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# Breaking through barriers in communicating the impact of sustainability standards

THE VIA INITIATIVE



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PRODUCED AND FUNDED BY THE VIA INITIATIVE



# INTRODUCTION

Businesses with ambitious sustainability commitments often rely on their sourcing decisions to fulfil these commitments.

**Whether they use sustainability standards or other sourcing solutions such as company-led schemes, these companies are increasingly asked to demonstrate that their sourcing decisions are having the intended positive effect on the environment or on people’s livelihoods.**

Never before has this need to demonstrate impact been bigger, and it is only expected to grow with increased regulation and consumer demand for information. The problem is that, even when the evidence exists, it is not always easy to understand what it actually means. This makes the task of creating compelling but evidence-based messages for different audiences a real challenge for sustainability professionals in these companies.

“FOR THE FIRST TIME, I REALLY APPRECIATE EVERYTHING. I REALLY DO SEE A HUGE OPPORTUNITY GOING FORWARD. THIS HAS BEEN A FANTASTIC PROJECT, AND IT’S WHAT WE SET OUT TO ACHIEVE FROM THE BEGINNING. WE HAVE A VERY GOOD MODEL TO BUILD ON, GROW AND MOVE FORWARD.”

**BUSINESS EXECUTIVE**

This document summarises the results of a pilot project coordinated by ISEAL to face this challenge head on when it comes to sustainability standards.

The Value and Impacts Analysis (VIA) pilot started in May 2015 with the support of major industry players in the forest products value chain (Tetra Pak, IKEA, Kingfisher, SCA, Essity and Precious Woods) and the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH). It aimed to understand and break the barriers to compelling and credible communication about the sustainability performance and impacts of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

By the time it ended in September 2017, the pilot had produced a set of evidence-based messages about the on the ground effects of FSC. Companies sourcing FSC material can use these messages to communicate about their contribution to a more sustainable future. More importantly, though, these messages are proof of concept for a highly-replicable model designed to credibly assess and communicate the performance and impacts of sustainability standards.

This document presents the VIA model that was developed through collaboration of a group of highly respected researchers, sustainability practitioners, and business executives. The document also reflects on the value of this pilot as a rich learning experience for all the individuals involved.

## HOW BUSINESSES COULD USE THE VIA MODEL

- Do you need to translate academic research into shorter, more accessible statements for business communication?
- Are you in need of evidence to show that your sustainable sourcing commitments are having a positive environmental or social impact?
- Are you frustrated that there is some evidence not being communicated?

ISEAL’s survey of 101 business leaders in 2015 identified that three in ten felt they lacked sufficient evidence to convince decision makers that standards are impactful. One in five said they lacked sufficient evidence to convince decision makers in their companies of the business cases for using standards.



# HOW THE VIA MODEL WORKS

## THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP

**The VIA pilot convened a Technical Advisory Group to lead the development of the VIA model. The Technical Advisory Group had 14 members with a balanced representation of skillsets from industry, NGOs, academia and technical experts.**

The representatives were selected based on a combination of the following criteria:

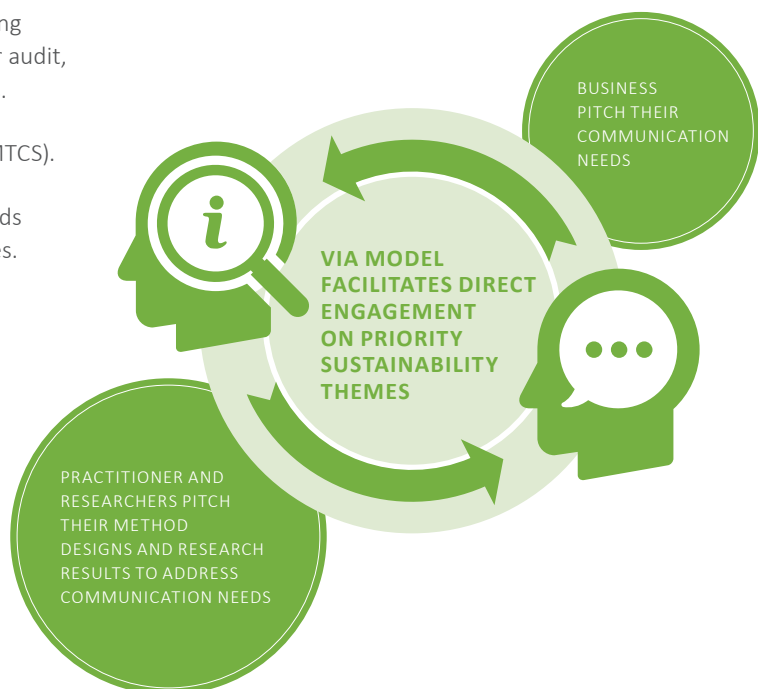
- Ability to provide specific research and methodological design input on key content areas (natural sciences, climate change, human rights, biodiversity, illegal timber trade, communication).
- Knowledge of ecological, social, political, and economic nuances of different regions applying FSC certification (e.g. plantation versus natural forest, different ownership models, management types, size categories) to support good research design.
- Expertise in performance monitoring, impact and outcome evaluation
- Current knowledge of the FSC standard, including familiarity with FSC systems and procedures for audit, monitoring and evaluation and feasibility issues.
- Knowledge of competing schemes (e.g. PEFC, MTCS).
- Knowledge and experience in design of standards system traceability systems and feasibility issues.
- Ability to commit to the timeline of the VIA pilot initiative.

## THE PITCH

The pitch enables a concept to be presented to a convened Technical Advisory Group to be considered for development and endorsement. The proposed concept should:

- Address at least one priority sustainability theme in a credible manner.
- Be clearly linked to business communication objectives and a target audience.
- Ideally generate recommendations for broader research or monitoring and evaluation approaches for voluntary sustainability standards.

If the Technical Advisory Group adopts the concept, then there can be further investment to develop or ‘mature’ the concept into statements or methods that the Technical Advisory Group could ultimately endorse. The pitch process can be used to help companies focus and deliver on ‘in-demand’ research questions that directly address their highest value evidence needs.



# HOW THE VIA MODEL WORKS

## THE ENDORSEMENT

**Once evidence is available, validating related statements for communication as credible through a transparent and documented appraisal process, generates trust in the outputs.**

Endorsement includes a series of documented steps:

1. An application for either a method, statement or business ready message is submitted along with a detailed document of record.
2. These materials are reviewed and revised through an iterative process, with all changes recorded, until a quorum of Technical Advisory Group members endorsed the content.
3. Once endorsed, the content is released following an agreed dissemination strategy, with all materials ultimately being available to the public.

The main outputs that the VIA Technical Advisory Group endorsed were statements that are accurate interpretation of research results.

Statements can be shared with communication experts to generate business ready messages. These messages can be based on one or more summary statements and are generally defined as:

- Useful within a specific business context, usually about an issue that is material or significant to the product or business.
- Truthful and based on substantiated evidence.
- Easily understood and free from misleading details.

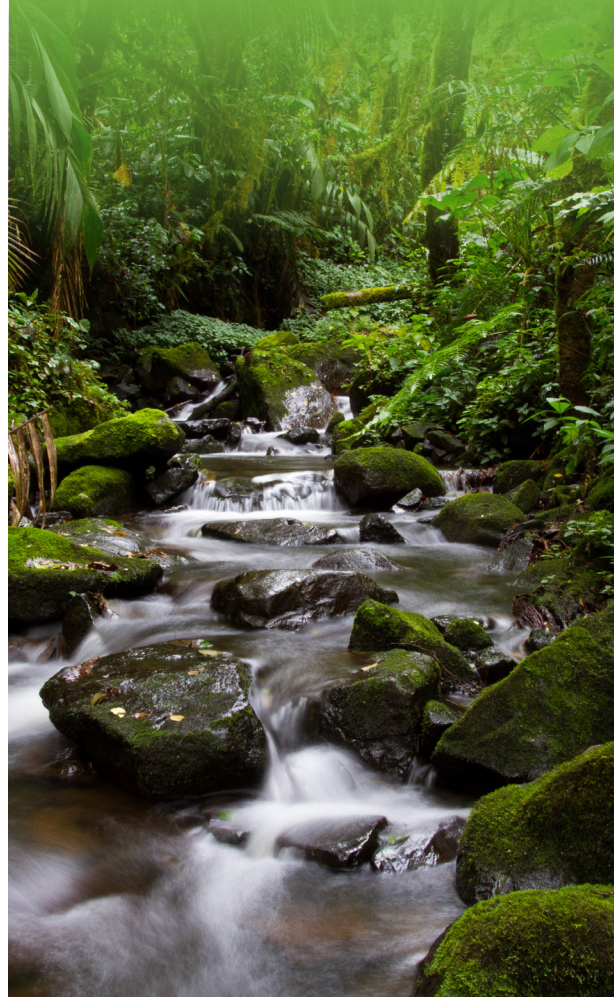
In addition to statements, the Technical Advisory Group can endorse methods.

## STATEMENTS

A statement is a concise representation of key conclusion(s) from a specific analysis. The analysis can take different forms based on the method and body of evidence considered.

## METHODS

An analytical approach to information synthesis or data analysis that is developed, piloted or revised using the VIA model, once adopted for development by the VIA Technical Advisory Group. A method could also include recommendations for data collection that may be applied through voluntary sustainability standards' monitoring and assurance practices.



# THE VIA MODEL IN ACTION

**To credibly communicate the performance and impacts of FSC certification, an approach was developed and trialled using actual evidence from FSC.**

The VIA model includes a Technical Advisory Group, a pitch and endorsement process for translating available evidence into statements for communication. Businesses benefit from the technical experts' agreement of the effects of voluntary sustainability standards such as FSC. This strengthens stakeholder uptake and the validity of the communication.

The following shows how evidence about FSC certification was used to create communication messages for Tetra Pak, a company procuring FSC certified raw materials.

**The VIA Approach begins with a piece of evidence, for example, a peer reviewed research article, monitoring and evaluation report or other research on FSC.**



**A concept about communicating the size of boreal forests protected by FSC certification is submitted to the Technical Advisory Group.**

**Original message:** By 2014, forest managers complying with FSC certification criteria were protecting boreal forest roughly equivalent in size to the state of Wisconsin.



**The Technical Advisory Group decides to adopt the concept but has some concerns about the message.**

**Concerns:** Not clear what is explicitly meant by 'protected' (protected from what and how?) and what the additive benefits of this protection is over the non-protected areas in certified forests.

Not everybody has a notion of how big the state of Wisconsin is. Concerned that 'protected' implies a more active management role than can be supported by the evidence, and that it is effective.



**Available evidence is reviewed and checked by the Technical Advisory Group to create a statement:**

**Statement:** As of mid-2014, over 91 million hectares of boreal forest were under responsible management according to FSC's requirements. Of this total, over 16 million hectares were set-aside for protection (i.e., no management intervention and left in a natural state).



**The statement is then adapted to a business ready message:**

**Business ready message** As of 2014, managers of FSC certified boreal forests had set aside an area roughly the size of XXXXX (over 16 million hectares) for protection. This represents nearly 20% of the 91 million hectares of carbon-rich boreal forests that were under FSC certified management.



**The statement and business ready messages are endorsed by the Technical Advisory Group and given to the representative from Tetra Pak to use.**



**The business ready message is given to Tetra Pak's Communication team who then uses it for external communication, e.g. social media**



## STATEMENTS AND BUSINESS READY MESSAGES

The statements endorsed by the VIA pilot Technical Advisory Group were adapted to business ready messages, as in the following examples

### EXAMPLE 1

**Statement:**

As of mid-2014, 16,912,748 hectares of tropical forest and 3,011,024 hectares of subtropical forest, under 233 and 94 FSC forest management certificates respectively, had met FSC requirements for responsible management. Of this total certified area, 2,906,292 hectares of tropical forest and 470,620 hectares of subtropical forest were set-aside for protection (i.e., no management intervention and left in a natural state).

**Adapted to business ready message:**

Among other goals, FSC aims to keep forests healthy and resilient through responsible management practices; these include setting aside areas for protection that are not commercially logged. Of the nearly 20 million hectares of biodiversity-rich tropical and drier sub-tropical forest that were under FSC certified management in 2014, over 3 million hectares—an area roughly the size of XXXXX (e.g., Belgium)—had been set aside for protection.

### EXAMPLE 2

**Statement:**

In Gabon, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo all 9 studied FSC-certified forest concessions had medical facilities, whereas only 3 out of 9 concessions that were not certified had medical facilities. Other variables that pertain to the living and working conditions of employees, such as health insurance, safety equipment checks, and injury procedures were all better in certified concessions.

**Adapted to business ready message:**

A study of FSC-certified forests in the Congo Basin found that even in remote concessions, loggers had access to medical care, which is key given the high incidence of death and serious injury among foresters.

**And/or:**

In several countries in the Congo Basin, living and working conditions, such as health insurance and safety procedures were all better for workers in FSC-certified forests than in forests without certification.

### EXAMPLE 3

**Statement:**

Across the tropics, forests where Reduced Impact Logging is practiced harbour larger populations of bird species compared to forests logged conventionally.

**Statement:**

Across the tropics, forests where Reduced Impact Logging is practiced, harbour larger populations of mammal species compared to forests logged conventionally.

**Combined and adapted to business ready message:**

Managers of FSC-certified forests are required to minimize disturbance caused by timber harvesting. Across the tropics, this practice, compared to conventional logging, helps harbour larger populations of mammals and birds, such as sunbears and great argus.



# KEY LESSONS

## **Spotlight:** The value of Technical Advisory Group endorsement

**The VIA pilot's greatest success was the team of collaborators assembled for the pilot, in particular, the formation of the Technical Advisory Group.**

The combination of the people and the problem produced new approaches for categorising available evidence and mechanisms for generating fact-based communications that could be applied by FSC and other stakeholders.

“BIGGEST VALUE OF VIA FOR BUSINESSES WAS THE COLLATERAL THINKING THROUGH OF IMPACT MEASUREMENT AND EMBEDDING THIS THINKING INTO FSC. FSC IS NOW PAYING A LOT MORE ATTENTION TO UPDATING TO A DATA-DRIVEN ORGANIZATION. WITHOUT VIA THOSE STRATEGIC PUSHES WOULD NOT HAVE HAD THE SAME STRENGTH. VIA HELPED TO GALVANIZE THE APPETITE FOR IMPACT-BASED STANDARDS.”

**FSC BOARD MEMBER**

“VIA WAS A VERY WELCOMED INITIATIVE BECAUSE IT TRIED FOR THE FIRST TIME, TO LINK VERY COMPLEX ON-THE-GROUND ACTIVITIES WITH THE FINAL CONSUMERS, AND IT AIMED TO DO THIS IN A COLLABORATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY WAY, APPLYING A SOLID METHODOLOGY, POSSIBLY AVOIDING SIMPLISTIC MESSAGES.”

**VIA TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP MEMBER**

“VIA WAS VALUABLE FOR CONSENSUS BUILDING. IT IS NOT A SINGLE RESEARCHER OR THE OPINION OF WORLD RESOURCES INSTITUTE, WORLD WILDLIFE FOUNDATION OR RAINFOREST ALLIANCE, BUT THE GROUP OF EXPERTS MAKING THESE CONCLUSIONS TOGETHER. THESE ARE REPUTABLE INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR OWN FIELD, BUT THE GROUP PROVIDES A BROADER PERSPECTIVE THAN ONE CONSULTANCY OR ONE ORGANIZATION. THIS IS A NOVELTY, SOMETHING THAT HAS NOT BEEN THERE BEFORE.”

**BUSINESS EXECUTIVE**

The VIA Technical Advisory Group endorsement provided companies with impartial validation of evidence that could be used to promote sustainable sourcing practices and bring added value to their sustainability strategies and products. The outputs were widely supported by a broad stakeholder group and there was consensus agreement on the effects of FSC. It added credibility to have the results validated by a relevant group of experts and company stakeholders through a transparent and documented appraisal process. Having stakeholders involved in the validation of the outputs generated trust in those outputs, and the resulting statements and messages were perceived to be improved over those currently used in the market place.



# KEY LESSONS

## Spotlight: Language guidelines for evidence-based communication

**A key product of the VIA pilot was the development of language guidelines that can be used to determine when there is sufficient evidence to communicate attribution of results to certification.** For example, when can a positive environmental impact be described ‘as a result’ of certification and when is it ‘associated with’? The language guidelines link the quality of the evidence to the description of causality.

The evidence typology and associated language guidelines helped stakeholders responsibly interpret the evidence base by identifying the type of study and what phrases can be used regarding attribution. The guidelines characterise nine types of evidence and then provide associated phrasing that reflects the strength of the evidence base. The language guidelines also refer to the advantages of using context to strengthen communications on the performance and impacts of FSC

“THERE IS PLENTY OF GUIDANCE ON RESPONSIBLE SOURCING, BUT LITTLE GUIDANCE ON RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS. WE STARTED FROM A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER, AND HOWEVER PROCESS-HEAVY, WE HAVE PRODUCED SCIENCE-BASED, RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS.”

BUSINESS EXECUTIVE

### LANGUAGE SUMMARY

	“AS A RESULT”	“CAUSED”	“LEAD TO”	“REDUCED”	“INCREASED”	“IS ASSOCIATED WITH”	“IS CORRELATED WITH”	“WAS FOUND TO HAVE”	“FINDINGS SUGGEST/ INDICATE”
SYSTEMATIC REVIEW	WORDING MUST REFLECT THE TYPE OF INDIVIDUAL STUDIES USED								
META ANALYSIS	WORDING MUST REFLECT THE TYPE OF INDIVIDUAL STUDIES USED								
RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL									
STUDY III: QUASI EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH DESIGNS									
STUDY II: SOME CONFOUNDERS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT									
STUDY I: CASE CONTROLS									
CASE REPORTS									
EXPERT OPINION									
OTHER EVIDENCE									

# REFLECTIONS

The VIA pilot produced several tools which can support sustainability standards in their impact communication.

**In addition to the tools described earlier, there are:**

- Endorsement application and document of record templates
- Evidence map and underpinning publication inclusion criteria
- Evidence typology and associated language guidelines
- An approach for calculating and interpreting FSC area statistics
- Guidelines for conducting corrective action request research
- Recommendations for improving FSC's supporting evidence framework

The pilot group learned a lot about convening an expert advisory group. Firstly, strong commitment, interest in the topic and a mix of expertise is vital. By considering all the skills needed to deliver the required outcomes, the right people can be invited to join the advisory group at the start. For example, in this pilot, the skill set of the Technical Advisory Group did not necessarily extend to communication expertise for developing concise and compelling business ready messages.

It is therefore important in future advisory groups to engage communication expertise at the beginning and throughout the process to support translation of evidence into credible messages.

Secondly, understanding the workload and time commitment for those on the advisory group is very important. While the pilot trialled a voluntary approach, this is not sustainable for an ongoing procedure so appropriate compensation should be considered for any future formation of a Technical Advisory Group which endorses outputs.

Developing and testing a new methodology, such as the VIA methodology, takes time, with various iterations needed to ensure a viable process. Now that the methodology is in place, future initiatives can build on this process and focus on the end objective of creating compelling messages ready for businesses to use widely.

**“VIA WAS IMPORTANT TO THE FSC BOARD AND FSC IN GENERAL. IT WILL HELP FSC IN ONE OF ITS GREATEST CHALLENGES, THE NEED TO PROVIDE INFORMATION AND TO BECOME A DATA DRIVEN ORGANIZATION.”**

**FSC BOARD MEMBER**



# BREAKING THROUGH BARRIERS

The VIA pilot was an example of how different groups of people can combine their knowledge to break through barriers. Now that the VIA model is developed, businesses can choose to replicate it using the process and a body of experts to endorse evidence. Businesses and others will find that VIA tools and guidance help them communicate more effectively about research evidence.

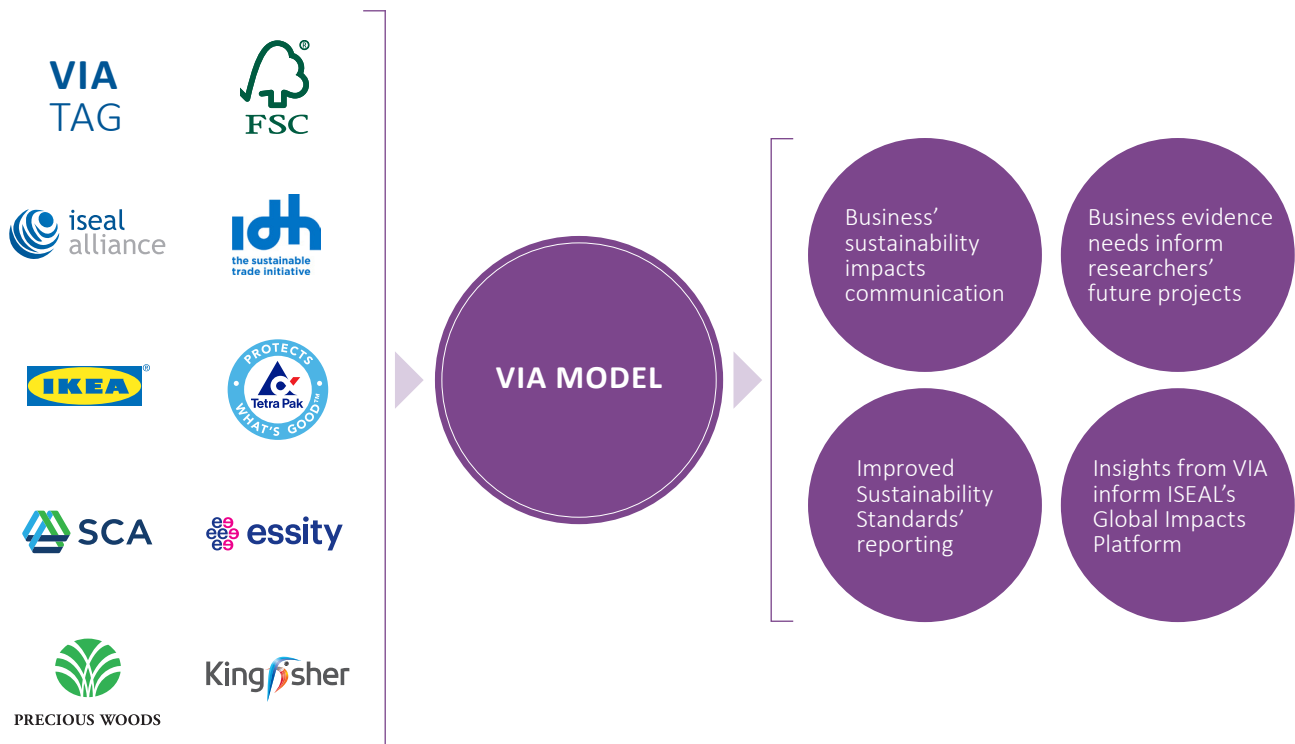
ISEAL continues to work to break through other barriers to credible impact communication. As part of this effort, ISEAL offers its technical and convening expertise to facilitate meaningful partnerships and dialogues among the voluntary sustainability standards, research and business communities.

ISEAL welcomes the investment of businesses to determine the research questions that companies want to answer so that researchers in those fields can answer such questions.

To discuss how ISEAL can help you break through barriers contact Kristin Komives, Director of Impacts, [kristin@isealliance.org](mailto:kristin@isealliance.org).

To learn more about recent research on standards visit [standardsimpacts.org](http://standardsimpacts.org) or contact Rita Mendez, [rita@isealliance.org](mailto:rita@isealliance.org).

## VIA MODEL INFLUENCES



Breaking through barriers in communicating the impact of sustainability standards

## THE **VIA** INITIATIVE

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