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UNEP FI Social Action Plan 2026–29

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1. About the Social Action Plan

1.1 What is the Social Action Plan?

The Social Action Plan (SAP) complements the UNEP FI strategy 2026–2029 by setting out a clear and coherent approach on how UNEP FI’s work aligns with the three UN guiding principles that underpin the implementation of the 2030 Agenda: gender equality, inclusion, and human rights.

The approach is divided into two complementary channels of action:

- Strengthening UNEP FI’s internal capacity, governance, and processes;
- Supporting member financial institutions in aligning their practices with these objectives.

1.2 Who is it for?

The SAP activities are designed mostly for the UNEP FI secretariat, defining how the secretariat can strengthen internal systems and processes while providing guidance and support to help financial institutions advance more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable financial practices aligned with United Nations frameworks.

1.3 How to use this document?

This document provides the context, rationale, and foundations of the SAP and is structured in four sections. The first three sections offer the background narrative needed to understand the proposed actions: they outline UNEP FI’s role and alignment with broader UN strategies, identify key social gaps in the financial sector that the SAP aims to address, and highlight UNEP FI’s experience in supporting members on social issues. The fourth section presents the objectives and specific actions that will be implemented in the next four years within the context of the SAP.



2. UNEP FI: Supporting the financial sector as a driver of change

UNEP Finance Initiative (UNEP FI) is an initiative of the UN Environment Programme that brings together a large network of banks, insurers and investors that catalyses action across the financial system to deliver more sustainable global economies.

The financial sector plays a critical enabling role in economies, influencing opportunities and resilience through lending, investment, underwriting, and client service. While they may not be the engine of economic activity, their decisions on loans, insurance products, and portfolio allocations significantly affect who can participate and under what conditions. In this sense, the finance sector has a role to play. On one hand it can enable pathways to respect rights, promoting inclusion and driving sustainable development; on the other hand, if misaligned, can result in exclusion and reinforce patterns of inequality and marginalization.

Understanding the importance of the sector, UNEP FI was created over 30 years ago with the purpose of engaging the finance industry on sustainability. It has been the birthplace of initiatives including the Principles for Sustainable Insurance (PSI) and the Principles for Responsible Banking (PRB), and undertakes projects relating to climate, nature, pollution and circular economy. Recognizing the social dimension of sustainability, as well as the intrinsic relationship between climate, the environment and the enjoyment of human rights, UNEP FI also supports financial institutions in strengthening the integration of social and human rights aspects in their activities.

2.1 UNEP FI strategy 2026–2029

Every four years, UNEP FI reviews its strategy, analyses context and trends, and engages with members and key stakeholders to identify priorities and strategic drivers that support responsible banking and sustainable insurance. The [UNEP FI strategy 2026–2029](#) was developed based on the engagement with several stakeholders across five regions and with the strategic orientation of UNEP FI's governance bodies at UNEP FI.

The 2026–2029 strategy reiterates UNEP FI's mission to inspire, inform, and facilitate responsible banking and sustainable insurance to foster responsible business, resilience, and inclusive economies, by driving both institutional change and systems change towards UNEP FI vision:

A global financial sector that positively impacts and serves people and the planet, strengthening resilience, fostering inclusive economies and contributing to society's goals, expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and regional/national objectives.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals, defined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, set out a vision for sustainable development grounded in international human rights standards, putting equality and non-discrimination at the centre of its efforts.¹

2.1.1 Social Action Plan

The Social Action Plan (SAP) complements the UNEP FI strategy 2026–29 by detailing how UNEP FI's work aligns with the three UN guiding principles that underpin the implementation of the 2030 Agenda:



Human rights-based approach



Leave no one behind



Gender equality and women's empowerment

Within this framework, issues such as financial inclusion, gender equality, respect for human rights and meaningful stakeholder engagement are not isolated topics, but interconnected elements of a coherent rights-based approach to managing social and human rights risks and contribute to sustainable development.

The SAP also aims to strengthen accountability and governance across UNEP FI's internal operations and programme delivery. This includes establishing effective grievance and remedy mechanisms and promoting more systematic stakeholder engagement.

To achieve its result, the SAP builds on the work already being developed at UNEP FI and supports alignment with UNEP FI's 2026–29 strategy and with the following relevant frameworks at UN and UNEP level:

- a. The UN-wide action plan on gender mainstreaming, [SWAP 3.0](#) 2024–30, which outlines an ambitious vision for gender mainstreaming across the UN through various measures;
- b. The [Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework](#), which builds on the core UN principles to articulate specific principles for the work of UNEP.
- c. The [UN Disability Inclusion Strategy](#), which provides a foundation for sustainable and transformative change towards disability inclusion.
- d. The Secretary-General's [Strategic Action Plan on Addressing Racism and Promoting Dignity for All](#), which aims to address racism and bring cultural changes across the UN.

Furthermore, the SAP takes into account the UNEP's [Medium Term Strategy 2026–29](#) which identifies advancing the development and implementation of the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and working strategically with communities to find solutions, including Indigenous Peoples amongst the work for the period.

3. Financial sector gaps

Operating at the intersection of finance, policy, and sustainability, UNEP FI recognizes that financial institutions influence those who benefit from financial systems through their capital allocation, products, and client relationships.² Indeed, the financial sector has an enormous power to significantly influence social and human rights outcomes (Business for Social Responsibility, Shift and Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2025),³ but current financial flows frequently reinforce systemic inequalities and insufficient stakeholder engagement, ultimately threatening both financial system resilience and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSD, 2025).⁴

Despite some progress in recent years, efforts to expand **financial inclusion** have not yet translated into meaningful participation in financial systems for those who need it most. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and groups in situations of vulnerability, such as people with disabilities, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and communities in situations of marginalization, continue to face barriers to access financial services, especially in developing regions (First Nations Finance Management Board, 2023; The World Bank, 2016; Grandolini, 2015).⁵ Even when account ownership increases, the effective use of credit, savings, insurance, and digital payments remains limited due to cost, documentation barriers, and discriminatory practices (World Bank, 2022).⁶

This exclusion restricts economic opportunities and heightens exposure to the impacts of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, as many affected groups lack access to financial tools that could provide protection. For example, low insurance penetration in low- and middle-income countries leaves large segments of the population vulnerable to economic and climate-related shocks. Risk models often disadvantage lower-income or informal sector clients, perpetuating exclusion unless products and assessment methods are redesigned (Glemarec, Y., Solana, M. & Babinsky, F., 2025).⁷

Gender inequality remains one clear manifestation of these exclusions across the financial system. Within financial institutions, women account for a large share of the workforce yet hold only a small fraction of executive positions, limiting diverse leadership and more inclusive decision-making. Women-owned SMEs, for example, face a significant global credit gap, and insurance products often fail to meet the needs of women or groups in a situation of marginalization, despite evidence that women borrowers often demonstrate strong repayment performance (OECD/GWEP, 2025).⁸

Across financial services, significant gender gaps persist in access to bank accounts, credit, insurance, and other products (Bonfert & Norris, 2025).⁹ Intersectional factors—such as race, geography, disability, and socioeconomic status—further exacerbate these disparities, creating additional barriers to financial access and making gender-responsive

and inclusive finance essential (Azcona et al., 2025, Finance Watch, 2020).^{10,11} Without intentional action, lending and investment patterns tend to mirror real-world inequalities.

At the same time, financial activities can contribute to **human rights** risks, and financial institutions are expected to respect human rights by aligning with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (OHCHR, 2011). Overall performance in terms of human rights policies, processes, reporting and practices is gradually improving, but no bank yet fully meets its human rights responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles (Banktrack, 2024).¹²

Engagement with affected stakeholders is a core element of respecting human rights, but mechanisms for involving communities—especially those most affected by financial decisions, such as marginalized groups and Indigenous Peoples—remain weak. Communities impacted by project finance and clients facing exclusion or unfair treatment often lack accessible channels for participation or grievance redress. Poor engagement can result in legal, regulatory, and reputational risks, whereas inclusive engagement improves risk assessment, product design, and trust between institutions and their clients (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025; Kvam, 2019; UNEP FI, n.d.; Yue, Nedopil Wang, Lin & Fan, 2022).¹³

At the same time, stakeholders—including regulators, investors, and customers—are demanding greater **accountability** on social and human rights issues (Kvam, 2019; Yue, Nedopil Wang, Lin & Fan, 2022).¹⁴ This is emerging through, for example, the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and growing pressure from civil society and consumers. Initiatives such as Forests and Finance,¹⁵ for example, are uncovering the connections between the finance industry and the harms resulting from industries such as palm oil, soy, beef production and mining, while the Taskforce on Inequality and Social-related Financial Disclosures (TISFD)¹⁶ is developing frameworks to strengthen transparency around social and inequality-related financial risks.

These trends mean that exclusionary portfolios and products will increasingly carry regulatory, legal, and reputational risks. Institutions that fail to integrate social inclusion and human rights into their finance flows may lose competitiveness, while early movers can strengthen market position.

Embedding social and human rights in finance flows is essential to building resilient financial systems. It is central to risk management, market opportunity, and competitiveness (UNEP FI, n.d).¹⁷

4. UNEP FI's social work

Recognizing that environmental sustainability and social equity are closely linked, UNEP FI has made deliberate efforts since 2006 to integrate inclusion, gender equality, and human rights into its workstream. These issues are addressed both as standalone priorities and as integral components of the broader sustainability agenda, alongside the environmental and economic pillars of sustainable development. UNEP FI contributes to both institutional transformation and broader system change by:

a. Developing practical tools and guidance

Mainly through the PRB and PSI frameworks, UNEP FI creates finance-specific resources that translate international and regional standards into actionable steps, addressing sustainability risk and impacts in a holistic way. UNEP FI has for example developed a range of tools and guidance specifically on the social and human rights issues, including:

- **Human rights:** The [Human Rights Toolkit](#) supports financial institutions in promoting respect for human rights. It provides step-by-step guidance on integrating human rights considerations into operations and business relationships, including retail banking, lending and investment activities.
- **Gender equality:** Through its [Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Target-Setting Guidance](#), UNEP FI supports institutions in embedding gender considerations across governance, product design, underwriting and engagement. UNEP FI also promotes gender balance within its own governance bodies, which currently comprise 53% women and 47% men.

b. Building member capacity

Through Communities of Practice, workshops, implementation support and regional peer learning, UNEP FI works with UNEP FI members to apply tools in practice, align with the SDGs, UNGPs, and improve financial health outcomes and advance gender equality. For example, currently UNEP FI has a Human Human Rights Community of Practice, with over 50 banks and insurers, and a PRB Community of Practice on Healthy and Inclusive Economies with over 100 banks.

c. Promoting commitment and leadership of members

Through specific projects such as: the [Principles for Responsible Banking Commitment to Financial Health and Inclusion](#), with 30 signatories, supports institutions in setting targets, improving financial access and contributing to inclusive economies.

d. Coordinating with policymakers and the UN system

We work with policymakers and UN bodies (ILO, OHCHR, UN women and others) to ensure alignment with global norms and clarity on expectations related to human rights, inclusion and gender equality.

Besides these specific examples, UNEP FI regularly incorporates social and human rights considerations into its work across all workstreams, supporting a holistic and coherent approach.

Furthermore, in line with UN values and understanding that diversity, especially in terms of social groups, backgrounds, and gender, is vital to enhance the organisation's capacity to comprehend and champion social and human rights,¹⁸ UNEP FI strives to have a diverse workforce that is trained and aware of the main social and human rights thematics, and can integrated into their day-to-day jobs.

5. The Social Action Plan goals

While UNEP FI has already established a solid foundation through existing initiatives and member engagement, internal processes, systems and institutional practices are at varying stages of maturity. This action plan therefore builds on current strengths while addressing identified gaps, ensuring that progress is structured, realistic and aligned with the organization’s broader strategic plan for the 2026–2029 cycle.

The proposed actions can be divided into the following:

Internal policies and processes	Work programme
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthen internal capacity 2. Promote and reinforce diverse and equitable governance structures 3. Embed inclusive participation and ensure accessible engagement 4. Strengthen and implement effective grievance and remedy mechanisms. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Support and guide members to adopt inclusive policies and practices 6. Develop and disseminate inclusive communication and outreach
Cross-cutting	
7. Cultivate and leverage strategic partnerships	

Through these actions, UNEP FI aims to contribute to long term progress among member financial institutions, ensuring that gender, inclusion and human rights are advanced in an integrated way alongside other sustainability priorities, including their capacity to:

- Integrate gender equity, inclusion, and human rights into portfolios and operations.
- Establish diverse and equitable governance and decision-making processes.
- Contribute to a system-wide shift toward inclusive, human-rights–aligned sustainable finance.

The action will be put in place in three different phases:

- **2026–7:** Awareness raising, systems and process development and new ways of working, for example establishing baselines and developing policies and protocols.
- **2028:** Embed and refine, introducing improvements as appropriate.
- **2029:** Realize the goals and plan ahead

This first version of the Action Plan will be refined gradually, also providing opportunities that occur naturally through the other strategic and implementation cycles of the organization to integrate change into existing systems as appropriate. In order to ensure stakeholders are kept informed, and to provide an opportunity for UNEP FI to reflect on

progress, a monitoring report will be done at the halfway point towards the end of 2027, and other at the end of the period, in early 2030. These reports will outline what has been achieved, where there have been chances to learn and improve and what is planned for the remaining implementation, as well as recommendations for next steps.

7.1 Actions and activities outline

Actions	Examples of activities	Examples of Indicators
1. Strengthen internal UNEP FI capacity on gender, social inclusion, and human rights.		
Develop and update internal tools to mainstream gender, social inclusion, and human rights across activities and subprojects	Maintain and regularly update an internal resources library. Embed social/gender/human rights lenses into templates, project docs, guidance, and QA checks for all new projects.	N° or % of sub projects and activities developed by UNEP FI in a year that includes gender and social considerations
Build capacity across UNEP FI.	Deliver annual organisation wide training. Host quarterly internal learning sessions and webinars Integrate social/gender considerations into onboarding processes.	Percentage of UNEP FI staff who have completed the training. N° of internal regular sessions and webinars on gender, financial health & inclusion, just transition and human rights, and any other relevant areas.
2. Promote diversity and equitable representation in UNEP FI governance.		
Maintain and enhance diversity within governance bodies.	Ensure diversity (geography, age, race, Indigenous Peoples, gender) in new appointments. Monitor and report annually on gender and social representation in governance structures.	Yearly internal report on staff and governance bodies diversity data (measures taken and data results)
Strengthen civil society participation.	Maintain and reinforce the PRB Civil Society Advisory Body.	Internal yearly report with Number of CSAB meetings held annually, participation rate of members,
Increase the representation of Indigenous Peoples and underrepresented groups	Establish formal participation seats for Indigenous Peoples and other underrepresented groups in governance committees where relevant.	Yearly internal report on governance bodies representation of Indigenous Peoples (measures taken and results)

Actions	Examples of activities	Examples of Indicators
3. Promote inclusive participation, engagement and accessibility		
Improve accessibility and multilingual access across UNEP FI materials and events	Use multilingual interpretation tools during events, when feasible. Translate priority UNEP FI publications. Keep UNEP FI's contact pages accessible and up to date.	N° of webinars and events offering multilingual interpretation. N° or % of UNEP FI publications available in more than one language. N° of stakeholder access/contacts made through UNEP FI contact points.
Promote and monitor gender balance in UNEP FI events	Track gender participation in events and trainings. Apply genderbalanced panel guidelines.	N° or % of women participating in UNEP FI organized events.
Establish regular communication channels with civil society(including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, local communities)	Hold an annual open meeting with civil society to present UNEP FI's annual work plan. Maintain institutionalised stakeholder dialogue. Foster representation of Indigenous Peoples, women's organisations and youth networks.	N° of civil society organizations participating in the consultation. N° of communication channels established with civil society and NGOs. N° of CSO organizations regularly contacted.
Gather and share data on inclusion and accessibility	Collect and share participation, gender, accessibility and stakeholder engagement metrics with team leads.	Monitoring system or database established, and regularly updated, to track inclusion, accessibility and stakeholder engagement.
4. Strengthen UNEP FI's grievance and remedy mechanisms		
Strengthen UNEP FI's own grievance mechanism.	Ensure the grievance mechanism is clearly visible and easy to find. Update grievance procedures for clarity, accessibility and alignment with UNEP best practices.	UNEP FI staff awareness of grievance mechanism measured through internal survey. N° of improvements/updates to the mechanism based on recommendations or feedback.
Engage in global forums to advance remedy and grievance practices.	Participate in OHCHR Business & Human Rights Forums, especially on grievance mechanisms. Share lessons internally after each global forum	N° of international engagements on grievance and remedy.
Build member capacity on grievance mechanisms	Provide training based on the UNEP FI Human Rights Toolkit. Support members in designing or improving grievance mechanisms.	N° of trainings delivered N° of participants Evidence of members updating/ strengthening grievance mechanisms.

Actions	Examples of activities	Examples of Indicators
5. Promote gender equity and social inclusion across UNEP FI member institutions' portfolios and own operations		
Develop systems to collect and analyze gender related data from members	Collect relevant data on gender from UNEP FI members.	Annual gender-related insights or analysis produced based on collected data.
Strengthen support through gender and financial inclusion initiatives	Support implementation of the Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment Target-Setting Guidance. Maintain the Healthy & Inclusive Economies Community of Practice. Develop regional gender responsive tools and methodologies.	No. of UNEP FI initiatives meetings supporting gender equality and financial inclusion. No. of financial institutions participating in these initiatives. No. of UNEP FI tools developed to support gender equality and financial inclusion.
Facilitate dialogue on gender equality and financial inclusion	Organize cross stakeholder roundtables with governments, NGOs, experts and FIs. Host regional deep dives on inclusive finance.	No. of multi-stakeholder dialogues, events or roundtables organized. Number and diversity of participating stakeholders
Build capacity on stakeholder engagement and human rights due diligence	Provide training modules based on the Human Rights Toolkit. Support FIs to integrate stakeholder engagement into operations.	No. of financial institutions participating in capacity buildings/ taking training modules.
6. Strengthen inclusive communication and outreach		
Develop guidance and materials for inclusive and accessible communications.	Create UNEP FI inclusive communication guidelines (inclusive language, accessibility, multilingual outputs). Develop clear protocols to ensure website accessibility. Promote events that meet accessibility standards (captions, interpretation, etc.).	No. of guidance documents or materials produced to support inclusive and accessible communications.
Strengthen visibility of gender and social inclusion work across UNEP FI platforms	Highlight success stories, case studies, and impact metrics across UNEP FI channels.	No. of UNEP FI communication products highlighting gender and social inclusion work (success stories, blogs, campaigns, newsletters, social media posts, etc)

Actions	Examples of activities	Examples of Indicators
7. Strengthen partnerships for systemic change		
Maintain/enhance strategic partnerships with UN & global initiatives =	Continue collaboration with UN Women, UNEP, OHCHR, ILO, and others. Support joint initiatives such as Decent Work guidance. Maintain UNEP FI's role in the WEFI Code.	No. of joint initiatives or actions implemented on gender and social inclusion through collaboration with UN and other international partners.
Maintain/enhance strategic partnership with civil society organizations	Co-develop relevant materials with civil society partners.	No. of joint initiatives or actions implemented on gender and social inclusion through collaboration Civil Society Organizations.

UNEP FI has a Social Team to lead the strategy, activities and monitor implementation, but specific activities on social, gender and human rights are across different teams at UNEP FI.

Endnotes

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UNEP Finance Initiative brings together a large network of banks, insurers and investors that catalyzes action across the financial system to deliver more sustainable global economies.

For more than 30 years the Initiative has been connecting the UN with financial institutions from around the world to shape the sustainable finance agenda. We've established the world's foremost sustainability frameworks, helping the finance industry achieve sustainability goals, address sustainability risks and identify the business opportunities in taking a responsible approach to banking and insurance.

Convened by a Geneva, Switzerland-based secretariat, more than 550 banks and insurers are individually implementing UNEP FI's Principles for Responsible Banking and Principles for Sustainable Insurance. Financial institutions work with UNEP FI on a voluntary basis to apply these industry frameworks and

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develop practical guidance and tools that drive institutional change, shaping the future of sustainable finance and positioning their businesses for the transition to a sustainable and inclusive economy. In parallel, UNEP FI also drives systems change and fosters enabling conditions in service of the broader mission to mobilize and align private finance to help achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Founded in 1992, UNEP FI was the first organization to engage the finance sector on sustainability and incubated the Principles for Responsible Investment, now the world's leading proponent of responsible investment.

Today, we cultivate leadership and advance sustainable market practice while supporting the implementation of global programmes at a regional level across Africa & the Middle East, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America & the Caribbean, and North America.



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UN Environment Programme Finance Initiative