What is the HCSA?

Established in 2014, the HCSA sets the standard approach for implementing no deforestation commitments on the ground for any commercial crop grown in moist tropical forest landscapes (for example, of palm oil, wood pulp or cocoa). It is underpinned not only by a commitment to no deforestation, but also by a commitment to respect the rights and livelihoods of local people. To this end, the HCSA has developed a Toolkit that provides practical guidance to help companies, local communities, and other stakeholders to agree on which lands should be used for commercial agriculture or forestry, what activities will take place on community lands, which areas of forests should be conserved, and how lands should be managed and monitored.

The HCSA Toolkit sets out practical steps to:

- Identify and conserve natural forest areas that qualify as High Carbon Stock (HCS) forests. There are four categories of HCS forests: high, medium and low-density forests, and young regenerating forests.
- Work with the High Conservation Value Approach methodology to identify and conserve areas containing High Conservation Values (HCVs). These include areas of forest and other ecosystems that are important for biodiversity, healthy landscapes and rare ecosystems (HCVs 1-3), for ecosystem services (HCV4), or for local peoples’ livelihoods and cultures (HCVs 5-6).
- Develop and implement an integrated conservation and land use plan (ICLUP), based on zoning of the land for commercial crop production, for community use and for conservation. It includes measures and procedures for collaborative management and monitoring.
- Respect, protect and support local communities’ and workers’ rights and livelihoods, including the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

The HCSA applies both to new commercial crop developments and to existing operations when changes in land use are proposed (such as clearance and planting of new areas). It applies both to the companies that are members of the HCSA and to their suppliers.
What are the HCSA Social Requirements?

Module 2 of the HCS Toolkit sets out fourteen Social Requirements that are designed to ensure that companies respect human rights and do not exploit local communities and workers. The Social Requirements are based on international human rights norms and apply to all aspects of operations. They address five main themes:

1. **Gathering information on the social context**
   The land manager must gather information about the social characteristics of the site, including the people who live there, their customary rights to land and resources, and their land use and livelihoods. This information will then be used in planning to develop an integrated conservation and land use plan (ICLUP) in cooperation with communities.

2. **Community engagement**
   Local communities who choose to engage with a land manager will be consulted throughout the HCSA process. The land manager must recognise their right to FPIC throughout, including the right to choose whether to engage with the land manager, what form any such engagement will take, whether or not to enter into any agreements, and in the case of proposed new commercial crop developments, whether the development should go ahead, or not, on their lands. If they do decide to engage, they will need to undertake participatory mapping to identify areas of land and forests that are particularly important for them, including for local ecosystem services (HCV 4), for livelihoods (HCV 5) and for cultural reasons (HCV 6). Later on they will need to enter into negotiations over and sign off on the ICLUP.

3. **The creation, management and monitoring of conservation areas**
   FPIC is also needed where proposed conservation areas in the ICLUP will affect local communities’ lands and resource rights and use. If there will be negative impacts on local people (for example, because of agreed restrictions on use), then specific incentives and benefits may need to be agreed upon in return, as part of the FPIC agreement.

4. **Minimising social impacts of broader aspects of operations**
   Policy and procedures must also be agreed on wider aspects of operations. These include labour rights and conditions, effects on local food production, persecution of individual protesters, non-discrimination (for example in relation to gender, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, sexual orientation, or political affiliation) and measures related to grievances, remedy and compensation.

5. **Applying the social requirements to existing operations**
   The Social Requirements were originally developed for new commercial crop plantations on undeveloped land, but they also apply to existing operations where a land manager is embarking on a potential land use change or is undertaking a retrospective assessment of their fulfilment of the Social Requirements.
Advantages and disadvantages of the HCSA for local communities

When applied well, the HCS Approach should help secure communities’ lands, rights, and futures. Some of the advantages of the HCSA for local communities are that there are additional checks to make sure that land managers act within the law; that they recognise customary rights; and that they gain agreement from communities before allocating any areas for crop development or for conservation that are subject to community rights and use. There may be additional positive benefits such as employment, support for community infrastructure, and technical assistance for smallholder production and other activities. However, the HCSA also has some potential disadvantages for communities because it may impose restrictions on land and resource use related to conservation. Also, implementation does not always deliver all the benefits expected. Therefore, communities need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed crop development carefully and bear in mind that they have the right to say no at any stage of the HCSA process. This may involve seeking technical or legal support from a local organisation. If they want the proposed crop development to go ahead, they will have the opportunity to negotiate the details, and the land manager will need their formal FPIC to the final ICLUP and other measures. Communities should also be aware that there are channels for them to raise grievances and seek compensation or remediation at any time.

What should local communities expect during the implementation of the HCSA?

Implementation of the HCSA consists of four broad stages:

The preparation stage
Representatives of land managers must visit all communities whose lands, land use or rights may be affected at the start of the process to tell them of their plans, inform them about the Social Requirements, and seek their Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) to go ahead. If the communities give consent, they will be asked who they wish to act as their representatives and their agreements will be sought on how further consultations are to be arranged and run. They will also be asked for information on customary land tenure and use. Also, a social background study will also be conducted by the land manager to ensure their knowledge of the social and socioeconomic realities and dynamics of the communities affected by their planned operations is comprehensive.
The assessment stage
If initial FPIC is given, several studies will be carried out on the ground. These include a social and environmental impact assessment, an HCV-HCSA assessment, and a social baseline study. These studies are important to ensure that social and environmental impacts are minimised, that HCS forests and HCVs are conserved, that local people’s rights are respected. Each of these studies will involve consultation with local people and the integrated HCV-HCSA assessment will involve more detailed participatory mapping and consultation. It is vital that communities express their views during this stage, as this is where the proposals for land zoning are developed. Communities should be informed of the results of the studies at the end of this stage.

The negotiation stage
The land manager will present communities with the first draft of an Integrated Conservation and Land Use Plan (ICLUP) based on the results of the assessments, including participatory mapping and consultation with communities. The ICLUP needs to be formally agreed with communities through a negotiation process based on FPIC principles before new land clearance and planting can start. Policies and procedures also need to be agreed upon for grievances, labour rights and conditions and non-discrimination. If any community decides not to give consent, their lands must be excised from the site of operations and the ICLUP.

The operational stage
Once the ICLUP has been formally agreed, operations on the ground can start. These include new land clearance and planting can begin, together with the creation of conservation areas and the provision of any community incentives and benefits that have been agreed upon. The land manager must continue to respect rights and ensure no exploitation throughout its operations at the site and must continue to liaise regularly with local communities on all aspects of operations that may affect or involve them, according to the procedures that have been agreed in the ICLUP.

Where to find out more
- Visit HCSA Website: https://highcarbonstock.org/
- An Introduction to the HCS Approach.
- Aperçu de l’Approche Hauts Stocks de Carbone.
- HCSA Social Requirements training materials.
- HCSA Interim Guidance: ICLUP Development and Implementation
- National interpretations of HCVs in francophone Africa: Gabon and Congo.
- Forêts de Haute Valeur pour la Conservation en RDC.
- The HCSA’s Grievance Mechanisms
- The HCV-HCSA Assessment Manual [English]
- Manuel pour les évaluations HVC-HCSA (French)
- The HCSA is a multistakeholder organization. The list of HCSA members is @ https://highcarbonstock.org/members/.
- Helpline: info@highcarbonstock.org