



*In Farmer Field Schools farmers run their own experiments, which they share with other farmers on field days. A farmers school in Kasrawad, Madhya Pradesh, India.*

Photo: J. Boethling

## Farmer Field Schools: from nobodys to role models

Farmer Field Schools (FFS) are a successful approach of participatory learning in the field. They are an effective and comparatively cheap tool to encourage communities to validate and adapt improved technologies to local conditions, improve rural food security and income generation, and empower farmers to find solutions to their problems.

The Farmer Field School (FFS) approach was first introduced in Kenya in 1995 through a project of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Western Kenya. Since then, several projects have been successfully implemented in the country using various different entry points, including issues such as integrated production and pest management, land and water

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management, self sustainability for refugee communities, integrated crop management of the sweet potato, promotion of farmer innovations, dairies, small livestock, bee keeping, fisheries, integrated social forestry, integrated nutrient management, soil management, export vegetables, floriculture, reproductive health, junior farmer field and life schools, farmer field and life schools, pastoral field schools, gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, and control of banana bacterial wilt.

Whereas the technical component of the season-long curriculum is devel-

oped around a selected key entry point, other vital livelihood issues that affect the community are blended into the curriculum as special topics, such as HIV/AIDS issues, reproductive health care, nutrition, gender issues, malaria control, child immunisation, environmental control, basic financial management, simple credit management skills and farming as a business.

This responsiveness to immediate community concerns has facilitated a transformation of the FFS to a popular community forum in which farmers discuss problems within their own local

### Typical FFS schedule for a learning session (crop-based FFS)

#### 8.00 – 8.15 am

**Prayer, roll call, recap and briefing on day's activities:** The host team leads the other farmers in prayer, finding out who are present, reviewing previous activities, and briefing the other farmers on the proposed activities of the day.

#### 8.15 – 8.45 am

**Field observation:** Split into small groups, farmers make observations of the whole field, and then examine 5 to 6 plants per plot, recording parameters such as plant height, number of leaves, number of branches, weed intensity, insect and pest infestation, disease incidence, availability of beneficial insects and any other relevant details.

#### 8.45 – 9.15 am

**Analysis:** Each group prepare drawing of their field observations, including information on the condition of the plants, pests and diseases, natural enemies of insect pests, weather, soil and water conditions, etc.

#### 9.15 – 10.00 am

**Presentations and discussions:** Each group present their outcome and discuss their observations and conclusions with the other FFS members. The whole FFS group reaches a consensus about the crop management practices that they will carry out during the coming week.

#### 10.00 – 10.20 am

**Group dynamic activity:** This activity aims to stimulate attention and participation, as well as to strengthen group communication and increase solidarity.

#### 10.20 – 11.30 am

**Special topic:** The facilitator guides the group in experiments, lessons, exercises and discussions on a special topic, identified by the group itself and related to what is actually occurring in the field or community.

#### 11.30 – 12.00 am

**Review of day's activities, planning for next session, evaluation, announcements and closing prayer:** Farmers evaluate the activities of the day, plan for the following session and identify the activities and special topic to be addressed.



Photo: G. Khisa

*In the morning farmers go in small groups to the fields where they make observations and record important parameters such as plant height, weed intensity etc.*

context and seek solutions with minimal external support. This development has been a fundamental factor in building farmers' confidence to determine their own destiny. The underlying reason for the success of FFS in the country has been the involvement of farmers themselves in identifying their problems, and in selecting, testing and evaluating possible solutions. To date over 12,000 FFS have been imple-

mented in the country involving over 400,000 farmers directly and two million farmers indirectly.

### ■ What is a Farmer Field School?

A Farmer Field School (FFS) is a community-based field study programme incorporating the application of experiential learning (or learning-by-doing)

principles. The field is the school. The field school emphasises observation, discussion, analysis, collective decision-making, presentation, and taking appropriate collective and individual action. Its roots are in ecology and it combines indigenous and introduced knowledge in empowering farmers – many of them women – in identifying actions. Typically, a FFS involves 25–30 farmers coming together voluntarily to form a group, and lasts for a year or for the duration of a crop or livestock cycle, with classes taking place regularly once a week. Apart from addressing agricultural issues, FFS often also focus on topics related to leading a healthy life, including sanitation, HIV/AIDS, nutrition. The underlying goal, however, is to improve food security, using sustainable production methods, to generate higher incomes and to create confidence among participants that it lies within their power to improve their well-being.

The direct cost of running a field school for a full cycle is typically about 500 US dollars (USD) that pays for facilitation services, materials to be used in classes and inputs for experiments. Including training of trainers and supervision services, average total once-and-for-all costs amount to between 30 USD and 50 USD per farmer "graduate".

### ■ Impact and achievements

One of the features of the FFS "movement" is that it is, in itself, continuously learning from its own experience. Thus most schools involve farmer-run experiments, the results of which are shared with other farmers and officials during field days. The farmers have created a "self-financing" model in which they would collectively work on a "commercial" plot during the first year so as to generate income that would then be used to finance a continuation in the following years, so that they are no longer dependent on outside financial



Typically a Farmer Field School involves 25 to 30 farmers that form a group. This group stays together for the duration of a crop cycle, with classes taking place once a week.

Eradication Committee, Sub District Agricultural Committee, etc.

FFS in Kenya have been subject to various evaluations and appraisals, including by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UN Development Programme (UNDP), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In general, the findings have been very positive, in terms of their impact on agricultural practices, output, food security, incomes, sustainable use of natural resources and, above all, in participants' capacity to take control of their own lives.

## Conclusion

The FFS as an extension methodology is quite participatory and effective. It is a comparatively cheap tool to encourage communities to validate and adapt improved technologies to local conditions, improve rural food security and income generation, and empower farmers to find solutions to their problems. The methodology also makes the farmers to be better clients for extension and research. Extension staff have developed a sense of responsibility and are getting job satisfaction.

assistance: this has now been widely adopted. Increasingly, FFS are being facilitated by farmers who themselves are FFS graduates, thus keeping costs low (less expenditure on vehicles and fuel), and enabling the movement to expand without being constrained by the limited number of trained extensionists. District FFS networks have emerged spontaneously among FFS where they come together especially for the purposes of bulk-buying of inputs, marketing production surpluses, seeking further information & knowledge and for advocacy and policy issues. The District networks also act as a platform for community based extension activities.

For individual farmers, too, both men and women, the FFS process has been empowering. Most of the FFS farmers were considered "nobodies" prior to the FFS. Now, however, they are regarded as role models, opinion leaders and leaders in their communities. Many have been appointed as assistant chiefs, some elected to the local government as councillors, some made Church elders, others made chairpersons of the schools board of governors and some have gained formal employment in schools, sugar factories, community based organisations and NGOs. The chairpersons of the FFS networks sit on various district committees such as the District Poverty

## Zusammenfassung

Das Konzept der „Farmer Field School“ (FFS) wurde in Kenia erstmals 1995 im Rahmen eines Projekts der UN-Ernährungs- und Landwirtschaftsorganisation (FAO) eingeführt. Es ist eine erfolgreiche Methode für den partizipativen Lernprozess im Feld. FFS sind ein wirksames und vergleichsweise billiges Instrument, das Gemeinden ermuntert, verbesserte Techniken zu übernehmen und an ihre lokalen Gegebenheiten anzupassen, die ländliche Nahrungsmittelsicherheit und Einkommenssituation zu verbessern und den Bauern zu ermöglichen, selbst Lösungen für

ihre Probleme zu finden. Bauern, die eine Farmer Field School besucht haben, gelten in ihren Dörfern als Vorbilder, Meinungsbildner und Führer. Vor allem jedoch stärken die Besucher der FFS ihre Fähigkeit, ein eigenverantwortlichen Leben zu führen.

## Resumen

El enfoque de las Escuelas de Campo para Agricultores (Farmer Field Schools – FFS) fue introducido por primera vez en Kenia en 1995 a través de un proyecto de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura (FAO). Es una metodología exitosa de aprendizaje partici-

pativo en el campo. Las FFS constituyen una herramienta eficaz y comparativamente económica para alentar a las comunidades a validar y adaptar tecnologías mejoradas a las condiciones locales, incrementar la seguridad alimentaria y la generación de ingresos en áreas rurales, y empoderar a los agricultores para hallar por sí mismos las soluciones a sus problemas. Los agricultores que han asistido a una FFS son vistos como modelos a seguir, líderes de opinión y dirigentes de sus comunidades. Pero el beneficio más importante está en que los participantes en las FFS fortalecen su capacidad de asumir el control de sus vidas.