



Exchange visits: Advice for improving the impact

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Target audience

The target audience for this good practice fact sheet includes men and women farmers, producers' organizations (PO) and support organizations and any groups of people preparing to undertake an exchange visit.

Objective

This fact sheet offers key approaches for the preparation, implementation and follow up of an exchange visit also called study tours, so that these visits have a real impact.

Geographical coverage

This fact sheet is based on the experience of exchange visits carried out by FAO projects in several regions and communities of Niger (in particular Niamey, Dosso, Gobéri, Konkorindo and Tillabéri) over the past decade or so. Participants in these exchange visits were both men and women, drawn from other regions of Niger and neighbouring West African countries.

Introduction

Participants in exchange visits organized in the early 2000s were mainly men. Involving women too has become a crucial issue – if rural agricultural output is to improve it is important that women can also take part in exchange visits. These experiences will provide them with access to knowledge and information, which will gradually give them greater empowerment.

Besides, women are under represented in farmer organizations (producers organizations, non-governmental organizations, projects) which participate in these visits. This is almost certainly because those in charge of such bodies continue to underestimate the value of including women.

It is especially important that women are given the opportunity to take part in this learning approach since they are less likely to travel and be able to encounter people facing similar challenges. It is for this reason that the Capitalization project:

- conducts awareness raising activities to achieve greater gender parity among participants;
- has drawn lessons on organizing exchange visits from years of experience of FAO projects.

As a result, it has designed a methodology so as to improve the preparation, organization and adoption of new practices on family farms.



Definition of an exchange visit

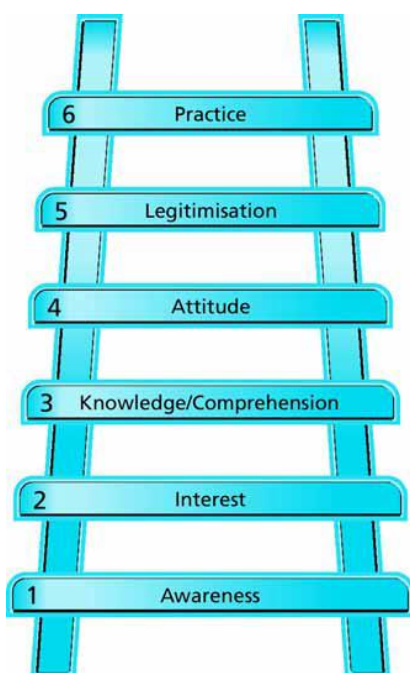
Exchange visits, which are also called study tours, seek to improve the knowledge and practices of the visitors and their organizations, and to integrate the experience gained from the visit into their daily lives.

Exchange visits involve organizing a meeting between, on the one hand, a group of visitors made up of between four and 30 people, both men and women, and, on the other hand, a host group. The aim is to exchange experiences and discover new viewpoints and approaches for a specific theme.

The geographical location of these visits varies according to the expectations of the participants. A visit may take place within the same community, area or country, or between different communities, areas or countries of a region or continent.

Exchange visits have been tried and tested among both illiterate and more literate farming communities.

The adoption ladder



In terms of capacity development, exchange visits offer considerable scope for both women and men farmers. That is because they allow **learning to take place at several levels**. This learning process reflects the different stages in the adoption ladder.

Producers will not immediately adopt a new practice simply because they have been made aware of its benefits. The process is more complex and requires going through certain stages:

Once a producer has been made aware of a new practice, he or she will need to have an interest in the practice. When the farmer has understood how to use this practice, the next step will be making changes in the way he or she thinks and behaves.

Only when what needs to be done in order to use the new practice in local conditions has been established will the farmer be able to translate the idea into action, leading to adoption and ownership. This process is not immediate, but progresses with the help of Communication for Development. It is a process that takes time and requires openness to dialogue.

Learning experiences facilitated through exchange visits can take place at the following levels:

- **Theoretical:** the exchange visits lead to mutual knowledge increase, due to practical demonstrations, which make it easier to understand an idea or a concept and which stimulate willingness to take action. This method also enables participants to become more aware of their own skills and capacities.
- **Practical:** beyond facilitating a simple exchange of ideas, an exchange visit makes it possible for farmers to «see» concrete examples and to understand the advantage of subsequently adapting these practices and applying them to their own circumstances.
- **Behavioural:** the exchange visit leads to changes in attitude and encourages open mindedness and free choice.



Stakeholders and partners

The main actors involved in exchange visits are:

- male and female members of producers' organizations (POs), which may be made up of just men, just women or mixed;
- men and women farmers;
- managers of national and microfinance institutions, as well as managerial staff for ministries and projects.
 - Between 2009 and 2012, the Capitalization project organized 16 exchange visits for members of about 40 institutions or producers' organizations. Beneficiaries included some 110 participants – among them nearly 50 women - from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal.

Methodological approach

To achieve its objectives, an exchange visit should be organized in **three phases**: «before», «during» and «after» the visit. Execution of these three stages should respect a certain number of criteria presented below. These criteria combine a systematic gender approach with a participatory approach. Both are crucial in order to take into account the needs and specific circumstances of all actors – both men and women – in the rural agriculture sector.

BEFORE

Practical arrangements to be made when organizing a successful exchange visit

1. Identification of theme and selection of participants

- Identify the theme of the visit;
- Identify an organization where the visit can take place in order to meet the objectives of the exchange visit;
- Identify candidates for the exchange visit by questioning them about their motivation, expectations and future commitments;
- Guarantee respect for gender parity in the selection of participants. It is crucial to increase the presence of women in exchange visits and take steps to ensure that they are able to participate fully (see solutions in the section on constraints);
- Use a system of alternating when selecting participants so as to avoid always choosing the same people and to enable both men and women who have never benefited from a visit to take part;
- Within the group chosen for the exchange visit, identify people whose qualities, roles and functions match the following criteria:
 - ✓ demonstration of a **degree of interest** in the objective of the visit, showing a willingness to play an active role in discussions and observations during the trip;
 - ✓ on return from the exchange visit, demonstration of a **formal commitment** to disseminate, to both men and women, the information and knowledge acquired.
- Take care to address the expectations of people not taking part in the trip but who could nevertheless benefit from the knowledge acquired by the group of visitors. This will facilitate careful targeting of the practices to be explored during the trip, ensuring that the group returns with concrete solutions.

2. Preparation for the visit

2.1. Logistical and technical preparation

Sharing roles and responsibilities between participants

It is a good idea to identify, within the group traveling, certain resource people and define their responsibilities. Ideally, it is advisable to choose:

- **A person in charge of logistical organization**, to coordinate preparation for the trip and accompany the group throughout the visit;
- **Two facilitators – one male and one female – to be in charge of technical details**, such as preparation and moderation of the visit. Together with the participants, these facilitators will also have to prepare a summary of the events of each day, and organize opportunities to report back (i.e to provide feedback) from the visit once the group has returned home.



It is important that the people chosen be communicative, that they know the rest of the group well and that they are able to explain things clearly and make themselves understood.

All the participants should take part in taking notes and photographs or recording interviews with audio or video. It is therefore essential to check that they have the technical skills to carry out these tasks.

Location and host organization(s)

The following are various aspects which should not be overlooked:

- Choosing the location for the visit and the host structure(s). The organization selected should fully match the expectations of the visitors and the resources available for the visit;
- Ensuring that the facilitators and person in charge of logistics – male or female – contacts the host organization(s) in advance (individuals and/or organizations) to obtain information about their activities, so the group can prepare for the visit;
- Checking with the host organization(s) as to which costs will be covered by the group of visitors (meals, accommodation, services);
- Supplying the host organization(s) with information about the objective and theme of the visit;
- Considering what contribution the visitors could make to the host group, so as to build a reciprocal relationship;
- Nominating, in the village, region or country visited, a person to take responsibility for organizing the on-the-spot logistics of the visit;
- Identifying an interpreter to translate discussions if the language spoken by the host group differs from that of the visitors;
- Ensuring that the host setting is suited to the specific concerns of women, as well as to those of men;
- Identifying the men and women within the host organization who will take part in the meetings, and defining their roles and responsibilities.

Timing and duration of visit

It is important to:

- Identify the best time of year to visit the location chosen for the visit.
Attention: It is advisable to avoid organizing an exchange visit for producers during the crop season, as this is a period of intense work for both hosts and visitors. This is especially true for women, who would be unable to delegate their domestic and agricultural duties,
- Think about the duration of the visit, which would create problems of having to limit the time spent at the location chosen for the exchange.

Preparation of journey, administrative formalities and material

- Define the route, study road conditions and identify the type of vehicle to be used;
- Decide the day and time of journey;
- Check all formalities required, such as visas and vaccinations;
- Prepare any foreign currency as needed;
- Identify and prepare material needed for the visit, for the host organization as well as for the visitors.

Financial organization of visit – Costs and allowance for participants

It is advisable to:

- Budget for all aspects of the exchange visit (transport, accommodation, meals, services supplied by the host organization, visas, vaccinations, etc.);
- Address any difficulties that might arise from different allowances between visitors, which may vary according to their membership in separate bodies.

2.2. Preparation of visit content

Preliminary meeting and identification of theme

It is crucial to **organize a meeting prior to the start of the exchange visit**. Ideally, the group should meet several weeks before the start of the visit, especially if the participants do not know each other. This will help to define issues to be addressed by the exchange visit and to encompass them within a wider common project.

This meeting will ensure that the visit does not become a «tourist excursion», and will strengthen the interest, involvement and sense of responsibility of the participants. Before leaving, the group should be made aware of the fact that members' input is fundamental to the successful outcome of the experience: the visit is not an end in itself, so the «before» (the preparation phase) and the «after» (the phase for giving feedback and applying lessons learned) make an equal contribution to achieving the objectives of the process.

Programming of field visits and interventions

The choice of resource people should be linked to the challenges to be addressed by the visit. It should be remembered that it is important to take into account the common and specific expectations of the women and men in the group. It may be useful to send a list of questions in advance, so that the resource people can be better prepared. It is up to the facilitator to ensure that the issues for each visit are defined in advance.

The programme for the visits should:

- take care to ensure a balance between theoretical and practical information. While the theoretical information will lay the foundation for a practice to be adopted, the field visits will enable participants to see it working in practice;
- set aside free time between visits so that all participants can absorb the information and exchange views about their impressions. If the timetable is too full, the visits may prove counter-productive;
- create opportunities **for social interaction** during meals.

Preparation of Terms of Reference

The objectives of the exchange visit should be clearly defined in the Terms of Reference. In this document, the group of visitors, and the organizations that they represent, should describe:

- their position and the situation at the outset;
- the areas of interest for both men and women participants, their motivation and the questions they have, as well as the practices they hope to learn about;
- the purpose and objective of the exchange visit, including any changes expected after the group's return home.

Ideally, these terms of reference should be prepared in consultation with the host organization, since it is advisable to agree the methodology with the partner.

Preparation of supplementary documents

Aside from the terms of reference, the visitors' group is advised to prepare a briefing note before departure. This should contain all the information gathered during the logistical and technical preparation phase, a programme, including the places to be visited, and a brief presentation of the people and organizations to be encountered.

The organizations represented by the visitors' group should also supply promotional **material** to be distributed to the people met during the exchange (brochures, posters, various documents).

2.3. «Psychological» preparation of participants and their entourage

A poorly prepared exchange visit can become a stressful experience for men and women not used to making such journeys. For this reason, it is advisable to:

- organize the visit **as a group**, as this will put everyone at ease;
- **give all details** about places to be visited, people who will be encountered;
- prepare the participants for discussions and give them **communication skills**. They should know how to listen, ask the right questions and request clarification;
- make sure the **group is escorted by a woman and a man** able to overcome cultural differences and act as a link between group members;
- ensure that **practical arrangements** are made at the host site so that everyone feels at ease. For example, organize a degree of privacy by separating accommodation for women and men, take account of specific needs of women who are breastfeeding, etc.

In addition, it will be important to arrange **advance preparation for families and the entourage** (husbands, heads of household, etc.) of women taking part in the exchange visit, so that they can:

- plan for their absence from the family and the community, and
- make arrangements so that their household and child care duties and responsibilities do not become an obstacle for preventing them to participate in the visit.



It is also important that the village chief, and the head of the POs, informs and reassures the families, explaining that the visit will benefit both the organization and the community as a whole, and that it will be carried out as a group and will involve other women, etc.

DURING Implementation and facilitation of the visit

1. Organization of daily visits

Each day, the group will make several visits. During these, the facilitator must ensure that all group members – women as well as men – are able to express themselves and receive answers to their questions.

It is crucial to:

- respect the established calendar and programme (punctuality and objectives);
- ensure discipline and respect for differences (values and customs) throughout the visit;
- stimulate a willingness to listen and communicate among participants, between visitors and the host group and encourage all participants to take an active role in debates;
- organize reporting groups on a daily basis;
- document during the entire process in order to enable opportunities for feedback after the event, and in particular:
 - ✓ take notes (of contacts and content)
 - ✓ take photos, record interviews
 - ✓ take samples if necessary.

2. Daily wrap-up meeting

It is essential to hold a daily wrap-up meeting, during which participants can:

- take turns to give their impressions;
- explain what has impressed them, favourably or otherwise;
- ask the facilitators questions on certain points.

The people tasked with taking notes will give a brief summary, add information from the discussions and complete their material with documents collected. The meeting should end with a review of the visits planned for the following day, including a quick list of the main questions to be asked and information to be gathered.

Should either men or women participants have any specific concerns, adequate steps should be taken to address these.



AFTER

Feedback, monitoring and evaluation for the visit

1. Preparation of exchange visit report and wrap-up meeting

The report from the exchange visit, based on results from the daily wrap-up meetings, should:

- ✓ summarize the content of visits and presentations;
- ✓ present the thoughts of participants.

The report should be **clear and instructive**, so as to make it easy for everyone to communicate the information gathered and the knowledge acquired. It is therefore recommended that participants set aside a day to wrap-up the experience at the end of the visit, so that they can all make an active contribution to the content preparation and organization of the final report.

2. Feedback meetings

Meetings to present and share the experience (and report back) should be based on the final report and illustrated with photos and, if possible, with video footage. These meetings should be facilitated by one or more members of the group that took part in the exchange visit. Such meetings often bring together staff from organizations that sent participants on the visit and may also include other partner organizations involved in the theme chosen for that particular exchange visit.

The feedback meeting offers an opportunity for the visitors' group to plan how the newly acquired knowledge can be put into practice in concrete terms. The group should also make provisions for sending its feedback to the host organization.

Members of the host group, which organized the meetings, will use this to analyze the experience and improve future visits.

If there is a rural radio station in the area, it may be interesting for one male and one female participant to take part in a broadcast and talk about what they saw and the lessons learned during the exchange visit. The broadcast can later be rebroadcast by other rural radio stations.

Lessons from the experience should be drawn during and after the exchange visit, with the following questions in mind:

- ✓ What worked well, and why?
- ✓ What did not work well, and why?
- ✓ What should be done differently next time?
- ✓ What recommendations can be made for the following day and for future visits?

If the various stages of the exchange visit are well documented, both the host organization and the visitors' group will be able to capitalize on the experience and improve their working methods in future.

Validation

The process of exchange visit was validated by the participants and the organizers after each trip. Besides, this practice was also validated by participants at sessions on exchange visits held at the Knowledge Share Fair in Niamey, Niger in June 2010 and at the Mini Knowledge Share Fair, held in Founzan, Burkina Faso in December 2012. Interviewed at these events, participants, including elected representatives, officials and managerial staff working in the rural sector and producers – both men and women – confirmed their satisfaction with this teaching method, which produces significant results. They declared that it represents:

- an ideal framework for peer exchange (between people who have a similar profession or role): it offers an opportunity for acquiring new knowledge, making comparisons with one's own practices and experiences, opening up to new partners, discovering new environments and pausing to reflect on one's own situation;
- a means for exchanging solutions to common, individual or specific problems;
- a conscious learning process that is both individual and collective;
- an effective tool for conveying information and raising awareness.

Given the importance of the **representation of women** in this type of initiative, it is worth noting that women who have taken part in exchange visits say that these have not only proved a valuable source of training, but have also offered an opportunity to increase their level of empowerment and, after witnessing the experiences of other women, to strengthen their capacities in decision-making.

Impact

Experiences from exchange visits **lead to changes** which can enable a new practice to be discovered, understood, assimilated, validated and subsequently applied. This corresponds with the outline of the adoption ladder described above, so long as participants move on to the next step of putting the knowledge acquired into practice, once they are back from the exchange visit.

An exchange visit does not just enable farmers to learn about a new practice that they did not previously use. It also encourages them to be more open minded and may motivate some of them to try a new activity.

- For example, the experience of the Capitalization project with exchange visits organized in Niger to learn about the inventory credit practice led to concrete results. Following these visits, this good agricultural practice is indeed now starting to be adopted in Burkina Faso, albeit a version adapted to local conditions. Besides, as a result of exchange visits, training and information centres on inventory credit have been launched in both Niger and Burkina Faso.

A more precise evaluation of the long-term impact that visits have on uptake of practices by participants (behaviour changes, «reinvestment» of experience acquired during the visit) can be obtained through **questionnaires** conducted with people who took part in exchanges. Alternatively, assessments can be specifically worked into the organization's **monitoring and evaluation mechanism**.

Innovations and success factors

Key success factors for an exchange visit can be summarized as follows:

1. Good preparation
2. Good participation
3. Good feedback

In particular, it is crucial that:

- the teams are composed of both men and women;
- the visit is well timed, taking account of the cropping calendar;
- the visit's programme and timetable are respected;
- there is a balance between theoretical and practical information;
- the visits are carried out between peers in a spirit of free exchange and mutual motivation, with both sides willing to listen and communicate;
- the practices studied at the host organization are suitable for replication by participants making the visit;
- feedback is effective. The visitors should be committed to summarizing the information acquired during their exchange visit for the benefit of other members of their POs.

Constraints

The various constraints encountered should be handled and solutions found.

The main constraints are:

- lack of communication. The question «why?» is not asked often enough and people make assumptions;
- lack of understanding between people speaking different local languages;
- difficulties in building teams composed of both men and women and respecting the principle of alternating among men and women participants;
- the cost of visits and different travel allowances between various members of the visitors' group;
- lack of planning and respect for the programme and inadequate time allowed for the visit, for identifying interesting people to talk to and for key figures;
- biased views (in either a negative or positive sense) of a reality different from one's own;
- lack of feedback. A sound reflection provides a good base for reporting back properly;
- difficulties for women in leaving the household and the burden of their workload when it comes to organizing their absence. Solutions exist for **encouraging the participation of women**: care of children, the elderly and animals, fetching of water and/or fuel and washing children's clothes can all be taken over by other family members while the mother is away on an exchange visit:
 - In the village of Saboudey Carré, situated in Niger's Tillabéry region, leaders of women's groups allocate roles to women taking part in visits. They do so on a rotating basis, so that women group members take turns to assume responsibility for carrying water.

Lessons learned

Based on the experiences of recent years, the lessons to be learned for both men and women are the following:

- It is advisable to clarify the expectations of both male and female participants so as not to cause dissatisfaction, and undo the positive effects of the visit as a result;
- It is crucial to ensure that the exchange visit is not based exclusively on theory;
- Failure to respect the programme or timetable has a direct negative impact on the quality of the exchange visit and therefore damages the overall impact of this kind of support;
- It is important not to overlook the debates and discussions that arise after the visits. These observations can enrich the experience of the exchange visit itself;
- In order for feedback to be effective, the visitors need to respect their commitments to report back made upon selection;
- Feedback should be given by the host group as well as by the visitors.

Sustainability

The effects of exchange visits will only be sustainable if there is a good feedback process at the end of the trip, so that a large number of people can benefit from the lessons learned by the participants. It is important that during the feedback phase, commitments are made to implement those practices that seem to be the most suited to the particular situation of the visitors.

Up-scaling

Exchange visits can be carried out at different levels within the same municipality or within different regions of the same country. At a higher level, a visit can be organized between different countries and regions of the world. Exchange visits will have distinct advantages and limitations, depending on the circumstances. The more complex the visit, the greater the logistical challenge and the higher the costs.

At local level

An exchange between different municipalities of the same region will have the advantage of simplifying the organization of the visit (logistics, transport, translation), thereby limiting the costs. This type of visit may also facilitate the participation of women, since their absence from their household and children will be limited. A local visit can contribute to social cohesion between producers – both men and women – in the same region and promote the sustainability of practices learned by visitors, who share similar climatic and geographical conditions.

At national and international level

The greater the geographical distance and the cultural and climatic differences between the host and visitors' groups, the more complex will be the preparation for the visit. Other factors that should be taken into account during preparation include logistical constraints (visas, currency exchange), language, social and cultural differences and time constraints (for organization and transport).

Conclusion

Exchange visits are highly enriching experiences, both at the professional and personal levels. They enable those who take part to witness other situations and help to open up people's minds to different ways of tackling problems, as highlighted by the following comments from participants:

- *«After taking part in exchange visits with the unions of Bokki, Dantchandou and Gobéri, we have understood the role that women producers can play in finding solutions to problems facing our organizations; for this reason, our PO, in turn, held a general assembly to provide feedback and prompt decision-making after its return from an exchange visit. As a result, three women were appointed to work in the board, whereas previously there had been none. The other POs will be quick to follow our example».*

Testimony from a union office member and chairperson of a PO, who took part in an exchange visit.

- *«A week-long exchange visit produced the result that the trainer had been trying to achieve for the previous two years».*

Observations from a group of women belonging to several groups who refused to combine their efforts to tackle certain common problems. All the awareness-raising sessions organized by the extension agent on this issue proved unsuccessful. It took just one exchange visit, lasting five days and carried out together with other organizations, for these groups to change their behaviour and make a spontaneous decision to collaborate.



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