channels

Social media and online blogs want concise, compelling copy with hard-hitting facts and statistics that summarise the key point of a story. Whilst it is not always appropriate (or possible in the case of Twitter) to substantiate or contextualise impacts claims in a few words, it is still important to ensure the wording of the claim is accurate and avoids misinterpretation.

The speed at which information is shared on social media means more caution is needed in developing claims being made through these channels. When composing any material intended for distribution via social media, whether a podcast, video, a post or a tweet, consider that it is predominantly this information alone that will travel your social networks.

Check that any impacts claim will not serve to mislead your audience into thinking it has more emphasis than is reasonable. The better the quality of the initial communications output, the better the likelihood that the impacts claim and supporting messages will be accurately reported and/or repackaged by secondary sources, such as members or the media.

Having a central organisational Twitter or Facebook account through which claims are made is useful so that staff can always retweet or share through their wider professional networks.

Assessing, learning after a claim

M&E and communications teams should continue to work together to assess the success of a claim after it has been made public and learn from the results. How accurately a claim has been interpreted by stakeholders can provide powerful insights and can serve to build on best practice in the future. For instance, has the impacts claim been accurately reported by others, and if not, why? Was the evidence understood and at the right level for the claim being made? Do you need to review your working practices related to impact and outcome claims to ensure they are successful?

4.2 Working together for good impact claims: checklist

Good impact claims are based on a common understanding of data and communication needs and team work.

That starts right at the beginning with planning evaluations through to developing claims and then learning from the results. This checklist might come in handy to help teams within standard systems work together to develop and communicate impact claims on a regular basis.

Working together for good impact claims: checklist

☒ All the time

- ☐ **1** Ensure teams have a common understanding of the system's Theory of Change
- ☐ **2** Ensure communications teams have a good understanding of the basics of your M&E system, data sources and ethics
- ☐ **3** Ensure M&E teams have a good understanding of the organisation's communication needs and key audiences
- ☐ **4** Always evaluate the timing of a claim and the suitability of specific communication channels you wish to use to make them
- ☐ **5** Have mechanisms in place to check the shelf-life of claims and withdraw claims that have 'expired' from public channels

☒ For individual research projects

- ☐ **6** Ensure teams work together from the start and are clear about the aims, scope, methods and communication outputs to be generated from the research
- ☐ **7** Designate a point person in each team to work together through the course of the project
- ☐ **8** Agree procedures for content generation, review and sign-off on final claims produced
- ☐ **9** Ensure new claims issued do not contradict old ones already in the public sphere (and if so, revise old claims accordingly before issuing new ones)
- ☐ **10** Ensure all relevant staff are briefed on the project's background, its results and have access to all supporting information

4.3 Illustrations of good and bad practice

The following scenarios aim to highlight how, by working together, M&E and communications teams can build the foundations for good impacts claims.

Understanding audience needs



Claim

Slides shared with a commercial partner for presentation to their CEO claim:

Mammal Protection Trust achieves 20% increase in wild-species population

Background


The Mammal Protection Trust is a standard that works with farmers to protect wild mammal species in habitats that overlap with agricultural activities.

A major commercial partner has asked for impact data to make a presentation to their new CEO who doesn't understand why the company supports MPT. A set of communications materials relating to an impact claim about improvements to population levels of pangolins are created by the communications team, in consultation with a contact person from M&E.

They are supported by robust evidence and provide links to that evidence. The impacts data does not include information on population levels for armadillos, however.

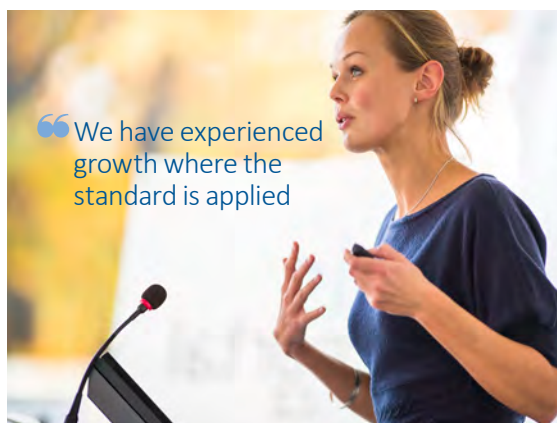
Several companies in the sector are under pressure to demonstrate positive impacts specifically to demonstrate conservation of armadillos and their habitats. They were expecting armadillo protection data to be included and find they cannot use the impacts claims about pangolins because it would only serve to add pressure to deliver on their impacts related to armadillos.

Analysis

 **Not a good claim**

- Ensure that you have a clear understanding of your **audiences** and what they need in relation to impacts data and information.
- Ensure that commercial, communication and M&E teams **work together** to understand needs and clarify that the expected data is available.

Sticking to context



Claim

A standards system communicates a positive impact claim in a press release and cites evidence to back up its claims. The claim referred to

'...growth in most regions where the standard is applied save a few where owing to social conflicts, the standard has not grown but is taking steps to address challenges.'

The press release also includes links to references, data and supporting evidence on its website.

However, a line from the press release relating to the impact claim is used in an opening statement by the CEO in her speech at the organisation's AGM that has representatives from all countries.

By taking the claim out of context, it has become inaccurate because it does not include the caveats and scope outlined in the opening paragraph of the press release and does not link directly to the supporting evidence on the website.

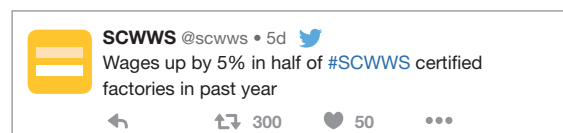
The claim is issued in a public forum with considerable press coverage, making correction or withdrawing it difficult.

Analysis


Not a good claim

- › Ensured all relevant staff are **briefed** on the key messages and provided **access to the evidence**.
- › Ensured that the M&E system is sufficiently **integrated** throughout the standards system.
- › Set up clear **sign-off procedures for all impact claims that could be made by the system**.

Working together to get the full picture



Claim

 Tweet from Semi-Conductor Workers' Welfare Standard (SCWWS):

Wages up by 5% in half of #SCWWS certified factories in past year

Background

SCWWS has a story to tell about the positive impacts of its initiatives to improve wages in 200 semi-conductor factories within its supply chain; a potentially clear, social story that can be effectively told via social media. The information given to the communications team from the M&E team states that mean wages have risen by 5% in 100 factories as a direct result of the well-evidenced initiatives in 2014. The information does not say what the baseline wage for the increase is, nor that wages have dropped in the remaining 75 factories that are SCWWS-certified because of an increase in supply of labour in those markets. The tweet is released with a link to the supporting evidence on the website but the digital team did not know that the 5% increase was negligible because the baseline wage was low – a fact that makes the claim inaccurate.

Analysis

Not a good claim

- › Ensure M&E and communications teams **work together** from the project's inception.
- › Ensure **skills sets are not overlooked** during project development so that communications teams can provide **input into what is measured**, for example, and to advise on whether or not a claim should be made public.
- › Ensure that **clear lines of communication** between the teams are agreed.
- › Spend time on developing **accurate messaging**.
- › Ensure that communications teams are given **sufficient lead time** to properly develop the claims communications.
- › Set up clear **sign-off procedures**.

Withdrawing expired claims



“PPP can no longer claim any credit for past laurels as they have let down smallholders.

Letter to PPP CEO

“We can no longer support PPP who are making false claims about their sustainability creds.

Researcher

Claim

An impact example on page two of the PPP annual report issued this year claims:

Pineapple production up 15% in PPP farms in Ghana

Background

The Pineapple Productivity Partnership (PPP) is a standard committed to the sustainable production of pineapple worldwide.

PPP is a well-established sustainability standard in the fresh-fruit sector operational for over fifteen years. They began working with smallholder pineapple farmers and eventually went on to certify plantations. They have had reasonable success with smallholder and plantation production in several countries, including in Ghana.

But two years back for strategic reasons, they ceased certifying smallholders and now only work with plantations and are phasing out smallholder farmers from their system. The move has been controversial and met with a lot of opposition from campaigning organisations working to secure pineapple farmers' livelihoods.

The above impact claim was based on robust research that they had commissioned four years back and was undertaken by leading researchers in the field. The research was on PPP certified smallholder pineapple farmers in Ghana, a particularly important source for PPP

partner. This year's annual report was commissioned to an external design agency to improve quality of copy and general appeal of the report.

The design team used a press release still live on the PPP website to write the example and linked it to the full report that was also still available on the PPP website. Using the example now in their Annual Report has meant that organisation is claiming benefits for improving impact for a group they no longer work with. It has irked campaigning groups with letters to the CEO and backlash from researchers who say PPP can no longer claim any credit for past laurels as they have let down smallholders.

Analysis

Not a good claim

- Ensure that impact claims made in the past that are no longer applicable are withdrawn from public sources (such as press releases). An old report could still be available for reference but be clearly dated and not be used to restate a claim that is inaccurate if the context of the intervention has changed.
- Ensure that all teams needing impact information and making claims are made aware of which information they can use and which not.
- Regularly update all staff on key internal developments.
- Set up clear **sign-off procedures**.

Be careful about timing



Claim

f A Facebook post issued by the Sustainable Jam Alliance, a social sustainability standard that aims to achieve improved social welfare for workers employed in jam factories worldwide claims:

SJA workers in Moria achieve 24-hour potable water access in all factories

Background

A member of the M&E team at SJA tells the communications team that they have a positive claim to make about SJA's efforts to provide drinking water access

for factory workers in Moria, a severely drought-prone region which produces pineapple-guava jam.

However, the previous week there was a serious fire in a factory in the same region that had no relation to SJA factories, however lives were lost and the issue of the lack of safety procedures and conditions within factories globally is under public debate.

The organisation posts the claim on social media, stating SJA is helping to improve workers' lives, with a link to further information. Given that the supporting evidence related only to access to drinking water and not to safety issues, this resulted in negative criticism on social media. The standards system was perceived to be lacking in compassion for the fire victims and to be undervaluing safety issues, although they have very good health and safety standard requirements.

Analysis

Not a good claim

- › Ensure M&E and communications teams **work together** from the project's inception.
The communications team had not been involved in the project planning so were unaware of the scope and context of the claim and the aims of the project. Had the communications team been involved in the research planning, it might have advised that safety conditions were included in the project scope, given that it is a growing issue in the region.
- › Check the level and nature of the **supporting evidence**.
- › Assess the **timing** of the communication in the context of other external factors.
- › Set up **clear sign-off procedures**.

Collaborating from the start



- › The teams agree what needs to be measured to substantiate a (possible) impacts claim and the research design is adapted accordingly.
- › They agree which staff should be involved in the project and make a plan to involve certain stakeholders.
- › Each team allocates a point person for continued lines of communication and sets up a process for project development.
- › The point person in the M&E team is also designated as having responsibility for sign off on all communications materials.

The two-point people plan how the results will be presented. This includes a range of formats, and styles adapted for the different audiences that will be distributed across a variety of channels.

They continue to work together and, once the results are finalised, agree the key messages for the findings and agree how the evidence will be presented. In this case, they decide that it will all be housed on one page of the website, because:

- › defining the caveats relating to the scope of the project is important to ensure the claim's accuracy, and
- › the related report they produced last year provides the context of the 'sustainability journey' the company is on, which they agree is an important ingredient for accuracy.

The point people brief the communications team on the project and explain the messaging and key factors to check for accuracy of the impacts claim. The communications team then creates a set of materials (press release, a series of tweets, Facebook posts, graphics, a short video, etc.) as well as an internal briefing paper for key staff, all of which are signed off by the designated M&E person. They assess the world news agenda before delivering their communications package to ensure the timing is optimal, and subsequently review the process and its strengths and weaknesses.

Analysis



This is an example of a **good claim**, since teams

- › worked together throughout all stages of the project,
- › understood the research and its context, and
- › communicated the claim at the right time and in the right way.

Claim

Research report with several secondary outputs claims:

Cashew success for farmers in Vietnam

Background

A cashew nut standards system needs to show that it is improving the income of organic cashew farmers in Vietnam. Its M&E team is in the final stages of research design and arranges to meet with key staff from the communications team. Together, they determine who their audiences are and identify their main needs. It is agreed that, in this case, providing evidence that yields have increased and thereby improved income will be most accurate way in which to map their progress. The cashew programme is vast and the variation in yield improvements varies across regions.

Together the teams identify a particular representative initiative that focuses on new irrigation techniques in a specific region that may deliver positive results. It is a region where they have worked for some time so the baseline data is solid.

Sources of further information and guidance

ISEAL's *Code of Good Practice for Assessing the Impacts of Social and Environmental Systems* – the 'Impacts Code'.

ISEAL's *Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide*.

Defra's *Green Claims Guidance* and *Quick Guide to making a Good Environmental Claim*.

The European Commission's *Guidelines for Making and Assessing Environmental Claims*.

ISO 14021:1999 *Environmental Labels and Declarations – Self-declared Environmental Claims* (Type II Environmental Labelling).

Reports on impacts, issued by New Philanthropy Capital.

Guidelines for communicating health and science issues developed by the Social Issues Research Centre.

NCVO's *Code of Good Impact Practice*.

Guidance on Sampling eTutorial 5, and the section 'Reporting' in *Guide to sampling strategies and statistical analysis for use in monitoring and evaluation programs*, available to members via the ISEAL website.

Reports and guidance issued by the Global Reporting Initiative.

Independent Commission for Aid Impact reports including *Dfid's Approach to delivering impact*

Reports and guidance from Bond website, especially the *Evidence Principles, Inspiring Impact, Transparency Review, Making Evaluations Work Harder for International Development, Core Principles for Assessing Effectiveness*, and *Impact Evaluation Guide*.

Resources from the Doughty Centre for Corporate Responsibility.

CIPR's *Best Practice Guide for Environmental Sustainability Communications*.

Communicating Science and Sustainability

Guidelines for communicating science, and social science, have been developed by a number of bodies, such as the Social Issues Research Centre.

Ben Goldacre *Bad Science*. Published by Harper Perennial. www.badsience.net

Darrell Huff *How to Lie with Statistics*. Published by Penguin.

WBCSD's '*Sustainable Development Reporting: Striking the balance*'

UNEP's *Communicating Sustainability: How to Produce effective public campaigns*

UNESCO's *Harnessing Communication To Achieve The Millennium Development Goals*

More information?

Visit www.iseal.org/claims

or see ISEAL's [Sustainability Claims Good Practice Guide](#)

If you want to know more please ask ISEAL.



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