

Rigour and Independence in the Core Benefits Verification Framework for Environmental, Social and Cultural values

This explanatory note illustrates how rigour and independence is embedded within the Core Benefits Verification Framework. The verification of environmental, social and cultural values follows research norms and this note will explain accepted rigour mechanisms evident in research methodologies for the new standard.

This verification process, built on the international development sector 'impact measurement' best practice provides accountability, independent and transparent verification of environmental, social and cultural values associated with carbon farming and primary production.

The verification process provides assurance to buyers of Australian Carbon Credit Units or other commodities in the market that the core benefits being purchased are physically inspected, documented and independently verified.

[International development 'impact measurement' principles](#)

Australian international development non-government organisations (ANGOs) are governed by sectoral standards to ensure accountability and credibility in their impact measurement. These standards detail processes to promote results validity and transparency to inform important funding and programming decisions. Key standards guiding the sector are:

- DFAT Monitoring and Evaluation Standards (April 2017)
- OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) codes
- Australian Evaluation Society (AES) 'Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluation'
- Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) 'Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation in Development (April 2016)
- BOND UK 'Evidence Principle and Checklist'

In 14-15FY, ANGOs received \$329 million in Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funding. Social research methodologies are the accepted and mainstay approach to impact verification of these DFAT ANGO programs.

The R&D behind the Core Benefits Verification Framework draw on these existing measurement blueprints and the expertise of international development practitioners responsible for the verification of DFAT funded projects. The rigour mechanisms built into the social research methodologies are therefore central to this verification framework.

[Capacity Development](#)

In addition to providing a rigorous and independent verification of the environmental, social and cultural values, the verification process enables ownership and capacity development of the people closest to the subject matter and their peers. It is these people who become the 'experts' in the measurement of the core benefits that they know most about it.

The framework embraces a concept known within the international development sector as ‘south to south’. This process challenges dominant international development paradigms that perpetuate technical experts usually coming from the ‘north’ (i.e. Paris, London, New York) and delivering a service to the ‘south’ (i.e. Asia, South America, Africa).

Building on this philosophy the standard invests in the training of Indigenous people, farmers and pastoralists in verification methodologies. ‘South to south’ in the context of Australian carbon farming therefore becomes ‘peer to peer’. A 5-day training nationally accredited course teaches ‘verifiers’ how to identify, measure and analyse environmental, social and cultural values of carbon farming using customised tools. As a result, a cadre of ‘peers’ will be established in each agribusiness sector (carbon farming, pastoralists, crop farming etc.) who understand best the context they are verifying.

The Aboriginal Carbon Foundation (AbCF) is committed to the skills development and income generation opportunities now available to verifiers who live on the land. The verification process is not designed to build the verification skills of external third-party evaluation ‘experts’ to undertake audits.

Model of Rigour

As explained above this Core Benefits Verification Framework has drawn on verification principles from the international development sector and as a result applies a community development lens to verification. In the case of Aboriginal carbon projects, Aboriginal people must have the decision-making power to identify the most valuable outcomes from their projects. To apply any alternative approach would re-enforce the dominant power relationships that limit the influence of Aboriginal people to determine their own futures and therefore re-enforces feelings of powerlessness and dependence.

We suggest that when Aboriginal people argue that their carbon projects are working for them, achieving the outcomes that they value most, and when they have the relevant evidence to support their claims it can be verified. The ‘Model of Rigour’ developed to measure social and cultural core benefits therefore facilitates a peer to peer directed process built on the principle of triangulation which underpins rigour in all social research.

What is triangulation?

‘Asking the right questions to the right people, in the right way’.

Within this verification framework triangulation involves a mixed methods approach to data collection, however essentially is defined as *‘asking the right questions to the right people, in the right way’*.

The model recognises that the people closest to the project (Aboriginal rangers, farmers, pastoralists etc.) are best placed to answer these questions, to identify what information needs to be collected, who the important people are to speak with to gather that information, and what protocols need to be considered to ensure the information collected is rich and accurate. Qualitative data collection methods and analysis are coupled with referencing of secondary quantitative data, readily available in existing reports depending on the industry (e.g. Land and Sea Management reports, turtle tags, fauna surveys, receipts, licenses, permits, employment contracts or Indigenous Land Use Agreements).

Participation and cultural responsiveness

Methodological validity is enhanced by high levels of participation and cultural responsiveness. For example, when outsider researchers without a solid grasp of the context enter a community to collect data they are immediately disadvantaged in several ways; they are far less likely to be understood or trusted with information about social and cultural outcomes, and they are unfamiliar with the local political context, power dynamics, cultural protocols and languages which will affect their abilities to collect accurate information and analyse it.

Utilising a peer to peer approach ensures the reverse. In the case of Aboriginal carbon projects, verification teams comprising independent Aboriginal rangers bring increased rigour to the process through their expertise in the subject matter, their familiarity with relevant cultural protocols, their understanding of how to navigate local politics and power dynamics to collect accurate information and triangulate data effectively, their familiarity with the patterns and rhythm of community life and in some cases their familiarity with local languages.

We do not have to teach Aboriginal people how to navigate being in another Aboriginal community or farmers how to be on another farm even if it is 1,000km away.

Independence

The verifiers will come from different regions throughout Australia. Independence and impartiality of verifiers is crucial; therefore, verifiers will be engaged in the verification of outcomes from differing regions not their own.

It is expected that a cadre of verifiers, specialists in their agribusiness spheres, will be established. Verifiers who have completed the training and shown strength in qualitative research ability will be identified and receive continued support to become leaders in verification.

Nationally Accredited Training package

Rigour is furthermore enhanced through the standardisation of a training package and customised core benefit verification tools which skill up the verifiers to confidently direct the process.

Appreciative inquiry methods for data collection and triangulation of data sources are taught within the training. Continued support to the verifiers as they gain confidence and skill will be available through the AbCF or other regionally based organisations.

Why not use existing standards?

We are aware of several existing standards for the verification of carbon core benefits. One international standard uses the language 'Certified SDG Impacts' to highlight the potential significance of core benefits for national level progress towards the SDGs. This approach requires the drawing down of prescribed indicators and outcomes from the national and international level SDGs. Our standard, in contrast, sees core benefits identified at the local level and without an externally prescribed indicator bank.

While there may be parallels between our framework and existing standards, there are a number of reasons why we have decided to create an alternative approach to the verification of environmental, social and cultural values of carbon projects:

- The existing standards all require selection of high level prescribed indicators developed in the Global North. In regard to environmental values there are some well-developed methodologies such as the Community Based-Monitoring approach with REDD+ projects and the Climate,

Community and Biodiversity Standards (CCBS) yet these do not extend into the large variety of social and cultural outcomes incentivised by the RCBC Fund.

- The Gold Standard (GS) and the CCBS have developed some methodologies for measuring social impacts. For example, the GS has developed methods around disability, water and sanitation and gender outcomes. These processes are currently limited to a narrow scope of outcomes (although they allow scope for working outside these outcomes as long as the approaches are verified by GS Validation and Verification Bodies (VVBs)). In addition, these methodologies appear to be resource intensive and dependent on the Global Northern experts who are the only ones accredited to implement the GS requirements. To date, only one project in Australia has completed GS verification.
- With respect to Aboriginal carbon farmers and recognising our key principles of 'Ownership' and 'Strengths-based approaches' we feel strongly that the existing standards with a minimalist mandate of 'do no harm' towards Indigenous peoples do not go far enough in advancing the rights or self-determination of First Nations people. Furthermore, the social category rewards and incentivises non-Aboriginal land holders signing Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) and support for the native title rights of the Traditional Owners.

ISEAL Alliance

We have researched international accreditation mechanisms and have decided that ISEAL Alliance is best suited to the purposes of our fund. This process takes, on average, three years for a product to secure accreditation. The result being an internationally accepted trade mark that ensures buyers the reputable process behind the verification of their premium purchase.

FAQs

Is this self-assessment?

No. The project owners will typically be farming for many years and in this time can witness and begin to document environmental, social and cultural outcomes. Once the rangers or property owners feels there is enough evidence to support their claims, a request is made to the AbCF to arrange for a verifying team from another region to visit the property.

Can a project be assessed by desk top research?

No. The project must be physically inspected by an independent verification team from another region.

Who are the verification teams and what is their role?

The verification teams will be made up of peers from across Australia, however in the first instance will be Aboriginal Rangers and farmers from across Australia who have completed nationally accredited training. Verifying teams will drive information collection across projects, implementing the customised verification tools and analysing the information collected. On the completion of data collection and analyse, the visiting verifiers will report back a summary of the evidence collected to the project and property owners.

Further R&D will customise the tools to be utilised by rangers for farmers across a variety of primary production activities.

What if the verifiers and the suppliers disagree on the core benefits claims?

The process of reporting back to the project communities or suppliers creates a 180-degree feedback loop that provides community members or project owners with an opportunity to raise their objections or to utilise an anonymous complaints mechanism.

The responsibility of the verification team is to collect and summarise the evidence that exists for each core benefit. The report to buyers will include a summary of the project team assessment, photographic records (GPS, time and date stamped) and the evidence that exists to support them, as well as some stories that reflect the core benefits being achieved. We feel this to be an appropriate approach, as outsiders are less able to make such determinations due to their limited familiarity with the context.

What about the measurement of environmental core benefits?

Many Ranger programs with native wildlife trapping or feral animal management components have existing partnerships with research institutions and universities that are tracking and measuring these outcomes. Where this information exists, it is easily incorporated into the verification process. Where this information does not exist, we are not proposing to train people in the methods required to collect this information (i.e. feral animal population dynamics) as this would be collected over an extended period of time. Within our approach however, there is scope to collect evidence through fauna and flora surveys which can also be verified through triangulation (i.e. by documenting the experiences of rangers, Elders, farmers, pastoralists and/or other appropriate knowledge holders).

How is the repeatability of data built within the standard?

This is a term applied to the collection of data determined by an externally developed and uniform indicator bank that is tested over numerous sites to determine accuracy of data collected. This concept is not relevant to this standard as we are not aggregating information across projects nor making judgements against prescribed indicators.

Each project is a discrete activity with its own character and although core benefits can fall within the three domains, the types of core benefits within these domains are vast.

How can consistency of verifier judgements be assured?

The development of customised tools and the roll out of the carbon farming training package ensures the methodology being implemented for verification is consistent. Verifiers will have varying ability to explore thoroughly the values associated with carbon farming, however the RCBC Fund will continue to support verifiers as confidence and skill is built in this discipline.

How are the different tiers verified?

There is no distinction between how each tier is verified. The customised tools enable the identification of core benefits to be verified and the determination of how and what evidence will be collected and analysed, irrespective of its value (environmental, social or cultural). The training course teaches participants how to triangulate evidence through data diversity and where further evidence could be located to support core benefit claims.