

# Building FFS networks in East Africa

**Arnoud R. Braun, James Robert Okoth, Habakkuk Khaamala and Godrick S. Khisa**

The first Farmer Field School (FFS) networks emerged in Western Kenya in the year 2000 as a result of exchange visits and communication between farmers, facilitators and trainers of different Farmer Field Schools. Similar networks have subsequently emerged elsewhere in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. These FFS networks were formed by farmers who had graduated from a FFS. The main reason for their formation was that the graduates wanted to continue the dynamics generated by the FFS process: to build local institutions to ensure the continuation of farmer-led FFS, and benefit from becoming a larger voice in expressing their demands. To date, the FFS networks in East Africa support about 2000 FFSs with close to 50 000 direct beneficiaries.

The Farmer Field School approach was first introduced in East Africa in 1995 through a project of the Food and Agriculture Organisation in Western Kenya. Since then, several projects have been successfully implemented in the region using various different entry points, including issues such as integrated production and pest management, land and water management, self sustainability for refugee communities, integrated crop management of sweet potato, promotion of farmer innovations, livestock, social forestry and control of banana bacterial wilt. The main reason for the success of FFS in the region has been the involvement of farmers themselves in identifying their problems, and in selecting, testing and evaluating possible solutions.

## Forming FFS networks

By design, the FFS approach is not intended for creating long-term organisations, but it has become apparent that after the season-long FFS process, most of the groups continue working together to address problems within their community. Whereas the season-long curriculum is developed around a technical component, other vital livelihood issues that affect the community are blended into the curriculum as special topics: HIV/AIDS issues, reproductive health care, nutrition, gender issues, malaria control, child immunisation, environmental control, basic financial management, simple credit management skills and farming as a business. This responsiveness to immediate community concerns has facilitated a transformation of the FFS to a popular community forum in which farmers discuss problems within their own local context and seek solutions with minimal external support. This development has been a fundamental factor in building farmers' confidence to determine their own destiny.

As the number of FFSs grew and alumni groups broadened their level of operation, new issues and challenges emerged that could not be solved effectively by the individual groups. As successive FFSs were established in the immediate neighbourhood of existing ones, there were frequent opportunities for interaction, and sharing of experiences among the different groups. As a result, innovations and the rich resources of indigenous knowledge could be shared faster. This also encouraged coordination within the cluster of FFSs, reducing the overall cost of implementation because the different FFSs are able to access inputs and market their produce in bulk.

Based on these experiences, the idea of FFS networks was developed further in 2001 during an East African farmers' forum held in Uganda that brought together close to 300 farmers from

Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Since then, various FFS networks have been established in all three countries, bringing FFSs together within well-defined geographical boundaries such as sub-counties, divisions or districts.

## Organisational setup

An FFS network draws its membership from all the FFSs within a given administrative boundary. Each FFS elects one member as their representative to the network at sub-county level. All FFS networks at sub-county level within a division are represented in the FFS network at divisional level, and FFS networks at this level choose their representatives in the district FFS network. All these networks usually have an elected core executive committee, comprising a chairperson, treasurer and secretary, and at least three working committees including the finance and planning committee, the loans committee and the market information service committee.

An individual FFS has a constitution, bye-laws and is registered as a community based organisation with the respective district community development office. Similarly, all FFS networks have a formal setup, which is important for recognition, safeguarding members' rights and is vital for arbitration purposes. The operations of the FFS networks are supported by the member FFSs through subscription fees and other sources of income, which include commissions on bulk sales, shares from members and profits from sale of farm inputs. However, these sources are often inadequate for the effective operation of the FFS networks and increasingly, many are also engaging in activities like agro-processing, produce trading and even operating village phone booths.

## Marketing

Individual FFSs are capable of conducting their own business but they are generally too small to engage in meaningful negotiations compared to the networks that bring together more



Photo: Arnoud Braun

The Bungoma Umbrella FFS Network shop.

than 25 FFSs. Still, the networks can only take advantage of their size if production among the member FFSs is co-ordinated. As business units, FFS networks are directly involved in the pre-season planning and enterprise selection process to ensure some uniformity for collective marketing. Similarly, after establishing expected production levels, the networks initiate negotiations with potential buyers.

To ease co-ordination, and in order to take care of the diversity of interests among the member FFSs, commodity associations within FFS networks are emerging. One example is the Soroti District FFS network in Uganda, which is developing five associations for citrus, cereals, honey producers, root crops, and oil crops. These associations are not limited to FFS members only, but also accommodate other farmers as well.

In Kenya, the Kakamega District FFS network has pioneered access to the national market in Nairobi, particularly for sweet potatoes. Initially, the network attempted to sell fresh orange-fleshed sweet potatoes with limited success. However, training in how to add value to products, and certification through the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute has enabled them to find a market for dried orange-fleshed sweet potato chips at a large national flour producer offering higher prices for the processed product than for the fresh produce. This network is also looking for diversification opportunities with cash crops and has currently entered into a contract with a commercial company to grow and supply chili peppers. A survey for potential national market opportunities for passion fruit, moringa (*Moringa oleifera*) and chili peppers is also under way. This network realised that as a community based organisation, its business opportunities were limited and they could not access other, more lucrative markets. As a consequence they have now opted to register as a Limited Liability Company.

### Information brokerage

Market information in the rural areas of East Africa is so poor, that under the traditional setting, distrust is widespread as everybody cheats everybody along the marketing chain. Farmer families in this region have an impressive set of skills and they are capable and willing to intensify and improve their agricultural production if it allows them to earn the money they need. Most FFSs are not in a position to provide their members with better access to markets and reliable information about prices, product quality or market conditions because they are based in remote rural settings with limited contact to potential markets. Realising this, the FFS networks increasingly provide basic market information like market opportunities, prices and volumes required to their member FFSs. This initiative has also been boosted by an IFAD-supported programme, the Linking Local Learners on demand-driven services, which started in 2004 in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The methodology uses the internet to support farmer groups' action learning activities. In this way, groups that are separated by large distances can share their experiences. Action learning, or learning-by-doing, provides farmer groups with practical experiences in trying out new technologies or ways of working. Sharing these experiences using the internet learning support tools stimulates new thinking and quickens the spread of effective locally relevant practices.

As a result of the Linking Local Learners initiative, all FFS networks in Uganda and Kenya have a functional market information service as well as a joint e-mail address. Although internet facilities are still limited in these countries, at least the towns within the region have internet kiosks while some of the FFS networks are looking at running such a service as a potential future business.

### Capacity building

All farmers who are members of a FFS are eligible for any position within the FFS network leadership structure. As a consequence, its leadership may have limited formal education. The increasing responsibilities of the FFS networks as the size and complexity of their operation grows, poses capacity challenges that have to be dealt with. Therefore, the current focus of support to the FFS movement in the region is building the necessary managerial capacity and the development of a system that can be managed by the network leadership with minimal external assistance. The curriculum at the FFS level is also progressively adapted to include issues such as farming as a business, simple financial management, marketing aspects, leadership skills, and saving and credit. In Uganda, two separate manuals, a "Facilitators' Guide" and a FFS network "Operational Manual" addressing these issues have been developed together with facilitators and members of the FFS networks, and are currently being field tested. Experience has shown that the use of resident facilitators, and especially farmer facilitators, has increased the ownership of the process.

### Way forward

With modest budgets, FFS programmes in East Africa have successfully shown that FFS networks are an effective way of organising and empowering smallholder farmers with common interests, and increasing their access to markets. However, mechanisms for facilitating market opportunities are still weak within FFS networks. As these networks develop and take on more complex initiatives, there is a need for more attention to capacity building in the fields of financial management, marketing, standards and quality, and use of information and communication tools. A pool of competent and innovative facilitators and mentors should be in place to ensure sustainability of the process. More investments in training and equipping the FFS networks with the relevant information and communication technology will bridge the information gap and enhance the diversification of business opportunities and improve efficiency of transactions. Better documentation of the lessons learned will also be necessary for scaling-up the process of building FFS networks. Lastly, the FFSs have triggered an increasing need for credit facilities in the rural areas of East Africa. The potential for investments has not been fully exploited and farmers will require external financial means to intensify their operations in order to be able to move away from poverty. In this context, a statement from a Kenyan taxi driver is illustrative: "You need money to make money"!

**Arnoud R. Braun.** Farmer Field School Foundation, Simon Vestdijkstraat 14, 6708 NW Wageningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: arnoud.braun@farmerfieldschool.net

**James Robert Okoth.** FAO/IFAD FFS Project, PO Box 363, Soroti, Uganda. E-mail: james.okoth@fao.org

**Habakkuk Khaamala.** Kakamega FFS Network, PO Box 1490, Kakamega, Kenya. E-mail: hkhaamala@yahoo.co.uk

**Godrick S. Khisa.** FAO/IFAD FFS Project, PO Box 917, Kakamega, Kenya. E-mail: ffsproj@africaonline.co.ke

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