

PRB Client Engagement Working Session

Key takeaways from 24 June 2026 London workshop

UNEP FI convened an in-person meeting of the Client Engagement Worktrack to share insights on client engagement on sustainability and transition. The session was attended by 15 participants from 10 banks. Participants were mainly senior representatives from sustainable finance and group sustainability teams in banks.

1) Discussion Topics and Breakaway Groups

Note on confidentiality: in line with the Chatham House Rule and standard anti-trust guidance applied at UNEP FI convenings, discussion at this session was not for attribution to individual participants or banks and did not extend to commercially sensitive or strategic information. This note reflects the substance of discussion without attributing views to specific individuals or institutions.

Participants worked in four breakaway groups, each assigned one of two client scenarios, with two groups per scenario. Each group selected a sector to ground its discussion and was asked to design a client engagement approach addressing three dimensions: the bank's internal organisation and business case, the client's position, and the engagement journey.

Scenario A: The hesitant client: A client delaying sustainability action amid geopolitical and economic pressures, resistant to further discussion of transition and decarbonisation projects, and unconvinced of the near-term business case. The client's CFO regards other priorities as more pressing.

Scenario B: The unengaged client: A client that has not yet considered sustainability a relevant commercial issue, despite rising energy costs and supply chain disruption. The client operates in a sector with high dependency on water and material impact on ecosystems and local communities and has no sustainability function of its own.

Groups were asked to consider:

- How to bring the relationship manager on board
- How to build a compelling business case for engaging the client internally
- What is driving the client's position, and which counter arguments and evidence would be most convincing
- How to make a compelling case to the client directly
- Who on the client side needs to be engaged
- What obstacles are anticipated, and how they might be addressed
- How progress would be measured

Following group work, each group reported back and the note below captures the themes from the discussion.

2) Key Takeaways

Organisational foundations for effective client engagement

Participants indicated that mandates, resources, governance and clear lines of accountability are a stronger foundation for client engagement than reliance on individual staff interest or goodwill. This points toward embedding sustainability expertise within client-facing and sector teams, rather than concentrating it in a central group sustainability function. Senior leadership support was identified as a precondition for progress. Internal silos between risk, sustainability and commercial functions were raised as a recurring constraint on consistent client engagement. Banks piloting new approaches require a control environment sufficient to permit experimentation without introducing undue risk.

Sequencing: From risk to revenue opportunity

Client engagement on sustainability was characterised as distinct from a binary, exclusion-based risk determination; the objective is to identify value for the client and revenue for the bank within existing risk parameters. Banks were encouraged to lead with advisory value and a developed understanding of the client relationship, introducing specific products once that foundation is established. Sustainability considerations are more effective when embedded into a transaction from the outset, rather than introduced once a transaction is already underway. Several participants noted that banks can shift over time from a risk-led engagement model, centred on compliance and exclusions, toward a commercial-opportunity and revenue-led model. This was characterised as a maturity trajectory rather than a starting position.

The Client Conversation

Effective client conversations were described as practical and specific, rather than framed in normative or values-based terms. Participants emphasised the importance of understanding a client's operating context, pressures and immediate priorities before introducing sustainability considerations. Framing around resilience, ongoing-concern status, business continuity and profitability was noted as particularly effective, including with family-owned businesses, where continuity carries additional significance for ownership.

Client segments vary materially in their needs: SME and mid-market clients are currently focused on navigating challenging economic conditions, and engagement language should reflect business and commercial resilience rather than sustainability terminology.

Physical risk was identified as an area warranting greater emphasis within resilience and transition-related conversations.

Participants also recommended a focused approach: prioritising a specific sector or product line, such as battery storage, rather than pursuing broad coverage simultaneously. Engagement with multiple functions within a client organisation, including operations, procurement and marketing,

alongside the CFO, CEO and, where present, the Chief Sustainability Officer, was identified as valuable.

Winning relationship managers

Participants raised the use of technical or sustainability-specific terminology as a barrier to effective engagement. Commercial and sector-specific language, for example energy costs and savings, or productivity and yield in the agricultural sector, was considered more effective than sustainability-first framing.

Two concepts from behavioural science were identified as directly applicable: nudging, whereby the framing or sequencing of a proposal shapes client or internal stakeholder decision-making, and social proof, whereby relevant, sector-specific case studies carry greater persuasive weight internally than abstract argument, as stakeholders tend to reference the practice of comparable peers.

Relationship manager capacity was raised as a structural constraint: existing vocabulary and technical grounding cannot be assumed, and upskilling should be treated as an ongoing requirement rather than a single intervention. Given the time constraints relationship managers operate under, supporting materials, tools and data requests should be designed to minimise administrative burden. A clear, practical business case that a relationship manager can use directly with a client was identified as a priority output.

Practical approaches

Participants identified several practical approaches and mechanisms. These included bank-developed data tools that give clients commercial insight beyond compliance reporting. They also included blended finance structures to improve the bankability of marginal projects. Participants discussed the general concept of the “j-curve” - this describes the expectation that transition-related investments may involve a near-term cost or lower return before delivering longer-term financial benefit. It was seen as useful for setting expectations with clients and internal credit functions.

Participants also discussed a supply-chain or value-chain approach. Under this approach, banks engage large anchor clients to extend influence across their supplier base. Finally, participants noted the value of using existing client survey infrastructure to monitor engagement and impact over time, rather than creating new measurement systems.

Regulatory developments were also identified as a potential ‘push-factor’ for client engagement, including the introduction of prudential regulation addressing climate-related financial risk in some jurisdictions.

Bankability

Participants reinforced that a sustainability or transition transaction may be strategic and carry a reduced return but must not result in a loss to the bank. Positive sustainability outcomes do not substitute for negative returns.