What are Farmer Field Schools?

The Farmer Field School (FFS) approach was developed in the late 1980s in Asia by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). It was created as a capacity building approach to empower producers and rural communities by strengthening their decision-making skills in the field, using ecological learning, systems analysis, experimentation, and group-building. This approach was built on people-centered learning and participatory methods to create an environment conducive to exchanging knowledge and experiences safely. FFS includes practical field exercises using direct observation, experimentation, discussions, and decision making that encourages learning-by-doing. Farmers are then able to test their local knowledge as well as new scientific innovations in their own fields within their local ecosystem and specific socioeconomic contexts.

Since its inception, FAO has been promoting FFS to address a broad range of problems and technical domains in over 90 countries over the past 3 decades. Over the years, this approach has been expanded and adapted to different contexts, populations, organizations, and needs with non-negotiables including:

- Farmers' needs defining and driving FFS programs;
- Farmers' local knowledge co-producing and co-creating new knowledge, science, and public services alongside knowledge and formal extension services;
- Making learning processes and knowledge generation central to FFS programs.

The Contribution of CARE’s FFBS to FFS

According to FAO, women comprised 38% of agricultural workers in crop, livestock, fisheries, and forestry production around the world in 2019. In many sub-Saharan African countries, women constitute well over 50% of the agricultural labor force. However, women remain severely underserved by extension and advisory services across the globe because of barriers related to social and gender norms among others. While the FFS approach has been adopted by many organizations, a need arose for the integration of gender transformative programming and market-based approaches to ensure underlying norms (both formal and informal) are also addressed, especially those that limit women’s meaningful participation, integration, leadership, decision making, and financial benefits.

Through CARE’s Farmer Field and Business School (FFBS) approach, which is an adaptation of FFS, CARE is promoting and implementing a gender transformative, market-based, and nutrition-sensitive approach to agricultural extension to help address a range of challenges and close the gender gap. The FFBS approach works by empowering women to address social and gender norm barriers, engaging men and boys to champion gender equality, supporting women small-scale producers, and increasing food security and good nutrition.
As seen through the featured statistics, gender transformative programming has been proven to be effective. A Social Cost Benefit Analysis of FFBS conducted by the New Economics Foundation also showed the cost effectiveness of the approach with a USD 31 return for every USD 1 invested.¹ This was split between women’s empowerment, improved food security, and higher incomes. FFBS shows the potential of FFS to deliver gender transformative and market-based outcomes!

**Increased agricultural yield:**
According to FAO, WF and IFAD, agricultural production for FFBS participants increased by as much as 56% for some crops.

**Increased household income:**
FFBS households’ monthly income increased from $3.41 to $9.90 in Ghana and from $11.60 to $17.38 in Malawi (Pathways program final evaluation).

**Better nutrition:**
62% of the FFBS households in the Win-Win project in Burundi had acceptable food consumption scores.

**FAO and CARE’s Partnership**
For several years, CARE and FAO have collaborated to empower farmers all around the world. CARE’s partnership with FAO on farmer-led learning and the FFS approach has evolved over twenty years. CARE has drawn upon and adapted the FAO FFS model in many contexts and learned from its application as well as its scale out.

Through our new collaboration with FAO’s global Farmer Field School platform, CARE and FAO aim to scale out FFS in ways that ensure gender transformative outcomes, improve Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning processes to strengthen the implementation of FFS and contribute to the attainment of SGDs. This collaboration is centered on four key objectives.

1. Increase learning, knowledge exchange and dissemination of good practices regarding gender transformative FFS with a focus on gender equality, business and markets;
2. Increase the impact and scale out of the FFS model through pathways such as digitization, advocacy and policy influencing;
3. Strengthen the monitoring, evaluation, and learning process of FFS to ensure the implementation of quality programs and projects;
4. Enhance staff capacity especially on gender transformative approaches implemented through FFS.

Through this collaboration, both organizations hope to unlock and enhance FFS’s potential to support women’s empowerment and advance gender equality.