

DISCUSSION: PROMOTING COLLABORATION OF STAKEHOLDERS IN AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Duration:	06. 08 - 20. 08. 2008
Facilitator:	Chris Ramezanpour, member of the Global Farmer Field School Listserve (Global-FFS-I)
Number of participants:	6
Number of Contributions:	7

II. INTRODUCTION OF THE TOPIC

Please find below a message by **Chris Ramezanpour**, a member of the Global Farmer Field School Listserve (Global-FFS-I), which is part of the Global Farmer Field School Network and Resource Centre (FFSnet). This message is being cross-posted on the FSN Forum for discussion, which would enrich the debate on both platforms.

Further information on the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach and the FFS network can be found at <http://www.farmerfieldschool.info>

Dear Members of the Global FFS Group,

This is my first time to write to the group and I would like to comment on the power of this forum. I believe this is an incredible method for exchanging knowledge, experiences and ideas. Since I have been a member of this group I have read messages shared between FAO officers from around the world, as they assist each other in discovering best practices for improved programming and assistance. This kind of communication offers an excellent resource to build the collective wisdom of the members and the organization they represent.

But what about the stakeholders on the ground?

As seen in a recent email from Peter Waboya, chairman of an FFS network in Western Kenya, the voice of the people on the ground, specifically the farmers supported by the FFS program, can provide some of the most effective feedback for enhancing and expanding the FFS program.

The question remains then – what more can be done to help the farmers on the ground interact and share information more regularly with the FAO officers? Is there a more powerful method of communication than monitoring and evaluation every 3-6 months?

As noted by Kees Stigter (of Agromet Vision) in a previous email to the group, the success of the FFS program in the near future depends on support to the agriculture extension officers. These extension officers can then help relay feedback from the farmers to the FAO officers.

I was a field agent with FAO Kenya in the Kilifi district (2 hours north of Mombasa) from 2003-05. The program was successful on a number of levels – outreach to a large number of farmers across the district, training of farmer facilitators, training of Farming-as-a-Business, and other concepts relevant to improving the livelihoods of local small-scale farmers. One of the main obstacles to the sustainable development of the FFS project in Kilifi though, was the **absence of better communication and coordination among stakeholders involved in rural development in the area**. While we were experts at teaching best agriculture practices through the FFS approach, and helping farmers appreciate the benefits of farming as a business, there were others (World Bank, Care, Plan, K-Rep, etc.) who could have been assisting in provisions of services to supplement the agriculture training – like credit access, irrigation support, and health training. We can help them learn to grow more maize, or grow cash crops for a market; but if they can't afford the seed, fertilizer, or transport, then what good is the knowledge when they can't apply it?

Rural development was never as simple as just providing training and expecting all the rest of the pieces to fall into place. In order to address a means of helping the farmers put those other pieces into place, I am advocating for **greater collaboration among the many stakeholders in agriculture development – the program officers of the IGOs and NGOs, the agriculture extension officers, the farmers, and the members of the agriculture research facilities to name a few**. This can only be done through greater forms of communication

I would appreciate your thoughts – since you are all experts in the field – on a web-based network of communication among these stakeholders, and potentially others. Is it possible for such a forum to offer more services than just the single discussion board we are using here? Can it become a network of shared resources – educational audio and video files (for local radio and tv use), contact links to important agriculture-related services, relevant white papers, news, market linkages, etc.?

As the internet and cellular infrastructure in Africa continue to improve and expand, there will be an opportunity for more organizations and stakeholders (even at the village level) to utilize handheld cellular devices (and personal computers) to access and share information. How can we take advantage of this technology to encourage collaboration and strengthen our connection with the people on the ground we have dedicated our work to helping?

You are all experts in the field and that is why I have posed these questions to you. I wrestled with them while in graduate school, as I sat in a classroom pondering policy solutions to rural

development, and wondering what the farmers I knew would say to the solutions I was proposing. I look forward to hearing your feedback. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Chris Ramezanpour

Chris Ramezanpour
216 Brookline Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

III. LIST OF CONTRIBUTIONS;

Contribution by Kevin Gallagher, FAO Sierra Leone

Dear Chris,

Wow... I was surprised by two things below. First that training was conducted out of context of farmer reality - FFS (Farmer Field School) are supposed to respond to local needs and not be something that is dropped into communities without any relationship to what actually improves lives. Why were FFS run if training was not enough? Who thought up a training programme when training was not sufficient?

The other surprise is about "sustainability" which I find is one of the most over-used misunderstood word in development talk today. FFS themselves are not meant to be sustained. They are inputs to a process which fits in some situations and not into most. FFS may help groups be formed, but the groups themselves, not FFS, might or might not be sustained. FFS for improving certain practices might help sustain the new practices but not necessarily the groups. Many of us are exposed to training programmes of some type - yet we don't expect to continue in the training programme but rather to continue using what we learned. Of course if what we learned is not relevant to our situation then the training was a waste of money and time. Granted, there are many programmes which use FFS as an entry to creating or strengthening self-sustained groups but these FFS should make this a clear aspect of the FFS activities.

How about local linkages?... I am not sure that internet will help much with that but I am more certain local networking will (e.g. face to face meetings).

One thing I do agree with is that the more we have folks from the field level on the discussion list, the more we will have a better feel of reality. Hopefully, most of the practitioners on the list are connected to field programmes closely.

With best regards,
Kevin Gallagher

Contribution by Masai M. Masai, FAO Kenya

Dear Chris,

Good to hear from you contributing to this very enriching forum on FFS. I wish to link you up with Mr. James Okoth of FFS in Uganda and other colleagues who have worked on a very innovative platform similar to what you are suggesting. I wish James and the rest to shed more light on the platform as presented during the FSG Workshop in Kadoma-Zimbabwe sometimes back.

I hope to hear feedback from these colleagues.

Regards,

Masai

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Contribution by Danilo A. Pezo, CATIE/NORWAY Project, GUATEMALA

Dear all,

I fully agree with the comments made by Chris Ramenzapour on how the effectiveness and potential for application of learnings in FFS could be enhanced by linking FFS participatory learning and experimentation efforts with other stakeholders.

In the project we have been developing in Central America for five years, working with livestock farmers and looking for alternatives for more sustainable and diversified land use options for degraded pasture lands, we do not only concentrated on developing livestock FFS applying silvopastoral approaches, but also analyzed the effects of exogenous factors (e.g., market access, local and national policies, farmers organization, provision of services, etc.), and we learnt that the aversion farmers have to take formal credit (i.e. with high transactions costs for rural families) is one of the factors that limited the adoption and/or expansion of technologies they valued as good to excellent, but required investment; on the other hand, those technologies that did not required external inputs or only signified a change in attitude were more widely implemented. Also improvements in access to markets by repairing rural roads, and the establishment of milk collection centres were also factors that affected positively technology changes by farmers.

These findings pushed us to establish better contacts with local governments, the milk private sector, local funding agencies, etc.

Sincerely,

Danilo A. Pezo
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CATIE/NORWAY Project
Flores, Petén
GUATEMALA

Contribution by Chris Ramezanpour, member of the Global Farmer Field School Net

Dear Kevin,

Thank you for your feedback. I strongly agree that the field level needs to be as connected as possible to the discussions.

Although, I think that you may have misunderstood what I was saying to suggest that the trainings were conducted "out of context". That is neither what I wrote nor implied. The case I was making is that field education models like FFS can better serve their target audience when the message taught is supported with the secondary tools that will be needed to apply that message. That way the tools for learning can be combined with the tools for application. And that way poor small-scale farmers may benefit in the long-term from the educational value of the FFS program.

On your second point, I do not share your idea that the FFS is a one-time, single moment teaching method. I think the education process is ongoing, if not lifelong, and if the farmers can

"sustain" the group (by paying for the facilitator, locating a communal plot, and purchasing the trial inputs for future crop trainings), then I think it is a good idea for them.

Many people who have participated in an FFS program have noted also the value of the group beyond the training exercises. For one it is a social network that often connects numerous groups across villages for benefits beyond farming (like health). Secondly, and economically more important, the power of the group, or the combined power of many groups, to grow sufficient quantities consistently is the best way for many small-scale farmers to access high-value contract farming opportunities. So when I use the word "sustainable" this is the vision I have in mind.

All the tools that are necessary to help them get to that point - most of us can rattle them off. Even the farmers can tell you much of what they need. What I always thought was a terrific opportunity was to connect what we know, and who we know at the Washington DC level, the Rome level, the country level, and the district level to what the farmers know and need at the farm-level. A web-based network seems a great way to do just that. An online forum that includes the myriad stakeholders and encourages conversations and idea-sharing among them has the potential to become an excellent tool for collaborative, multi-stakeholder program design that can address many of the farmers needs beyond training and into the application stage.

All the best,

Chris Ramezanpour
216 Brookline Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

Contribution by M. Anantharaman, member of the Global Farmer Field School Net

Dear FFS members,

I also fully agree with Dr. Chris that FFS should respond to local needs. Technological interventions should be based on local needs identified based on participatory agro-eco system analysis. Of late the concept FFS is taken for granted anything done in farmers' fields. Many FFS projects are implemented without the essence of local needs, testing the technologies without farmers participation and above all the purpose of FFS is develop farmers participated curriculum development by them based on their field experience. Very few FFS come out with FFS curriculum. It may be nice to document the curriculum developed in various FFS.

With regards

Yours,

DR.M.Anantharaman
CTCRI, Trivandrum, Kerala

Contribution by Kevin Gallagher, FAO Sierra Leone

Dear Chris,

Apologies that I may also have taken your comments out of context. In fact, I have seen many FFS implemented without thinking through the longer term implications - or rather FFS implemented for the sake of implementation and not as part of a longer term strategy (either externally or internally elaborated). I certainly second your call for FFS to be used within a strategy where they link to the overall direction of development and add to moving forward.

On the second point... this is perhaps a question of semantics. People graduate from FFS but the group often stay together - indeed for continued learning as a group and doing activities with mutual support. For myself, the name is not the point but rather one of process. Post-FFS activities are extremely important. That members stay together is important for mutual support.

However, I also hope that "FFS" themselves will remain as clear budgetable items with start and finish dates and with the release of their facilitators (or transfer of facilitator responsibility) so that new FFS may be established - even developing post-FFS budgets as specific budgetable activities (paid by farmers, projects, private sector, etc.). Here I speak as a person responsible for designing projects and trying to understand how to develop budgeted programmes.

With best regards,

Kevin Gallagher

Contribution by Mickey Freeman, member of the Global Farmer Field School Net

Kevin & Chris,

While I'm on the sidelines these days, I have enjoyed reading the discussion about FFS. And Kevin I think your last message drew the distinction that I was familiar with (between the real FFS and the farmer group that continues to stay together). Both Chris and I worked with FFS Networks that were focused on continued learning as well as putting that learning into cash crops. that, to me, is the real value of the FFS program.

Chris, hope things are well. I echo your comments.

Mickey Freeman
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