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# Farmer Field Schools

## *an ideal method for urban agriculture?*

**Farmers in urban settings sometimes have limited pools of local technical knowledge on which to draw compared to their rural counterparts, sometimes because they are new to farming, sometimes because the environment in which they farm is new and unfamiliar. The Farmer Field Schools (FFS) provides the means for farmers and facilitators to explore available local knowledge and very importantly in this context, to identify the knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. Some pros and cons are discussed below.**

**T**he history of adult education has shown that adults learn best through hands-on experience and exposure to subject matter that relates closely and relevantly to everyday experience. This is the fundamental principal underlying FFS: it provide the setting and the materials for farmers to explore and discover for themselves on the basis that knowledge actively obtained in this way will be more easily internalised, retained and applied after the training has finished. Field schools typically consist of once-weekly or once-fortnightly meetings of half a day that run throughout the agricultural season. The field school environment can offer an extended training ground for new skills and new potential sources of income.

The limitation of this kind of adult education approach is the degree of dedication it requires from participants. For poor urban dwellers this kind of commitment to one strategy can be difficult.

### **A SEASON-LONG EXPERIENCE**

The FFS spans the full season of a particular crop precisely so that farmers and facilitators can explore problems and opportunities that arise at different moments, from issues of seed health, soil fertility to disease management and harvesting to knowledge of markets. A season-long school can help urban farmers really confront the shifting and perhaps unfamiliar difficulties in the urban environment.

Judgments are needed about particular crop combinations, access and quality, planting conditions, different kinds of stresses, market opportunities that exist, whether to grow for the family or for sale to local fresh or processed markets.

However, the frequency of meetings (once a week preferably) and the duration of the school over the season may conflict with other time demands on families, especially new, unforeseen employment opportunities or seasonal work, for example in the construction industry.

### **AN ARENA FOR PARTICIPATORY EXPERIMENTATION**

As fields of participatory learning, FFS are excellent arenas for experimenting with new technologies. FFS started on the subject of Integrated Pest Management, but experiments on other subjects are ongoing. The specific conditions of urban farming, such as limited space, insecurity of tenure, poor soils, competing labour demands and so on require assessment of the best-bet crop management options. A stable means of conducting experiments through which farmers will themselves select the technologies best adapted to the circumstances is extremely important. Possible limitations on this involve the willingness and capacity of urban dwellers to overcome competing demands.

### **FARMER-TO-FARMER LEARNING**

The scaling up of FFS is based on a system of “training of trainers”, or more accurately, training of facilitators, since the emphasis is always on facilitating learning

in a hands-on context, rather than on extension-type training. Depending on personal aptitude, some of the persons who undergo the first FFS then go on to facilitate other FFS. Learning seems to occur far more readily through farmer-to-farmer interactions than when a technician or scientist facilitates, though the latter continues to be involved as resource persons for particular elements of the curriculum. Farmer-to-farmer learning and the group formation brought about by FFS also has the potential for other benefits, notably the formation of social capital via the linkages forged among members and the technical leadership fostered amongst the facilitators. Though a whole range of informal mechanisms already exist which contribute to this goal (informal credit groups, soup kitchens, child-minding groups etc) FFS offer an important opportunity for the additional formation of social and economic capital through sharing of productive knowledge and resources.

### **HEALTH**

The agro-ecological and physiological character of soil-crop health relationships is a fundamental part of the field school curriculum: from understanding plant-pathogen and plant-insect interactions to understanding the effects of different kinds of fertilizer and pesticide applications. The circumstances of urban crop production, makes health of primary importance for farmers.

There may be limited familiarity with pests, diseases, or physiological symptoms present in the urban environment. The soils in urban areas are often highly impoverished, making soil fertility a major issue. However, poverty and insecurity of tenure can lead to short-term strategies to ensure quick income generation, despite the associated risks.

As far as is known, experience with the application of the FFS approach to urban settings is still very limited. Some work is currently underway in Ecuador and Zimbabwe, but it is as yet too early to report results in terms of the potential benefits and limitations discussed above. We look forward to hearing of more experiences and to identifying ways to better adapt Farmer Field Schools to the circumstances of urban agriculture.

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