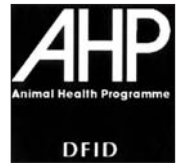




Kenya's Innovative Farmer Field School



"The Farmer Field School is not about technology: it is about people development."

Farmer Field School (FFS) is a method of extension, which involves farmers 'learning-by-doing', where farmers choose the topics they wish to learn more about. Currently, over 1,000 Farmer Field Schools (FFS) on crop and soil management are being successfully implemented in Kenya — and many more in Africa as a whole. But can the FFS approach be developed for more complex issues like animal production and health, where responses to interventions may not be as fast?

At the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) in Nairobi, the DFID/FAO project on Farmer Field Schools for livestock, started in April 2001, is adapting and testing the FFS approach for animal health and production, focusing on smallholder dairy farmers. Over 20 pilot FFS have been established in five different agro-ecological zones in Central and Rift Valley Provinces, where two-thirds of households own dairy cattle, as well as at the Coast.

This has involved adaptation of an approach called 'agro-ecological observation' to make animals the focal point, and use of participatory approaches to address livestock-related issues. The project is also developing approaches to test and introduce integrated methods to control tick-borne diseases and worm infections, and to improve animal husbandry practices and the efficient use of available feed resources within the crop-dairy system. These activities contribute to the ongoing DFID Smallholder Dairy Project (SDP).

On-going activities in the livestock FFS project
Extension officers from the Ministry of Agriculture were trained as FFS facilitators during a two-week course. They then worked with established groups



Pictures: Bruno Minjauw

Farmer Field School participants measuring calf girth and recording general information — important learning skills.

of 25-35 farmers to identify the main constraints to improved efficiency of milk production, using participatory methods. Issues highlighted by all groups were similar and included, in order of priority: 1) Feeding strategies; 2) Fodder establishment and conservation; 3) Calf rearing and mortality; 4) Diseases (tick-borne and mastitis); and 5) Water management and breeding (equal priority given to the last two).

Based on these priorities, each group prepared individual grant proposals, including a detailed work plan and budget. A grant of US\$600 was deposited in an account controlled by elected members of the FFS group, to cover the cost of field activities and the cost of facilitation (travel and lunch allowance for the facilitator). Management of this budget empowered the farmers to control activities covered by the FFS and ensured that the services offered responded to farmers' actual priority problems and needs.

One major difference between crop and livestock FFS is the approach to understanding the impact of animal health on productivity, and how to control diseases. Participatory activities to study basic disease occurrence provide assistance to facilitators in integrating animal health activities in their programme.

FFS groups usually meet on a weekly basis. Since the main objective of the FFS is to develop farmers'

learning skills rather than simply to increase knowledge of particular technical issues, record keeping and accurate observation are important components. Activities are meant to improve farmers' observation skills and decision-making skills. Farmers are divided into small groups and observe an animal from one of their farms. Observations are guided by a checklist covering general information, such as the life history of the animal, production parameters, and observations on the animal's health status. Each group presents their results in a standardised format to the rest of the school, where the findings are discussed, allowing farmer-to-farmer information sharing and evaluation of progress.

Carrying out comparative experiments is one of the biggest challenges for livestock FFS. While it is relatively easy to design a comparative study for crop FFS, the high economic value of cattle does not allow any experiment involving risk to the animal or even short-term productivity losses. Therefore, one of the objectives of the livestock FFS project is to establish what kind of technology development can be performed, without any risk or detrimental effect, while still allowing farmers to experiment.

Not every problem can be easily dealt with by a "learning by doing" approach. Some problems, such as dealing with contagious diseases, are not suitable

or too dangerous for experiment. Others may be too abstract to be demonstrated physically, such as the importance of epidemiological status or immunological reactions. These can be addressed in special topic sessions. Since the facilitator cannot be an expert in every subject, he or she will help the group to invite the right person to talk about the subject chosen by the farmers. This empowers the FFS group to contact other organisations such as NGOs, national or international research institutes. Special topics can also include

non-livestock-related issues, giving farmers the chance to access information relevant to their priorities at a particular moment.

Conclusions: If scientific research is to achieve real impact on farm productivity and livelihoods, new approaches for learning have to be developed. Participatory approaches that facilitate farmer demand for knowledge, give farmers the opportunity to choose, test and adapt technologies according to their needs. Through participation in FFS, farmers develop skills that allow them to continually analyse their own situation and adapt to changing circumstances. The livestock FFS project is testing and adapting a participatory method to create a sustainable relation between farmers, extension officers and research institutes. These relationships are critical for scientists to collect appropriate data and to transform developed technologies into products adapted to farmers' needs.

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• Contact persons at ILRI: Dr Bruno Minjauw: b.minjauw@cgiar.org or Mrs Gertrude Buyu: g.buyu@cgiar.org



KITUI ROAD, INDUSTRIAL AREA, P.O. BOX 18388-00500, NAIROBI, KENYA. TEL: 531480-3, TELEFAX: 542478. Email: -aluware@kaluworks.com



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