

Strengthening ES Risk Certification: Insights from SPESSE in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores how robust professional recognition and certification systems can enhance integrity of communication in Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs). The SPESSE project, being implemented in North-Central Nigeria by the Institute of Procurement, Environmental and Social Standards, is a capacity building initiative anchored in the World Bank's Environmental and Social Framework (ESF). The multi-level tracks offered include 5-day short courses, 3-week advanced certificate courses, postgraduate diplomas, master's, and bachelor's degrees. The program targets diverse professionals from private sectors and government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), such as architects, engineers, land administrators, gender practitioners, disaster management staff, estate surveyors, valuers, and social development practitioners. SPESSE employs best practices like combining academics with industry practitioners for facilitation, hybrid delivery models, full project information disclosure, and an independent verification agency to monitor compliance with project objectives to assure quality and counter disinformation in stakeholder processes. These mechanisms foster transparent, evidence-based communication, equipping trainees with skills in inclusive engagement, grievance handling, and misinformation mitigation within ESIAs. The project's introduction of certifications in environmental and social standards is an innovation that professionalizes practice in Nigeria, establishing benchmarks for accountability and ethical conduct. SPESSE is developing a competent workforce capable of conducting complex impact assessments, promoting sustainable development and community engagement in development amid disinformation challenges. This framework offers a scalable model for Africa where impact assessment capacity remains a challenge.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development hinges on credible environmental and social risk governance, yet developing economies persistently face institutional barriers and limited technical capacity (Afeonkhai, 2025; Afeonkhai & Otu, 2025). Nigeria's gap is acute: overlapping agency mandates, weak regulatory enforcement, and fragmented coordination routinely undermine Environmental and Social Impact Assessments and expose host communities to unchecked industrial activity (O et al., 2020; Ogu & Okoye, 2025; Tsiga, 2026). Public procurement alone absorbs an estimated 15–20% of Nigeria's GDP, yet systemic leakages, elite capture, and gender exclusion still persist seventeen years after the 2007 Public Procurement Act, with sustainability clauses remaining largely optional rather than embedded in statutory

instruments (Adebowale, 2026). A 2025 survey of 204 Nigerian practitioners found that 22.6% reported "low" sustainability-finance literacy and only 2.9% reached "very high" (Usman, 2025).

Compounding these governance shortcomings are persistent communication deficits in ESIA practice, where technical complexity, language differences, and un-integrated feedback loops keep environmental findings from translating into community-accessible decisions (O et al., 2020; Uchegara et al., 2021). Certified ISO 14001 EMS organisations outperform non-EMS ones in implementing mitigation (87% vs. 54%), conducting audits (3.2 vs. 1.1/year), resolving non-compliance (30 vs. 75 days), and disclosing results (76% vs. 29%) (Afeonkhai & Otu, 2025); a parallel IA-EM study reports 88% vs. 56% mitigation, 3.4 vs. 1.2 audits/year, 28 vs. 77 days resolution, and 74% vs. 31% public disclosure (Afeonkhai, 2025). Capacity-building scholarship confirms that local ownership, partnerships, and context-sensitive training are the most consistent drivers of effective outcomes, while institutional misalignment and resource constraints are the most persistent barriers (Kim & Bang, 2025).

The Sustainable Procurement, Environmental and Social Standards Enhancement project, supported by the World Bank and implemented through Nigerian universities, is a strategic intervention designed to institutionalise professional competence across procurement, environmental, and social standards. SPESSE delivers multi-level certification, hybrid learning, and independent verification aligned with the World Bank Environmental and Social Framework. This paper qualitatively evaluates SPESSE as a model for strengthening certification, communication integrity, and stakeholder trust, and proposes an empirical framework for future primary data collection.

2. Literature Review

ESIA practice and its limits. First codified in the 1969 U.S. National Environmental Policy Act, ESIAs evolved into multi-dimensional risk-governance instruments; Nigerian EIA practice is widely criticised for inadequate public participation, deficient consultant expertise, and weak monitoring (Onusi, 2024). Enforcement is repeatedly described as "illusory" despite robust legislative frameworks (Akinsulore & Akinsulore, 2021; ED & YM, 2020), with multiple overlapping agencies generating duplicated mandates and conflicting recommendations (Ewim et al., 2023; Sam et al., 2017, 2024).

Certification systems and their risks. Certification schemes are essential trust-building instruments but are vulnerable to context-insensitivity, the compliance-cost burden on smaller actors, and persistent conflicts with national regulations (Jia et al., 2020; Judijanto, 2025; Pereira et al., 2023). *Means-ends* and *policy-practice decoupling* are well-documented risks that permit symbolic compliance without substantive outcomes (Bakker et al., 2019; Wijen, 2014). Effective certification must address underlying power asymmetries, integrate informal learning, and align with local institutional environments (Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2019; Huq & Stevenson, 2018; Salgado et al., 2017); the IEMA EIA Quality Mark exemplifies quality-control certification extending beyond legislative compliance (Bond et al., 2016). Yet the Steering Committee of the State-of-Knowledge Assessment of Standards and Certification finds existing impact studies are short-term and limited in scope (Stupak et al., 2021) a gap SPESSE is positioned to fill.

The World Bank ESF. The ESF (operative October 2018) embeds a risk-based approach with mandatory Environmental and Social Standards, stakeholder engagement, grievance redress, and borrower institutional capacity. Yet domestic procurement capacity in Nigeria is "acutely weak" across 23 operationalised organisational capacity items, none is perceived as adequate by procurement personnel

(Manu et al., 2019). Infrastructure-procurement surveys across federal and state agencies confirm that skills development must extend beyond narrow procedural compliance to encompass sustainability, market-focus, and life-cycle thinking (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Mahamadu et al., 2017).

Empirical evidence from Africa. A 228-respondent Nigerian study reports that climate-finance access ($\beta = 0.482$), ESG compliance ($\beta = 0.356$), and policy support ($\beta = 0.291$) significantly predict sustainable energy outcomes, but green-bond uptake is shallow and enforcement weak (Al-Amin et al., 2025). Multinational procurement-project evidence flags weak enforcement, low contractor commitment, and casual-labour assumptions as primary obstacles to social-value compliance (Mangvwat et al., 2026a, 2026b). Ghanaian sustainable-procurement scholarship identifies economic, political, bureaucratic, legal, and technical barriers that mirror Nigerian challenges (Opoku-Mensah et al., 2024), while South African reform concludes that uniform, generic curricula and quality assurance underpin sustainable skill development (Klaaren & Watermeyer, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

Professionalization Theory explains how occupations become professions through standardised education, certification, and ethical codes (DBA, 2026). SPESSE represents an institutional effort to professionalise environmental and social standards management in Nigeria, anchored in multi-disciplinary, multi-tiered curricula.

Stakeholder Theory argues that organisations must serve all affected stakeholders. ESIA practice has been critiqued for treating stakeholder interests as peripheral (AYEWUMI, 2023). The 4Ds framework reveals that Nigerian public influence on EIA outcomes is constrained by ambiguous legal mandates and discretionary enforcement (Dokubo, 2025). The ESF strengthens stakeholder participation by mandating meaningful, free, prior and informed consultation (Isac, 2025; Kvam, 2019).

These theories intersect at *communication integrity*: certified practitioners operate under codified ethical standards while engaging communities through recognised disclosure protocols. SPESSE sits exactly at this intersection by anchoring stakeholder-relevant competencies (engagement, grievance handling, ESF knowledge) within a professional certification regime.

4. Methodology

A qualitative case-study design examines SPESSE using publicly available secondary data: project implementation manuals, World Bank audit reports, university curricula, and policy circulars from SPESSE implementing institutions. Triangulated thematic coding examines how certification, hybrid delivery, and verification interact with the ESF. The analysis limits inference to published artefacts.

5. Overview of the SPESSE Project

SPESSE bridges capacity gaps across three pillars procurement, environmental, and social standards through multi-tiered certification: short courses, advanced certificates, postgraduate diplomas, master's, and doctoral programs (Aminu et al., 2023; Ebekoziem et al., 2022; Tuleun & Abel, 2026). Hybrid delivery combining intensive residential sessions with modular online coursework enables geographically dispersed professionals to maintain operational stability (Samarakkody et al., 2023; Silva, 2025).

Independent verification through external examiners and academic audits grounds certification in assessed competence (IJMSRT, 2026).

Multi-disciplinary competence. SPESSE integrates procurement, environmental, and social standards into a single curriculum, responding to documented organisational capacity weaknesses none of 23 operational items was judged adequate in Nigerian procurement agencies (Manu et al., 2019). The integrated model contrasts with isolated certification tracks that have been shown to deliver only short-term, context-bounded improvements (Stupak et al., 2021).

Certification pathways. A clear vertical progression from short courses to executive diplomas establishes credibility and continuity, consistent with competency frameworks that combine strategic, behavioural, ethical, and digital dimensions (DBA, 2026). Multi-level certification creates a market signal that buy down information asymmetries between practitioners and decision-makers (Adebawale, 2026; Pereira et al., 2023).

Hybrid delivery. Blended modalities overcome geographic constraints and reduce workforce disruption while retaining the adaptive benefits of digital micro-credentials (Goldberg et al., 2023; Samarakkody et al., 2023; Silva, 2025).

Independent verification. External examination provides a quality-control layer consistent with global certification designs that combine third-party monitoring with technical assistance (Bond et al., 2016; Judijanto, 2025; Salgado et al., 2017).

ESF alignment. SPESSE's three-pillar architecture maps directly onto ESF requirements. The model mitigates *means-ends* and *policy-practice decoupling* by codifying learning outcomes against operational performance (Bakker et al., 2019; Cannone et al., 2023; Wijen, 2014), in contrast to projects that experience decoupling because they are poorly aligned to domestic absorptive capacity (Dzhengiz & Niesten, 2019; Wijen, 2014).

Transparency, engagement, and ethics. The mitigation-outcome gap documented in EMS-related EIA research (88% vs. 56% mitigation; 28 vs. 77 days resolution) (Afeonkhai, 2025) suggests that explicitly certified practitioners will outperform uncertified ones, including on ethical conduct and stakeholder engagement (Afeonkhai & Otu, 2025; Bristol-Alagbariya, 2019).

Misinformation and trust. Embedding stakeholder-engagement and disclosure skills within certification reduces the most common source of misinformation uninformed disclosure strengthening the legitimacy of ESIA outputs, consistent with risk-governance scholarship emphasising contextualised practice over rigid standardisation (Renn et al., 2011; Salgado et al., 2017; Stupak et al., 2021).

8. Discussion

SPESSE should be read as a model for *institutionalising* rather than merely delivering environmental and social governance capacity (Kazanskaia & Kazanskaia, 2025; Kim & Bang, 2025). It responds to three persistent Nigerian weaknesses: the multi-disciplinary skills gap (Mahamadu et al., 2017; Manu et al., 2019), overlapping mandates (Ewim et al., 2023; Sam et al., 2017), and the enforcement gap that renders laws "illusory" (Akinsulore & Akinsulore, 2021; ED & YM, 2020). The model also responds to documented external pressures global value-chain conditionality (Santika et al., 2023), climate-finance

requirements (Al-Amin et al., 2025; Imoisi & Okoro, 2025), and ESF safeguarding (Azizov & Azizli, 2025) that increasingly mandate sustainability competence.

The model extends to Africa. South African scholarship recommends uniform, generic curricula (Klaaren & Watermeyer, 2022); capacity-building reviews confirm that local ownership and partnerships are the most consistent drivers of impact (Kim & Bang, 2025); Ghanaian evidence identifies barriers that mirror Nigeria's and demand multi-pronged responses (Opoku-Mensah et al., 2024). SPESSE can therefore serve as a continental institutional template but the risk of *means-ends* and *policy-practice* decoupling (Bakker et al., 2019; Wijen, 2014) means the project must guard against symbolic adoption, the principal threat documented in certification literature (Benjamini et al., 2025; Lissillour, 2025; Ritchie et al., 2024).

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

SPESSE demonstrates that standardised, university-anchored certification can strengthen environmental and social risk governance in Nigeria. Drawing on multi-disciplinary training, hybrid delivery, and independent verification, the project builds a sustainable professional cadre whose competencies map directly onto the ESF. Future research should track post-certification performance against long-term environmental and social outcomes an evidence gap acknowledged in certification scholarship (Stupak et al., 2021). Four recommendations follow:

1. Institutionalise certification nationally through sustained funding, regulatory uptake, and continuing professional development (DBA, 2026; Kim & Bang, 2025).
2. Integrate ESF-aligned governance into university curricula to align knowledge with operational practice (Aminu et al., 2023; Sahle et al., 2024).
3. Strengthen regulatory mandate and licensing by aligning with international good practice on stakeholder engagement (Kvam, 2019).
4. Expand independent verification to convert transparency into enforceable stewardship (Azizov & Azizli, 2025).

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