

# Bringing farmers together

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Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) have been used in many countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa as a way to deal with constraints such as crop pests, soil fertility depletion, health issues like HIV/AIDS and the communal management of natural resources. They often work in partnership with local NGOs or Government institutions to develop solutions to complex problems facing farmers. In Lukwanga parish, Wakiso District, FFSs have encouraged the creation of new institutions and led to the development of stronger and more cooperative relationships within the community. This has put farmers in a better position to tackle their financial difficulties and to deal with two major agricultural constraints: environmental degradation and depleted social capacity.

## Difficult living conditions

Most farmers in Lukwanga are smallholders who grow crops and rear livestock. Crop yields are low and soil fertility depletion is recognized as a major problem. There is a serious and growing threat to livelihood opportunities, food security, nutrition and health. The HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to have a profound impact on the community and has severely weakened the ability of the families to work on their fields. As the number of orphaned children, widows and widowers grows, food insecurity intensifies.

The social structures in the area are not very strong. Before the introduction of the farmer field schools, there were 18 farmers' groups consisting of 5 - 10 persons each. These groups were the result of previous development activities in the area and their main aim was to facilitate the access to credit from micro finance institutions. The cohesion of the farmers' groups was weak and their bargaining power was limited. As a result, the micro finance institutions charge high interest rates and apply very strict payback arrangements. The absence of a mechanism for rescheduling loans was a serious problem for the farmers if their harvest failed. The weak social structures, together with the degraded natural resources, made the farmers very vulnerable.

## Establishing Farmer Field Schools

Between 2002-2005, a transformation took place in Lukwanga. The catalyst was the NGO *Environmental Alert* (EA), which was already working in Uganda as part of the larger East Africa INMASP (Integrated Nutrient Management to Attain Sustainable Productivity increases in East African farming systems) initiative. During the course of four seasons this NGO facilitated the establishment of Farmer Field Schools in Lukwanga. The farmers involved in these FFSs were drawn from groups established during earlier development efforts. This was done to establish a group of farmers in the FFS who were interested in improving soil fertility, but also to avoid weakening existing structures or undermining ongoing development activities.

Two FFSs were set up: the *Alinyikira Farmer Field School* and the *Nabukalu Demonstration Farm School*. For the last two years integrated nutrient management technologies have been tested and evaluated and, based on a participatory needs assessment, farmers have been trained in specific aspects of integrated soil and nutrient management.

Each school had about 25 participants and although men, women, youth and the elderly were represented, the majority of participants (90 percent) were women. In contrast to earlier



Photo: Solomon Semakula

FFS participants conduct field analyses on the Nabukalu central learning plot sown with groundnut.

farmers groups, the FFSs had a formal leadership elected by their members, and specified rules and regulations were laid down in the form of a constitution. The FFSs were also registered with the District Directorate of Community Services. This meant they were able to open and maintain operational savings accounts. Membership fees of up to US\$4000 (US\$2.20) and monthly fees of US\$500 (US\$0.25) were deposited in these accounts together with money earned from the commercial plots established by FFS members. In this way, farmers were able to raise money to buy inputs for their commercial plots and to accumulate capital that could be loaned to members on terms that farmers themselves considered realistic.

In contrast to the previously existing farmer groups, the FFSs and the later community-based organizations (CBOs) have been characterized by a strong group dynamic and sense of common purpose, as well as a holistic approach to dealing with community issues such as health and nutrition, credit management, general household development, group marketing and the care of orphans.

## From FFSs to CBOs

After four seasons of experimentation, training and evaluation of integrated nutrient management technologies, farmers and facilitators of *Environmental Alert* discussed strategies to facilitate the smooth exit of the NGO. The facilitators enquired whether farmers wished to continue with the FFSs. Farmers reacted positively. They wanted to go on meeting together to share knowledge, information and skills on agricultural production and

livelihood issues as well as continue their experiments with integrated nutrient management technologies. They also wanted to encourage FFS members and non-FFS members to put into practice what had been learnt from the school plots.

It was decided that that both FFSs would form associations that had clear objectives and were legally recognized. This would strengthen their dynamics and cohesion and enable them to follow the facilitators' advice and start tackling problems such as the lack of access to farmer-friendly credit, the low prices paid for farm products and the need to arrange care for the community's orphans.

FFS members developed a constitution capable of guiding their activities and they were given leadership training. They elected a chairperson, secretary, treasurer and committee members and registered the FFSs as community-based organizations with the Directorate of Community Services. After that, a savings account was opened at a reputable local bank.

Working with a facilitator, the new CBOs developed work plans for a period of six months to ensure that specific objectives would be met. Members meet once a fortnight and at the end of each month they evaluate the progress made. Currently *Environmental Alert* is playing a backstopping role. It puts the CBOs in touch with agricultural input service providers and community development agencies such as *National Agricultural Advisory Services* (NAADS) and the *Buganda Cultural and Development Foundation* (BUCADEF) that can help them improve their sustainability (see Table 1).

### Impact in the community

The impact of FFSs in Lukwanga is visible and can be seen in the increased capacity of farmers to analyze their farming

systems and apply practices that ensure good nutrient management. Participating farmers are now able to present their opinions with confidence during regular village meetings and there is a more deliberate attempt by farmers to exchange experience on planning and development. In addition, the FFS experience has enhanced the community's social capital. Social relations have been strengthened, especially amongst participating farmers, and there is a greater readiness to help each other in good times and bad.

Currently the community-based organizations are developing commercial crop plots of up to 0.8 ha, testing proven integrated nutrient management technologies on members' farms and – in a programme of general household development – each member donates a gift to another member of his or her choice in sequence until all members have received some benefit. Through the CBOs, farmers have been able to raise substantial amounts of money from their group contributions and these funds have made it possible to buy improved seed and farm inputs without having to resort to external sources of credit. Development agencies have been very ready to recognize the CBOs, considering them to be easier to work with and more reliable and organized community structures than smaller groups of farmers.

### Lessons learnt

Introduction of FFSs to farmers in Lukwanga required much discussion, explanation, education and practical exposure. Farmers were not used to this form of extension. Rather they were used to being provided with new technologies and solutions by researchers and scientists. The Lukwanga experience has shown how FFSs can overcome this type of dependency. Some farmers did drop out of the FFSs when they realized they would not get any free inputs. However, it appears to have strengthened the sense of cohesion and common vision amongst those who have committed themselves to the FFSs and the CBOs.

The consistent use of participatory approaches continues to make the collective identification of community problems possible in Lukwanga. Strong and productive working relationships are being consolidated and farmers are acquiring the tools and skills they need to achieve their common goal. However, this process is not without challenges. Amongst these is the need to develop ways of dealing with those in the community who have different objectives and ways of working to those being promoted by the CBOs; and the difficult task of encouraging the new and more cooperative attitudes required to effectively develop organizations like marketing associations.

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**Table 1. Benefiting from social networks**

Name of networking organization	Alinyikira FFS	Nabukalu Demonstration Farm School
NAADS	Training in group dynamics. Advisory services on crop & livestock enterprises.	Training in group dynamics. Advisory services on crop & livestock enterprises.
Soil Science Dept, Makerere University	Access to Rhizobium (Nitrogen-fixing organisms).	Access to Rhizobium (Nitrogen-fixing organisms).
BUCADEF	Advice on bean, maize and rice production. Improved seeds for these crops to all members.	
Alinyikira FFS		Exchange visits, learning from each other.
Nabukalu Demonstration Farm School	Exchange visits, learning from each other.	