

FAQs – Remote Audits

Since April 2020, FLOCERT changed its operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following FAQ document aims to offer further information.

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1 Onsite versus remote audits

1.1 Will all Fairtrade audits be converted into remote audits?

No. Only where our careful assessment has proven onsite audits to pose a health risk to either the communities or to our auditors, will the audit be conducted remotely.

1.2 How do I know if my next Fairtrade audit is remote or onsite?

The auditor will get in touch with you to arrange your upcoming Fairtrade audit. At that point you will be informed whether the audit will be conducted remotely or onsite. Where we cannot yet conduct onsite audits, we will continue with the remote audit methodology until further notice. We will continue to keep you up to date on any developments

1.3 Must I accept an onsite audit?

No, not if it can be proven that the perceived risk is high (e.g. official travel warning, incidence of COVID in that area). No NC or cancellation fee will be raised for not accepting the onsite audit if a remote audit is accepted in its place.

1.4 During the pandemic, must I take special measures during the onsite audit?

During the pandemic, onsite audits only take place after a careful assessment by FLOCERT. Nevertheless, everyone involved during the audit shall commit to adhering to the established health and safety measures, such as adequate safety equipment (face masks/face shields/gloves), hand sanitizer and social distancing. Please also take adequate precautions in line with your local regulations and guidelines.

1.5 After a remote audit, will the next onsite audit require more effort and time invested from our side?

No, your next onsite audit will not be extended or prolonged, and will therefore not require any additional preparation or onsite time.

2 Remote audit methodology

2.1 What is a remote audit?

A remote audit is the method of conducting an audit remotely, using documentary evidence and electronic methods such as video conferencing, email and telephone to obtain audit evidence. The overall aim is to evaluate this evidence objectively to determine the extent to which the Fairtrade standard requirements have been fulfilled.

2.2 What does a remote audit look like?

A remote audit typically involves document sharing and review in combination with some virtual interaction with the audit site(s) through remote interviews and/or remote site tours. The remote audit comprises four elements: Preparation & Scoping; Document collection; Desktop review; Live interaction.

For more information, see the following Standard Operation Procedure that describes the procedure for remote audits in a more detailed manner: <https://www.flocert.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CERT-RemoteAudit-SOP-10-en.pdf>.

2.3 How much time should we reserve for a remote audit?

The audit time for remote audits is the same as that for onsite audits. Please, have a good look at the agenda and time schedule for your individual remote audit which the auditor will share with you in the audit preparation letter.

2.4 What is checked during a remote audit?

The audit scope is the same as that for an onsite audit. The complete compliance criteria checklist can be verified during the remote audit.

2.5 Can follow-up audits also be conducted remotely?

Yes, the remote auditing approach can be applied to all audit types and customer set-ups (except customers applying for or being certified against the Textile, Climate or Gold Standard).

2.6 How can we share and organize all the documents required for the remote audit?

Before sending the audit preparation letter, the auditor reduces the list of documents according to the audit scope and to such an extent that you need to submit only the most necessary documents (at the latest, one week before the date of the desktop review).

The auditor will provide you with a link and password to FLOCERT's cloud. There you can access your individual audit folder and upload the requested documents in an easy and secure way.

2.7 (Only applicable to producer organizations) How will you carry out the interviews? How many participants from our side are required for the remote audit?

Your auditor will send you an audit preparation letter with detailed information on the documents you are required to upload, but also who the interview partners are that need to be available for a live interaction to clarify open questions. In general, the auditor will talk to the same interview partners as they would at an onsite audit, such as representatives of your organisation, members and/or workers.

2.8 (Only applicable to producer organizations) Our initial audit was conducted remotely. Will we be certified as per the normal procedure?

If you are a new customer and had a remote initial audit, you will receive Permission to Trade once you have demonstrated compliance with all major compliance criteria, which allows you to trade under Fairtrade terms. This Permission to Trade will remain valid until a full onsite audit has been conducted on your premises and all elements of the Fairtrade Standards have been assessed. Only then will the Fairtrade Certificate be issued.

If major non-conformities are identified during the initial remote audit which cannot be credibly resolved in the evaluation process, no Permission to Trade will be issued. A follow-up onsite audit will then be scheduled once it is possible to do so. .

3 Impact on our Fairtrade certification

3.1 Will this change in operations affect the validity of my Fairtrade certificate?

No, the validity of your Fairtrade certificate will not be affected.

3.2 Our country is in lockdown, and we may not go to our office buildings to prepare for the audit. What should we do?

If this is the case, please inform the auditor accordingly during the preparation and scoping call. If you don't have access to the documents required for the remote audit, the remote audit obviously cannot take place. Your audit will then be postponed until you have access to the documents

3.3 What happens if we don't manage to send all required documents to the auditor on time?

We highly recommend being as transparent as possible regarding the reasons why you haven't submitted the requested documents. If the pandemic makes it impossible for you to provide information for an audit, please raise that as soon as possible in the remote auditing process and provide evidence as to why it is not possible. It will then be decided whether the deadline is extended, the remote audit postponed or the audit cancelled completely. If there is no clear evidence and/or collaborative attitude from your side, not providing adequate reasoning for delays, this could be considered a major non-compliance regarding "You accept announced and unannounced audits at your premises including subcontracted premises and provide all requested information needed to demonstrate compliance with the Fairtrade standards."

3.4 Is the procedure after a remote audit different to that after an onsite audit?

No, the same evaluation procedure, including timelines, apply to both remote and onsite audits, and certification decisions continue to be based on the level of compliance with the Fairtrade Standards.

For producer remote initial audits only, there are specific procedures in place regarding permission to trade and the certificate (see question 2.8).

3.5 (Only applicable to producer organizations) We have been unable to hold our General Assembly due to the pandemic. Will this be a non-compliance?

No non-compliance will be issued if you provide all relevant evidence to the auditor to demonstrate the reasons for the cancellation and rescheduling of the General Assembly.

3.6 (Only applicable to producer organizations) Do we have more flexibility in terms of decision making on Premium use?

There is indeed more flexibility given with regards to the decision making on premium use, as the pandemic is considered an unexpected event. If the organization identifies Premium investments to minimize the spread of the disease and/or to mitigate any potential negative effects on farmers, workers, and their communities, it is possible to make these Premium investments without prior GA approval. Changes in the Fairtrade Development Plan need to be documented. Once a General Assembly of members is possible, the management of the organization needs to explain the changes and ratify the Premium use retroactively.

4 Technical challenges

4.1 What should we do if we cannot hold the audit remotely due to technical problems such as bad internet connection and/or missing technology?

Technology, and especially a stable internet connection that allows for a transfer of documents and information, is key for the remote audit. In the preparation and scoping call with the auditor, please raise and discuss all challenges you might face in this regard. There are different options available when performing the remote audit: the live interaction with the auditor is ideally done via a web-based audio or video tool, but if teleconferencing is not possible due to poor internet connection, a live interaction via telephone is an option or even via an instant e-mail exchange on an agreed date. Whatever the circumstances, the auditor will try to accommodate your preferred option. If the auditor realises that none of the options are feasible, the audit may need to be postponed. You will be kept informed.

4.2 We had connectivity issues that prevented us from completing the audit. Will this be a non-conformity? Will we be suspended?

No, you will not be suspended or even sanctioned if you have valid reasons why the audit couldn't be realised or finalised. Depending on the situation, you might need to repeat the exercise. Our process allows for such flexibility, and our auditors are aware of this possibility.