

COMMON QUESTIONS, ANSWERS AND SUGGESTIONS ON FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

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Summary

This paper frankly examines many of the themes and myths of farmer field schools (FFS) as expressed about IPPM¹-FFS programmes. It attempts to clarify how FFS fit into overall development processes in terms of empowerment and education, how FFS address poverty alleviation and answers some of the myths on costs and extension systems issues perpetuated certain individuals within complex organisations. Suggestions for actions and improvements are given for general discussion by this International FFS Meeting.

Introduction

Part of my work with the FAO Global IPM Facility is focused on developing IPM/IPPM programmes that include policy, farmer education and technology development within the context of national poverty alleviation and agricultural development programmes. In this work, I frequently meet with farmers, field staff, NGOs, plant protection officers, ministers, local and national policies and many other players. There is a common set of questions frequently asked that I would like to present to the participants of this international gathering in order to provide my current inadequate answers. I also provide some suggestions for how we – as a group – may respond better.

This paper is written in a personal style because this is not the view of a monolithic FAO, but my personal views. There are hundreds of highly committed individuals including FFS facilitators, researchers, secretaries, accountants, drivers and academics that have shaped the FFS movement and are responsible for its development. My views are my own but are heavily shaped by the work of these champions.

Some of my comments may be rather sensitive or too direct. However, this meeting is a milestone in change I believe. Honesty and frankness will help us get at issues more quickly in the short time we have to discuss and find answers to our critics and move forward. Names are used because each of us must take responsibility in this world and should not hide behind our organisations.

The paper is organised as question, answer and suggestion for simplicity and directness. By the end of this meeting, I would hope that the paper will be rewritten with better answers including better data and better suggestions based on what we share here.

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²IPM is Integrated Pest Management, IPPM is Integrated Production and Pest Management

Questions, Answers and Suggestions

1. *What is the role of FFS in development?*

Development is a social process of personal transformation and the increased ability to contribute to this generation's social objectives and to next generation's livelihood. Wealth accumulation is not our single objective – but a mean to reach end objectives - so cannot be the sole measure of development either. This process of personal transformation requires access to skills and information by individuals and communities. This definition of development is related to Dr. A. Sen's "freedom as development". Development is about people being free of ignorance and free to have opportunities to improve their life.

The theoretical basis of FFS is grounded firmly in the empowerment of farmers and communities. This process of empowerment assumes that;

- Without education, empowerment is more difficult to achieve.
- Without empowerment, self-direction is more difficult to achieve.
- Education and empowerment improves the ability of farmers to decide for themselves how they work as individuals or in groups to achieve their own self-defined objectives – e.g. what development goals individuals and communities want to pursue.
- Development is based on knowledge and the ability to create ones own path to improving oneself.

Suggestion: All 'development' programmes should have a strong educational process built in for individuals and communities to continue the process of life-long learning. FFS is one approach. Study circles, radio listening groups, participatory technology development study groups are other methods. Each has its pro-cons for specific topics. FFS are good for hands-on long-term management issues that have many complex decisions to be made. Study circles are good for less field oriented activities (e.g. community savings groups). PTD for group research on new problems and technologies, etc. See Annex 1.

Suggestion: UNESCO's "Education for all" programme should adopt FFS and other study group methods on a large scale for education of young and old men and women farmers and farm workers. FAO's extension service should play a role in this as one of the partners focusing on rural populations.

2. *What is the role of FFS in poverty alleviation?*

The flip side of poverty alleviation is livelihood improvement. In farm communities, farmer education is the starting point for improving livelihoods. FFS should not be seen primarily as a technology transfer system, but as an education programme that can provide learning on specific technologies leading to financial benefits as well as creation of social and political capital. Education on specific technologies can help to improve incomes and reduce risk during production and thus provides a focal point of creating the wealth required to achieve personal, family and community goals (wealth is a means, not an end).

Evaluations of FFS in E. Africa and Asia show that a major outcome of FFS are social institutions at the community level and social trust as well as process skills that allow for further community driven development (fund raising, management skills with planning and financial management).

Suggestion: Livelihood benefits within FFS should be evaluated for their social and financial benefits and compared with other development investment programmes to better evaluate FFS impact.

3. *But according to the World Bank, especially in the opinions of Jaime Quizon, Gershon Feder and Rinku Murgai, the FFS are too expensive and therefore shouldn't be pursued. What about that?*

Their paper points out the obvious – that most extension services have no money to implement programmes without external budgets (a hang over of more expensive and ineffective World Bank training and visitation systems). Using their paper, one would also conclude that any public expenditure is too expensive. But governments still fund education, health and other services. Their paper is filled with erroneous assumptions and bad analysis only publishable in the Ohio Extension Journal – not exactly a place where many papers of global importance might be published! There is no cost benefit analysis for example – only costing. There is no discussion of public returns on public investment. No comparative analysis with other programmes. The third author has already authored other papers on CIP Peru programme with opposite conclusions. The paper, I believe was motivated primarily by personal issues and not good science – as the analysis could just as well have been done on any World Bank supported extension programme and come to the same conclusions – extension services have no money and going to the field costs money that typically are supported externally.

Meanwhile, for countries such as Tanzania that do have some funds, FFS have been declared one type of national extension method and recently funded directly from government funds based on their own analysis of the FFS. In countries with stronger local government, FFS investment is common (Vietnam, Thailand, Uganda, Kenya and many others). Rice farmers in Australia, organic farmers in California and many others use similar practical group study activities as well. The number of research institutions and NGOs using the FFS processes is also growing – and one assumes that these people are evaluating the process positively before and during implementation since these programmes continue to grow although there is much to improve.

This World Bank paper has done much damage to the FFS movement. But it has also spurred a movement towards self-financing FFS in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania whereby the study field itself becomes a fund raising mechanism (to be presented in this meeting).

Suggestion: The Bank should issue a statement that the FFS are currently being tested in their extension programmes with success (e.g. Tanzania NAEP II) and urge others to consider their use where appropriate. They should also investigate the motives of the authors mentioned above.

Suggestion: This meeting should provide sufficient data to show economic and social impact of the FFS.

Suggestion: Improve our monitoring, evaluation and reporting of FFS programmes!

Suggestion: Self-financing of FFS should be a major research and development area following this meeting. Farmers need to liberate themselves from extension systems to be become truly “clients” demanding services.

4. *Why doesn't the FAO extension service support FFS development within extension systems?*

The universe is full of mysteries. Within FAO mainstream services, there are now FFS programmes on IPM/IPPM, water management, soil husbandry including no-till methods, livestock, HIV/AIDS, food security and nutrition. I believe that the key reason is that a few senior staff are out of date and still mourning the death of the top-down T&V systems. There are several individual extension service officers – especially those closer to field programmes in regional offices that are supporting FFS as well.

Suggestion: This meeting should call upon the FAO-SD department to review the relevance of their extension service to farmer development and livelihoods and request a clear position with supporting documents of their views on FFS. Their voice carries weight in the direction of extension services in member countries.

5. *Some say that the FFS and IPM movements are more like religion than science...*

This is usually said by people that are not committed to a particular ideal such as farmer empowerment and development as a social freedom. Similar comments are said about those passionate about gender equality, the environment, organic agriculture, etc. – but this does not make their cause less worthy or professional. The people I know that are committed to FFS and IPM are examining the data and making appropriate changes and looking for better methods to achieve objectives – as we are doing during this meeting.

Suggestion: Don't confuse “passionate and committed” for “not professional”.

6. *Can't the funds spent for IPM-FFS be used better in other activities to achieve the same goals?*

This is a hard question. Radio is often suggested as an alternative – but it too is not cheap – not does it provide communities with trust and group skills. Group organisational activities cost about the same, but don't usually result in immediate financial benefits as those with IPM with added social benefits. Programmes like CLUSA in Zambia and Mozambique do a good job connecting farmers to markets at about the same cost as FFS programmes, but still farmers need to have the skills to produce quality products.

Programmes show that IPPM-FFS provide good benefits for the costs incurred in terms of immediate financial returns, community benefits and political assets. As Dr. Oka has said many times though, “the biggest room in the world is the room for

improvement". We should continue to enhance the FFS methods. Food security FFS are now including HIV/AIDS, literacy, saving groups and nutrition as special topics in the FFS. Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are testing self-financing mechanisms and cluster models to encourage networking for marketing and self-management. Cambodian Farmer Life Schools are encouraging social agendas to be dealt with. Thai School IPM programmes are meeting the needs of the next generation. And there are many other developments being nurtured.

Suggestion: Encourage self-financing of FFS and FFS networks where appropriate.

Suggestion: Explore study groups and other group study methods for non-field topics of study.

7. *Are FFS an alternative for extension services?*

No. But I always wonder if people asking this realise the extent or potential of "extension services". I use an example from Busia, Kenya: When we started there, we asked how extension services would change if there were 10,000 FFS graduates and each person decided to plant 100 orange trees... Now there are almost this many graduates, but the extension service is locked into old ways to doing their job.... Can they provide market information on export, procession or fresh markets in the region? Can they do a feasibility analysis of citrus industry development? Can they help arrange for standardised boxes with individual farm labels? Can they assist the FFS network design an efficient market place? Can they designate some of their staff as citrus experts and receive special training? All answers are "no". Their system was designed for top-down information transfer... fortunately the FFS network can potentially answer these needs. Unfortunately the extension service is not likely to change soon which slows down the accrual of benefits from FFS programmes.

Suggestion: Assess the ability of extension to be more service oriented to the demands of organised farmer groups and make recommendations for appropriate changes.

8. *How can benefits reach more farmers – how to "scale-up"?*

The answer to this question seems obvious to me when restated as "how can more farmers receive educational benefits?". There is a need for trained facilitators, for revolving funds to support self-financed FFS, commitment of institutions to farmer education and a willingness to follow-up education with innovative programmes such as FFS network skill development, market linkages, research linkage, etc. This would require that extension services redefine their role from one of information providers to facilitators of development groups that will have changing needs overtime.

Suggestion: Commit to development of a development systems which uses group study to develop farmers and communities towards undertaking their own development activities including contracting for services, linking with markets and working with research institutions.

9. What do you see should be the future of FFS development?

I feel the FFS should fit into a large development process – namely one in which FFS provides education for farmers on specific needs of farmers and communities in such a way as to build towards community action. Education should include savings programmes leading to groups accumulating financial and social capital that can be used to build more capital. For example, FFS on livestock should allow farmers to access livestock after education. This might require better connections to financial institutions or better community organising to access markets and develop herds. This makes the FFS something like a 2-step process of education with savings programmes followed by access to livelihood assets (cash, seed, animals, tools, etc.). Already in Congo, women's groups are learning how to rapidly multiply cassava mosaic resistant varieties and learning small business skills so that FFS groups can become independent commercial activities (this based on initial work done by Godrick Khisa in Kenya!).

Suggestion: Enhance FFS curriculum with savings and livelihood topics to prepare for post-FFS activities.

10. Any last comments?

I feel blessed to have been part of this movement of so many dedicated and committed people with similar ideals – that farmers can think and act for themselves and do this better when they have support for their educational needs. I do not mean to upset colleagues in the Bank or FAO, but to be transparent and address issues honestly.

Annex 1: Research - Education Spectrum of IPM/IPPM Activities

Note: Thickness of gray bar represents relative level of row quality. (e.g. "basic research" achieves the goal of research more than "field schools", while "field school" achieve the goal of education more than "mass media" - assuming awareness is not the same as education.)

Note: Does not include policy development activities such as farmer forums, farmer networks, newspapers, or workshops possible when community-based organisational activities are strengthened.

Activity->	Institution based activities			Community based organisational activities					Awareness activities									
	Basic research	On-station trials	Off-station/ on-farm trials	FPR ² & Farmer Controlled Res.	PTD ³ , Farmer innovation	PTD-FFS ⁴	Farmer Field Schools	Study circles	Plant clinics, T&V	Demonstrations field days	Classroom training, workshop	Inter-active web	Mass media, radio, TV	Broad-casting web	Posters, magazine	Academic, journals		
Quality																		
GOAL: Research																		
GOAL: Farmer Education																		
Research led																		
"Extension" led ⁵																		
Farmer Participation																		

² FPR - Farmer Participatory Research [e.g. farmers and researchers working towards original knowledge]

³ PTD - Participatory Technology Development [e.g. farmers and researchers working toward adapting known knowledge to new situations]

⁴ FFS - Farmer Field Schools

⁵ Extension includes staff from government, NGO, private sector as well as farmer trainers

