

Evaluation in FFS: a burden or a blessing?

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Looking at the many training and extension programmes currently taking place in the rural areas of Peru, there is not one that does not include the word “evaluation” as one of its activities. On paper, all projects and programmes evaluate many of their activities and resources. In practice, however, the picture is not so clear or straightforward: evaluations are perceived as being very difficult and complex. So much so, that often they simply do not take place.

A short field survey, carried out as part of the FFS process initiated with an FAO IPM-FFS Project in Peru, showed many of the limitations all FFS actors face around the processes of monitoring and evaluations. The following five most significant limitations and difficulties could be identified:

- **Lack of time and resources** of FFS facilitators
- **Lack of ownership** giving facilitators limited possibility to control and influence the process.
- **Little experience and capacity** for monitoring and evaluation, and this experience is limited to the use of quantitative indicators.
- **Little diffusion or use of what is found** - evaluation results are seldom published and reports are not distributed.
- **Negative perception of evaluations** by field workers who often see them as “control-tools” applied by those in charge.

Trying out PM&E

In this context, the FAO project tried to identify whether and how monitoring and evaluation could become beneficial to FFS trainers and their organizations. It did so by trying out different Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation (PM&E) processes, hoping to throw off the image of evaluation as a burden.

PM&E was seen not as a structured set of steps and activities, but rather as a multifunctional toolbox containing guidelines, methods and tools to facilitate participatory assessments, interactions and understanding between the actors involved. In short, the process implemented showed that PM&E is useful to: strengthen institutional involvement; learn and improve performance and link different actors.

Strengthening institutional involvement

The FAO IPM FFS project offered the FFS methodology for potato and cotton cultivation to several institutions, as an alternative to their usual agricultural extension and training activities. However, after a complete training process and implementation phase, many of the decision makers were still not convinced about the effectiveness of the FFS methodology. Many of the “bosses” had very little notion of their field workers’ new activity. The achievements of facilitators in their FFS were rarely discussed in staff meetings, neither were they included in the institutions’ reports or analyses. Consequently, facilitators received very little assistance from their own institutions.

In order to strengthen the involvement of the whole institution in FFS activities, the project’s Board of Directors was asked to evaluate the FFS methodology and to give their opinion on the project’s achievements. An evaluation plan was designed jointly with all representatives, requiring their direct involvement in the

process. The members of the Board identified their own indicators based on what *they* considered a “good” project should contain. Later, in a full day visit to the field, these Directors implemented their plans, “evaluating” according to their indicators. Returning from the field, they all sat together to analyse and present their results, trying to come to collective conclusions. Their visions, opinions and conclusions were presented the next day to a group of FFS facilitators. This provided an opportunity to exchange perceptions and experiences; to jointly reflect upon the strengths and limitations of the methodology; and to develop a common understanding between decision makers and FFS facilitators.

This brief experience demonstrated that evaluation can be an effective way of provoking interest and involvement, even in those situations where knowledge and interest are initially modest. It showed that actors feel appreciated when their help and opinion is asked for, and moreover, it provided valuable information on the institutions’ perceptions, interest and values. After having evaluated the FFS methodology, the members of the Board who participated in the evaluation showed much more interest in and appreciation of the methodology. At the same time, the project workers gained a much better idea of the Board’s point of view.

Improving immediate performance

Two main evaluation activities are common to all FFS training processes. The most significant is Agro-Ecosystem Analysis (AESA). This is based on a series of field and crop observations carried out during the whole cropping season. Farmers are trained in various AESA tools, which enable them to make informed decisions on crop management. A second integrated evaluation approach is the “ballot box”, an exercise involving tests that measure farmers understanding and abilities before and after an FFS training season. This is usually based on relevant, practical agro-ecology such as crop growth strategies, weeds, insect pests, the damage they cause and their natural enemies.

In both AESA and the “ballot box” exercise, evaluation is considered an essential element for farmer learning. It is accepted that field evaluations improve farmers capacities. So why not utilize evaluation to improve the capacities of facilitators and other actors involved in FFS? This was tried in the context of the IPM-FFS project, with the objective to ensure quality throughout the whole FFS implementation. Evaluation was considered part of a process rather than a separate activity. Facilitators were encouraged to evaluate *every* FFS session, to reflect on their own performance and carefully prepare each new session. In addition, PM&E tools were elaborated to strengthen the analyses of IPM, crop production and experimentation results. This meant focusing on evaluation not only immediately after harvesting, or at the final session of the FFS training process, but at each stage of the training process, as a continuous activity included in each FFS session.

In a short training session on participatory methods, all facilitators designed PM&E plans for their field schools. Each plan identified clear objectives for evaluation, including who should participate and what inputs were required. A set of indicators were selected to be discussed and analysed with the participants, including for example yields, costs, quality of product and the presence of pests. Issues of immediate relevance were discussed in every meeting, such as those related to the facilitator’s performance, the topics discussed, the whole learning process and interest showed by participants. Practical methods and tools were also used that could be easily applied in farmer communities such as matrix scoring, role plays, songs, poems, letters and drawings.



A poem presented as part of a final FFS evaluation.
Photo: Kim Groeneweg.

Both farmers and trainers expressed their satisfaction at being able to exchange opinions and discuss items of importance in a relaxed and entertaining way. The methods enhanced not only the interactions between facilitators and farmers, but also reinforced the interfaces between farmers themselves. Facilitators emphasised that PM&E improved their relationship with farmers and provided them with valuable feedback. This left them feeling a lot more secure about their performance and motivated to improve their FFS. At the same time, farmers felt appreciated and enjoyed this dynamic way of evaluation.

Linking actors

PM&E tools and methods were also used to create platforms for discussion between the different actors, both to validate the FFS methodology and to stimulate interaction. Various types of workshops were organised with the participation of representatives of the different institutions, facilitators, farmers, and members of the FAO Project.

In every workshop, members of each group were invited to define the most important aspects to be evaluated. This showed clearly that each actor or group of actors had different backgrounds, interests, and expectations, which did not always coincide with the FFS principles. A thorough analysis was needed to gain an

understanding of these different backgrounds and objectives, and to determine the type of benefit that the FFS methodology could provide to the specific actor. It was noted that with indicators of their own choosing, each actor found it easier to analyse both the process and the results achieved through the FFS. Farmers appreciated the opportunity to express their opinions, analyse the achievements and limitations of the methodology and identify future plans. These workshops made both the project and actors aware of the different perspectives of those involved, opening a door for increased co-operation and common work.

Limitations

Various constraints and limitations were also identified in the use of PM&E. First of all, the methodology is relatively unknown, and it usually requires those involved to change some of their attitudes. Undoubtedly, this also means changes in the institutional policies and M&E methods and tools currently applied, something that is not likely to happen overnight. It should be mentioned, however, that within the existing systems there are many possibilities for this approach, as more and more development organisations and fieldworkers share a positive view and express a need for *participatory* methodologies.

A recurring problem is that few facilitators have the necessary skills. Therefore, intensive training is recommended in rapid and practical methods and tools for PM&E. Assistance is also required for strategic planning to develop location- and actor-specific PM&E mechanisms. Considering FFS practitioners lack of time and resources, development of easy, fast, dynamic, time and cost-effective PM&E methods is necessary.

Conclusions

The activities implemented showed that PM&E enhances involvement by inviting key actors to evaluate activities, leading to an increased sense of ownership. PM&E activities strengthen participation, raise awareness of the current situation, and enhance the willingness to continue participating. They encourage dialogue and motivate actors to look closely at the situation and develop an opinion. Interaction and understanding between the different actors is stimulated through the creation of platforms for dialogue.

As with other kinds of evaluation, time and resources are limited. There is still, therefore, a need for simple and fast methods, and specific training programmes are required. PM&E requires clear and well-defined objectives to avoid unnecessary and ineffective work, which, not surprisingly, is perceived as a heavy burden. Efforts should be made to include evaluations as an integral part of FFS implementation, rather than a separate activity.

PM&E encourages learning, as it generates feedback and self-reflection. It motivates FFS facilitators and farmers to improve their activities and skills because they themselves identify what is achieved. They become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and of the results of their actions. Hence, PM&E enhances peoples self-esteem, confidence and motivation to improve their activities undertaken. In contrast to conventional evaluations, PM&E has the *power to empower*.

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

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Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation in the FFS cycle

COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

- ▶ Baseline study (needs and problem analysis using PRA tools)
 - Mapping of farmers practices provides material for final evaluation
- Introduction of the FFS methodology to the community
- Selection and inscription of participants

PREPARATIONS

- Elaboration of curriculum, official FFS agreement and time-schedule
- Training norms, group forming and identification of role of host team

GETTING STARTED

- ▶ Pre-ballot box test
 - Evaluation of participants knowledge, to adapt training and monitor advances
- Analysis and design of FFS
- Analysis of soil health and fertility and selection of seed
- Field preparation
- ▶ Introduction of record keeping for all expenses
 - Tool for analysis of field production results (cost-benefit analysis)

IMPLEMENTATION OF FFS TRAINING SESSIONS

- Opening
- Review and evaluation of agreements
- ▶ Agro-ecosystem analysis (AESA)
 - Decisions on pest management made based on field evaluations
- Special topic
- Group dynamics and energizers
- Agreements and compromises
- ▶ Evaluation of session
 - Decisions on content and process are based on evaluations with all participants and trainers at the end of every FFS session

HARVEST AND ANALYSIS OF FIELD RESULTS

- Analysis of production and ICM
- ▶ Evaluation of FFS process and activities
 - Participants develop indicators for analysis of field results, the process and activities, using PRA tools & baseline study data
- ▶ Post-ballot box test
 - Final test to assess participants' advances which can provide a basis for planning follow-up activities
- Planning of future activities
- Closing ceremony