

Feed

the knowledge community
by MEDIET Project

Unlocking the potential:
**a guide to navigating
the FEED Platform**

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INTRODUCTION

About a year ago, a team of interdisciplinary experts at CIHEAM Bari acknowledged that empowering communities - regardless of their scale - who hold knowledge of their land and daily challenges, is an effective way to achieve tangible and lasting change. Experts in international cooperation, food security, sustainable development, local policy, information technology and agricultural research agreed that there is an urgent need to provide younger generations with a concrete opportunity to achieve a more sustainable future by strengthening relationships, trust and a sense of mutual sharing and responsibility between people and organisations. Therefore, the inception of the FEED platform, the Knowledge Community, seeks to foster the establishment of fresh partnerships and leverage experiences with replicable potential, all within a unified network. This initiative aims to enhance the quality of life for communities and regions. The platform was established as part of the MEDIET project, which was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Italian Cooperation. The project has enabled a bottom-up exchange of knowledge and experience on issues related to the sustainability of food systems in Mediterranean areas and beyond.

FEED gathers good practices, initiatives and projects, regulations, and publications. The data collected is not statistically representative of countries. It reflects the reality of small communities that have shown an exceptional capacity for change, growth, and improvement of living conditions and the environment. Data collection is often qualitative and must be contextualised in relation to the geo-political, cultural, religious and social conditions of each area. When combined with interviews, direct testimonials and quantitative data, this allows for complex and nuanced analysis, providing an in-depth look at the needs, beliefs and orientations of communities.

The aim of FEED is not only to collect and consolidate documents but also to establish a connection between the beneficiaries and international cooperation actors who are willing to bring about significant change in their regions by supporting the implementation of effective solutions to current and future challenges.



FEED CLUSTERING

During the first year of FEED, 276 users from 46 countries registered. Over 4,000 documents were uploaded, including 227 good practices, 436 projects and initiatives, 2,827 publications, and 515 regulations. The collected material was clustered into 15 topics based on the uploaded documents. For each topic, keywords were identified that best describe the topic. In addition, the documents were categorised by SDG, by country and by the stage of the production process under consideration.



Figure 1: Topics in the platform

Analysis of the available data shows that, regardless of the geographical area, local actors are highly active in the following domains:

- Engaging women and young people in actions that have a positive impact on the sustainability of food systems.
- Positioning typical products on the market, linked to forms of cooperation between producers and agri-food operators.
- The food and health nexus, as communities recognise the health and nutritional benefits of consuming local produce.

The table below shows the most common topics, keywords and SDGs found in the documents available on the platform:

<p>The most common topics are, in order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Food and Health ○ Market & Trade ○ Youth and Women Empowerment ○ Education, Training and Capacity Building ○ Natural Resources and Biodiversity 	<p>The most popular keywords are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Food Security ○ Local Food ○ Exports ○ Professional Development ○ Traditional Food
<p>The most common SDGs are mainly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 2 Zero Hunger ○ 1 No Poverty ○ 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth ○ 12 Responsible Consumption and Production ○ 15 Life on Land 	

Table 1: Most common topics, keywords and SDGs

An in-depth examination of the topics identified in FEED is carried out using selected factors from the information contained in the platform. The aim is to provide a critical reading of territories at local or regional level. The examination takes into account factors such as the most relevant issues, needs, challenges, and SDGs.



CHALLENGES EXPRESSED AND NEEDS

The following analysis briefly examines the three challenges that emerged most strongly in the Platform up to December 2023 namely **Women's work, their social role and food security**, **Promotion of local crops on the market** and **The right to preserve biodiversity**.

It elaborates on them by describing some good practices that highlight the barriers and critical issues encountered, as well as the results achieved.

The description of challenges and needs considers differences in geography, socioeconomics, environmental performance, and sustainability orientation. Cross-cultural differences and gaps in existing national policies for sustainable food systems have also been taken into account.

This qualitative study enables the needs and perspectives of local communities, civil society, and all stakeholders to be comprehended objectively. The gathered information and documentation serve as a valuable foundation for international working groups to adopt a bottom-up approach.

This report focuses on Good Practices that have been proven to work well and produce good results, and are therefore, recommended as a model. It also includes projects which are meant as valuable mechanisms for leveraging collective strengths in a given time and place, fostering innovation, and achieving impactful results through collaborative efforts.

Women's work, their social role and food security

Gender equality is an issue that is felt in many countries, albeit in different social and cultural contexts. The road to gender equality is still long and winding, and the barriers that hinder the process are even more evident when looking at two new TWIN indicators launched by the UN: The Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) and the Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI). The former examines women's power and choice, while the latter measures gender inequality across key dimensions of human development, including health, education, inclusion and decision-making. The 2030 Agenda considers the issue strategically in SDG 5, which aims to ensure women's equality in access to education, health care, the workplace and political and economic decision-making.

FEED, which focuses on developing countries, argues that gender inequality has a negative impact on women, mainly through under-investment in sectors such as health, education, skills and knowledge development, and lack of labour and financial inclusion (e.g. lower pay for women's labour compared to men - gender pay gap).

A careful analysis of the documentation collected revealed that women face difficulties in engaging in activities that are easily accessible to men, such as access to land, technological knowledge and tools, and the appropriate means of production to engage in productive agriculture. Among the most highlighted details is the total denial of access to bank accounts, cash loans and, finally, the prohibition of registering a business in one's own name (<https://idea.usaid.gov/women-e3>).

These barriers highlight the extent to which women's roles are still associated with the sole figure of the housewife or as mere helpers in agricultural activities, as evidenced by the many testimonies collected on the FEED platform. This validates the traditional expectation for women to prioritize

home and childcare duties, resulting in a noticeable decrease in their economic and financial involvement.

On the contrary, women's participation in decision-making in the workplace and in the family income changes their role in society in the short term, creating a social ladder for future generations to access education and aspire to better living conditions.

A remarkable testimony confirming the above has emerged in the practice called *“Unleashing the potential of Syrian rural women improving their confidence and social status via income-generating activities”*.

In an environment disrupted by the war in northern Syria, women have gained financial independence through the creation of women's associations and income-generating activities, improving the economic status of their families and, above all, of society. The good practice established rural associations as a necessary measure. The conflict had forced women to become the sole breadwinners in a market and cultural context that lacked support. Due to the lack of educational opportunities and vocational training, finding decent employment had become even more challenging. Past challenges were exacerbated by the fact that women were primarily engaged in family affairs and lacked expertise in economic and financial matters. Despite the challenges and hardships caused by the war, the evolving role of women in Syria has provided a new opportunity.

Women's self-confidence and the social status of their families and communities have been greatly improved by involving them in income-generating activities previously undertaken only by men. Women's ability to express opinions, participate in decision-making, be breadwinners and meet other female role models has helped to improve their perception by other members of the community. This social and financial recognition strengthens their social support and contributes to greater cohesion among members.

Women play a crucial role in the rural economy. They are responsible for half of the world's food production and produce between 60 and 80 per cent of the world's food. Women are critical to the food security of their families and communities. Poverty, not food availability, is the main determinant of food insecurity, according to the FAO. FEED reports that good practices link increasing food security with women's access to the agricultural sector.

Empowering women in agriculture is crucial to lifting rural communities out of poverty. Women need the same access to productive resources as men. The good practice examples above show that if women had equal access, the output of their farms would increase by 20-30%. This would lead to a 2.5-4% increase in agricultural production and a 12% reduction in the number of people suffering from hunger (The state of food and agriculture women in agriculture 2010-2011, FAO 2011).

Another example comes from the good practice entitled *“Uniting isolated producers under one collective brand: a solution to empower female Egyptian micro-enterprises”*. In 4 governorates of Egypt (Fayoum, Sohag, Aswan, Asyut), characterised by poverty and insecurity, some producers have created a brand that is recognised abroad in order to access the market. They received support from 460 women who have attended training courses run by local women, created micro-enterprises in various sectors such as food and non-food production and services, and signed agreements to market their products.

The adoption of good practices has positively influenced the sustainability of women's activities. Beneficiaries were trained in soft skills, small business management (SBM), and marketing.

Consequently, they reinvested part of their profits to grow their enterprises, broaden their customer base, explore new markets, or engage in collaborative efforts with other women, either within the same sub-sector or through synergistic partnerships with complementary sectors. Many other communities, not only in Egypt but also in neighbouring countries, have taken this social and cultural development as a model and have seen immediate improvements, especially in terms of access to food.

In summary, the experience of the FEED platform has provided valuable insights into how local communities identify their needs and find appropriate solutions. These communities act on or wish to act on certain aspects, regardless of geographical distances and cultural differences:

- “Provide women and girls with access to primary education as well as training on agricultural production, resource management and conservation.
- Facilitate lending to women entrepreneurs working in agriculture; make financial services more accessible to rural women.
- Provide rural women with greater market information and technology services.
- Build local leadership and leverage relationships with local and central government to create responsible food security policies that prevent crisis, integrating gender considerations into policies using evidence-based advocacy”.

(<https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/46460857.pdf>)



SPOTLIGHT - Creating Added Value for Toogga Oil

In Mauritania, the Women Harvesters Cooperative of Badely signifies more than agricultural endeavours—it's a symbol of empowerment, especially for the H'ratine community, descendants of slaves. The journey started with a group of 50 women and today it comprises 150 resilient women, primarily mothers. This cooperative has reshaped the local crops market.

Driven by the Toogga project, it aimed to elevate neglected fruits into valuable product lines, much like the success seen with Moroccan argan oil. Toogga oil, derived from traditional methods, not only serves as sustenance but also for body care, has antioxidant features, is antifungal and antidiabetic becoming a beacon of local produce in global markets.

The introduction of a manual crusher by Toogga Sarl revolutionized fruit processing, ensuring safety and efficiency. International support fortified the cooperative's infrastructure, empowering these women to manage their affairs.

In 2016, the Cooperative of Badely sold over 5 tons of fruit, reaping significant revenue and transforming their economic landscape. This practice isn't just about oil; it's a story of market transformation, resilience, and empowering marginalized communities, especially those with a historical legacy of enslavement.

Promotion of local crops on the market

Ensuring decent living conditions for all in such a complex context will be challenging. This is especially true in countries like those in sub-Saharan Africa, where a high percentage of people live in extreme poverty.

SDG 2 defines poverty as a state of severe deprivation of basic human needs and as the main cause of food insecurity, which is rooted in and evolves differently in different regions of the world. Food insecurity is a significant consequence of poverty, particularly in challenging social and market contexts.

Many small producers struggle to access profitable, high-value markets and face increasing competition from new, low-cost products traded on international markets. Currently, they sell their raw materials directly or through middlemen to small shops or local markets, without economies of scale. This results in a lack of knowledge of the market and its quality requirements. Reasons for limited agricultural development include difficult access to credit, market barriers, technology gaps, and the lack of competent public agricultural services, such as extension services. In addition, the **lack of cooperation between institutions and private individuals** in involving civil society is a major hindrance. In this respect, several solutions have been implemented in the Mediterranean countries

and reported as good practices and projects in the FEED platform. The actors in these initiatives have identified the key success factors as the management of the value chain at local or wider level, the clear identification of the actors and their roles, the governance decision-making mechanisms, **the production** and transformation process, the sale on the market and the distribution of revenues. Some experiences have led to the creation of holistic and sustainable development models for large communities, using highly innovative solutions with a high level of producer empowerment.

In this context, the good practice implemented in Lebanon, "*Improvement of the income of small producers in Lebanon through the combination of ready-to-eat and healthy snack products with traditional food*", shows the maturity of the market through the introduction of direct buying and selling between individuals and consumers. The Food & Roots Association grows and produces local Lebanese products based on traditional methods, with support from research organisations and NGOs. To facilitate communication and transactions between producers and consumers, the association has established a support structure. This benefits both parties in a win-win scenario. Initially, this initiative consisted of training courses for producers. Later, it evolved to include direct and online promotion of local products. The experience promotes the concept of 'social agriculture', which significantly contributes to the development of the region, rural communities, and the safety of the food sold.

The Campagna Amica network in Italy is a direct equivalent. It has addressed various needs of the rural community, such as environmental and biodiversity conservation, supply of healthy food, and revitalization of urban areas, despite starting from more favourable socio-economic conditions. However, the absolute value of the 0 km markets is particularly noteworthy. This has led to a significant trend reversal, favouring producers who opt for a second distribution method over large-scale distribution. In this respect, farmers markets provide a way to rebalance producers' margins by establishing a direct relationship of trust with consumers. This creates an alternative to the heavily biased distribution-producer relationship. Farmers markets have reawakened the concept of 'agricultural marginality' through this intermediary-free relationship with consumers. The Farms4Climate project contributes to the agri-food market, in addition to the objectives achieved by the two good practices described. The 'economy of love' principle suggests that supply chain actors are brought together not only by the pursuit of maximum profit, but also by identifying new climate-friendly business opportunities that benefit producers and rural communities. These opportunities include regenerative agriculture and carbon farming, which are adapted to local conditions and farming systems.

After reading the experiences gathered on the platform, it is clear that local communities have acknowledged the importance of:

- providing farmer-friendly support systems, resources and environments through government policy development, private sector engagement and local and international partnerships
- ensuring better access to financial services, technical assistance, and technology
- facilitating access to both local and international markets through improved product quality
- communicating to consumers the link between better production, better food, better environment, better life.

SPOTLIGHT - Sustainable horizons for the blue economy in the Kenyan coastal

In Kenya's coastal embrace, the Share Blue project has sparked a transformative movement, especially within women-led Beach Management Units (BMUs). These groups, pivotal in preserving marine life, received essential tools to enhance fishing techniques while championing responsible practices—from large-mesh nets to ice-making machines.

This initiative ushered substantial change. Meetings with local communities and cooperation bodies acted as guiding lights, empowering people with practical knowledge in fishing, conservation, and seaweed management. Witnessing these shifts, communities became advocates, spurring a ripple effect of encouragement for others to follow suit.

Beyond technique refinement, this collaboration bolstered the fishery's value chain. It established an independent ice production system on the remote island of Wasini, where solar energy powers essential tools and rainwater serves as the sole resource. This practice isn't just about fishing; it's a testament to how cooperation among public authorities, local communities and private organizations stimulates resilience and strengthens Kenya's coastal blue economy, ensuring sustainable horizons for generations to come.



The right to preserve biodiversity

According to SDG 15, biodiversity is essential for the development of humans, other living organisms, and ecosystems. The goal promotes the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of the environment and terrestrial ecosystems through sustainable forest management, soil restoration, and the preservation of biodiversity. Between 2010 and 2016, an important and successful agricultural biodiversity initiative took place in Mauritania. The good practice, *'Cultivation of cowpea during the period of receding waters: the experience of Maghta Sfeirat'*, describes how farmers in the village of Maghta Sfeirat have revalued the cultivation of a special type of bean, cowpea, as an alternative to maize in an area where water use is restricted. Cowpea enhances the community food security and is resilient to climate hazards due to its low water requirements and high protein content compared to maize. The initiative, led by local farmers and supported by the Rural Development Platform Rim-Rural, has transformed over 800 hectares into productive cowpea plots through improved crop management techniques. This initiative is a replicable and resilient solution. It can bring economic benefits, improve nutrition and empower local communities.

Local crops are well-suited to harsh environmental conditions and limited resources, and are considered ecologically, economically, and socially viable. Despite their nutritional richness, they are often undervalued and overlooked in research and development. These crops have the potential to improve the nutritional status and food availability of local populations.

Careful examination of the FEED material reveals that the Mediterranean region has considerable agricultural biodiversity. However, this diversity is at risk due to the industrialization of agriculture, reduction in food diversity, climate change, changes in land and sea use, overexploitation of resources, pollution, and the presence of alien species.

Experiences like Campagna Amica in Italy raise awareness of the importance of conserving ancient agricultural varieties for landscape protection. The initiative exemplifies a perfect balance between preserving agricultural biodiversity, developing the local economy, promoting transparency, passing on food traditions, prioritising health through food, and reclaiming degraded land. This new social model involves collaboration between citizens, public administrations, and private individuals to conserve biodiversity and maintain ecosystem functionality.

These examples showcase the important work of 'custodian farmers' who provide their expertise and land for the preservation of old varieties, which serves as a preventive measure against species extinction. This is the case of the Abu Ghraib horticultural nursery in Libya, a country suffering from severe political fragmentation, widespread poverty, and permanent drought, which has made it possible to reclaim hectares of abandoned land. The orchard has achieved self-sufficiency in fruit production through organic fertilisation, water conservation, and seedling propagation, transforming previously arid land into fertile soil.

A significant achievement in the restoration of biodiversity has been witnessed in the mountainous region of Homolje, Serbia. Beekeepers have collaborated to revive the age-old practice of honey production. Eighty-four cooperatives collectively purchase materials for feeding and caring for hives, and market their products under a protected geographical origin label. They play a vital role in restoring the interdependence between pollinating bees and plant species. This strengthens the health of the ecosystem through a holistic and multifunctional approach. On the other hand, its

weakening reduces the barrier to the spread of pathogens, increasing the risk of epidemics transmitted through human-pet-wildlife relationships.

In conclusion, analysis of the information on the platform shows that local communities are working to:

- strengthen relationships between institutions, research organisations and farmers to conserve seeds of local varieties in situ, thanks to custodian farmers, or ex situ through seed banks;
- restore degraded lands, including those affected by catastrophic climate events, and claim the right to restore the balance between economy, environment and health;
- promote alternative development models to intensive agriculture that allow the restoration of a healthy rural ecosystem for the benefit of people and nature;
- implement new cultivation methods adapted to each area;
- respect environmental and cultivation conditions.

SPOTLIGHT - Local Seed Bank

In the pursuit of preserving biodiversity, Local Seed Bank in Palestine emerges as guardian of Earth's genetic legacy, embodying the inherent right to conserve nature's diversity. These local repositories serve as crucial bastions, safeguarding indigenous plant species often overlooked in mainstream agriculture. Its essence lies in preserving genetic wealth and ensuring the availability of diverse seeds for future generations. Beyond mere storage, this bank empowers communities to protect their agricultural heritage, fostering resilience amidst environmental shifts, and helps farmers to avoid expulsion from their lands. At their core, the Palestinian Local Seed Bank honours the fundamental right to preserve biodiversity, nurturing seeds resilient to local conditions. It stands as vital pillars supporting food security and sovereignty, offering a lifeline for communities navigating climatic uncertainties.

This bank isn't just a repository; it symbolizes our shared commitment to safeguarding biodiversity. It enables communities to protect their heritage and ensure a resilient future by preserving nature's diverse offerings.

Change is not immediate; it is the result of a complex process that can only begin with recognizing a problem and believing in the need to improve the current situation by those experiencing it.

The achievement of a successful change process necessitates certain obligatory steps. In some cases, these steps are carried out autonomously and unconsciously by the beneficiaries, while in other cases, a third party (such as an NGO or cooperation agency) manages them. The third party can guide the process but cannot offer the solution, so that the beneficiaries perceive the change as their own.

All FEED good practices follow the same path that has led to a change in the living conditions of the target population:

- **Knowledge and awareness of needs**
- **Knowledge of possible solutions**
- **Selection, application and adaptation of the solution that is considered best for the context in which it is used.**

The initial step in implementing these processes is to initiate a dialogue, both among peers (i.e. different communities exchanging knowledge, approaches to problems and solutions) and between beneficiaries and local and international stakeholders who share the same ultimate goal. With the aim of replicating successful experiences, the FEED platform network promotes the transfer of solutions that have already been applied to common needs also by open laboratories. It compares different perspectives from various countries and stakeholders and encourages all cooperation actors to put people at the centre, in their individual and community dimensions, and to ensure the adoption of harmonised and coordinated development processes.



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