EVALUATION LESSONS LEARNED AND EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES

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The purpose of this guidance note is to provide background on definitions and usages of lessons learned applied by the ILO Evaluation Unit. Intended users of this guidance note are evaluation managers and any staff in project design or technically backstopping the evaluation process. There is separate guidance provided for consultants on how to identify, formulate and present these findings in reports.[1]

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important purposes of evaluation in the ILO is to contribute to improvements in project or programme performance and promote organizational learning. Evaluations are expected to generate useful lessons that can be applied elsewhere to improve programme or project performance, outcome, or impact. Evaluations also serve accountability purposes by

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[1] Checklist 5 *Preparing the Evaluation Report* should be given to evaluators to guide them on preparing the report and ensuring that lessons learned and emerging good practices are identified and presented according to ILO Evaluation Policy.

feeding these lessons into the decision-making process of stakeholders, including donors and national partners.

This guidance is meant to ensure high quality lessons learned in all ILO evaluations, which the Evaluation Unit subsequently further codes with metadata in its database. The lessons learned data sets are made accessible to all officials providing independently triangulated lessons for three core levels of ILO's work: 1) future project design, 2) a source of data to identify trends in technical and administrative aspects of project implementation, as well as 3) evidence-based lessons to be considered for design and evaluation of country programmes and strategies.

The ILO definition takes these three levels into consideration and aims to capture lessons that can be applied to project contexts, but also be generalized for broader use.

ILO Definition - **Lessons learned**

A lesson learned is an observation from project or programme experience which can be translated into relevant, beneficial knowledge by establishing clear causal factors and effects. It focuses on a specific design, activity, process or decision and may provide either positive or negative insights on operational effectiveness and efficiency, impact on the achievement of outcomes, or influence on sustainability. The lesson should indicate, where possible, how it contributes to 1) reducing or eliminating deficiencies; or 2) building successful and sustainable practice and performance.

A lesson learned may become an emerging good practice when it additionally shows proven results or benefits and is determined by the evaluator to be worthwhile for replication or up-scaling.

Lessons learned are meant to describe knowledge gained by experience and are derived from specific and well-defined situations. They are intended to be significant, to have a relevance to a wider context, to be generalized and replicable. In many cases, however, lessons learned do not meet the above criteria; they are often poorly formulated, insignificant, invalid and not replicable. In addition, processes and tools designed to promote their dissemination and uptake are often weak. The result can be that lessons learned are shelved or ignored. In order to avoid this, specific processes have been put in place at the ILO to disseminate lessons learned and promote their use.

1. IDENTIFYING LESSONS LEARNED

Identifying lessons learned	Flagging emerging good practices	Disseminating and sharing lessons learned	Reuse of lessons learned

This section covers the process of identifying lessons learned using ILO criteria to best capture the information needed by stakeholders, and to conform to optimized use of ILO evaluation information systems. This section will also explain how lessons learned are stored and retrieved, how emerging good practices from lessons learned are flagged and stored for further validation by a group of technical experts; and ways in which lessons learned and good practices inform further project design and improve programme performance. Evaluation reports of programmes or technical cooperation projects constitute one of the main sources from which lessons can be derived. Evaluators are tasked to identify lessons learned in their evaluations and vet them against the criteria being applied by the ILO. In particular, lessons learned should address any positive or negative insights gained through the life of the intervention which had substantial impact on operations, achievement of outcomes, or impact on sustainability. They can relate to administrative aspects of the project or the technical context of the intervention. Lessons learned should highlight strengths and weaknesses and provide decision-makers with relevant information to help them avoid common mistakes and promote a more enabling environment.

The lessons collected during an evaluation are one of three key outputs included in EVAL's checklist for ensuring the quality of evaluation reports. Identifying and presenting lessons learned is an exercise to recognize and document the richest and most meaningful lessons gained from project events. The elements listed below provide a framework for identifying lessons learned.

KEY ELEMENTS OF A LESSON LEARNED:

- A lesson learned can refer to a positive experience, in the case of successful results; or to a negative experience, in the case of malfunctioning processes, weaknesses or undesirable influences.
- A lesson learned should specify the context from which it is derived, establish potential relevance beyond that context, and indicate where it could be applied and by whom.
- A lesson learned explains how or why something did or did not work by establishing clear causal factors and effects. Whether the lesson signals a decision or process to be repeated or avoided – the overall aim is to capture lessons that management can use in future contexts to improve projects and programmes.

- A lesson learned should indicate how well it contributes to the broader goals of the project or programme and establish, when possible, if those goals align appropriately with the needs of beneficiaries or targeted groups.

Each of the following criteria should be considered, included and adequately explained, to ensure that lessons learned are complete and useful. Specific instructions are provided to consultants conducting evaluations for the ILO and templates provided for this purpose must be filled in as a part of the evaluation submission.[2]

Lessons Learned Criteria Checklist
The evaluator should cite and explain the points below, when appropriate.

✓ **Context –** Explain the context from which the lesson has been derived (e.g. economic, social, political). If possible, point to any relevance to the broader ILO mandates or broader technical or regional activities.

✓ **Challenges –** Cite any difficulties, problems or obstacles encountered / solutions found - *Positive and negative* aspects of the lesson should be described.

✓ **Project Goals –** Point out any contribution to the *broader goals* of the project, if relevant.

✓ *Causal factors* **–** Present evidence for "how" or "why" something did or did not work?

✓ **Beneficiaries –** Targeted users or beneficiaries affected by the lessons learned should be cited.

✓ **Success –** The lessons learned should cite any *decisions, tasks, or processes* that reduced or eliminated deficiencies or built successful and sustainable practice and performance; or have the potential of success.

Utilizing lessons learned

Evaluators are encouraged to concentrate on the quality of lessons learned and are instructed to present them in the report only if they can adhere to the quality criteria listed above. Each lesson learned identified in the report should be accompanied by a completed template, annexed to the report. These templates are then included in a data roster, coded with additional metadata and later re-used in analyzing the technical and administrative aspects of evaluation findings. For further information on how these templates serve the storage and dissemination of lessons learned, see these sections later in the guidance note.

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[2] The handout to evaluators is Checklist 5 *Preparing the Evaluation Report, which contains details on all aspects of formulating and presenting an ILO evaluation report, including the identification and presentation of lessons learned and emerging good practices in ILO standard templates.*

2. FLAGGING EMERGING GOOD PRACTICES

Identifying lessons learned → Flagging emerging good practices → Disseminating and sharing lessons learned → Reuse of lessons learned

ILO evaluation sees lessons learned and emerging good practices as part of a continuum, beginning with the objective of assessing what has been learned, and then identifying successful practices from those lessons which are worthy of replication. As defined in the previous section, a lesson learned may have negative or positive aspects. Some key differences between a simple lesson learned and an emerging good practice are that an emerging good practice:

a) represents *successful* strategies or interventions that have performed well;
b) through establishing a clear cause-effect relationship, the practice has achieved marked and measurable results or benefits; and
c) related strategies are determined to be specifically useful for replication or up-scaling.

Those *successful* lessons adhering to this and other criteria, therefore, are presented as emerging good practices, and details of the substantiating criteria are filled in the templates provided by the evaluator. The Evaluation Unit undertakes some further coding of these good practices, and they are subsequently made available to ILO staff as data sub-sets for further validation by technical experts and discussion groups.

ILO Definition - Emerging Good Practice

A lesson learned may become an "**emerging good practice"** when it additionally shows proven marked results or benefits and is determined by the evaluator to be considered for replication or up-scaling to other ILO projects.

An emerging good practice should demonstrate clear potential for substantiating a cause-effect relationship and may also show potential for replicability and broader application. It can derive from comparison and analysis of activities across multiple settings and policy sources or emerge from a simple, technically specific intervention.

KEY ELEMENTS OF AN EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE[3]:

- An emerging good practice is any successful working practice or strategy, whether fully or in part, that has produced consistent, successful results and measurable impact.
- An emerging good practice implies a mapped logic indicating a clear cause-effect process through which it is possible to derive a model or methodology for replication.
- An emerging good practice can demonstrate evidence of sustainable benefit or process.
- An emerging good practice has an established and clear contribution to ILO policy goals and demonstrates how that policy or practice aligns, directly or indirectly, to the needs of relevant beneficiaries or targeted groups.

The following criteria for identifying an emerging good practice should be fully considered.

Emerging Good Practice Criteria Checklist **When possible, the evaluator should cite and explain any of the points below.**
✓ **The Good Practice -** Cite as specifically as possible the task or practice which works and how it works, linking it to projects relevance and purpose.
✓ **Context and relevant preconditions –** Indicate the circumstances under which the good practice took place and cite anything that might affect its application to other settings (e.g. problems and obstacles). Provide relevant preconditions or specific organizational aspects which contributed to the emerging good practice. Has it been used before?
✓ **Causal factors –** This is sometimes linked to context and beneficiaries, and should also indicate where project design and objectives, or the prevailing theory of change in the project can be linked to the emerging good practice.
✓ **Beneficiaries –** Explain who are the targeted beneficiaries or users of the good practice and the impact on them.
✓ **Measurable impact –** Demonstrate when a specific impact was linked to the emerging good practice, providing specific figures or details when possible.
✓ **Potential for replication –** Cite specific reasons why the emerging good practice is considered to be potentially replicable in different contexts? How?
✓ **Link to ILO policy goals –** When possible, indicate any relevant contribution or link to the broader ILO policy goals or country programme outcomes.

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[3] These elements should be considered as **in addition** to those elements required to determine a lesson learned.

Utilizing emerging good practices

Each emerging good practice is accompanied by a completed template, annexed to the report. These templates are included in a data roster, coded with additional metadata. Additionally, some emerging good practices are selected for further validation by technical experts. For further information on how the templates serve the storage and dissemination of emerging good practices, see these sections below.

Lessons learned and emerging good practices taken from the templates are entered into their respective modules in the i-*Track* database by the database administrator in EVAL. Both the lessons learned and good practice modules generate reports which are useful for searching by intervention themes, policies, regions, etc. Good practice data can be clustered by theme and these practices made available for use in validation exercises undertaken by technical experts. Figure 1 shows how to generate a report from the database.

3. DISSEMINATING AND SHARING LESSONS LEARNED

There are several approaches to the dissemination of lessons learned from ILO evaluations:

- Lessons learned are directly communicated to the relevant stakeholders either during the stakeholder workshop, or by line management soon after the evaluation takes place.

- Evaluation summaries containing lessons learned are put up on the public website of the ILO, with the full report available upon request.

- The i-Track database produces reports listing the text of lessons learned identified in independent evaluations and searchable by thematic criteria, and exportable as a management report in Excel.

- The project manager and the evaluation manager are encouraged to disseminate evaluation summaries to relevant stakeholders through formal and informal meetings.

Technical specialists in headquarters and the field should also make an effort to disseminate relevant lessons learned to interested officials in the Office. The Evaluation Unit also has the *i-eval Flash Newsletter* covering regional and sectoral evaluation highlights, posting noteworthy

insights and lessons learned to the wide network of ILO evaluation practitioners, users and clients.

Knowledge dissemination may also take the form of conferences, workshops, training sessions, or seminars and may be hosted by EVAL, the evaluator and project staff or other stakeholders. Large projects may have a dissemination strategy as part of their M&E plan targeting a specific range of clients. For higher-level strategy evaluations, the report and specific follow-up on recommendations and lessons learned are presented to the Evaluation Advisory Committee and the Governing Body. The emerging good practices can be made available to technical experts through communities of practice and other discussion groups for further validation through EVAL's Knowledge Sharing Platform.

To search for Lessons Learned in i-Track

Cut and Paste into your internet browser   http://www.ilo.org/evalinfo/

Generic Log In: username   ILO   Password: view

Go to the menu item EVAL TRACK – then select LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

4. USE OF LESSONS LEARNED

| Identifying lessons learned | Flagging emerging good practices | Disseminating and sharing lessons learned | Use of lessons learned |

As explained in previous sections, evaluation reports are stored in a systematic manner and the knowledge generated by lessons learned are made available as data sub-sets in a searchable format through the *i-Track* database.

A primary source of use of lessons learned is input to the drafting of new project proposals. The project appraisal process stipulates that all new project proposals review the evaluation database for relevant evaluations and incorporate and cite appropriate lessons learned into new project designs.[4] All ILO officials have access to the database and can easily search evaluations, locating specific findings in the lessons learned that can be incorporated into new

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[4] See PARDEV Technical Cooperation Appraisal Mechanism and Appraisal Checklist

project proposals. Cumulative reports citing a range of administrative lessons learned on implementation or operational processes are regularly made available for analysis.

Additionally, The Evaluation Advisory Committee (EAC) was established to provide a mechanism to oversee the use, implementation, and follow up to lessons learned and recommendations resulting from ILO high-level evaluations. Its objective is to promote institutional follow-up of independent evaluation findings and accepted recommendations, and to provide pertinent information and advice to the Director-General on progress made by the Office.

All line managers are accountable for ensuring proper use of relevant evaluation findings, lessons learned and recommendations. The reusing process focuses on encouraging and promoting lessons which have been screened and validated through the evaluation process. This provides management with knowledge to effectively support organizational objectives by repeating successful outcomes and avoiding unsuccessful efforts.

> **Lessons learned, EVAL and the ILO Information Gateway: To further strengthen organizational learning, EVAL aims to feed lessons learned from project evaluations into the "policy track" contained in the nascent ILO Information Gateway. These will be accessible through a central gateway featuring prominently on the ILO public website. Through increased dialogue with the technical units, and the expanding resources of the ILO evaluation network, EVAL aims to collaborate closely with line management and strategic management to foster better use of ILO lessons learned.**

ANNEX 1 – LESSONS LEARNED TEMPLATE   (filled in by the evaluator)

ILO Lesson Learned Template	
Project Title:	**Project TC/SYMBOL:**
Name of Evaluator:	**Date:**
The following lesson learned has been identified during the course of the evaluation. Further text explaining the lesson may be included in the full evaluation report.	

LL Element	Text
Brief description of lesson learned (link to specific action or task)	
Context and any related preconditions	
Targeted users / Beneficiaries	
Challenges /negative lessons - Causal factors	
Success / Positive Issues - Causal factors	
ILO Administrative Issues (staff, resources, design, implementation)	

ANNEX 2 – EMERGING GOOD PRACTICE TEMPLATE (filled in by the evaluator)

ILO Emerging Good Practice Template

Project Title: **Project TC/SYMBOL:**

Name of Evaluator: **Date:**

The following emerging good practice has been identified during the course of the evaluation. Further text can be found in the full evaluation report.

GP Element	Text
Brief description of the good practice; link to specific action, task or policy	
Relevant pre-conditions, Context	
Causal Factors	
Targeted users / Beneficiaries	
Indicate Measurable impact	
Potential for replication	
Links to Country Programme Outcomes or ILO Policy	
Other relevant documents or comments	