



Strategies for Scaling-up Sustainable Agricultural Practices: SUSTAINET Approach

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Abstract

Assessing whether an agricultural practice is good or sustainable is a significant effort for sustainable agriculture. A good agricultural practice has to fulfill many attributes and criteria for increased acceptance and adoption by farmers. If a good agricultural practice is well accepted as it fulfills most of the sustainability indicators and criteria, then it is appropriate to spread and diffuse this good practice among wider farming communities. So, scaling up strategies need also be developed and tried for wider scaling up. Here is a framework for self-assessment of good sustainable agricultural practices and devising appropriate scaling up strategies for diffusion and scaling up of good sustainable agricultural practices among our farmers.

Keywords: Good practice, scaling up Strategies, Sustained, sustainability indicators

Introduction

Sustainability assumed importance when questions are raised on such key aspects as increased yield, profit, economic benefit, acceptability and environmental friendliness of an agricultural practice. You may wonder how to answer these questions. You will surely have difficulty in choosing between economic gain or profit and harm to environment and loss to society, in which we live. It is indeed, a difficult proposition to strike a balance among our own individual benefit, welfare of our society and our natural resource base including land, water and environment. Researchers have developed many criteria and indicators and measures of sustainability, but you may find them difficult to apply to your particular agricultural practice. So a new approach is developed by Sustained of the German organization, GTZ to help you conduct self-assessment of a sustainable practice to test whether it is a good practice for your local situation.

In this paper you will understand the key issues and concepts of a good sustainable practice and the process of scaling-up of a good practice through a simple and easy to understand analogy.

An Analogy to Understand the Key Concepts

You might have encountered a question commonly asked among people: Which is more important- Seed or Soil? The answers, would anyway, vary as people of different walks of life may perceive differently. Some may say, if the soil is good, even a bad seed may germinate and give you some yield, while others may argue for a better seed against a better soil. While the debate may continue, you would agree with me that a good seed germinates in a good soil and yields well to express its potential vigor. Hence, it is obvious that both seed

and soil are important for achieving better results. It is not possible to choose between the two - seed and soil as both are important.

If I take this analogy of seed and soil further, you would agree with me that a good seed, if thrown on open land, will go waste as congenial conditions are not available to the seed. So, a good farmer would till the soil, and create a fine tilth for the seed to germinate. By tilling the soil, he creates conditions like adequate soil moisture, temperature, soil porosity, good soil structure, and fertility that are required for the seed to germinate, grow and flourish. In the same way, he treats the seed appropriately for achieving better germination. So, in order to get good yields, both the seed and soil need be thoroughly prepared before we set ourselves for sowing and cultivating crops.

If I take this analogy a little longer to scaling up sustainable agricultural practices among the farming community on a large area and scale, you would agree with me that a good agricultural practice needs a good socio-economic-political setting for successful diffusion and wider adoption. So a good seed, or a good idea, or a good practice needs good soil, or good setting, that receives the seed or idea and allows it to grow and flourish. Hence basic understanding of *what constitutes a good practice* and *what scaling-up is* may be required before we make any effort at scaling up.

Good Sustainable Agricultural Practice

Here by good practice, we mean sustainable practice (See Fig.1), the one that fulfills following criteria for “good practice”:

- 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?”

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.

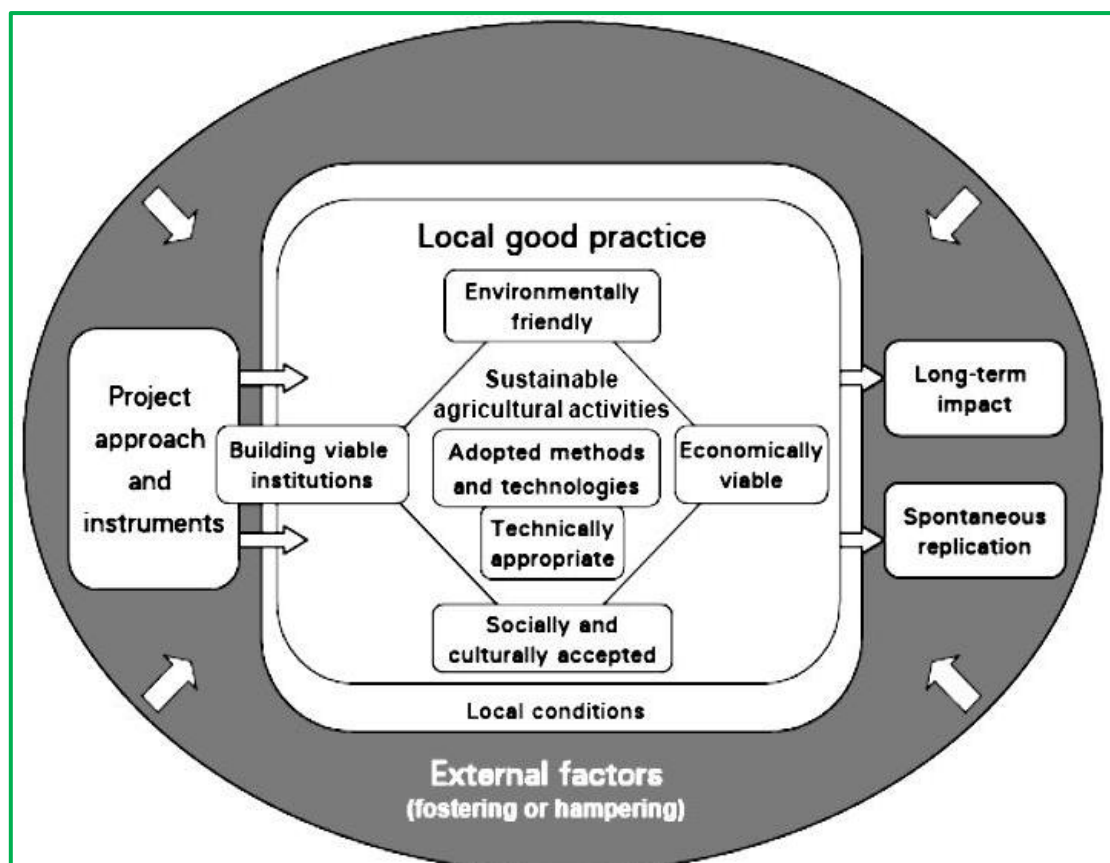


Fig. 1: Sustainability Indicators of Good Sustainable Agricultural Practices

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 marginalized), that they are respected and firmly linked to private and public service providers, and that they have sufficient managerial capacities.

If the above-mentioned indicators are observed in a good sustainable agricultural practice, you may find that farmers would be ready and willing to accept, adopt, patronize and integrate into their sustainable agricultural systems. Then the good practice is spontaneously replicated and your job of diffusing in the community at large scale and area becomes easy and assured. Thus, a good practice that is sustainable will be a harbinger of progress. A gospel of good word must reach everyone.

Scaling Up Strategies

Generally speaking, scaling-up means “increasing impact”. Scaling-up has become a new paradigm in the discussion on the impact of development activities. 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 not spread and 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 Fig.2). Based on existing taxonomies we identified four categories for the assessment of scaling-up strategies, which are indicated in the chart (See Fig.2). The strategies are arranged from the bottom (as core activities of the organisation) to the top (as more peripheral activities).

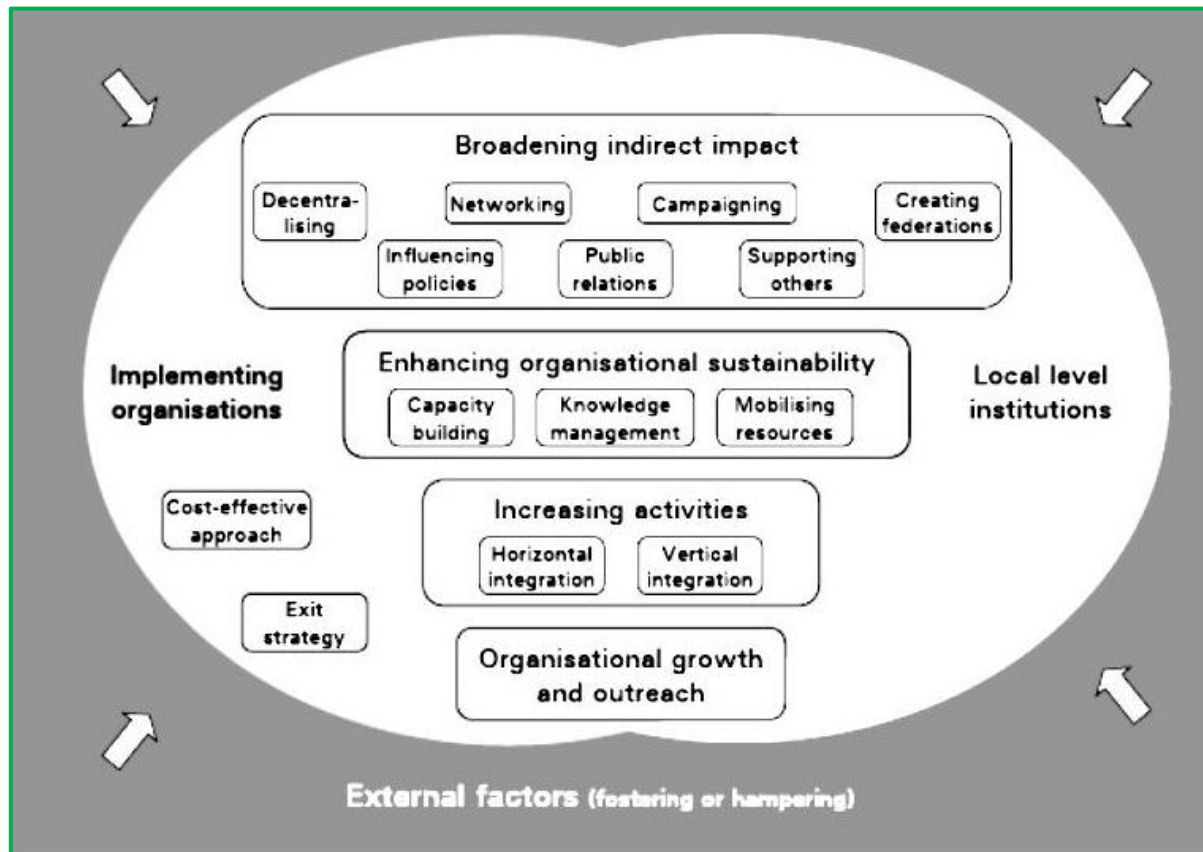


Fig. 2 Strategies for Scaling Up Good Sustainable Agricultural Practices

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. Extension service 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.

Agricultural extension service 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.

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 mobilization of resources.

Finally, an extension service 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), mobilizing and campaigning, giving support to other organisations and individuals, decentralizing 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. Having a cost-effective approach is important to its rapid spreading over a larger area, thus increasing the organization'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.

Conclusion

Understanding the key concepts and mastering the process of self-assessment of a good practice and how it can be scaled-up for wider impact through diffusion and adoption of the good and sustainable agriculture practice is essential not only for practicing farmers but also for the development projects and extension service staff interacting directly with farmers and operating at grassroots level. Extension service organizations need to assess the good agricultural practices on all the indicators and attributes and try to enhance their acceptance among farmers. All the strategies need to be explored and tried to enhance the impact of scaling up of good sustainable agricultural practices for the benefit of our farming community.

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