

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH FARMER FIELD SCHOOL (FFS) – A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The approaches of Farmer Field School (FFS) are of innovative, interactive and participatory learning methods. It emphasizes discovery based learning and problem solving. The aim of FFS is to build the capacity of farmers, to analyse their production systems, recognize problems, identify possible solution and to finally help themselves in adapting the practices, that suit the most to their farming systems (FAO, 2003). An opportunity is also provided to the farmers, by FFS for practicing, testing and evaluating the sustainable land use technologies. It also introduces new technologies, by comparing their conservative technologies, advanced with their own custom and culture.

KEYWORDS: Farmer Filed School (FFS), Agro-Ecosystem Analysis (AESAs), Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Participatory Technology Development (PTD).

INTRODUCTION

What is Farmer Field School?

- Farmer Field Schools (FFS) includes few groups of farmers, who meet together and learn a particular topic.
- The topics discussed vary from organic agriculture, animal husbandry conservation, agriculture, and income generating activities such as Mushroom, Vegetable garden, Ericulture, etc.,
- Farmer Field Schools deliver opportunities for learning by practice. Basic agricultural and management skills are taught by FFS, so that the farmers can become experts in their own farms.
- FFS is a forum. Here, the trainers and the farmers discuss about their experiences, observations, and current new information from the exterior to the community.

Why Farmer Field School?

- Farmers are empowered with skills and knowledge
- Transforming the farmers into experts in their own areas.
- Improving the ability of the farmers to make critical decisions.
- Explaining farmers in modern means of thinking and problem solving
- To help the farmers learn how to establish themselves and their surrounding people.

METHODOLOGY

Essential elements of Farmer Field School

The Group

Farmer Field School has groups comprising individuals with 20-25 members. These people have a common interest and they become the core of a FFS. FFS helps in strengthening the existing groups and also leads to new group formation.

The Facilitator

Technically competent and experienced person is required for leading the group members with her/his hands-on exercises. This person is called the facilitator. She/he could be an extension agent or a graduate from a Farmer Field School.

The Field

The field is the teacher. Most of the training materials like plants, pests and other required facilities are provided by the field. The study sites are provided by the communities in most of the cases with shaded areas for conducting follow-up discussions.

Programme Leader

The role of the programme leader is very important to support the training by the facilitators. This person is also responsible for getting materials organized for the field, participatory way of problem-solving and in nurturing facilitators. The programme leader must be a good leader who can empower others.

The Curriculum

The natural cycle of the subject is followed by the animal, which could be a crop, soil, animal or any handicrafts. This helps in covering all aspects of the subject in parallel with what is happening in the field of FFS.

Financing

Financing is one of the important elements as FFS can be of low-cost or expensive depending on the person implementing them and the way how these are conducted (Technical Manual on FFS, 2010).

Methodology

Farmer Field School is generally a time bound activity involving a group of 20-30 farmers, happening in one agricultural production cycle or a year. This is facilitated by the farmer facilitators (FFs) or by the extension staff. The methods emphasized by Farmer Field School are grouped observation, analysis, presentation, discussion, and collective decision making and actions. Setting up of a Participatory Comparative Experiment (PCE) is the basic component of FFS. It is commonly referred to as Participatory Technology Development (PTD). In this, the farmers put the concepts of FFS into practice. The development of a PCE is made using the subjects of livestock, agriculture, Agroforestry, forestry, livelihoods and others. For the participants, a practice plot (PCE) is the learning and experiencing ground. Experiments laid out for farmers practice, integrated pest/nutrient management (IPM) alternatives, standard, long term experiments, intercrops like cowpea and border crops like marigold, maize, and bajra can be introduced, as a source of additional income and for disease and pest management.

Core Principles of FFS

- Learning place is the field
- Facilitation, not teaching
- Discovery and hands-on -based learning
- Farmers become experts
- Equity and no hierarchy
- Curriculum is integrated and learner-defined
- Experiments based on comparison

Agro-Ecosystem Analysis (AESA)

Weekly observations of AESA in the PCE/PTD plots by each sub group including

- Measurement of the plant growth,
- Weeds and their coverage,
- Pests/diseases and their importance,
- Soil conditions like moist/dry/wet, etc.
- Weather like sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy, etc. and
- Friendly insects, pests and their populations,
- Overall health of a plant during the particular stage

Table 1

Introduction			
General information		AESA data	
Pest	Plant drawings	Friendly insects	
Observations		Recommendations	

A discussion session is conducted by the facilitator after the presentations of the sub group. When there is some requirement for applying chemicals, eliminating pests, etc. the discussion will be led by the facilitator who asks the members to make a decision on the required actions. Finally, the discussion is wrapped up by the facilitator, who also summarizes the lessons learnt and the decisions made. The topics discussed and learnt should be known by the host team. In the following week's recap session, major decisions of the previous week are discussed. Conclusions on the processes of AESA must be made on the same day. The role of AESA is farm condition analysis, observation, data collection and immediate action planning for farm management. Finally, the session must end with the decisions taken based on farm management.

AESA charts presented are stored and used during PCE analysis and for presentation on the field days.

Short Studies

To enable the participants gain hands on experience, short studies on insert zoo, nutrient management, leaf compensation, mulching and preparation of leaf extracts were taken up.

Group Dynamics

Certain team building activities are also involved by FFS such as group dynamics, which improve problem solving skills. Folk media and other communication methods are used as group dynamics.

Today's Topic (Special Topic)

To provide the members with technical input and knowledge, a session called, "Topic of the Day" is designed, which is also referred to as "Special Topic". This is because of its significance in introducing various topics that are not necessarily FFS related, but includes social, health and culture related topics. Sub group discussions and other facilitation skills use by the facilitators in order to make the session more participatory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Decision Making Capacity/Self-Confidence

A key activity in the FFS's learning process is the presentation of PCE/PTD findings by farmers. The participants are encouraged to present their findings, knowledge and experiences in front of other FFS participants while caring their ideas on findings and decisions made. This process helps in building self-confidence, particularly in women, minority group members and poor household members.

Increasing Knowledge Ownership

Farmer Field School does not mainly rely on the techniques or the information provided by the extension agents, which are transferred to farmers. Rather, it focuses on encouraging the farmers in systematic observation and in informed decision making that is based on discovery based learning. Due to this, the farmers gain knowledge and generate the practices themselves. Ownership of learning process and the local adaptation is stimulated by this process.

Minimizing Risks in Experimenting with New Practices

Opportunities are provided to the farmers by FFS to try out new practices with minimum risks on a group farm. It also ensures that the potential losses are shared by group members. The participants have an opportunity to conduct tests and compare with the alternatives in an environment that is relatively risk free with calculable figures for discussion among participating farmers.

Changing Deep-Rooted Beliefs and Practices

An analytical structure is provided by FFS along with season long interactions on a regular basis with the facilitators, field and other FFS members. This enables the farmers to learn the benefits of testing PCE new technologies and also to comprehend the introduced crops behaviour. Their experience with FFS helps them to recognize the misunderstanding and assists them to avoid errors in farming beliefs and practices.

Developing Problem-Solving Capabilities

Integrated learning opportunities are offered by FFSs for a period of one season/cropping system. Due to this, the farmers gain knowledge of problem solving that also encourages them to develop positive attitude and proactive behaviour towards an uncertain future.

Leadership Development

Development of leadership is another key outcome of FFS, although it is not an explicit objective. FFS should have an appointed group of leaders, including the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. Furthermore, the FFS membership is divided into 4-5 sub-groups. Each sub-group has a leader. By managing the FFS group and their sub-groups, the appointed leaders develop their leadership skills and group management skills.

Cohesiveness and Team Work

In addition, FFS inspires unity among the members and team work is developed. FFS is a time bound project activity. Even after the completion of FFS learning cycle, many FFS groups continue in order to motivate themselves by studying other subjects, to develop collective marketing of agricultural production and for cooperation.

The activities of FFS increase cohesion of a mixed membership community that includes several ethnic groups.

Success Stories of Farmers

IPM Decisions - Women are Making a Difference

In Kottur, a part of Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu, decisions about farming, especially those related to pest management is always the domain of a man. In contrary to this, the women participants, who have recently gained knowledge through FFS, have introduced new practices on their field reaping benefits. They have reduced the incidence of tomato crop damaging mite, red spider. Though the men were sceptical in the beginning, on seeing the benefits, they have started accepting the decisions of women on IPM in the cultivation of tomato. Another benefit of this idea is that they have started saving on expensive chemicals. This success has led to the encouragement of men to women in attending the sessions regularly. FFS have assisted women in increasing their knowledge levels, which also made a positive contribution to farm production (AMEF, 2006).

Igniting Young Minds on Ecosystem Conservation

Making the school children and the youth to understand the relationships with the ecosystems was a unique experience. Their participation was so enthusiastic in activities like field observation, presentation and preparation of charts. These young participants shared their experiences and understanding on crops, pests and their relationship with their friends and other students (AMEF, 2006).

IPM- Encourages Cotton Growers

The extensive approach of FFS is observed to be very effective in providing the required skills and transforming knowledge related to the cultivation of cotton during the weekly meetings between the farmers and the facilitators. During these meetings, the queries raised by the farmers are clarified by the facilitators immediately. With the help of FFS, the farmers are able to take correct decisions on crop management during every stage of the crop. They also developed a frequent habit of watching out their field and monitoring the crop pest and diseases. 80% of the participating farmers are able to identify the difference between the defenders of cotton and pests.

They also realized the significance of natural enemies' conservation. Some Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITKs) that was effective and of low cost, were recorded. The same knowledge has been replicated in each and every individual field of the FFS farmers. There were times when controversies arose, among the farmers on pesticide and non-pesticidal management of cotton production. Even after the severe discussion, they accepted the IPM technology concept in cotton cultivation. MYRADA KVK (2016), also supports these results.

CONCLUSIONS

The approach of FFS empowers farmers in multiple aspects through decision making exercises and confidence building. FFS brings development in farmers, by helping them to learn and improve farming and also through innovation to an alternative idea.

It also helps farmers to take ownership over their knowledge, which ultimately increases their confidence on what they have learned and practiced.

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