Annex 2. DEFINITIONS, UNDERSTANDINGS AND LIMITATIONS OF BEST/GOOD PRACTICE ANALYSIS

Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways

Volume 2: Cedefop analytical framework for developing coordinated and coherent approaches to upskilling pathways for low-skilled adults

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Definitions, understandings and limitations of best/good practice analysis

The use of good/best practices originated in the private sector and from there it was rapidly exported to the public sector. This led to the development of catalogues, guidelines, awards and dissemination programmes in practically every sector of intervention, in Europe and across the world, often promoted by central authorities and addressed to local administrations. Policy-makers often seek efficient solutions that can be applied within short timeframes. This inclination to learn from others has produced many examples of good/best practices which are increasingly being used to guide public policy in different fields following the so-called 'policy diffusion phenomenon' (Gilardi, 2015). This says that policies, programmes and many practices are widely diffused and experienced from one context to another as policy-makers are keen to be influenced by the success or failure of policies elsewhere.

However, there is still little clarity on what constitutes a best/good practice. 'Best' practices can suggest a judgement but, as a minimum, they carry the implicit understanding that there is an assessment framework (such as a set of criteria and indicators) against which a given practice can be considered among the best. For some it is defined as results-oriented decision-making based on empirical evidence (Cannon and Kilburn, 2003); for others the term best practice relates to successful initiatives or model projects that make an outstanding, sustainable, and innovative contribution to the issue at hand. For example, according to Bendixsen and De Guchteneire (2003), a good practice concerns 'the accumulation and application of knowledge about what works and what does not work in different situations and contexts' and has at least one of the following properties: it is innovative (it develops solutions new and creative to common problems); 'makes the difference', that is, is able to show a tangible result to a given problem; it is sustainable, since it contributes to the eradication of the problem over time; and it is replicable, that is, it acts as an 'inspiration framework' to generate policies

and initiatives. Other definitions relate to 'processes and activities that have been shown in practice to be the most effective, efficient, democratic or whatever other goal intended by the processes and activities' (de Vries, 2010, p. 315). Bretschneider et al. (2005, p. 309) argue that a best practice 'implies that it is best when compared to any alternative course of action and that it is a practice designed to achieve some deliberative end'.

The term best practice may also suggest that that there is a 'best' way of delivering policies and obtaining results. Hence there is a growing tendency to replace the term 'best practice' with 'good practice' or some similar term ('learning practices', 'lessons learned' and 'promising practices', 'smart practices', or 'innovative practices'). The use of alternative terms to best practice acknowledges that policy effectiveness relies on several contextual factors. The intention is to indicate positive examples of some practice or approach that produces results deemed as valuable (EIGE, 2013).

Hall and Jennings (2008) propose a gradation of good practices (including in this term both policies and programmes and simpler actions/projects) based on the availability of scientific or quasi-scientific evaluations of the results obtained. They distinguish between best practices (those that have proven effective and efficient), evidence-based practices (which focus on outcomes assessed on the basis of systematic empirical evidence), and 'promising' practices (those that are still difficult to evaluate and yet worthy of attention).