



TBI whistleblower policy

June 2021

1. Introduction

Tropenbos International (TBI) has had its own integrity policy in place since early 2018. As one of the specifications of this, TBI drafted a ‘whistleblower policy’, which complements the integrity policy and is based on the ‘Integrity system guide’ developed by Partos (2018).

TBI’s whistle blower policy outlines the protocol and procedures for actions to be taken on receiving complaints including information about or when suspecting the possibility of unlawful expenditures by TBI employees, Tropenbos Network Members/ subcontractors/ partner organisations of TBI.

This whistleblower policy refers to TBI and applies to TBI, its employees and interns, regardless of the contractual basis of their employment. This also applies to the TBI Board and independent third parties (e.g. consultants) contracted by TBI, in cases where TBI could be held responsible for their actions.

Although the whistleblower policy is applicable to Tropenbos International in the Netherlands, it is TBI’s aspiration that all Tropenbos Network Members will adopt similar policies.

This whistleblower policy is intended to encourage and enable TBI staff and stakeholders to raise serious concerns about any perceived misconduct or irregularities in TBI operations. In addition to the organisation’s own employees, the clients, programme beneficiaries (‘target groups’), volunteers and staff of other organisations (‘stakeholders’) can also report any suspected integrity violations.

In this policy the party making the complaint is called the Notifier. If the Notifier has a serious complaint against TBI¹, the Notifier has different options to report the complaint according to the process explained in this whistleblower policy.

This documents first describes the scope of complaints (section 2) and the different options of the Notifier to report a complaint and to whom (sections 3 and 4), differentiating whether the Notifier is TBI staff or an external party. The requirements for a formal complaint are elaborated in section 5 while in section 6 the follow-up to a complaint is explained. The last sections describe anonymity, confidentiality, and protection.

¹ TBI refers to TBI Board, employees, interns and independent third parties contracted by TBI (see above)



2. Scope of complaints

Misconduct by TBI staff or third parties contracted by TBI can be reported under this policy. Such violations include but are not limited to the following.

1. Misuse of power or position (corruption, conflicts of interests, and partiality (e.g. nepotism, favouritism), manipulation or unauthorised divulgence of information.
2. Financial violations (fraud, misuse or improper use of resources, theft, tax evasion or asset management/investment policies contrary to organisational purpose and objectives.
3. Interpersonal violations (unwanted intimacy, sexual intimidation and sexual violence, aggression, discrimination and bullying).

Reports can also be filed regarding the integrity of research, environmental and development concerns, respect of traditional and local knowledge, and intellectual property rights.

3. Follow-up of complaint

The process for the complaint differs for TBI staff and external parties being the Notifier.

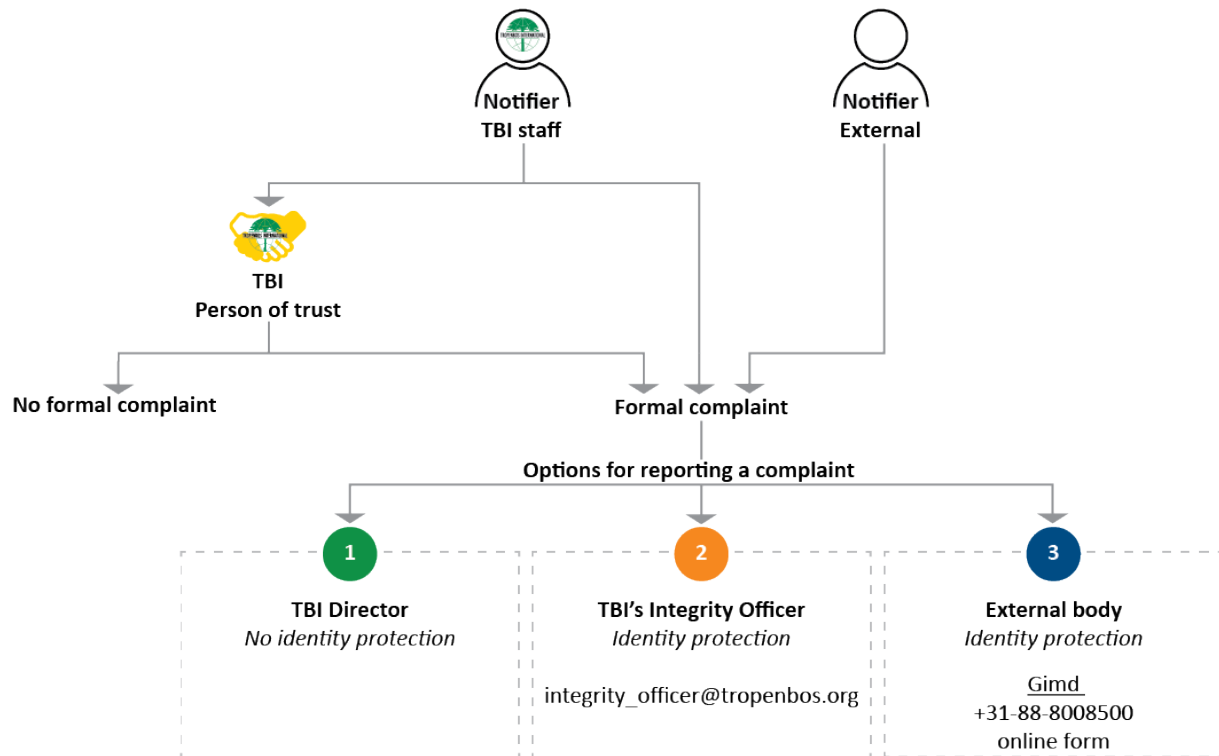
In case the Notifier is a member of TBI staff, including interns, (s)he has the option to first speak to the appointed person of trust within TBI. This person of trust (name known by TBI staff) has been jointly appointed by TBI staff. The role of the person of trust is to provide frontline support to any member of staff who has been the victim of, or witness to, a violation.

All conversations with the person of trust are held in the strictest confidence. The person of trust will not share any information on the complaints with any other party or person and will not document the complaint.

In consultation with the person of trust, the notifier may decide whether to withdraw a complaint or decline taking further action, or the person of trust can help to identify next steps and refer and support the notifier to the preferred channel in the reporting system. The latter implies that the complaint will become official, and the complaint will be registered and documented.

TBI staff members also have the option not to involve the person of trust, but to officially report any violations directly to either TBI's integrity officer or the external whistleblower body appointed (see below). For Notifiers who are not TBI staff members, the official reporting channels have to be followed at all times.

TBI's complaint procedure



4. Channels for reporting a formal complaint

If the Notifier has decided to report a violation, (s)he has the possibility to choose between three different channels of reporting (random order).

- **TBI's Director**

In the case of reporting to the Director, it is not possible to protect the identity of the Notifier. The Director always informs the Integrity Officer.

- **TBI's Integrity Officer²**

In this case it is possible to protect the identity of the Notifier. The name of the Officer is available on the TBI website, next to the TBI integrity policy and this whistleblower policy.

- a. Hans Vellema, TBI Programme Coordinator.
- b. integrity_officer@tropenbos.org (through this email address, the Integrity Officer can be contacted by anyone wishing to report a violation).
- c. Working hours: 09.00-17.00 hrs Central European Time (Monday to Thursday).

- **External/independent whistleblower body**

TBI has also appointed an independent body to act on reported violations. This makes it possible for an employee to report a violation if (s)he prefers to do so. The whistleblower body will inform the TBI Integrity Officer regarding the complaint.

- a. Gimd
- b. +31-88-8008500/online form
- c. klantsupport@gmid.nl

TBI staff can decide which option of reporting they chose. External parties that wish to make a complaint about TBI can either report to the TBI Integrity Officer or to the independent whistleblower body. External parties are not to report directly to the TBI Director nor involve the TBI person of trust.

5. Content of the formal complaint report

The Notifier should ensure that complaint/violation reports should be as detailed as possible (especially anonymous ones) and include at least the following information.

- What type of alleged wrongdoing is being reported?
- Where and when did the events occur?

² Beside this role, the Integrity Officer also has an important preventative role, by developing a plan whereby everyone in the organisation has the opportunity of receiving training on preventing misconduct.

- Which people were/are involved and who had/has knowledge about the matters being reported?
- How did the individual, organisation or company commit the alleged wrongdoing?
- Why should this conduct be investigated and why is the matter being reported?
- What documents and other sources support the complaint?
- Which steps did the Notifier already make (in changing the situation, addressing the complaints and reporting)?
- What are the expectation of the Notifier towards the Channel of reporting?

Notifiers are strongly encouraged to submit all supporting documents or inform the 'channels for reporting' (see above: Director, Integrity Officer, whistleblower body) where such documents might be located, and to identify other possible witnesses who could provide relevant information.

If desired, the Person of Trust can support the Notifier with collecting the required information.

If a complaint has not yet been submitted officially, the Channels of Reporting are only allowed to inform the Notifier about the process and the check whether the required information is complete; at this stage, no details about the complaint itself can be discussed.

NOTE: The earlier the concern is reported, the easier it is to take action. And it is always possible for the Notifier to withdraw the complaint at any moment or decline to take further action.

6. Further actions and procedures following reporting³

First of all, all information on the complaints will be highly confidential, unless both parties agree, in written, to make the complaint public while ensuring the privacy and interest of the Notifier and persons involved in the (alleged) violation. On their request, official bodies may get access to the information on the complaint.

All documents regarding the complaint will be kept in archive for two years, in a protected digital archive that is only accessible by the Integrity Officer or External body.

TBI will respond to all registered complaints. The process of the complaints will be documented but the content of the complaint and of the actions taken will be kept confidential.

³ Adapted from www.fundsforngos.org/microfinance-human-resources/whistleblowing-policy-human-resource-policy-microfinance-companies/.



If urgent action is required, this will be taken before any investigation is conducted. Within ten working days of a complaint being raised, the channel used by the Notifier will undertake the following.

- Acknowledge that the complaint has been received.
- Indicate how (s)he proposes to deal with the matter.
- Provide an estimate of how long it will take to provide a final response.
- Inform the Notifier whether any initial enquiries have been made.
- Supply the Notifier with information on staff support mechanisms (for TBI staff).
- Inform the Notifier whether further investigations will take place, and if not, why not.

The procedures that the Integrity Officer will follow are explained in the [Partos Integrity System Guide](#). Any reported complaint will start with a preliminary investigation to determine whether a disciplinary investigation is warranted, or some alternative action would be more appropriate. If further investigation is warranted, the Integrity Officer will nominate and instruct persons (internal or external) and ensure there is a budget for required actions. If the investigation is complex, the Integrity Officer will consult the external whistleblower body. If no further investigation is warranted, a risk analysis may be conducted to draw lessons for the future.

If the investigation concludes that a TBI employee has indeed committed an integrity violation, the Integrity Officer will request an external or internal legal specialist to provide advice on the appropriate disciplinary action/punishment, which then will be submitted to the Director. The Director makes the final decision with regard to the imposition of any disciplinary action/punishment. If the violation is a criminal offence, the Integrity Officer will ensure that it is reported to the competent authorities.

7. Anonymity and confidentiality⁴

TBI is committed to safeguarding whistleblowers, and provides the opportunity to treat all whistleblowing reports as either confidential (in which case the person's identity will be known only to the chosen channel and will be kept confidential), or anonymous (in which case no one, not even the 'the channel', will know that person's identity). The identity of the Notifier can be protected by the Integrity Officer and the External body, not if the Director is chosen as channel of reporting.

⁴ Sections on 'Anonymity and confidentiality' and 'Protection' are adapted from the whistleblower policy of the Global Fund www.theglobalfund.org/media/2942/core_whistleblowing_policy_en.pdf?u=63700181824000000.



The Notifier's identity will not be disclosed within the organisation or to external organisations without the Notifier's prior consent. In all cases of (alleged) integrity violations, the interests of due process and victim support must always take priority over those of communication. For example, information contained in a report made through the formal channels may not be divulged to anyone who is not directly involved in the preliminary investigation and any disciplinary investigation.

The only exceptions to this assurance may be where TBI is required to comply with separate legal obligations such as a court order or when an allegation has been determined as being malicious and needs to be referred.⁵ Importantly, the TBI assurance of confidentiality can only be completely effective if the whistleblower likewise maintains confidentiality. The choice between confidential or anonymous whistleblowing is that of the Notifier alone. TBI, however, encourages Notifiers to put their name to allegations when possible as anonymous concerns are less powerful, while confidential reports are more likely to have an impact.

If an allegation is made in good faith but it is not confirmed by the investigation, no action will be taken against the Notifier and no retaliation against the individual will be tolerated. If, however, an allegation is made frivolously, maliciously or for personal gain, disciplinary action may be taken against the TBI Notifier. If the complaint is made on false grounds by an external Notifier, an official rectification will be requested and, in case the Notifier refuses to do so, will be enforced through court.

8. Protection

Both confidential and anonymous whistleblowing options aim at safe reporting. TBI is also committed to preventing those who benefit from misconduct from attempting to retaliate against or victimise a whistleblower for loss, or potential loss, of any ill-gotten benefit. TBI will not tolerate any retaliation, i.e. any act of discrimination, reprisal, harassment or vengeance, direct or indirect, which is threatened or taken against a whistleblower or his/her relatives or associates by any person because the whistleblower has made a disclosure under this policy in good faith, reasonably believing it to be true.

The reporting process outlined above has been introduced to allow confidential or anonymous reports to be made, while at the same time safeguarding the identity of the person making the report to the fullest extent possible.



In the case of internal whistleblowers, where it is considered necessary, the Integrity officer may recommend that the TBI Director temporarily reassigns the person who has allegedly been the subject of retaliation, or to take other measures appropriate to ensuring protection against any further acts of retaliation. Any such recommendation will only be submitted with the approval of the staff member involved, and appropriate measures will be taken to safeguard employee confidentiality to the fullest extent possible.

Reporting under this policy in no way protects a whistleblower from sanctions arising from their own wrongdoing. In other words, blowing the whistle is no 'escape hatch' for complicity in misconduct.