

# More Farmer Field Schools: Ongoing agricultural education needed to meet challenges

Demand across the world for Farmer Field Schools (FFS) - consisting of about 30 people who meet regularly throughout the season to identify common problems and find solutions for their agricultural production areas - are increasing due to their ability to help smallholder farmers cope with complex challenges. While there are teachers, this community-driven approach to agricultural training and education is geared to generate relevant knowledge through participation, which allows for a multitude of innovative social and technical skills to be developed.



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FAO, having set up the first FFS in the late 1980s, supports them in more than 90 countries today, with 70 FFS projects in Africa alone. There are now more than 12 million "graduates" worldwide.

FAO is relying substantially on FFS initiatives to enable smallholder farmers to use simple, affordable and sustainably effective methods to combat [Fall armyworm in Africa](#), where the newly introduced pest poses a major threat to crops and food security.

"Farmer Field Schools contribute to developing sustainable agriculture practices, building on an understanding of ecology to manage complex agro-ecosystems, and promote people-centred development," said Dan Gustafson, FAO deputy director-general for Programmes. "FFS have been generating innovations since they started. Continuous learning and innovations are needed to keep addressing new challenges in agriculture."

FFS effectively nudge the technology-transfer approach of traditional agricultural extension programmes into a broader rural communication service enabling smallholder farmers to improve management skills.

## Knowledge products to promote sustainable agriculture

In response to the increasing demand for FFS FAO has set up a Global Farmer Field School Knowledge Platform with more than 15 partner organisations to facilitate access to best practices and specific expertise.

The purpose of the platform, the first of seven new global knowledge products that FAO is developing to promote sustainable agriculture, is to strengthen the quality of FFS at a time when they are poised for rapid upscaling. It includes a library of key resources, online profiles of experts, a news service and a global email discussion group for practitioners from more than 100 countries.

"The Global Knowledge Products are aimed at promoting innovation and supporting countries in their efforts to integrate production of crops, livestock, forests, fisheries and aquaculture in ways that improve natural resources management, agro-biodiversity, income, livelihoods and adaptation to climate change," says Clayton Campanhola, FAO strategic programme leader on sustainable agriculture.

## **Many benefits to a grassroots education**

FAO set up the first FFS in Southeast Asia in 1989 with a focus on Integrated Pest Management to deal with brown planthopper outbreaks, which were caused by rice farmers' overuse of pesticides that eliminated the natural predators of the pest. The community-driven FFS method has delivered positive results for a wide array of other crops and issues, including climate change, soil health, land and water management, livestock, agroforestry, crop-fish systems, disaster risk reduction, nutrition, enterprise development and market access.

Field school schemes helped farmers in Andhra Pradesh, India, understand and monitor groundwater availability, leading to a better selection of crops to grow during the dry season. In Nepal, a focus on the value of pollination services enhanced capacities to grow high-value fruits and vegetables. Participants in an FFS in Balochistan, Pakistan devised ways to improve nutritional and economic output from their kitchen gardens. Pesticide use in China's Yunnan province has been lowered by almost a third thanks to an FAO-led FFS project.

As a form of ongoing adult training and education, FFS have also led to notable dividends on the social level, elevating the soft skills of participants by boosting gender equity and empowering those who rely on rural livelihoods. In Uganda's post-conflict Karamoja region, participation required people to work in the fields together and gave more individuals the opportunity to be heard in the local community. One outcome was a jump in social cohesion, as women welcomed the acknowledgement of their opinions and experience, while demobilised combatants appreciated the status and structure associated with participation and some even hailed it for inducing them to drink less.

One great advantage of the FFS approach is that it relies on the kind of distributed and decentralised knowledge that allows for solutions to be fine-tuned to local agro-ecological conditions in a way no conventional extension or research system can.

The transition from an input-intensive to a knowledge-driven approach to sustainable intensification of agriculture - a requirement for the world to meet the growing demand for food - must by nature be location-specific. At the same time, field schools offer a people-centred approach and foster ecology literacy tools enabling appropriate responses to environmental changes.

FAO's new global FFS platform aims to provide some unifying principles to what is intrinsically great diversity on the ground. FAO's response to the Fall armyworm invasion in Africa is also showing how FFS programmes have the ability to tap expertise - particularly from people who have learned to live with the pest on other continents - and spread it through a

capillary network to tackle a serious threat to food security and rural livelihoods is another way the global platform can add value to practitioners and farmers alike.

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