

B The conceptual framework

This chapter presents the conceptual framework. It outlines the theoretical background to the two topics “good practices of sustainable agriculture” and “scaling-up strategies” and our understanding of how to assess these terms. Both terms will be defined and the different aspects involved in each term will be discussed. Charts show how these aspects are interlinked.

The conceptual framework sets out the meaning of the different aspects of “local good practices of sustainable agriculture” and “scaling-up strategies”, and the inter-linkages between them. In order to assess both topics, we first of all agreed on their definition after reviewing existing literature and drawing on the field experience of our Indian partner organisations.

The conceptual framework is the result of close cooperation between the Indian Sustainet partners and the SLE team, and includes feedback on our work from several individuals. “We” in the context of these guidelines thus refers to Sustainet, its partner organisations in India and Germany, and the SLE team.

Good practices

Conscious of the fact that there is no common understanding of “good” or “best practices”, a short introduction to the different meanings might be helpful in following our definition of “good practice” framed later on.

The terms “good practice” and “best practice” stand for “the **formal and structured process** of searching for those practices which lead to superior or excellent performance, the observation and exchange of information about those practices, and the adaptation and implementation of those practices into one’s own organisation” (MEADE 1994).

Reviewing the literature, it is obvious that the terms are widely used around the world, both in different contexts (for case studies, behaviour, strategies) and with a different focus (showing “best” or “good” examples in corporations, in diverse fields). In most cases, the use of the term “good” or “best practice” is associated with ranking and implies the existence of a “No. 1”. However, “good practices” and “best practices” are often used interchangeably.

The table on the next page may be helpful for the understanding and classification of successful approaches or activities. It shows different stages of practices, from an innovation or good idea to a proven model or a policy principle that is widely applicable.

The amount of practice evidence can differ. One model might have stood the test in a few cases, e.g., in surrounding villages with similar local conditions, whereas best practice will have been proved in different settings, e.g., different climatic zones or different continents. Similarly, the risk of failure as a result of emulating an approach or activity is higher for a model with limited practical experience than for good practice where the replicability has been tested.

Table 1: States of practice, evidence and applicability

STATE OF PRACTICE	LEVEL OF EVIDENCE	GENERAL APPLICABILITY
Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - minimal objective evidence - inferences from parallel experiences and contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - new idea - no previous experience - high risk
Promising practice, state of the art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unproven in multiple settings - anecdotal evidence - testimonials articles - reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high risk
Model, lessons learnt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - positive evidence in a few cases - program evaluations - conferences - workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - limited number of settings and experiences
Good practice, better practice, exemplary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - clear evidence from some settings - several evaluations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - promise of replicability, medium risk
Best practice, protocols, codes of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - evidence of impact from multiple settings - meta-analyses - expert review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - demonstrated replicability, limited risk
Policy principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - proven in multiple settings - replication studies - evidence quantitative - scientific 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consistently replicable - widely applicable "truism" essential for success

Source: HANCOCK ET AL. 2003:12

Using the term "good practices" as defined in the table above may not include all of the approaches used by Sustainet partner organisations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These cover both small initiatives with locally adapted solutions that have not yet been tested elsewhere and large experienced organisations with national strategies and models already verified in different contexts. Bearing in mind that there is no "one beats all" solution in the extensive field of sustainable agriculture, but a variety of locally adapted solutions, we decided to use the term "good" rather than "best". From our point of view it is almost impossible to rank different approaches, since the success of a specific approach will always depend largely on local conditions.

Sustainet should therefore have a wide approach that includes all levels of experience and refers to categories extending from innovation to policy principle. We decided to use the term "good practices" in the sense of including all levels of experience.

In order to cover successful projects in the field of sustainable agriculture, we agreed on the following working **definition**: First of all, good practice in sustainable agriculture is not an approach restricted to a sole activity but several activities at least in the same or different fields. Thus, we have to talk about **good practice as a couple of activities or measures**.

Regarding the **criteria** for “good practice” we agreed upon the following:

- **Measurable outputs and impact:** this implies that the project has already existed for some years and produced visible results. We distinguish between a short-term impact (e.g., increased yields) and a more aggregated long-term impact, where we focus on food and nutrition security.
- **Replicability:** the aim of a project should be to create activities in sustainable agriculture that are replicable with little or no external inputs rather than “island” solutions.
- **Local appropriateness:** sustainable agricultural practice should be easily adaptable, since this is an acceptance criterion at local level.
- **Sustainability:** general sustainability criteria, i.e., environmental friendliness, economic and financial viability, technical appropriateness, social and cultural acceptance, and building of viable institutions, are of course also vital in the field of agriculture.

In order to describe and analyse the criteria of “good practices of sustainable agriculture”, we began to draft a conceptual framework chart, asking questions such as “What are the main characteristics of good practice?”, “What are the preconditions?”, “What are the impact and replication factors?”.

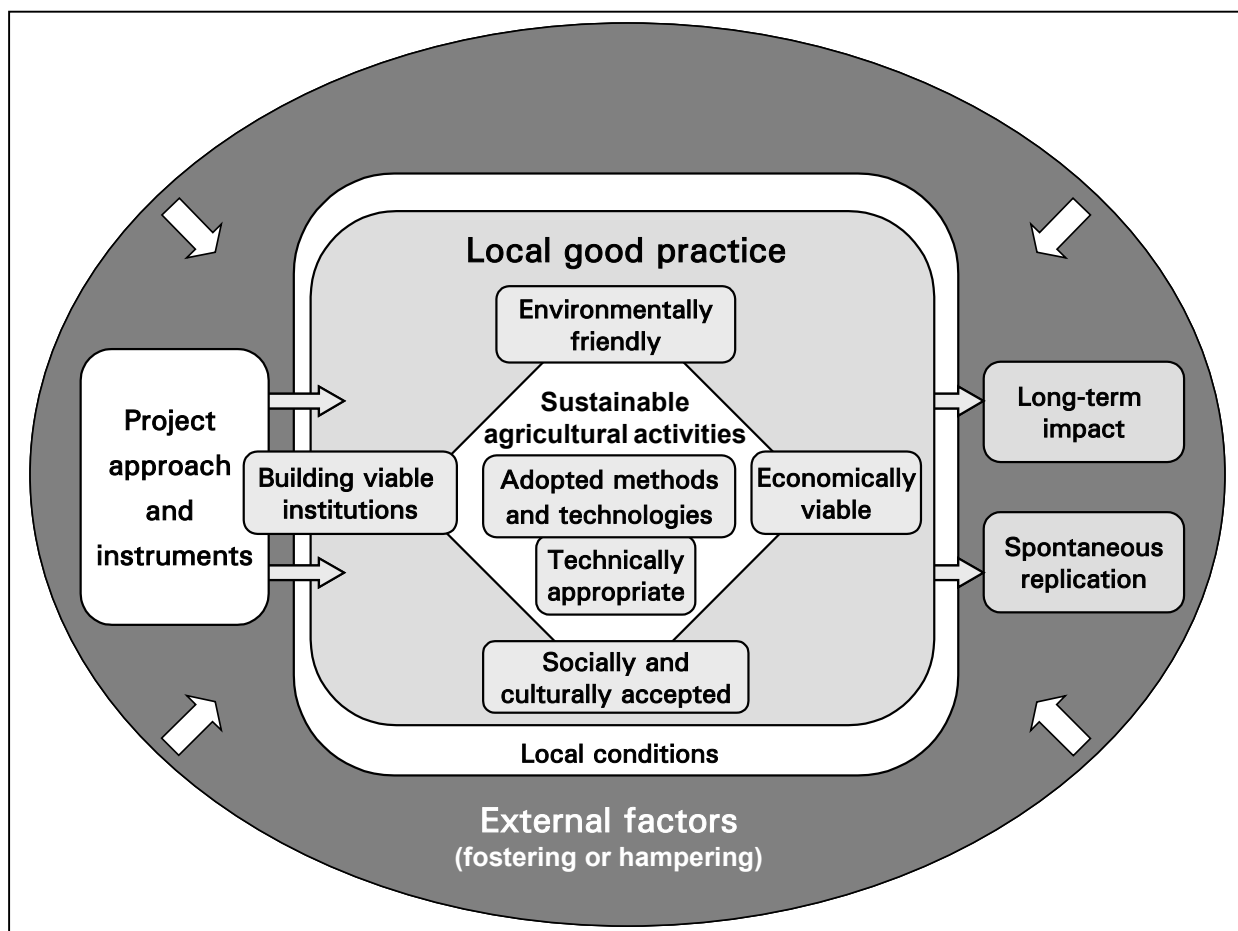
Once we see something that looks like “good practice”, we cross-check whether all the aspects mentioned have been met. For this purpose, we start with an analysis of the various activities in sustainable agriculture (the white quadrangle in the centre of the chart on the following page) that constitute local good practice in the specific project context. For practical reasons we focus on the one or two more successful activities in the different fields of agriculture. For each single activity selected we look at the methods and techniques that have been adopted, and their technical appropriateness. Regarding the **methods adopted**, we want to identify the reasons why groups of farmers (marginal, small, big) either adopt or do not adopt certain methods. To avoid overlapping with the subsequent analysis of local good practice sustainability as a whole, questions on **technical appropriateness** are limited to finding out the extent to which each activity incorporates indigenous knowledge, makes use of locally available resources, and is manageable and safe.

The next step is to check the extent to which a good practice generally fulfils sustainability criteria:

- **Environmental friendliness** means that the practice has a positive – at least a non-degrading – impact on the environment, thus contributing to the improvement of soils, water, and flora and fauna (biodiversity).
- **Economic viability** means that the practice has lasting benefits for the family and village / community economy, and is financially advantageous – or at least bearable – for the adopting farmers.
- **Social and cultural acceptance** means that the practice respects local traditions and belief systems, is positively received by the various local social groups, is sensitive to the needs of people affected by health problems, and that it has positive effects on the organisation of labour within the families and the community.

- **Building viable institutions** means that local institutions created and/or strengthened by the project have clear and shared objectives with a focus on sustainable agriculture, represent various social groups (including the marginalised), that they are respected and firmly linked to private and public service providers, and that they have sufficient managerial capacities.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework – local good practice in sustainable agriculture



Source: Own presentation

A good practice itself is embedded in local conditions and influenced by the project approach and its instruments. Both boxes in the diagram remain white to indicate a more descriptive rather than analytical approach to the assessment.

The description of **local conditions** includes key elements of the natural, socio-economic and socio-cultural environment, as well as existing institutional structures relevant to agriculture. To enable sustainable agriculture, the **project approach** and its instruments comprise various aspects of project planning, implementation, and follow-up, that include target group analysis, identification of appropriate solutions, instruments applied, services provided, cost-effectiveness, and a withdrawal strategy.

In the context of our assessment, we are particularly interested in the contribution of local good practice in sustainable agriculture to the achievement of poverty alleviation objectives in the long term and its potential for replication. We therefore focus on the **long-term impact** on food and nutrition security, and on more equitable access to and control over

relevant farming resources. The assessment of **spontaneous replication** (which means that certain practices, methods, technologies or institutions are adopted without any outside support, particularly project incentives) will provide a first insight into why local good practice is replicated by farmers.

The entire framework of local good practices, the project, spontaneous replication and impact are again influenced by **external factors**, which can have either fostering or hampering effects. Although these factors go beyond the project's sphere of influence and that of its target groups and differ according to context, they need to be assessed to analyse good practice reliability.

Scaling up

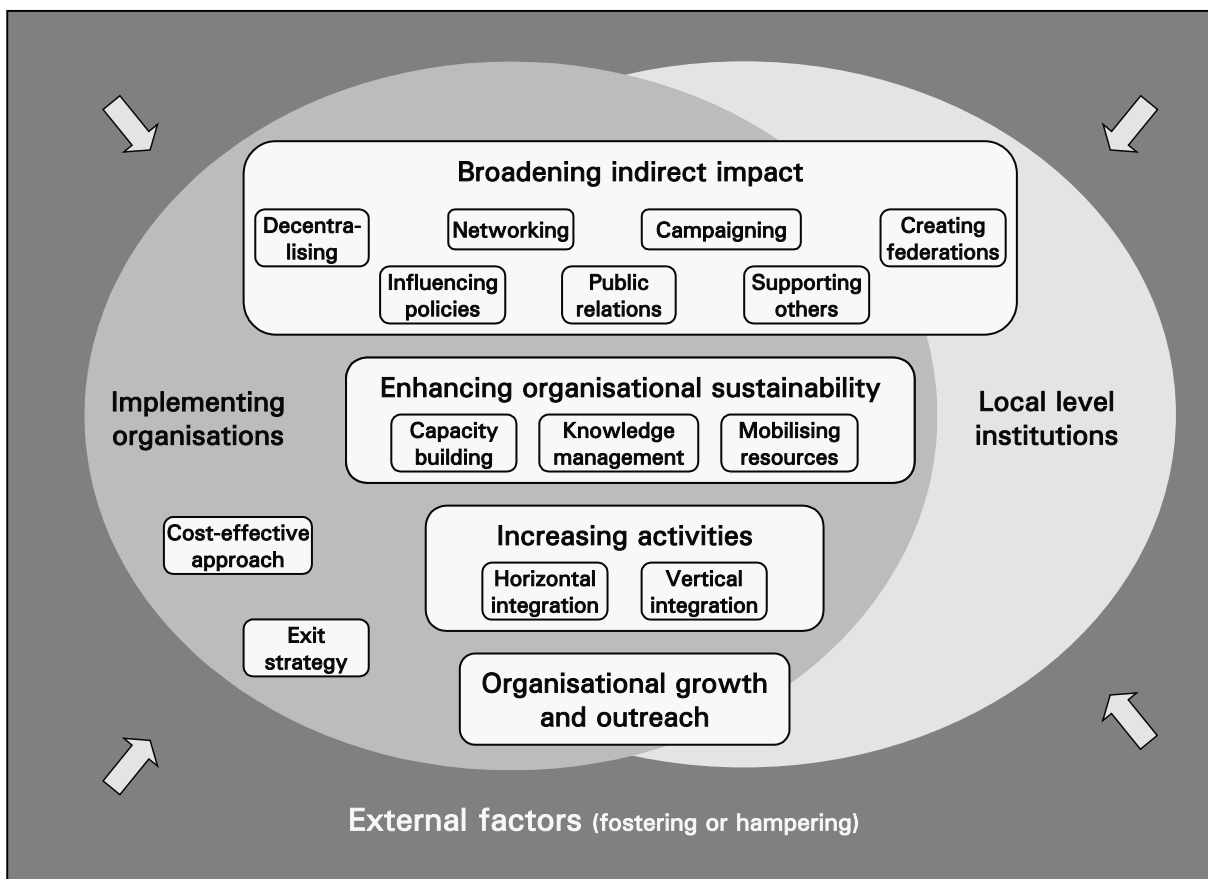
Scaling-up has almost become a new paradigm in the discussion on the impact of development activities. Generally speaking, scaling-up means "increasing impact". Although in no way new to the field, the goal of scaling up has nevertheless become a recent mainstream issue, since the dissemination of good practices is seen as a fundamental means of preventing successful practices remaining "island" solutions. If good practices are implemented by different organisations in different regions, they run the risk of remaining isolated solutions to local situations. A number of potential good practices are thereby lost as an example to others. What is missing are activities that increase the impact of good practices by, for instance, passing on their benefits to more people. This can be achieved by strengthening the sustainability of the implementing organisation, increasing activities and geographical coverage, and broadening indirect project impact by influencing other actors working in the same field.

The second part of the conceptual framework describes the various strategies pursued by organisations or projects to scale up their local good practices. Using the „International IIRR workshop“ definition as a starting point, we understand **scaling up** as any effort to bring more quality benefits to more people, over a wider geographical area, more quickly, more equitably and to more lasting effect. We differentiate between scaling-up strategies and activities of local level institutions and those of implementing organisations. However, numerous overlaps do occur (see chart on the following page). Based on existing taxonomies (e.g., UVIN, JAIN AND BROWN 2000) we identified **four categories** for the assessment of scaling-up strategies, which are indicated in the chart on the following page from the bottom (as core activities of the organisation) to the top (as more peripheral activities).

Organisational growth is probably the most natural scaling-up strategy to achieve greater outreach and thus bring more benefits to more people over a wider geographical area. Organisations may increase their staff, resources, and project area. However, it is not a prerequisite for scaling up; some organisations may even decide to reduce their staff, but are still in a position to increase their impact.

Organisations can also **increase their activities** in order to bring more quality benefit to a greater number of people, more equitably and to more lasting effect. This can happen either on the horizontal level, when an organisation extends activities to new sectors, or on the vertical level, when activities are added to those already existent within one sector. However, for good practices of sustainable agriculture the potential for scaling up is higher when activities are increased vertically rather than horizontally.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework – scaling-up



Source: Own presentation

Another category of scaling-up strategies consists of activities that **enhance organisational sustainability** to ensure long-term availability of human and financial resources and thus provide more quality benefits to more lasting effect. This strategy can include activities such as capacity-building of staff, organisational learning and knowledge management, and the mobilisation of resources.

Finally, an organisation can pursue the strategy of **broadening its indirect impact** by affecting the behaviour of other actors who work with the poor; hereby, the target group is reached indirectly through the actions and decisions of others. The most prominent example is networking, which organisations use in order to cooperate (temporarily) with other organisations for a common goal. Other activities to achieve indirect impact are public relations, influencing policies (e.g., lobbying and advocacy), mobilising and campaigning, giving support to other organisations and individuals, decentralising and outsourcing, and creating federal structures.

In addition to these four strategies, we consider having a cost-effective approach and an exit strategy fundamental to the assessment of scaling-up strategies (both aspects are covered in the assessment of the project approach and instruments). Having a **cost-effective approach** is important to its rapid spreading over a larger area, thus increasing the organisation's outreach. Having an **exit strategy** for the project will ensure that an organisation withdraws as early as possible from a project area, and is able to spend its resources on new projects.

It should be kept in mind that the impact of all scaling-up activities mentioned above can be limited by **external factors** beyond the organisations' sphere of influence (e.g., government policies and global conventions).