



Good practices at FAO: Experience capitalization for continuous learning



Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

1. Why do good practices matter?

For an organization to progress and adapt to change, it must become a **learning organization** which draws lessons from its experiences in order to identify and understand good practices. These good practices will improve the way the organization works. They can be applied to specific contexts, institutionalized, shared and replicated at different levels: from local to international.

However, if no action is taken to analyse, capitalize and share the knowledge gained in programmes and projects, institutional memory will not be transmitted, the same mistakes will be repeated, the success of our experiences will not be known and opportunities for improved practices will be lost, thereby preventing the sharing of good practices. An organization can turn knowledge into action through knowledge sharing and capitalization of experiences.

This concept note is a short introduction to the process of documenting and capitalizing on experiences and good practices.

2. Good practices at FAO: background

FAO has been tasked by its members to address **major global challenges**, including population growth, insecurity and crisis, “the large and increasing number of undernourished people in the world, the prospect of rising inequality and problems of access to food by the most vulnerable populations, and the increased scarcity of natural resources worsened by climate change. The situation is further compounded by the volatility in world food prices.”¹

Besides these global challenges, FAO is striving to ensure disaster risk management and to make the link between emergency, rehabilitation and development activities. Good practices are key in delivering this work.

There is growing interest in sharing good practices and lessons learned within FAO and with partners. Good practices within FAO are available on the FAO Good Practices Web site: www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices/ and in the Corporate Document Repository: www.fao.org/documents/.

3. Good practice and best practice: differences and similarities

A “**good practice**” can be defined as follows:

A good practice is not only a practice that is good, but a practice that has been proven to work well and produce good results, and is therefore recommended as a model. It is a successful experience, which has been tested and validated, in the broad sense, which has been repeated and deserves to be shared so that a greater number of people can adopt it.

¹ *The Director-General’s Medium Term Plan 2010-13 (Reviewed) and Programme of Work and Budget 2012-13: www.fao.org/docrep/meeting/021/ma061e.pdf (page 4, 3rd paragraph)*

Some people prefer to use the term “**good practice**” instead of “best practice”, as in reality it is debatable whether there is a single ‘best’ approach knowing that approaches are constantly evolving and being updated.

The expression “**best practices**” can be defined as the best examples of practices: which methods, tools, or approaches have been shown to be the “best” in a specific situation. As is the case of good practices, best practices should also imply ease of transfer to other situations with similar goals.

As “best practice” may imply that no further improvements are possible, the term “good practice” may be more appropriate.

Continuous improvement and iteration are in fact implicit to the concept of “good practice”. However, the terms “best practice” and “good practice” both share the same goal and imply a single process, namely:

- A validated and successful experience which deserves to be disseminated for better adoption by a larger number of beneficiaries;
- A beneficial experience which can be replicated elsewhere;
- An experience, which has been tested, accepted and adopted by those who implemented it.

4. Criteria for identifying good practices

The following set of criteria will help you determine whether a practice is a “good practice”:

1. **Effective and successful:**

A “good practice” has proven its strategic relevance as the most effective way in achieving a specific objective; it has been successfully adopted and has had a positive impact on individuals and/or communities.

2. **Environmentally, economically and socially sustainable:**

A “good practice” meets current needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poorest, without compromising the ability to address future needs.

3. **Gender sensitive:**

A description of the practice must show how actors, men and women, involved in the process, were able to improve their livelihoods.

4. **Technically feasible:**

Technical feasibility is the basis of a “good practice”. It is easy to learn and to implement.

5. **Inherently participatory:**

Participatory approaches are essential as they support a joint sense of ownership of decisions and actions.

6. **Replicable and adaptable:**

A “good practice” should have the potential for replication and should therefore be adaptable to similar objectives in varying situations.

7. **Reducing disaster/crisis risks**

A “good practice” contributes to disaster/crisis risks reduction for resilience.

5. Experience capitalization: a process to identify good practices

“Capitalize is to transform the experience into shareable knowledge”

Pierre de Zutter, *Des histoires, des savoirs, des hommes : l'expérience est un capital*, FPH, Paris, 1994, p. 36

What is experience capitalization?

Experience capitalization, or “systematization” is an iterative process through which an experience (with its successes and failures) is identified, valued and documented in various media. This systematic process will allow learning of lessons and identification of good practices. Thanks to this approach, the practice can change and improve and may thereafter be adopted by others.

Thanks to the work of documenting and capitalizing of good practices, an organization can respond more quickly and effectively to different types of crises and changes that may arise.

“capitalisation d'expériences”
in French

“sistematización”
in Spanish

How do we proceed?

Several complementary approaches are indicated in the process of experience capitalization (part of a knowledge strategy). It is therefore necessary to:

- Systematically integrate experience capitalization into the project cycle;
- Plan it from the beginning along the different steps;
- Use participatory methodologies (to ensure effective involvement of stakeholders);
- Integrate monitoring and evaluation (allowing comparison and verification of data and information obtained at the different steps of the implementation of the practice);
- Follow approaches that are useful to the process, such as analytical, self-evaluation and self-criticism approaches, and be open to criticism and changes;
- Use Communication for Development;²
- Use knowledge sharing methods and tools;
- Take gender into account (in order to include the specificities of target groups).

Why does gender have to be taken into account in the experience capitalization process?

Throughout the cycle of capitalization, one should remember that:

- “Women and men have knowledge about different things”
- “Women and men have different knowledge about the same things”
- “Women and men may organise their knowledge in different ways”
- “Women and men may receive and transmit their knowledge by different means”

Dimitra's Publication: *Communicating Gender for Rural Development*, page 63, FAO, 2011

² *Communication for Development (ComDev) is a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. ComDev is about seeking change at different levels including listening, establishing trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. See www.fao.org/oek/communication-for-development/comdev-home/en/*

The experience capitalization cycle

The experience capitalization cycle, which will allow good practices to emerge, can be defined in five steps. As noted in the image below, this is a participatory, iterative and non-linear process.



This is not a linear process, but an iterative and participatory one

A. Engage in an action

Good practices emerge from our work, whether in the field, in decentralized offices or at headquarters. We need to take the time to reflect to enable good practices to emerge out of repeated experiences that may have taken place in different regions of the world and in many different areas of interventions.

B. Assess experiences and learn lessons

It is necessary to take the time to analyse our experiences to improve what has been done in order to share it. In other words, understand better to do it better and to share it better.

Human, financial and technical resources should be allocated for this exercise. To help with this analysis, several tools and methods are available:

- Storytelling
- Anecdote circles
- Focus groups
- Interviews
- After action review
- Critical moments reflection
- Appreciative inquiry
- SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats)
- Peer assists
- Village assembly
- Calendars
- Briefing and debriefing
- Templates/checklists
- Knowledge fairs

For more information about these methods and techniques please have a look at the CGIAR, FAO, KM4Dev, UNDP and UNICEF Knowledge Sharing Toolkit at www.kstoolkit.org

The Participatory Rural Appraisal (**PRA**)³ or Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) tools are very suitable for field work and are useful for experience capitalization. The PRA encourages the target local population to strengthen its autonomy by sharing, analyzing and improving their knowledge and living conditions.

The PRA tools most commonly used are:

- Social Map
- Village Resource Map - Transects
- Ranking
- Timelines - Historical mapping
- Calendars

For more information on PRA tools, please visit:

www.fao.org/Participation/english_web_new/content_en/PRA.html

C. Capture good practices and organize the documentation

Good practices should be captured throughout projects and programme cycles or after events and activities have taken place. FAO has developed a **template** to guide you when capturing good practices. This Good Practices Template is available in **Annex A**. It is valid for different audiences, though the format (text, audio, video) and the language may differ. The template can be used as a checklist when you want to collect good practices.

The organization of the documentation requires ways of filing, archiving, cataloguing the good practice in order to be able to find it. Whether documentation is in digital form or not, the use of metadata is essential. Metadata is commonly defined as data about data. It consists of information about the contents of the factsheet. With metadata, it is possible to archive the document and find it easily. This is useful if the good practice is part of a database, or if it is published on a Web site. For example, at FAO good practices are stored in the FAO Corporate Document Repository: www.fao.org/documents.

The **list of metadata** needed to organize good practices in a searchable form is available in **Annex B**.

D. Share and disseminate good practices

Only documenting a good practice is not enough, it is also important to disseminate and share it to a wider audience. The audience of good practices will vary, from policy makers to farmer organizations to individuals, and from extension workers to partner organizations. A good practice should be presented in different formats (text, audio, video, etc.) depending on the target audience. Disseminating and sharing, involving interaction and conversation, can take place through Share Fairs, workshops, networks and communities of practice, Web sites, newsletters, etc. Decisions related to methods and tools for sharing and disseminating a good practice should be discussed with the stakeholders involved in the process of capitalization.

Here are some examples of tools that are available:

- Community interactive theatre
- Briefing and debriefing
- Knowledge fairs
- Newsletters
- Directories
- Workshops
- Informal seminars
- Brown bag lunch
- Study visits
- Open house
- Rural radio
- Listening clubs
- Mobile phones
- Video
- Web sites
- Blogs
- Micro blogging
- E-mail
- Networks
- Communities of practice
- Intranets

For more information about these processes and techniques please have a look at the CGIAR, FAO, KM4Dev, UNDP and UNICEF Knowledge Sharing Toolkit at www.kstoolkit.org.

³ www.kstoolkit.org/Participatory+Rural+Appraisal+%28PRA%29

E. Adopt, adapt and apply good practices

The ultimate purpose of capturing, documenting and sharing good practices is for them to be adopted and applied in future activities of the same or similar nature.

In the field in particular, these activities are carried out in order to empower women and men in rural areas, mainly men and women farmers and producers.

The adoption ladder

We do not proceed immediately to the adoption of a new practice simply because we are aware of its benefits. The process is more complex and requires going through steps.

Once aware of a good practice, a person must also have an interest in a practice. If the person understands and is aware of how he/she can use this practice, he/she has yet to change his/her attitude or behaviour. When the person validates what needs to be done to apply the practice to his/her context, then he/she can go ahead with the practice, its adoption and ownership. This process is not immediate, but is built thanks to the process of Communication for Development. This process takes time and requires openness to dialogue. See *Participatory communication strategy design Handbook p 20, FAO, 2004.*⁴



Do not confuse

<i>lessons learned</i>	<i>key success factors</i>
<i>good practices</i>	<i>success stories</i>

Lessons learned describe constraints as much as key success factors. **Key success factors** are the elements that will determine whether the practice can be described as a “good practice”. These factors will allow emergence of solutions and innovations found in order to remove the constraints encountered during the experience and learn from failures.

The process of experience capitalization will enable identification of **success stories** that can be used in advocacy or institutional communication. These success stories may come from the documentation of **good practice**. The template used for the documentation of a practice allows identification of elements that will be used in success stories. Therefore, it is advisable that the same people conduct the documentation of good practices and success stories in order to avoid doing the work twice. The contents of the success story are less detailed than the good practice fact sheet, and focus on the induced change.

⁴ www.fao.org/docrep/008/y5794e/y5794e00.htm

6. Required elements in the template to document good practices

In light of these findings, it is necessary to know the elements of good practices to be able to collect them once identified. The elements describing a good practice may include:

- A good practice identifies the main actors or owners of the good practice.
 - A good practice explains the context and the process.
 - A good practice explains what the change/innovation is, as a result of applying the practice.
 - A good practice explains failures and not only successes, as these help to identify weaknesses, thereby allowing improvement of the good practice.
 - A good practice explains the critical success factors that have triggered the positive change being observed.
 - A good practice explains what risks and constraints there are in applying the practice.
 - A good practice explains the impact on the community (based on appropriate evaluation and validation).
 - A good practice uses participatory approaches in order to engage stakeholders and ensure good practice ownership and sustainability.
- A **template**, no matter in which format the end product will be (text, audio, video), for capturing (or describing) good practices should have all of these elements built into its structure and process. The template will serve as a checklist from the beginning of the experiment in order to take into account the different elements that should be kept in mind throughout the project or experience. This approach gives good results if it is part of the monitoring and evaluation process and of the Communication for Development process. In this way, at any time of the project or experience, benchmarks can be immortalized in the form of interviews (audio, video or written), or photos (places, men and women at the beginning of the experience, during and after a change was made). They serve as indicators for monitoring and evaluation.

Different types of documents resulting from experience capitalization

Information fact sheet	Summary highlighting the salient points of an experiment or a good practice. It should not be exhaustive, but should contain technical or other information.
Experience fact sheet	Documentation of an experiment showing (i) the process used for its implementation and (ii) the lessons learned after the analysis of constraints and key success factors.
Good practice fact sheet	Documentation of a validated and repeated practice, using the template as a checklist from the beginning of the experiment (or more experiments). For a given topic, there may be several "sub-practices." However, it is advisable to start from the general, and then turn to experts to identify, isolate and highlight the essential particularities of the practice.
Methodological fact sheet	Documentation of gender-sensitive participatory methodology used during an action, a series of activities on the same topic. Some examples include a checklist which enables to quickly review the elements of a process, or a methodological guide , training manual or learning module which are much more detailed support material, specifying the process step by step.
Case study	Detailed analysis of a practice or a situation which allows illustration of a concept, a hypothesis, a problem or a diagnosis.
Guidelines	Description of the operational details related to the implementation of strategic objectives and policy statements.

It is by doing this work of documentation through the production of various types of fact sheets that one becomes more aware of the useful aspects of experience capitalization. These fact sheets must be tailored to the target audience, which is why it is important to specify to whom this information is intended and what its purpose is. The fact sheets can have different forms and media: poster, two-sided plastic sheet for use in the field, note for advocacy or information, film, audio documentary, theatre play.

The validation process

The process for validating good practices includes the following steps:

- Quality check;
- Peer assist;
- Rewriting to simplify the text, if needed;
- Using a layout which facilitates reading and comprehension.

Summary of advice for the production of fact sheets

- Write an introductory paragraph to make the reader want to continue reading, and introduce the context of the experience or practice;
- Make sure you indicate the month and year of the fact sheet publication, in order to keep a time reference point;
- Write short sentences (subject - verb - complement), easily understandable and accessible to a non-expert public;
- Prefer the active voice to the passive voice;
- Express one single idea per sentence;
- Connect the sentences and paragraphs with logical articulators;
- Do not forget to answer the following questions: Who? What? Where? When? How and why?
- Do not use acronyms or abbreviations: Always write fact sheets bearing in mind that readers ignore the context of the experiment;
- Be gender sensitive throughout the fact sheet and not just in certain points;
- Identify key success factors, but also failures.

Do you want to know more about good practices and experience capitalization?

For further reading on good practices and experience capitalization, please visit:

- The good practices website where you will be able to find bibliographical reference and resource material: www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices/en/;
- Or contact our team : goodpractices@fao.org

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Annex A: Good practices template

This template can be used as a checklist to verify that you have covered as much as possible when documenting a good practice. It will help you identify and collect best practices. The right hand column describes the meaning of the element. The purpose of this template is to guide you when identifying and documenting good practices. This template is based on a thorough analysis of FAO and its partner organizations' approaches to good practices collection.

Element	Guiding questions
Title	What is the name that best describes the good practice?
Type of document (optional)	To include in the subtitle, for example. Specify is the document is a good practice fact sheet, an information sheet, an experience sheet, a case study, a manual or guidelines?
Publication date	When (month and year) was the good practice documented/published?
Author(s)	Who wrote the good practice document?
Publisher (optional)	Is the good practice published by FAO or together with partners, in which case please specify the names of the partner organisations.
Target audience	To whom is this document addressed?
Objective	What is the aim/objective of this document?
Location/geographical coverage	What is the geographical range where the good practice has been used? Please specify when possible, the country, region, province, district, town and village. If possible, add a map to show where the practice was implemented.
Introduction	What is the context (initial situation) and challenge being addressed? Please provide a short description of the good practice being addressed and specify the period during which the practice has been carried out? Explain how gender was taken into account in both the challenge being addressed and the good practice itself. In disaster prone situations, explain how the good practice is contributing to risk reduction and crisis management for resilience.
Stakeholders and partners*	Who are the beneficiaries or the target group of the good practice? Who are the users of the good practice? Who are the institutions, partners, implementing agencies, and donors involved in the good practice, and what is the nature of their involvement? Please explain the different roles men and women play as they benefit from the good practice and their degree of vulnerability to different types of threats.
Methodological approach*	What methodology has been used in order to address the initial issue and lead to a successful outcome and finally to the good practice? What was the process and in which way it was a participatory process? How long did it take to learn lessons and identify key success factors? Please include gender aspects addressed in the description of the methodological approach.
Validation*	Confirmation by the beneficiaries that the practice addresses the needs properly. Has the good practice been validated with the stakeholders/final users? Brief description of the good practice validation process.
Impact*	What has been the impact (positive or negative) of this good practice on the beneficiaries' - both men and women - livelihoods? Please explain how the impact may differ between men and women. Have these beneficiaries' livelihoods been environmentally, financially, and/or economically improved (and if applicable, become more resilient), and if yes how?

* All of these dimensions should contain information that is sensitive to gender, or the difference between men and women.

Element	Guiding questions
Innovation and success factors *	In what way has the good practice contributed to an innovation in the livelihoods of men and women? What are the conditions (institutional, economic, social, and environmental) that need to be in place for the good practice to be successfully replicated (in a similar context)?
Constraints*	What are the challenges encountered by men and women in applying the good practice? How have they been addressed? In a disaster context, in which way do crises/shocks affect the livelihoods of groups at risk?
Lessons learned *	What are the key messages and lessons learned to take away from the good practice experience, for men as much as for women?
Sustainability*	What are the elements that need to be put into place for the good practice to be institutionally, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable?
Up-scaling *	What are the possibilities of extending the good practice more widely? If you were giving advice to men and women living in another geographic area, what are the conditions that should be met/respected to ensure that the good practice is replicated, but adapted to the new context? The aim is to go further than the section “Innovations / critical success factors” in specifying the requirements for replication of the practice on a larger scale (national, regional, international).
Conclusion*	Conclude specifying/explaining the impact and usefulness of the good practice. When possible, use anecdotal evidence such as a storytelling or testimony of a man or a woman showing the benefit of the good practice.
Contact details	What is the address of the people or the project to contact if you want more information on the good practice?
URL of the practice	Where can one find the good practice on the Internet?
Related Web site(s)	What are the Web sites of the projects under which the good practice was identified and reproduced?
Related resources that have been developed	What training manuals, guidelines, technical fact sheets, posters, pictures, video and audio documents, and/or Web sites have been created and developed as a result of identifying the good practice?

** All of these dimensions should contain information that is sensitive to gender, or the difference between men and women.*

Annex B: Checklist of metadata needed to organize good practices in a database or other searchable form

Metadata is commonly defined as data about data. Broadly, this means information about a document and its content. Metadata makes it easier to archive and retrieve the document. This is useful if the good practice is part of a database or is published on a Web site, or in the central archiving system for FAO, the FAO Corporate Document Repository: www.fao.org/documents

Element	Guiding questions
Title	What is the name that best describes the good practice?
Type of document (optional)	For example, to include in the subtitle. Please specify document type. Is the document a good practice fact sheet, information sheet, experience sheet, case study, manual or guidelines?
Publication date	When (month and year) was the good practice documented/published?
Category	In which one of the FAO Good practice categories ¹ does this good practice fall?
Author(s)	Who wrote the good practice document?
Publisher (optional)	Is the good practice published by FAO or together with partners, in which case please specify the names of the partner organisations.
Target audience	To whom is this document addressed?
Objective	What is the aim/objective of this document?
Location/geographical coverage	What is the geographical range where the good practice has been used? Please specify when possible, the region, the country and all different decentralized administrative levels (province, district, village).
Summary	What is the context (initial situation) and challenge being addressed? Please provide a short description of the good practice being addressed and specify the period during which the practice has been carried out? Explain how gender was taken into account in both the challenge being addressed and the good practice itself.
Contact details	What is the address of the people or the project to contact if you want more information on the good practice?
URL of the practice	Where can one find the good practice on the Internet?
Related Web site(s)	What are the Web sites of the projects to which the good practice is related?
Related resources that have been developed	What training manuals, guidelines, technical fact sheets, posters, pictures, video and audio documents, and/or Web sites have been created and developed as a result of identifying the good practice?
Language(s)	In which language(s) is the good practice document available?
Format (optional)	Is the document in a PDF, Word, PPT, jpg, html or some other format? Knowing the format can be used to determine the software, hardware or other equipment needed to in order to access the document.
Resource size (optional)	How many pages long is the document? If it is available as a file, how large is it? If it is a video or an audio file, how long does it last, and again how large is the file?
Keywords	What are a few keywords or tags that best describe the key issues being addressed and processes being applied by the good practice?

¹ The FAO Good Practices categories are listed on the FAO Knowledge Forum Web site: www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices

Contacts

The Good Practices team : goodpractices@fao.org

Web site: www.fao.org/knowledge/goodpractices/en/

External concept note

Good Practices at FAO: Experience Capitalization for Continuous Learning

- In English, 12p. 351kb : www.fao.org/docrep/017/ap784e/ap784e.pdf
- In French, 12p. 443kb : www.fao.org/docrep/017/ap784f/ap784f.pdf
- In Spanish, 12p. 417kb : www.fao.org/docrep/018/ap784s/ap784s.pdf

