Towards self-financed farmer field schools

Farmers conducting field observations on groundnuts. Photo: James Okoth

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The effectiveness of Farmer Field Schools often depends on their financial sustainability. This article looks at several innovations for financially sustainable FFSs that were developed by the East African Sub-regional Pilot Project on Integrated Production and Pest Management Farmer Field Schools, and are now being taken up by a number of other FFS programmes. The cornerstone of these innovations has been the evolution of an initial grant system (semi-self financed FFSs) into an educational revolving fund (self-financed FFSs), supported by the proceeds of commercial plots that are managed alongside the study plots. Involving farmers right from the start has been crucial in successfully implementing these innovations.

Semi-self financed FFS

The semi-self financed FFSs were initiated in 1999 with the introduction of the grant system, in which farmer groups wrote simple proposals for grants to run their FFSs. Figure 1 provides a flow chart of steps in the development of a semi-self financed IPPM FFS. Step One is for a group to submit a proposal in response to an announcement that grants are available. Grant forms include guidelines and application forms for groups. Currently, IPPM FFS grants require that the group have three officers (Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary) of which at least one is a woman (in mixed gender cultures). Groups must have a multi-signatory savings account and agree to record keeping and audits, and the grant must be used for at least one high value crop and a food crop. The group may also include other topics such as IPPM for poultry. An indicative budget is provided for partial guidance, but it is also stated that extension staff should be paid based on officially published rates, although these can be negotiated. The grant form provides space for background, justification for grant and activities, work plans and budget, and should include the signatures of all group members as well as the local agriculture officer.

Once the grant is approved, Step Two is to transfer the grants to the groups. Typically this is a combination of materials and cash or cash alone. Materials such as flip-chart paper, crayons and other stationary are more cheaply available (or only available) in large cities, so it is more efficient to provide some materials. Cash is provided in at least two instalments over the season, depending on the length of the FFS (for example, annual crops are usually 4-5 months, soil and perennial crops are 12-18 months). The size of the grant for IPPM FFSs is typically US$100 to US$400 per season of study. The grant reporting must include bookkeeping, maintaining receipts and accepting an audit. Grants can in some cases be transferred electronically to accounts, and in other cases they are provided in cash. In many cases the opportunity to handle and control funds has led to increased ownership with farmers providing co-financing as well.

In Step Three, payments to field school facilitators are made directly by the field school group at pre-agreed rates. If the facilitator lacks technical skills, is a poor facilitator or even has inappropriate social skills (arrogance and top-down approaches are leading problems), the group may “release” or “fire” the facilitator – and this has indeed been known to happen.

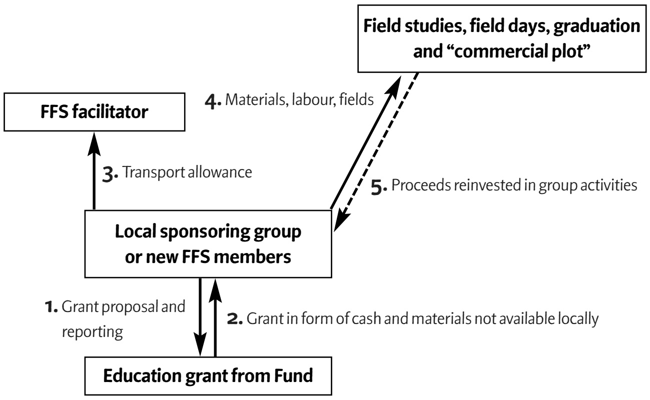

Figure 1. Semi-self financed field school with capital provided by grant and group proceeds reinvested into group activities.

Facilitators receive important feedback from this! If the facilitator does not show up or shows up in an inappropriate state (for example, drunk or late), the group can withhold payment. On the other hand, the facilitators usually receive payment on the day they travel – a far better situation, they feel, than filling out paperwork and waiting for a delayed payment, as is typical of most extension travel allowances. Groups may also request that information on special topics such as soils, nutrition, or environment be delivered by specialised staff, in which case they use the grant to pay transport for the specialist.

IPPM FFS participants also arrange their own field study plots (as shown in Step Four in Figure 1). The study plots are typically 0.2 to 1 ha. in size, and include various educational features – such as comparison trials between IPPM and conventional practices, fertility management methods, and new variety testing. Groups in Western Province, Kenya were the first to begin the “commercial plots” which are larger fields that the group manages together in order to raise more funds. These groups converted the “snack” budget line to field inputs to get started. This has now been institutionalised and it is recommended that all groups have commercial plots. The land arrangements depend on local conditions and include the use of village land, as well as donations from larger landowners and the sharing of crop produce with owners. It is the responsibility of the participants to provide the land and the labour for both the study fields and commercial plots. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to provide a profitable educational activity, including bringing in socially important issues such as HIV/AIDS, women's reproductive health, and soil fertility management.

In Step Five, proceeds from the FFS plots are re-invested in the groups own account. This has now become possible because all grant-recipient FFSs must have their own accounts and means of managing them. The funds are used by the group for further study, and the purchase of animals or other activities. Each group is also requested to assist in training one other group, and farmer-led field schools are quite successful.

As a result of this grant process, groups have shown a very high level of ownership of the FFS process. Many FFSs enjoy a high level of matching funds, material inputs provided by the community and participants, and display an increasing ability to manage funds and activities on their own. Groups become more independent of extension services, and they are also better partners for the extension services – even though many extension services still have difficulty seeing this. The process of applying for grants, making work plans and budgets, organising fields, paying facilitators and managing funds, enables groups to organise themselves to continue on their own. Although FFS grants are intended to support a group for a set time period, many field school participants go on to develop longer-term associations due to the cohesion, trust and joint fund-raising ability developed during the FFS period. The grants provide capital to groups and catalyse new ways of working together. Case studies from various beneficiary semi-self financed groups indicate that if well guided, the groups are able to recover the whole grant after a couple of seasons. As a result, self-financed FFSs are emerging, where the grant has been transformed into an educational revolving loan.

Self-financed FFS

Although semi-self financed IPPM FFSs partially solve at least one issue some of the problems of maintaining the sustainability of farmer groups, extension officers need a new set of funds each season to keep the programme expanding year after year. Thus, new ideas have been sought by IPPM facilitators and farmers, resulting in the self-financed model. The basic difference between this model and the semi-self financed FFS is that the group is the recipient of revolving funds, rather than a grant. The loan-requesting group must agree – by group contract – that they will return the operational costs of the IPPM FFS to the revolving fund. The concept is similar to revolving seed funds, in which one kilogram of seed provided at the beginning of the season is repaid with one or more kilograms of seed at the end of the season. In the case of self-financed field schools, operational costs are pre-financed and the group returns the operational fee at the end of the season through funds raised in the field plots and educational fees.

The model allows very resource-poor farmers to participate, as they are able to help generate funds for the FFS fund by contributing their labour during part of the season. It is conceivable and perhaps even more effective, that instead of cash repayment, farmers could replenish the fund with in-kind contributions.

Operational guidelines are currently being developed on the best way to implement the educational revolving fund, taking into consideration key concerns like the security of the revolving fund from local "leakage" and the problem of payback during drought or flood. The second issue is more problematic, but it is felt that either farmers will have to pay with educational fees, or the repayment could be reduced in proportion to typical yield losses seen in the field. The rationale for the guidelines is the need to come up with an operational framework that can blend into the existing structures such as FFS networks, the extension system, political structures and civil organisations with minimum overhead costs. So far, the FFS networks provide the most suitable structure for handling the revolving fund.

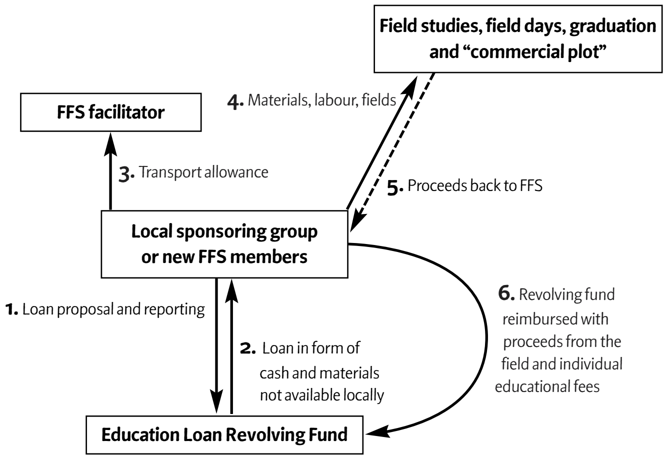

Figure 2. Self-Financed Field School with capital provided by revolving fund. The group reimburses the fund at end of season.

A major concern is the issue of reputation. The model requires that farmers trust the knowledge and teaching ability of IPPM facilitators before signing the contract. Unfortunately, the top-down programmes of the past have given many extension systems a poor reputation, so this may be a very serious problem. Retraining of extension staff into IPPM facilitators with technical and facilitation skills has helped, but the farmers long-term experiences with extension services may be difficult to overcome.

One positive development is the increasing interest of local governments and some NGOs in the approach, to the extent of committing some of their meagre funds to sponsoring the establishment of FFSs. As a result, the FFSs are recognised as a major channel for community development. Similarly, rural micro-finance institutions are also using the FFSs as an entry point for group loans. In Uganda, Village Banks have been established by private sector promotion centres in the three pilot districts, where the FFSs are able to buy shares and acquire simple loans. The same Centres provide financial management skills to the groups. In Kenya some farmers have began pulling together resources and funding FFS activities, the so-called self-sponsored Farmer Field Schools. This level of confidence in the FFSs indicates a very bright future, which will be strengthened more by the self-financing approach.

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A full version of this paper is available at www.eseap.cipotato.org/upward.

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