

STOCKTAKING OF FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS IN THE CARIBBEAN

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Abstract

Globally, Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) use participatory and ecological approaches for field testing and local adaptation of innovative practices and knowledge in different technical areas. FFSs were introduced in the Caribbean during 2002-2003 to address the indiscriminate use of toxic pesticides and the consequent negative impact on the environment and human health. From February to May 2016, a stocktaking of FFSs in the Caribbean was undertaken to review progress as well as to determine their impact at the national and regional levels. Towards this end, a desk research was conducted to secure the required information from the countries and collaborating regional institutions. Results indicate that the FFS approach has varied from country to country and the reach of the FFS experience was conditioned by inter alia the institutional capacity of the implementing entity, the commodity being researched, funding and the eco-region. The Paper presents the final results of the stocktaking and shares the outcomes which are anticipated to be (i) A virtual library of FFS experiences in the Caribbean as well as documents generated and related to the experiences of FFS (ii) an interactive database of related projects, organizations and institutions that focus on FFS in the Caribbean countries and (iii) systematization of relevant experiences, including list of actors, location and available thematic bibliography, and initial ideas on FFS quality.

Introduction

Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) use participatory and ecological approaches for field testing and local adaptation of innovative practices and knowledge in various technical areas. FFSs originated in Asia during the mid- to late-1980s and subsequently spread to Africa as well as Latin America and the Caribbean. The indiscriminate use of toxic pesticides and the consequent negative impact on the environment and human health were the main triggers that led to the introduction of FFSs in the Caribbean during 2002-2003. Since then, field schools have spread within the Caribbean with varying results. In order to review progress and determine the impact of FFSs at the national and regional levels, a stocktaking exercise was undertaken by FAO via a desk study.

Materials and methods

The FAO Sub-regional Office for the Caribbean (Barbados) sent correspondence to 14 countries and 4 regional agencies in order to obtain relevant information for the stocktaking. Responses from 11 of 14 countries and two regional agencies that have been engaged in FFS have facilitated the development of a database of FFSs in the Caribbean. Where provided, the country-specific information was used to populate the database with details on linkages to FAO programs as well as projects and institution contacts. In analyzing the information provided by the countries, due consideration was given to the issue of FFS quality and the verification of areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Main results

In 2002, Trinidad and Tobago was the first country to be introduced to the FFS methodology, with the implementation of a Training of Master Trainers for participants from six countries (Dominica, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago) under an EU-funded Regional Pilot Project. In 2003, the six countries embarked on a Training of Trainers (ToT) under the same project. Over the next 3-4 years, field schools were organized in some of the project countries (e.g. Dominica, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago). Guyana successfully mobilized funding from the Guyana Rice Development Board (GRDB) to launch a commodity (rice) FFS in June 2003. St. Lucia launched a FFS-TOT as part of an EU-funded project implemented by FAO. Antigua did likewise in 2013 with the launch of the Zero Hunger Challenge Initiative and St. Kitts and Nevis became engaged in May 2015, through the FAO project TCP/STK/3501.

Table 1 summarizes the history of FFS implementation in the region, including the number of farmers trained in each country and by the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI). Guyana and Haiti are the only countries with thousands of farmers trained. In all of the other countries <1000 farmers are reported to have been trained. Notably, the number of farmers trained is not reflective of the quality of the FFS experience and the degree of diffusion. FFS implementation generally targeted farmers with shared interest and willingness to take risks. The sustainability of the FFS approach is dependent on the establishment of institutional support for the efficient and effective functioning of a cadre of FFS trainers/facilitators. The TOTs undertaken have graduated a significant number of FFS trainers throughout the region.

Table 1. A summary of FFSs in the Caribbean

COUNTRY / AGENCY	Start of FFS Experience	End of most recent FFS	No. of farmers trained
Trinidad & Tobago	2002	2008	Not reported
Guyana	2003	Ongoing	> 30,000 ¹ (attendances)
Dominica		2014	178
Haiti ²		Ongoing	2,126
Jamaica ³		2014	415
CARDI	2008	2016	124
Grenada	2009	2011	94
Saint Lucia	2009	2015	296
Belize	2011	ongoing	754
Antigua and Barbuda	2013	Ongoing	906
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	2013	2014	84
St. Kitts & Nevis	2015	Ongoing	22

1. Guyana reported over 30,000 attendances, some individual farmers attended more than one session

2. The report from Haiti speaks to FFS activity which commenced in November 2012 – nine (9) years after the completion of the TOT

3. The report from Jamaica speaks to FFS activity which commenced in March 2009 – approximately six (6) years after the completion of the TOT

In the Caribbean, the term ‘Farmer Field School’ has also been used for practical, hands-on farmer training conducted in the field using participatory methods. While they do not fully fit in the traditional ‘FFS mould’ these activities have been given due consideration and included in the FFS database as they contribute significantly to the overall development of small/family farmers, backyard gardeners and rural farming communities. Furthermore, FFS curricula have covered not only crop and pest management but a myriad of other topics/thematic areas (livestock nutrition/housing, land management, backyard gardening, business skills, enterprise development) and subjects such as HIV/AIDS (Guyana). These interventions paid little attention to the women’s informal systems and survival strategies that can significantly impact FFS processes and outcomes. Participation-wise both women and men are involved, as farmer trainees and as FFS trainers/facilitators. The ratio of female to male trainers is varied: St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the only country with higher female to male (12:9) trainers. Antigua and Barbuda has the second highest ratio (0.98), followed by Haiti (0.86). All the other countries have more male FFS trainers, with Guyana having the least number of female to male FFS trainers (0.07).

Conclusions

While the FFS methodology has been embraced by Caribbean countries, its application seems to differ widely. In some instances the duration of the interventions were insufficient to allow for experiential learning and a clear understanding of the dynamics of key agro-ecological, socio-ecological and socio-economic relationships. Some interventions bore the features of other participatory approaches that are learner-centred, field-based and designed to catalyse the transfer of technology; and many of these seemed vulnerable to loss of quality due to the short length of the interventions. In the countries reviewed, most documented evidence of the FFS approach relates to impacts at the farm(er) level. However FFS impacts transcend to the individual level. Collaboration among farmers, facilitators and experts serves to build social capital which is a prerequisite for collective action.

In most instances the FFSs included an exit strategy, but this was not sufficiently robust to facilitate next step actions among farmers, in relation to networking and knowledge management designed to reduce transaction cost along the value chain. The majority of FFS programmes did not have sustainable funding and thus suffered post-project collapse, in particular where national institutional support was limited due to fiscal challenges and deficient public-private partnerships.

In moving the process forward, in respect of FFS programming in Caribbean Agriculture, due attention must be paid to the collective level and the establishment of mechanisms that can foster equity of gender relations through genuine participation.

FAO has recently developed a Guidance Document for FFS good quality programs, which will be an essential tool to support improvement of the quality of FFS at country and field level. This Guidance Document <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5296e.pdf> is hereby launched in the Caribbean at the 52nd Meeting of the Caribbean Food Crops Society.

Bibliographic references

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