



Women farmers making drawings of their field observations from an onion field. These drawings are used afterwards for group presentations.
Photo: Hans Feijen.

The Egyptian experience with FFS

Jaap van de Pol

In Egypt, implementation of the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach has posed a number of challenges. This article describes the development and adaptation of FFS in the Egyptian setting, from the initial Farmer Learning Groups (FLGs) through to the more recently established FFSs in Fayoum Governorate, which follow the original FFS concept more closely.

In 1996 and 1997, two Egyptian-German projects started implementing the first Egyptian FFSs for IPM in cucumber, tomato, citrus, mango and cotton. These projects used the basic FFS concept as it was originally developed in Asia, but several modifications were necessary for the approach to function in the Egyptian context. Soon after introduction, the FFSs were renamed Farmer Learning Groups (FLGs). More than 15,000 FLGs, involving 175,000 farmers, have now been organised.

Farmer Learning Groups

When the two projects started to implement their first FLGs, the Egyptian agricultural extension culture was dominated by a high involvement of government in the agricultural production of a limited number of strategic crops, and this is to some extent still true today. For these strategic crops, the government extension units assist farmers with all kinds of support including inputs, marketing and advice. To be able to provide this support, the government established a huge extension organisation between 1978 and 1982, resulting in a very high density of agricultural extension workers. One village extension worker for 130-150 farm-households was, and still is, quite common in Egypt.

Since 1984, the Egyptian government has been working towards greater liberalisation. It therefore welcomed the initiative of the two Egyptian-German projects to increase the involvement of the farmers in agricultural extension. The extension organisation, however, was used to a technology transfer approach - the participatory approach was something quite new. Only a few NGOs in Egypt had obtained some experience in participatory extension. Most of the government field staff and

farmers had never experienced working with each other in a "participatory" atmosphere.

Village extension workers were trained as facilitators in a one-week basic training course on Principles of Participatory Extension, and a two-week advanced course on Participatory Extension and Communication Skills. However, a number of challenges presented themselves in implementing the FLGs. When the Egyptian-German projects asked the village extension workers to mobilise farmers for the FLGs, it turned out to be very difficult to organise groups of 25 farmers. Most of the extension workers were used to working only with individual farmers. They started by inviting 15 farmers, but regularly ended up with less than 10 farmers per session. It also turned out to be difficult to organise sessions of 3-4 hours. Farmers were used to officials visiting them. In addition, they were used to the government making it attractive for them if they were asked to participate in an extension activity. Therefore, it was difficult for the FLG facilitators to ask the farmers to invest more than two hours of their time.

Second, the frequency of meetings needed to be modified. In the FLG on vegetables and cotton, the farmers met on a bi-weekly basis, and in the FLG on mango and citrus they met on a monthly basis. As a result, the FLG facilitators spend only a third of the time (14-16 hours) with the farmers compared with their colleagues in the "original FFS" (40-50 hours). Finally, the facilitators found it difficult to offer the farmers principles instead of practices. As members of the governmental extension organisation, they were used to giving farmers the official technical advice on crop cultivation, and farmers were used to receiving clear recommendations from them. This meant that the FLG sessions became focussed on understanding the official agricultural recommendations, instead of educating farmers to become better decision-makers in their own farming system. Farmers hardly carried out any field experiments during the FLGs and most FLG sessions turned into discussion sessions. As a result, most of the educational impact of the FFS approach was lost. An evaluation concluded that the main reason for this was that at all levels, insufficient time had been invested in training, because of pressure to reach large numbers of farmers rapidly.

From FLG to “real” field schools?

Two years after the two Egyptian-German projects started to implement their FLGs, the Egyptian-Dutch projects in Fayoum Governorate started piloting the FFS approach. Making use of the experiences of the two earlier projects, greater priority and more time was given to training the first group of facilitators and to the development of the FFS curricula. Only a few FFSs were established, following the original FFS concept as closely as possible. In 2001, after two years of piloting, the real scaling-up of the number of FFSs in Fayoum started, and the projects were joined together in the Fayoum IPM Project. It is planned to establish 1500 FFSs by the end of 2004.

The FFS facilitators, selected from amongst government extension officers, now receive intensive training. After an introductory training of two weeks, the facilitators continue to receive 2-3 days training per week for one full year. During the other days, they facilitate FFSs under the supervision of a senior facilitator. Besides learning about technical topics, the training pays considerable attention to how to facilitate these technical topics during the FFS sessions. After one year, the facilitators still receive one day training per week, mainly from their colleagues. During these training days, a lot of observations and ideas from field level are channelled back to project management. Most of the modifications and adaptations made in the FFSs were based on these observations and ideas received from the field.

Most of the adaptations made to the FFS concept are a result of the cultural and social characteristics of the local farming communities and the Egyptian extension organisation. The FFSs in Fayoum meet weekly, like the original Indonesian FFSs for field crops like cotton, tomato, and beans, but for fruit crops they meet on a monthly basis. The FFS curriculum focuses on IPM, but is placed in the context of a broad range of crop management topics. Field-crop FFSs last for one year, following a cropping cycle of two or three crops. Fruit-tree FFSs follow a two-year programme. Separate FFSs are held for female farmers. The number of farmers participating in a FFS on field crops is on the average between 22 for men and 25 for women. In the FFS on fruit crops, the average number is 15.



Men farmers discussing the results of their Agro-Ecosystem Analysis in mango during their FFS on fruit crops. Photo: Hans Feijen.

The Egyptian-Dutch project has still not managed to increase the average length of a FFS session. As in the FLGs, the FFS sessions in Fayoum do not last for more than two hours. The main reason for this is that the facilitators find it difficult to do practical things with the farmers during the sessions. The social structures and customs in the local farming communities make it difficult for the facilitators to organise practical group activities. If something practical needs to be done, for example in the study

field, it will be done after the FFS session and/or by hired labour. Further, the project is still looking for suitable “group dynamic activities” and “icebreakers”. Most of these activities, developed in Asia, do not work in Egypt. The Arabic-Egyptian culture differs too much from the Asian cultures.



Women farmers performing Agro-Ecosystem Analysis in a field with recently transplanted camomile, a popular medicinal/aromatic crop in Fayoum, grown by women farmers. Photo: Hans Feijen.

The process of adapting the FFS in Fayoum has also included adding new elements. Because farmers need education on IPM in relation to more than one crop, the FFSs started to deal with more crops and crop rotations simultaneously. To be able to do this, the total length of an FFS was extended to one full year. Further, a very broad interpretation of IPM was chosen. This broad interpretation of IPM gives the facilitators the possibility to include all crop, pest, soil and water management practices in the curriculum of the FFS. This broadening of the FFS curriculum has made the FFS a more complete tool in agricultural extension.

Although the FFSs in Fayoum differ in a number of characteristics from the “original FFS concept” they are certainly “real” FFSs. They follow the main FFS principle of educating farmers to become better decision-makers. That this is really happening, can be concluded from cases where farmers have continued meeting each other after graduation from the FFSs, and continued to implement some farmer experiments. Further, the farmers attendance during the FFS sessions does not drop during this long period of one year. With 50-52 sessions, in total 100 hours of training, the FFSs in Fayoum are twice as long as the “original” FFS. Farmers are willing to invest their time because they are learning what they like to learn during the field schools, and consider the FFS to be their own activity.

A lot can be learnt from the modification and adaptation process of the FFS concept in Egypt. Starting with the same “original FFS concept” in mind, the process went different ways, resulting in different products. Important lessons learned from these experiences are first, that in an environment where there is little or no experience with working in a participatory atmosphere, it is very important to pay a lot of attention to the training of facilitators and development of the FFS curriculum. Second, the adaptation process of the FFS approach to the local circumstances has to be a joint activity of farmers, facilitators and project management. ■

Jaap van de Pol. Fayoum IPM project, Netherlands Embassy Cairo, Postbus 20061, 2500 E.B. Den Haag, The Netherlands. Email: jaappol@access.com.eg.

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