

In a traditional region in Egypt, farmers started participating in Farmer Field Schools (FFS) to receive training on pest management. When women facilitators were recruited, some women-only field schools started, while later even mixed schools emerged. The topics discussed slowly moved beyond agriculture to health and reproductive issues, rights and literacy. "My husband never listened to me. Now he wants to hear what I learned during the training sessions."



Photo: Hans Feijen

Farmer Field Schools in traditional societies: From technical to social issues

Hans Feijen

The Fayoum is an oasis 90 km south of Cairo, with some 1500 km² of farmland and a total population of roughly 2.5 million. Between 2001 and 2008, an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Project was implemented there, supported by the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture and the Netherlands Embassy in Cairo. It originally focused on promoting IPM and cutting down on pesticide use. Specific objectives included increasing farmers' decision-making capacity, improving the flow of information and contributing to a better environment and health awareness.

The project followed the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach as the main tool for non-formal, participatory farmer education. Covering many different topics, schools ran for a full year with weekly sessions. Parallel to the extensive FFS programme, the project also looked at the capacities and skills of the facilitators. This included basic training, on-the-job courses, continuous weekly activities and more specific technical trainings. Besides the training of the regular facilitators, there was a large programme for training farmer facilitators.

FFSs for women farmers

In seven years we carried out more than 2000 schools. Most of them were set up for male farmers and around field crops, but 423 schools were also organised for women farmers, and 83 for mixed groups. The project was especially interested in FFSs for women and girls as, in general, they have less opportunities (in educational, social or economic terms). Another important consideration was that, in practice, many small farms are permanently or temporarily headed by women, as many men work abroad or in Cairo. The number of FFSs for women, however, was not large, basically because female facilitators could not be recruited in sufficient numbers. These schools also required more logistical arrangements, like transport for facilitators. Mixed schools developed spontaneously from 2003 onward, and many were formed after 2006.

Each school had around 25 participants, meaning that more than 48 000 farmers were directly involved in the project for a year or more. Schools had different focuses: orchard crops, aromatic crops, or organic agriculture. Other schools developed a special curriculum for the so-called "newlands". Apart from the curriculum, most schools were very similar. There were definitely also cultural differences between the various regions of the Fayoum. This can be clearly seen from the distribution of the "mixed" schools. In some regions these mixed schools were quite common, while in other regions they simply did not occur.

In total, there were 47 female and 200 male facilitators. They received several weeks basic training, followed by on-the-job training. One day was set aside each week for additional training, often given by one of the senior facilitators, but also by outside specialists. Specific trainings (of up to two weeks) were given on a broad range of topics, including women's rights, reproductive health, crop marketing, prevention of bird flu, post-harvest practices, bee keeping, and even English and computer sciences. In addition, up to 150 farmer facilitators were trained each year. In principle, the farmer facilitators functioned for one year as assistants of the facilitators in their own FFS. However, the best farmer facilitators went on to other functions like literacy trainer or full facilitator. Quite a number also remained active in NGOs or other community organisations.

Ms. Naglaa Houssein, farmer facilitator and literacy trainer

Ms. Naglaa was selected to be a farmer facilitator because of her academic qualifications and her active attitude. Through discussions, she tried to create a co-operative spirit between the female farmers, who had confidence in her. She started to practice being a farmer facilitator under the supervision of a facilitator. She was also chosen to be trained as a literacy trainer. Naglaa states: "Illiteracy is spreading in my village. In order to be able to help, I attended a 12-day training course on literacy, where we studied Arabic grammar and arithmetic. Other subjects were communication skills and dealing with adult students. My literacy class runs for five days a week from 2.30 pm till 5.00 pm.

Broadening the curriculum

Although originally an IPM-oriented project, we took a broad approach from the start. Plant protection was put in the context of integrated crop management and a low external input agriculture. The same requirements for a successful IPM programme (improved decision-making capacity and two-way information flow) were gradually used for many other relevant issues. In the early years of the women's schools, up to 40 percent of the sessions were devoted to topics like legal rights, credit options, obtaining ID cards, and literacy. Special attention was also given to "cottage industries", activities that can be done in or around the house (pottery, basket work, cheese or yoghurt making). After 2005 the FFS curricula diversified even more, also in the men's schools, to include major rural issues and challenges. The project changed from being IPM and agriculture oriented, towards focusing on information and awareness-raising activities. Working towards the new goal, the training activities also had to be adapted.

Networking formed a crucial element of the FFS approach: collaboration with GOs and NGOs in various topics was emphasised. Networking with local stakeholders helped increase the feeling that it was "their" project and not an outside effort. Culturally it was also very important that families knew that they could entrust their women and girls to our schools. The project explored a number of options to sustain the approach and to link up with and promote farmer's associations. Staff were well-trained in collecting, processing and sharing information relevant to rural communities, using all modern digital means. Having reserved ample time for non-agricultural topics, two special issues became important components of the project: environmental awareness and gender issues.

Environmental awareness and gender issues

We had to consider the fact that farmers invest one morning per week for a whole year in the FFS, and that they do this only if there is a (direct) return on their investment. This means that you can deal with a number of issues of no direct economical relevance, but there should always be a certain emphasis on economic issues. Otherwise, attendance figures would certainly drop. This was especially important in our case, as we categorically refused to pay "attendance money", as happens in a number of other projects.

In terms of environmental awareness, the emphasis gradually shifted from general campaigns, like on the dangers of agricultural chemicals, to a much broader approach, including topics like solid waste removal, nature conservation, and the negative aspects of smoking. At the same time, the emphasis shifted from creating awareness to action-oriented campaigns, such as the setting up of sustainable rubbish collecting systems. This was implemented in close co-operation with the local units and NGOs.

Based on the subjects tackled in the FFS, I discuss with the literacy students topics such as food pollution, balanced diets and female issues.

"I accept criticism without anger and lead the discussions, allowing various opinions to be heard. I greatly benefited from the training courses not only in my work but also in my personal life. I respect other points of view and use my skills to convince others. On the other hand, I noticed that literacy levels amongst boys are now lagging behind those for girls. As a result, I decided that after finishing my present class, I will open one for boys. After that, I would like to be a supervisor to help the female trainees."

A campaign style approach was also used for other topics, such as homeless children, child labour and bird flu, or even (since 2007) against the practice of female genital mutilation. These were often entwined with the "regular" FFS activities. In short, these aimed to raise female farmers' living standards and status, ensuring a greater role for women in the rural society. Health formed a main issue in the FFS agenda, especially in the women's FFS, covering topics such as reproductive health, family planning, or sexually transmitted diseases. Another topic was the relationship between health and the environment. We aimed our environmental campaigns at school children who were not involved in the FFSs, thus reaching large numbers of people in a short time.

The promotion of higher literacy levels was one of the most successful parts of our programme. In collaboration with the National Authority for Illiteracy Eradication, we developed the option of attaching literacy classes to the FFSs. Of the 2037 FFSs implemented, 333 schools had a literacy class attached, with a separate schedule and a literacy teacher. A number of farmer facilitators were trained to become literacy teachers. The literacy classes used the Concentrated Language Encounter approach, which combines literacy learning with the teaching of useful life skills, so that reading and writing is not seen in isolation from the realities and priorities of life. The National Authority was so enthusiastic about this approach to literacy classes that they decided to use it in other governorates in Egypt.

Results in the field

The FFS approach and collaboration with institutions gave the following results:

- 11 700 female farmers were directly involved in the FFS programme, resulting in improved problem-solving and decision-making skills, and increased networking, leading to better co-operation among farmers.
- 2505 female farmers obtained a national ID number and card.
- 6700 female FFS farmers participated in literacy classes.
- Greater health awareness, especially reproductive health.
- Increased environmental awareness.
- Increased production of local crafts as an additional source of family income.

Perhaps the most interesting result is the higher status which female farmers now have within their families and communities. We have repeatedly heard it said that "my husband now listens to my opinion on farming and other issues". We can definitely conclude that women and girls are more active and involved in different roles. Visitors (including government ministers) were impressed at how vocal the women in the FFSs had become. A group like unmarried young women, who often were just sitting at home, have become active, participating as literacy trainers or facilitators, and being involved in NGOs and small projects.

A common reaction of participants towards the end of the school year was that they wanted to continue. On the other hand, hamlets that had not yet been covered also made it clear that it was now "their turn". Sadly, the Dutch embassy phased out the agricultural activities, so the project came to an end. However, the embassy was so impressed by the results of the FFS project that they approved a follow-up that will place even more emphasis on gender issues and on the development of the rural communities in general.

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