Good Practices for Hybrid and Remote Methodologies in Social Auditing

Remote and Hybrid Auditing for Auditors

Social auditing, in general, already requires advanced skills of an auditor to navigate the challenges of complex social topics and dynamics. Time is always constrained in audit settings and can cause additional stress and pressure during auditing and in-person interviews at the farm. Remote and hybrid auditing methods can present a remedy to time pressure as they can be applied as complementary elements to make more time for personal in-person interviews, which are vitally crucial in the context of human rights violations and social issue detection.

Digital tools, as well as hybrid and remote auditing methods have gained momentum, especially post-pandemic. They can be highly beneficial to auditors when complementing traditional means of auditing, such as interviews with farmers and workers. The project "Fostering Social Auditing: Enhancing Issue Detection and Risk Identification through Responsive and Context-Specific Approaches." implemented by 4C, Meo Carbon Solutions, and ISCC has explored the benefits and limitations of applying remote and hybrid auditing methods for social context. The following chapters will elaborate on the useful areas of application by explaining good practices of remote and hybrid auditing.

1. Audit Preparation

During the preparation for an audit, an auditor can make use of means of remote auditing by leveraging digital tools.

- Risk assessment: As part of the risk assessment, several components can be conducted remotely
    - 4C specific risk assessment: Use the GRAS Tool+ (remote sensing) to identify the risk index and obtain additional information to inform the audit; the use of the GRAS Tool+ is mandatory for auditors in 4C audits. Geodata of the farm locations will be entered into the Tool in order to obtain the GRAS risk index. You can find more

guidance on how to use the GRAS Tool+ in the respective learning video on the 4C Academy. The module "4C Risk Assessment" is only accessible to 4C auditors

- Complementary tools: Additional tools and indices can be of avail to dive deeper in specific issues, like
  - Risk of child labour: FAO's DIGIChild (currently only available for Honduras and Uganda)
  - Food security: NAFSA Tool

- Coordination with Managing Entity: To coordinate the audit, digital communication tools like email, teams, zoom, WhatsApp, etc. or traditional phone calls can be used to obtain all information required from the Managing Entity prior to the audit
- Getting informed about the local context: To properly prepare for the local context of the audit, applicable local laws, regulations and customs in the particular region can be reviewed online. Furthermore, reports from NGOs, watchdog organisations, and news can be also reviewed in online media
- Preparatory review of documents: Prior to the audit, the Managing Entity must provide audit application documents (including the BPM and IP if applicable). These documents can be shared via email and reviewed remotely by the CB

2. During the Audit

During the audit, there are several aspects that can be audited remotely, such as:

- Document review: As part of an audit, several documents, such as policies, procedures, contracts, training plans, lists of attendance, payment information etc. must be reviewed. Especially on Managing Entity level, these reviews can be conducted remotely via digital tools such as Zoom or Teams calls, sharing documents via email, or other information sharing technologies used by the Certification Body
- Reviewing grievances: The review of grievances received through a grievance mechanism implemented by the Managing Entity can be conducted remotely, e.g., by having a Zoom or Teams call, in which the responsible staff from the Managing Entity shares their screen
- Video calls: For opening and closing meetings, video conferences can be used to unite the ME staff and auditors. For particular parts of the facilities, video calls can also be used to show, e.g., how the site is organised, how traceability criteria are being implemented or how 4C coffee batches is being physically segregated from non 4C-coffee. However, there are also limitations to video calls (see 1.4), which need to be considered

For specific guidance on which checkpoints can be fully or partially audited remotely, please, review the 4C Audit Checklist v.5.0 and especially the implementation and verification guidance

3. After the Audit

After the core part of the physical audit (visits on-site), several components of cross checking, confirming and triangulating audits results can be conducted remotely

- Consulting additional stakeholders: Additional stakeholders can be consulted via phone or other digital means (Whatsapp, Zalo, teams, email) to obtain further information on situations observed or suspicions of violation. Stakeholders that might deem useful can be e.g., schools and school staff, NGOs on the regions, official authorities, etc

- **Following up with interviewees**: If during audit settings open questions remain open the auditor can ask the interviewee to share further contact details (permission to share their contacts must be granted by the interviewee) to follow-up with the interviewee on any open questions or further clarifications. Likewise, auditors can share his/her contact details for the interviewee to share anything they might deem relevant or would like to after the interview
- **Further clarification with Managing Entity**: As previously mentioned, the auditor may review additional evidence and documents at ME level. Furthermore, additional interviews can be conducted with ME staff via digital means such as Whatsapp, Zalo, teams, email or traditional phone call.

4. Limitations

Remote auditing holds several advantages of efficiency, saving travel costs and time, and immediate responses. However, in specific contexts, the assessment of complex social issues and human rights violations is challenging to impossible via remote auditing. This concern especially the farm level, interviews with farmers and workers, and visual inspection on site.

- **Effectiveness and reliability of outcomes**: When interviewing farmers and workers, technical literacy and connectivity issues can create high barriers that impede an effective interview via phone, Whatsapp, Zalo or other digital mean. Important nuances might get lost due to poor connection, or the interviewee might feel even more urge to leave the situation as it presents an unusual situation with a very formal context. Proper trust building is also hindered as the human component of building up a safe interviewing environment is essential
- **Influence by others**: The risk of interviewees being influenced by their superiors or employers during or prior to a remote interview is exponentially higher than in traditional on-site audits, since when being on site, the auditor can perceive signs of non-verbal influence in the relationship between employer/supervisor and the employee. Furthermore, when cameras are turned off in meetings or during traditional phone calls, the auditor has no chance of verifying if the interviewee is being influenced. In on-site settings, the auditor can also influence and adapt the modality of interviews (group or individual interview, interviewing only women etc.) and make spontaneous changes to avoid any preparation or briefings given to the interviewees. In remote settings, interviews need to be planned with more time in advance and therefore bear high risks of the employer/supervisor influencing the interviewee right before or during the interview, which might be covered as "technical assistance" to facilitate the use of digital communication tools
- **Risk of parts being hidden or omitted**: When conducting video calls to review and visually inspect certain areas of a farm or facilities, the auditor's eyes will only see what is shown to them. This bears high risks that important parts of a farm/facilities that would usually become evident during an on-site visit are not being shown on purpose or omitted by accident. This concerns especially social aspects, like e.g., living conditions of workers on farm, children living in or around the premises, dangerous areas or machinery at the farm/facility causing health and safety hazards, surrounding conditions, remoteness of the farm, interpersonal relation between the employer and their workers, physical health of workers, etc.

Due to the limitations mentioned, remote auditing can only be complementary but cannot fully replace on-site inspection and personal interviews. On Managing Entity level, many criteria can be verified remotely or hybridly, while on farm level, interviews with BP Producers and workers should be conducted in person and be complemented by a physical visual inspection of the farm. For large Service Providers (traders, large warehouses), hybrid methods can be deployed when it comes to document review and administrative information. For specific guidance on which checkpoints can be fully or partially audited remotely, please, review the 4C Audit Checklist v.5.0 and especially the implementation and verification guidance.