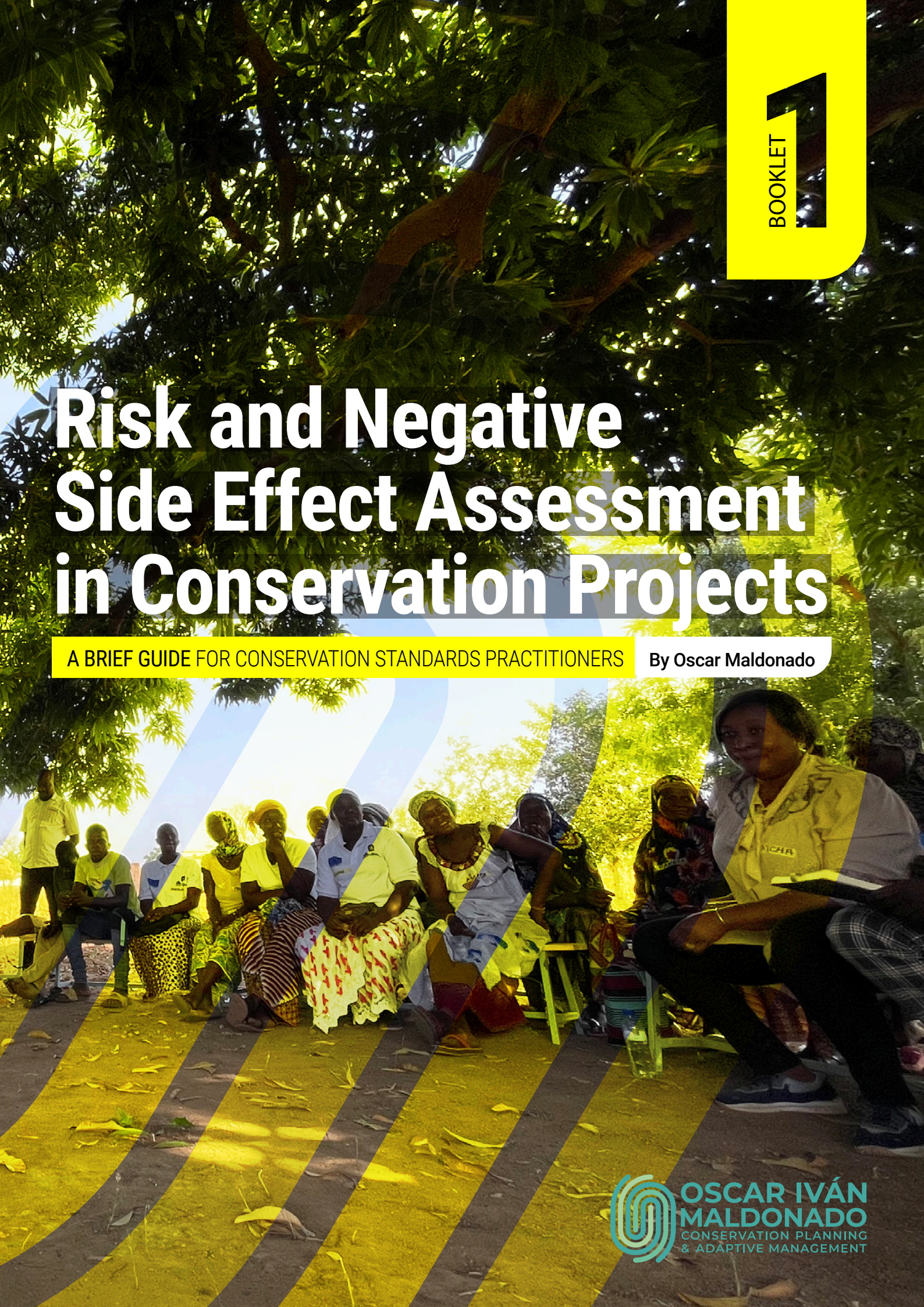

BOOKLET 1

Risk and Negative Side Effect Assessment in Conservation Projects

A BRIEF GUIDE FOR CONSERVATION STANDARDS PRACTITIONERS

By Oscar Maldonado

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Why assess risks and negative side effects?

Conservation projects aim to achieve positive environmental and social impacts. However, interventions in complex socio-ecological systems may carry inherent risks and unexpected consequences. These risks and negative side effects (NSEs) may result in unintended harm to people—particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable—as well as to nature, jeopardizing the success of the project.
Timely assessing risks and NSEs:

- Reduces the likelihood of unintended consequences with high social and economic costs to people and projects.
- Aligns projects with ethical responsibilities, especially towards vulnerable groups.
- Contributes to overall project success by integrating mitigation measures in the project design.

Why an additional tool for the Conservation Standards? Why gender and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)?

The Conservation Standards (CS) recommend risk analysis but provide limited guidance on how to integrate it into the project design. These guidelines present an approach to identifying and addressing risks and NSEs, with the aim to:

- Seamlessly integrate the risk and NSE assessment into conservation planning.
- Support compliance with environmental and social safeguards and facilitate the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of local stakeholders.
- Improve the accountability and sustainability of conservation initiatives.

The inclusion of a gender and DEI lens is not optional—it is essential for the credibility, ethics, and effectiveness of this assessment process.
Even in well-executed assessments, gender-specific or minority issues can remain invisible:

- Women, youth, Indigenous peoples, or other groups may be underrepresented in workshops.
- Participants may not spontaneously raise sensitive issues without targeted facilitation
- The group may average out risks, masking disproportionate effects on marginalised subgroups.

Many social dynamics in conservation settings—such as gendered divisions of labor, land tenure conflicts, and cultural constraints—require particularly sensitive approaches to uncover these impacts.

Assessment readiness: What needs to be in place?

Before starting your assessment, ensure that the following components are in place:

- **Vision**—it is always important to remind the team of the project's ultimate goal.
- **Geographic scope**—it helps to understand where the impacts on people and biodiversity may occur.
- **A comprehensive stakeholder analysis**—essential for identifying key people who may be affected by the project's actions and outcomes. This analysis should be conducted prior to the R+NSE assessment and must include a careful examination of social sub-groups, including vulnerable communities. The analysis should remain aligned with the purpose and scope of the project as not every possible sub-group will be affected. A clear understanding of the project scope will help identify which groups require closer attention.

Tip: During the stakeholder analysis use key guiding questions to ensure vulnerable people are not overlooked (i.e. Are all women equal? May all women be equally affected? Such questions help identify critical sub-groups, such as women who own land versus landless women).

Note: *While the term 'stakeholder' remains widely used, 'interested parties' is increasingly employed—especially in projects involving Indigenous communities where it may be seen as more culturally appropriate. Be mindful of cultural nuances when choosing either term.*

Understanding the difference: risks vs. negative side effects

While risks and NSEs are often related, they differ in their causes, nature, and required responses. Understanding these differences is critical to determining project responsibilities and the appropriate course of action.

Risks

External circumstances that exist independently of the project but may hinder implementation or results.

The project is not directly responsible for risks but may need to prevent or mitigate their consequences to ensure its success.

Negative side effects

Unintended consequences caused by the project that directly affect people, biodiversity, the environment or the project itself.

The project has a responsibility to prevent, mitigate, or correct these effects.

STEP 1 Identify risks and NSEs

Result chains represent the backbone of a conservation initiative, making them the right place to conduct your assessment. Working through this exercise in your results chains allows you to integrate mitigation measures within your strategies as part of their design phase.

Start by identifying *what can go wrong and who may be affected* in a general overview of your results chains. If necessary, conduct a deeper analysis by reviewing each box in your diagrams, however the most critical issues often stand out during the initial review.

Once you identify them, classify each one as either a risk or an NSE.

Methodological tip

To ensure a more objective review of potential risks and NSEs in your results chains, rotate or switch groups working on different diagrams when conducting the analysis in workshops.
Reviewing another group's work makes it easier to identify potential issues. If possible, invite external reviewers to provide fresh perspectives. However, always include at least one person from the original group to respond to any questions and report back on the findings.
Keep the stakeholder analysis handy and review it regularly during the assessment. This will help ensure that potential risks or NSEs that may particularly affect certain groups or individuals are not overlooked.
Develop a list of generic potential risks and NSEs with a gender focus beforehand, and use it as an adaptable guide during assessment exercise.

Examples of risks

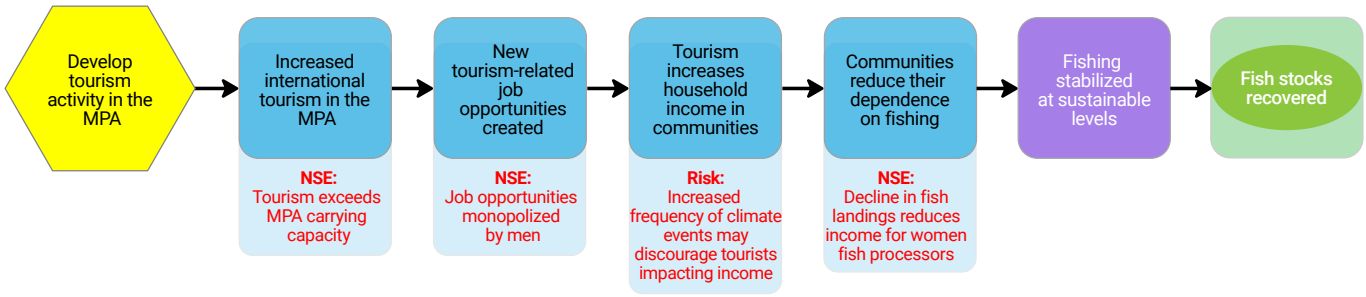
- **Gender, equity, and inclusion risks**: limited participation of marginalized groups, decision making processes monopolized by men.
- **Social risks** – land-use conflicts, opposition from some influential interested parties.
- **Environmental risks** – droughts, floods, wildfires.
- **Political risks** – changes in government support.
- **Financial risks** – loss of funding.
- **Operational risks** –security risks in conflict-prone areas.

Examples of NSEs

- **Gender, equity, and inclusion NSEs** – increased workload for women, unintentional exclusion of less visible groups from project benefits.
- **Social NSEs** – undesired changes in livelihoods, unemployment.
- **Environmental NSEs** – restricted access to resources needed for local communities, increased human-wildlife conflict.
- **Economic NSEs** – financial instability, reduced income, increased cost of goods and services.
- **Cultural NSEs** – erosion of traditional knowledge and practices.

Note: Gender and DEI considerations are cross-cutting. Any type of risk or NSE may affect groups differently and should therefore be assessed with a gender/inclusion lens.

Results chain with risks & NSEs identified



STEP 2 Analyze magnitude and probability

Now that you have identified risks and NSEs, analyze whether they need to be considered for mitigation measures. This evaluation is based on two key criteria: probability and magnitude.

Probability refers to the likelihood of a risk or NSE occurring, while magnitude assesses the expected level of impact—in depth and pervasiveness—on people, biodiversity, the environment, or on the project itself.

As with other Conservation Standards assessments, use a four-level rating scale ranging from low to very high to classify risks and NSEs. Keep in mind that different stakeholders may be affected in different ways; therefore, in some cases it may be necessary to differentiate probability and magnitude ratings by gender or other affected groups. This requires a disaggregated analysis to avoid averaging out specific or severe impacts experienced by less visible groups.

Criteria for analyzing probability and magnitude

Probability

- **Low:** The event is unlikely to occur. Most conditions suggest that it will not happen.
- **Medium:** The event is more unlikely than likely, but certain conditions could lead to its occurrence.
- **High:** The event is more likely to occur than not, with most conditions favoring its likelihood.
- **Very High:** The event is almost certain to occur, with strong indications supporting its inevitability.

Magnitude

- **Low:** Minimal or negligible damage, easily manageable or reversible.
- **Medium:** Moderate damage, but mostly reversible. Requires additional resources to manage.
- **High:** Substantial damage causing medium-term harm. Challenging to mitigate.
- **Very High:** Severe, potentially irreversible damage with far-reaching consequences.

Analyzing and prioritizing risks and NSEs	Low magnitude	Medium magnitude	High magnitude	Very-high magnitude
Low probability	✕	✕	✕?	✕?
Medium probability	✕	✕?	✓?	✓?
High probability	✕?	✓?	✓	✓
Very-high probability	✕?	✓?	✓	✓

Recommendations:

- Drop risks and NSE rated **low-low** or **low-medium** (in green on the table).
- Prioritize those rated **high-high**, **high-very high**, and **very high-very-high** (in red on the table).
- Discuss the relevance of those with intermediate ratings before deciding to include them or not (in yellow and orange on the table).
- Consider that risks and NSEs may materialize at different timeframes, affecting people later or over extended periods.

STEP 3 Identify mitigation measures

Once you have assessed the probability and magnitude of risks and NSEs, the next step is to propose mitigation measures. You should identify at least one mitigation measure for each high priority risk or NSE.

There are three kinds of mitigation measures:

- **Prevention:** Aimed at avoiding the risk or NSE from occurring.
- **Mitigation:** Focused on reducing or managing the consequences of a risk or NSE.
- **Correction:** Intended to repair the consequences of a risk or NSE—this should be considered as a last resort.

Mitigation measures should be:

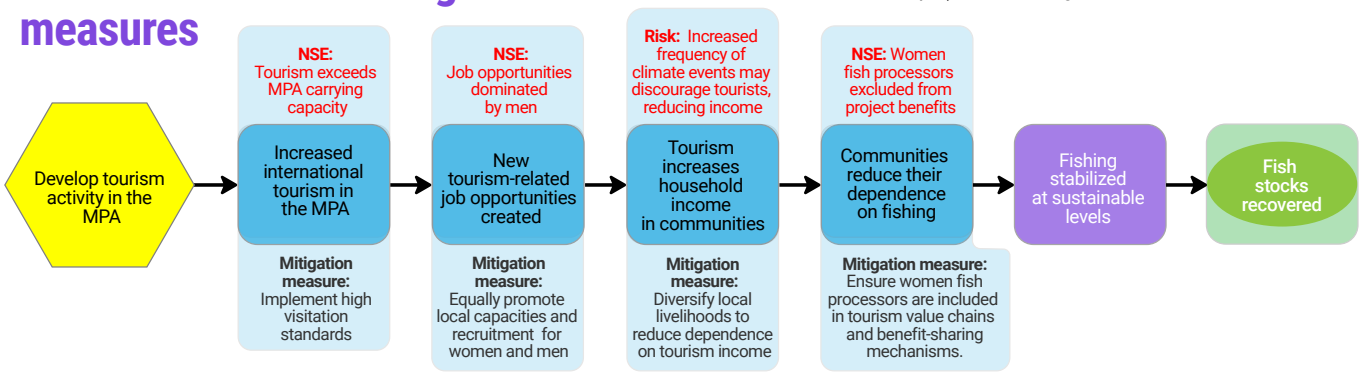
- **Specific** – Directly address the identified risk or NSE.
- **Feasible** – Realistic within the project's scope and resources.
- **Integrated** – Incorporated into project design rather than as an afterthought.

You may consider:

Differentiated measures: Develop differentiated mitigation measures tailored to the most affected groups and stakeholders.

Accountability: Embed accountability mechanisms to track and follow up on mitigation measures, such as internal monitoring protocols (also to be included in Step 5) and formal grievance mechanisms.

Results chain with mitigation measures



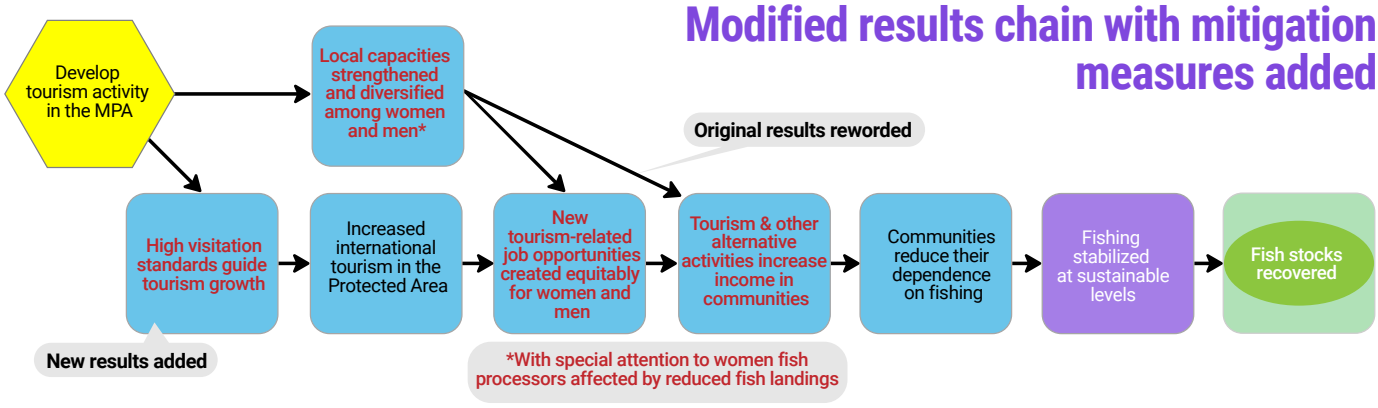
STEP 4 Integrate mitigation measures into project design

Once mitigation measures have been identified, the next step is to determine how they will be incorporated into the plan. This ensures that mitigation is not treated as an afterthought but rather as an integral component of the project and strategies.

Mitigation measures can be included in different ways:

- **As a new result in the results chain** – If a risk or NSE is significant, you may consider adding a new intermediate result box into the results chain diagram. Ensure that this result is stated as such—not as an activity—and it is linked to the result associated to the risk or NSE. You may also consider defining an objective for this with a corresponding indicator.
- **As activities** – Most mitigation measures can be addressed through activities integrated into the work plan or included in the monitoring plan to track as early warning indicators.
- **As a stand-alone mitigation strategy** – In very rare cases, specific risks or NSEs may require a dedicated mitigation strategy as part of your project.
- **As a reference to another strategy** — the mitigation measure may already be embedded in another strategy, or another existing strategy may inherently serve as a mitigation measure for some priority risks or NSEs.

Modified results chain with mitigation measures added



STEP 5 Monitoring mitigation measures

To ensure the effectiveness of mitigation measures, it is essential to track their implementation and outcomes, particularly for measures developed to address the most critical risks and NSEs. Defining key outputs for measures incorporated as activities in work plans and establishing indicators for those tied to objectives ensure measures are properly included in the project.

Integrating mitigation measure indicators into the project's monitoring plan allows teams to systematically assess progress, determine effectiveness, and make necessary adjustments for continuous improvement. For measures addressing highly sensitive risks and NSEs affecting local communities, teams may consider developing a separate community monitoring plan with collective tracking activities tailored to community needs.

Facilitation tips

Facilitating a risk and NSE assessment requires a systematic approach to ensure clarity and engagement. Consider the following strategies:

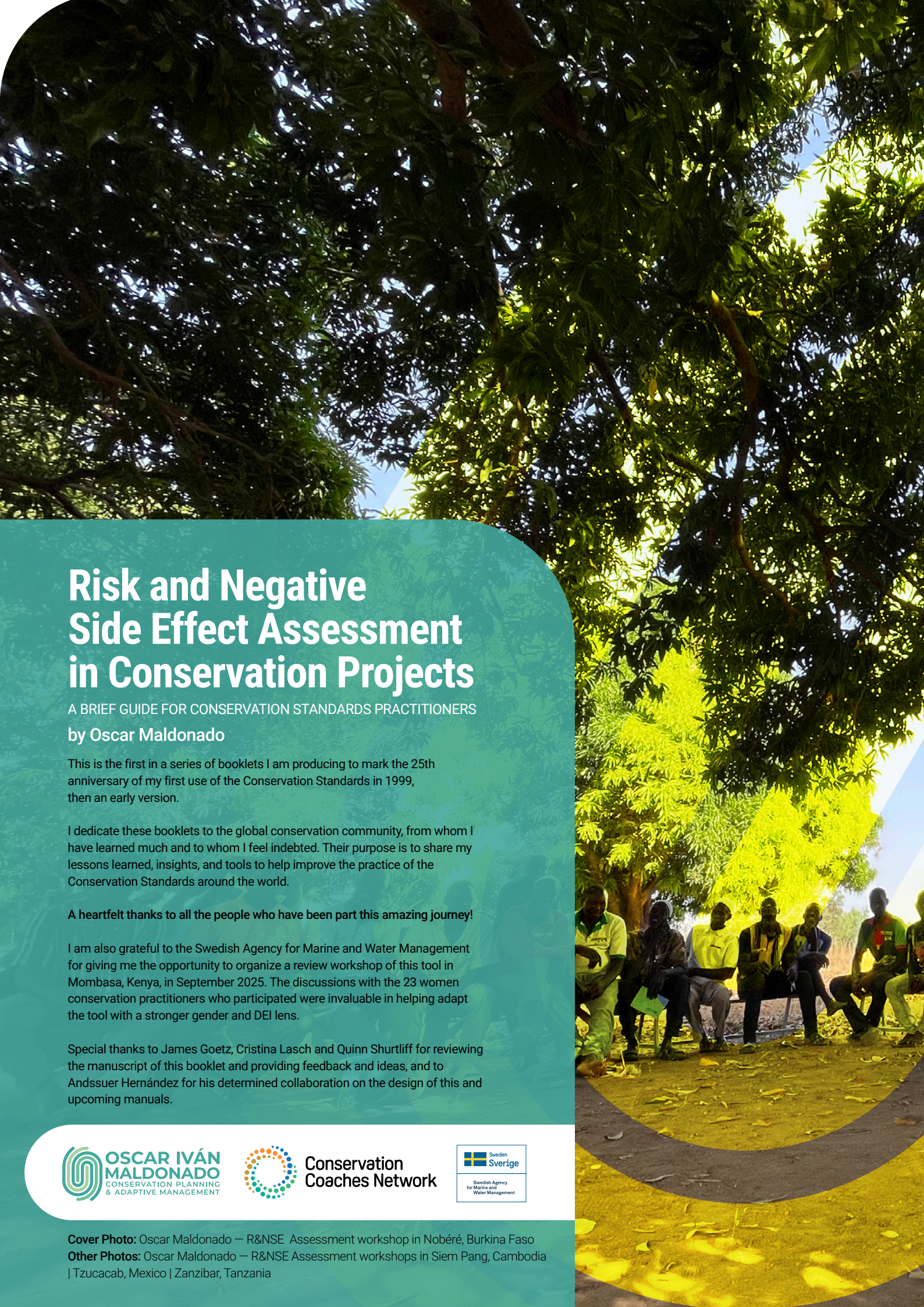
Result (as it is in your Results Chain)	Risk (R) or NSE	Affected stakeholder or project component	Probability/ Magnitude	Mitigation measure	How to include it in the project design?	Does it need an indicator? Which one?

- **Use a structured table** – Given the amount and diverse types of information, capturing key outputs in a table helps visualize progress and keeps the discussion organized and efficient.
- **Foster a safe, respectful space for dialogue** — Manage group dynamics so participants feel comfortable speaking (for example, creating women-only working groups instead of distributing women in male-dominated groups).
- **Encourage group rotation** – Allow different teams to review each other's work to provide fresh perspectives and identify overlooked risks or NSEs.
- **Use targeted guiding questions** — Develop guiding questions and require disaggregated ratings and discussions.
- **Prioritize discussion on high-risk items** – Focus on risks and NSEs rated as high or very high in magnitude and probability to ensure key issues are addressed.
- **Engage stakeholders actively** – Ensure local communities and key actors participate in the discussion to validate findings and strengthen ownership of mitigation measures. Encourage participants to share contrasting experiences and perspectives; and seek participation from vulnerable groups.
- **Allocate sufficient time** – This exercise benefits from thoughtful reflection, so plan adequate time to step back, review, probe and refine findings. rcise benefits from thoughtful reflection, so plan adequate time to step back, review, probe and refine findings.

Linking risk and NSE assessment to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

The risk and NSE assessment can play a crucial role in ensuring compliance with Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles. FPIC is essential for maintaining the social credibility of conservation initiatives, particularly those involving Indigenous peoples and local communities. By integrating risk and NSE assessment into FPIC processes, projects can foster transparency, community ownership, better outcomes for people and nature, and long-term sustainability.

- **Strengthening the FPIC process –** Risk and NSE assessments provide communities with a clearer understanding of potential issues and unintended consequences of the project, helping them make informed decisions about their involvement and the consequences the project may have on them. This enhances the legitimacy of FPIC consultations.
- **Addressing community concerns proactively –** Identifying risks and NSEs early allows conservation projects to incorporate community concerns into the decision-making process. This ensures that mitigation measures are developed collaboratively, reducing resistance and fostering trust.
- **Enhancing social safeguards –** Social safeguards, particularly those applied to REDD+ projects, emphasize the importance of community rights and participation. The risk and NSE assessment helps ensure that safeguards are not only considered but also operationalized to minimize harm and maximize benefits for local stakeholders, particularly vulnerable groups.
- **Supporting sustained consent –** FPIC is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. By continuously monitoring risks and NSEs, conservation projects can maintain community trust and respond to emerging concerns, ensuring that consent remains valid throughout the project's lifecycle.
- **Aligning with multiple-benefit standards –** Many conservation initiatives seek certification under standards such as the Climate, Community & Biodiversity (CCB) Standards. Integrating risk and NSE assessments into FPIC not only strengthens project credibility but also supports compliance with multiple-benefit carbon standards, reinforcing commitments to environmental and social integrity.



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This is the first in a series of booklets I am producing to mark the 25th anniversary of my first use of the Conservation Standards in 1999, then an early version.

I dedicate these booklets to the global conservation community, from whom I have learned much and to whom I feel indebted. Their purpose is to share my lessons learned, insights, and tools to help improve the practice of the Conservation Standards around the world.

A heartfelt thanks to all the people who have been part this amazing journey!

I am also grateful to the Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management for giving me the opportunity to organize a review workshop of this tool in Mombasa, Kenya, in September 2025. The discussions with the 23 women conservation practitioners who participated were invaluable in helping adapt the tool with a stronger gender and DEI lens.

Special thanks to James Goetz, Cristina Lasch and Quinn Shurtliff for reviewing the manuscript of this booklet and providing feedback and ideas, and to Andssuer Hernández for his determined collaboration on the design of this and upcoming manuals.

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Cover Photo: Oscar Maldonado — R&NSE Assessment workshop in Nobéré, Burkina Faso
Other Photos: Oscar Maldonado — R&NSE Assessment workshops in Siem Pang, Cambodia | Tzucacab, Mexico | Zanzibar, Tanzania