

Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund
45th Meeting of the CEPF Donor Council
Tuesday 25 November 2025
8:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time (EST)
2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Brussels and Paris Time
10:00 p.m. – 1:00 a.m. (+1 day) Tokyo Time

Development of a Social Sustainability Policy for CEPF

Recommended Action Item:

The Donor Council is asked to review and approve CEPF's new Social Sustainability Policy.

Background

In early 2023 l'Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and CEPF collaborated to pursue a funding opportunity for the Indo-Burma Hotspot via the Green Climate Fund. The team working on a concept note for the funding concluded that the social narrative CEPF presented did not fully take into account issues of inequality and vulnerable populations. Because AFD is committed to ensuring that their funds serve the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations to the greatest extent possible, AFD offered to support CEPF to strengthen its practices, in collaboration with AFD's Social Links team.

Terms of Reference were developed for a consultant to lead the process and several calls for proposals were posted. As a result, in March 2025, Berlin-based consulting firm Syspons GmbH was selected. The consultancy is managed by AFD, with technical supervision provided by CEPF. The Syspons team is led by Norovsuren Enkhbaatar, who is supported by several technical staff.

The team commenced work on 1 April 2025 and is scheduled to complete the work by 31 December 2025. Final deliverables will include a policy, guidelines, monitoring tools and training materials translated into six languages. Since April, the team has conducted interviews and consultations, formed a steering committee, and reviewed CEPF and donor policies pertaining to gender and social inclusion. A first draft of the policy was presented to the Secretariat on 8 October 2025. A revised policy was presented to the Working Group on 6 November. The Working Group did not recommend any changes to the policy, now presented to the Donor Council.

Annex: *CEPF's Social Sustainability Policy*

S Y S
P O N S

CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIP FUND

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY POLICY – DRAFT V.2.0



Anchoring Equity and Inclusion in Biodiversity Conservation

Status: Circulated for internal review and feedback

23.10.2025

1 Introduction and Context

CEPF's Commitment

At CEPF, equality and inclusion are recognized not as stand-alone goals or donor-driven add-ons, but as core enablers of effective and enduring biodiversity conservation. CEPF is guided by the belief that social sustainability, anchored in inclusive, equitable and locally grounded approaches, is essential to achieving CEPF's mission of long-term conservation impact and community ownership. When diverse voices are meaningfully engaged and empowered, conservation efforts become more resilient, contextually relevant, and widely supported.

Definition of Social Sustainability

At CEPF, we understand social sustainability as ensuring that conservation efforts are inclusive, equitable, and rooted in the lived realities of the people they affect. It reflects our belief that long-term biodiversity outcomes depend on the meaningful participation of diverse voices, the fair distribution of benefits, and the removal of barriers to equality that exclude or marginalize. Social sustainability is not a separate goal, it is how CEPF does conservation: by empowering communities, respecting rights, and embedding equity into every stage of CEPF's work.

In this context, CEPF distinguishes between *equality* and *equity* to ensure that its inclusion efforts are grounded in justice. While equality offers the same support to all, equity recognizes that people face different barriers and require tailored strategies to achieve fair outcomes. CEPF centers equity as the more transformative goal - not as a rejection of equality, but as a deeper commitment to fairness, dignity, and effectiveness. This framing shapes the principles below and guides how CEPF supports partners, designs interventions, and measures success.

Rationale for a Social Sustainability policy

Because CEPF sees equity and inclusion as central to CEPF's mission, it is both timely and necessary to anchor these principles in a dedicated CEPF Social Sustainability Policy. This policy provides a framework for how CEPF embeds equity and inclusion across all areas of work and communicates to partners and donors CEPF's firm commitment to ensuring conservation outcomes that are not only environmentally sustainable but also socially equitable.

Development Process

The policy was formulated through a consultative and iterative process, that included regular discussions and feedback loops with a wide array of stakeholders. Insights gathered from these consultation meetings and workshops were analysed and synthesized to shape a comprehensive organisational vision and concrete commitments aimed at integrating equality and inclusion in the breadth of CEPF's operations.

2 Purpose and Scope

Anchoring CEPF's Commitments

This Social Sustainability Policy anchors CEPF's beliefs and commitments in a dedicated framework. It outlines CEPF's commitment to embedding equality and inclusion across all aspects of CEPF's work – from project design and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) capacity building to knowledge sharing, monitoring, and resourcing. By fostering a positive and compelling narrative around inclusion, CEPF seeks to build broad-based buy-in among CSOs, local communities and donors, ensuring that conservation outcomes are not only ecologically sound but also socially just.

Relationship with the Gender Policy

This policy complements CEPF's Gender Policy. The Gender Policy remains in force and continues to guide CEPF's work on gender analysis, training, and monitoring across the grant cycle. The Social Sustainability Policy builds on this gender-focused perspective by embedding it within a broader framework that also addresses youth, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. Together, the two policies ensure that CEPF's conservation investments are inclusive, equitable, rights-respecting, and culturally sensitive.

Application of the Policy

The policy applies across the entire grant lifecycle – from application and review through implementation, monitoring, and closure. Its primary entry point is with CSOs (including applicants, grantees, and Regional Implementation Teams (RITs), where CEPF can most directly support the integration of social sustainability into project design, implementation, and reporting. The Secretariat provides the overarching structure, it ensures the enabling conditions by adjusting processes, issuing guidance, offering training, and collecting and analysing data. While the Secretariat is not the immediate agent of change, it plays a critical role in empowering CSOs to succeed.

Accordingly, the scope of this policy covers:

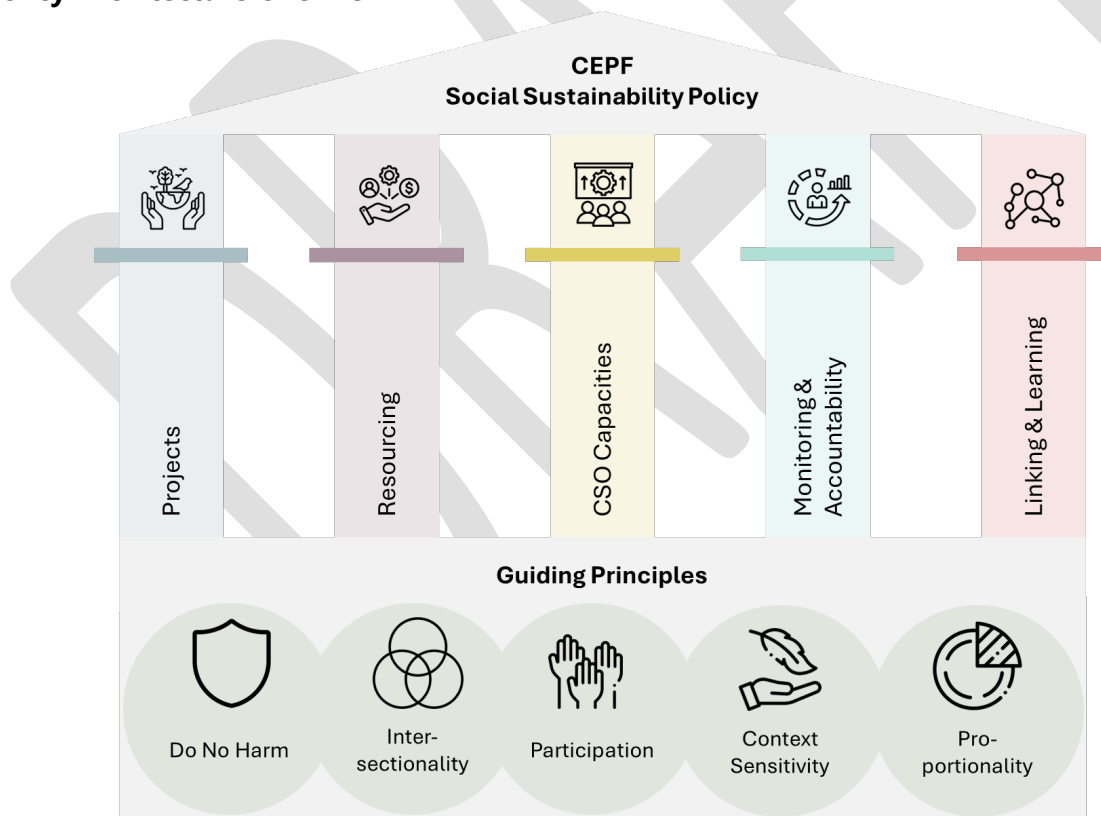
- **Applicants** – guidance at proposal stage are informed of the policy and provided proportionate templates/examples. They are encouraged to integrate inclusion measures in design, and proposals are scored on social-sustainability readiness.
- **Grantees** – ensuring that equality and inclusion are considered from proposal development through project delivery and reporting.
- **Regional Implementation Teams** – as intermediary CSOs, both requiring capacity support themselves and enabling smaller CSOs to comply with and benefit from this policy.
- **The Secretariat** – as the promoter of the policy framework and provider of tools, guidance, and monitoring mechanisms, ensuring consistency across regions and grantees.

This policy reflects a collective commitment and should be followed in terms of commitments made by CEPF as a partnership (through its governance structures) and by the Secretariat as the implementing body. Its application by CSOs is guided by proportionality (see Guiding Principles). Measures will be adapted to organizational size, capacity, and context, ensuring that requirements strengthen rather than overburden CSOs. This makes the policy an instrument that allows setting expectations and commitments, while also being flexible enough to work within contextual realities and capacities.

Taken together, the purpose and scope of this policy positions social sustainability as a pillar that strengthens CEPF's core mission of biodiversity conservation, clarifying where change is expected, who is responsible, and how equality and inclusion are embedded across the fund's operations.

This policy provides CEPF's shared commitments and direction. Its operational application is defined through accompanying Operational Guidance and tools that translate these commitments into practical steps across the grant lifecycle. These resources clarify what is expected from applicants, grantees, RITs, and the Secretariat, and how progress will be supported and monitored.

Policy Architecture Overview



This diagram illustrates CEPF's Social Sustainability Policy architecture. The foundation of Guiding Principles supports five Action Areas, which together operationalize CEPF's commitment to inclusive, equitable, and rights-based conservation.

3 Core Commitments

CEPF's Vision

CEPF acknowledges that healthy ecosystems are essential for human well-being. At the same time, socially sustainable communities – through participatory governance, local knowledge, and equitable resource use – play a vital role in protecting and restoring biodiversity. To this end, CEPF envisions biodiversity conservation and social sustainability as fundamentally interconnected. CEPF commits to advancing inclusive, equitable, culturally sensitive and rights-based conservation practices that empower marginalized groups, address barriers to inequality and ensure fair benefits for all. By embedding social sustainability into CEPF's approach, CEPF aims to foster enduring stewardship and stronger conservation outcomes.

Action Areas

To translate its vision for social sustainability into practice, CEPF commits to five interlinked Action Areas that represent the pillars of CEPF's social sustainability approach: Projects, Resourcing, CSO Capacities, Monitoring & Accountability, Linking & Learning. They define the key dimensions where decisions, resources, and capacities shape how conservation projects are designed, implemented, monitored, and learned from. While each Action Area may be more prominent at different stages of the grant lifecycle, they are not sequential steps, they are interconnected levers that, taken together, embed equity and inclusion into CEPF's conservation model. By operationalizing these commitments across grant-making and partnerships, CEPF ensures that social sustainability is not a parallel track, but a core part of how conservation is done.

Interpretation Guidance for Readers:

All commitments and action areas in this Policy should be read and applied through the lens of the five Guiding Principles: Do No Harm, Intersectional Approach, Participatory Approach, Context Sensitivity, and Proportionality. In practice, this means decisions and adaptations should safeguard rights and dignity, recognize intersecting inequalities, enable meaningful participation, be responsive to local contexts, and scale requirements to organizational capacity. The Guiding Principles are the first point of reference for interpretation, planning, risk management, and review. Capacity support, tools, and templates will be provided to help partners operationalize the Policy in ways that are feasible and relevant across diverse CSO contexts.



Projects

This Action Area pertains to the full range of conservation interventions designed, implemented, and monitored by CSOs – from proposal development, through implementation, to project closure and reporting. CEPF commits to integrating a social sustainability lens across this entire cycle, ensuring that diverse communities, especially those most dependent on and affected by conservation measures, are meaningfully included in decision-making, benefit equitably, and contribute their knowledge to conservation efforts. CEPF does so by embedding social sustainability considerations into proposal guidance and appraisal criteria, supporting CSOs during application and project design, and requiring grantees to integrate social sustainability into implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.



Resourcing

This Action Area addresses the need for dedicated financial and human resources to advance social sustainability. CEPF acknowledges that doing so requires additional effort and investment from CSOs and RITs. RITs need adequate staffing, training, and guidance to effectively support and mentor CSOs in applying this policy; strengthening RIT capacities is essential for consistent, high-quality implementation across all hotspots. CEPF commits to supporting CSOs and RITs in mobilising the resources necessary to integrate social sustainability objectives into conservation work. Where donor conditions permit, CEPF will allocate targeted funding to strengthen social sustainability within projects and institutional practices. CEPF contributes to this by encouraging applicants to include budget lines for social sustainability in their proposals, assessing resourcing as part of project review, and, where feasible, providing supplementary funding or technical support to grantees for activities related to social sustainability. During implementation, CEPF also encourages grantees to adjust budgets as needed to address emerging social sustainability needs, in line with CEPF guidance and approval processes.

Resourcing for social sustainability is a shared responsibility: donors commit contributions that recognise social sustainability as an integral objective for each hotspot; the CEPF Secretariat stewards this commitment across programming and oversight; RITs enable consistent application across hotspots; and grantees plan for and resource social sustainability within their projects, adapting as needs emerge. CEPF does not impose co-funding requirements, supporting equitable access for organisations of varied sizes and capacities.



CSO Capacities

This Action Area focuses on strengthening the institutional capacities of CSOs to mainstream social sustainability in both their internal structures and conservation projects. Capacities include the skills, knowledge, and systems required to integrate social sustainability effectively. CEPF commits to enhancing the ability of CSOs to integrate social sustainability objectives into their conservation work. This commitment is put into practice by offering training and mentoring opportunities, facilitating peer learning exchanges, and providing targeted technical support through RITs and the Secretariat.



Monitoring & Accountability

This Action Area focuses on monitoring, reporting, and accountability for integrating social sustainability in CEPF's work. Together, these elements provide the evidence base for adaptive management, ensuring that commitments translate into measurable outcomes and that CEPF and its partners remain transparent about progress. Monitoring is essential for understanding outcomes, building evidence, and driving continuous improvement across the grant cycle. CEPF commits to systematically monitoring social sustainability outcomes, supporting CSOs in generating reliable data, and holding itself and its partners accountable for progress. This commitment will be advanced by equipping CSOs with practical guidance and approaches for collecting and analyzing social sustainability data, and by offering opportunities for capacity-building in participatory and context-appropriate monitoring. CEPF will draw on existing systems and tools, or adapt them where relevant, to better capture social sustainability outcomes.



Linking & Learning

This Action Area emphasizes the importance of shared learning on social sustainability in biodiversity conservation. Linking and learning creates opportunities for CSOs, RITs, regions, and the Secretariat to exchange practical approaches, lessons, and challenges, with the purpose of strengthening future programming, improving project outcomes, and accelerating collective progress on social sustainability. CEPF commits to fostering a culture of mutual exchange and continuous learning, where experiences in integrating E&I are captured, shared, and applied across projects, institutions, and regions. This commitment is realized by facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges, creating opportunities for reflection within and across CSOs, and embedding social sustainability learning into CEPF's broader knowledge management and guidance. CEPF will also use aggregated lessons to inform its own support and policy development, while supporting CSOs to adapt their project design and implementation based on emerging insights.

4 Guiding Principles

All core commitments under CEPF's social sustainability policy are grounded in a set of cross-cutting guiding principles that inform how equality and inclusion are embedded across the fund's operations.



Do No Harm Approach

CEPF is committed to safeguarding the rights, dignity and well-being of all people affected by its work. CEPF actively seeks to prevent unintended negative impacts of CEPF's interventions, including restrictions on Indigenous people and local community rights to natural resources. CEPF promotes culturally respectful and rights-based conservation practices that address systemic barriers and strengthen trust and relationships between communities and conservation actors.



Intersectional Approach

CEPF recognizes that individuals experience overlapping forms of discrimination and disadvantage based on their gender, ethnicity, age, disability, socioeconomic status and other factors. CEPF's approach seeks to understand and address these intersecting inequalities to ensure that conservation efforts meaningfully address peoples' lived experiences.



Participatory Approach

CEPF prioritizes meaningful engagement of diverse stakeholders, especially marginalized and underrepresented groups, in decision-making throughout all phases of the project cycle. This inclusive approach ensures that conservation initiatives are informed by local priorities, knowledge, and lived experiences, thereby enhancing their relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability.



Context Sensitivity

CEPF acknowledges that the nature and scope of equality and inclusion measures implemented by grantees may vary significantly depending on distinct social, cultural, political and economic contexts. In recognition of this diversity, this social sustainability policy designed as a guiding framework that that can be adapted to specific circumstances. This approach ensures the relevance, feasibility and effective uptake of the policy across varied implementation settings.



Proportionality

CEPF applies requirements related to equality and inclusion in proportion to size, capacity, and experience of grantee organisations. This approach ensures that inclusion measures are appropriately scaled to strengthen rather than overburden grantees. It enables all partners to make meaningful progress aligned with their operational capacities and roles within their conservation landscape.

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Appendix: Glossary

Term	Definition
Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)	Non-governmental organizations, community groups, and other entities that implement conservation projects with CEPF support
Context Sensitivity	Adapting equality and inclusion measures to local cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities
Do No Harm	Ensuring CEPF's work safeguards the rights, dignity, and well-being of all people, especially Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
Equality	Treating all individuals the same, regardless of differences. CEPF acknowledges equality but centers equity as the deeper goal.
Equity	Recognizing different circumstances and tailoring support, resources, and opportunities to remove systemic barriers so that people can achieve comparable outcomes. CEPF treats equity as a commitment to fairness and justice.
Grant Lifecycle	The full span of a CEPF-funded project, from application and review through implementation, monitoring, and closure.
Inclusion	Meaningful engagement of diverse stakeholders, especially marginalized groups, in decision-making, benefit-sharing, and project design.
Intersectionality	Considering how overlapping identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, disability etc.) shape experiences of discrimination and access.
Linking and Learning	Sharing experiences, lessons, and approaches across CSOs, RITs, and regions to strengthen collective progress.
Monitoring & Accountability	Systems and practices for tracking progress on social sustainability, generating evidence, and ensuring transparency.
Participatory Approach	Involving stakeholders particularly underrepresented groups in all phases of the project cycle to ensure relevance and legitimacy.
Proportionality	Scaling requirements and support based on the size, capacity, and context of CSOs, ensuring inclusion measures are feasible and empowering
Regional Implementation Teams (RITs)	Intermediary CSOs that support smaller grantees, facilitate capacity building, and ensure consistent policy application across regions.
Resourcing	Allocation of financial and human resources to support social sustainability, including budget lines, staffing, and training.
Social Sustainability	CEPF's approach to embedding inclusive, equitable, and locally grounded practices into conservation efforts. It ensures biodiversity outcomes are socially just.