

PROMOTING COLLABORATION AMONG STAKEHOLDERS IN AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT

The topic below is raised by Chris Ramezanpour, a member of the Global Farmer Field School Listserv (Global-FFS-I), which is part of the Global Farmer Field School Network and Resource Centre (FFSnet). This topic is 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,

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