



ISPO certification for smallholders: process and challenges

Key points

1. The Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification was launched in 2011 as a national palm oil sustainability standard. Its goals are to align Indonesian palm oil production with international developments and legal requirements, to make production more sustainable, to promote acceptability and competitiveness of Indonesian palm oil in international markets, and to help the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.
2. ISPO certification establishes minimum sustainability criteria for the palm oil sector in line with relevant national legal and regulatory requirements. It follows seven principles for companies and five principles for smallholders, with the principles and criteria (P&C) for smallholders being less complex than those for companies.
3. Since 2011, ISPO certification has been mandatory for all company and state-owned oil palm plantation. As of November 2025, it will be mandatory for all oil palm producers, including smallholders.
4. ISPO certification of smallholders (farms < 25 hectares) involves establishment and training of smallholder groups, development of standard operating procedures (SOPs), pre-audit preparations, and ISPO certification audits.
5. ISPO's mandatory nature means it has potential for much greater inclusion and reach than voluntary palm oil certification systems, but several issues have held back smallholder certification rates. In From the total of 6.2 million hectares of smallholder oil palm plantations in in 2023, only 81 ISPO certificates have been issued for smallholder farmers with an area 58,289 hectares.
6. Challenges include issues related to land tenure legality, a burdensome cultivation registration (STD-B) process, onerous institutional, documentary and audit requirements, and high costs.
7. To expedite ISPO certification for smallholders, several key actions are recommended:
 - a. clarification of legality regarding smallholder plantations in forest areas;
 - b. ensuring that efforts to streamline STD-B registration extend to the local level;

- c. reinforcing national level support for smallholder groups;
- d. adopting a phased approach to full certification to expedite smallholder certification and facilitate their inclusion in global markets; and
- e. increasing availability of funding to support the ISPO certification preparation process.

Background

The ISPO Certification was introduced in Indonesia in 2011 as a national palm oil sustainability standard which aims to establish minimum sustainability criteria for the palm oil sector in line with relevant national legal and regulatory requirements.

A revision of the ISPO standards began in 2016 and, in 2019, the Indonesian government reinforced its commitment to sustainable palm oil management through the issuance of Presidential Instruction Number 6 of 2019 concerning the National Action Plan for Sustainable Palm Oil Plantations (*Rencana Aksi Nasional Perkebunan Kelapa Sawit Berkelanjutan (RAN KSB)*) 2019-2024. The Presidential Instruction mandates, among others things: i) the strengthening of data, coordination, and infrastructure; ii) enhancing the capacity and capability of farmers; iii) environmental management and monitoring; iv) plantation governance and dispute resolution; and v) accelerating the implementation of the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) Certification and improving market access for palm oil products.

In line with the issuance of RAN-KSB, the Government issued two key regulations on Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) Certification, and these are: Presidential Regulation No. 44 of 2020 on Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) Certification and Minister of Agriculture Regulation Number 38 of 2020 on the technical implementation of ISPO certification. ISPO Certification is also featured in the Government Regulation No. 38 of 2023 on Revenue Sharing Fund for Oil Palm Plantations (DBH Sawit) where funds allocated to provinces/ districts can be used to provide guidance and assistance for ISPO.

The current ISPO standard, promulgated in Presidential Regulation No. 44/2020, was five years in the making. Per the Regulation, the goals of ISPO are to align Indonesian palm oil production with international developments and legal requirements, to make production more sustainable, to promote acceptability and competitiveness of Indonesian palm oil in international markets, and to help the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. ISPO certification covers the upstream sector and is primarily focussed on oil palm plantations. The certification follows seven principles for companies and five principles for smallholders, with the Principles and Criteria (P&C) for smallholders being less complex than those for companies (See Table 1 and Table 2). Under the ISPO standards, smallholders are defined as individuals owning less than 25 hectares of land and to be certified, independent smallholder must belong to a smallholder group.

Although ISPO does not include a supply chain traceability system from production to processing of palm oil and palm oil-based products, the ISPO regulations do stipulate supply chain requirements for mills regarding systems to determine certified and uncertified sources.

Table 1. ISPO Principles and requirements for companies and smallholders

Principle	Description	Applicability	
		Companies	Smallholders
1	Compliance with Plantation Business Legality	YES 2 Criteria, 9 Sub criteria	YES 5 Criteria
2	Application of Good Agriculture Practices	YES 2 Criteria, 10 Sub criteria	YES 3 Criteria, 8 Sub criteria
3	Management of Environment, Natural Resources and Biodiversity	YES 9 Criteria, 3 Sub criteria	YES 2 Criteria
4	Responsibility for Labor	YES 6 Criteria	NO
5	Social Responsibility and Community Economic Empowerment	YES 3 Criteria	NO
6	Application of Transparency	YES 6 Criteria	YES 2 Criteria
7	Sustainable Business Improvements	YES 2 Criteria	YES

Table 2. Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Management for Smallholders

Principles	Criteria
1 - Compliance with Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legality and smallholder management • Location of smallholder • Land dispute and compensation and other disputes • Legality of plantation business • Obligations related to environment permits.
2 - Application of Good Agriculture Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smallholder institutional organisation of • Smallholder management • Agricultural practices and transportation of oil palm
3 - Management of Environment, Natural Resources and Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention and overcoming fire • Conservation of biodiversity
4 - Application of Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales and price agreement for fresh fruit bunches (FFB) • Provision of data and information
5 – Sustainable Business Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve performance by developing and implementing action plans that support increased sustainable palm oil production.

The authority to issue ISPO certificates is with independent ISPO Certification Bodies accredited by the National Accreditation Committee. ISPO is governed by the ISPO Steering Council, a multi-Ministry Council chaired by the Coordinating Minister of Economic Affairs, which decides on the membership of the multi-stakeholder ISPO Committee. The ISPO

Committee sets ISPO Principles, Criteria, Indicators and Verifiers, coordinates the certification process, and monitors Certification Bodies. Since October 2020, the ISPO Committee has been chaired by the Minister of Agriculture.

Since 2011, ISPO certification has been mandatory for all oil palm plantation in Indonesia and it will be mandatory for all oil palm grower and smallholder by November 2025. Its mandatory nature means there is potential for much greater smallholder inclusion and sectoral reach than voluntary palm oil certification schemes. However, a number of challenges have held back ISPO roll-out and very large numbers of smallholder remain uncertified.

This brief aims to raise awareness of the basic requirements for smallholders to receive ISPO certification by summarising key steps in the process. It then summarises key challenges in implementing ISPO certification for smallholder and proposes options to support ISPO acceleration for smallholders.

ISPO certification for smallholders

The process of smallholder certification begins with supporting farmers to set up farmer institutions, raising awareness of ISPO certification, building relevant capacities and preparing legal documents to meet requirements under ISPO.

Step 1: Identification of and assistance to smallholder groups

For ISPO Certification of smallholder groups, several preparatory steps are required:

1. **Identification of farmer institutions:** This step involves identification of villages, farmers and plantations to be involved in the certification effort and forming a smallholder group. In most cases this means building on existing village farmer organisations, whether informal groups, associations, cooperatives, or village-owned enterprises, etc.
2. **Building commitment to certification:** The smallholder organisation is established and a preliminary gathering with smallholders aspiring to ISPO Certification is held to lay the groundwork for the organisation and the certification process.
3. **Setting up farmer institutions:** The structure of the smallholder organisation is established, and necessary administrative processes are put in place. Legal recognition for the organisation is obtained through a Notarial Deed obtained through the public notary.
4. **Formation of Internal Control System (ICS):** A dedicated team responsible for implementing and monitoring the Internal Control System required for ISPO Certification is established. This team is responsible for developing and implementing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) within the organisation and conducting internal audits to ensure adherence to the SOPs. The ICS team comprises:
 - a. **An ICS Manager.** Responsible for ensuring that each organisation member implements the ISPO standard and has documentation to demonstrate compliance.

- b. **Membership and training unit.** Responsible for recruiting new members based on internal approval and organising training.
 - c. **Internal audit unit.** Responsible for conducting internal audits and monitoring all group systems.
 - d. **Trade documentation unit.** Responsible for buying and selling fresh fruit bunches (FFB) based on SOPs.
 - e. **Environmental and OHS management unit.** Responsible for environmental and occupational safety management in the group work area and managing environmental documentation.
 - f. **GAP management unit.** Responsible for ensuring that SOPs on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) are well implemented by all members.
5. **Organisational Capacity Building:** Training and support is provided to enhance the skills and capabilities of the ICS team and group members in meeting ISPO standards. Trainings can be conducted independently or in collaboration with NGOs, government or private companies.
 6. **Preparation of Work Plan and Performance Evaluation System:** Developing a detailed work plan outlining tasks, timelines, and milestones, along with a robust system for evaluating progress and performance.
 7. **Preparation of SOPs for smallholder groups:** To support effective management of the smallholder organisation the ICS team develops, maintains and supports implementation of SOPs in accordance with ISPO Certification requirements. The SOPs are set out in Table 3.
 8. **Internalisation of rules for group members:** Once documents and SOPs are prepared, information is disseminated to smallholder group members to ensure that all procedures are complied with and implemented.

Table 3. ISPO standard operating procedures (SOPs) required for smallholder organisations as per Annex 1, Ministry of Agriculture Regulation 38/2020

Principle	Relevant SOPs
1 - Compliance with Legislation	NA
2 - Application of Good Agriculture Practices (GAP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land Clearing • Planting with reference to Good Agriculture Practices • Pest Management • Handling Pesticide Waste • Determining criteria for harvest and harvest cycle • Transportation of FFB
3 - Management of Environment, Natural Resources and Biodiversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire Prevention and Control
4 - Application of Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information service
5 – Continuous Business Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning and Implementation of Business Improvement Activities

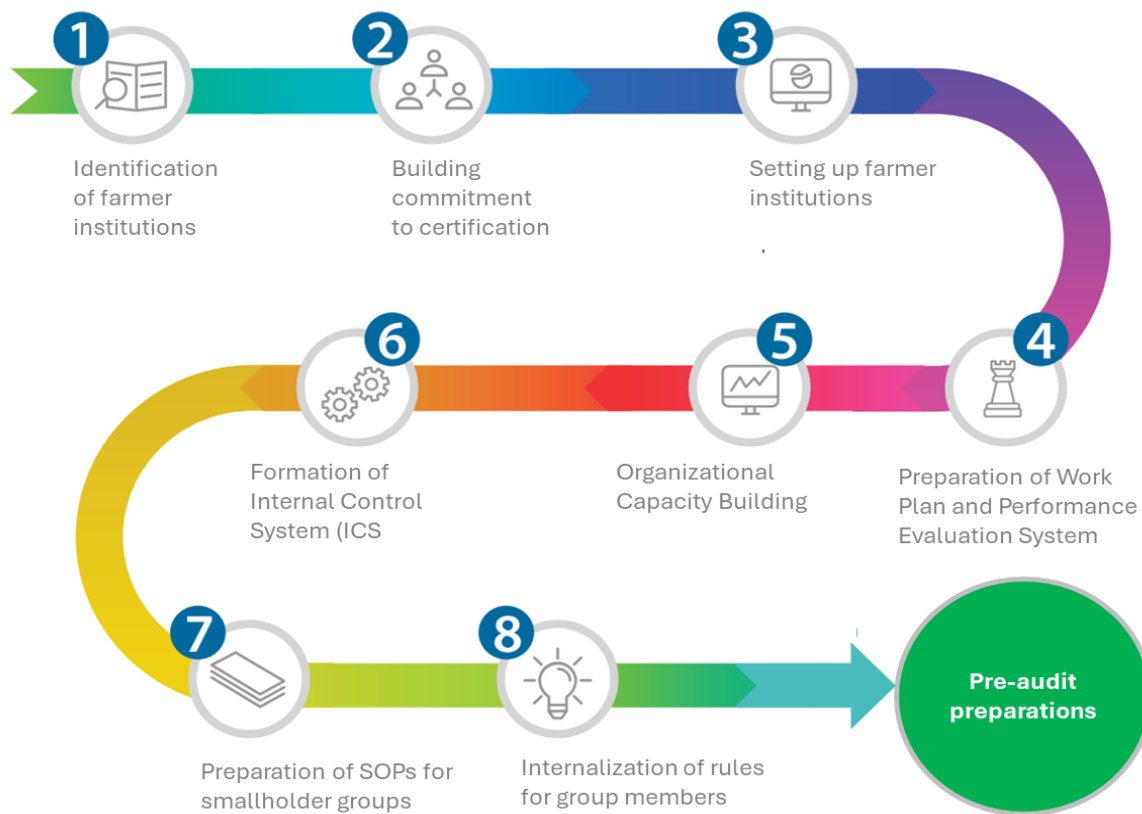


Figure 1: Flowchart of farmer institutional set up and strengthening assistance

Source: Adapted from Yayasan Kehati - Module II, Farmer ISPO Certification Assistance, Part A: Institutional Strengthening Assistance for Farmers.

Step 2: Pre-audit preparations

1. Preparation of documents for ISPO Certification Audit

Once the smallholder group has prepared the required SOPs the next step is to prepare the ISPO certification documents in line with the P&C verifiers relevant for smallholders as outlined in annex 1 to regulation 38/2023. Information relevant to the 5 principles for smallholders include, but are not limited to the following:

Principle 1 - Compliance with Plantation Business Legality

- Land legality - Smallholders have a valid proof of land ownership such as land certificate, land sale and purchase deed, girik, etc.
- Location of plantation - The land in the farmer's Location Permit is in accordance with the Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW) and does not overlap with other land rights.
- Records of land disputes, their resolution, and a map of the location of dispute/s are available.
- Cultivation Registration Certificates (STD-B) are available and issued by the competent institution, in accordance with applicable legislation.

- Surat Pernyataan Kesanggupan Pengelolaan dan Pemantauan Lingkungan Hidup (SPPL) / Statement of Environmental Management and Monitoring Capability is available.

Principle 2 - Application of Good Agriculture (GAP) Practices

- Smallholders have formed a smallholder group or cooperative and have valid legal proof.
- The smallholder management unit has an operational work plan that covers production estimates, crop maintenance, pest control, harvesting, transportation of fresh fruit bunches (FFB), maintenance of terraces, drainage, production roads and, where applicable, replanting plans and reports of activity implementation.
- Seeds planted are certified by agency authorised by the Ministry of Agriculture, and the origin of seeds is recorded.
- Planting SOPs have been developed and implemented in accordance with GAP including record of data such as planting year, seed source, plantation area, number of plants per hectare, fertiliser use, and pest and disease management.
- Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is implemented.
- SOP for determining harvest maturity criteria and harvest rounds are available.
- SOPs for transportation are available including records of fruit quality, fruit damage/contamination/loss and timeliness of arrival at the processing site.

Principle 3 - Management of Environment, Natural Resources and Biodiversity

- Fire prevention mechanisms/guidelines and SOPs are developed and implemented.
- Records of endangered/ rare animals and plants and a protection mechanism are available.

Principle 4 - Application of Transparency

- Fresh Fruit Bunch (FFB) price information based on the price set by the FFB Pricing Team for each sales purpose is available and there are records of FFB prices and transaction with dealers / mills.
- Information Service SOPs have been developed and implemented.

Principle 5 – Improvement of Sustainable Business

- There are records of implementation of continuous business improvement.

2. Internal audit

The ICS carries out pre-compliance checks against the ISPO standard to assess group readiness for audit. The following checklist can be used during internal audits which was adapted from Yayasan Kehati's - Module II, ISPO Certification Assistance for Farmers Part B: support for ISPO smallholder certification audit.

Table 4. ISPO internal audit: Checklist for Document Completeness

Principle 1: Compliance with laws and regulations		Check
1	Copy of the title documents from all members in the group	
2	Overlay map of group member with the Regional Spatial Plan (RTRW)	
3	Copy of member's STD-B document	
4	Report of Land Dispute Resolution	
5	Report on Settlement of land and compensation and other disputes	
6	SOP for Environment Management	
7	Copy of member's Statement of Environmental Management and Monitoring Capability (SPPL)	
8	SPPL Report	
Principle 2. Application of Good Agriculture Practices		
1	Minutes of Meeting for the Formation of the smallholder Group	
2	SOP for Land Clearing	
3	Group legality documents	
4	Bylaws document	
5	Record of group member registration	
6	Documentation of all group members	
7	SOP for planting with reference to GAP	
8	SOP for Pest Management	
9	SOP for Handling Pesticide Waste	
10	SOP for Determining criteria for harvest and harvest cycle	
11	SOP for Transportation of fresh fruit bunches (FFB)	
Principle 3. Management of Environment, Natural Resources and Biodiversity		
1	SOP for fire prevention and suppression	
2	Record and information on fire-prone areas	
3	Record of availability of fire prevention equipment	
4	Fire emergency response simulation footage	
5	Plan for documenting and identifying rare animals and plants	
6	Documentation and proof that no rare animals are captured or kept by farmers	
7	Document listing rare animals and plants found in the plantation area	
Principle 4. Application of Transparency		
1	Fresh fruit bunch (FFB) price agreement document	

2	Evidence of FFB price transparency	
3	FFB price record	
4	FFB sales realisation record	
5	A partnership agreement signed by the group and each buyer and acknowledged by the Head of the Plantation office	
6	SOP on Information Service	
7	Feedback form or documentation of response for stakeholder information requests	
Principle 5: Continuous business improvement		
1	SOP for the preparation of action plans and business improvement activities	
2	Record of business improvement activities	

Step 3: ISPO Certification Audit

Following completion of pre-audit preparations, the smallholder group is ready to begin the third-party ISPO certification audit process as described in Figure 1 and below.

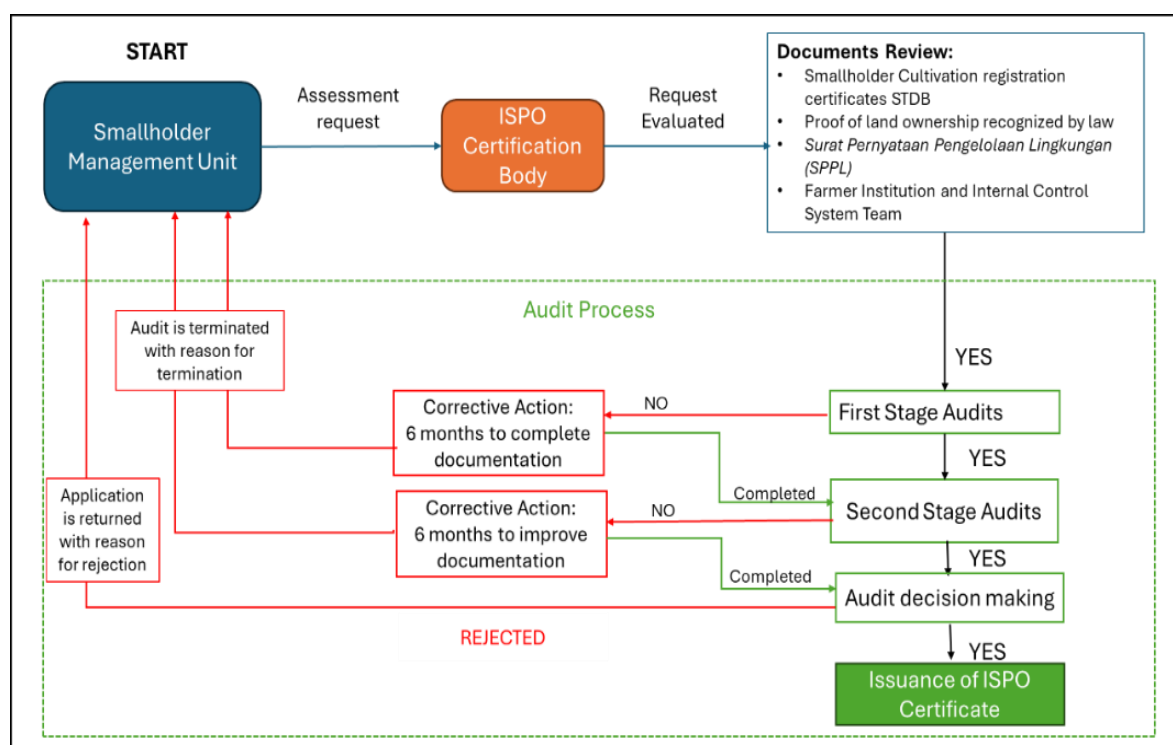


Figure 2: ISPO certification process for smallholder groups

1. Submit an ISPO certification assessment request

Once the documents are prepared and internal audits have been carried out, an application for ISPO certification can be submitted to the Certification Body. Currently, there are 18

Certification Bodies accredited by the National Accreditation Committee (KAN), as shown on the [KAN](#) website.

2. Audit

Stage 1 audit includes assessment of:

- Completeness and accuracy of legality documents.
- Samples of plantations and processing activities to be assessed in stage 2 audit.
- Critical points regarding plantations and processing activities such as plantations in protected areas.
- Storage areas for hazardous and toxic substances (B3).
- Plantations on sloping land.
- Selected stakeholders as information sources.

Stage 2 audit includes assessment of:

- All documents used by the group.
- Implementation of ISPO P&C in plantations and processing activities.
- Competence of personnel involved in plantations and processing activities.
- Confirmation of the implementation of ISPO principles and criteria.

3. Corrective actions

Stage 1 audits: If the results of the stage 1 audit meet the assessment criteria, the process can proceed to stage 2 audit. If not, the auditee is given the opportunity to make corrections within a period of 6 months. If the auditee is unable to make the corrections, the audit is terminated and the application is returned with reasons for termination.

Stage 2 audits: If the results of the stage 2 audit meet the assessment criteria, the process continues with the decision to certify under ISPO. If the results of the stage 2 audit do not meet the assessment criteria, the auditee is given recommendations to make improvements within a period of 6 months. If the auditee fails to make the necessary improvements, the audit process is terminated, and the application is returned with reasons for termination.

4. Issuance of certificate, validity and re-certification

- The decision to issue the certificate is published on the ISPO Certification Body (CB) website within 30 days of the ISPO certificate decision.
- If the CB rejects certificate issuance, the application is returned to the auditee with reasons for rejection.
- The CB is required to report the issued certificate to the Minister of Agriculture.
- The certificate is valid for five years, and assessments are conducted annually.
- Renewal is carried out by the smallholder groups by submitting a re-certification request no later than six months before the expiration of the ISPO certificate.
- The re-certification decision is determined before the expiration of the ISPO certificate and no later than four months from the last day of the stage 2 audit.

ISPO certification challenges

Despite ISPO certification having been mandatory for plantation companies since 2011, many remain uncertified. The 2020 Presidential Regulation mandated that all smallholders must be ISPO certified within five years – by November 2025.

Over the past 13 years, the implementation of ISPO has seen approximately 1% uptake among smallholders. From the total of 6.2 million hectares of smallholder oil palm plantations in 2022, 81 ISPO certificates have been issued for smallholder farmers with an area 58,289 hectares. Better progress has been made regarding company plantations with 893 certificates issues covering an area of 5.24 million hectares (69% of the total plantation area of private companies) and 76 certificates covering an area of 378,587 hectares (69% of state-owned enterprise plantations) were issued in 2023¹.

The adoption of ISPO certification has been limited for a number of reasons including limited perceived benefits, insufficient technical and financial capacity, lack of market recognition, and challenges in meeting ISPO requirements. For smallholders, low uptake is further driven by obstacles including the following:

1. **Land tenure legality issues:** Land legality is a fundamental requirement for ISPO certification. However, many smallholder oil palm plantations are located within the nationally designated forest area (*Kawasan hutan*), including in conservation and protected areas. In particular, indigenous or customary groups cultivate land they have historically inhabited but over which they do not have statutory rights. Even when smallholders possess proof of legal tenure, disputes may arise due to permit overlaps and conflicts with government spatial plans.
2. **Burdensome Cultivation Registration Certificate (STD-B) application process:** The STD-B is essential for smallholders to access government support and apply for ISPO certification, serving as a baseline for legal recognition. However, obtaining the STD-B necessitates proof of land ownership or rights, which many smallholders lack. Smallholder registration also holds challenges related to low farmer understanding, process complexity, and insufficiency of financial and technical support.
3. **Onerous institutional requirements:** ISPO certification mandates smallholders to be part of a smallholder group. However, according to Hadi et al. (2022), 80% of independent smallholders are not affiliated with any group. Establishing and formalising farmer organisations for ISPO certification requires substantial financial backing and facilitation. Additionally, there are significant limitations regarding human resources for coaching and supervision in the plantation sector at the regional level.
4. **Onerous documentary and audit requirements:** ISPO certification entails navigating regulatory frameworks and developing numerous documents and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), including the Cultivation Registration Certificate (STDB), Seed certificate/s, Statement of Environmental Management Undertaking (SPPL), and documentation of implementation of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). Fulfilling these

¹ <https://ditjenbun.pertanian.go.id/informasi-ispo/>

requirements and undergoing various audit stages is cumbersome, time-intensive, and expensive for smallholders.

5. **High certification costs:** Studies by Wibobo et al. (2023) estimate that smallholder groups require approximately IDR 115 million (EUR 6500) to prepare for ISPO certification, including establishing smallholder groups, mapping farms, and developing SOPs. Certification costs for smallholder groups can reach around IDR 250 million (EUR 14,100). Salam (2022) indicates that ISPO certification costs IDR 0.75-1.2 million (EUR 42-68) per hectare and necessitates annual verification by a Certification Body, incurring additional costs of IDR 0.4-0.5 million (EUR 23-28) per hectare.

Options for ISPO acceleration

- **Clarification of land tenure legality issues** – the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF) plays a crucial role in addressing issues related to smallholder oil palm plantations in forest areas. Coordination with the Ministry of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency (ATR/BPN) is also essential in resolving land legality issues. Additionally, collaboration with local stakeholders who have in-depth understanding of land use can expedite data collection for oil palm plantations in forest areas and help resolve tenure disputes. This approach aligns with the 'Resolution of Land Tenure in the Context of Forest Area Management' (PPTPKH) program, outlined in Articles 110A and 110B of the Job Creation Law (UUCK), which aims to involve local stakeholders in accelerating data collection for community oil palm plantations in forest areas.
- **Ensure that efforts to streamline STD-B registration extend to the local level** – In April 2024, the Ministry of Agriculture issued revised STD-B issuance guidelines (Decision No. 37/Kpts/PI.400/03/2024). The updated guidelines aim to enhance the efficiency of STD-B issuance. Key improvements include a shorter field verification process, direct information upload to the e-STDB platform for paperless submission, clear roles for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the STD-B registration process, and a simplified data collection form. To ensure the improvements take effect, the information contained in the guidelines must reach and be followed by local governments, which are responsible for STD-B processing and issuance. In many cases, district governments impose additional requirements for STD-B registration, making the process excessively cumbersome for applicants. By making STD-B issuance a performance indicator associated with available funding sources such as DBH-Sawit, state budget (APBN), and regional budget (APBD), this issue can be addressed. The approach can also enhance transparency and ensure efficient utilisation of resources.
- **Support for smallholder groups** – Central and provincial governments should implement awareness raising/socialisation campaigns to educate farmers about the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification. Campaigns could include information about trainings and financial support available to assist ISPO certification. Additionally, farmers should be supported through capacity-building initiatives focused on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) or Best Management Practices (BMP) and establishment of Internal Control Systems (ICS).

- **Adopt a phased approach to full certification** – To reduce burden on smallholders and ensure progress towards sustainability, ISPO could adopt a stepwise approach to full certification, given that achieving sustainability as defined by ISPO takes considerable time and effort. A first step, could involve meeting basic legal obligations outlined in the ISPO Principles and Criteria, collecting geolocation data (as mandated by the STD-B) and demonstrating deforestation-free production. If obligations were aligned with global market requirements, smallholders meeting step 1 requirements criteria could access markets for legal and deforestation-free commodities, such as the European Union. This phased approach could facilitate smallholder inclusion in sustainable supply chains while incentivising continuous improvement towards full ISPO certification.
- **Support for certification costs** – funds from the *Badan Pengelola Dana Kelapa Sawit* (BPDPKS) currently can be used to support ISPO certification audits. However, a large portion of the cost for certification is incurred during the certification preparation process as described in this brief. It is therefore important that funds be made accessible to smallholder groups to support the ISPO certification preparation process. Funding could be drawn from government sources such as DBH-Sawit, APBN, APBD, and BPDPKS but also other forms international partners/donors, or from the private sector as a part of company Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives. Palm oil processing businesses could also support certification costs by assisting ISPO certification of smallholders in their supply base. By engaging with smallholders, companies can contribute to enhancing sustainable practices and expand their involvement in global supply chains.

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Cover photo: Smallholder oil palm farmers in Karang Tunggal village, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. EFI.

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