



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS AND EMPOWERMENT



Community empowerment, social inclusion and gender equality,
experience from Jordan and Tunisia

Recommended citation:

FAO. 2016. Farmer Field Schools and empowerment: Community empowerment, social inclusion and gender equality, experience from Jordan and Tunisia. Cairo. <https://doi.org/10.4060/i6343en>

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The mention of specific companies or products of manufacturers, whether or not these have been patented, does not imply that these have been endorsed or recommended by FAO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

The views expressed in this information product are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of FAO.

© FAO, 2016

FAO encourages the use, reproduction and dissemination of material in this information product. Except where otherwise indicated, material may be copied, downloaded and printed for private study, research and teaching purposes, or for use in non-commercial products or services, provided that appropriate acknowledgement of FAO as the source and copyright holder is given and that FAO's endorsement of users' views, products or services is not implied in any way.

All requests for translation and adaptation rights, and for resale and other commercial use rights should be made via www.fao.org/contact-us/licence-request or addressed to copyright@fao.org.

FAO information products are available on the FAO website (www.fao.org/publications) and can be purchased through publications-sales@fao.org.

Farmer field schools and empowerment

GENDER EQUALITY, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT - EXPERIENCE FROM JORDAN AND TUNISIA

Lucie Chocholata, Gender and Development Expert¹ (FAO, AGP), Manuela Allara, FFS Programme Specialist (FAO, AGP), Alfredo Impiglia, FAO Regional Initiative and FFS coordinator in NENA region (FAO, RNE) and Elisabetta Tagliati, Programme Officer (FAO, AGP – Rotterdam Convention)

Key words: Farmer Field School (FFS), Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Social Inclusion, Community Empowerment, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Sustainable Agricultural Production, Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, Jordan, Tunisia

WE LIVE IN A QUICKLY CHANGING AND INTERCONNECTED WORLD FACING NEW CONDITIONS, SOCIAL AS WELL AS ENVIRONMENTAL. OUR CAPACITY TO COPE WITH THESE CHALLENGES HEAVILY DEPENDS ON OUR ADAPTABILITY, THE CAPACITY TO TAKE RIGHT DECISIONS, TO BUILD STRONG INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY AND COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT. ALL THESE ASPECTS, ALONGSIDE TECHNICAL AGRICULTURAL SKILLS, ARE BEING DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY ADDRESSED BY FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS.

The Farmer Field Schools allow people to make better decisions. The approach has been, in its various forms and local adaptations, used worldwide for decades. Initially, FFS programmes were related mainly to IPM, but soon have been adapted to other technical domains. There is an evidence coming from different countries that FFS increase the efficiency of agricultural production, its sustainability and profits. It has become evident that FFS contribute to community cohesion and its development in many different aspects including social dynamics, and gender equality dimensions or work with social vulnerabilities. Therefore, FFS may play an important role in social inclusion and gender mainstreaming and contribute to improved participation and livelihoods of vulnerable groups², sustainability of agricultural production and reduction of rural poverty by empowerment of rural communities. Discussion and a deeper understanding of gender equality related aspects is crucial and identification of good practice examples will continue within the context of the FFS networks at regional level.

Between 2004 and 2014, FAO has developed over few thousands FFS in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region primarily on good agricultural practices and IPM, covering ten countries³ under the Regional Integrated Pest Management Programme in the Near East (GTFS/REM/070/ITA). The main objective has been to improve food security in the target areas of the participating countries and territories through community based – FFS – IPM, aiming at reducing and possibly eliminating pesticide related risks for health and environment, and at improving farmers' access to markets. The FFS has been adapted for several crops as tomato, cucumber, olive, apple, wheat, citrus, strawberry, pistachio and mint. In the case of Lebanon, FFS on poultry has been introduced, on organic agriculture in Syria and animal production in Morocco.

¹ This document and the scoping exercise on "FFS, gender equality, social inclusion and community empowerment" has been developed and conducted by Lucie Chocholata, Gender and Development Expert (FAO, AGP) together with Manuela Allara, FFS Programme Specialist (FAO, AGP), and Alfredo Impiglia, FAO Regional Initiative and FFS coordinator in NENA region (FAO, RNE) and Elisabetta Tagliati, Programme Officer (FAO, AGP – Rotterdam Convention). For any comments, questions or suggestions, please contact the authors (lucie.chocholata@fao.org, manuela.allara@fao.org, alfredo.impiglia@fao.org, elisabetta.tagliati@fao.org).

² The category of vulnerable groups is internally extremely heterogeneous and its characteristics depend on numerous factors as culture, regional context, economic dynamics or activity of its members. All this changes over time. Within this context the term is used with consciousness of what mentioned and as a strategic category that permits a formulation of appropriate action with an ultimate goal of amelioration of quality of lives of these persons and groups.

³ The Syrian Arab Republic, the Republic of Lebanon, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Palestinian Territories, Tunisian Republic, Kingdom of Morocco, People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Republic of Iraq.

The FFS approach has been used to fulfil the main objective of the project, to build and strengthen the capacity in the participating countries in IPM and to put basis for the sustainability of the approach at national and regional level. FFS facilitators, master trainers and farmers have been trained and efforts to facilitate access of women to IPM and FFS have been made in order to empower them by providing knowledge, skills and the participative environment. About 13% of 20 000 farmers trained were women. This allowed them to play a more prominent role in their communities and some of them became farmer-facilitators. Of the more than 2 500 facilitators trained, 28% were women. By establishing FFS in the programme, a number of formal and informal rural organizations have been created. This FFS potential should be further developed. Building on this regional experience, the first step within the work on gender equality and women's empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment has been done through the scoping exercise in the NENA region, with the focus on Jordan and Tunisia.

Furthermore, these activities are anchored in the broader FAO's work on gender equality and the empowerment of women which is guided by its corporate Policy on Gender Equality (2012-2025), clearly states that *"Gender equality is central to FAO's mandate to achieve food security for all by raising levels of nutrition, improving agricultural productivity and natural resource management, and improving the lives of rural populations. FAO can achieve its goals only if it simultaneously works towards gender equality and supports women's diverse roles in agriculture and rural development."*⁴ And the FAO Strategic Programme 3 indicates that *"Women play a critical role in securing enough nutritious food on the table as much as in contributing to income generating capacity of rural households. Addressing inequalities between women and men in access to productive resources, services, and economic opportunities should therefore be an essential ingredient of food security and rural poverty reduction strategies."*⁵

This scoping exercise aims to provide an insight into and deeper understanding of gender and social dimensions of FFS. It offers an impulse of reflection on this multidimensional topic for better inclusion of these aspects to the FFS broader discussion and future work. A part of this exercise consists in the identification and description of successful stories to better communicate the impact of FFS on individual and community level. A number of farmers from Jordan and Tunisia has been requested to share their stories, their experience with FFS. Thus, this is a possibility to have an insight into their lives through their own voices.

In this document some of the farmers' stories are presented, describing their experience and changes in their personal and professional life. The exercise is based on qualitative methods to capture the information through focus group discussions complemented by individual discussions with FFS (ex-) members and facilitators, using open-ended guiding questions. Main thematic areas of the scoping exercise are: **gender equality and women's empowerment**; **social inclusion** (social vulnerability, ethnicity, age, etc.); **social protection in terms of community empowerment** (building of their own social support systems/safety nets/mechanisms); **nutrition-related decision making** (diet diversity/improved diet, health); and **sustainable agricultural production**, IPM and access to and control over natural resources.

Working towards poverty reduction (most of the poor live in rural areas), improvement of livelihoods and empowerment of rural communities have today a paramount importance and play a key role in enhancing stability at national and regional level. It is also related to and it influences both the village-town as well as international migration. It is extremely relevant to talk about social dimensions of development actions also within the context of agriculture.

⁴ 2012. FAO Policy on Gender Equality: Attaining Food Security Goals in Agriculture and Rural Development

⁵ 2014. FAO, SP3

REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

In the NENA region, more than 80% of agricultural production is provided by small-scale agriculture. Small farmers, especially women and youth, are a vital element to reducing poverty and improving global food security. Inequality and rural poverty continue to represent one of the main challenges in the region and small-scale agriculture remains neglected by major policies related to agriculture and food security. Sustainable development of small-scale agriculture has the potential to boost local economies, and lift communities out of poverty and create decent jobs opportunities in rural areas.

A common pattern in Jordan and Tunisia is the underestimation of women's contribution to agriculture. This is mostly because of the informal nature of their involvement especially under the form of unpaid labour on family farms or as non-registered seasonal workers. Most of them remain out of labour statistics and thus invisible to policy makers. Furthermore, women are facing specific barriers as access to land (decision making over land), information, extension services, credit and cultural barriers where women's agricultural work is perceived as auxiliary and as an extension of their household responsibilities.⁶ Of course, some of the mentioned barriers are faced also by poor and often landless men.

Jordan / has population of 6 607 million, and it is classified as a middle income country with a per capita GNI of USD 5.160⁷. Jordan's HDI is 0.745⁸ which is in the high human development category and the country at 77 out of 187 countries and territories.⁹

Unemployment is 13% overall, 11% for men and 22% for women¹⁰, and 33.7% for young people aged 15 to 24. Non-Jordanians make up about 25% of the labour force, while up to 1 million Jordanians work abroad. In 2010 14.4% of Jordanians were living below the absolute poverty line, rising to 16.8% in rural areas. On average, poor households are deeper in poverty than they were a decade ago. Approximately 22.5% (and 28.8% in rural areas) of all households stand just above the poverty line and are vulnerable to falling below it.¹¹

Contribution of agricultural sector to GDP is 3.8%¹² and it officially employs 2.7% of the formal labour force. However, it is estimated that 20% of the rural population depends on agriculture for some part of their income.¹³ It is important to mention that most of women work in agriculture as unpaid labour force in family farms and they are not captured by labour statistics.¹⁴

Over the past 5-10 years, agricultural exports have grown at over 15% per year, and in 2011 they were seven times higher than in 1996, accounting for some 16% of total exports.¹⁵

Jordan's landlocked territory has only a short shoreline along the Gulf of Aqaba. The northern part of the rift valley is referred to Jordan Valley or Al Ghor, and is home to a significant part of the country's agriculture. Jordan has three different farming systems (the north-western tip of the country is primarily dryland, cereal and livestock farming; the central region pastoral agriculture and the eastern desert area is largely uninhabited).¹⁶ One of the Jordan's most important challenges represents its limited natural

⁶ AARINENA 2012

⁷ World Bank 2014

⁸ However the HDI falls to 0.607, a loss of 18.6% due to inequality.

⁹ UNDP 2014

¹⁰ IFAD and Department of Statistics 2013

¹¹ IFAD and Poverty Reduction Strategy 2013-2020

¹² World Bank 2014

¹³ IFAD 2014

¹⁴ AARINENA 2012

¹⁵ IFAD 2014

¹⁶ AARINENA 2012

resources, primarily water scarcity. Excessive and improper use of agrochemicals negatively impacted water quality. Furthermore, Jordan has to cope with difficulties deriving from the Syrian crisis, among others with an important decrease in agriculture exports.

The most typical form of women's participation in agriculture is as unpaid labour force in family farms. They are perceived as helpers or farmer assistants by the community as well as by themselves, even though they are providing significant portion of the agricultural work. There are also women involved as paid labour force, mainly as daily and seasonal workers. Independent women farmers are not very frequent and most of them manage not more than 1.5 ha.¹⁷

FFS were introduced in Jordan in 2003 through the FAO programme GTFS/REM/070/ITA. Since then, over 150 FFS have been implemented mainly along the Jordan Valley, South Shouneh, Mahes & Al Fehaies, Dair Alla, Madaba, Irbid, Mafraq, Highlands and the Safi Area. About 400 trainers have been formed and 4 000 farmers have actively participated and benefited from over 16 specific topics regarding several cultivations such as tomatoes, watermelons and cucumbers.

Tunisia / has population of 11 000 million, and is classified as a middle income country with a per capita GNI of USD 4.210¹⁸. Tunisia's HDI is 0.721 which is in the high human development category and the country at 90 out of 187 countries and territories.¹⁹

Unemployment stands at 15.7% overall, 13.1% for men and 22.5% for women²⁰, and 31.2% for young people aged 15 to 24. Tunisia made a big progress in poverty rates decline in the last 15 years, however there are significant differences among regions and between urban and rural areas. In 2010 15.5% of Tunisians were living below the absolute poverty line, rising to 22.6% in rural areas.²¹ The rural poor are mostly landless families working as daily and seasonal workers and small-scale farmers in rain fed agriculture. It is primarily the rural northwest of the country where poverty pockets are located.

Contribution of agricultural sector to GDP is 8.6% and it officially employs 16.2% of the formal labour force. But almost half of the country's workforce is employed in agriculture and agriculture related work.²² The not new phenomenon of male out-migration affected also Tunisia and changed dynamics in the male-dominated agricultural sector.²³

Tunisia has four different farming systems (the north-western tip of the country is primarily humid mixed; the northern central part dryland with cereal and livestock farming; pastoralism in the central part and the very southern tip of the country; and largely uninhabited desert area in the south). More than half of the country's land is arable. 97% of farms cultivate an area of less than 50 ha and more than 50% of all farms cultivate on less than 5 ha.²⁴

FFS were introduced in Tunisia in 2010 through the FAO regional IPM Programme in the Near East - GTFS/REM/070/ITA. Since then, around 30 FFS have been implemented on the recognition of diseases, pests, and crop management on tomato, pepper, strawberry, citrus, apple and olive trees across the Tunisian territory. Around 1 000 farmers and technicians have benefited from the trainings and have also been involved in inter-FFS visits to exchange experiences and lessons learnt with farmers in other regions.

¹⁷ AARINENA 2012

¹⁸ World Bank 2014

¹⁹ UNDP 2014

²⁰ IFAD 2013 and World bank 2014

²¹ World Bank 2014

²² AARINENA 2012

²³ AARINENA 2012

²⁴ AARINENA 2012

FARMERS' STORIES

LIBERATING AND DEVELOPING OWN POTENTIAL

Asma (Jordan, Karak, South Ghor – Safi)

Asma's home is Safi, southward of the Dead Sea in Karak Governorate where she lives together with her family.

Asma was 24 when in 2007 she was proposed, together with her brother, to join the FFS group on tomatoes production in this area. She was one of the two women in that FFS group. Her skills improved rapidly as well as Asma's capacity to express clearly her opinion and to communicate openly with other group members that were mostly men. "My voice changed, I started speaking more loudly and with more confidence".



Nayel, the FFS facilitator and today the Head of Project department from the local extension office explained why he contacted Asma: "I know local people; I have been working here for ages. Asma was extremely shy but she was working very hard. I realized that she needs support to liberate her potential. The situation was facilitated by the presence of her brother in the same FFS group."

Later on, in the third year of the participation in FFS, Asma became an FFS facilitator for a group of women. At that point her sisters, Zeinab and Wisal, also joined. Even today, when there is no active FFS programme, the FFS ex-group of women is still meeting to discuss technical problems they are facing in their agricultural activities and to share information. One of the women from Asma's

group said: "Everybody used to work on his/her own. The FFS changed us a lot, we strengthened our relations and we work very often together nowadays. We trust each other." This ex-FFS women group is practicing the rotation saving system, in Jordan called "jameiyah", which is usually used for the purpose of educating the members' kids.

Asma started working on the family farm at her 17's. Nowadays it is she, together with her elderly father, to be the principal managers and decision makers. Her big sisters Zeinab and Wisal are the co-workers and co-managers, "everybody has his or her own important role". Their family is able to do all farm work by themselves so they hire 4-5 seasonal workers (neighbours) only in specific moments of the year, especially during the harvest.

They used to grow basically only tomatoes for the commercial purpose. After their FFS experience they introduced a new variety of tomatoes (through the FFS programme) and new crops as okra, bean, squash, broccoli, or cauliflower. They produce for local market and home consumption using actively IPM approach. The quantity of pesticides used lowered by more than half. Among technical skills, knowledge, tools they learnt in FFS they see as most significant the observation, soil solarisation, and use of pest traps.

When we asked Asma what she perceives as the most positive effect of her FFS experience, she said: "I have much more self-confidence and self-esteem. My knowledge improved, we regularly share information with other farmers, we discuss. And my family respects me." The women in her group said: "Even if men are still more critical towards women than towards other men, we are now recognized by them much more because of our knowledge and capacities in the field work. So basically we now decide what we do."

"My neighbours contact me whenever they have a problem in their field, and I am able to give them an advice." There are other seven women farmers that started their agricultural activity with Asma's help, she became an example for them.

The family income increased significantly thanks to lower production expenses and higher income. They are also able to sell their produce at 5-10% higher price because of the IPM quality. This allowed them to do many things that were impossible before, "we didn't have remaining resources available before starting practicing FFS knowledge". "Now we are sending two of our kids and our youngest sister to university and we could also afford to travel three times to Mecca for pilgrimage (Omra)", said Asma smiling and with her wide-open eyes.

Asma told us that when there is a conflict in the community (usually because of water), they act as a group and become mediators between the two parts. They are able to play this role, because of the respect from the community they gained through the regular FFS work.

And Nayel is adding: "Asma is another person today. She became strong and self-confident, able to express and to defend her opinion. She is guiding and inspiring other people now."

THE WAY OF INDEPENDENCE AND RECOGNITION

Hasan (Jordan, Karak, South Ghor - Safi)

Hasan lives together with his family in South Ghor, southward of the Dead Sea in Karak Governorate, not far away from the potash production site.

He shared his great story with us starting back in 2005 when he joined the FFS group organized in collaboration of the FAO regional IPM programme and the Ghor al Safi agriculture directorate.

He used to cultivate on 3 ha and at the same time he used to work for a big farm as a supervisor of a group of workers. "Through the work and experience done in FFS we became more independent, more self-confident. Now we are able to make the right, reasoned decision without relying on others." The second year Hasan's wife, son and niece joined the FFS group too. After that they decided to rent another 3 ha of land. "First, we felt we can manage it, that we have enough knowledge and skills. Second, we had enough financial resources to do it." Currently they are growing mainly tomato, eggplant, pumpkin, pepper, broccoli, cabbage and some other vegetables for home consumption. IPM caused better quality of produce and lower expenses. Higher revenues allowed the family to invest in some apartments in the city.



"Communication with my family improved so much. In FFS we learnt how to listen the other person. I'm now using dialog, discussion to solve everything."

Another thing that was changed in the community thanks to FFS experience "is the way of thinking and communicating with others. We listen to the others' opinion, we respect it. Previously we were not really listening."

There are other non-FFS farmers coming to ask for advice. "People trust me a lot. Through FFS I became recognized by my community. I often represent the community, I communicate with authorities. This allows me to transfer the message from people, farmers to the ministries. I asked for more FFS in our area. I said, this is what we need here." Hasan is now the member of the local district community.

He was chairman between 2007 and 2009 of the local association "Ghor Safi Agriculture Cooperative". "We found resources through which we were able to initiate a revolving microcredit fund for small farmers. Twenty farmers benefitted from this programme."

As a first small-scale farmer, he has been awarded by the potash company as a "good farmer". Before that, only large-scale farmers used to be the winners.

Hasan used many times during the interview expressions such as recognition and independence and finally he added "My family is proud of me."

AN AMAZING STORY OF AN AMAZING LADY

Chedlia (Tunisia, Monastir, Cherahil)

Chedlia is an amazing smiley and strong lady with a deep look and life experience written in her face. She lives together with her family composed by her two little daughters, sister, and their old mum in Cherahil in Monastir Governorate, little less than 300 km away from the capital, Tunis. Chedlia's husband left the country long ago and they don't have much contact, so nowadays it's Chedlia and her sister to take care of everything.

Their farm is a bit isolated, without many contacts with other neighbours, so when the proposal to join the FFS group came for the first time in 2012, she refused. It was something new, she has never heard about it before. However, she remained curious about the initiative and when she had the possibility to see the results from the first FFS cycle, she and her sister Nejiha decided to join the next year round. And just in that moment the change started.

Their income comes exclusively from agriculture, cultivation and partially processing. Currently they are growing mainly tomatoes, chilli peppers, eggplants, potatoes, leafy vegetables, carrots and some other vegetables for home consumption. They also have some olive trees. Actually it was eggplant that made a big difference; it wasn't typical at all in this area and Chedlia decided to take the risk and to start growing it. Now she has four greenhouses and occasionally employs other two or three women.

Chedlia is actively using IPM in her farm. She practices alternative methods to control pests and she is happy because the use of pesticides lowered by half and thus, the expense related to this also did.

The family's means of transport is a donkey-drawn cart. Chedlia managed to establish regular collaboration with a local purchaser who is coming to her farm to buy produce.

The farm's expenses lowered and the yield increased. With the higher income they decided to start small sheep farming, to increase the number of poultry and to enlarge their house.

²⁵ Local district community is a group of active people, representatives of the local community. They are identified and selected by the governor together with the local community to represent it in meetings of the administration where problems and its solutions are discussed together. These representatives are usually appreciated and recognized by the community for their wisdom and credibility. Local district community groups consist of on average 10 members.

The experience and function of FFS goes much further than agricultural activity: “This year there is no FFS and we miss it so much. It became a habit, a nice routine, a regular contact with others.”

Chedlia became an inspiration for other women in the area because of her knowledge and courage. She is actively encouraging them.



THIS IS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS THAT HAPPENED IN MY LIFE

Sameh (Jordan Valley, Dear Alla)

Sameh is a farmer from Jordan Valley and an ex-member of a FAO IPM/FFS group.

He was contacted in 2007 by the local FFS facilitator involved in the implementation of the FAO regional programme. He took his time to reflect on the proposal. He wasn't convinced at the beginning as he never heard about FFS before. “We were quite sceptic about it, we couldn't imagine how we could significantly increase our income. The answer came during the FFS and after the first harvest.” Moreover, Sameh and other farmers in the area had previously gone through a not very positive experience with a joint activity when they had an association. “That mutual trust, we lost in the past due to the failure of the association, but we re-gained the trust thanks to FFS.” So finally Sameh decided to join the FFS group on tomato production and he remained for three FFS cycles.

“I was a typical father-to-son farmer. I just automatically inherited this activity. The knowledge I had, was that one of my daddy. Thanks to the experience I gained through FFS everything changed. I became an expert in what I'm doing. I have enough knowledge, skills and confidence to take the right decisions. I, as well as my friends from our FFS group feel much more equal when we talk with technical people now.” Sameh added that the significant change came at both levels, economic and social.

Sameh had 3 ha from his father but during last years, since he started practicing FFS knowledge, he arrived at 30 ha. Unfortunately the Syrian crisis is heavily impacting all farmers in Jordan Valley because a lot of them used to export their produce traveling through Syria. Thus also Sameh had to adapt to this fact and nowadays he works on 5 ha. "The crisis is very difficult for all of us but let's say that our group is able to cope with it. We have a great planning and we are able to minimize production costs thanks to what we learnt in FFS."



"We changed agricultural map of the area by introducing new crops and technologies." The main crop in the area was open field tomato, today the group is growing different other crops as okra, chicory, cabbage, lettuce or maize for animal feed. The whole group is actively practicing IPM, reducing the amount of pesticides by more than a half. "We are aware of pesticide residue levels, so we pay much attention to this problem."

"We learnt that life is not only about taking but also about giving. I have to transfer the knowledge to others." There are about 40 non-FFS farmers who are currently using some of the FFS techniques, mostly related to IPM, and they are advised by the ex-FFS members. "There is always somebody asking me for advice", says Sameh. "We help each other when there is a need."

At the personal level, "I have much more self-confidence", describes Sameh. "The communication within my family is very open now. I started sharing everything, my thoughts, my doubts and we discuss everything including economic issues. This is an important example for our kids. You know, my wife knows much more about the difficulties I'm facing in my agricultural activity now. I feel my family very close to me, I feel supported.

The ex-FFS group continues working together. "We are a strong group and our community recognizes us. We have also created a new association called Gubat Al Sakhra which is mainly active in agricultural sector. But we try to address also social issues of this locality. One big success was the establishment of a new nursery school for 150 kids or the programme of installation of solar water

heaters”, says Sameh. From time to time, the group mediates conflicts at community level. “People trust us. We are recognized as a group.”

“FFS changed my way of thinking, I see others in a different way. I think when we improve ourselves, we are improving the whole society. Look, let’s make it short, this is one of the best things that happened in my life.”



CONCLUSION

The implementation of Integrated Pest Management, Organic Agriculture and Good Agricultural Practices has been the entry point for FFS in the NENA region. Around 2 000 FFS have been established around sustainable agro-ecological approaches, generating a reduction in cost of production, while increasing yields and quality. Within one or more production cycles, farmers are able to value the benefits of the FFS approach, and they get easily involved in developing innovative practices.

Farmers participating in FFS acquire skills and knowledge that allow them to be responsive and to make appropriate decisions within changing environments. The FFS approach is perceived by the farmers that participated in the exercise as the most appropriate and useful way to improve analytical skills, learn better, to fill gaps, to respond to their needs and to strengthen their capacity of making an appropriate, informed and knowledge-based decision in order to solve problems (together).

FFS not only improve technical skills but significantly change social dynamics, strengthen relations, help building mutual trust within the community. As previously mentioned, the main thematic areas of the scoping exercise are: **gender equality and women's empowerment**; **social inclusion** (social vulnerability, ethnicity, age, etc.); **social protection in terms of community empowerment** (building of their own social support systems/safety nets/mechanisms); **nutrition-related decision making** (diet diversity/improved diet, health); and **sustainable agricultural production**, IPM and access to and control over natural resources.

Gender equality / It is clear that FFS have a beneficial effect not only on technical skills and capacity of informed and considered decision-making done by farmers, but it influences significantly the community as a whole as well as in-house dynamics. Many of the man farmers expressed how profoundly their FFS experience based on communication, listening, expression of opinions, respect for others' opinions and joint decision-making based on observation and discussion, changed the way of communicating in their families.

Women's empowerment / Mixed groups, with the participation of women and men together were not numerous but in case of exclusively women groups, the FFS participation have represented a very important moment. Not only due to improved technical skills, increased self-confidence, and recognition by the community but also in terms of networking and in some cases formal or informal organizations were created. An improved or changed self-perception, self-confidence and reconsideration of their own role in agricultural activities is crucial to make a change happen. This is where empowerment starts and FFS prove to be very powerful approach.

Social inclusion / In a way FFS are socially inclusive by definition because of the focus on small farmers who are often among those more vulnerable. But even within the context of rural communities and small-holders, social inclusion/exclusion needs to be reflected, analysed and translated into an appropriate setting of an FFS. The categories to be taken into consideration when focusing on social vulnerabilities are for example, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, age or poverty.

Community empowerment / Expressions as "trust" and "recognition" are often used by the farmers. The participatory nature of FFS impacts social dynamics, strengthens relations, helps building mutual trust within the community and joint problem-solving. Most of the groups (especially those composed of men) stated that they continue working together in agriculture but their activities are very often going much beyond. There is an evidence indicating the importance FFS play in community joint activities and in creation of formal and especially informal rural organizations.

Nutrition-related decision making / Almost all farmers in Jordan reported that they diversified crops for home consumption as a consequence of the knowledge they had from the work in FFS. In Tunisia

this aspect was not very strong, only some women said that they somehow modified their nutrition-related habits and crops they are growing. However FFS remain a big potential when talking about nutrition.

Sustainable agricultural production / All interviewed stated that they are actively using the IPM approach. Most of them lowered the use of pesticides by half (and thus the costs), using non-chemical alternatives such as traps and natural enemies. Some of them are able to commercialize their produce on higher price because of the IPM quality and lower level of pesticide residues. However they mentioned the problem of “non-sensitized” customers still giving more priority to the cost.

A broader discussion, (especially within the regional FFS networks - in the NENA region, with the support from the FAO regional Initiative on Small-scale Agriculture for Inclusive Development in the Near East and North Africa - the newly established FFS network) and a deeper understanding of these aspects are crucial in order to develop proper impact assessment tool of FFS programmes and to be able to fulfil the potential of the FFS approach in future activities and adaptations.

Acknowledgement:

Huge thanks go to the Regional FAO office in Cairo, FAO country offices in Jordan and Tunisia, the FAO AGP and ESP divisions, the FFS facilitators and master trainers, and especially to the farmers that decided to share their story with us.

The Farmer field school (FFS) approach has been, in its various forms and local adaptations, used worldwide for decades. It has become evident that FFS contribute not only to technical capacity of farmers but also significantly to community development including social dynamics, gender equality or social inclusion when talking about social vulnerabilities. Therefore, quality FFS represent a huge potential for the improvement of livelihoods of vulnerable groups and reduction of rural poverty by empowerment of rural communities. Discussion and a deeper understanding of these aspects is crucial in order to develop proper impact assessment tool of FFS programmes and to fulfil the potential of the FFS approach in future activities and adaptations.

FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa.
11 Al-Eslah Al-Zerai street, Dokki
P.O. Box 2223, Cairo, Egypt
Telephone: (+202) 33316000
www.fao.org/neareast