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FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN OUTSIDER AND FRIEND

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MY PERSPECTIVE VIS A VIS FFS

First of all, my perspective of FFS is that of an “outsider”. I have watched FFS, as it were, from the sidelines, for many years. I have read widely about FFS; I have seen FFS sessions out in the fields in Viet Nam; I have watched meetings when new curricula for FFS were being developed, as with the curriculum for tea in Viet Nam; I have dialogued with FFS leaders in Cambodia; I was invited to evaluate the FAO’s FFS work in Southeast Asia (a job I could not take on because of a time conflict); and I have met many of FFS’ leaders, both at the international level, such as Peter Kenmore and Kevin Gallagher, and at the village level. But, having worked mostly in Latin America, I have never actually become involved in a FFS program. Thus, what I will say today comes from the perspective of someone who has not actually worked in FFS, but from one who sees it from another perspective—who can see it in the context of what is happening in agricultural development in the rest of the world.

So why do I claim to be a friend of FFS? First of all, I have been very impressed with the results that FFS have achieved. Because of its very positive results (tremendous decreases in the use of pesticides, by hundreds of thousands of farmers, over a relatively short period), I feel FFS is one of the most important, even most exciting, and certainly one of the most successful, agricultural extension efforts in the world today. Furthermore, I have seen the movement’s impact first-hand, and therefore I know the reports are accurate.

Furthermore, we share a good number of basic values: the need to maintain a healthy environment, the need to reduce the use of chemicals in our agriculture, and the need for farmers to become “empowered,” to become the leaders in your own development process.

But there is an even more basic reason for being a friend of FFS: we share a good number of basic beliefs about how agricultural development must be carried out—the methodology of development—if you farmers are, in fact, ever going to become the leaders in your own development process. For instance, when those of us in my organization identified the five most important of our principles for agricultural extension methodology, they were, and still are:

1. Motivate and teach farmers to experiment more and more accurately, so they can adapt and adopt technologies and even develop new ones by themselves.

2. Utilize rapid, recognizable success to motivate farmers and avoid the use of artificial incentives.
3. Use appropriate technologies—those that are inexpensive, simple, and based on locally available resources.
4. Initiate the process with a very limited number of technologies: one or two, if that is enough to achieve recognizable success.
5. Train some villager farmers to become trainers. This principle we often call “farmer-to-farmer extension.”

You can see very clearly that FFS believe in exactly the same principles, though they may be worded somewhat differently, or not even mentioned much at all. Certainly FFS has been working hard in recent years to further farmer-to-farmer extension and to train farmer trainers. It is also obvious that the FFS movement uses technologies and processes that are as simple as possible, and depend on local resources, rather than purchased chemicals.

But FFS have also done a very good job of “limiting the technology” taught. You do not go into a village trying to teach everything about every crop there, plus a few other crops that you feel should be introduced. In most cases, you start with one crop (such as rice), and then limit your work with that crop to one aspect: IPM (although you do, of course, define IPM rather broadly). Thus the focus, at first, is very limited. This limiting of the technology we work with at first, is extremely important because our message to the farmers is clearer and the farmer can try out those few things taught on a small scale before adopting them on a large scale. But most of all, it is important because the farmer has time to gain experience with what is being suggested, thereby becoming part of the process, thereby having a chance to eventually become a leader in the whole process.

THE ROLE OF FARMER EMPOWERMENT

But how did it occur that a small NGO in Latin America and a huge, United Nations funded movement in Southeast Asia came to adopt the same methodology? Why do our basic principles and ways of doing things coincide so well? I believe that this is because, as Kevin Gallagher once said to me, “We were just following the farmers.” That is, those programs that truly respond to what the farmers in the villages want (wherever in the world those farmers are), will come to these same conclusions. Organizations that are honestly working for farmer “empowerment,” which truly desire that you farmers will become the leaders of your own process of development--the “authors of your own destiny,” as Paulo Freire said--will gradually discover these principles. This is true because only those farmers who become both trainers and researchers, you your selves, will ever be able to lead such a movement. This, I believe, is one of the most important

truths in the field of agricultural development. And it is one we share—the FFS movement, as well as my organization, COSECHA.

ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Furthermore, it is pretty much only through an approach that uses these five principles that we can achieve sustainability in our development process. We have studied what happens five years and even fifteen years after agricultural development programs leave an area where they have worked. The results of these studies are somewhat surprising. What had sustainability up to fifteen years after program termination in those areas where farmers were still getting yields as good or even better than those achieved when the program was still active, was not the specific technologies the program taught. Those technologies had already died away or been changed radically by the farmers. Rather, what remained, and what made the yields continue to increase and the costs decrease over the years, was the ability of the farmers themselves to try out new technologies, to adapt them to their own needs, and then to share them with each other.

That is, sustainability of the development process will not come because we learn and apply a lot about IPM. The development process will continue in our villages when you as farmers become involved in a social process of constant innovation, in which you identify your most important problems, find out possible solutions to them, try out those solutions, share among yourselves the results of your experiments, and then decide once again what are your most important remaining problems, repeating this same process year after year.

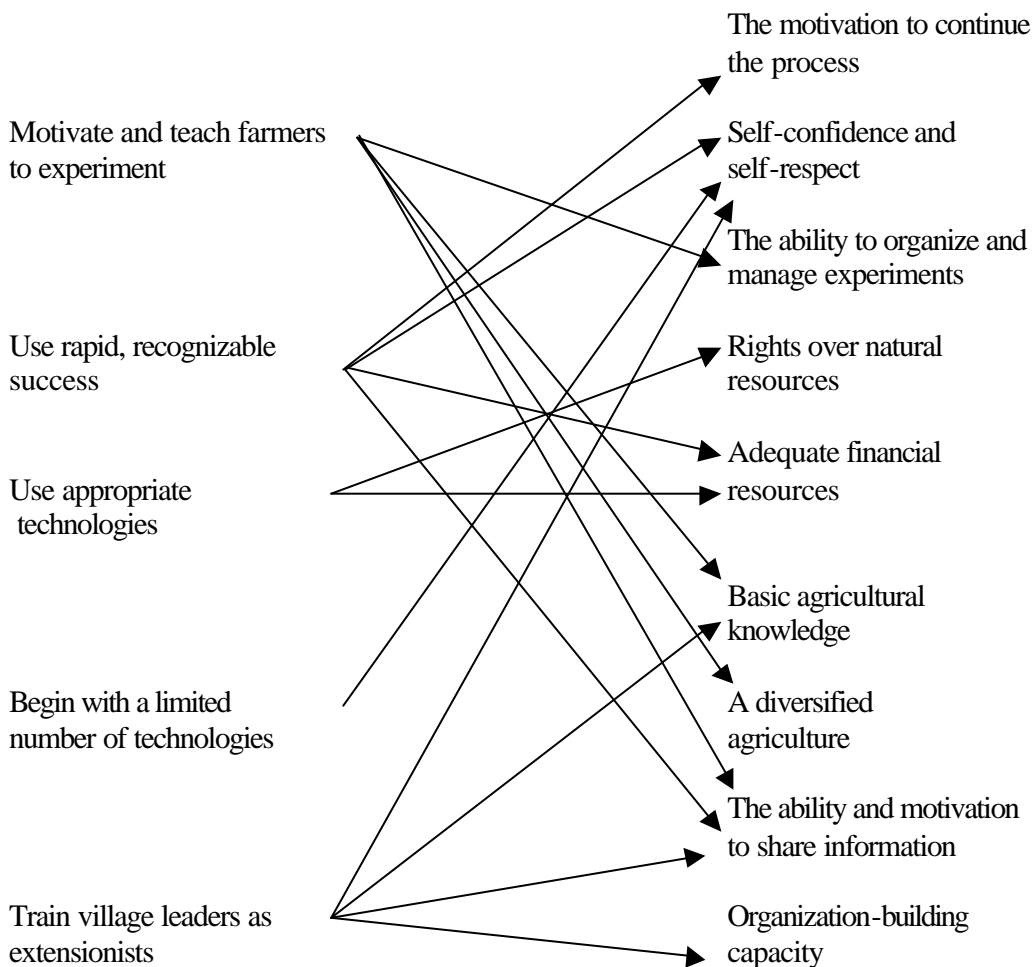
In order to carry out this process sustainably, nine factors must exist in each community:

1. The motivation to continue experimenting and finding new technologies.
2. The confidence in your own ability to find new technologies that are definitely beneficial to your communities.
3. The ability to organize and manage good experiments.
4. Rights to enough resources (mostly land, water, and a decent ecological situation) to be able to go on improving your situation.
5. Enough money to risk doing small-scale experiments that won't always bring success.
6. A basic knowledge of agriculture, soils and different crops, and how they all work.
7. A fairly diversified agriculture.
8. The ability and motivation to share new ideas with other farmers.

9. The ability to organize yourselves and work together well in organizations you have created because of your own needs.

It is interesting that these factors of sustainability are very closely related with the five principles of agricultural extension mentioned above. Each arrow in the diagram below indicates that the use of a given principle of extension methodology automatically strengthens the factor of sustainability toward which the arrow is pointing:

Diagram #1: The relationship between the training methodology we use and the factors of sustainability of the agricultural development process

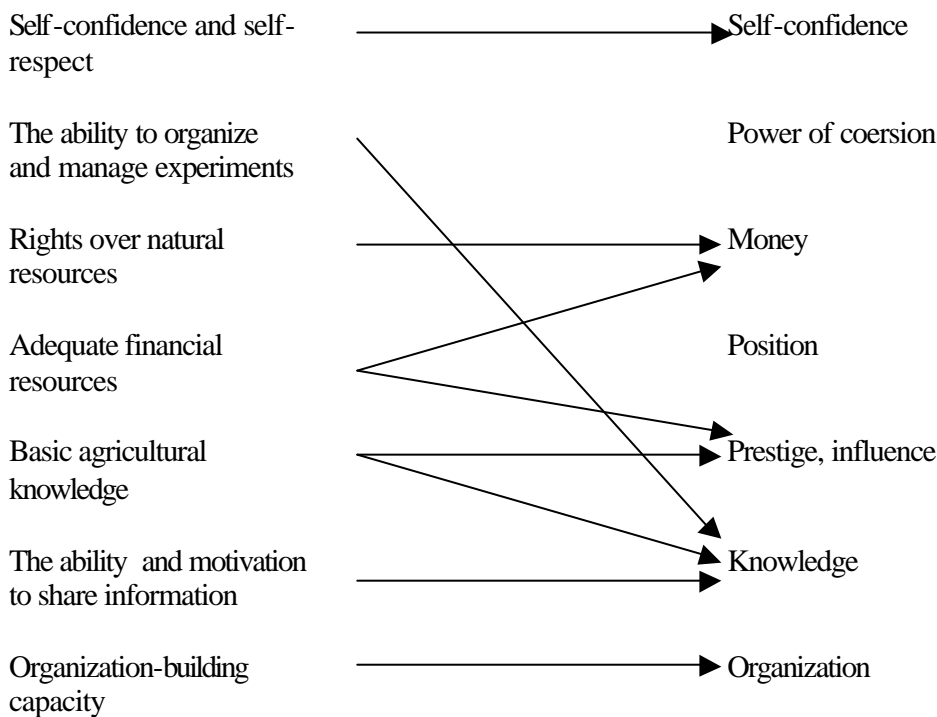


It is also interesting that there is an even closer relationship between the sources of power for any individual within any society and those factors needed for sustainable agricultural development. That is, if farmers achieve the factors or characteristics necessary to carry on the process of agricultural development, you will, at the very same time, be achieving the characteristics that can bring more power, or “empowerment,” to your villages and to yourselves. (Each arrow indicates a close relationship between the factor of

sustainability and the factor, on the right, which social scientists have identified as a factor that brings power to an individual or group of people)

Diagram # 2: The relationship between the factors of sustainability and the sources of power for an individual or community

The motivation to continue the process



SOME IDEAS ABOUT ACHIEVING EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY EVEN MORE EFFECTIVELY

As I have said above, the FFS movement is doing a very good job of working toward both of these goals, in great part because of the very methodology it is using in its programs. However, I believe there are a couple of ways in which the FFS movement could improve its impact on both empowerment and the sustainability of its agricultural development impact.

1. Strengthening the role of repeated success. We have found that a very important way of motivating those farmers new to the process to keep experimenting, is to have a series of technologies that they can try, one after the other, each of which has a fairly good promise of success in increasing yields or reducing costs. After four or five years of experiencing success fairly frequently, these farmers more or less acquire a habit of

constantly trying out new ideas, of constantly experimenting and sharing those innovations that are successful with their neighbors.

For farmers with a lot of experience, like those here today, there is another problem. Often you know of few new technologies that can make a major improvement in your fields. The programs working with you have left, or have run out of successful new technologies to try out. And when one comes to believe that few new innovations are going to improve things, one sees little point in continuing to be involved in classes or meetings. The motivation to participate decreases. Thus, in many places, there has been concern that FFS activities were not as sustainable as we had hoped.

Nevertheless, I believe there is a major new group of principles that could lead to much higher yields of rice (up to 12 and 14 t/ha and more) with equal or reduced costs. These principles are grouped together under what is called the “System of Rice Intensification,” or SRI. Basically, SRI is a new way of growing rice which takes advantage of the facts that a) each rice seedling can produce as many as one hundred tillers, if it has enough space and is transplanted early enough, and b) the roots of rice plants grow better and live much longer if they are not constantly submerged in water, and if they have less competition from other rice plants.

Thus, SRI is a series of changes in the way we have traditionally grown paddy rice, which in most countries has led to doubling and, in some cases, tripling, of rice yields, with little or no use of chemicals or “improved” seeds. The different innovations include:

1. Using much less water, even letting the surface of the soil dry out occasionally during the growth stages of the rice.
2. Transplanting the seedlings at only the two-leaf stage, normally only 7 to 10 days after planting in the seedbed. Because the seeds are small, one must take care that the roots are in an “L” form, rather than pointing upward toward the soil surface. This practice is especially difficult for farmers to try, because the rice plants look so weak and perishable when transplanted so young. However, within a month or so, they will be growing with a vigor you may never have seen.
3. Planting only one or two seedlings per hill, at distances of 20 to 30 cm square (in rows).
4. With the decreased amount of water and wider spacing between plants, there will be a lot more weeds. Nevertheless, the additional weeding work will be extremely well paid for by the increases in yields. Furthermore, there are now simple, inexpensive hand weeders that can make this job very easy.
5. Applying as much organic matter to the soil as possible, either as animal manure, crop residues, crop residue or other organic animal bedding, or legume crops such as cowpeas, rice beans, and mung beans planted on the paddies during the drier season. In some countries farmers are even experimenting with the intercropping of certain legumes in

their paddy rice fields (made possible because there is less water and more space between rice plants).

Some farmers in FFS have already discovered that some of these innovations do increase their yields. But systematic experimentation with these various innovations, one or two at a time, just might bring farmers major increases in yields over a period of three or four years. If this were the case, such an activity would greatly motivate farmers just finishing their training in IPM and would maintain the interest and the motivation of experienced farmers who feel they have few new technologies to learn that will really make much of a difference in their productivity.

2. A more systematic training of farmer trainers. I believe that a more systematic process of training farmer trainers would make FFS more sustainable over the long term. In Central America, we bring together groups of farmer leaders—those who have shown they have applied the original technologies well and have the willingness to teach others—and train them in how to teach others (much like the “trainer of trainers” courses used in FFS). At the same time, we give them a chance to lead training sessions while experienced trainers are observing, so they can learn to train others through a process of learning by doing. We also take these select groups of farmer trainers on “educational field trips” to observe what other farmers are doing in other villages and regions, to discuss with those farmers what they’ve done. We also invite them to regional and national conferences of “farmer experimenters,” so they can learn from each other of new technologies with which they can experiment back home and then include in their training of other farmers. If and when we acquire new seeds or hear of new ideas, these farmer trainers are the first ones we sell the seeds to or inform about the new technologies, because we know they will experiment with them and, if successful, will spread them to other farmers.

All of these, and other, activities, should be considered as just as essential a part of a farmer trainer’s training as each of the classes in a training curriculum. That is, they should be organized and carried out in a systematic way, just as a training course curriculum organizes the various ideas to be communicated in a systematic way.

THE FFS APPROACH IN THE FUTURE

The methodology that the FFS are using is far too important, and far too valuable, to be used only for IPM, even though I fully agree IPM is of tremendous import. But around the world, and even in large parts of Southeast Asia, other issues may be the limiting factors for farmers. In some places (semi-arid and desert areas), water management is an extremely important factor for small farmers. In other areas (and especially once IPM has been dealt with), soil quality and soil improvement is far and away the most important issue for small farmers. In others, soil conservation or finding alternatives to shifting or swidden agriculture is the most important issue for farmers.

In these cases, the FFS movement should be prepared to recognize that one of these other issues is the main issue facing farmers, and therefore should be the main issue to be addressed by development programs. Just as there are now FFS teaching IPM for tea and for vegetables, because these crops are more important for some people than is paddy rice, there should be FFS that are focusing not on IPM, but on water management, or on soil improvement, or on soil conservation. Why? Because in some areas, farmers have tremendous needs to learn about these issues. And I think you will agree with me when I say that the FFS approach to learning is the best way farmers can learn. If we limit the FFS approach to IPM, we are limiting the impact of a very important methodology. And there is nothing about the FFS methodology (the pedagogical approach, if you will) that limits it to use with only IPM.

For instance, I know of groups in Laos and Cambodia that are trying to work with farmers to find alternatives to agricultural burning. I know development agencies all over South Asia that are trying to train farmers in ways of dealing with water scarcity. I know of groups in Viet Nam and the Philippines that are training farmers in soil conservation. Couldn't the FFS movement train leaders from these NGO's and GO's, and begin to help them develop FFS-style curricula that would be aimed precisely at each of these problems?

I believe the FFS methodology could be tremendously useful for such people and in such situations if it was just adapted a little to other such subjects. I believe that organizations all over Asia, dealing with all sorts of agricultural issues, could someday be using the FFS pedagogical approach.

Is it possible that even though I am an "outsider," I believe more in the potential of what you people are doing than you yourselves do?