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## Farmer Field Schools - a unique way to teach farmers



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Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is a unique way to educate farmers and is an effective platform for sharing of experiences and collectively solving agriculture related problems. The first FFS were designed and managed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Indonesia in 1989. Since then more than two million farmers across Asia have participated in this type of learning. During the 1970s it became increasingly apparent that pest resistance and resurgence caused by the indiscriminate use of insecticides posed an immediate threat to the gains of the Green Revolution. At the same time, new researches demonstrated the viability of biological control of major rice pests.

However, gaps still existed between the science generated in research institutions and common farmer practices, conditioned by years of aggressive promotion of pesticide use. Over the ensuing years, a number of approaches were tried to bring integrated pest management (IPM) to small farmers - particularly rice farmers - in Asia, with mixed results. Some experts claimed that the principles of IPM were too complex for small farmers to master, and that centrally-designed messages were still the only way to convince farmers to change their practices. By the end of the 1980s, a new approach to farmer training emerged in Indonesia called the 'Farmer Field School' (FFS). These field schools were designed basically to address the problem of lack of knowledge among Asian farmers relating to agro ecology, particularly the relationship between insect pests and beneficial insects.

The Farmer Field School brings together concepts and methods from agro ecology, experiential education and community development. These FFS were initiated based on two premises. Firstly, although farming itself is done mainly on individual farms, the rural community plays an essential role in farmer's strategies for survival and development. Farmers like to get together to share information and other forms of mutual support with others whom they trust. Secondly, farmers have a tradition of developing and applying technologies and refining it through experiences. They learn tacitly – learning by doing.

In this regard Dr. Shiraj A Wajih, President of Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group and member of State Agriculture Committee of Uttar Pradesh said, "The FFS approach is built around these two premises. It responds directly to the information needs of the small marginal woman farmers who have been largely neglected in conventional extension systems. The FFS offers farmers the opportunity to learn by sharing, by being involved in experimentation, discussion and decision-making. This strengthens the sense of ownership of rural communities in technological packages and evolving new knowledge and skills."

In the FFS process, village meetings are conducted and a seasonal action plan is prepared at the beginning of the year. A fortnight before the FFS day, problem cards are distributed to the farmers wherein they enter the problems encountered by them in their fields. The problem cards are collected and distributed to the Master Trainers, who are specialists in their fields, for

providing remedial solutions to the problem and for identifying appropriate resource persons. Very often, farmers also invite resource persons and experts from agriculture universities, government departments, etc. to provide valuable inputs and remedial solutions to problems. On the FFS day, participants gather at a common place and the session continues for 4-6 hours. Follow-up session of preceding month's FFS day is also conducted. Participants visit demonstration farm site to observe encouraging changes brought on by the application of suggested remedies. The Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group has been running 12 such farmer schools in two blocks of Gorakhpur district since the last five years.

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