FFSs in translation: Scaling up in name, but not in meaning

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After discovering the seriousness of pesticide problems in Carchi, Ecuador, farmers and their communities began to search for ways to decrease reliance on agrochemicals. In 1999 the Farmer Field School (FFS) methodology was introduced, of which early results were promising. Through participation in FFSs, hundreds of potato farmers discovered alternatives to pesticides and fertilizers, while maintaining high production levels. The associated decreases in costs meant better productivity – commonly a return on investment of 40 percent or more. Further, medical research showed that decreased exposure to pesticides improved health. As a result, FFSs became increasingly popular, and it was encouraging to see numerous farmer groups, NGOs, government organisations, and even private industry adopt the methodology. Nonetheless, our optimism proved short-lived.

Case studies of contrasting forms of FFS

We do not question the utility of people-centred, problem-based, self-discovery approaches to Integrated Pest Management (IPM), such as FFS. Nevertheless, we have concerns over how and why professionals and their organisations diversely apply such approaches, in particular when they emerge in forms that contradict original purposes. An earlier article in the Spanish edition of *LEISA Magazine* (Vol.19 No.1, June 2003) found a systematic erosion of the FFS methodology. As follow-up, between 2003 and 2006, we visited many FFSs and talked with participants, graduates, facilitators and Master Trainers. We documented numerous examples of FFS in practice and held meetings and workshops to identify reasons behind the changes to this approach.

As an illustration, we present three examples of how FFS came to be practiced in Carchi. In each case the individuals initially were acknowledged as outstanding FFS facilitators. Nevertheless, over time, different professional and organisational factors initiated a transformation of FFS. As a result, we do not believe that competency is the issue at hand. Instead, we believe the erosion of FFS to be the result of more subtle social matters.

Case 1: Donor demands

In November 2005 we visited an FFS "field day", organised by an Ecuadorian NGO and its donor agency in the village of San Rafael. Normally a field day takes place at the end of a cropping cycle, so that participants can share the results of their experiments and demonstrate what they have learned. By design, FFS participants take charge of the day. They choose topics for presentation and discussion, prepare information stands, and plan logistics. Nevertheless, this field day was organised prematurely – only one month after sowing the learning plots. When we questioned the facilitator about this, he explained that the period of financial support had ended, and to be compliant with the donor agency, he had to move up the event. As a result, the participants had not yet acquired the knowledge, skills, and confidence to run a field day on their own, so the facilitators had to take charge. Contrary to FFS designs, the facilitators determined the topics, prepared the materials, and gave most of the presentations.

Photo: Marc Schut

Empty pesticide package found in the FFS learning plot.

The messages of the field day ended up being a confusing set of presentations that produced contradictory messages to the central purpose of this FFS – decreasing reliance on agrochemicals. The presentations focused on the promotion of pesticides, rather than explaining how joint learning and an agro-ecosystem analysis (AESA) could help farmers reduce the need for pesticides. Nor was there attention to how experimentation could support farmers to discover alternatives to agrochemicals, such as insect traps. During the field day we found an empty pesticide package in the learning plots (see photo), which for us symbolised the field day's confusing content and messages.

Case 2: The preferences of an individual extensionist

In December 2005 an NGO partner established a Farmer Field School in the village of Yascón. A week before the facilitator had been in the community to explain about the methodology and to recruit participants. He said he was asked to establish this FFS in order to meet his organisation's quota of four groups. By design, the facilitator and participants should choose the focus crop together, based on the results of a participatory diagnostic. In this case, the facilitator predetermined that the FFS would work on *frijol* (common field bean).

Instead of co-selecting the learning plots, preparing the soil and sowing the plants with the participants, the facilitator determined that the learning plots would be a five-week old bean field found outside the community. Additionally, the participants had explained that due to their heavy workload during the week, they preferred to hold sessions during the weekends. But the facilitator refused, arguing that he did not work on the weekends and that Mondays best suited his agenda. As compensation for having to meet on Mondays, he offered to shorten the duration of this FFS-cycle from fifteen to ten weeks, since the learning plots had been planted five weeks earlier. As a result, the FFS skipped three of the five stages of the FFS methodology: 1) establishment of the group, 2) determination of the technical content and 3) establishment of the learning plots. The curriculum of this FFS became limited to the remaining two stages: implementation of the learning activities and graduation.

Case 3: Impositions of a distant supervisor

Luis (not his real name) was an extension-researcher for the national agricultural research service. As the head of the provincial field office, he led numerous projects, many of which relied on FFSs for capacity building. Luis was "a champion of FFS by-the-book". He expressed concerns over the "erosion" of the methodology. He observed that facilitators commonly cut corners at the cost of participants' learning. He emphasised that an FFS was not an FFS if it did not include the cornerstones

of the methodology: AESA, learning plots, insect collections, and farmer-led experiments. He lobbied for the creation of a standardised test to ensure that facilitators and graduates met minimum standards of both the technical aspects of IPM and the learning process aspects of FFS.

Luis actively resisted collaboration between his organisation and the pesticide industry, as a result of what he understood as the inherent contradiction between a company's interest in selling products and the government's mandate to protect the public interest. Nevertheless, when he left for two years of graduate studies, his supervisor in the capital, who did not share his perspective, took advantage of his absence to establish a lucrative project with the pesticide industry. In Luis' absence, new approach to FFS underwent a strong transformation. When he returned in 2004, Luis' supervisor forced him to implement a "hybrid" FFS, a form that shared little in common with the original methodology. The new approach involved five modules that centred on getting farmers to adopt an "IPM technology package". Under the new designs, content became pre-determined, and there was little time for learning plots, AESA and experiments. Despite Luis' conviction for FFS by-the-book, externally imposed constraints compelled him to implement a very different form of the methodology.

What lessons do these experiences hold?

Despite much enthusiasm over early results, eight years later we observed that professionals and their institutions apply the FFS approach in diverse and even contradictory ways. Certainly, this approach is still applied in Carchi and elsewhere, but we have become concerned about what we see as a trend: the systematic translation of FFS (and FFS-like methodologies) from people-centred to more conventional technology-centred designs.

The FFS methodology requires space for open-ended, participant-led learning, integration of different types of knowledge (of both local and other experts), and flexible agendas. As the three cases have illustrated, in practice, professionals and their organisations commonly transform the FFS approach, providing different forms and meaning to it. Table 1 summarises the extremes that were observed in Carchi – what we call "FFS by design" and "FFS in the social wild". Due to its present conflicts with established ways of organising and conducting development practice, FFS by design requires protected space.

Conclusion

The strength of the FFS approach is that farmers –and not organisations, donors or vendors– determine the learning outcomes, and thus its development. Sadly, as an FFS Master Trainer in Ecuador confided: "As soon as the FFS-methodology was adopted by Ecuadorian institutions, it was pulled back into the paradigm it was supposed to challenge. Supporting farmers in local innovations became technology transfer again, and the farmer-led, demand-driven character was replaced by externally-driven development."

Farmer-led methodologies demand a very distinct way of working that conflicts with conventional development practice. If we believe that FFS is the right way to go, then we need to provide attention to the professional and organisational conditions that determine who is in the "driver's seat" of development. Until more conducive conditions for people-centred development are established, as we have seen in Ecuador, approaches such as FFS will continue to scale up in name but not in meaning.

Recently, awareness over the erosion of locally-led development has led partners in Ecuador and elsewhere in the Andes to re-organise. In April 2007 the different agroecology networks in Ecuador met to discuss ways of protecting people-centred development at its national conference, leading to the creation of a new collective charged with advocacy. In October, the Network of Alternative Agriculture and Action (RAAA) in Peru organised a national seminar on agrarian development that emphasised changes needed for enabling more locally-led development, placing the agenda of the National Association of Ecological Producers (ANPE) at centre stage. The emerging Program for Local Innovation in Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management in the Andes (PROLINNOVA-Andes) is organised around the concept of peoples' science and is establishing a network of like-minded actors in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador to create safe spaces for locally-led learning and innovation.

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Table 1. Divergent forms of applying FFS

	FFS "by design"	FFS in the "social wild"
Goals and didactics	Challenge conventional practices through open-ended, farmer-led innovations and experiments. Based on discovery-based-learning an learning-by-doing	Transfer of knowledge and technology, diffusion of IPM-packages through learning
Learning process	Open-ended	Project-based
Decision making	Based on analyses and discussion	Based on assumption, generalisations and routines
Facilitation	Participative, enthusiastic, working with the farmers	Steering, demonstrative and lecturing
Agenda setting/ ownership	Organised around the life cycle of a crop or animal. The FFS-participants determine crop, curriculum and experiments, are actively involved, experience ownership and responsibility over their learning process and activities	Organised within the boundaries of organisational and donor preferences. The FFS-participants are passively involved, facilitators determine and own the learning process and activities
Long term objectives	Nurture groups that will continue to address agricultural and community problems on their own and with technical backstopping: 'Farmers as the subject of development'	Increase food production: 'Farmer's attitudes, lack of knowledge, and practices are an object/constraint of a development process'