



DEVELOPING THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND TALENT OF YOUTH TO FURTHER FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

The following case study was received as a result of a call issued by the Committee on World Food Security for case studies highlighting examples of initiatives aimed at 'Developing the knowledge, skills and talent of youth to further food security and nutrition'. The cases received provide the background for a discussion of lessons learned and potential policy implications at a special event on October 15th, 2015 during CFS 42. Find out more at www.fao.org/cfs/youth.

NATIONAL SMALLHOLDER FARMERS' ASSOCIATION OF MALAWI

Background

85% of Malawi's population lives in rural areas, and 90% practice subsistence agriculture. Changing weather patterns are damaging agricultural production. Dry spells are common and can cause losses of 20-30% of total yield per hectare. In 2012-2013 1.97 million people faced food insecurity.

Challenges

The complex interconnections between the many causes of poverty and food insecurity require integrated solutions. In addition, agricultural behaviours can be hard to change, and changing attitudes in cooperation with traditional leaders is a key challenge faced by NASFAM. High rates of illiteracy also hamper knowledge transfer.

Approach Used

NASFAM is using support from Irish Aid to spread Conservation Agriculture (CA) knowledge among 100,000 farmers across 19 districts.. NASFAM's collective membership nature, and its wide national network of farmers, is the crucially important vehicle for this knowledge sharing, training and empowerment. The programme aims to widely share CA principles and practice, so helping smallholder farmers produce more food and cash crops despite challenges like soil depletion, climate change and high prices for commercial fertilisers.

The main strategy is to train 'lead farmers', who then share their new knowledge, for example on crop diversification, with farmers clubs. Training for lead farmers emphasises not only new farming methods but also the importance of a diverse and nutritious diet. Farmers learn about tree planting and water conservation, building their knowledge on how to become more resilient to longer-term climate change.

The project also documents 'best practice' and communicates this through the media (with regular slots on national radio, twice-a-week at midday and twice-a-month in programmes that have a specific focus on climate change). Demonstration field days provide another route to farmers. And a quarterly newsletter, disseminated at district level, keeps extension workers informed.



Regular visits by project coordinators ensure information flows both from and to 'the field'. This model of participatory skills and information sharing is empowering and accountable because knowledge flows in both directions. Information passes from NASFAM head office, to regional and district level and from lead farmer to farmers in 'clubs'. But farmers also discuss their concerns and provide vital information 'from the ground', which is fed back to inform research on good practice, disease challenges and economic growth trends and changes.

As well as training, the NASFAM programme provides practical assistance. The project helps farmers get quality inputs such as seed and fertiliser and advises farmers on getting better prices in domestic and global markets.

It is clear that high adult illiteracy hinders efficient technology transfer. In rural Malawi 28% of men and 51% of women are illiterate. So in a shift from the normal NGO model of focusing on one or two development issues, NASFAM has developed adult literacy and numeracy classes, run at local schools. This project, which targets NASFAM members who are either illiterate or semi-illiterate, helps farmers to read about new agricultural practices and also do gross margin analyses to appreciate the benefits new practices offer.

Outcome and Impact Achieved

97% of NASFAM members are now aware of CA techniques and 37,589 farmers have adopted the approach. A total of 15,445ha is farmed with CA, 19,135ha now use organic manure and 11,677,850 new trees have been planted. With crop diversification, and water harvesting, farmers clubs report higher yields and more predictable water resources. Children are better nourished, and raised incomes have let more attend school. Poor rural women are more empowered to take control of assets and of marketing their produce as a result of literacy classes. Over 30,000 members have benefited from these and are now able to read, write and work out simple mathematics. NASFAM members are more food secure than average smallholder farmers. More than 55% of rural Malawian households suffer from chronic food shortages in a normal production season as against 21% of NASFAM farmers. The project has also built awareness and understanding of CA both among district-level extension works and at national level in the Ministry of Agriculture.

Lessons Learned/Opportunities for Scaling-Up

Large membership organisations (like NASFAM) can build a capacity-building knowledge 'chain' linking, national policies to district extension workers to lead farmers and then to collective farmers clubs or associations.

Knowledge sharing through networking, peer-to-peer training and good practice demonstrations can yield widespread and significant benefits. For example, smallholder farmers in Malawi report CA has brought higher and year round yields, reduced labour requirements, made agriculture more climate resilient, raised incomes, improved family nutrition and, indirectly, improved educational access for children.

Combining interventions can produce 'more than the sum of their parts'. Here, combining CA training with opportunities to improve literacy is helping farmers both access knowledge and



use it to market their produce. Literacy and numeracy training is particularly empowering Malawi's rural women.

Policy Implications

Approaches to poverty reduction must take into account the varied and interconnected causes of poverty, and seek to address them simultaneously.