The Farmer Field School (FFS) is an experiential training methodology grounded in the principles of adult education. It focuses on group learning by discovery, experimentation and observation, group analysis of results and making better decisions (Aguilar et al. 2010, Rivas et al. 2012).

The FFS was developed by specialists from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at the end of the 1980s in Asia and Africa (Pontius et al). Since then, organizations such as the Zamorano Pan-American Agricultural School in Honduras (Bautista-Solís 2012), the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and CATIE (Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center), mainly through the Mesoamerican Agroenvironmental Program (MAP) (Gutiérrez et al. 2013) have used and enriched this methodology.

Multithematic farmer field schools for Climate Smart Territories implementation

FFSs are classrooms without walls where participants learn about topics of common interest through observation, discovery and exchange of experiences. Furthermore, topics strengthen capacity for improving livelihoods while also supporting the establishment of Climate Smart Territories (CST). Examples of topics include gender equity, food and nutritional security, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, restoration of ecosystems services and business administration.

Strategic and methodological approach

The methodological steps for the design and implementation of an FFS begin with a diagnostic and development of a baseline of the zone or territory where the activities will be carried out. Once the first phase has ended, families are identified and invited to be part of the FFS. Grass-roots organizations that will be responsible for implementing the FFS are identified, to work in close collaboration with MAP-CATIE under duly established collaboration agreements.

The criteria developed by MAP-CATIE for organization of an FFS follow:

1. Each FFS has the support of a grass-roots organization, a MAP partner.
2. Each FFS has a facilitator/promoter belonging to one of the MAP partner organizations.
3. It is usually composed of 20 to 30 men and women (adults and young people), representatives of the families who have common interests and similar levels of skills and knowledge. One or more members of each family may participate in FFS activities (ideally 40% will be adults of each gender and 20% will be young people, also both male and female).
4. An FFS is usually developed at the community level with direct activities on the farm of each of the participating families.
5. After formation of an FFS and informing the community of its structure and operation, a farm and home-garden plan is prepared with each family. As a basis for the plan, diagnostics of the farm’s resources (biophysical and socioeconomic), its constraints and its opportunities are prepared and the farm and home-garden plan is defined.

Preparation, development and implementation of the FFS curriculum

This next step consists of preparation of the curriculum design by both the families and the facilitator. Information from the plans is used to design the curriculum of the FFS for each community. These FFS then implement a variety of learning sessions, test plots, individual technical assistance visits and learning exchanges among families. In addition, farmers analyze together the potential financial instruments that could support farm innovation (e.g., payment for environmental services schemes). In each of these topics, care is taken to integrate cross-cutting topics, such as equity (e.g., gender, ethnic, age), climate change adaptation and mitigation, organization and administration, business plans and marketing, aimed at improving farm production as part of the implementation of the CST approach.
Learning and participatory experimentation sessions

In a training cycle an average of six meetings are held, scheduled to be in line with the phenological cycle of the crops.

In each meeting with the families, topics related to food security, home garden and farm diversification and production intensification are discussed in a simple, practical and participatory way. Among the work methods used are learning by doing and field/farm trips. Generally the activities are carried out on the farm or in the home garden of one of the families participating in the FFS, and each family is encouraged to undertake at least one trial related to the work topics (agroecological or agroforestry practice) on their farms and home gardens. The experimentation or trials facilitate an interchange of learning among those in the FFS and the group has the opportunity to assess lessons learned and adopt the improvements suitable for each.

In MAP, the FFS has become an important instrument for monitoring and getting feedback. Through FFS farmers try out the topics they learn in the meeting as well as technical assistance recommendations. It also allows the farmers and their families to reconvene to evaluate results on implementation of innovations, discussing the results and recommending adjustments to the original practices.

FFSs evolve over time, addressing the new challenges faced by the farming families, such as responding to climate change and variability. As one evaluator of an FFS put it, “They learned many things, but above all, they strengthened their capacity to innovate, to solve their own problems.”

Promotion of gender equity and equality as a cross-cutting approach

During the training of both facilitators and families, spaces are dedicated to gender equity awareness to foster equitable relationships. The MAP Norway team provides technical-methodological tools about inclusion of the gender-equity approach to facilitators and the organization they belong to.

In the FFS, the contributions and roles of the family members (young people, women, men) are highlighted in all areas of the curriculum. In the case of farm and home patio planning, affirmative actions are promoted to stimulate participation, especially in productive decision making, by all members of the family.

The processes include reflections on gender equity in different roles (reproductive, productive and community) and decision making. These learning processes are carried out during the FFS sessions in 40-minute thematic capsules based on the methodological material Gender in Farmer Field Schools: Capsules for Learning and Inclusion, presented in this document. All of these actions are framed within the MAP Gender Strategy.

Training of male and female FFS facilitators and promoters

The facilitators/promoters take part in a training process led by the MAP Norway team and that is carried out in parallel with that of rural families. During this process, the facilitators/promoters strengthen their technical-methodological knowledge and skills for guiding the work carried out with the families. The selection of facilitators and promoters is done jointly by MAP-CATIE with partner organizations, with a balanced participation of men and women. Criteria used to select facilitators include:

- They live in the area or have the possibility of traveling to the community where the FFS group is located.
- They can read and write.
- They have practical experience in management of farms/home patios.
- They have skills and experience in working with groups.
- They are open to incorporating the gender approach in processes of teaching, learning, attitudes and values.

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