



**Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations**

# **Introducing the farm business school**

## **A training package**

**A unique opportunity to engage farmers in  
developing capacity for running profitable  
market-oriented farm businesses**

**One-day orientation programme  
Seven-day orientation programme  
Handbook  
Training exercises**

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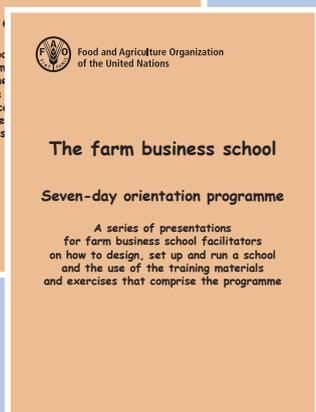
# Introducing the farm business school

## A training package

This collection of materials contains the following ...



One-day orientation programme  
... presents the training concept to  
policy-makers and programme managers



Seven-day orientation programme  
... prepares facilitators to set up  
and run farm business schools

The orientation programmes are  
supported by PowerPoint slides

Handbook  
... outlines the scope of the farm  
business school programme

Training exercises manual  
... provides the working exercises  
for the training programme



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**Dramatic changes are taking place in farming worldwide as a result of globalization, liberalization and rapid urbanization. Farmers are intensifying existing patterns of production and diversifying their farm enterprises in an attempt to improve their livelihoods. Technical know-how is not enough. In order to be competitive and take advantage of the new opportunities that are arising farmers increasingly have to adapt their farm business to changes in the market and to improve efficiency, profitability and income.**

The desire to increase income by taking advantage of market opportunities requires farmers to become better decision-makers and better at competing in this new environment. The emphasis on the market and the need of farmers to be competitive, calls for better farm management skills. Marketing and farm management have rapidly gained predominance globally over the last two decades. Farm business management skills and knowledge is recognized as important for farmers to effectively respond to present day farming challenges.

Farm management advice helps farmers to make the right choice between crop enterprises according to individual levels of financial, labour and land endowments and at their level of risk adversity.

One of the best ways to build the skills and capacities of farmers is through a process of practice and learning. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) developed the Farm Business School (FBS) to help farmers learn how to make their farming enterprises and overall farm operations profitable and able to respond to market demands. The school enables farmers to learn and improve their knowledge, change their attitudes and enhance their skills needed for farm commercialization - while working on their own farms. A unique characteristic of the farm business school

is that learning takes place at farm level through schools set up in the individual communities. Learning about business occurs in the farmers' own local environment where they work in small groups at their own pace. The FBS programme takes the school to the farmers.

The farm business school uses a learning-by-doing approach which provides the farmers with a structured experience in which they can learn the theory and practice of farming as a business, implement that learning and then evaluate the progress of their farms and of their own farm business management skills. The iterative process is intended to reinforce learning so that by the end of one cycle of the FBS, the farmers are on a clear pathway to commanding the progress of their farm businesses.

The farm business school was inspired by the FAO experience with Farmer Field Schools (FFS) and uses an experiential learning framework. It focuses on content by providing practical exercises to facilitate learning of specific knowledge and skills - exercises can be organized into unique learning programmes. It involves facilitated farmer learning led by a trained facilitator. It is designed around a selected farm enterprise that can be produced locally. It covers the production cycle from planning to marketing. And learning is linked to real farm settings to reinforce learning and to deliver more immediate impact.

The FBS is organized in seasonal training programmes where farmers work in small groups at their own agreed time and duration. The materials for the school are specially designed to work with limited resources. Participants need to be basically literate and numerate, but they do not have to have had any significant formal education. The manuals provide step-by-step guidelines that take the facilitator and the farmers through the basics of farm business management - following the production patterns of their own particular farms.

Extension workers - especially those with farm business management experience - make excellent FBS facilitators. An intensive orientation programme prepares facilitators for setting up and independently running an FBS programme as a part of their regular extension work.

### What an FBS is not ...

**It is not intended to teach farmers how to produce crops or manage livestock.** It is assumed that they will already have this knowledge.

**It is not a set of lectures.** Exchanges of information and knowledge are facilitated through the meetings/sessions, with observations, dialogues, and discussions.

### In brief, an FBS is ...

**A programme of learning** designed to help smallholder farmers produce for the market and to make their farms work profitably.

**A venue that brings farmers together** to carry out collective and collaborative action to address business and marketing problems and opportunities.

**A forum for sharing knowledge** between farmers through discussion, practical exercises and self-study.

## The approach to learning

The FBS learning process closely adheres to what is called the Participatory Mutual Training and Learning Approach (PMTLA). The PMTLA is a group process that facilitates training and learning among adults. The participants learn by doing and through sharing their knowledge and experiences.

The process involves the participation of people with common interest and purpose. There are no instructors or teachers, but only facilitators. The participants mainly learn from each other. The learning moves from the known to the unknown, from the easy to the difficult and from the simple to complex. It is guided by a curriculum that facilitates learning.

The training and learning is organized and structured. The FBS requires a facilitator and structured modules to guide and support the group training and learning process. Through the process, the participants generate new practical knowledge and ideas. They learn what to do, how to do it, the cost involved, the potential problems to be confronted and the benefits it will bring.

The PMTLA approach enables the participants to learn from each other. The approach is based on three principles:

### **Reflection and sharing**

The participants in the training reflect on the topic, share experience, knowledge and understanding on the subject. It begins with what the participants know.

### **Generating new knowledge**

Here new knowledge is created based on existing capacity and exchanges plus new concepts derived from the FBS.

### **Motivating innovation and creativity**

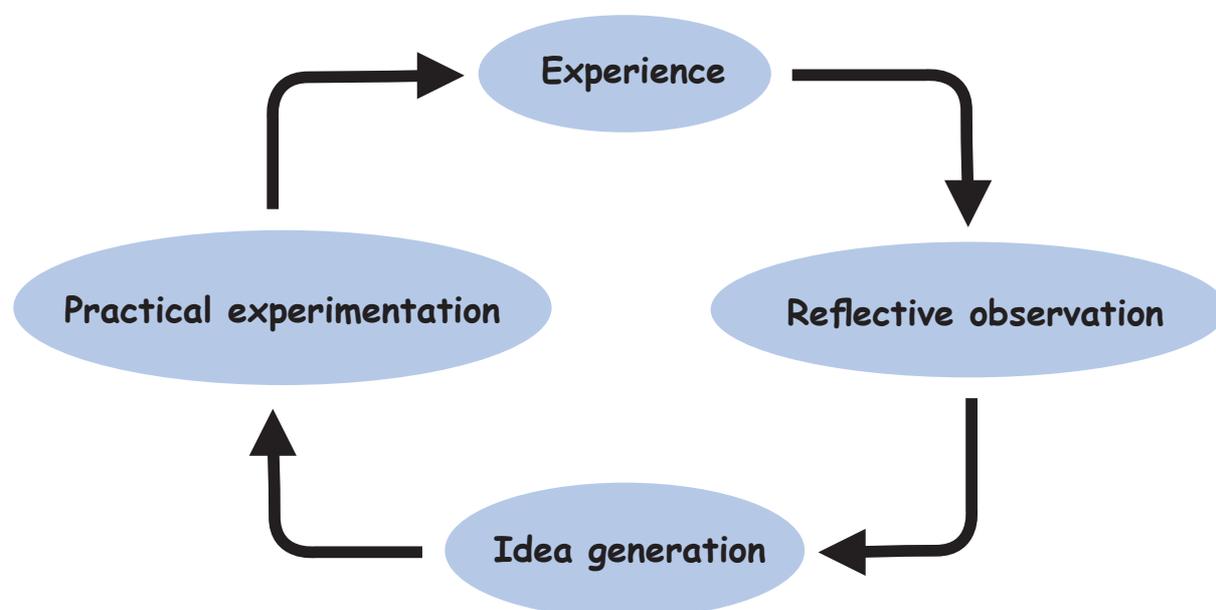
The new knowledge and insights help the participants to innovate, to develop new ideas from old ones and to create completely new ideas.

The farm business school differs from conventional farm management approaches, which are tool-based methods and dependent on the availability of data. The FBS approach is 'entrepreneurial', and relies on simpler decision support tools, checklists and strategic questions. It is based on the real experiences of the participants on their own farms.

Discussion, practical exercises and self-study enable farmer participants to share ideas, offer advice, experiment and formulate opinions on whether a practice will work on their farm and for their farm.

## It is all about building capacity among the farmers

The learning generated is consolidated and reinforced through action - that is, through implementing what they have learned on their own farms. The essence and the dynamics of this approach to learning are captured in the experiential learning model set out below.

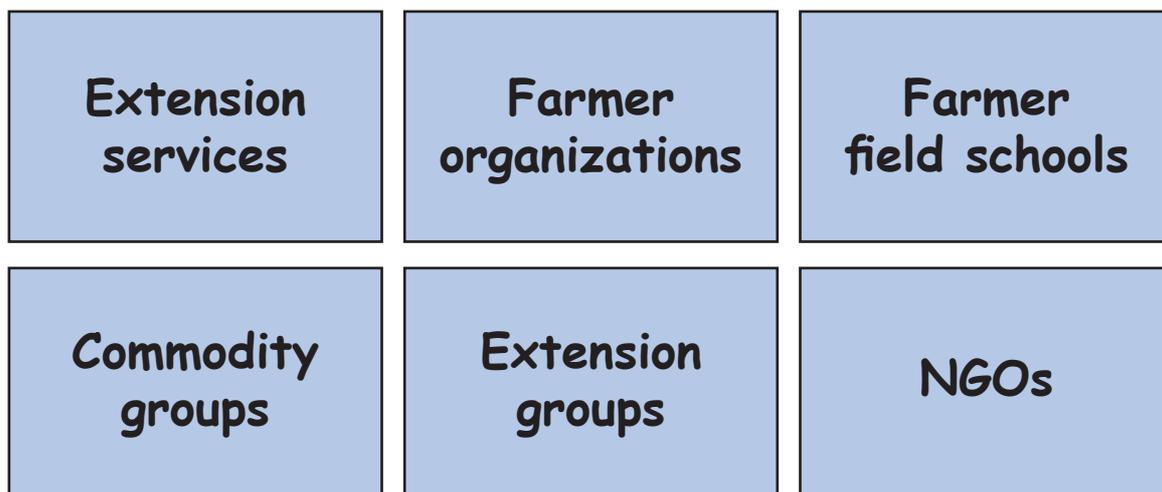


### The experiential learning model

Source: Adapted from Kolb, 1984

## Who should establish a farm business school?

While the handbook is geared toward extension workers at the facilities of the FBS curricula, there are no restrictions on or requirements governing who should establish an FBS. A farm business school can be started by any number of people or agencies including public sector extension services, NGOs, commodity groups with advisory services, farmers associations and cooperatives, and colleges and universities.



Whoever establishes a farm business school will need to be able to provide the necessary back-up teams of specialists to coach and mentor the trainers. The FBS is not a once-off training event; it should be part of an extended strategy to build farm business capacity among farmers.

Whoever establishes a farm business school will need to have the capacity to meet the standards set by the approach to learning covered in the next section. They will also need to be able to carry out the following tasks:

- Create awareness and identify and select potential FBS participants.
- Design and organize a number of farm level training programmes among interested farmers. The training programmes will each be held at a specific location and will run for a whole season.
- Recruit and train farmers as FBS facilitators to help you with subsequent rounds of farmer training.

- Mentor farmer groups and give them back-up support as and when needed.
- Keep in touch with other FBS facilitators to collectively identify opportunities for further training as well as reflect on lessons learned and areas of improvement for the next farm business school rollout.

## The training materials

The farm business school training materials are divided into four parts. The two main parts of the FBS programme are 'The handbook' and the accompanying 'Training exercises' manual. The handbook provides an outline of the entire programme from beginning to end. The manual of exercises provides working outlines for the various school training sessions and the list of topics following the exercise contents provides a quick-reference guide to assist users in the design of individualized learning programmes. The 'Seven-day orientation', to train FBS facilitators, and the 'One-day orientation', for policy makers and programme managers, completes the package of FBS training materials.

The materials have been designed to offer maximum flexibility in offering FBS programmes. While the exercises themselves do provide step-by-step guidelines, they also offer an abbreviated overview of the process which the facilitator can use to design his or her own approach to the exercise. Similarly, there is no fixed programme or sequence of exercises. While there are some exercises that build on one another and should be done in a particular sequence, the facilitator is encouraged to select and order the exercises based on the training needs of the each group of participants.

While it creates flexibility, designing the materials in this way places a greater obligation on the facilitator to prepare carefully. The facilitator will need to be methodical and systematic; first in determining the training needs of the potential participants, and then in selecting and sequencing the exercises to match those needs. Each school programme will need to be uniquely designed in response to the unique training needs of each group of participants. Ad hoc and last-minute arrangements should be avoided.

The general objective of these materials is to provide extension workers with materials to support training farmers in farm business management within a learning framework similar to that of the 'Farmer Field Schools'. The FBS concept and materials have been developed to assist farmers who are faced with the realities of rapid changes in agricultural production and marketing that is occurring around the world. The farm business school process will increase the capacity of farmers to cope with and take advantage of these changes. While the exercises may appear simple, and indeed, some are meant to be, they are all designed to provide the necessary foundations for building farm business capacity among farmers.

The materials are only one aspect of the farm business school. They form the foundation for learning in a more formal setting involving structured classes with specific exercises. But it is not intended that the FBS training begins and ends with the exercises provided. Rather, after the training has been completed, facilitators will need to follow-up and accompany the farmers in applying what they have learned to their individual farm businesses.

'The handbook' and the 'Training exercises', are generally self-explanatory and the material provides sufficient information for skilled facilitators to set up and run a successful farm business school. Initially facilitators may still feel the need for help and welcome additional guidance about running and supporting their school programmes. However, once awareness meetings and initial planning meetings have been conducted, the farm business school will start.

## The handbook

This is the core material of the farm business school programme. It is not a textbook for university or college students. It does not cover the theory behind farm business management, but rather focuses on practical knowledge and skills. It has been designed as a guide for extension workers to adapt and apply the FBS in the field as they assist participating farmers to acquire the basic skills they need to efficiently run their farms as businesses. The handbook is organized in following four sections.

### Section 1

#### **THE FARM BUSINESS SCHOOL**

Provides the background and rationale for the FBS and guidance for establishing and running a school

### Section 2

#### **ESTABLISHING A FARM BUSINESS SCHOOL SYSTEM**

Provides step-by-step guidance for setting up a FBS system so that it is tailored to a specific country or region

### Section 3

#### **BUILDING BUSINESS MANAGEMENT SKILLS**

This is the central theme of the farm business school and outlines the range of topics covered in the exercises that drive learning in the FBS

This section includes guidelines for 'Reflection and evaluation' of the school system. It also includes 'Tools and resources' offering additional information on some of the more technical aspects covered in the FBS exercises. These can also be used by facilitators for their own learning or to augment the learning of the farmers in the programme.

### Section 4

#### **PREPARING FOR THE FIELD**

Provides guidance for the practical arrangements for setting up and running a FBS including graduation and post-graduation accompaniment

The handbook is generally self-explanatory and the material provides sufficient information for a skilled facilitator with training in farm business management to set up and run a successful farm business school. Facilitators will need to read through the entire manual before embarking on setting up a school. They will need to conduct 'surveys' among potential participants to determine the specific farm business training needs in order to select the appropriate exercises and determine their sequence.

## Training exercises

This manual provides a working format for the various exercises grouped according to the subject themes and core topics. They are listed in both the handbook contents and the training exercises manual. Step-by-step guidance is provided on how to conduct exercises in a group setting and to ensure that quality training is given. The structure of the exercises, how to prepare for them and how they are to be conducted is explained in detail at the beginning of the training exercises manual.

### One-day orientation programme

This presentation is aimed at managers and policy makers in the organization taking responsibility for setting up and overseeing an FBS system. It has four sessions:

- Introduction to the farm business school;
- The training programme and curriculum;
- Establishing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating;
- Closing the one-day programme.

During these sessions participants will:

- Explore the changes facing extension;
- Be introduced to the farm business school;
- Discuss who should establish a school;
- Understand the FBS approach to learning;
- Be exposed to the training programme;
- Discuss establishing and monitoring an FBS.

### Seven-day orientation programme

This is a series of presentations for farm business school facilitators. The three areas covered in the orientation are:

1. Understanding the background and philosophy of a farm business school including the rationale for the FBS and the methodology.

## 2. Setting up and running a farm business school including:

- Facilitators' roles, responsibilities, code of conduct and ethics;
- Organizing and managing an FBS;
- Collaborating with government, NGOs and other partners;
- Ensuring ownership of the FBS by participants;
- Working with resource people.

## 3. Farm business school curriculum and methods including:

- Curriculum for the FBS;
- Using creative techniques of learning;
- The links between the farm business, the market and other external linkages;
- Participatory and gender-sensitive facilitation skills;
- Identifying common enterprises.

The seven-day programme is comprised of 27 sessions drawing primarily on the training exercises. They are designed to capture the essential points of the FBS programme and create a detailed framework for orienting facilitators. No attempt has been made to contextualize the content. Therefore, it is important for those responsible for preparing this programme of orientation to review all materials carefully and to adapt them to the context of the country, region and/or particular setting relevant to the trainee facilitators.

In addition to preparing FBS facilitators for deployment, the orientation also creates a greater sense of purpose, cohesion and unity of thought. It provides a foundation for later reflection after several FBS programmes have been run.

Those responsible for organizing and running the seven-day facilitator orientation will need to review the programme in its entirety and study both the handbook and the training exercises before beginning. Ideally the facilitator will do each of the required exercises to become familiar with them in preparation for the current orientation session.

Orientations are self-explanatory, offer step-by-step guidance for the facilitator and include a number of PowerPoint presentations

The Farm Business School (FBS) operates at field level. The aim is to build farmer capacity in entrepreneurial and management skills. It does this through a 'learning-by-doing' approach. It enables farmers to learn and improve their knowledge, change their attitudes and enhance their skills toward improved farm commercialization - while working on their own farms. Extension officers and lead farmers are trained as facilitators. They organize seasonal training programmes, where farmers work in small groups at their own agreed time and duration. The materials for the FBS are specially designed to work with limited resources. Participants need to be basically literate and numerate, but they do not have to have had any significant formal education. The manuals provide step-by-step guidelines that take the facilitator and the farmers through the basics of farm business management - following the production patterns of their own particular farms.