

# STARTER KIT

## STARTING WITH FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

A short introduction to Farmer Field  
Schools in the SD=HS programme

### **Starting with Farmer Field Schools**

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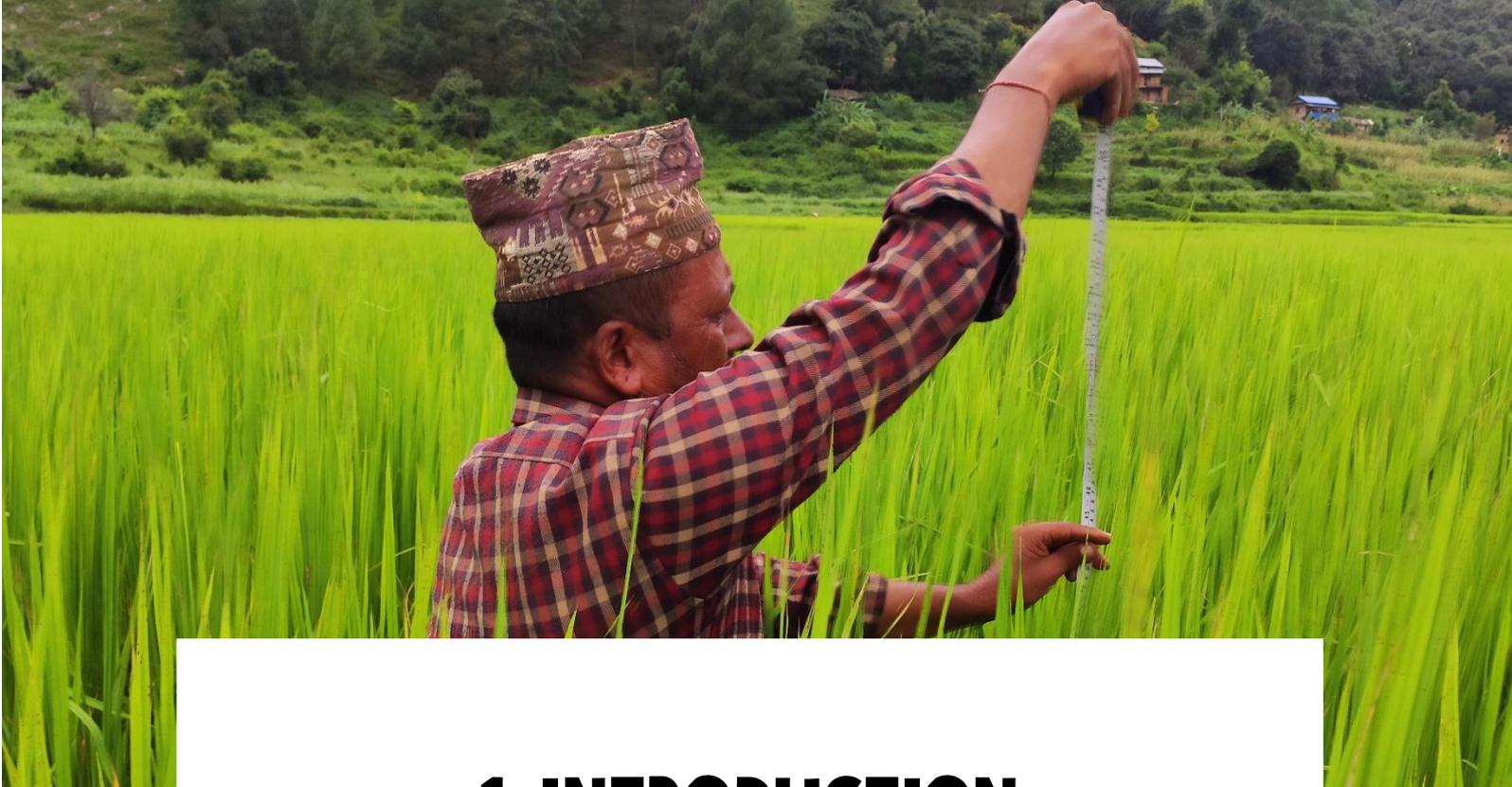
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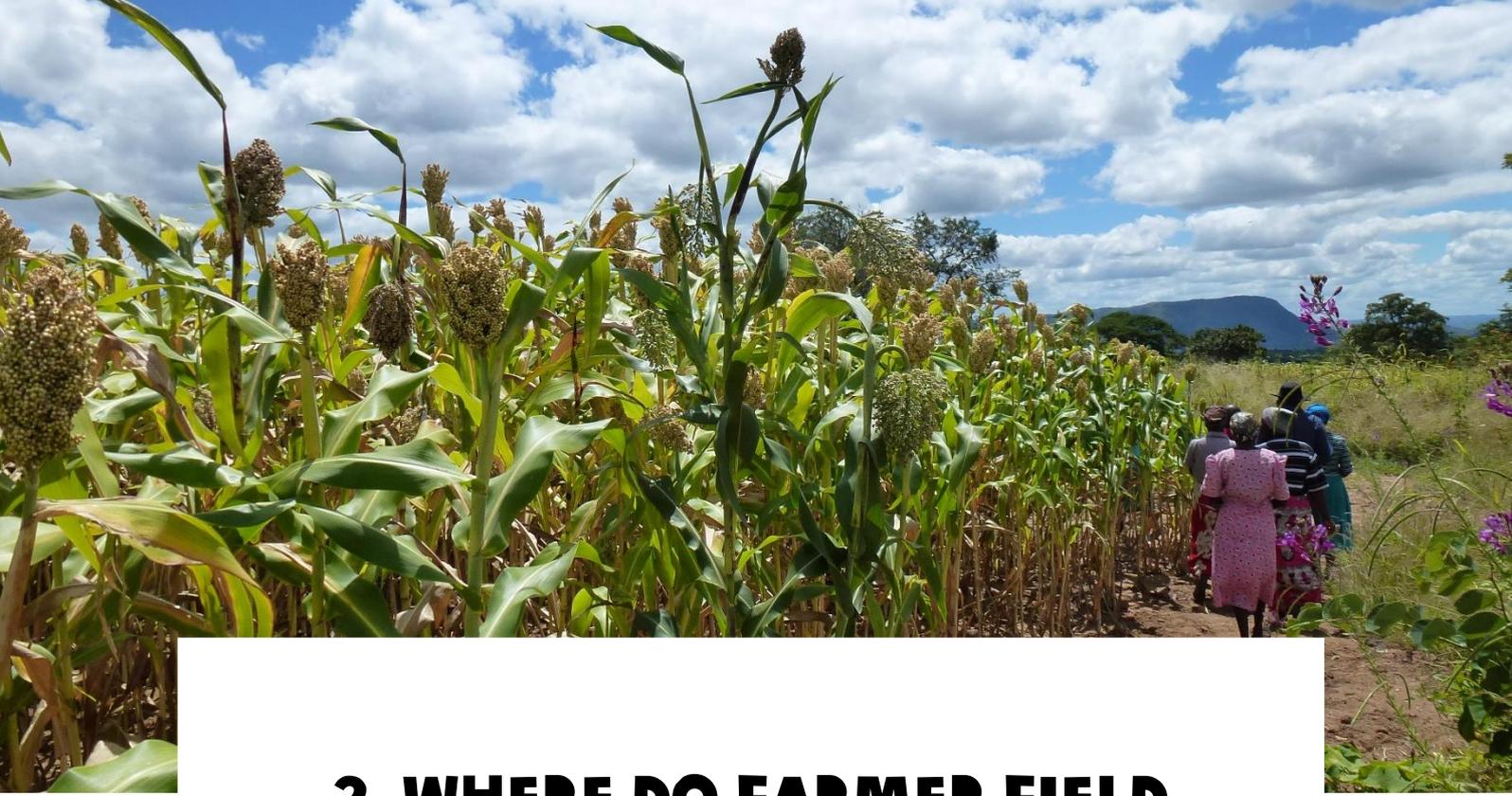
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The following pages intend to give a short introduction to the three Field Guides developed by the SD=HS programme, i.e. the Field Guides on Participatory Plant Breeding, on Nutrition and Local Food Plants, and on Farmer Seed Production and Marketing. These three Field Guides contain some common elements on the Farmer Field School approach and methodologies that are now grouped in this Starter Kit. In this way, this Starter Kit also answers some questions that new trainers and facilitators might have on what is specific for the Farmer Field School approach.

This document is short, and is made for easy reading. It fits well as an introduction in the Training of Trainers sessions (ToT), when participants are relatively new to Farmer Field Schools. It is not a summary nor a replacement of the three specific Field Guides. Rather, it is an attempt to help participants in the ToTs and facilitators of Farmer Field Schools to better grasp and explain the principles of Adult Learning behind Farmer Field Schools, as well as to help facilitators in efficiently preparing and organising a Farmer Field School. It ends with a number of Frequently Asked Questions from our own trainers and facilitators.



## 2. WHERE DO FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS COME FROM?

More than thirty years ago, in 1989 in Indonesia, staff of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) developed the Farmer Field School concept. This was to promote integrated pest management (IPM) for rice, the staple crop of the country.

The Farmer Field School (FFS) was to provide a platform for farmer education and empowerment, it should strengthen farmers' knowledge for the purpose of sustainable agro-ecosystem management, and it was to help communities in improving their decision-making skills, group collaboration and action.

The idea of FFS did not come out of the blue. Traditional education and transfer of knowledge and technologies was only successful to some extent, because it was based on top-down teaching approaches and technology transfer, and was not rooted in farmers' own agro-ecosystems, experiences, and traditional knowledge. The FFS concept was an attempt to break with top-down

approaches, and to take farmers' knowledge and experiences as the starting point.

Other participatory approaches have been promoted and implemented as well. What makes the approach of Farmer Field Schools different is that it depends on direct learning in the field by and between farmers based on their own experimentation, with support from other stakeholders where needed.

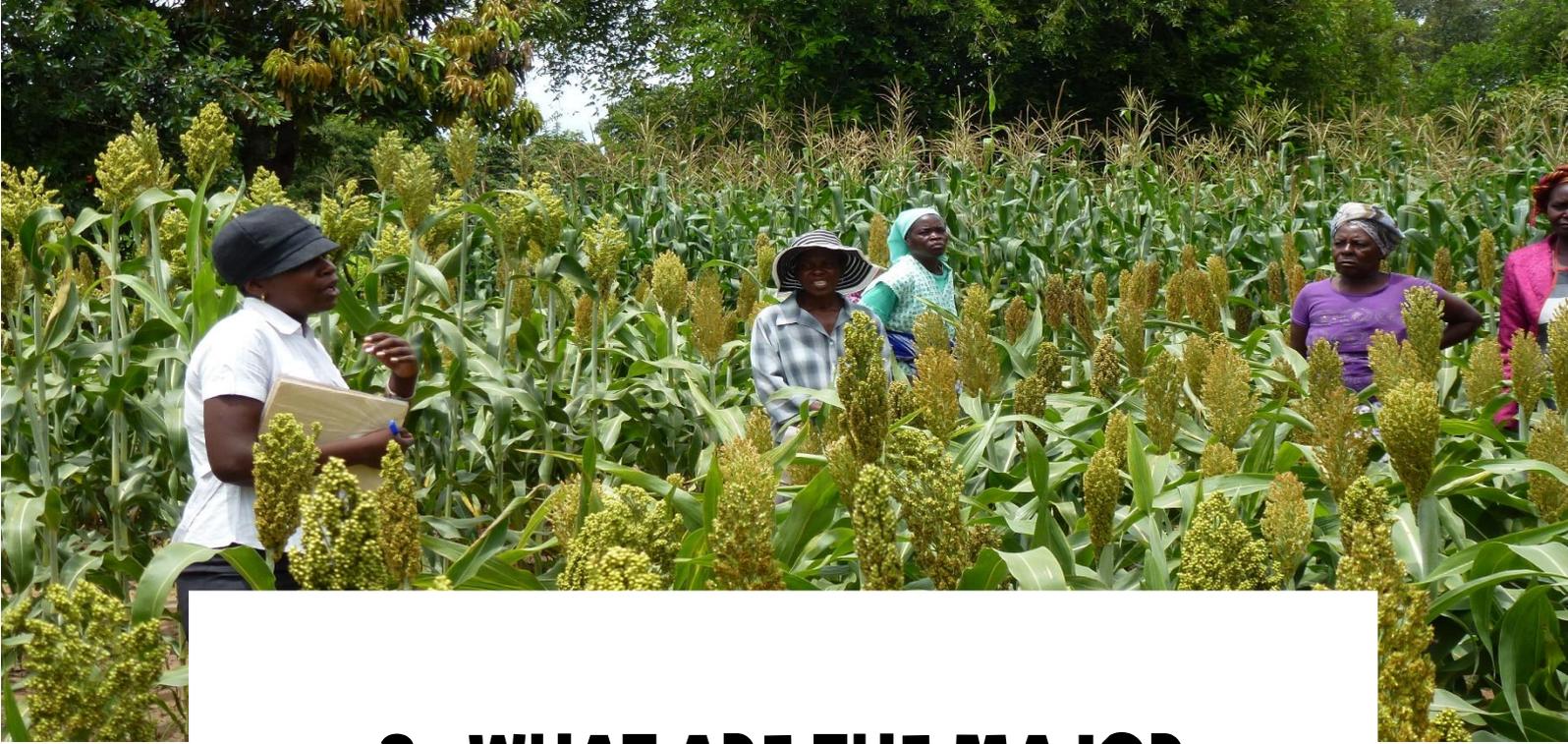
Through this approach, farmers are best able to develop new knowledge and skills, which contribute to their self-respect and ability to come up for their rights, also referred to as farmer empowerment. The most important outcome is indeed this empowerment. Farmer Field Schools have transformed agriculture and have created platforms for rural development. In their focus on empowerment, Farmer Field Schools have also addressed gender equality and social inclusion.

Whereas in the early years the FFS was devoted to Integrated Pest Management, later the FFS approach was also used to address a variety of other topics within and even outside agriculture, such as soil management, community forestry, livestock production, gender issues, and even the containment of HIV/AIDS in rural areas.

Currently, FFS approaches are used in over 90 countries, in Asia, Africa, the Near East, Latin America and Europe. Every year, between 400,000 and 1 million farmers participate in FFS. An estimated 20 million farmers have participated in FFS since they started.

*A platform for farmer education and empowerment.  
Photo: Sacha de Boer, Laos*





### **3. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR PRINCIPLES OF FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS?**

#### ***Learning by doing***

Adults learn and change most through experience, not by passive listening at lectures or looking at demonstrations. Through experimentation, observation, and analysis, FFS group members can create and own their knowledge, and be confident about their knowledge.

#### ***Focus on a specific topic***

Each FFS focuses on a single challenge at a time. This challenge must be of relevance to the livelihoods of all participants. Different ways to address the challenge are compared through experimentation (e.g., different cooking methods, crop varieties, marketing strategies) and issues are discussed among the FFS participants as they occur in real life.

#### ***The duration of the FFS must match with the challenge being studied***

“From planted seed to harvested seed”, “from affluent period to scarcity period” (when studying nutrition in the community) or “from seed production to seed processing and marketing”.

#### ***The field (or kitchen, forest, market) is the classroom***

In many FFS, learning sessions take place in the field, on a plot of land made available by the community or an individual FFS member. Depending on the topic, learning may also take place in a dedicated facility or site, such as a kitchen or forest with food plants, or a seed market. Participants observe and learn from the field work, food

preparation, or forest and market trips, instead of from textbooks and lectures.

***Facilitation and support instead of teaching***

The facilitator plays a critical role. Rather than teaching, the facilitator must help guide FFS members through the learning process, remaining in the background, listening attentively, asking questions, and encouraging participants to think, observe and find answers by themselves. See also the role of facilitators below.

***Farmers' own knowledge forms the starting point of the FFS activities***

During the FFS, participants improve their observation and learning skills. Farmer Field Schools may also benefit from collaboration with scientists, crop breeders, health workers, etc. Such collaboration can provide farmers with new insights, knowledge, and materials.

***Regular observation and analysis form the cornerstone of the FFS sessions***

All participants are involved in weekly (or regular) observation, analysis, and presentation of what happens in the field, in the wider environment, in family food production and in local food culture, or in local markets. The group takes decisions

based on these exercises, about weekly or regular activities, but also about the final conclusions drawn based on the experiments.

***No group hierarchy***

All FFS members participate on an equal basis. The FFS recognises no hierarchy between farmers and facilitators, group leaders and ordinary members, men and women, people of different ages, status or caste, diploma holders and those who do not read and write. Special care should be taken to allow equal participation of farmers with low literacy. All members are equal partners in the FFS learning experience.

***The FFS provides the basis for collective action***

Acting as a group creates more power than as an individual. The shared learning experiences in the FFS are reinforced by group dynamics, song, dance, and drama. Shared decision-making enhances ownership of results and newly acquired knowledge. By the end, a strong group is formed that can take a leadership role in tackling new challenges in their community, or in autonomously continuing the FFS activities.

***The role of facilitators***

Farmer field schools need capable facilitators. They should:

- guide the learning process within the FFS, mentor and assist the participants to take responsibility for their own learning
- ask questions and facilitate discussions
- use practical, participatory methods and tools, and organise activities in which all members of the group participate
- guide the group to reach mutual expectations and agreement on which actions need to be taken to reach the FFS learning goals
- encourage and value different views, of both women and men, as well as of youth participants.
- take records of the seasonal learning and compile a report from major FFS discussions
- capture lessons learnt and suggest recommendations for the successful operation of the FFS
- be able to function as an ambassador of the farmer field school to the outside community
- mentor other facilitators in other communities in the country.



## 4. WHY FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS IN THE SD=HS PROGRAMME?

The Sowing Diversity = Harvesting Security programme aims to improve farmers' access and use of crop diversity, to strengthen farmers' seed systems (the way farmers produce, exchange, sell and access seeds), and to improve household nutrition in the community. The Farmer Field School forms its central approach.

With the support of scientists and local extension staff, farmers learn breeding and selection methods, and in the process they test the seeds of new varieties and share their observations on these seeds. Farmers also address nutrition: they strengthen

their coping strategies by increasing the consumption of nutritious food based on local biodiversity and by improved management of local food plants (with a special focus on neglected and underutilized species, or NUS). To generate income and provide local and nearby communities with the crops and varieties best adapted to their eco-systems, farmers may decide to produce and sell their own seeds in local markets. The Farmer Field School also helps farmers to look at government policies and national laws, and how these hamper or support their rights as farmers.



## 5. HOW TO PREPARE FOR FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS?

Farmer Field Schools need facilitators or trainers. Farmer Field Schools are coordinated by one or more facilitators who takes participants through the activities. For the facilitators to effectively support their Farmer Field Schools, they need training themselves. Facilitators are trained in Trainings of the Trainers, where they meet each other, where they can plan jointly, and where they can exchange their experiences and table their challenges. Trainings of the Trainers allow the facilitators to reconvene on a regular basis. Trainers can have many different backgrounds. Farmers, NGO staff, extension service workers and health sector workers, staff of farmers' cooperatives can all act as facilitators. What is most important is the focus on empowerment of the participants in the Farmer Field School. Lead farmers form a very important category of trainers since they live in the communities and help to increase the sustainability of the FFS efforts. The more the FFS programme becomes established, the more it may be possible to rely on lead farmers trained as facilitators.

### Participating in a Training of Trainers (ToT)

Depending on the topic and the availability of participants, most ToTs take between five days and two weeks, and take place in a central facility. They should be scheduled well in advance of the growing season. Each ToT requires a strong commitment and sufficient time from the participants, who should facilitate a FFS for at least one full growing season. The ToT is organised by the partner organisation of the SD=HS programme. It is prepared and facilitated by a small number of Master Trainers (3 – 5) who are normally staff of the partner organisations. The Master Trainers select and invite the participants who are to form the future facilitators of the Farmer Field Schools. The ToTs and the FFS will preferably make use of local languages.

The ToTs in the SD=HS programme address the activities to be undertaken by the facilitators who will support the Farmer Field Schools after having completed the ToT. The appropriate Field Guide provides support for the activities

and discussions in the ToT. The ToT may involve external resource persons/experts who may contribute on specific topics.

All ToTs address the following elements:

- the FFS principles and ways of working (rules and regulations; energy levels and ice breakers)
- the preparatory stage during which the FFS in the community is planned, with sufficient attention for disaster risk management
- the diagnostic stage in which farmer participants analyse their situation and set their learning objectives
- the implementing phase in which FFS participants engage in field or community work
- gender and power issues related with the establishment and running of the FFS
- the end-of season evaluation in which lessons are discussed and next-season planning is made.
- special topics, allowing more in-depth discussion and learning on underlying aspects of the FFS work.

During the ToT, a planning for the upcoming FFS season is made (which communities, which dates, which facilitators), and the trainers decide how to use the Field Guide in their work (which topics, adaptations needed, translation if needed). Also, the participants in the ToT discuss and the external resource persons agree on how the external resource persons will be involved in FFS implementation, e.g., by visits to individual FFS. What the ToT cannot and should not do, is to select the crops and varieties to work on, or to agree on the most important needs and therefore the items and methods that will be addressed in the FFS itself. This can only be done later by the FFS participants (see next chapter, diagnostic stage).

Like in the FFS, in the ToT the experiential learning method is followed. To that end, the full ToT group (20 – 30) is divided into smaller sub-groups of 5 – 6 members to take up assignments and to report back to plenary on the results and outcomes of their work. The ToT participants also set their own rules and regulations, just as in the later FFS. They are organised in the ToT in the same way as the FFS will be operating later.

Upon finishing the ToT, a WhatsApp or Signal group may be established so that facilitators and Farmer Field Schools can remain in touch with each other throughout the season and can be easier supported and advised by external specialists. Such tool is especially helpful in times of Covid-19 restrictions, when movement of project staff and facilitators as well as the size of meetings, including FFS meetings, may be limited.

## The next season

After a full first cycle of ToT and FFS has been organised and a full season or cycle has been completed, several simultaneous ToTs may be organised subsequently at the district level rather than at the national level, in which the experienced facilitators train a new group of farmers who experienced the first FFS series so that these farmers can act themselves as farmer-trainers. (This approach is only needed if the total number of FFS and facilitators makes it impossible to reconvene in a single ToT.) Such clusters of district ToTs may take less time, e.g., 2 – 3 days, since both the original facilitators and the selected lead-farmers have already participated in a full FFS. New facilitators work in pairs under close supervision of a more experienced facilitator acting as a mentor. This approach allows the scaling-up of the FFS, and in particular the number of FFS organised, the total number of available (farmer-)trainers, and hence the total number of communities reached.



## 6. HOW TO ORGANISE A FARMER FIELD SCHOOL?

The organisation of the Farmer Field School follows the same steps as the ToT. But there is more. The planning of each Farmer Field School starts with several community discussions. These discussions form the preparation for each FFS.

### Community discussions and formation of the FFS membership

Before the onset of the Farmer Field School, the FFS facilitators discuss with the community members the plan to establish a FFS, as well as the topic of the FFS (e.g. Participatory Plant Breeding, Nutrition, Farmer Seed Production and Marketing). The facilitators, seconded by a field officer of the partner organisation where possible, explain what the FFS will entail and what the limitations are, which commitment is expected from each of the FFS members and what the advantages stemming from participation may be. They also discuss which fields and facilities will be needed for the FFS. Farmer Field Schools must also seek the support from local authorities and community

leaders, to enlarge their impact, to reach more members in the community and to make results lasting.

Finally, the facilitators discuss the selection of the FFS members by the community. The total number of participants is ideally 25 – 30. Smaller numbers may reduce the potential exchange of knowledge and learning between the participants and lower the impact on the community as a whole.

- The selection of FFS participants should be guided by clear and transparent criteria, defined by the communities themselves.
- Key criteria for selection should include: i) willingness to consistently participate in the season-long FFS and to share the acquired knowledge with other members in the community; and ii) a keen interest and preferably some earlier experience in the planned activities.
- Equal participation by men and women should be pursued, and special efforts

should be made to engage youth. From the onset, barriers for women to fully participate in FFS activities should be discussed and resolved collectively. Likewise, if more women than men are interested to join the FFS, we need to understand why male participation is limited and try to engage more male farmers in the FFS. Of course, this may be associated with the topic of the FFS. Often a FFS on Nutrition attracts more women. Note that even in case of FFS with a majority of female participants, male participants may tend to steer the decisions. This requires promotion of an active role

- The FFS participants agree on their own rules and regulations, e.g., on day and time to meet.
- The final selection of the FFS participants should be communicated within the community.

## The importance of forming sub-groups

Sub-group formation helps all participants to feel free and express their ideas and preferences. Team building, cohesion and a feeling of belonging can be easier established in small groups. New leaders and high-potential farmers emerge easier from small group activities, where more opportunity for participation exists. In cases where women's interests and preferences may deviate from those of men, it is recommended to have subgroups with only women or men, in particular in the diagnostic stage. Likewise, it can be useful to consider wealth or age. For example, the more equipped farmers tend to have different breeding preferences than farmers with less assets.

The sub-groups are the key units for data gathering, analysis and reporting. They are responsible for documentation of all experiments, results, and analysis. Each small group must have its own team leader and record keeper or reporter.

All sub-groups will report to plenary. Group dynamics will be addressed in plenary to maintain a spirit of liveliness and competition. The goal of a plenary discussion is to reach group consensus.

Note that different sub-groups may focus on different crops or varieties or on different practices (e.g., collecting wild plants, growing local food plants, or food preparation), but they will all work on the same topic (which is e.g., Nutrition) with the same objective (i.e. to improve nutrition security).

## The agenda of the weekly meeting

Key elements which return in every session are the following:

- opening (how is everyone, anything special happened?)
- 'field' observations in sub-groups (e.g., AESA)
- plenary discussion and analysis of observations
- collective decision making about field and activity management
- energizers/breaks
- additional topics for learning or discussion.

The weekly meeting usually takes up to three hours. In some countries travel time to the FFS might be substantial, and weekly sessions may not always be feasible.

## Diagnostic stage

The diagnostic stage is crucial. Remember that the stomach, the mind, and the heart should be addressed. It should ensure that the FFS will address the primary needs and concerns of the farmers in the community. This is the only way to ensure farmers' commitment to the FFS. In this stage, farmers perform a collective diagnosis of their situation and the problems and challenges they encounter.

The results of the diagnostic stage form the basis for the agreement on objectives and expected results, as well as on the workplan of the FFS, which is guided by the Field Guide's suggested curriculum. In formulating the FFS objectives both women's and men's interests should be considered. The agreement forms the benchmark against which the later outputs and impact of the project will be measured. If the workplan involves the need to access materials and support from outside, the facilitator should arrange for its timely delivery.

## Implementation of the workplan

The facilitators use the Field Guide to implement the FFS activities, elaborated in the season-long activities. Each Field Guide contains detailed suggestions for the FFS activities. The reader is referred to the individual Field Guides for further information on the specifics of these activities.

In many FFS, meetings should take place on a weekly basis, but depending on the topic other arrangements can be agreed as well. The FFS group will meet on an agreed site, for not more than three hours. Depending on the topic and FFS stage a joint field inspection can form part of the weekly meeting. The total number of FFS sessions will depend on the topic and the agreed workplan.

In many sessions, after an introduction of the session activities, the FFS group will split into the agreed sub-groups, that simultaneously carry out their tasks, and then report back to plenary for a FFS-wide discussion and for planning for the next FFS session. The agreed workplan is a living plan: it can be adjusted if the FFS participants decide so.

At the end of each weekly session, the facilitators should check if the learning objectives of that day have been met. If there are challenges and needs raised by the members, the facilitator may need to address these in the next session.



*Demonstration plots, field days, seed and food fairs, seed markets, community seed banks, and other activities may help promote the FFS.*  
Photo: Sacha de Boer

## Farmer field day

When the standing crop shows at its best, just before harvest, and when field evaluations have been completed, the Farmers' Field Day is an occasion where the FFS farmers invite their fellow community members to share what they have learned and achieved. The day may include a field tour, an exhibition, dances, and tastings. It is an occasion to showcase what a group of farmers can do when working together as a team to solve their problems and can be important to secure support for follow-up activities from their community and local dignitaries. Of course, when the FFS has focussed on nutrition, meals may be prepared and tasted, and recipes be shared, and how to

make better use of local field crops can be shown.

## **Evaluation of the FFS**

At the end of the FFS, the FFS participants analyse the acquired data and evaluate the FFS. They list the successes and failures, explain why these occurred and make suggestions for improvement. They normally also plan activities for the next season of the FFS. The findings are further discussed at a national end-of-season workshop, bringing together facilitators of all FFS.

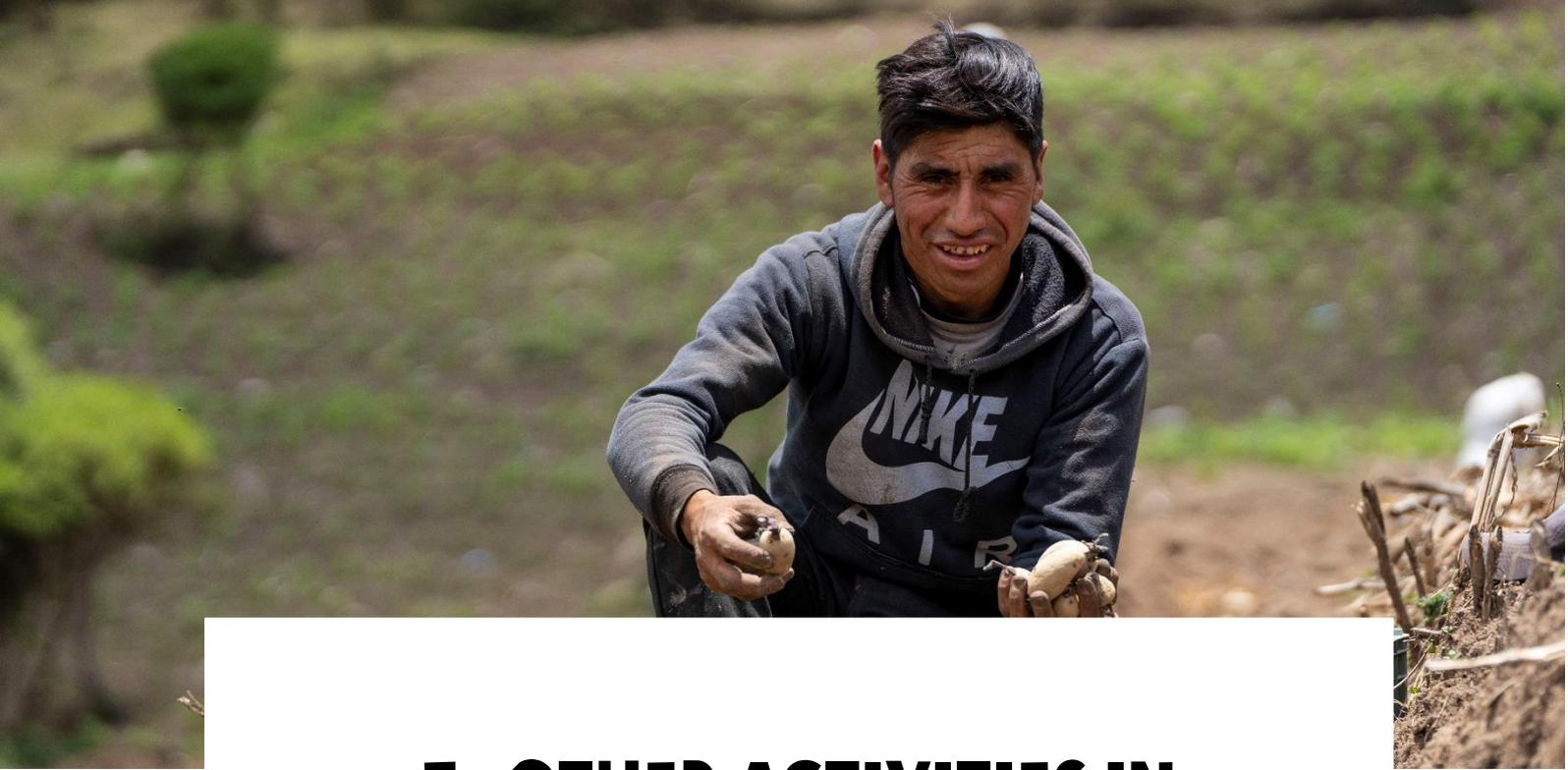
## **Reaching outwards and sustainability**

It is important to share the results of the FFS with the wider community. Demonstration plots, field days, seed and food fairs, seed markets, community seed banks, and other activities may serve the promotion of the FFS. The sustainability of the results of the FFS forms a major challenge. Support from the authorities and the community leadership is essential. Continued collaboration with external resource persons will help to maintain the quality of the work. Promoting the incorporation of the FFS approach in government and public sector institutions will

help to scale up the FFS work and to reach many more communities. Recognition of the FFS approach in government policies will also facilitate the involvement of government staff in the FFS activities and may sometimes allow for limited financial support. Furthermore, sustainability can be improved by linking the FFS activities to other community assets, such as cooperatives and community seed banks.

## **Reporting and documentation**

Reporting is important. Listing the outputs helps the FFS itself in better understanding its own results. It helps other FFS in understanding success and failures, recognising opportunities and avoiding problems. It helps convincing local authorities and government institutions about the importance of Farmer Field Schools, and why they should support these. Documentation helps the community itself to look back after several years on what happened and what has changed. It helps FFS in other countries to learn from the commonalities and the differences between countries and cultures, and how to learn from these. And finally, successfully reaching outwards depends on showing how much has been reached and achieved over time. The Field Guides provide support and tools for proper reporting and documentation.



## **7. OTHER ACTIVITIES IN RELATION TO THE FFS**

Whereas every FFS will focus on a specific topic (in the context of the SDHS programme PPB, Local Food Plants for Nutrition, and Farmer Seed Production and Marketing), FFS members may also wish to engage in other activities that complement the FFS efforts, that may keep the FFS members united, and that promote the continuity and sustainability of the FFS. These activities may include the following.

1. Registration and recognition of the FFS and its activities by local authorities
2. Engagement in government projects from which the FFS may benefit, e.g., activities related to agro-ecological approaches such as on soil and water management or pest and disease management.
3. Micro-credit schemes such as Village Saving and Loaning Agreements (VSLAs)
4. Any other activities that the FFS participants may decide to take up.



## 8. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### ***Who qualifies to be a facilitator?***

Although writing and reading skills are essential, it is not the formal education, gender or the economic status that determines who can be a good facilitator. It is the acquired attitude to listen carefully and create space for all members in the FFS to learn, that makes a good facilitator. But it is also the quality of the facilitator to make people listen to them and value their suggestions. Remember that the FFS is a school without walls. Most important for a good facilitator is that she or he can support the participants in the FFS to learn from their own and others' experiences in the FFS. A good facilitator can guide participatory action research, group discussions and team-building exercises. He or she is also able to create space for group observation, discussion, presentation, analysis and making decisions collectively. Only then, the FFS curriculum is ultimately defined by farmers themselves.

### ***What motivates facilitators?***

The major motives of good facilitators are the belief that smallholder farmers can empower themselves through joint learning, that empowerment will benefit their livelihoods, that FFS results will form a showcase for all

community members, and that these results can inspire support from local to national authorities. But also, the prospect of learning new skills, acquiring new knowledge, learning about leadership and facilitation, and the prospect of becoming a trainer or master trainer. Moreover, receiving an award or certificate as proof of facilitation capacities is a major motivational factor. Competition for best facilitator status might be part of such recognition scheme. Finally, monitoring and recognition by project organisation field staff and government officials can also form a big support for their work.

Facilitators and FFS participants are best motivated and will stay committed to the FFS if the learning objectives address issues that are relevant to their livelihoods (the stomach), intellectually interesting (the mind) and emotionally fulfilling (the heart).

### ***Are facilitators paid?***

Facilitators are not paid. They are not hired for a job. Government workers from the agricultural centres or rural extension services, as well as staff of development NGOs can get compensated for costs that they have to make to act as facilitators, such as travel costs,

communication, and lodging. Working hours and costs associated with conducting FFS must be included in the workplan and budget of the relevant government agencies. Participation of farmers as facilitators involves very limited costs, since the FFS are organised in their own and/or neighbouring villages. If some of them are “recruited” in a new FFS season to train new FFS in other areas, time investment and travels may be necessary, in which case they receive compensation for their time, travel, communication and lodging.

Facilitators gain a lot of experience and will be recognised by their communities and by the authorities noticing their contributions to community development and livelihood improvement.

### ***What happens to the produce (seed) from the FFS?***

The FFS members themselves should decide on what will happen with the seed produced in the framework of the FFS. It might be used for further experimentation in the next season. Any surplus may be distributed amongst the members of the FFS, or sold in the wider community, or be handled as a compensation for the host farmer.

### ***How is the host farmer compensated for offering his land to the FFS?***

During the initial community discussions, FFS participants discuss which land may be used as a FFS plot. They first look for options to use communal land. In many cases, a farmer will volunteer his/her land to function as a FFS plot. In return, the other FFS members offer their labour to prepare the land and help manage the crop. Only in exceptional cases, the farmer whose land is used for FFS experimentation can be compensated. Compensation should be motivated by the fact that she or he loses the opportunity to grow crops on the land to provide in his/her livelihood needs.

### ***How can we involve more women in participating in and facilitating the FFS?***

The FFS approach promotes equal participation of both female and male farmers. Involving more women requires providing the right conditions for their participation and actively seeking their involvement. It requires carefully investigating which barriers exist that limit women’s participation (childcare, cooking hours, meeting times). Many of these barriers are cultural and some of these are enshrined in law (e.g., land ownership, family relationships). Remember that it is not sufficient to simply announce that women are especially invited to participate in the FFS. It requires removing barriers. The Gender Journey Module provides the facilitators with a tool that helps to equally empower all members of the FFS, while promoting the participation and leadership of women, and to achieve gender equality in the FFS work.

### ***How can we involve more youth in participating in and facilitating the FFS?***

Involving more youth requires a similar attitude from the facilitator as involving more women. But there are differences as well. Young people may feel less connected to their birth soil. Their education may aspire them to find a job outside agriculture, and their fellows may have migrated to the cities. They may have other interests, for example in marketing crop produce. Involving more youth may also mean to address common issues such as that youth are not listened too, own no land, or have no clear role to play in their community. Youth who still attend schools, may be involved by organising the FFS sessions on the school grounds. Successfully involving youth means approaching youth to participate in curriculum development, rather than presenting them a fully developed programme which may not sufficiently inspire them. This is a huge challenge and partly up to the creativity of the ToT and the facilitators. Approaching youth to interest them in a FFS may be done through their schools and their own youth organisations.