



Eastern and Central Africa Programme for Agricultural Policy Analysis

A Programme of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural
Research in Eastern and Central Africa

Electronic Newsletter

07 April 2006---Volume 9 Number 06

NEWS

ECAPAPA wishes all its stakeholders a Happy Easter

FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS: A BOON OR BUST FOR AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN AFRICA?

Agricultural extension and advisory services are a critical means of addressing rural poverty. However, despite the tremendous need for extension approaches that contribute to poverty reduction in rural sub-Saharan Africa, many extension models have been tried with only limited success. Kristin Davis, a Post-doctoral Fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Ethiopia, examines the farmer field schools (FFS) approach in detail and concludes that although the FFS model has shown remarkable impact in sub-Saharan Africa, its inherent limitations require policy makers to explore other options based on local situations. Below are excerpts from the paper.

Introduction

THERE are almost one billion small-scale farmers worldwide that extension is responsible to. It is thus urgently seeking for the best ways to support these farmers in terms of information, technology, advice, and empowerment. Is there an extension approach that adequately addresses these issues? In the African context, with poverty growing and productivity declining on the continent, the question is crucial. In 2004, extension was one of the top agricultural priorities listed by 24 African countries for a poverty reduction strategy identified by the Inter Academy Council. One highly successful extension approach is the farmer field schools (FFS) approach. Started in Indonesia in 1989, the approach has expanded throughout many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya alone, there are over 1,000 FFS with 30,000 farmer graduates.

Although a popular method, the new “orthodoxy,” much of what is written on farmer field schools is found only in the grey literature, and deals mainly with the methodology or cases of FFS approaches. Peer-reviewed journal articles based on research have been confined mostly to the World Bank Asian studies. Because of the limited number of studies, much remains obscure about the approach and the issues pertinent to extension, such as effectiveness, sustainability,

participation, and financing. In spite of the limited evidence, many donors, governments, and non-governmental organizations are enthusiastically promoting farmer field schools in sub-Saharan Africa today. As a result of their popularity, there is some discussion as to whether FFS should be scaled up and out and incorporated into mainstream extension practices.

Farmer field school approach (FFS)

The FFS approach is an adult education method developed in Asia to teach integrated pest management techniques to groups of farmers. It is used to educate and empower farmers as well as to disseminate information and technology. FFS are sometimes viewed as “schools without walls” where facilitators use experiential learning, group dynamics, and simple experimentation to “co-learn” with farmers. In the typical FFS, a group of about 25 farmers meets regularly with a facilitator during the cropping season. The facilitator does not so much lecture to the farmers as he or she helps them to learn for themselves by asking questions and encouraging discovery learning. Farmers are taught to problem-solve, set priorities, and to experiment. The process involves field days where neighbors and officials are invited and taught by the farmers, and culminates in a graduation ceremony. Farmer participants are sometimes trained as facilitators for future schools.

FFS have shown remarkable impact in terms of pesticide reduction, increases in productivity, knowledge gain among farmers, and empowerment. However, these effects have been generally confined to the local level. Some studies show that FFS have limited or no effect on economic performance, the environment and health and farmer-to-farmer dissemination of information and technologies. There are also many questions about their sustainability.

Issues in farmer field schools

Many extension approaches have been used in sub-Saharan Africa to achieve certain basic objectives: to improve agricultural performance, bring about rural community development, and provide non-formal/ continuing education. Approaches have included the commodity-specific, transfer of technology, farming systems research and extension, and training and visit (T&V). While the FFS approach is a new twist on these earlier approaches, it is experiencing many of the problems that plagued its predecessors.

Sustainability

Just as the T&V system was brought down by its limited financial sustainability, FFS is facing similar challenges. FFS appear to be an expensive intervention both in terms of direct outlays for professional facilitators and the opportunity cost of farmers’ time. Moreover, they are overwhelmingly dependent on donor funding rather than recurrent government expenditure.

Several solutions have been pursued, such as wholly or partly self-financed FFS programs in East Africa, or those that rely on the relatively low-cost services of a farmer-facilitator. But there are no studies showing whether these types of schools are effective in comparison to regular FFS.

Scaling up

Can FFS have impact at the national level? Some studies have revealed that although there were changes in farmer practices at the local level, FFS did not appear to have impact at the broader national level. These findings reflect the economics of scaling up--mobilizing adequate human and financial resources to replicate the approach at the national level. Farmer-to-farmer dissemination is a key issue in scaling up, that is, farmers from the schools diffusing knowledge and technologies to their neighbors. However, some studies show that effective farmer-to-farmer dissemination is not taking place. Farmers may be gaining skills and knowledge, but they are not sharing them with their neighbors.

Empowerment

One of the unique aspects of the FFS approach is that it embodies an effort to empower farmers through the process of learning and teaching, an element that is absent in other extension approaches. Empowerment is characterized by the long-term viability and cohesiveness of groups engaged in collective action. The empirical evidence suggests mixed results in terms of empowerment. In Kenya, for instance, one study shows that FFS groups are more cohesive than non-FFS groups, while other reports shows empowerment gains through FFS. A study on Sri Lanka, however, found that the FFS groups do not stay together.

Participation

The issue of participation in FFS has barely been touched in the literature. FFS usually target women and encourage them to join, but there is no clear documentation of whether they actually respond. It is also not clear whether some farmers are unable to join the groups, and if so, why or whether FFS are able to reach everyone. In looking at household characteristics of FFS and non-FFS farmers in the Philippines, some studies have discovered that FFS participants were tenants rather than owners of land, tended to be female, and had off-farm income sources with little difference between participants and their neighbors, except that farmers who worked as casual labourers were less likely to participate.

Donor-driven approaches

Extension is not immune to donor interests and fashions. The T&V approach, though used throughout sub-Saharan Africa, was popular until emerging evidence suggested that it was a widespread failure. One wonders whether the FFS approach is not just another donor-driven craze. There are some close similarities between the T&V and FFS approaches to suggest this. First, as with T&V, the FFS approach is being promoted aggressively by donors without sufficient monitoring and evaluation or ex ante and ex post assessment. These concerns not to be taken mildly; many experts argue that the World Bank's efforts to push the T&V approach with "excessive expectations" based on "erroneous assumptions" led to its failure.

With respect to the FFS approach itself, there are several similarities with T&V that are of concern. The formulaic gathering of farmer groups for weekly meetings during a crop growing cycle for experiencing and experimenting may not produce the desired increases in yield or empowerment. It is not simply a matter of a country taking up an approach that has worked well in Asia or even

another African country. Adopting an approach simply because it is popular and worked elsewhere should not be done. The FFS methodology cannot be used as a “cookie cutter” approach to development.

Another danger is that of practitioners and policymakers picking and choosing the aspects of the approach that they want, and not paying attention to the necessary adult education principles woven into FFS. Donors and policymakers need to decide what they expect from the schools, and whether the FFS approach can help meet their broader goals. If they decide that the schools are appropriate to their goals, then they need to implement FFS as a complete package to achieve the desired results. There have been many adaptations to the approach since its inception in Asia; however, the approach loses its effectiveness when the fundamental principles and components are overlooked.

Conclusion

The ultimate impact of the FFS approach depends on the goals for which the schools are used. If the schools are employed merely to increase yields at some aggregate level, then they will likely fail to meet expectations. If they are used only to mobilize and empower farmer groups, then they will also fall short. If they are used to increase the long-term sustainability of extension services, then once again they may not measure up. But as a means of combining these objectives into a single approach, there is some evidence to suggest that farmer field schools are useful. But as a “one size fits all” answer to development problems, the approach has no chance. Should FFS be scaled up? Do we mainstream the approach, or leave it as one option to be used when and if the conditions are right? The position of this paper is that FFS offer one possible approach among many that are viable in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not a “quick fix” or an easily implemented solution to farmers’ problems, but it is another tool in the toolbox that may be appropriate to specific conditions in specific communities.

In summary, FFS are indeed a boon to extension. They have shown promise in terms of participatory methods, gender sensitivity, environmental considerations, empowerment, and productivity gains. However, it is doubtful that the FFS approach can be applied across the board as mainstream extension. FFS should be implemented because they suit local conditions and because they work, not because they are donor-driven. We must focus on what FFS and other extension methodologies were designed for. FFS are not necessarily an alternative to existing systems, but certain principles of FFS could be incorporated into existing systems, to make them more effective at reaching small and marginalized farmers and in alleviating poverty.

Perhaps the Mozambique experience of “building African models” of extension may be a guiding light for those searching for appropriate models to fight poverty in Africa. This approach built a Mozambique-specific agricultural extension model by drawing on past experiences, using pilot studies, experimenting with institutional innovations, learning by doing, focusing on emerging opportunities, and learning from other countries’ experiences. Similarly, those wishing to improve agricultural extension should seek methods that consider and are compatible with these issues.

All of the judgments are not in on FFS, as they seem to be on the World Bank’s training and visit system. There is still much that is not known about FFS and their impact. But from the lessons learned from T&V, it would be wise for policy makers and practitioners to take a cautionary

approach with FFS, using them where they are suited rather than applying the methodology across the board.

Where do we go from here? This paper is a call for scholars, practitioners, and programs to report what is really going on in FFS and what is not working, and design rigorous yet participatory research that can tell what works when, where, how, and why; and also how to scale up the approach, if this is warranted. It is only when right tools are utilized at the right place and time that pro-poor extension and true development would occur.

A full article can be accessed on www.aiaee.org/archive/Vol-13.1.pdf

ECAPAPA welcomes your comments, suggestions and encourages article submissions.

COMMUNICATION

Awards

The UN-HABITAT invites organizations to apply for grants under the Mashariki Innovations in Local Governance Awards Programme (MILGAP). MILGAP is a biennial awards programme for the East African region that aims to alleviate poverty and promote excellence in public service delivery, good governance, and enhanced local democracy and decentralization. It does this by recognizing, rewarding and promoting innovative practices in local governance thereby demonstrating the valuable work being done at the local level to improve the conditions of the poor. Through this process, the programme seeks to capture good cases of grassroots project that are addressing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For information, contact any of the following country offices: Cecilia Kinuthia-Njenga, MILGAP Project Manager, UN-HABITAT, P.O. Box 30030, Nairobi, Kenya, Tel: 254- 020-623164, Fax: 254 020 623715, e-mail: cecilia.njenga-kinuthia@unhabitat.org or milgap@unhabitat.org or Peter K. Wegulo, UN-HABITAT Programme Manager–Uganda, UNDP-15B Clement Hill Road, P.O Box 7184, Kampala, Uganda, Tel: 256-41-233440/1/2/5, Fax: 256-41-344801, e-mail: peter.wegulo@undp.org or Phillemon S. Mutashubirwa, UN-HABITAT Programme Manager–Tanzania, P.O Box 9182, Dar-es Salaam, Tanzania, Tel: 255-22-2112799/2118081, Fax: 255-22-2113272/2118113, e-mail: phillemon.mutashubirwa@undp.org or visit: www.unhabitat.org/milgap

E-learning opportunity

The International Food and Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Virtual Learning Room is launching a **Global e-Learning Programme** designed to provide free e-learning opportunities for professionals around the world. The Global e-Learning Program will initially comprise two separate e-learning courses on *How to Write a Convincing Proposal* and *How to Communicate Scientific Research*. The methods and materials for both courses were developed by experienced international specialists and were tested extensively in two successful pilot e-learning programs carried out in 2005. Both courses will be on-line for 4 months during 2006. Participants can choose to take either or both of the courses. For further information and registration for the courses, please visit IFPRI Virtual Learning Room at <http://learning.ifpri.org/>

Vacancies

1. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) invites candidates to apply for a position of **Research Fellow** in its new office in New Delhi, India. The Fellow will work on policy issues of critical importance in the region. Such issues include; governance related to rural growth and poverty reduction; the changing structure of agri-business and its implications for small holders; economic and social safety nets for the poor; water-management; mainstreaming of gender issues among others. Applicants should have any of the following; a Ph.D. in Political Science, Rural Sociology, Economics, Agricultural Economics, or related fields. The deadline for receipt of applications is **15 April 2006**. For details, visit: www.ifpri.org
2. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) invites qualified persons to apply for the positions of **Programme Manager** in charge of **Policy and Environmental Governance Unit** and **Programme Officer** for the **IUCN Rosa Regional Programme**. Both positions are based in Pretoria, South Africa. Applicants for the position of Programme Manager should contact Ms. Anthea Stephens, the Acting Country Programme Coordinator, via e-mail: anthea.stephens@iucn.org and; Ms. Tabeth Chiuta, via e-mail: tabeth.chiuta@iucn.org for those applying for Programme Officer. The closing date is **28 April 2006**.

ECAPAPA received all the above information from Dr. Luis Navarro, IDRC Kenya. He is gratefully acknowledged.

This newsletter is an attempt to use e-communications to provide to a broad audience within and outside Eastern and Central Africa a mechanism for distribution and exchange of information relevant to agricultural policy issues. This newsletter is being sent to identified stakeholders of ECAPAPA. We want to respect your privacy and desire not to have your e-mail inbox filled with unwanted correspondence. If you do not want to receive this newsletter please send us a note at <ecapapa@asareca.org >, and we will remove your name from the distribution list. For back issues of this newsletter, go to 'View Archive' at www.asareca.org/ecapapa

ECAPAPA is a regional programme of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA). ECAPAPA is receiving support from a number of organizations including, BMZ/GTZ, EU, IDRC, SDC, and USAID. This newsletter is supported by a grant from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The editorial content of the newsletter is solely the responsibility of the Co-ordinating Unit of ECAPAPA.