IFAD'S ORIGINAL APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT:
AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING SYSTEM ON RURAL POVERTY

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In order to reach its potential as an instrument to empower rural people to overcome their poverty, IFAD has repeatedly established its position that the Fund needs to develop effective learning and knowledge management systems. However, IFAD is also conscious that it is not making sufficient progress towards becoming a learning and knowledge organization. The recent IIE Desk Review Report states that the evaluation team was "not able to identify a simple set of [knowledge management] objectives that the Fund is genuinely committed to or which are shared by staff interviewed" (p. 52), concluding that "it is unlikely that knowledge management has improved IFAD's effectiveness" (p. 71).

This Concept Note outlines the main elements of an *original* IFAD response to the need to design and implement a Knowledge Management System (KMS) for the organization. The goal is to enable the rural poor to overcome their poverty. The purpose is to harness the knowledge embedded in the development practice of the global community engaged in overcoming rural poverty, including the rural poor.

The first part of this document outlines the concept. The second part sets the objectives. The third section is dedicated to issues of implementation, including an outline of how IFAD as an organization fits into this concept.

1. THE CONCEPT

The cornerstone of our proposal is the notion that IFAD's KMS should be firmly grounded on the knowledge that is encoded in the development practice of the tens of thousands of individuals, groups and organizations that participate in IFAD's projects throughout the world. This **experience-based knowledge** is IFAD's comparative advantage in the field of poverty-focused KMS, and what it can most fruitfully contribute to the global community.

Yet, this experience-based knowledge is by and large *tacit*; it is embodied in the actions and judgments of development actors, but its principles and rules have not been formalized and made *explicit*. IFAD cannot tap into this experience-based knowledge unless it first contributes to making this knowledge explicit. Hence, an initial objective of IFAD should be to stimulate and support a process of **experiential learning**[1] to make this knowledge explicit; this process should be the heart and soul of IFAD's KMS.

The **development practice** that is subject to this experiential learning, can include different types of processes, from very local and context-specific initiatives at the village level, to projects, programs, policies, and strategies at the national, regional and even global levels. Thus, the **knowledge** made explicit and available, will also be of different types, including, among others: knowledge on poverty processes - to be used for project implementation (in particular better

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[1] By experiential learning we mean 'a process whereby knowledge is created through the grasping and transformation of experience' (Kolb et al., 2000). D.A. Kolb, R.E. Boyatzis and C. Mainemelis. 2000. Experiential learning theory. In R. J. Sternberg and L.F. Zhang (Eds.). <u>Perspectives on cognitive, learning and thinking styles</u>. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

targeting) but also for policy dialogue and advocacy; 'good practices' at the level of community-based organizations; new solutions to problems that affect many rural poor; innovative and effective process at the project or national levels; public-policy criteria and contents; approaches and methods to design, implement and monitor and evaluate different sorts of development initiatives, including IFAD projects; grades and standards for different types of development products and processes, etc.

An important consideration is that this knowledge does not belong to IFAD. It is the product of the practice of rural people, communities and organizations, and of all those who are part of the context of that practice. This experience-based knowledge is and should continue to be **a public good**, developed by all and free to be used by all: a **global pool of knowledge**.

Therefore, a process of experiential learning at the center of IFAD's KMS, should be **an open process** in which any willing individual, group or organization in the world can contribute to and can benefit from, by designing and implementing **learning initiatives**. This is consistent with IFAD's mission.

It follows that the process of experiential learning needs to be highly **decentralized and diverse** in its forms, manifestations and outcomes and products. Different individuals, households, villages, rural organizations, NGOs, private firms, consultants, IFAD Departments or staff members... will be interested in and capable of making specific contributions to the common pool of knowledge and in developing different mechanisms, procedures and interfaces to harvest knowledge from that pool to inform their own decision-making and practice. Depending on their context, their capabilities and their objectives, they will be able to move faster or slower in the learning process, and to act at more local or more global scales.

A corollary of the above ideas is that this experiential learning process will take place mainly **outside IFAD Headquarters**. This is consistent with the concept of '**Virtual IFAD'**. The main arenas will be the projects, countries, and regions, with a complementary element of inter-regional sharing, communication and learning. IFAD Staff and IFAD organizational units can and should participate in this experiential learning process, either by joining the learning initiatives that take place in the projects, countries and regions, or by developing and implementing their own learning initiatives to contribute to, and to harvest from the global pool of knowledge. IFAD HQ in this sense can be conceptualized as a **sixth Region**.

The process requires **'starters'**, that is, organizations in the regions that get the ball rolling by designing and implementing the first sets of learning initiatives. The IFAD Regional Networks already in place can play this role, together with other capable groups. A decentralized process also requires **regional facilitators**. Again, the IFAD Regional Networks can be asked to play this role. IFAD is responsible for stimulating and supporting this process. The **resources** that IFAD decides to invest in this experiential learning process should be allocated through the regular mechanisms and procedures that already exist, so that the learning process is built in organically into each IFAD operation and does not become one more isolated effort.

It will be noticed that this design is consistent with the observation made in the IIE Desk review Report, that for IFAD it will be *crucial* to get "the right balance between developing the in-house capacity for policy development versus being an intelligent customer of existing global knowledge in rural development" (p. 51).

2. OBJECTIVES

The goal of the experiential learning system is to enable the rural poor to overcome their poverty.

The purpose of the experiential learning system is to harness the knowledge embedded in the development practice of the global community engaged in overcoming rural poverty, including the rural poor.

The outcomes of the experiential learning system are:

1. A highly decentralized network of qualified organizations is in place to facilitate the process in each region
2. Multiple learning initiatives take place world-wide, organized by a diversity of organizations in partnership with IFAD projects and programs
3. The different IFAD Departments and Divisions design and put in place their own strategies, methods and tools to contribute to, and to harvest from the global experiential learning system
4. The experiential learning system is continuously improved based on the analysis of the process, outcomes and products

3. IMPLEMENTATION

Before discussing the implementation by outcome, it is important to clarify one strategy and one operational issue:

1. Developing and implementing the concept outlined in the previous sections will take IFAD into uncharted waters. As is always the case in the quest to overcome rural poverty, in this experiential learning process cause and effect will rarely be near to one another. We are proposing a complex task, which cannot be done through blueprint thinking.

2. In the discussion that follows, IFAD HQ is treated as a 6th Region. Decentralized learning initiatives can and should take place in any unit in IFAD HQ; for example, Division X can organize an internal workshop to discuss its most successful and its most unsuccessful operation in the past year. Interested units or staff of the 6th Region (IFAD HQ) can and should also participate, in partnership with others, in the learning initiatives taking place in the other regions; for example, one CPM may want to attend a systematization exercise of an innovative savings and loans association, which has been organized by the organization and an NGO in India.

Outcome 1 - A highly decentralized network of qualified organizations is in place to facilitate the process in each region and in IFAD HQ

To start, the experiential learning system requires the following agents:

1. Regional facilitators – these are qualified organizations that have the responsibilities of: (a) stimulating and coordinating the learning process in each region, (b) controlling the quality of the process its outcomes and products, and (c) critically assessing the process and its outcomes in order improve it continually. The existing Regional Networks (ENRAP,

FIDAFRIQUE, KARIANET and FIDAMERICA) could play this role. One Facilitator is required to play the same role within the 6th Region (IFAD HQ). The Regional Facilitators need to interact with each other during this process to ensure inter-regional learning and, to the extent possible, convergence of strategies and methods.

2. National 'starters' – one to five organizations in each of at least 50% of the countries in which IFAD operates. Their role is to take the lead in developing the first learning initiatives and submitting them to the Regional Facilitators for approval if they require technical and financial support; if the learning initiatives do not require technical and/or financial support, they do not need to be approved by the Regional Facilitators. The national starters should be diverse, including NGOs, community-based and farmers' organizations, universities and think tanks, local governments, private firms, local or provincial offices of extension agencies, implementing units of development projects whether funded or not by IFAD, and so on; this diversity is needed for the richness of the pool of knowledge that will result from the learning initiatives. The 'starters' receive information, general guidelines and backstopping from the Regional facilitators. Before the first round of learning starts, a Training Workshop should be organized in each region to assure that the Facilitators understand the strategy, process, and methods.

3. Management functions of the experiential learning system – Within IFAD as an organization, the following management functions need to be developed: (a) leadership and oversight of the experiential learning system, not only within IFAD HQ but also in the regions; (b) assurance that IFAD's corporate needs in terms of learning and knowledge management are well taken care of; (c) assuring adequate linkages and synergies and promoting spillover effects between regions, between the regions and IFAD HQ, between different units within IFAD HQ, and between IFAD and other organizations; (d) learning-about-learning leading to the continuous improvement of the overall system.

The resources required to fund the work of the Regional Facilitators and of the starters, will be allocated through the regular channels and procedures of IFAD: budgets, project budgets, grants, TAGs or special mechanisms such as IMI.

Outcome 2 - Multiple learning initiatives take place world-wide, organized by a diversity of organizations in partnership with IFAD projects and programs

Once Outcome 1 has been achieved in each region, including IFAD HQ, the learning process is launched. Learning initiatives are designed, approved, facilitated and supported technically and/or financially, according to the strategies, methods and schedules deemed appropriate for each region. Not all regions need to start at the same time.

Learning initiatives can be very diverse: systematization exercises, workshops, learning routes for farmers and for technical staff, contests of good practice, documentation of innovative experiences, comparative analysis of evaluation reports, exchange of staff or of community leaders...

There should be only four requirements made to any learning initiative:

(a) Each learning initiative must be grounded in development practice. This is an experiential learning system, not one that will be used to carry out other forms of learning, such as research or training.

(b) The learning initiatives must be clearly related and relevant to IFAD's mission and strategic objectives.

(c) Although any individual, group or organization in the world can be the initiator and facilitator of a development initiative, they must act in partnership with at least one IFAD project, program or unit.

(d) Each learning initiative must include a 'communication product' that allows other individuals, groups or organizations to also learn from that activity. Such product can be a formal document, a less formal text, a set of digital pictures, hand-made diagrams, a video, an audio tape, a CD-ROM. One role of the Regional facilitators is to make sure that each 'communication product' reaches the Information and Communication Division in IFAD HQ, where they can be utilized or edited for many uses, including as content for the Poverty Portal.

Quality assurance criteria, standards and mechanisms will be developed and applied to review: (a) the design of those learning initiatives that request technical and/or financial support from the Regional Facilitators, (b) the learning process, (c) the outcomes and products of each learning initiative, including the communication products. The quality assurance process will be primarily oriented at finding opportunities for the continuous improvement of the experiential learning system, although it will also screen those learning initiatives, outcomes and products that do not meet even basic quality standards. The quality assurance system will also be decentralized to account for the fact that there may be different capacities in each region. The quality assurance function will be the responsibility of the Regional Facilitators, including those within IFAD HQ. To help them in discharging this responsibility, the Regional Facilitators – including those in IFAD HQ- should have the assistance of Expert Advisory Groups, that could also help in bringing an outward orientation to the overall system, for example by identifying opportunities for value-adding or collaboration with other learning and knowledge management initiatives taking place in the rural development community, or by brining in new partners who can enrich the global pool of knowledge.

If one is to judge from the FIDAMERICA, FIDAFRIQUE and ENRAP experience, the quality and relevance of the process, of the specific learning initiatives, of the Regional facilitation and of the outcomes and products, will improve year after year. It is important to take this gradual, learning perspective to the issue of quality.

The first round of learning, lasting about one year, will be a pilot, and the number of learning initiatives should be limited to make sure that proper attention to each one and to the overall process can be paid by the Regional Facilitators. Considering that there are six regions, it is reasonable to expect that during this pilot first year of operations, there will be between 75 and 100 completed learning initiatives. IFAD HQ, the 6th Region, should be challenged to produce at least 10% of them[1].

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[1] It may be interesting to consider an internal competition of 'best learning initiative', with an important symbolic prize to be awarded by the highest IFAD authorities.

The resources required to fund the learning initiatives in each region will be allocated through the regular channels and procedures of IFAD: budgets, project budgets, grants, TAGs or special mechanisms such as IMI and SCP sources

Outcome 3 - The different IFAD Departments and Divisions design and put in place their own strategies, methods and tools to contribute to, and take advantage of the global experiential learning system

Three types of learning initiatives need to be implemented within the 6th Region (IFAD HQ), starting during the pilot year as this aspect of the system also needs to be tested:

(a) Learning initiatives to contribute to the global pool of knowledge through critical reflection on, and analysis of the development practice of IFAD units and staff.

(b) Learning initiatives oriented at harvesting the global pool of knowledge for new insights and opportunities and for solutions to important problems of IFAD as an organization.

(c) Learning initiatives to monitor and evaluate the process, its results and products at the global level; the Regional Facilitators should play a very significant role in this M&E.

In addition, IFAD HQ staff and even complete units can participate in the learning initiatives taking place in the regions.

The process will also be decentralized within IFAD HQ, with each and every one of its units, staff members, and senior and long-term consultants, having the opportunity and support necessary to design and carry out learning initiatives. This decentralization accounts for the fact that each unit has a specific development experience to contribute, and because each also has particular needs and priorities of what it wants to harvest from the pool of knowledge. For example, the Policy Division needs to ask questions that are not the same as the issues that are important to the Audit Department or to the Asia Division...

Learning initiatives involving two or more units should be particularly encouraged, breaking down walls that may cause the loss of important learning opportunities and accelerating the sharing and dissemination of 'good practice' across Divisions and Departments.

It is important that a good balance is achieved between the first two types of learning initiatives within IFAD HQ. While contributing to the global pool of knowledge is important, in the end IFAD will be able to benefit from this experiential learning system if it pays close attention to harvesting the newly available knowledge to improve its strategies, policies, and operations.

Learning initiatives that harvest the global pool of knowledge for innovations and solutions useful to IFAD as an organization can be of many different types[1]: Capturing best practices for use by others with similar requirements; building and maintaining competitive intelligence; supporting collaboration and shared development of content; supporting specific new competences with distributed learning/training environments; leveraging existing intellectual assets; re-using document resources; converting specific areas of business-critical knowledge into tools that can be used by less-skilled personnel or into automated tools. These questions will make IFAD evaluate a number of ICT options to support the new functions.

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[1] Following www.kmconnection.com

The Technical Division (PT) has an important role to play in the experiential learning system. Like all other IFAD HQ units, it can generate its own learning initiatives according to its own needs and objectives. However, it should play a leading role to stimulate: (a) synergies and coordination between the individual learning initiatives in IFAD HQ, (b) identification of value-adding opportunities (e.g., training, need to revise procedures or guidelines...) on the basis of the results generated by the individual learning initiatives. These roles are essential if IFAD as an organization is to make use of the experiential learning system to improve its strategies, policies, and operations.

The Poverty Portal and other information and communication processes, applications and tools, will be able to benefit tremendously from harvesting the global pool of knowledge for relevant content. At the same time, they will make an important contribution to IFAD's experiential learning system, by providing means to store, organize, give access to and disseminate the multiple and diverse 'communication products' generated by the learning initiatives. Hence, EC should be an active and important player in the experiential learning system.

As stated before, one of the management function within IFAD HQ is to assure that IFAD's corporate learning and knowledge management needs are being sufficiently addressed by the sum of the individual learning initiatives designed and implemented in a decentralized fashion by the different Divisions and Departments.

Given the decentralized and organic nature of the learning process within IFAD HQ, the annual objectives and work plans of each IFAD HQ unit will include learning initiatives, either to contribute to the global pool of knowledge, and/or to harvest it in answer to its specific needs. The resources for these activities will be included in the regular budget of each unit, their allocation following the normal procedures and channels.

Outcome 4 - The experiential learning system is continuously improved based on the analysis of the process, outcomes and products

Each year each Regional facilitator must prepare a critical analysis of the process and of its outcomes and products. Based on this critical analysis, each Regional facilitator will propose changes of whatever nature to the experiential learning system. As a reminder, this includes the 6th Region: IFAD HQ.

The Regional facilitators will then exchange their reviews and meet face-to-face to discuss them. The result of this meeting will be a proposal to IFAD with the necessary changes to the experiential learning system.

Independent external evaluations of the experiential learning system should be commissioned every five years.

This learning-about-learning process will be sharply focused on identifying opportunities to improve the experiential learning system.