



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations



ENABLING INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE FARMER FIELD SCHOOL APPROACH

POLICY BRIEF

25⁺
years

90⁺
countries

12⁺ million
small farmers

Following their first formation in Indonesia over 25 years ago, Farmer Field Schools (FFS)¹ have served as a “proof of concept” of how transformative learning can help governments, donors and development stakeholders achieve development objectives. The FFS approach, which has now been used in more than 90 countries by more than 12 million small farmers (FAO, 2016), not only creates a space in which the practical needs of smallholders to solve production-related issues can be addressed, but also fosters personal and community-level transformation through empowerment.

FFS are inclusive platforms that bring together various stakeholders, including producers, who can engage in dialogue and collaborate on cross-sectoral processes. They thus pave the way not only to technological innovation but also, and most importantly, to social change. While FFS themselves are a group-based activity, in which each specific school has a beginning and an end, the FFS approach can be applied more generally and can function as a catalyst for the fulfilment of a given

vision, such as, for example, sustainable agriculture and socio-economic development. FFS can lead to improved farming practices, better collective action and greater interaction among stakeholders. As a result of the success of the FFS approach and the general shift towards extension and advisory services that are more participatory, pluralistic and demand-driven, the demand for institutional and financial support for FFS programmes has increased significantly.





Vision for institutionalization of the FFS approach

Reaching sustainable development by enabling rural people to innovate and make transformative change through empowerment and experiential learning.

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Institutionalizing the FFS approach could contribute to the achievement of several development goals, such as sustainable agriculture, food and nutrition security and the reduction of rural poverty. Institutionalizing the approach should therefore enhance the impact and sustainability of FFS and maintain their flexibility and quality at scale. Yet institutionalization is by no means a linear process,

and will entail more than simply incorporating the FFS approach into public agriculture extension systems. If the culture of learning and the changes that FFS can generate are to be made sustainable, all stakeholders, including public, private, producer and community organizations, must make a concerted effort to institutionalize FFS-like experiential learning processes.

‘INSTITUTIONALIZATION’

IS THE PROCESS BY WHICH NEW IDEAS AND PRACTICES ARE ADOPTED BY INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS AND BECOME PART OF ‘THE NORM’.

Source: Jonfa and Waters-Bayer, 2005



KEY MESSAGES

- The FFS approach can serve as a **catalyst for sustainable development**. Specifically, it can be used to achieve the objectives of reducing rural poverty and increasing food and nutrition security.

- **FFS triggers a transformation** by empowering smallholders to set their own agenda, define their issues by themselves, interact as equal partners with service providers, and thereby effect transformative technical and social change.

- Institutionalizing the FFS approach can increase the **impact at scale** and mobilize **human and social capital** through **individual and group empowerment** at the community level.

- Providing **funding**, strengthening **the capacities of individuals and organizations** and creating an **enabling environment** are all prerequisites for the sustainability of transformative experiential learning processes such as FFS.

- **Strong policy support**, which implies framing a clear strategy, making arrangements for implementation and allocating resources, will enable national and local stakeholders to adopt FFS-like approaches.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The **demand for integrated FFS support mechanisms and guidance has risen** as the FFS approach is increasingly taken up by a plurality of different actors, including non-public stakeholders, and as the approach becomes more common among a variety of user groups as a means of addressing diverse technical and social issues. Although **the usefulness of the FFS approach for addressing smallholder livelihood needs, empowering rural producers, enhancing critical thinking and improving decision making is well-documented, the long-term use of the FFS approach by local and national actors often proved problematic.** Because FFS programmes struggle to continue once time-limited funding is exhausted, significant obstacles remain to scaling up the FFS approach and nurturing a continuous culture of learning for community-based FFS groups. While institutionalization of the FFS approach contributes to sustainability, it does not guarantee it.

The main factors for the successful institutionalization of the FFS approach include:

-  **availability of funding;**
-  presence of **local and national capacities** to support FFS-related activities;
-  **strategic targeting.**

Key characteristics of institutionalization of the FFS approach

- Incorporated into policies and planning with clear strategies and incentives
- Integrated into university and tertiary education curricula incl. refresh courses and on-the-job training for extension advisers
- Allocated human and financial resources with clear roles and responsibilities
- Established institutional arrangements for the systematic application of the approach
- Committed Individuals, organizations and political actors
- Self-sustained FFS groups in which the culture of learning becomes the “norm”
- Functional FFS networks and platforms for sharing and learning
- Developed FFS guidelines and standards with functional and iterative M&E processes
- Optimized capacities of individuals, organizations and the enabling environment

Source:
FFS Dgroup discussion,
Nov 2017

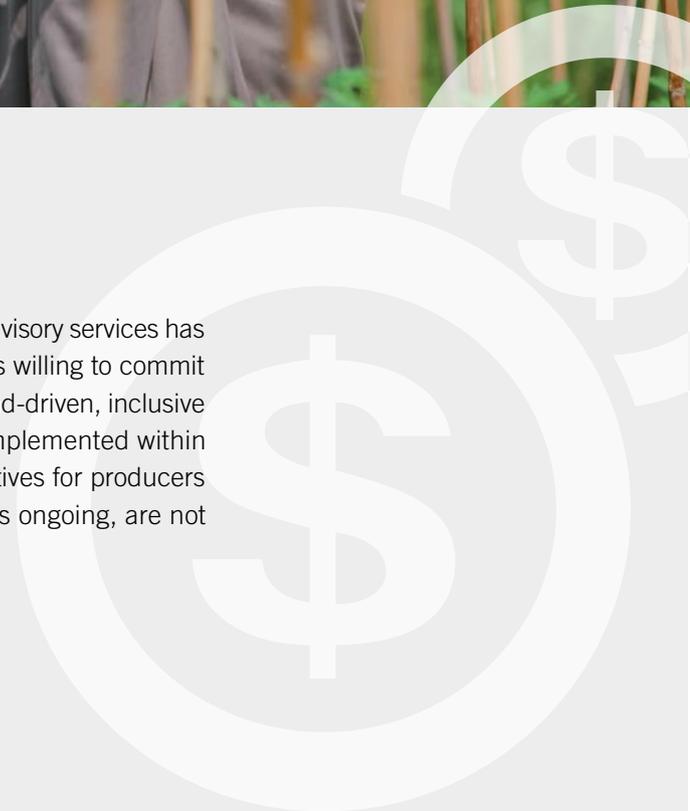




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Securing funding

In many developing countries, public investment in extension and advisory services has been declining. Political actors and decision-makers are not always willing to commit precious resources, nor is there effective **policy support** for a demand-driven, inclusive and participatory extension approach. As a result, FFS is often implemented within the context of projects and programmes where benefits and incentives for producers to participate in FFS, though plentiful as long as the FFS project is ongoing, are not available at scale and cannot be continued over time.



If the importance of participatory learning processes is recognized and if the processes are integrated into national policies, then appropriate public investment can be made in the deployment of FFS as a transformative experiential learning approach. Public institutions can support the process of institutionalization through **recognition, incentives and inclusion in their policy frameworks**, all of which are prerequisites for scaling up FFS without sacrificing quality standards.

EXAMPLE → In the **PHILIPPINES** the FFS approach is included in all national food production programmes, and a yearly budget is set aside for its implementation. This has facilitated the partnership between the Department of Education and the Department of Agriculture for the integration of FFS into elementary and secondary schools (FAO, 2016b).

In **BURKINA FASO** in 2010 the Ministry of Agriculture and all the actors involved in agricultural advisory and extension services (research institutes, universities, producers' organizations, NGOs, etc.) formally registered the FFS approach in the National Agricultural Advisory Support Extension System (SNVACA). The Ministry of Agriculture finances the implementation of more than 2 000 FFS each year (Tiko Hema, personal communication, 2017).

A better **alignment between the FFS approach and national initiatives** or already existing policies helps secure funding and can produce an enabling environment conducive to networking and collaboration among actors, who can thus obtain joint funding for FFS-related activities.

EXAMPLE → In **CHINA** more than 31 000 FFS have been implemented in the last 20 years. A milestone for institutionalizing FFS was reached in 2012 when the National No.1 Official Document on Quickening Agricultural Science and Technology Innovation and Enhancing Agri-produce Supply linked the FFS approach with government objectives (Chulunbaatar and Yoo, 2015).

Innovative funding mechanisms can be developed through partnerships, linkages and synergies with stakeholders that are engaged in FFS-like learning processes or are following an FFS approach. The stakeholders may include the private sector, research institutes, development organizations, markets, producer organizations, financial institutions, etc.

EXAMPLE → In **HONDURAS** the Reactivation of the Education and Agricultural Production in Educational Centers (REPAC) initiative was proposed and financed by the Ministry of Education. It involves several different stakeholders, including the government, the Agricultural and Livestock Secretary (SAG), a private-sector representative of "Cargill de Honduras", local authorities, the National University of Honduras (UNA) and community organizations. UNA is in charge of implementing and monitoring community activities, the local authorities coordinate with farmer organizations, and the Secretary of Education coordinates funding and facilitates the inclusion of key stakeholders (Chulunbaatar *et al.*, 2017).

Promoting **self-financing arrangements** by nurturing FFS and related group activities. FFS lay the foundations for collective action and group cohesion, which promotes the sustainable social and economic development of the groups, and causes a beneficial spill-over effect upon other producers and their groups.

EXAMPLE → In **KENYA** farmers participating in FFS pay for their FFS facilitators and learning materials using the profits from their crops. Networks of FFS groups also invest in other producer groups by covering their start-up costs (Gallagher *et al.* n.d.).

Developing and managing standardized iterative M&E processes, with a set of indicators to assess the quality of FFS both at a national and at a local level. Having documentary evidence of how FFS can advance national development objectives is crucial to **galvanizing commitment and securing funding**.

EXAMPLE → In **CAMBODIA** M&E exercises, including baseline, midterm and post-project surveys, are periodically undertaken to assess the impact of FFS. There are also several tools for monitoring the quality of FFS such as, for example, the FFS Diary, which is used in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the FFS Quality Matrix, which is used in Indonesia (FAO, 2016b).



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Strengthening capacities

Often, country-level capacity to support transformative learning processes such as FFS is limited. Government officials, programme planners and extension advisors often lack the capacity to provide the continuous support needed to nurture the FFS culture of learning or to scale up the FFS process following project termination. It is important to note that the **capacities** in question refer not only to **individuals**, but also to **organizations** and the **enabling environment**, which includes policy-setting. Building up policy capacities is essential to creating a conducive environment in which stakeholders can join and support participatory and transformative learning approaches such as FFS. It is therefore **crucial to invest in strengthening capacities at all levels**.

The **capacities of local institutions** need to be developed to ensure sustainable support systems for good quality FFS, including through formal training, mentoring and coaching through hands-on collaboration with national and local organizations. Strengthening capacities through partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including non-public organizations, has become more important as pluralistic advisory services become more prevalent. Multi-disciplinary programmes depend upon such enhanced partnerships, and facilitate the development of integrated capacities at a national level.

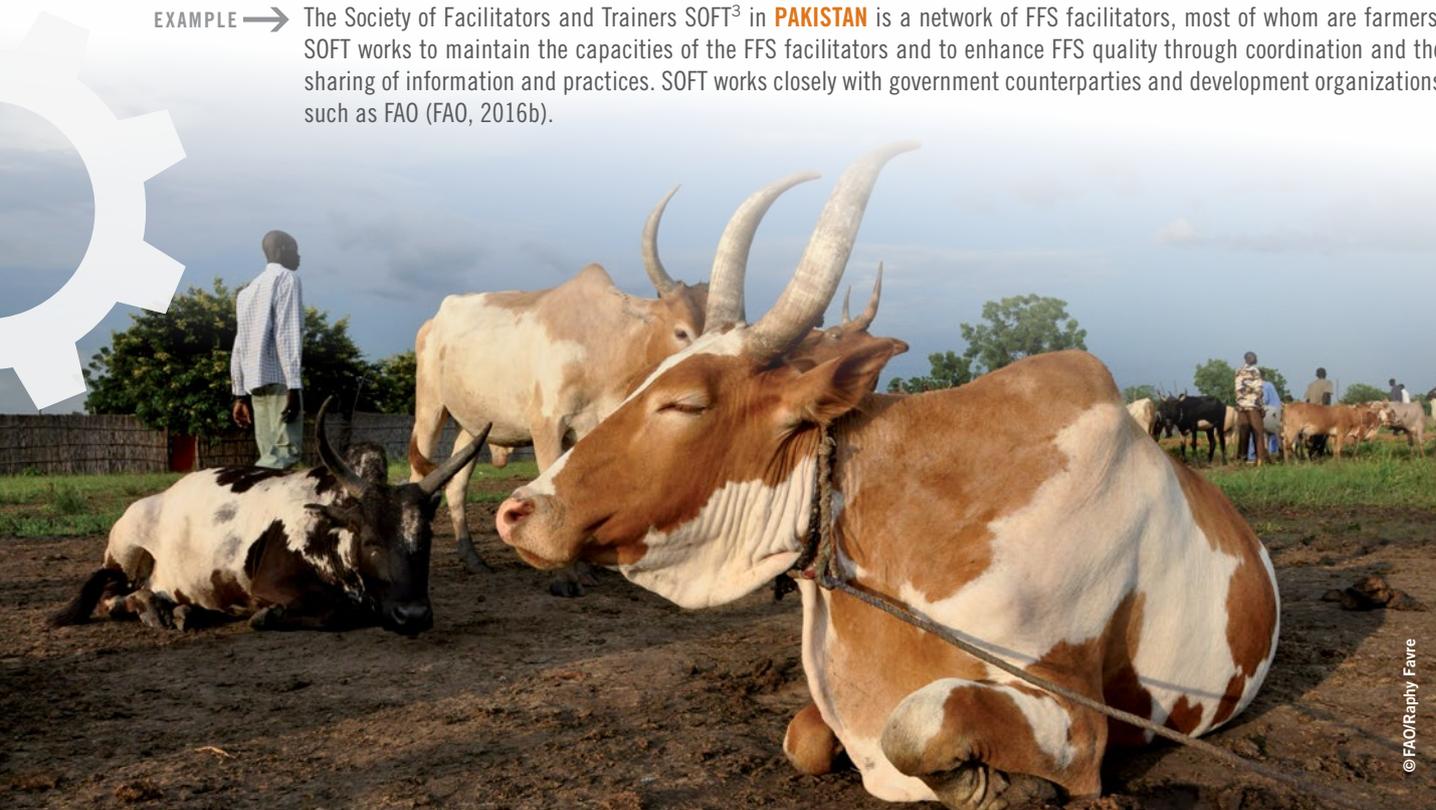
EXAMPLE → The International Potato Centre (CIP), a CGIAR research Centre, has considerable experience in capacity-development for good quality FFS, particularly in **PERU**. Since 2001, CIP has been working with FAO Peru on enhancing the capacities of local institutions and providing a space in which different stakeholders (e.g. municipalities, private actors and POs) can work together using the FFS approach. CIP has also developed a number of training manuals that have been used by other organizations such as NGOs in Peru (Chuluunbaatar *et al.*, 2017).

Developing and institutionalizing **quality assurance guidelines and indicators** (e.g. the certification of facilitators on reference to FFS core principles) will provide guidance on capacity development interventions at all levels.

EXAMPLE → In **PERU**, the “Universidad Nacional del Centro del Peru” of Huancayo organized a graduate seminar on the FFS approach with the REDECA network² in which FFS facilitators and professionals are certified by FAO Peru. The initiative has helped university students and professionals familiarize themselves with the FFS methodology and work as competent extension advisors and FFS facilitators (Chuluunbaatar *et al.*, 2017).

Facilitating the development of FFS **networks and innovation platforms** strengthens the collective capacities of FFS facilitators and experts. The networks and platforms provide a space for cross-sectoral dialogue, collaboration, collective learning and the exchange of information. Networks are not only used to strengthen technical capacity of facilitators by enabling exchange, but can also effect policy changes by lobbying at various levels.

EXAMPLE → The Society of Facilitators and Trainers SOFT³ in **PAKISTAN** is a network of FFS facilitators, most of whom are farmers. SOFT works to maintain the capacities of the FFS facilitators and to enhance FFS quality through coordination and the sharing of information and practices. SOFT works closely with government counterparties and development organizations such as FAO (FAO, 2016b).





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Targeting institutions for sustainability

FFS are usually project-driven and time-bound. FFS activities are focused on achieving project-related objectives, mainly production-related, rather than on galvanizing **commitment to farmer education** and **strengthening local institutions** to support farmer learning processes. While the FFS approach is grassroots-driven, aimed at rural producers and implemented at the community level, the **engagement of local and national stakeholders** during project and programme implementation is crucial for institutionalization, which, in turn, is necessary for building the required capacity and securing the commitment of stakeholders.

Creating **strategic alliances and political incentives** for international and national projects and envisioning programmes that engage and strengthen local institutions from the design phase are essential for the establishment of the capacities needed to support FFS.

EXAMPLE → In **JORDAN**, the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Centre for Agricultural Research and Extension (NCARE), with the support of FAO, carried out a project to promote IPM by teaching farmers and their communities to manage their agro-ecosystems. Once NCARE realized the value of the FFS approach, it started to institutionalize IPM/FFS, by embedding it into the National System of the Extension Service of NCARE and creating a Participatory Extension Unit to expand the initiative across the country (Alhawamdeh, 2012).

FFS-like **participatory and experiential learning processes and approaches in educational systems**, including in vocational training and in tertiary-level agriculture extension courses, need to be mainstreamed. Mainstreaming enhances the capacities of individuals and organizations to support the implementation of FFS locally and nationally.

EXAMPLE → The Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center⁴ (CATIE) in **COSTA RICA** teaches graduate-level courses on participatory methodologies to researchers, scientist, practitioners and experts. It offers courses on agriculture extension and FFS-related topics, including adult education principles, learning theories and facilitation skills. CATIE has applied and adapted FFS to different contexts and farmers' needs, and has documented results from more than 20 years' experience in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Mexico (Chuluunbaatar *et al.*, 2017).

In **PERU**, CIP was first to introduce the FFS approach and has used it widely for projects involving the rural communities of the highlands of Peru and in the central Andes for the last 30 years. CIP used the FFS approach to build a pillar of participatory research and technology development, and has fostered the use and credibility of FFS by leading through example, both nationally and regionally (Chuluunbaatar *et al.*, 2017).



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FFS can help countries meet their SDGs by ensuring sustainable food and nutrition security and by **empowering smallholders to transform their livelihoods**. It requires **commitment and political will** to accelerate the process of FFS adoption, optimize its impact and ensure that national stakeholders provide institutional support, including enabling policies. Institutionalizing FFS entails a commitment to participatory farmer education and a culture of experiential learning.

Institutionalizing FFS is therefore a complex process that requires time and resources: it cannot be done through projects and programmes alone. At the local and community level, FFS is not an aim in itself but a stepping stone towards development through the formation of self-sustaining groups that can work together to improve their communities and territories.

Watch out!

- Overemphasizing technical aspects, while neglecting people's empowerment;
- Focusing on accountability to donors and governments while neglecting what farmers need and expect from FFS;
- Misusing FFS as a delivery mechanism rather than as a platform for experiential learning based on adult education approaches;
- Using FFS to teach new technologies instead of nurturing group learning and innovation.

Source:

FFS Dgroup discussion,
Nov 2017



Capacity development

- Provide strategic guidance both to national and to international programmes and projects on building strategic alliances and partnerships that will create opportunities for the development of national and local capacities.
- Create incentives for facilitators and practitioners to interact, exchange and learn through establishment of local and national platforms and networks.
- Strengthen coordination and collaborative linkages and partnerships among national and local stakeholders involved in FFS-related activities to increase the financial and institutional resources available for FFS.
- Encourage the participation of rural people in policy dialogues and processes by empowering and allowing FFS groups to frame collective policies and advocate for them.
- Support the mainstreaming of participatory and experiential learning processes and approaches in the education system.

Evidence and policy inclusion

- Facilitate the generation of evidence, the coordination of data collection and the documentation of the impact of FFS-like experiential learning processes for better policy support and investment plans.
- Incorporate the FFS approach as an effective adult education and experiential learning approach, making it part of national policies, and setting clear strategies, implementation arrangements and resource allocations.
- Enable innovative funding and implementation mechanisms for collaborative investments linking donor with national/local stakeholders for participatory research and extension activities in which service-providers and rural producers innovate as partners.

Quality assurance

- Establish a regulatory mechanism for the certification of facilitators, the standardization of training programmes and the monitoring of FFS quality based on non-negotiable FFS principles.
- Guarantee the involvement of the relevant stakeholders, including networks, platforms and producer groups, in the development and validation of FFS programmes and curricula to ensure their relevance to the actual needs of the user groups.
- Establish strategic partnerships with institutions such as FAO for technical support to prevent the loss of quality when FFS is scaled up.

Key resources

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Endnotes

- ¹ FFS bring together a group of producers to engage in a process of experiential learning over a season/production cycle as a time-bound activity. For more information and practical guidance on FFS please refer to FAO's FFS Guidance Document 2016.
- ² The Regional Network of FFS Facilitators from the Central Andes (REDECA) was set up as a FFS association in 2006. REDECA's members include professionals who work as independent extension advisors.
- ³ Society of facilitators and trainers in Pakistan: <http://www.softpakistan.org>.
- ⁴ CATIE is a regional centre dedicated to research and graduate education in agriculture, management, conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources. Its members include Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Venezuela, and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and the State of Acre in Brazil.



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