How To

Recommendation Guide

Digital Agriculture Landscape Assessment Toolkit

JengaLab   TechChange   DEVELOPMENT GATEWAY
An IREX Venture

RECOMMENDATION GUIDE:
DIGITAL AGRICULTURE LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

IFAD

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PART 7 : RECOMMENDATION GUIDE

Recommendations are a common component of landscape assessments and other types of reports. However, knowing how to make **useful** and **actionable** recommendations (that are not obvious) can be challenging. This section of the toolkit provides helpful guidance on using the landscape assessment and analytical outputs to develop recommendations.

The evidence base for recommendations should include:

- Desk review
- Interview guides
- Analytical framework
- User analysis
- Stakeholder/ecosystem mappings

This guide will explain how assessments can be used to develop recommendations, identify common types of recommendations and their constraints, and provide bad, good, and great examples of recommendations.

HOW TO DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS

STEP 1: GO BACK TO THE USER AND USE CASE OF THE LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

The first step in developing an actionable and specific recommendation is to **understand the intended target**. Often (but not always), the team will address the recommendations to the audience or user of the landscape assessment (a government ministry, a development organization, a group of policymakers, etc.). Refer back to Toolkit Section 05: User Analysis for more information about understanding the audience of the landscape assessment.

Remember that the purpose of an assessment is to increase digital agriculture use at a specific organization/institution, enable evidence-based decision making on technology in a given sector, gather system requirements, and develop a new system.

Below is the basic formula for recommendations:

Based on the findings of this landscape assessment, we recommend:

[USER OF LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT] adopt

[SPECIFIC ACTION/SOLUTION] in order to

[USE CASE OF LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT].

STEP 2: BRAINSTORM ACTIONS OR SOLUTIONS THAT WOULD MEET THE NEEDS OF THE LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT USER AND USE CASE

Much like getting started on a landscape report, you can begin developing the specific actions or solutions contained in a recommendations guide by considering factors affecting supply, demand, and use of technology. Think of solutions or actions the audience of the assessment could take to improve demand, supply, and/or use of technology.

In a data or digital ecosystem, common "solutions" or "actions" could mean:
- **Drafting or implementing policy documents** - For example, a data or digital strategy or a data privacy policy
- **Establishing reference documents** - For example, a data dictionary or standards document
- **Conducting additional assessments** - For example, a data quality assessment or training needs assessment
- **Establishing additional governance mechanisms** - For example, a chief data officer position or a technical working group
- **(Re-)Allocating resources** - For example, investments in IT systems or digital infrastructure, and a hiring strategy to increase data capacity
- **Reinforcing use via incentives** - For example, including data/digital use in performance reviews and celebrating champions

Leverage use cases and user stories to develop specific recommendations for system requirements.

If going back to users and use cases still does not inspire specific or actionable recommendations, make a list of all the data and digital problems or challenges uncovered during the landscape assessment and brainstorm solutions with the team. Remember, **the goal is not necessarily to address *every* single data and digital challenge. Rather, the goal is to provide actionable and useful recommendations that meet the needs of the specific landscape assessment audience**.

Recommendation "Parking Lots"

--> *Keep a running list of recommendations as they occur to the team.* For example, you may be in an interview where someone gave an example:

"There are no common standards across data sources; the same indicator could be measured or reported in many different ways. There is no authority or owner of data standards, so open questions about data definitions and formats prevent interoperability."

In this example, an interviewer should instantly recognise the need to address data standards and establish a data quality "authority." The interviewer should record or "park" these ideas/ notes in a separate document. This will allow a team to proactively develop recommendations as more information is collected about a data ecosystem. **Create and share a team document where members can "park" ideas for recommendations throughout the assessment.**

STEP 3: NARROW THE SCOPE

Once you have developed a list of actions or solutions that could meet your users' needs, ask yourself:

"Why hasn't this action/solution been achieved already?"

Often, nothing has been achieved because:
  A. The organization receiving the recommendations lacks capacity (e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture cannot increase its own budget), or
  B. It is not within the scope of the assessment to make those kinds of recommendations (e.g., specific personnel decisions).

For these reasons, you should scrutinize your recommendations and narrow them down to actions and solutions that are:
  1. Within the constraints of the organization, and
  2. Within the scope of the ecosystem assessment.

Constraints of the Organization

The common types of constraints faced by stakeholders are discussed in detail below under *Common Constraints*. When evaluating the constraints of a target organization to make recommendations, **consider the decision space of the intended audience: what incentives (i.e., mandate, authority, resources, skills, access) does the recipient have to adopt your recommendation?** The more you can tie your recommendation to the decision space of the institution, the more likely it is that your recommendations will be well received.

Constraints of the Assessment

Assume you are assessing the education data ecosystem in a particular country, and the indicators used to monitor the strategic plan are so far reaching that they would be impossible to measure with any certainty. It may be tempting to recommend the revision of the government's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) indicators -- ,however, education M&E indicator advisory support is probably not within the scope of your assessment.

To get around such an obstacle, you might instead recommend that the Ministry of Education maps available education data to the M&E indicators to identify gaps and develop data collection methodologies to address those gaps.

At the same time, there are some small exceptions to this rule. For example, IT software and hardware may not necessarily be explicitly considered in the scope of the assessment, but you may find that IT infrastructure is such a significant barrier to technology use that it warrants inclusion in your recommendations.

Use your discretion, knowledge, and working relationship with the audience of your assessment to determine whether these scope-adjacent recommendations should be included.

STEP 4: ENSURE YOUR RECOMMENDATION IS ACTIONABLE AND SPECIFIC

At this point, you should have developed a recommendation that is within the scope of your ecosystem assessment and suitable for your audience based on this formula: [USER OF ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT] adopt [SPECIFIC ACTION/SOLUTION] in order to [USE CASE OF ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT]. The next thing to do is to ask yourself:

<p style="text-align:center; color:red;">"Was that obvious?"</p>

Nobody likes an obvious recommendation (thanks, captain obvious!). Imagine you commissioned external consultants for a six-month data assessment and the recommendation you got was "improve data quality." That recommendation is neither specific nor actionable. Improve data quality how? What needs to improve? By whom?

Therefore, it is important to make sure your recommendations are both actionable and specific. Some tips:

➢ Do not use pronouns or general terms like "organization" or "indicators" - **be specific!** What organization? Which indicators?
➢ Ask yourself: can the audience of this recommendation **run with it tomorrow**, or will they have additional questions? If they have any additional questions, your recommendation needs to be more specific.
➢ Go back to your interview notes and desk review and tailor your recommendations to **meet the realities of your audience**.

COMMON RECOMMENDATION TYPES

Landscape assessments often generate specific types of recommendations. Below is a summary of the common recommendation areas covered:

Data/Digital Challenge	Recommendation	Justification
There is no single "thread" connecting disparate data or digital systems	Utilize national farmer registries and/or national identification schemes as unique identifiers	Oftentimes, existing national data or digital public infrastructure can be leveraged as a vehicle for interoperability through the use of nationwide and standardized "unique" identifiers (e.g., social security numbers).
Data sharing should happen in theory, but does not in practice	Microdata sharing policy	When it comes to data sharing, merging, and interoperability, the devil is often in the details. Microdata sharing policies can help stakeholders gain clarity on the source, reliability, trustworthiness of the data they exchange.

Lack of collaboration or partnership	Coordinating data collection and data priorities between [other similar] groups and governments	Note that this recommendation on its own is too broad to be considered a "good" recommendation - so this should be supplemented with information on specific groups and governments as well as data and priorities.
Duplication of efforts	Potential for partnering with ongoing data initiatives in terms of data collection priorities, sharing, and interoperability (e.g., early warning systems, household surveys)	Government, civil society, and research stakeholders often do not have a birds-eye view of others in their space or potential areas of collaboration. Use your user personas, stakeholder map, and ecosystem map to identify areas of partnership. Try to ground-truth interest or feasibility as much as possible.

COMMON CONSTRAINTS

Consideration of stakeholders' constraints is crucial for developing recommendations that are specific, actionable, and therefore likely to be adopted.

Often, recommendations may seem obvious to an outside audience that does not understand the decision space of the digital ecosystem in question. However, stakeholders face many constraints when adopting recommendations, and often these constraints are out of their direct control.

The common types of constraints faced by a data or digital ecosystem stakeholder could include:

❖ **Budget** - The organization does not have the budget to implement the recommendations. Some recommendations above the budget level should consequently be deleted.

Others could be improved with potential suggestions for a phased approach; alternatively, if a budget is unknown, solutions can be recommended at various funding levels.

- ❖ **Scope -** The recommendation falls outside the organization's remit. In this instance, consider deleting the recommendation. If the recommendation is outside the scope, but a priority area, suggest a partnership.

- ❖ **Timeline** - The recommendation cannot be implemented on a timeline that meets the organization's most immediate needs. Depending on the organization's needs, adding immediate, medium, and long term solutions could improve a recommendation.

- ❖ **Priority** - The recommendation is not a priority for the organization, country, or region. If the recommendation is outside the priority and the scope of the organization, delete it. If it is a priority area but outside the scope, the assessment team can recommend partnering with a specific organization for implementation.

- ❖ **Specificity** - The recommendation is too broad or vague, or not specific or actionable enough. Ask yourself if the organization could take the recommendation and implement it tomorrow. If not, the recommendation should be more specific.

CREATING BETTER RECOMMENDATIONS

GOOD RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding organizational, country, and regional priorities – as well as constraints – is essential to formulating good recommendations. Tying recommendations to known priorities at the organizational, country, and regional levels will improve the likelihood that they will be implemented. Good recommendations are actionable, specific, and suitable for the digital ecosystem and the target organization.

Figure 1: Recommendation Examples from the Data For Children Do-it-Yourself Toolkit[1]

FIGURE 4A: **Example of items in the recommendation matrix of a Country Office D4C Action Plan**
(more detail is provided in the report itself)

SECTOR		ISSUE OR OPPORTUNITY	PROPOSED ACTION(S)	RATIONALE	PRIORITY/ URGENCY	
🤲	**Child protection**	Coordination and governance	Support clear governance (roles and responsibilities) for use of Gender Base Violence Protection Unit (GBVPU) administrative system	This system is already being built out. While there are clear roles defined re: IT processes, governance of data issues was less well defined.	🔴	High priority (happening now)
👶	**Early childhood development**	Leverage existing successes	Produce, publish and disseminate ECD-MIS reports for 2018 and 2019	Building of a relational database is well under way. It is critical to ensure linkages with existing databases within MGECW and with those of MoEAC and MoHSS. Considered a high priority by a key development partner (European Union).	🔴	High priority (happening now)
📖	**Education**	Make better use of available data sets	Additional analysis – potential opportunities: Learner disability, school finance and performance, shifts in child populations and dropout trends (especially between years), continuing efforts to drive local level use	Regularly collected EMIS data are key for decision making in the education sector and beyond	🟡	Moderate
🍲	**Health & Nutrition**	Leverage existing successes	Continue supporting the work on MHAI/MoHSS birth registration	This programme has significant support and was repeatedly noted as a success during interviews. The need for continued support to build engagement across all levels of the health sector was requested	🔴	High
👥	**Social Policy**	Make better use of available data sets	NSA geospatial capacity: Deprivation analyses, DRM, etc.	Geospatial analyses and capacities in the NSA that can support social policy advocacy	🟡	Moderate

Examples of Good Recommendations:

- IFAD should consider utilizing the national farmer registry to monitor and track smallholder farmer beneficiaries across its program. While this would require a data sharing policy and arrangement with the Ministry of Agriculture, it could increase the value and availability of high-quality M&E data for both parties.

- IFAD could support members of farmers' organizations through advanced ICT training sessions (such as exchange studies or immersion programs). With the appropriate support, farmers' organizations can become strategic partners that not only provide knowledge of the agricultural sector but also act as links between farmers, agro-business companies, and government institutions.

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[1] [UNICEF Data for Children Do-it-Yourself Toolkit.](...)

- The study recommends the adoption of an open-source call center software that integrates call center functionalities with analytics and feedback capabilities, specifically CiviCRM.

Tips & Tricks

- ❖ Organizing recommendations in different ways can create scalable solutions. Some potential ways to **organize recommendations**:
  - ➢ Address specific areas of supply, demand, or use of technology
  - ➢ Develop short, medium, and long term timelines
  - ➢ Determine the required levels of funding
  - ➢ Policy, organization, user
  - ➢ Outline the enabling or advisory support needed
- ❖ Looking at the **opportunities** section of an assessment report is a good way of identifying low-hanging fruit.
- ❖ Referring to the assessment questions which ask stakeholders to identify solutions
- ❖ Target organizations may be more likely to adopt recommendations if they are similar to the existing initiatives of their partners of other similar entities. Organizations will not have to "reinvent the wheel" when implementing recommendations - instead they have opportunities to learn from others or pool resources.
- ❖ If you receive some pushback from a target organization, use the various outputs of the landscape assessment (e.g., analytical framework, ecosystem mappings, user stories and use cases) as an **evidence base** for the recommendations.

BAD RECOMMENDATIONS

Bad recommendations are vague, broad, not immediately actionable, or do not meet the needs and priorities of the target organization.

Bad Recommendation Example: IFAD regional office should identify partners to implement digital agriculture projects.

This is a bad recommendation because it is overly broad in several ways. Firstly, the assessment team should have already identified a number of key stakeholders, partners, and other actors in the ecosystem that have overlapping interests and projects in common with the IFAD regional office. As such, it would be more useful to name those specific organizations and the overlapping projects in this recommendation. If several organizations would be a good match, adding bullets with that information could be helpful.

Secondly, the recommendation suggests partners to work on "projects." This is also vague given the amount of information available. Name the specific project where partners could be a value add, and describe the potential partnership arrangement.

> Better Recommendation Example: IFAD regional office should partner with Lola's Community-Based Organization to train IFAD staff on reaching farmers with mobile messaging.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

ABelow is an example of a poorly constructed recommendation. With several improvements, it can be transformed into a mid-level and (eventually) a good recommendation, as shown in the subsequent points.

- **Bad Recommendation**: Improve the capacity of data analysts in the organization.
- **Mid Recommendation:** Provide training to improve the capacity of data analysts to use Power BI for data visualizations
- **Good Recommendation:** Train X, Y, Z staff on A, B, C topics to improve the capacity data and analytical capacities. Tie the completion and application of these training sessions to employee performance reviews. Ensure that future job postings require competencies on A, B, C topics. Cultivate a culture of knowledge sharing and improved data capacity by facilitating working groups, hackathons, and other areas for collaboration and championing.

FURTHER READING

UNICEF Data for Children Do-it-Yourself Toolkit - You can use this digital ecosystem methodology/toolkit to develop your own recommendations, particularly when the assessment you are undertaking has the same scope. You can still leverage this methodology to produce good recommendations even if your landscape assessment has a different scope.