





# Farmer field schools

Gender equality, social inclusion  
and community empowerment

EXPERIENCES FROM SENEGAL

Case study

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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
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# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abbreviations and acronyms .....	v
<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Methodological note.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3 Experiences from Senegal .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.1 Context .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.2 Main findings, considerations and challenges .....</b>	<b>23</b>
3.2.1 Farmers' experiences .....	26
3.2.2 Farmer field schools facilitators, master trainers and other farmer field schools practitioners .....	51
3.2.3 Challenges .....	54
<b>3.3 Farmers' stories .....</b>	<b>56</b>
CASE 1 Building alternative role models.....	57
CASE 2 I don't need to emigrate .....	58
CASE 3 Understanding who you are and what your potential is .....	59
CASE 4 I've made such progress.....	61
CASE 5 It is important to think of the future .....	62
CASE 6 We function more as a group, as a community.....	64
CASE 7 No battle is lost.....	65
CASE 8 Education simply changes you .....	66
CASE 9 Me and my husband talk a lot .....	67
CASE 10 When you don't know yourself, you cannot understand others .....	69
<b>4 Conclusion and next steps .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>4.1 Next steps.....</b>	<b>74</b>
References .....	79
Further resources.....	81
<b>Annex: Discussion module .....</b>	<b>83</b>

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# Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>AFDB</b>	African Development Bank
<b>BCI</b>	Better Cotton Initiative
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>FFS</b>	Farmer field schools
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>HDI</b>	Human Development Index
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>IFPRI</b>	International Food Policy Research Institute
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IPM</b>	integrated pest management
<b>IPPM</b>	integrated production and pest management
<b>M&amp;E</b>	monitoring and evaluation
<b>MEL</b>	monitoring, evaluation and learning
<b>NENA</b>	Near East and North Africa
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>SP</b>	Strategic Programme (FAO)
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>VSLs</b>	village savings and loan scheme
<b>WB</b>	World Bank



Most FFS groups develop collective action, going beyond agricultural work, towards non-professional problem solving and mutual help.



# 1

## Introduction

**I**n its various forms and local adaptations, the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach has been used worldwide for decades. Initially, FFS programmes were related mainly to integrated pest management (IPM), but were soon adapted to other technical domains. It has become evident that FFS contribute not only to farmers' technical capacity, but also play a significant role in community development, including social dynamics, gender equality and social inclusion. FFS allow people to make better decisions. There is therefore great potential for FFS and quality FFS programmes to improve the livelihoods of rural communities, as well as reduce vulnerabilities and rural poverty through the process of empowerment. At the same time, a deeper understanding of these aspects is crucial in order to develop proper impact assessment tools for FFS programmes and fulfil the FFS approach's potential in future activities, programmes and adaptations.

It is for this purpose that the first phase of a scoping exercise to better understand gender equality, social inclusion and community empowerment aspects in farmer field schools was initiated in Jordan and Tunisia, and later expanded through a second phase in Senegal and Uganda. It was launched by the FAO Plant Production and Protection Division (NSP) and implemented in collaboration with the FAO Social Policies and Rural Institutions Division (ESP), the FAO Rural Poverty Reduction Strategic Programme (SP3), the FAO Regional Initiative on Small-scale Family Farming, and the FAO offices in Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Senegal and Uganda.

Senegal has had extensive experience with the development and implementation of the FFS approach across almost two decades. Between 2001 and 2013, FAO Senegal, with support from the FAO Plant Production and Protection Division (NSP), introduced



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FFS usually brings together various age groups and strengthen the links/relations between generations.

1 366 FFS focusing on sustainable agriculture practices and integrated production and pest management (IPPM) (primarily in relation to the cultivation of vegetables, rice, cotton and mangoes). The community-based FFS approach has been used to fulfil the main objective of projects, improve food security in target areas, build and strengthen field and institutional capacities with respect to IPPM, and laid the foundation for the sustainability of the approach at the national level. FFS facilitators, master trainers and farmers have been trained, and efforts to facilitate women's access to IPPM practices and FFS have been made in order to empower them by providing them with knowledge, skills, connections with other FFS groups, and by creating a participative environment. On average, 43 percent of the 24 737 farmers trained were women. This allowed them to play a more prominent role in their communities, and some of them became farmer-facilitators, farmer-advisors, or entered local politics. Out of the 843 facilitators trained, 30 percent were women (FAO Senegal, 2017). Thanks to the introduction of FFS, a number of formal and informal rural organizations have been created and strengthened.

Building on this experience and that of the first phase of the scoping exercise conducted in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region (and using the same methodology), a field visit took place in order to support the efforts of FAO Senegal in its FFS-related work and assessments, as well as assist with the production and

sharing of information at the regional level. The main objective was to collect and analyse the experiences of FFS members, graduates and practitioners in relation to gender equality, social inclusion, and individual and community empowerment, as well as changes to these as a result of participation in an FFS, while also confirming the relevance and/or importance of certain related thematic areas. The purpose of the initiative is to make farmers' experiences more visible, and not only demonstrate the impact of FFS programmes, but also use these experiences in future implementations of the FFS approach. By identifying gaps in knowledge and opportunities, achievements and challenges, best practices and lessons learnt, this exercise aims to provide an insight into and deeper understanding of the FFS' gender and social dimensions. It offers the opportunity to reflect on this cross-cutting issue to allow these aspects to be better incorporated into the broader FFS discussion and its wider work. The exercise also identifies the needs of FFS facilitators in relation to gender equality, social inclusion and community empowerment, and examines the relevance of related concepts and approaches and its modalities. A review of the existing work on strengthening gender equality and improving access for vulnerable groups within the context of FFS programmes has also been conducted.

The exercise's main thematic areas are gender equality and women's empowerment, social inclusion, and



One of the FFS members, who shared his experience and contributed to this study, Senegal, Tambacounda.

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Group discussion, FFS group, Senegal, Tambacounda.

community empowerment, with additional areas including nutrition-related decision-making and sustainable agricultural production, IPPM, and in some cases, access to and control over natural resources. In this document, some of the farmers' stories are provided, in which they describe their experiences and changes in their personal and professional lives.

This work is also rooted in FAO's wider work on gender equality and the empowerment of women, as guided by its Policy on Gender Equality (2012–2025), which 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

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**The exercise's main thematic areas are gender equality and women's empowerment, social inclusion, and community empowerment, with additional areas including nutrition-related decision-making and sustainable agricultural production, IPPM, and in some cases, access to and control over natural resources.**

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works towards gender equality and supports women's diverse roles in agriculture and rural development. Gender equality is not only an essential means by which FAO can achieve its mandate, it is also an acknowledged basic human right.” (FAO, 2013a).

The FAO Policy on Gender Equality includes a clear approach and guidance for ensuring that the Organization actively and systematically promotes gender equality in all areas of its work: “FAO believes that progress towards eliminating hunger and poverty will result from: (i) ensuring that its programmes and projects, as well as its normative work, reduce the gap in access to productive resources and services between men and women; (ii) ensuring that women and men have the ability to influence programme and policy decision-making, and building institutional responsiveness and accountability (voice); and (iii) ensuring that rural women and men can take advantage of economic opportunities to improve their individual and household wellbeing (agency)”. (FAO, 2013a)

Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue, and within the FAO strategic framework it is treated as such. It should be fully incorporated throughout all five Strategic Programmes, and gender inequality issues should be addressed on the basis of an in-depth analysis. FAO is currently focusing on its work on the social aspects of agriculture in order to reach the most vulnerable and make agriculture more equitable and sustainable. In this context, quality farmer field schools are an excellent example of an approach that can make a difference.

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Working towards poverty reduction (most of the poor live in rural areas), improving livelihoods and empowering rural communities is today of paramount importance, and plays a key role in increasing stability both at national and regional levels. This work is also linked to, and influences, village-city migration as well as international migration. It is therefore extremely relevant to talk about the social dimensions of development work within the context of agriculture.



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One of the benefits of the FFS is that families have more resources for education purposes for their children.

# 2

## Methodological note

**T**his work is based on and has been developed using the **constructivist paradigm** (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), with some overlaps with the critical theory paradigm (Morrow and Brown, 1994) and its transformative orientation, using methods and approaches common to both (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). According to these paradigms, multiple constructs, rather than realities, are formed in specific local, social and historical contexts (influenced by political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender aspects). These constructs are perceived as realities, and as such, influence people's lives. They are shared by and among individuals, groups and often cultures. They

change over time as those who constructed them become more informed and aware. Within the context of research, knowledge is constructed through the interaction between a particular investigator (or investigators) and a particular respondent (or respondents) who are interactively linked. There is no independent relationship between the investigator and the respondent (the "object" of the investigation, as the positivist paradigm would refer to them). The critical theory goes further, focusing primarily on transformation by understanding how structures are constructed, how they can be changed and what is required to carry out the change (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).



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FFS participants generously shared their experiences including both personal and professional dimensions. Senegal, Tambacounda.

FFS (ex-)members/graduates, FFS facilitators, master trainers and other FFS practitioners have been actively involved in the exploration. This part of the exercise uses **qualitative methods** (Quisumbing *et al.*, 2014) (although some data may lend itself to quantitative analysis) to collect information through **focus group and individual discussions**, working with open-ended/basic guiding questions covering the main thematic areas. This allows for changes to be made to the flow and content of the discussion if the interviewee expresses something he or she feels is more relevant or

important to the discussion. The focus group discussions helped participants to formulate and express their collective experience and opinions. For FFS members and graduates, the discussion and guiding questions focused on **farmers' self-perception of their opportunities and power over their lives, as well as changes at the professional, personal and community level as a result of their participation in the FFS programme.**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> More on this and on "transformative learning theory" in Duveskog, Friis-Hansen and Taylor, 2011.





Some authors suggest that data on individual's perceptions of change help us to understand a study's area of interest within the local context, and are able to provide information related to ongoing social, economic or environmental changes (Roeschel *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, they enable local communities to be involved in decision-making and become protagonists in sustainable development processes that are being implemented at the local level. These same authors advocate the use of big data, when available, as well as data on the perception of change at the local level,

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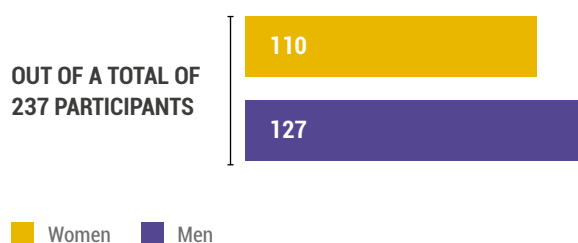
**For FFS members and graduates, the discussion and guiding questions focused on farmers' self-perception of their opportunities and power over their lives, as well as changes at the professional, personal and community level as a result of their participation in the FFS programme.**

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as the effects of global challenges manifest themselves at the local level. A wide range of variables, which probably cannot be reflected on a large scale, affect these data. The authors consider data on *individual perceptions of change* to be a cost-effective option allowing policymakers to act when big data are not available.

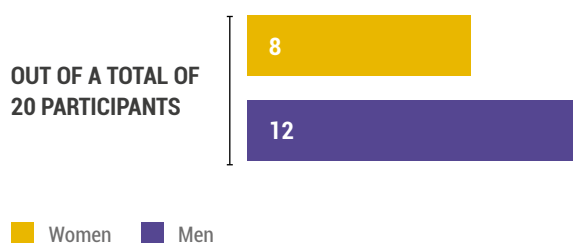
The farmers approached by way of purposive sampling were asked to share their **stories**, their experiences of the FFS, and related changes in their personal and professional lives. This offers an opportunity to gain insight into their lives as told through their **own voices**. Both the focus group and individual discussions took place in environments familiar to the farmers, where they are used to meeting and in a rather informal atmosphere. . Interactive methods were used to discuss some of the questions/thematic areas, and data from the exercise were collected in a sex-disaggregated manner. In total, 12 focus group discussions were held with farmers in 12 villages across three areas – Niayes, Anambe Basin (Kolda region) and

**Figure 1**  
**FFS graduates having participated in focus group discussions**



Source: Author's own elaboration

**Figure 2**  
**FFS graduates having participated in individual in-depth interviews**



Source: Author's own elaboration

Tambacounda – during ten days of field work involving 237 FFS members and graduates (W – 110, M – 127) and 20 in depth individual interviews (W – 8, M – 12; see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Three regions were selected in the first stage of the preparatory process, with different localities subsequently visited during the field work. Translation was used from and to national languages where needed and depending on locality. The farmers who participated in the exercise joined their FFS between 2001 and 2015. This work was complemented by observations made during a regular session of the FFS. Three different farming systems were covered: rice production, cotton production and horticultural crops. Discussions with **FFS practitioners** focused primarily on their experiences with topics such as gender equality,<sup>2</sup> women's empowerment and social

inclusion during FFS programmes, the relevance of certain approaches, strategies for including such topics, and practitioners' needs in relation to this work. Furthermore, the discussions offered opportunities for joint reflection and lesson learning.

All participants in this exercise were informed about the purpose of the study and how the collected information would be used.

This exercise's **main thematic areas** are the following: **gender equality and women's empowerment; social inclusion** (this may cover social vulnerability, ethnicity, age, etc.); social protection in terms of **community empowerment** (collective action, building of community-based social support systems/safety nets/mechanisms, formal and informal organizations). The following additional thematic areas were also covered: **nutrition-related decision-making** (dietary diversity/improved diet, health); and **sustainable agricultural production**, including IPPM and access to and control over natural resources (see Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> FFS practitioners are considered here mainly as facilitators and master trainers, but programme managers can also be included in this category.



Group discussion, FFS group, Senegal, Niayes.

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An analysis of the most relevant lessons learnt and **success stories** was carried out with the objective of identifying **examples of good practice** in relation to gender mainstreaming, individual and community empowerment, and social inclusion. Attention was also given to the role of FFS in strengthening existing formal and informal organizations and prompting the creation of new ones.

The exercise was developed in order to explore the thematic areas described above

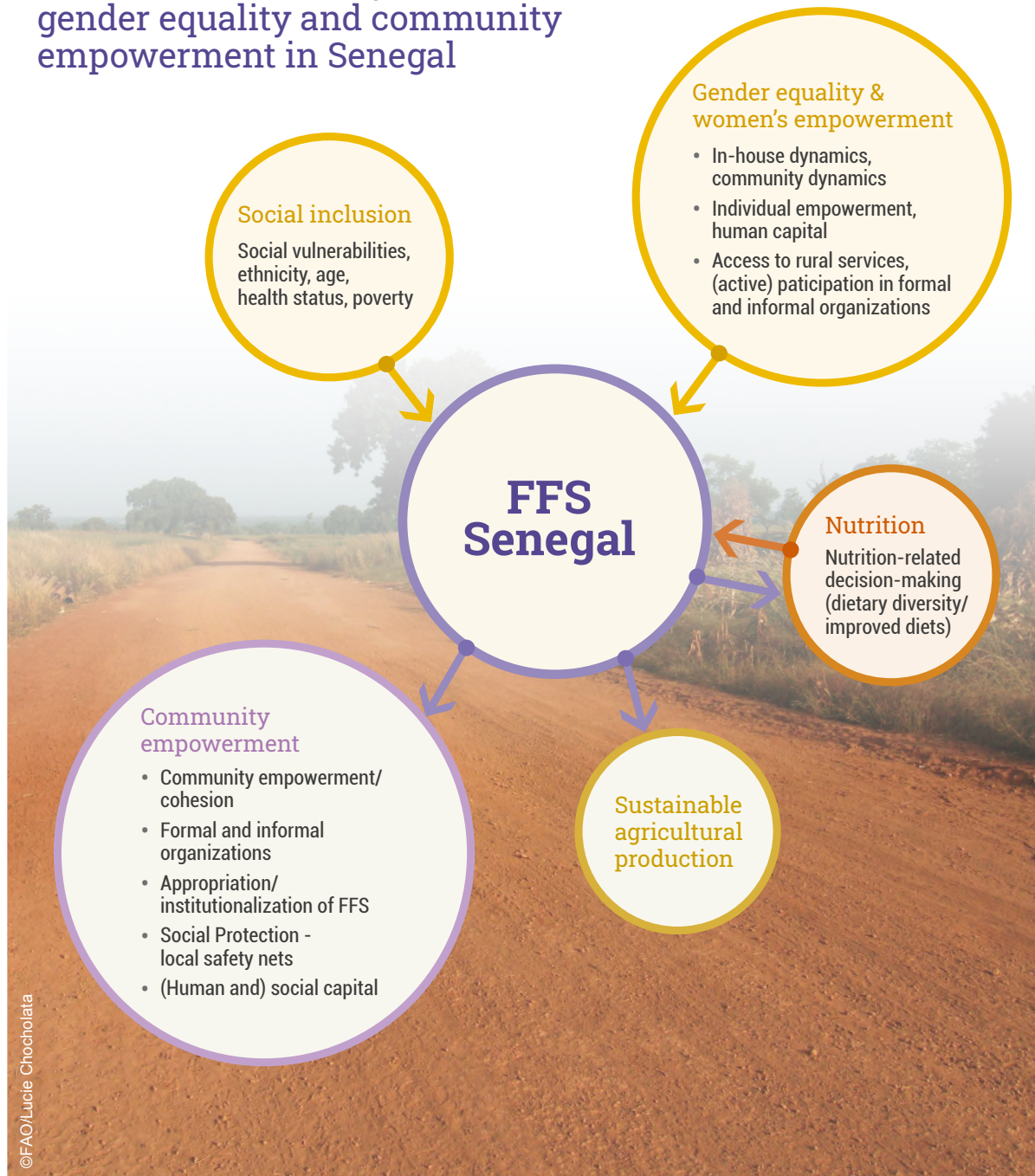
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Figure 3 Main thematic areas of the scoping exercise

## Themes of case study on FFS, gender equality and community empowerment in Senegal



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Source: Author's own elaboration

within the context of the FFS programme, and **initiate discussion of the following broader questions:**

- What topics are relevant to the discussion on the social dimensions of FFS?
- What concepts and terms are relevant to such a discussion?
- What is already in place, and what needs to be considered, when talking about gender equality, women's empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment within the context of the FFS programme?
- What is the experience of FFS members, facilitators and practitioners with these thematic areas?
- How do people perceive their condition and the changes they have experienced? How do they express this?
- How could such experiences be translated and shared?
- Are there common patterns across these various and rich experiences?
- How can the potential of FFS be better used to strengthen gender equality, women's empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment?
- What do FFS practitioners need to work better on these aspects / to feel more comfortable when working with these thematic areas? What do they need to better achieve their objectives while being more inclusive?

- What might be the project-/programme-related implications (in terms of design, implementation, M&E/MEL/impact assessment)?

Moreover, data were also collected through a **desk review** of relevant information in the available literature, project documents and reports.

Factors such as the limited time period and number of farmers interviewed could be perceived as a limit. However, this concern could be addressed by a more in-depth study or studies at the national or regional level, or else through systematic monitoring and evaluation efforts to build on the knowledge acquired using the lessons learnt during this exercise. It could then make use of/capitalize even more on the potential of participatory methods as a means of interactive learning and empowerment. If the sample is relatively large, combining quantitative and qualitative methods would no doubt be an advantage.



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FFS are enabling positive changes at the personal, family and community level.



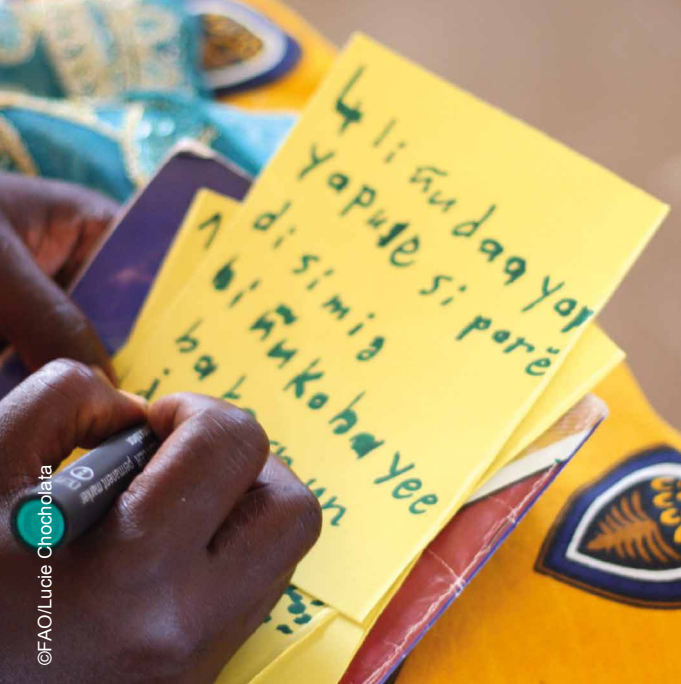
# 3

## Experiences from Senegal

### 3.1 Context

**S**enegal, one of the most stable African countries, has a population of 16 209 million, and is classified as a low-income economy with a per capita gross national income (GNI) of USD 980 (WB, 2019). Its Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.466, which is in the low human development category, and the country is ranked 170 out of 188 countries and territories (UNDP, 2015). Senegal has an annual population growth rate of 2.75 percent (World Perspective, 2019),<sup>3</sup> with almost half of its population living under the national poverty line in

<sup>3</sup> However, according to the Continuous Demographic and Health Survey (2016), only 70 percent of births of children under 5 years of age are registered at the civil registry (ANSD and ICF, 2017).



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Findings from the group discussions among FFS members, Senegal, Niayes.

2010,<sup>4</sup> this rising to 57.1 percent in rural areas. The proportion of the population that is undernourished is 14.8 percent (FAO, 2015). School lunch plans have helped to tackle food insecurity and nutrition issues among children from socially disadvantaged families, and have reduced disparities between health outcomes (IFAD, 2019). Senegal is addressing the country's heavy and growing dependence on food imports (FAO, 2015). The country's agricultural production represents on average half of domestic consumption (FAO, 2013b). Its major food commodity imports are rice and wheat, and the dependency ratio for cereal imports is 51.1 percent (FAO, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> 46.7 percent (poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line), (WB, 2011).

The contribution of the agricultural sector to gross domestic product (GDP) is 17.5 percent (WB, 2019), and the sector was the primary means of livelihood for 70 percent of the formal labour force in 2013. According to studies carried out by the National Rural Advisory Council (CNCR), family farms in Senegal represent around 95 percent of all farms.

In rural areas, women are highly involved in the production, processing and marketing of agricultural, livestock and fishery products. A common pattern in many countries is the underestimation of women's contribution to agriculture, despite the fact that they are providing a significant portion of the agricultural work, representing more than 70 percent of the workforce. (Touré *et al.*, 2022). This is mostly due to the informal nature of their involvement, especially in the form of unpaid labour on family farms or as non-registered seasonal workers. Most women remain outside labour statistics and thus invisible to policymakers. Furthermore, women are facing their own particular obstacles, such as access to land (decision-making over land), information, factors of production (capital, inputs, equipment, etc.), extension services and credit, as well as cultural barriers due to the fact that women's agricultural work is perceived as auxiliary and an extension of their household responsibilities. Of course, some of these barriers are also faced by poverty-stricken and often landless men. Thus, despite the existence of constitutional protection,



women, especially in rural areas, are still forced to contend with the (changing) traditional patriarchal cultural system.

Rainfall, the main climatic variable which impacts food security, varies considerably across Senegal at seasonal, inter-annual and multi-decadal intervals, and significantly contributes to the potential vulnerability of populations. Rice, groundnuts, millet, sorghum and cotton are the main crops.<sup>5</sup> For those crops that are sensitive to varying rainfall patterns, less precipitation leads to lower crop production. Central areas of Senegal in particular receive irregular precipitation during the rainy season, with late season starts and early season ends, as well as long periods of dry sequences. In terms of consumption, rice is the most important food commodity (Jalloh *et al.*, 2013). Different types of crops and their distribution across the country are thus closely linked to the quantity, distribution and timing of rainfall in this predominantly rainfed agricultural system. A further two traditional irrigation techniques are practised, the first using rainwater runoff with the consequent flooding of low-lying areas (paddy rice cultivation), and the second being the flood-recessional agriculture used along rivers and streams. Access to water represents one of the Senegalese agriculture's major challenges. Only 1.3 percent of agricultural land is equipped for irrigation (FAO, 2015).

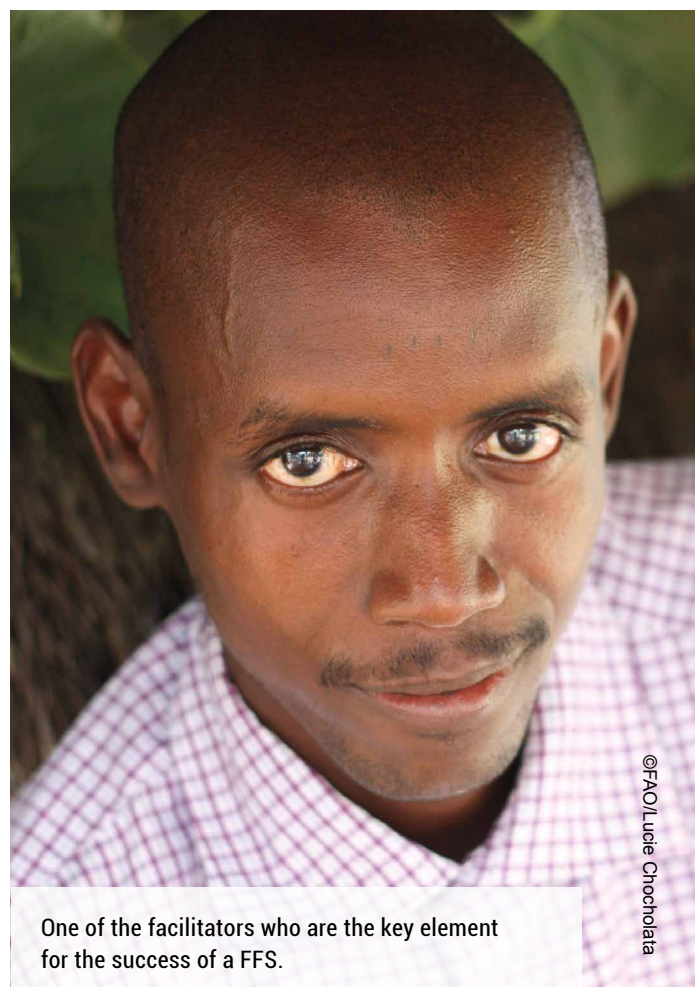
<sup>5</sup> Primary cash crops are sugarcane, groundnuts and cotton. Rice, millet, sorghum and maize are the main subsistence crops (FAO, 2015). The groundnut-millet rotation dominates the cropping system (Jalloh *et al.*, 2013).

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(Touré *et al.*, 2022).

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One of the facilitators who are the key element for the success of a FFS.

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More than 24 percent of the country's population live in the capital and its surroundings. However, Dakar benefits from 80 percent of the country's national wealth, 95 percent of its industry and commercial companies, 87 percent of the workforce in permanent employment, 75 percent of the wage-earning workforce, and around 60 percent of the country's educational and health facilities (Jalloh *et al.*, 2013). Migration towards urban areas, and international migration in particular (with more than half of African migration that occurs primarily between countries located within the same region (IOM, 2015), is having a significant impact on Senegalese society, particularly in certain regions. It is mostly young men who are migrating from rural areas to cities, and women are increasingly responsible for managing agricultural activities. Two of the regions visited, Tambacounda and Kolda, are particularly affected by high emigration rates.

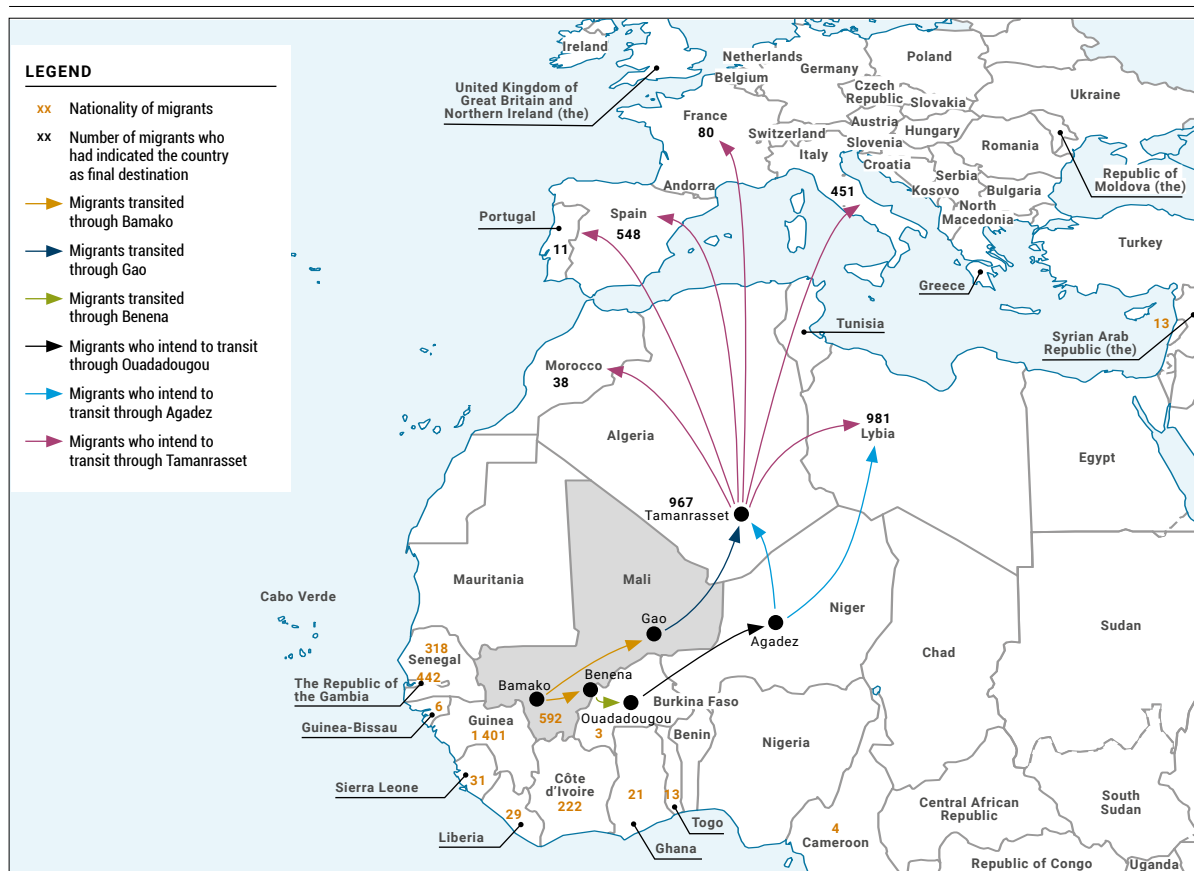
Senegal is receiving remittances that equalled 11.9 percent of GDP in 2015 (WB, 2019), a figure which includes only those remittances that were officially recorded. When unrecorded payments through both formal and informal channels are taken into account, the overall amount is obviously higher. This places Senegal among the top ten recipients of international remittances in Africa. Emigration to Europe is thus still perceived by many – particularly young men, often supported by their families (this is confirmed by the data collected from farmers in Tambacounda and Kolda regions) – as a viable strategy for improving the livelihoods of their families.

Libya is currently the main transit point for those migrating from North Africa to Europe. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the second most represented nationality among migrants rescued/intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard in 2016 was Senegalese, and 87 percent of all those rescued/intercepted were men (UNHCR, 2017). Migrants transiting through Mali, following one of the key migrant routes to North Africa and Europe (see Figure 4), are of Guinean, Gambian, Senegalese and Malian nationality. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 96 percent of these migrants are men. After Mali, the main transit countries for migrants are Algeria, Burkina Faso and the Niger. Having reached Algeria or Libya, most migrants put their onward travel temporarily on hold and work to accumulate the resources needed to proceed with their journey (UNHCR, 2017).

Faced with the high risks along the difficult route through Mali and Algeria (or Burkina Faso and the Niger) to Libya, and on towards Europe, some migrants decide to give up at a certain point and return, most often to their homes in rural areas. The number of returnee organizations trying to assist other returnees in their reintegration process, facilitate capacity building, and inform them of the risks associated with this type of migration, is increasing.

FFS-related activities were introduced to West Africa through IPPM in 1996, with the first training for facilitators taking place in Ghana. A few years later, the first training

**Figure 4 Migration routes map**



Source: OIM. 2016. DTM Middle East and North Africa. <https://dtm.iom.int>.

of trainers was organized in Senegal, with participants from Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal. The first full-scale FFS programme implemented by FAO in Senegal started in 2001. Between 2001 and 2013, 843 facilitators have been trained and 1 366 FFS has been set up. (FAO, 2009, 2012, 2013b).

Three areas were visited (see Figure 5), covering three different eco-geographical regions and three different farming systems, each with their own particular set of social and FFS-related characteristics.

The first, **Niayes**, is the 180 km-long and 25 km-wide area north-west of Dakar which covers four regions (Dakar, Thies, Louga and Saint-Louis). It has a coastal micro-climate and is particularly suitable for horticulture and aviculture. Mango cultivation is also common in this area. Its proximity to Dakar and other large urban centres facilitates access to markets and exportation. 80 percent of the country's horticultural production comes from Niayes. Due to its proximity to the capital, Niayes has benefited



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Most of the FFS groups indicated that the change they saw in gender dynamics was significantly related to the increased cultural, and thus physical, mobility of women, and to greater fluidity in cultural codes relating to the use of physical space.

from the attention of various national and international development agencies, and has also benefited from commercial opportunities, including exports. These stimuli have accelerated change in this area, and farmers (as well as their predominantly Dakar-based consumers) have, for example, been encouraged to adopt attitudes in favour of organic products.

In Niayes, access to land (and the securing of allotted land) remains a serious, and unfortunately worsening, problem due to the heavy pressure for land to be used in construction as the city's expansion claims additional spaces. Increasing urbanization and industrialization reduce the amount of agricultural land available. These diverging

interests as regards land use continue to create tensions in local communities. In addition to traditional barriers, there is also a gender aspect to the effect of land grabbing, negatively impacting women's access to land. Women farmers usually have less land than men farmers. In Niayes, most women growing vegetables do so on areas of 0.05 ha, with this rarely exceeding 0.1 ha. In the Niayes area, FFS were introduced in 2001 focusing primarily on horticultural production.

The second area visited was the **Kolda** region in Casamance in the south of Senegal, located between the Gambia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. Millet and rice are the main food crops in the region. Millet is mainly

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**FFS-related activities were introduced to West Africa through IPPM in 1996, with the first training for facilitators taking place in Ghana. A few years later, the first training of trainers was organized in Senegal, with participants from Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal. The first full-scale FFS programme implemented by FAO in Senegal started in 2001. Between 2001 and 2013, 843 facilitators have been trained and 1 366 FFS has been set up.**

(FAO, 2009, 2012, 2013b).

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cultivated for subsistence purposes and usually hand-processed by women. It is also used as a raw material for fences and the roofs of rural houses. The main cash crops are groundnuts and cotton. Looking at the rice production in this region, most women cultivate on areas of 0.25 ha, which is significantly less than their male counterparts. The area of Upper Casamance (Anambe Valley) is considered to have great potential for cereal production. Small family farms with cultivated lands of between 1.5 and 6 ha predominate in the region (Boulenger, Bayemi, and Traore, 2005). In Kolda, FFS were introduced in 2011 and have been focusing primarily on rice production.

The third region included in the data collection was **Tambacounda** in the south-east of the country. Poverty rates are higher than in other regions: two thirds of its population live under the

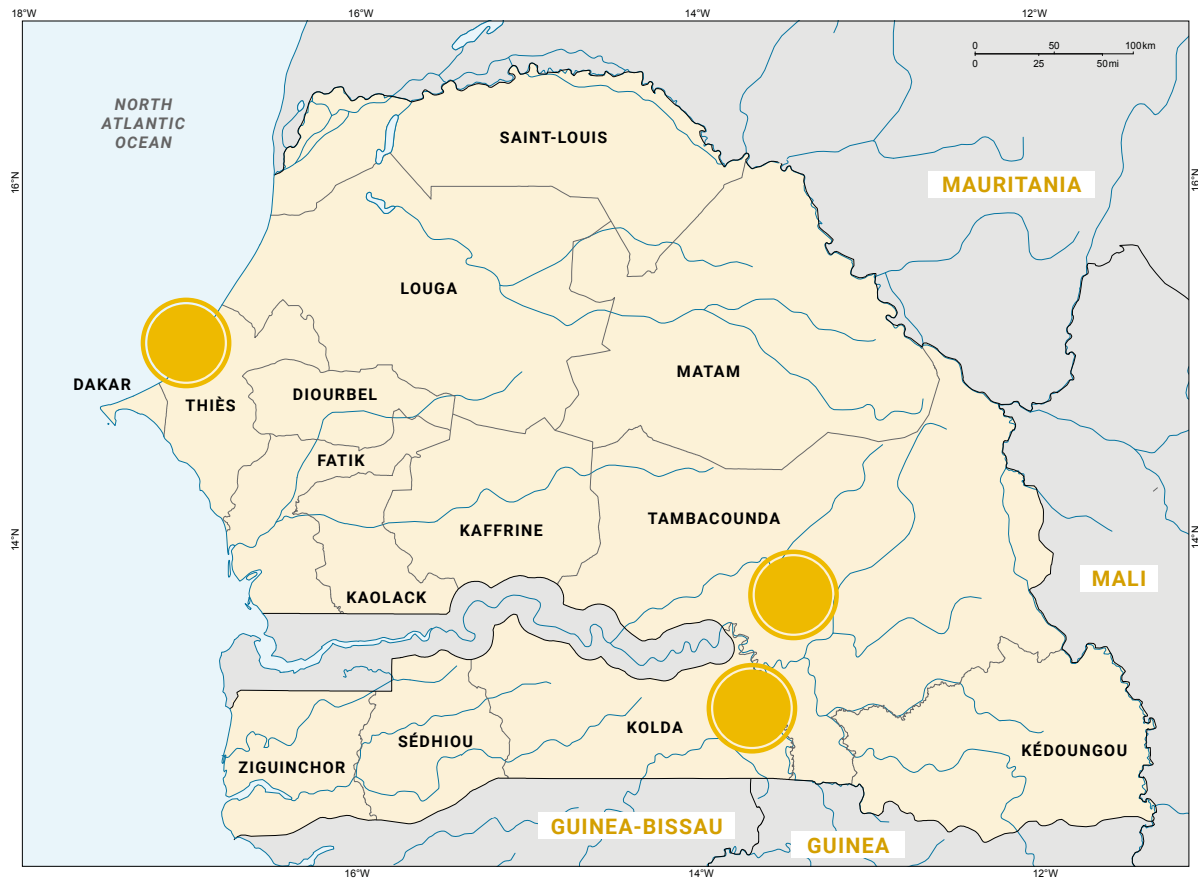


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national poverty line (compared to a national average of less than 50 percent). Cotton and groundnuts are also the main cash crops in this region. The country's cotton industry accounts for 3 percent of total exports and is present in almost all regions of Senegal (Page and Ritchie, 2009). Cotton production is concentrated in Eastern Senegal and Upper Casamance, and is largely in the hands of cotton companies, which have been primarily

taking a top-down approach to decision-making. However, the situation in the sector is changing, also due to the ongoing effects of climate change. FFS primarily designed to meet the needs of cotton producers in the Tambacounda region were introduced between 2009 and 2015 and have helped farmers to build on and improve their knowledge, skills and experience in order to allow them to make the right decisions in their agricultural work.

**Figure 5** Areas visited



Source: Author's own elaboration. Map based on: United Nations Geospatial. 2020. Senegal. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/senegal-0>

## 3.2 Main findings, considerations and challenges

As described in the methodological note, the focus group discussions served as an environment for the formulation and expression of collective experiences, opinions, perceptions and ideas related to the farmers' participation in FFS, as well as any changes resulting from this participation in their professional, personal and community lives. Some of the graduates shared more in-depth information during the individual discussions.

The following text summarises the main findings and commonalities that emerged from the discussions. It is divided into three sections, the first covering the **farmers' experiences**, and the second focusing on **what the FFS practitioners see as important** for this discussion and for unlocking and boosting the FFS' potential to effect more profound social change. The third section summarizes the **main challenges** emerging from the focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Despite the relatively limited timeframe and number of farmers interviewed, the reaction of participants and the information that has emerged from the discussions reveals a great deal of interest in the topics covered by the study and an openness to sharing their experiences. This was also the case with FFS practitioners.

Farmers participating in FFS acquire skills and knowledge that allow them to respond to change and make **appropriate decisions** within changing environments. The FFS approach is perceived by the farmers that participated in the exercise as an appropriate and useful way of improving analytical skills, learning more effectively, filling gaps in knowledge, responding to their needs and strengthening their capacity to make the appropriate, informed



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Almost all women indicated that their knowledge and skills improved. This have enabled them to initiate, reinforce or diversify their agricultural or agriculture-related work, resulting in greater financial independence.

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**Farmers participating in FFS acquire skills and knowledge that allow them to respond to change and make appropriate decisions within changing environments.**

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All female graduates interviewed stated that they had gained more respect and decision-making power within the community and household environments, as well as in their agricultural work.

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**Older groups, where members continued working together and maintaining activities they had in common, considered primarily social benefits to be the most significant, such as social cohesion, greater solidarity and mutual help, a decrease in conflicts, (information) sharing, improved relations at the household level and increased participation in decision-making.**

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and knowledge-based decisions that allow them **to solve problems together**.

The evidence coming from the focus group discussions shows that **the longer a group had been running, the more they stressed the social outcomes of their participation in the FFS programme**. The newer (more recently established) groups considered financial and technical knowledge in particular as being the most beneficial effects of the FFS on their lives. Older groups, where members continued working together and maintaining activities they had in common, considered primarily social benefits to be the most significant, such as social cohesion, greater solidarity and mutual help, a decrease in conflicts, (information) sharing, improved relations at the household level and increased participation in decision-making. These groups tended to perceive financial aspects and technical knowledge as equally important, but thought of them more as ordinary effects of their participation in the FFS programme (see Figure 6).

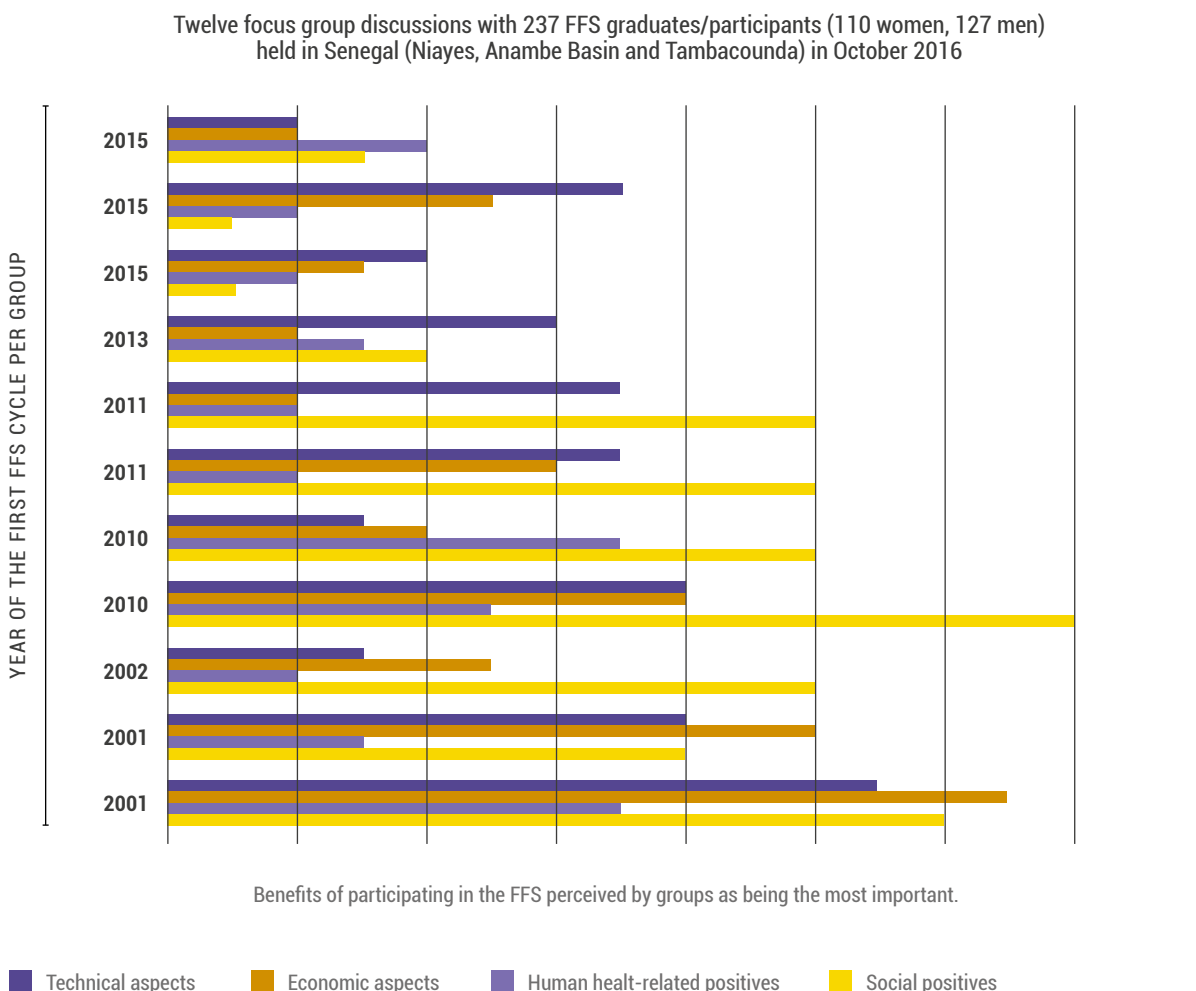
While the FFS approach was not primarily designed to address dynamics at the household and community level, it often impacts them in a very significant way. Empowerment/emancipation in a more general sense (in this text it is understood as an expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices within their households and their communities, particularly in contexts where this ability has been limited (Kabeer, 2001)) represents



one of the three key areas of learning (the other two being technical and practical matters) (FAO, 2016). The following subchapters reflect the main thematic areas of the scoping exercise.

**While the FFS approach was not primarily designed to address dynamics at the household and community level, it often impacts them in a very significant way.**

**Figure 6 Groups' perceptions of the most important benefits of FFS**



Source: Author's own elaboration

## 3.2.1

### Farmers' experiences

#### 3.2.1.1 Gender equality

It is clear that FFS have a beneficial effect, not only on farmers' technical skills and ability to make informed and considered decisions, but also on the community as a whole, as well as on internal household dynamics. Many of the male farmers expressed how profoundly their FFS experience, which emphasized communication, listening, expression of opinions, respect for others' opinions and joint decision-making based on observation and discussion, changed how they communicated with their families.

The following points summarize the main elements related to gender equality that emerged from the focus group and individual discussions. Their order reflects the frequency and emphasis with which they were expressed:

- from FFS group dynamics to household dynamics;
- mutual understanding (and better understanding of gender issues) between partners (with partial changes in the division of/responsibility for tasks at the household level);
- communication as a way of understanding the other's experience and seeing things from the point of view of someone of the opposite sex;
- more respect and increased decision-making power;

- shared responsibilities and decision-making;
- economic independence/empowerment of women, their financial contribution to household finances (shared financial contribution to family budget from partners);
- listening, discussion, more open communication, respect for others' opinions;
- changes in attitudes, changing role models;
- experience of working in a team (women and men together), improved mutual understanding;
- greater fluidity in gender cultural codes, increased mobility within physical and symbolic spaces.

When examining the impact of FFS on gender relations within a community, careful consideration should be given to the context. That being said, one example from the Tambacounda region can be used to describe the changing gender dynamics in the (mostly remote) villages that were

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**Many of the male farmers expressed how profoundly their FFS experience, which emphasized communication, listening, expression of opinions, respect for others' opinions and joint decision-making based on observation and discussion, changed how they communicated with their families.**

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visited. This change took place within a rather traditional environment where women and men are supposed to follow well-defined roles determining the use of physical and symbolic spaces and their mobility within them. In this setting, women and men usually meet separately. All the FFS groups we met were mixed (made up of both women and men). Most of the groups indicated that the change they saw in gender dynamics was significantly related to the **increased cultural, and thus physical, mobility of women, and to greater fluidity in cultural codes** relating to the use of physical space. “Before the FFS, it wasn’t very common for women and men to meet in the same place and do things together” (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes). Another graduate describes how social control influences how active or passive women are in public spaces and activities: “One of the reasons for women’s unwillingness to actively participate in public activities is potential criticism from other community members because it might be seen as inappropriate. This changed in our community as a result of the FFS; it became normal for women to participate in public affairs” (female FFS graduate, Niayes). However, the degree to which this changed varied from case to case and also depends on the initial context of the group. The same change was confirmed by FFS practitioners when reflecting on changes within the predominantly Mandinka communities: “A woman never sits next to a man here. The fact that we were sitting all together in the same place is a huge change. And you know what, this is even more significant, because today at the

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**Most of the groups indicated that the change they saw in gender dynamics was significantly related to the increased cultural, and thus physical, mobility of women, and to greater fluidity in cultural codes relating to the use of physical space.**

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same meeting the head of the village was also there” (male FFS facilitator).

The majority of the graduates reported that **household communication and dynamics changed after their FFS experience due to the improved way they communicated, participated in discussions and listened to others’ opinions.** “One of the basic principles in FFS is that decisions are taken together. This influenced dynamics at both the household and community levels” (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda). They started being able to communicate more openly with their spouses and other family members and to share more information, including work- and finance-related issues. According to them, this **improved mutual understanding and collaboration within their households.** “Our relationship improved because of mutual understanding and shared responsibilities in relation to family income, and generally we have more in common now. I started understanding his situation more; the same happened to him” (female FFS graduate, Niayes). Another graduate explained: “My ability to communicate with my family is definitely stronger but an even more important change I see is that I have

become more humble which makes me see things differently” (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).

Most FFS graduates in the Tambacounda region reported that, compared with the past, they now worked together with their spouses in the field, or had started **helping each other** with their field work. According to them, this improved relations and the collaborative spirit at the household level. “Compared with the past, we discuss a lot and share much more information, and we usually make decisions together” (female FFS graduate, Tambacounda). Some of the male graduates mentioned that they had reconsidered their perception of women as a result of the FFS experience: “At the FFS, I realized how much potential women have to learn, what kind of really good decisions they are able to make. In the past, I was convinced that women were not very capable at work and in general” (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

All female graduates interviewed stated that they had gained **more respect and decision-making power** within the community and household environments, as well as in their agricultural work. They attribute this change to their improved

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**“One of the basic principles in FFS is that decisions are taken together. This influenced dynamics at both the household and community levels”**

(male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

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knowledge and skills, which have enabled them to initiate, reinforce or diversify their agricultural or agriculture-related work, resulting in greater **financial independence**. These women reported that their partners perceived them as participating more in matters of household management and finances. This was confirmed by the men interviewed: “I used to work by myself in my field. Nowadays I share the work with my husband. I noticed that even our children are more sensitive towards us as parents. They can see we share the work in the field, that we work a lot and, compared with the past, we both bring home money” (female FFS graduate, Tambacounda). The additional or increased income that female FFS graduates generate creates a strong motivation for men to support women’s participation. “Even men who used to put up barriers to women trying to join the FFS have finally been convinced of the economic benefits. This has made the process much easier, so it is a possible

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**All female graduates interviewed stated that they had gained more respect and decision making power within the community and household environments, as well as in their agricultural work. They attribute this change to their improved knowledge and skills, which have enabled them to initiate, reinforce or diversify their agricultural or agriculture-related work, resulting in greater financial independence.**

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**In the cases where both the spouses attended the FFS, the beneficial effects of this on gender dynamics seem to be considerably greater.**

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point of entry for the work on women's empowerment" (male FFS facilitator, Kolda). Another graduate said: "I see women as more active now. For example, in the past, I was the only one responsible for contributing financially to the household. I feel much more at peace now, now that my wife also has her own income" (male FFS graduate, Niayes). However, mainly (but not only) female interviewees also mentioned persisting cultural double standards for women and men in society, although these obstacles are perceived as changing and not absolute.

There is a **gender division of labour**. Most of the work connected to the household, such as cooking, taking care of children and cleaning, is generally carried out by women with the help of their daughters and younger sons. In households where one of the partners or both took part in an FFS, farmers reported **increased mutual understanding**, which also partially affected the gender division of labour. In some cases, men have begun to take personal responsibility for tasks, such as providing firewood and water, but more frequently their involvement meant that they secured the income needed to obtain these items. "Compared to the past, I see my husband as more involved and



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The majority of the graduates reported that household communication and dynamics changed after their FFS experience due to the improved way they communicated, participated in discussions and listened to others' opinions.

supportive. He also motivates our kids to help more with housework and he ensures more money for running the household" (female FFS graduate, Tambacounda). In the cases where **both the spouses attended the FFS**, the beneficial effects of this on gender dynamics seem to be considerably greater: "I never used to help my wife and nor did she help me. We changed: we are helping each other and it's easier. You know, a person without education is like a blind person" (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

Women are often in charge of school-related expenses for children. "Our FFS group regularly organizes fund-raising activities to collect money and buy school supplies. These are then sold to women in

the community at lower than market price” (male FFS graduate, Niayes). Women are typically involved most in frequent life-cycle ceremonies in Senegal (e.g. weddings, naming ceremonies for newborns), and they are also responsible for the related expenses, which are not insignificant.

The **phenomenon of migration** takes away mostly young men, which is the reason why women are increasingly becoming actively involved in managing agricultural activities. Some interviewees mentioned that the reason young men migrate is due to the impossibility of making a good

living from agriculture, which conveys a traditional negative image of agricultural work, that of hard work in the field, still very often practised without mechanization and offering limited income. Lack of knowledge and limited access to it, as well as limited access to inputs and markets, are other disadvantaging factors, especially for women involved in agriculture. Access to land and the problem of securing allocated land very often remain a serious obstacle which is difficult to overcome for women, as well as young people in general. However, factors with short- and long-term social impacts are changing Senegalese society.

**Figure 7 Main findings – gender equality**



Source: Author's own elaboration

### 3.2.1.2 Women's empowerment

Empowerment, at the individual level, means an improved and greater control over one's own life. This includes control over knowledge, financial resources, rights and assets, but at the same time it also refers to a sense of well-being and self-esteem/self-confidence<sup>6</sup>.

In Senegal, most of the **FFS groups were mixed** (made up of both women and men). In contrast with some other countries, where a **critical mass** of women within a mixed group is needed in order for them to feel comfortable working with men, this culture-specific aspect was not a critical issue in Senegal. However, a balanced representation of women and men in the groups (where possible and appropriate) amplified the positive impact of FFS on gender dynamics. Attention needs to be paid to the role different group members play, and the overall dynamics within the group. Do the usual gender roles proliferate into the group? Do female members have equal opportunities to participate actively? And do they in fact participate actively? All these questions need to be carefully considered. The role of facilitators, and their ability and willingness to work with these thematic areas, is crucial.

According to the female farmers interviewed, participating in an FFS (mostly in mixed groups of women and men) has been a

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very important experience for them. This is not only due to their improved technical skills, increased self-confidence, and the greater recognition they receive from the community, but also in terms of networking. "I was so shy and full of complexes, because I had only completed primary school, so I didn't want to talk in front of others," says one of the female graduates. She continues: "This is all gone. I've completely changed. Everybody knows me now, people trust me and come to me for advice or help. I'm able to mediate conflicts, to solve problems. Even elderly women come to me for advice" (female FFS graduate, Kolda).

Disparities between women and men in rural areas are often intensified by their different levels of formal education (with women tending to be at a greater disadvantage), negatively impacting women's ability and self-confidence to express themselves freely and clearly, especially in front of a group. This was more pronounced in very new (recently established) groups. According to the interviewees, the experience gained through the FFS motivated some of the female graduates to enrol in external (to the

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<sup>6</sup> More on this and the links between empowerment and well-being in Friis-Hansen and Duveskog, 2012.



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One of the FFS members, who shared her experience and contributed to this study, Senegal, Kolda.

FFS programme) classes to improve their literacy. For women, **improving or changing their self-perception and self-confidence, while re-examining their own role in agricultural activities**, is essential for change to occur. This is where empowerment begins and where FFS is proving to be a very powerful approach.

The following are the key points related to women's empowerment formulated by women farmers during the focus group and

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**For women, improving or changing their self-perception and self-confidence, while re-examining their own role in agricultural activities, is essential for change to occur. This is where empowerment begins and where FFS is proving to be a very powerful approach.**

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individual discussions. The order reflects the frequency and importance with which they were expressed:

- knowledge, skills and experience gained;
- increased income (and decision-making power, decisions on family income);
- increased participation in community decision-making (e.g. local governments);
- increased mobility within physical and symbolic spaces;
- recognition and increased respect within the family and community;
- increased self-confidence and self-esteem;
- formal and informal rural organizations, networks, VSLs;
- role models – female FFS graduates as an inspiration for other women; and
- information sharing.

All women interviewed reported that both their income and ability to make decisions on family income increased. All FFS introduced or reinforced already existing **saving schemes (village savings and loan**



**schemes, or VSLs**). In some cases, these are co-managed exclusively by women (some specific, mostly administrative functions might be carried out by men due to their usually higher level of formal education). In addition to savings, these groups also offer microloans to their members. However, in most cases, such loans are also made available to the wider community if individuals are perceived by the group as trustworthy. At the same time, VSLs generate additional income for the group. Whether VSLs are included as part of the FFS programme, created spontaneously, or developed as a result of the FFS (in the case of existing schemes), they are an important aspect that enables smallholders, and particularly female smallholders, to access credit. This is often the only access they have to financial resources. In all cases, formal or informal organizations were either created or significantly developed. Many of these organizations (especially the economic interest groups with a village savings and loan scheme (VSL) component) are composed of predominantly female members.

There are some excellent examples of women's **increased participation in decision-making processes at the community level**. This fact is perceived – by both the women themselves and male FFS

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**All women interviewed reported that both their income and ability to make decisions on family income increased.**

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graduates – as an indirect consequence of their participation in the FFS. One of the groups in Niayes gave the example of 25 women in the local government (out of 56 members), of which 20 are FFS graduates. They explained that it was a new phenomenon for their village to have so many women in the local government. One of the women added: “We became active through the FFS. At the beginning we didn't know how to talk in public, how to clearly formulate opinions, and how to do politics. It is also true that in some cases we met resistance from our families before joining the FFS” (female FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).

Some female FFS graduates stated that the presence of female facilitators made it easier for women to participate. “I remember there were mostly male facilitators at the beginning, and I believe the presence of female facilitators later on encouraged women farmers to participate” (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes). It has been confirmed through the discussions and interviews that **female FFS graduates and their activities attract the attention of other women**. They become a source of inspiration,

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**Female FFS graduates and their activities attract the attention of other women. They become a source of inspiration, co-creating new role models, and therefore might play an important role in motivating other women to join.**

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co-creating **new role models**, and therefore might play an important role in motivating other women to join.

While in various countries the provision of extension services remains limited for both women and men, women farmers still receive less support from extension service providers than men farmers (FAO, 2011). It is evident that FFS often play an **important role in overcoming these gender disparities in access to extension services**. Facilitating

access to information and knowledge, and creating environments where this knowledge can be applied and experienced, are crucial elements in building the capacities of women involved in agriculture and women farmers. There is an example from Niayes where a female FFS graduate (after three FFS cycles) moved to another region using the knowledge and skills she had gained from the FFS. **“She became a source of support for other farmers and continues to provide advice”** (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).

**Figure 8 Main findings – women’s empowerment**



Source: Author's own elaboration

### 3.2.1.3 Social inclusion

Social inclusion is both the process and the outcome of improving the terms by which people participate in society. It concerns the dignity of people who have been disadvantaged as a result of their identity, and is about improving their ability and opportunity to fully take part in society, and making them feel valued and important. It might also include securing rights and enabling factors for individuals and groups so that all can participate in the decision-making processes that influence their lives and have access to political, social and physical spaces and services (WB, 2013). Initiatives and activities promoting social inclusion thus help individuals and communities who have been socially excluded to overcome inequality and disadvantages. They promote equality of opportunities and diversity, and aim to eliminate discrimination.

FFS are, at least in part, socially inclusive by definition due to their focus on small farmers who are often among the most

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**Social inclusion is both the process and the outcome of improving the terms by which people participate in society. It concerns the dignity of people who have been disadvantaged as a result of their identity, and is about improving their ability and opportunity to fully take part in society, and making them feel valued and important.**

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vulnerable members of society. But even within the context of rural communities and smallholders, social inclusion/exclusion needs to be carefully considered, analysed and translated into the appropriate setting of an FFS. The categories to be taken into consideration when focusing on social vulnerabilities are, for example, sex, ethnicity, nationality, age, health, family status, membership of a particular social group, and poverty. “We had cases of FFS members that were facing the difficulty of limited means – for them it was hard even to find the money for the transport to the FFS session” (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes). In cases where one of the preconditions for participation in the FFS is that the participant be a decision-maker in relation to land or an agricultural activity, this might be especially limiting for many women who nevertheless play an important role within the context of family farms.

Farmers’ and other organizations were used as the main point of entry for setting up FFS in Senegal.<sup>7</sup> Information was disseminated to farmers primarily through these organizations, or with their assistance. A significant proportion of the first FFS participants were members of these organizations, which represented the majority of the farmers in the areas visited. Subsequent FFS cycles started using more diversified and capillary channels (village authorities and meetings, direct contact,

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<sup>7</sup> These were farmers’ organization (their unions and federations), women’s organization or youth organizations.



Facilitators are a key element for the success of a FFS.

etc.) so that non-members might also be reached more easily: "The facilitators came to my field when I was there, explained more about the FFS and suggested that I join the group. I had already heard about the FFS and I knew the facilitators, so I accepted immediately" (female FFS graduate, Niayes). FAO projects with an FFS component also covered the criteria of vulnerability, primarily targeting small-scale farmers for whom agricultural activity is their main livelihood. The process of identifying/targeting potential FFS members also began to be more inclusive thanks to the "second generation" of facilitators: farmers who had become facilitators after passing through the FFS experience themselves and later receiving training. These farmer-facilitators are familiar with the local context, including its social aspects. While this may potentially increase the inclusiveness of these programmes, it might also represent a potential limiting factor in cases where their work conforms to the local cultural context. Moreover, due to their lower level of formal education, many of the farmer-facilitators need more assistance and training, especially in areas

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**The process of identifying/targeting potential FFS members also began to be more inclusive thanks to the "second generation" of facilitators: farmers who had become facilitators after passing through the FFS experience themselves and later receiving training.**

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they are not – at a theoretical level – familiar with. This includes topics such as gender identity and roles, gender equality, women's empowerment, vulnerability analysis and social exclusion/inclusion.

Furthermore, group membership may not necessarily result in active participation or an active role within the group, and it is therefore not the quantity but the **quality of group membership** which needs to be carefully analysed and taken into consideration when setting up FFS. For instance, women in agriculture may easily face constraints related to access to knowledge, land and land ownership, capital, credit, markets, extension services and production assets. They are often forced to contend with multiple workloads, limited mobility and wage disparities compared with men. Quality FFS programmes encourage all FFS members to play an active role and promotes their active participation, as well as inclusive decision-making. The quality of this process is therefore crucial.

The findings of this exercise demonstrate that in cases **where the facilitator was more aware of and sensitive to social vulnerability issues**, this was reflected in both the composition of the group and, in particular, **the group dynamics**. "At the beginning, it wasn't easy to approach some subjects. We met culturally based resistance and had to make real efforts in order to break down these barriers. We of course used the group dynamics exercises during the learning sessions, but you only reach non-members indirectly through this, so in some cases it wasn't sufficient. For instance,

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**In cases where the facilitator was more aware of and sensitive to social vulnerability issues, this was reflected in both the composition of the group and, in particular, the group dynamics.**

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if we mentioned the issue of gender equality, there were men basically afraid of something new, afraid of losing control over their household and usual dynamics. They were convinced women would turn against them afterwards. So when the FFS started and their wives were supposed to attend, they tried to prevent them from joining or made it more difficult for them to attend. Sometimes we had to go to the household to talk to them, convince them and explain that we really needed women to come with us to the FFS. These situations are certainly more frequent in cases where only one of the spouses participates in the FFS" (male FFS facilitator, Kolda).

Furthermore, the group discussions and individual interviews showed that improved communication, the capacity to listen more to others' opinions, and an **acknowledgment of the importance of understanding others' views**, have not only significantly improved mutual understanding within the FFS groups themselves, but over time this has also, according to FFS farmers, spread to external groups in the wider community. This has permitted the creation of **more socially fluid and inclusive environments** at the community level.

FFS graduates also reported **improved intergenerational relationships**, as in many cases the first family member to join an FFS subsequently encouraged other family members to join (usually sons, daughters or siblings). This shared FFS experience and common interest strengthened their relationships. “Initially, most of the participants were older farmers – younger ones joined later, when there was evidence of the results. It was actually something that helped to create consensus over a topic between younger and older generations. We also set up the regular FFS meetings for Sunday. It was much easier for many community members to join, including young people, for example university students” (female FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).

In localities where **Dimitra listeners’ clubs** have been introduced alongside an FFS,<sup>8</sup> the **mutual beneficial effects and synergies** of the two approaches were observed. According to the farmers interviewed who had experience with both activities, the Dimitra listeners’ clubs allowed the spectrum of participants to be widened. “It allowed other non-FFS members of the community, but especially those who for one reason or another don’t work in the fields – for example elderly people – to take part in a community-wide discussion on different topics” (female FFS graduate and member of a Dimitra listeners’ club, Kolda). Based on the data collected, it can be concluded that already existing FFS activities (and related aspects, such as group

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**“Initially, most of the participants were older farmers – younger ones joined later, when there was evidence of the results. It was actually something that helped to create consensus over a topic between younger and older generations.”**

female FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes

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and community dynamics) facilitate the establishment of the listeners’ clubs: “When Dimitra came, we were very much used to regular meetings from the FFS, so it was easy for people to participate on a regular basis” (female FFS graduate and member of a Dimitra listeners’ club, Kolda). The Dimitra listeners’ clubs thus created an even more **inclusive environment involving the broader community**, linking its various members of the community and bridging differences, for example, of age or social role. The interviewees highlighted the importance of improving **intergenerational communication by exchanging on common topics**, with a potential impact on power relations in the community. To confirm the latter, further investigation would be needed.

One of the informants, an NGO representative coordinating social protection-related activities, reported that he uses **FFS graduates as resource persons** for the implementation of their programmes. According to him, in addition to the fact that they know the localities’ social context very well, the graduates have developed organizational and communication skills, and are widely perceived by the

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<sup>8</sup> FAO introduced the Dimitra listeners’ Clubs in the region in 2006 (FAO, 2015).

Figure 9 Main findings – social inclusion



Source: Author's own elaboration

communities as reliable, skilled and successful. The regard people have for them enables them to intervene even in socially complex situations. This indicates an **increase in human and social capital among FFS graduates.**

The concept of social capital draws attention to social connections within a society and the interpersonal resources used to establish and cultivate them (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).<sup>9</sup> It is thus commonly used to describe

the value of these connections within and among more or less institutionalized social networks, value of social trust facilitating cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 1995).

Among other things, it facilitates information flow and the resolution of common problems, and enables collective action, which could be one of the indicators of increased social capital (Brehm and Rahn, 1997). As with other thematic areas, this area has its own gender dimension which cannot be overlooked.

<sup>9</sup> However, Bourdieu used the concept of social capital to describe the phenomena of social exclusion.



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Female FFS graduates and their activities attract the attention of other women. They become a source of inspiration co-creating new role models, and therefore might play an important role in motivating other women to join.

Acknowledging the crucial role FFS play in empowering people and communities, it would be useful to explore how to make them more socially inclusive, more accessible for socially vulnerable individuals and groups within specific local contexts,<sup>10</sup> and enable them to benefit from participation.

<sup>10</sup>The category of vulnerable groups is extremely heterogeneous internally and its characteristics depend on many factors such as culture, regional context, economic dynamics or the activity of its members. All of these change over time. In this context, the term is used with awareness of what is mentioned and as a strategic category that allows for the formulation of appropriate action with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of life of these people and groups.

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**Acknowledging the crucial role FFS play in empowering people and communities, it would be useful to explore how to make them more socially inclusive, more accessible for socially vulnerable individuals and groups within specific local contexts, and enable them to benefit from participation.**

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### **3.2.1.4 Community empowerment, social cohesion**

Empowerment at the community level means people gain more control over their lives and become active agents of their own development. This involves greater collaboration when working as a group and is also closely linked to community ownership of this process for social change. Some of the key characteristics of the FFS, such as the participatory learning process, season-long meetings and working together, communication, discussion and joint decision-making, the principle of equity, and incorporation of special topics into the curricula, are essential for enabling the **empowerment of communities** (see Figure 10). The participatory nature of the FFS influences social dynamics, **strengthens relations**, helps build **mutual trust** within the community, and promotes **joint problem-solving**. FFS groups are **perceived by the wider community as reliable and trustworthy**; they are often asked by other community members or bodies to disseminate community-wide information



unrelated to agriculture. In many cases, FFS groups thus represent an **additional unifying element in the community**.

FFS graduates spoke of changes in the everyday life of their community and in relations between members resulting from their participation in the FFS, and also of relations built or reinforced through it. Most of the graduates indicated that communication, and as a result, community relations, social cohesion and solidarity significantly increased. One of the FFS graduates reported: “I feel much more tolerant and able to listen to others, communicate, accept their point of view and find an agreement with them. In the past I was rather critical and argumentative. A part of this change stems from my capacity to formulate and clearly express my opinion, and discuss things” (female FFS graduate, Niayes). Another farmer said: “We really

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**The participatory nature of the FFS influences social dynamics, strengthens relations, helps build mutual trust within the community, and promotes joint problem-solving.**

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like doing things together. The day of an FFS session, people are happy” (female FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

All groups who participated in the study developed, reactivated or reinforced village savings and loan schemes (VSLs), as discussed previously, as well as **emergency cash boxes** from which resources can be released in the event that a group member needs to cover expenses related to an unexpected life situation (most frequently health-related or social expenses that he

**Figure 10 FFS characteristics enabling community empowerment**



Source: Author's own elaboration

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**All groups who participated in the study developed, reactivated or reinforced village savings and loan schemes (VSLs), as discussed previously, as well as emergency cash boxes from which resources can be released in the event that a group member needs to cover expenses related to an unexpected life situation.**

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or she could not afford). In most cases, the amount is paid out in the form of a non-interest loan unlike loans paid out by the VSLs, where an interest rate is applied. Two of the groups stated that in some cases, the group decides to allocate resources under a non-reimbursable expense scheme, or additional resources to assist a member in need, collected ad hoc from group members. Groups or group members are very often involved in the organization of support for vulnerable households in the community. The majority of graduates stated that such interventions in support of a person or family in need are mostly provided anonymously, as social and economic vulnerabilities may have a stigmatizing effect. This represents a joint community/group response to community members' needs and issues. Varying degrees and forms of reinforcement of community **safety net mechanisms** can be observed in all the groups interviewed.

As anticipated, access to land is a serious issue in some localities of Senegal, the area of Niayes being one of them. The

community's responses to this issue are various. One of the groups interviewed is actively involved in an inter-organizational **land recovery initiative, seeking access to land for landless families**. "Land owners who don't use their land lend it for at least one year. This land is then used by landless families. Each of them has 0.25–0.5 ha. In 2015 we reached an agreement with owners over the use of 50 ha, and in 2016, 54 ha. One hundred and fifteen families have benefited from this programme" (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes). They are also active in the **mediation of conflicts** over land grabbing and discussions with local authorities.

The groups stated that their capacity to self-organize at the community level, including in relation to non-agricultural topics, had significantly increased. Most of the groups said that they were continuing to work together in agricultural matters, but that their activities very often went much further. There is evidence to suggest that FFS play an important role in joint community activities, and in the **creation and strengthening of both formal, and in particular informal, rural organizations**. According to the interviewees, participation in the FFS had built mutual trust, reinforced

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**The groups stated that their capacity to self-organize at the community level, including in relation to non-agricultural topics, had significantly increased.**

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FFS field, Senegal, Kolda.

community cohesion and inspired its members in terms of how to self-organize. This fact facilitated the establishment of new rural organizations and the strengthening of those already existing. One of the groups explained: “When we created our organization, it enabled us to receive a loan to buy some machinery we now use and also rent to others. We also installed power lines in our fields” (male FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).

The farmers reported **improved intra-community and inter-community relations**

**and collaboration.** Thanks to the FFS programme, relationships built with other nearby FFS groups, and field visits, various farmers have maintained these contacts for professional and personal purposes. In some cases, the radius of these connections stretches up to 40 km. “Thanks to the FFS, the collaboration between 24 villages has been strengthened. After the FFS, ten new organizations (economic interest groups) emerged. Nowadays, when I go to another village, I’m not a stranger anymore and that’s really nice” (female FFS graduate and facilitator, Niayes).



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The following are the key concepts and comments related to community empowerment expressed by the FFS graduates during the individual and focus group discussions. The order reflects the frequency and emphasis with which they were articulated:

- Strengthening of community, community spirit, social cohesion;
- Listening, dynamic discussion, more open communication, respect for others' opinions, joint decision-making (influencing the family environment);
- Collaboration, working together, helping each other (especially in their agricultural activities);
- Establishment of personalised mechanisms and strategies for coping with/overcoming difficulties, informal and semi-formal safety nets (anonymous support of vulnerable community members and families, VSLs);
- Formal, and especially informal, rural organizations (various degrees of collaboration);
- Sharing of technical information/ skills (network, many of the graduates providing information/technical assistance to other non-FFS farmers, non-FFS farmers imitating FFS practices once they see the results)
- Expansion of contacts for personal and professional purposes (intra-community and inter-community relations and collaboration);
- Mutual trust;
- Access to credit, improved capacity for financial planning (VSLs);
- Conflict mediation, conflict resolution at community level (e.g. access to land, land use, land recovery);
- Strengthened position in society (as individual and group), how society perceives me now;
- General information sharing (FFS groups perceived by larger community as trustworthy, requests from community members and organizations to disseminate community-wide information);
- Joint activities, collective action (beyond agricultural activity, non-professional problem solving, social events).

FFS is perceived by the farmers as a relevant and useful way of learning, filling in the gaps in their knowledge, responding to their needs and making the right

decisions in order to jointly solve a wide range of issues related to more than just agriculture. Many graduates underlined the key role that FFS had played in creating a sense of community, explaining that it is now more functional and collaborative: **“It’s much easier to meet up and find common solutions to the problems we are facing. It’s the basis for organizing anything”** (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

There are examples of a **decrease in conflicts** between groups (herders and farmers) in the case of cotton producers in the Tambacounda region. FFS farmers explained how the knowledge gained, improved communication and collaboration within the community had helped mutual understanding and created a better understanding of the mutual beneficial effects of various agricultural activities (e.g. organic fertilizers as an important input for maintaining cotton yields). Furthermore, fewer conflicts at the community level and the capacity to solve them peacefully (either individually or as a group) was one of the most frequent comments made by the FFS graduates interviewed. **“There are fewer conflicts in the community. Conflicts don’t arise, or are resolved immediately, even before they can escalate”** (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

A number of graduates reported on the effect that the FFS learning process had had

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**“It’s much easier to meet up and find common solutions to the problems we are facing. It’s the basis for organizing anything.”**

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A group meeting of one of the FFS in Kolda.

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on their **perception of education**: “I didn’t really care much about my kids’ learning process at school. It was just enough for me to know they are attending classes. Through my own experience from the FFS, I learned a lot and I realized how important it is for my kids to study more and well. So, as a result, I started to ask them more about school, to discuss what they are doing there and how it is going” (female FFS graduate, Kolda).

**FFS farmers explained how the knowledge gained, improved communication and collaboration within the community had helped mutual understanding and created a better understanding of the mutual beneficial effects of various agricultural activities (e.g. organic fertilizers as an important input for maintaining cotton yields).**

**Figure 11 Main findings – community empowerment, social cohesion**



Source: Author's own elaboration

### 3.2.1.5 Sustainable agricultural production, nutrition-related decision-making, health

All graduates were well aware of the **risks of pesticide use**, including the problem of pesticide residues, and stated that they are actively using the IPPM approach. Most of them **stopped or significantly lowered their use of conventional pesticides** (and thus their related costs), and began **understanding and increasing biological control, and using botanical pesticides (e.g. neem extracts) and non-chemical alternatives** instead. Some of them are able to sell on their produce at a higher price due to the use of IPPM or the fact that the produce is organic, this being the case primarily in Niayes.

The problem of agrochemicals was expressed and seen as problematic principally by the FFS graduates in Niayes. Various FFS farmers reported that they were aware of cases of pesticide poisonings in the community, and particularly past cases involving children. "From time to time there have been cases of kids accidentally ingesting pesticides stored in plastic bottles, mistaking them for a drink. They died. Me personally, I don't buy chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers anymore. I started using neem extracts, for example, to control pests. And now I no longer suffer from symptoms like headaches, nausea and skin irritation that were generally perceived as something normal in the past" (female FFS graduate, Niayes). The majority of them are convinced that their health has improved as a result of practising IPPM and using non-chemical

alternatives and botanical pesticides. They are also actively involved in **information campaigns**, offering non-FFS farmers their assistance in order to lower the overall use of pesticides in their area. "We are aware of the danger of pesticides for human health and for the environment, which in any case also affects human health. It's clear that we are motivated even more to pass on the information and knowledge we gained from the FFS to other farmers in our village, so they are able to manage their fields without the use of chemicals. If they use them, it's a danger for us too – we live here" (female FFS graduate, Niayes).

According to the FFS farmers in Niayes, there is a relatively strong demand for organic produce. One of the farmers described the existence of a trust-based system: "My clients, many of them from Dakar, call me regularly and come to pick up what they order. Trust is important; they prefer to buy from somebody they know. Sometimes I'm not even able to satisfy all the requests" (female FFS farmer, Niaye). Another FFS graduate said: "I sell my produce personally at a market in Dakar. I have fairly regular clients who come; sometimes they call and order what they need in advance. They can also order by email through the federation of which I am a member" (female FFS farmer,

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**Most of them stopped or significantly lowered their use of conventional pesticides (and thus their related costs).**

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Niaye). Horticultural crops are often more sensitive to various pests, and the related risks might be perceived by farmers as too high to be worth taking. These **converging factors** (the IPPM knowledge that allowed farmers to manage pests in alternative ways and thus also to lower some of their production-related expenses, and the parallel demand from consumers for organic produce) have probably facilitated farmers' adoption of less agrochemical-intensive farming.

The context of cotton production, represented in this exercises by the Tambacounda region, is specific with regard to the use of pesticides.<sup>11</sup> Due to the relatively high production costs which drive the majority of farmers into debt, there is little willingness to take risks that might potentially threaten the harvest. Despite this potential resistance of farmers to adopt new techniques, all the primarily cotton-growing FFS graduates reported that they had lowered the amount of conventional agrochemicals (pesticides and fertilizers) they were using, and were instead making use of various IPPM strategies and techniques. This allowed them to decrease their production costs and debt, and thus increase their revenue. *"In the past, I used to spray on average six times a season. Today, by also using other ways to control pests, I spray conventional pesticides 2–4 times per season. I decreased the amount of these pesticides by half: I buy 50 litres instead of 100. This makes a big difference for me"* (male FFS graduate, Tambacounda).

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<sup>11</sup> Most farmers produce for the main cotton company, whose main role is to ensure the availability of inputs and the purchase of production.

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**FFS graduates stress that the knowledge and skills they developed as a result of the FFS significantly affected their agricultural production as a whole, and not only that of the crop that had been the main subject of the FFS in which they participated.**

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FFS graduates stress that the knowledge and skills they developed as a result of the FFS **significantly affected their agricultural production as a whole**, and not only that of the crop that had been the main subject of the FFS in which they participated. The majority of interviewees said that they are applying the approaches and practices they learnt during the FFS in their fields. Almost all farmers stated that they had **diversified the crops they cultivate** as a direct or indirect result of the knowledge and inspiration gained during the FFS.

All farmers confirmed that the **knowledge gained through the FFS naturally spreads to non-FFS farmers**.<sup>12</sup> Most of the graduates share this new information with other farmers on an ad hoc basis to solve specific problems, or graduates support them over the longer term. One of the graduates says: *"Non-FFS farmers come quite often and ask for advice, or attend some of the FFS sessions. They see we are successful. We share with them what we know and they are grateful. I believe this is also what strengthened relations at the community level"* (male FFS graduate, Kolda).

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<sup>12</sup> The level and extent of this diffusion effect could be explored separately.



The FFS approach continues to have significant potential where **nutrition** is concerned. However, specific modules or sessions (special topics) need to be incorporated into FFS programmes to make use of this potential, and they should not be limited to a female audience. **“It is crucial that men know more about nutrition because it is them who traditionally provide the money for family food consumption”** (male FFS graduate, Niayes). A similar point was made by some of the other male and female respondents. Furthermore, it was evident that in those groups where nutrition was introduced as a part of the curriculum or a special topic, awareness was significantly increased in both women and men. In most areas visited, the graduates reported significant changes in their diets thanks to the FFS which had improved farmers’ skills, knowledge and collaboration at the household level. The **quantity of food** increased, but more importantly, their **diet became more diverse**, thanks to a **greater diversity of production, as well as an increase in available resources**. **“Look, we used to eat mostly millet or rice with baobab leaves or groundnut sauce. In addition to the fact that you hardly see us prepare baobab leaves today, we consume various vegetables that we grow, for example, carrots, eggplant, chilli peppers, tomatoes. And most days we also add fish, and one or two times a week we have meat. Vegetable growing is going well; there is enough for our own consumption as well as for the market”** (female FFS graduate, Kolda). There are also examples of graduates from Niayes who diversified their diets by **exchanging produce with other FFS farmers**.

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**Specific modules or sessions (special topics) need to be incorporated into FFS programmes to make use of this potential, and they should not be limited to a female audience.**

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**Nutrition-related knowledge** is also influencing traditional aspects, such as the **dividing up of symbolic and physical spaces, and other cultural codes**. For example, one of the FFS graduates explained: **“Children are not allowed to eat from the centre of a shared plate, where the most precious pieces of food are – usually the vegetables and meat. This is negatively impacting their nutritional well-being. Through the FFS we were able to learn the nutritional needs at different stages of a person’s life, thus also children’s needs, and this is changing the tradition”** (male FFS graduate, Kolda).

The following are the key aspects related to sustainable agricultural production, nutrition-related decision-making and health that emerged from the focus group and individual discussions:

- Sustainable management of natural resources, local heritage and environmental conservation (replacement of agrochemicals or a significant decrease in their use, use of botanical pesticides and fertilizers, biological control);
- Knowledge-based and joint decision-making;



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FFS graduates stress that the knowledge and skills they developed as a result of the FFS significantly affected their agricultural production as a whole.

- Information sharing, information spreading naturally to non-FFS farmers;
- Greater dietary diversity (through production diversification, increased income, exchanging produce with other ffs farmers, knowledge, and changing tradition);
- Improved health, fewer symptoms of poisoning related to pesticide use (very much reflected in niayes)
- Raising consumers' awareness and/or consumer demand encouraging farmers' adoption of organic production (or less agrochemical-intensive production), expansion of market opportunities;
- Agro-ecosystem analysis;
- IPPM;
- Crop diversification.

**Figure 12 Main findings - key elements**



Source: Author's own elaboration

### 3.2.2 Farmer field schools facilitators, master trainers and other farmer field schools practitioners

The context in which the FFS programme was introduced in Senegal was somewhat different from that of other countries where this exercise had already been carried out (Jordan and Tunisia), where existing public agricultural extension systems were the key (and almost exclusive) partners, and it was primarily their network of technical staff that were involved as facilitators. Under this approach, the model of farmer-facilitator was less common than in Senegal. Nevertheless, it is usually government extension workers, sometimes together with NGO staff, who tend to be involved in the first phase of introducing the FFS to a new area. In subsequent cycles, they provide mentoring and support to new farmer-facilitators.

The challenges faced in both situations differ in some respects. In the first case, there may be difficulties associated with the usual top-down approaches to working under the paradigm of technology transfer of the traditional extension services. At the same time, these structures often have specialized human resources that they can draw on relatively readily. The farmer-facilitator model on the other hand, which helped significantly during the FFS scaling-up process in Senegal, responds more to an approach focusing on farmers' participation in processes of innovation, and encouraging experimentation within communities.

Furthermore, farmer-facilitators, who are FFS graduates, are usually motivated, experienced and very much aware of the local context, and are based in the area so do not face difficulties relating to travel. Farmer-facilitators are more likely to need greater support, training and backstopping in relation to specific topics such as gender identity and roles, gender equality, women's empowerment, vulnerability analysis and social exclusion/inclusion – areas they might not be familiar with at the theoretical level.

Moreover, various facilitators in Senegal expressed their uncertainty when approaching certain topics, such as gender equality, women's empowerment and vulnerability. "Not all facilitators are able and willing to work with topics like gender. Moreover, there are some facilitators, even women, who hold rather traditional beliefs" (male FFS facilitator, Kolda). Related training is seen by them and other FFS practitioners as crucial in order to build the necessary **capacity** to carry out this work. One of the facilitators said that the specific support in relation to gender equality that they had received from FAO helped them greatly to improve their ability to work with this topic. "We started working specifically

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**The farmer-facilitator model responds more to an approach focusing on farmers' participation in processes of innovation, and encouraging experimentation within communities.**

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on gender as part of the FFS a year ago and it helped a lot. There is a need for more specific training adapted to suit facilitators with lower levels of formal education and consequently more accessible for them” (male FFS facilitator, Kolda).

It is more likely that farmer–facilitators (as well as others) who do not go through an appropriate training process will not be able or willing to raise potentially problematic questions. Some of the community’s social (and specifically, gender) dynamics may therefore be reproduced within FFS groups. This may limit the FFS’ potential to strengthen gender equality, women’s

empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment. One of the facilitators confirmed that reflections on gender dynamics also influence facilitators on a personal level: “Dealing with gender-related issues also helped me a lot on a personal level” (male FFS facilitator, Kolda).

Enough time needs to be made for the **preparatory phase** and baseline study, in which not only technical challenges and opportunities, but also social ones, should be reflected on in an appropriate setting, and the targeting criteria adapted to suit the local context.

Most FFS practitioners in Senegal report that they are aware of the often very significant impact of this approach on social dynamics. Nevertheless, some of them were surprised by the magnitude of the changes that emerged from the farmers’ stories collected during this exercise. The reasons for not collecting and **reporting** this information might be the following: firstly, this is not usually required by the programme’s formal reporting mechanisms; secondly, these aspects could be perceived as the collateral impact of the FFS, and thus not very relevant for reporting; and thirdly, collecting such information could be time-consuming and require the use of more specific tools. FFS practitioners recognize the need for further exploration of these changes, as they can contribute to the efforts focusing on high standard of quality FFS programme.

When discussing with FFS facilitators, master trainers and other FFS practitioners the social aspects of FFS and their impact



All female graduates interviewed stated that they had gained more respect and decision-making power within the community and household environments, as well as in their agricultural work.



FFS brings together knowledge and experience of farmers.

at the social and community levels, it seems evident that most of the currently used **monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment mechanisms** do not record individual- and community-level changes that are not strictly linked to the FFS's technical component and its economic implications (unless a programme has specific social objectives). This unfortunately means that various very important aspects, such as changes in gender dynamics within the community and at the household level, remain hidden or overlooked.

One of the final considerations emerging from numerous discussions with FFS practitioners is the importance of **focusing on the process**, on how and in what environment and context different aspects

become a reality, bearing in mind that the end-result is highly dependent on and is a result of this process. Furthermore, while focusing on the technical content, as well as any other topics that might be of interest to participants, is certainly important, there needs to be a strong enough human “support structure” which is able to facilitate the process, work with such content and adapt it to specific local contexts.

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**Most of the currently used monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact assessment mechanisms do not record individual- and community-level changes that are not strictly linked to the FFS's technical component and its economic implications.**

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### 3.2.3 Challenges

- How can the FFS' potential be better used to strengthen gender equality, women's empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment? How can FFS programmes and the FFS themselves be made more inclusive? How can social vulnerabilities and the specific needs of rural communities be better addressed, taking into account context- and culture-specific aspects? What do FFS practitioners need in order to better work with these aspects and feel more comfortable when doing so? What are the project-/programme-related implications (design, implementation, M&E/MEL/ impact assessment)? These are the questions that should be reflected on and possibly answered in order to boost the FFS programme or project's potential to produce positive change at the individual and community levels in terms of gender equality, women's empowerment, social inclusion and community empowerment.
- Female participants reported that they often had to contend with the problem of heavy workloads that impeded their regular participation. Some of them mentioned that at the beginning, they experienced attempts on their husband's part to prevent them from participating or make it difficult for them to participate. This seems to have occurred less or not at all when husbands were also involved in the programme, or in a community-wide preparatory phase.



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One of the amazing FFS fields in Kolda.



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Everybody in the group is encouraged to express his/her own opinion and experience.

- Motivation, lack of female role models, successful female FFS graduates attracting the attention of other women.
- Social norms, often strong among women themselves; what is acceptable, common, usual. However, these social boundaries are not absolute.
- One of the series of interconnected questions that should be answered in the preparatory phase of an FFS programme and the formation of groups is: "Who receives the information, what channels are used to disseminate the information, and who is giving the information?" And another, no less important: "Who can participate, who is allowed to participate,

who is able to participate, and is there somebody for whom FFS experience would be helpful, but who is being left behind?"

How can human capital be developed with the focus on the social aspects of FFS?

- Quality FFS programme, facilitators, master trainers, strong national and regional (global?) FFS networks, information exchange, capacity building, etc.;
- Additional support (such as training and coaching) for farmer-facilitators in relation to specific topics, such as gender equality, women's empowerment, social inclusion, etc.

### 3.3

## Farmers' stories

**P**art of the exercise involved identifying and describing farmers' experiences and success stories in order to better communicate the impact of FFS at the individual and community levels, and in this case, using the farmers' voices.



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In the cases where both the spouses attended the FFS, the beneficial effects of this on gender dynamics seem to be considerably greater.



## CASE 1

### Building alternative role models

**MBaye  
(Niayes, Senegal)**

MBaye lives in Niayes, one hour's drive from Dakar, the beating heart of Senegal. Niayes is the 180 km-long and 25 km-wide area north-west of Dakar; it has a coastal micro-climate and is particularly suitable for horticulture. Most of Senegal's horticultural produce comes from here. Its proximity to the capital and other large urban centres also facilitates access to markets. Unfortunately, farmers in Niayes are facing problems of access to land and of securing allotted land in particular due to increasing pressure on land use for construction purposes as the city expands and claims additional spaces.

MBaye joined the FFS at the beginning of the programme in 2001. Her husband heard about it from the programme's implementing partner and suggested that MBaye join the initiative. **"This was why I didn't have many doubts. I was also very much concerned about the use of pesticides, and of course I wanted to increase my production. These were my initial thoughts."** At the very beginning of the programme, some community members expressed scepticism: **"What else should we learn, we know how to cultivate, they were saying."** The first year, most of the participants were older farmers. Younger people joined later, when there were clear results. **"It was actually something that helped the younger and older generations arrive at a consensus over the**

**same topic."** Regular group meetings were held on Sundays, making it easier for many community members to join, including university students (family members).

**"My story probably differs from others'. When I joined the FFS, I was already active in social initiatives. I was working as a teacher as part of literacy programmes organized in partnership with the local authority. So shyness wasn't my issue,"** MBaye said when explaining her experience of the FFS. Many other female FFS graduates, however, reported that their self-confidence and ability to formulate and defend their opinions improved.

**"You know, in Senegal women are typically most involved in very frequent life-cycle ceremonies, like weddings, naming ceremonies for newborns, and so on. They take care of related expenses, that are definitely not insignificant."** Based on her experience, and success in agricultural production, MBaye is continuously trying to convince other women to spend less of their money on ceremonies and invest it instead in productive activities in order to gain more independence. According to her, these cultural ideas are slowly changing. Alternative role models play a significant part, and MBaye is one of them.

She is the head of her household: her husband passed away a few years ago. Today she manages and works 1.5 ha, together with four seasonal workers. MBaye produces various vegetables and also has a number of small ruminants. After joining

the FFS, MBaye's production significantly increased, as did the quality of her products. **"Look, we are so concerned about pesticide residues that when we have to buy a product that we don't produce, we only buy it nearby, from other farmers we know. This applies to all types of vegetables, fish, chicken and fruits. We only buy rice, sugar and oil from the market."**

MBaye is also fully involved in organizing support for vulnerable households in the community, using her experience and her connections with the FFS, the local authority and religious groups. This support is generally provided anonymously, as social and economic vulnerabilities have a stigmatizing effect. Her FFS group introduced a VSLs, and loans are accessible to non-members too. An emergency fund was also set up by FFS members who decide how the funds are used. They are usually used to cover group members' health-related and social emergencies, and those of their families.

All participants who joined FFS groups during the first year of the programme were members of the local farmers' organization. The second year, the two best (and available) participants from each group were identified and provided with training to become facilitators. This resulted in new FFS groups being established in 2003, where participation was not limited to members of farmers' organizations.

## CASE 2

### I don't need to emigrate

**Abdoulaye  
(Niayes, Senegal)**

Abdoulaye is a smiley young man. He lives in Niayes, a 180 km-long area north-west of Dakar where most of Senegal's horticulture products come from. He always used to help his parents in their field, using traditional methods of working the land. But years ago, before he first joined the FFS in 2001, he had one big dream – to emigrate. **"I saw friends coming back from abroad and buying land."** It was clear that this plan would require him to complete his studies. So he finished high school, and immediately afterwards it was suggested that he joins an FFS group. **"My principal motivation for joining was to gain a further qualification, to receive another certificate."**

At the very beginning, Abdoulaye's family was rather sceptical about his participation in the FFS. **"Where are you going? You want to study how to cultivate, something we've always been doing? You cannot learn more than we know. This was what they were telling me. But in the end, they recognized and appreciated all the knowledge and skills I gained there. From time to time my dad calls and asks me for advice or help with his work."** Another point Abdoulaye makes is: **"It was through the FFS that I learned the risks connected with pesticide use and how to manage pests in alternative ways."** In 2004, he started facilitating his first FFS: **"I started helping other farmers to improve their skills through the FFS. The last group I facilitated was in 2015."**

**"Thanks to my experience at the FFS, I discovered our locality's potential, and I started to be more open."** He says he also changed his way of communicating with others, including his family: **"I apply what I learnt at the FFS."** Abdoulaye describes himself as a role model for the community: **"I feel I'm an expert now, providing advice to others, and I'm recognized by others."** He explains that this is not only in connection with agricultural activity, but also with broader social and community issues. **"I also spent some time on the local council."**

Abdoulaye says that women farmers encounter specific barriers: **"I remember that at the FFS too, at the beginning the women were seated in the back. We really tried to work a lot on this, and you can see that some of them are active today in local politics. This has been a success."**

Nowadays, Abdoulaye acts as an important point of connection between mango producers and exporters. **"Our company has agreements with exporters. We receive orders and then we link them with producers and ensure the final step in the production process – picking and post-harvest handling – in order to maintain the mangoes' high quality. In addition to this, I cultivate potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, okra, chilli and lemons."**

**"Today, I'm fine, I'm living a great life. I'm financially self-sufficient. I don't need to emigrate anymore,"** he laughs.

### CASE 3

## Understanding who you are and what your potential is

**Mariama  
(Niayes, Senegal)**

Mariama joined the FFS group, which at that time was focusing on vegetable production, in 2003. In 2008, she started facilitating other FFS groups. When the opportunity to join the programme arose, she didn't know anything about the FFS, but decided to seize the chance and enrol. Her home is in Niayes, the 180 km-long and 25 km-large area north-west of Dakar, which is very suitable for horticulture. Its proximity to the capital and other large urban centres facilitates access to markets. Mariama started growing organic vegetables on her field after joining the FFS.

**"Before, I didn't really use to work in the field, only my husband did. When I started at the FFS, we agreed I would have my own field. Our relationship improved thanks to the mutual understanding and sharing responsibilities in terms of family income, and generally we have more in common now. I started to understand his situation more, and the same happened to him. Nowadays I don't have time to waste on insignificant problems, and I also think I'm less pretentious and more sensitive towards others,"** says Mariama, smiling. She goes on to explain that it was the long-term, regular and topic-wide learning process, common interest, and an environment in which everybody had an important role to play, that produced changes at the individual and

community levels. **“I see that an increase in income, especially for women (who are mostly responsible for kids’ school-related expenses), has had a positive impact on education. More money is available, for example for school supplies.”**



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She describes her experience with FFS: **“My life changed a lot after the FFS. I’m much more tolerant and able to listen to others, communicate, accept their point of view and find an agreement with them. In the past, I was rather critical and argumentative. A part of this change stems from my ability to formulate and clearly express my opinion, and to discuss things.”**

She is convinced that women and men participating in the same group is very important for mutual understanding. **“FFS is extremely important for women, because it just helps you to understand who you are and what your potential is,”** says Mariama. Participating in the FFS motivated some women to enrol in literacy classes. **“Furthermore, the FFS broadens your horizons, gives you ideas and tools to realize them. You strengthen relationships with others and forge new ones,”** adds Mariama. She explains that knowing each other better improves relations in the community, and it also means that one cares more about others. **“As a group, we became very sensitive to group and community members in need. Support often comes in an anonymous and secretive way. For example, you can receive rice and oil during the night and find it in front of the door in the morning. We also buy seeds for people in need so they can cultivate too. Me personally, I changed a lot thanks to the FFS experience.”** She believes that solidarity and cohesion has increased within the community.

## CASE 4

### I've made such progress

**Matar**  
**(Niayes, Senegal)**

Matar's home is in Niayes, one hour's drive north-west of Dakar. This 180 km-long area has a coastal micro-climate and is very suitable for horticulture. Most of Senegal's horticultural production comes from here. Its proximity to the capital and other large urban centres also facilitates access to markets. Unfortunately, farmers in Niayes are facing problems with access to land and securing allotted land, in particular due to increasing pressure on land for use in construction as the city expands and claims additional spaces.

He explained his background, his work for the Agro-Pastoralist Federation, and the fact that over time he became an FFS facilitator. Matar's reply to the question of what had changed in his life since the FFS was: **"In addition to the practical changes in my agriculture-related activities, increased opportunities and increased income, I've definitely started to care more about others and to systematically share what I learnt. I'm more aware."**

Describing how changes at the community level arose, he says: **"In the FFS, we all come together to work in the field. Everybody is different; they are not usually used to communicating openly. What happens in the FFS is that they simply start [communicating]. They are there,**

**solving problems, trying to find solutions, discussing things. As a result of all this, people start understanding others."**

Matar says he developed managerial skills which allow him to guide others. **"I've also gained much more confidence; I wasn't like this in the past. People trust me, and I also have respect for elderly people. Imagine that even old ladies call me Papa Matar, as an expression of respect,"** he adds, smiling. **"Communication within my family has also improved. I have eight children and we've started sharing more discussion topics. We just sit together and discuss things. You know, I'm more open-minded now. I feel I've made so much progress over the last few years."**

Another example of how he decided to share his knowledge is offering it to young women who for some reason left school early. **"In 2015, with the help of my daughters, we identified at first five girls between the ages of 15 and 26 and started providing regular, free-of-charge training over 14 months on agricultural practices and vegetable growing, which was inspired by the FFS. At the end [of the training], they were ready to sit a state-recognized exam and received a certificate. All of them from the first round passed the exam, and we are currently organizing the second round with another five,"** says Matar, explaining that this is his personal initiative.

Regarding gender issues in the FFS, Matar says: “As a facilitator, I of course encountered resistance from some of the members. They were afraid that traditional religious practices might not be respected in some way, but in the end we managed to convince them.” He explains that they also requested and received support from local religious representatives in relation to the question of women’s inheritance, as there is nothing in Koran that prevents women from inheriting. **“I appreciate it, and there are already some examples of a positive impact in this regard. Men are starting to share their land with women.”**

## CASE 5

### It is important to think of the future

**Mariam**  
**(Kolda, Senegal)**

Mariam, a small woman with a bright look in her eyes, joined her first FFS in 2010. She lives in the Kolda region in southern Senegal with her children; she is their only living parent. Mariam remembers that at the beginning, some people in the village were sceptical about the proposed activity. **“It was something new, and the decision of whether or not to take part was widely discussed at the village level. The head of the village facilitated a lot this process, and in the end it was accepted.”**

**“I used to cultivate vegetables in my small garden of around 3 m<sup>2</sup>. Now I have 35 m<sup>2</sup>; it doesn’t seem much but more land would become too difficult for me to manage, essentially because of water scarcity in some periods of the year. The last two years were much drier anyway; things are changing.”** The women in the village who are involved in rice production usually cultivate on one ha fields, whereas in the past the average field was 0.25 ha. Converging factors have contributed significantly to improving living conditions in Mariam’s village. In addition to the FFS groups, they have also benefited from another form of FAO support, receiving a tractor that has enabled farmers to expand their fields and increase their income, and recently a school was built thanks to another development programme.



Mariam points out: **“What really changed is our nutrition, especially in terms of its variety. We used to have mostly millet and some maize or rice with a simple sauce, for example one made from baobab leaves. Nowadays we eat vegetables like carrots, eggplant, lettuce, okra and others, and we also use fish or meat to prepare sauces, and we’re able to do this basically every day.”**

When describing what kind of changes the FFS experience has helped her to make, she says: **“My credibility has increased; people have faith in me. The knowledge and skills I gained allow me to work really well, and to earn more.”** She has diversified her income, and has started a small business, buying in the city and then selling in the village. **“I’m planning more; it’s important to think of the future. This is also what I often repeat to my children.”** She also explains that the FFS gave her more tools to help her educate her children, including the ability to share knowledge, plan ahead, and communicate and collaborate with others.

**“What I can see in the community is that now communication is so quick. We have improved the way we communicate with others. This has increased the level of understanding, so there is more compassion too.”** Before the FFS were set up, there was already a VSLG group in place, which was managed primarily by women. Thanks to the FFS and the increased income of its members, the work of the VSLG was strengthened

and further developed. **“We opened a bank account, and we also started sharing a field where we now work together. There are also enough funds to offer small loans to members and non-members.”**



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## CASE 6

### We function more as a group, as a community

**Keba  
(Kolda, Senegal)**

Keba lives together with his family in the Kolda region in Upper Casamance, southern Senegal, between the Gambia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. He became a farmer-facilitator in 2010. Keba says he has made significant progress in his life. Before joining the FFS, he used to work as a herder. **"I was taking care of livestock and I wasn't very active in cultivating. Thanks to the FFS, I have improved the way I work. I'm also much more communicative. I used to be quite quick-tempered; now, even if I don't like something or don't agree with a situation, I'm able to manage it and find a solution."** He adds: **"I believe education is very important. This is why I'm pushing so much for it. My oldest daughter is in high school. She lives with my friend's family because our village is too far from the town. I also support my young brother in his university studies."** Keba seems proud as he says this.

Today he produces rice on a 2 ha field: **"I keep one third of what I produce for home consumption and I sell the other two thirds."** He explains that his wife cultivates on another 1 ha field producing rice and vegetables. **"It is my land, but we agreed she can manage it herself. Our children are helping us both when they can."** Their family income has also increased: **"We decided to buy two donkeys so they help us with the work. I can also afford to pay for medical expenses in case we need to."**

Keba explains more about the ways in which FFS graduates' knowledge and skills spreads to others, non-FFS farmers in the community: **"After the last programme (through which FFS were implemented) finished, a group of women asked me to replicate the FFS within their group, so I did."** And he explains that even those who did not take part in the FFS benefit from it indirectly. He perceives the knowledge sharing as something quite natural: **"I received training so I should pass it on."**

When discussing vulnerable groups in society, Keba says: **"Of course there are individuals or families that are in need; usually these are very poor families without children. As a community, we organize support for them. They usually receive rice and maize for example at the time of the harvest. Then, from time to time, they also receive personal support."** He confirms the existence of a VSLs group managed almost exclusively by women, founded before the FFS, which was significantly developed and whose income increased after joining the FFS: **"Special fund-raising activities are organized for exceptional situations. Last week, there was a woman who received an amount to cover expenses for the care she received during childbirth."**

According to Keba, the experience of the FFS has strengthened the relations, identity and cohesion of the community: **"We function more as a group, as a community. We've become more responsible, more aware."** He adds that communication has improved as there are more occasions and willingness to meet.



## CASE 7

### No battle is lost

**Kadiatou  
(Kolda, Senegal)**

Kadiatou is another of these incredibly strong and at the same time calm and smiling ladies. When you look into her eyes, you do not know what you are going to hear, but you are sure it will be a long story.

Kadiatou lives in the Kolda region in south Senegal with her seven children. Her husband passed away years ago, and she has had to take care of the family on her own. **"It was really hard for me to find enough money to satisfy even the basic needs of my family. I used to work for others in their homes; you know, those small jobs like cleaning, washing clothes or cooking. You cannot really earn much. It was difficult. At the time I had a small garden, around 40 x 40 metres, where I used to grow maize for home consumption and manioc for sale. This heavy workload caused a kind of isolation; I didn't have time to spend time with others."**

One day Kadiatou's second eldest son came and said that he had decided to try his fortune in Europe. **"I was against this plan; it is so dangerous. Many years ago, my brother emigrated too, and we haven't heard from him since. But there was no way of convincing my son. He told me he couldn't see me working so much and so hard. So he left with some friends. They came back after some time: the journey was too dangerous, and horrendous things can happen along the**

**way. My son decided to keep going."** There is silence. A lot of men, mostly the young, are leaving south Senegal, and certain regions in particular are significantly affected. Emigration to Europe is still perceived by many, mostly young men as a viable strategy for improving their families' incomes.

Kadiatou joined her FFS group in 2011: **"I was so shy and full of complexes, because I had only completed primary school, so I didn't want to talk in front of others."** She smiles. **"All this has gone. I've completely changed. Everybody knows me now. People trust me and come to ask for advice or help. I'm able to mediate conflicts, to solve problems. Even elderly women come for some advice."** The FFS practitioners that know Kadiatou well confirm this: **"She has made incredible progress and became a role model for many people in this area."** Kadiatou mentions that relations in the community have improved, and immediate mutual help is provided when needed. They have great relations with other nearby FFS groups. **"We've got to know new people from other villages now. We've become friends and invite each other to ceremonies."**

She explains that her life completely changed as a result of the FFS: **"Nowadays I grow rice, maize and groundnuts on a 1.5 ha field I inherited. The amount I produce is sufficient for home consumption as well as for sale. I don't use agrochemicals; we prepare botanical fertilizers at home, and I agreed for herders to bring livestock to the field, so that's an additional way of naturally increasing the soil fertility."** This increased

production not only satisfies her family's needs, but also allows her to sell the surplus. Kadiatou continues: **"I had three thatched huts. I kept only one as a kitchen and I removed the other two, replacing them with small, solid brick houses."** Kadiatou seems really proud of herself.

All Kadiatou's school-age children are studying; two of her children have already finished high school. **"All my sons – there are four of them – know how to cook very well. I taught them."** Her children help her with the field work during the holidays. **"I've always said to my kids they have to be kind, educated, not depend on others, and earn their living in an honest way."**



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## CASE 8

### Education simply changes you

**Thierno**  
**(Tambacounda, Senegal)**

Thierno's home is in the Tambacounda region in south-east Senegal, which has been strongly affected by the emigration of young people, especially men. His family also has some members who decided to undertake the dangerous journey to Europe. **"Almost all families here have somebody who left."** Poverty rates in Tambacounda are higher than in other regions: two thirds of the population live under the national poverty line.

Thierno says he learnt a lot about cultivation and its various techniques, as well as nutrition, through the FFS he joined in 2015: **"I wasn't used to paying attention to the quality of the food we were consuming."** He cultivates cotton, millet, sorghum, maize and groundnuts on his 3 ha field. **"Nowadays I'm able to decide what to do in my field, and how and when to do it, based on my own decisions, not just because my neighbour is doing it in a certain way."** Thierno adds that as a household, they are almost self-sufficient in terms of food: **"We only buy some rice, oil, onions and meat."** Three of his seven children still live with him: **"There are four of us doing all the work in the field."**

**"In the past, I wasn't even interested in cultivating relations with others or in solving conflicts. In this sense, I've changed quite a lot. I'm – how to say – generally more attentive."** He explains that even in his family, communication and relationships

have improved. "I always tended to be rather irritable. Now I feel wiser, or let's say calmer. Our time here is limited, so we shouldn't waste energy on pointless disagreements. FFS helped me in the process of understanding this."

Thierno continues describing his FFS experience: "In FFS, I realized how much potential women have to learn, what kind of really good decisions they are able to make. In the past I was convinced that women were not very competent at work and in life in general." He adds: "Look, education simply changes you. When you are not educated, there is no difference between you and a cow," he says, laughing. Access to knowledge, the new skills he has gained, better relations and new contacts have also helped him to increase his self-confidence. His reply to the question of how he would describe himself today was: "Thierno who knows."

## CASE 9

### Me and my husband talk a lot

**Hawa**  
**(Tambacounda, Senegal)**

Hawa lives with her family in a rather remote village in Tambacounda. Poverty rates are higher than in other regions. Two thirds of its population live under the national poverty line, compared to the national average of less than 50 percent. Hawa joined the FFS in 2015 together with her husband. They have seven children; three of them joined another FFS group the year after.

She explains that there are three main areas where she has seen a big difference as a result of the FFS or facilitated by it. "The first of course is the knowledge and experience relating to cultivation we gained from the FFS." She says that as a consequence, there are fewer expenses (previously spent on agrochemicals) and there has been an increase in income.

She mentions the community as another area where there has been a big change: "You need to be tolerant in your life. I learnt this thanks to the FFS, by getting to know others better, and having work and responsibilities in common. Other FFS members are ready to help in case it's needed, and so am I." She explains that according to her there is more solidarity and trust among group members. "Our existing women's VSLG group was developed. We save regularly; there are more funds available when needed."



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The biggest change she has perceived is in the relationship with her husband. **“Unlike the past, we discuss things a lot and share much more information, and we usually make decisions together. And I see he is very participative and supportive. He also motivates our kids to help more with tasks at home, and he provides more money for running the household. This helps me a lot.”** So although the traditional division of tasks didn’t change much in her case, there has been an increase in mutual understanding, and participation in the management of their household has therefore improved. Hawa says that in the past, everybody used to only take care of their own field. **“After the FFS we started helping each other: I help him and he helps me. It’s much better now, and I can say there is more peace in our house.”**



## CASE 10

### When you don't know yourself, you cannot understand others

**Arouna**  
**(Tambacounda, Senegal)**

Arouna lives with his family in the Tambacounda region in south-east Senegal. Tambacounda is affected by higher poverty rates than other regions. Two thirds of its population live under the national poverty line, compared to a national average of less than 50 percent. Cotton and groundnuts are the main cash crops in this region. Arouna joined the FFS together with his wife in 2015.

He points out that FFS helped him to understand how important it is to know others, and communicate with them and seek consensus. **“One of the basic FFS principles is that decisions have to be taken together. This influenced the whole community and within families too. I have to say that this improved my relationship with my wife a lot. She also changed the way she looks at me and communicates with me. Thanks to the FFS, I’ve developed a greater sensitivity towards others.”** The FFS experience encouraged self-reflection for him: **“When you don't know yourself, you cannot understand others.”**

**“I clearly saw that what I’m able to do by myself is not the same as what we can do as a group,”** says Arouna, adding that his ability to prevent and solve conflicts at the very beginning of the course definitely improved. He has also started to make plans: **“I used to always take action directly, without any planning. This has changed.”**

He and his wife cultivate cotton, millet, sorghum, maize, groundnuts, okra, beans and some other vegetables. **“We are almost self-sufficient in terms of food.”** He explains that in the past, he and his wife used to work exclusively on their separate fields. **“I never helped my wife and nor was she helping me. We’ve changed; we are helping each other and it’s easier. You know, a person without education is like a blind person.”**



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Many FFS groups continue working together after the initial programme terminates.



# 4

## Conclusion and next steps

**W**e live in a quickly changing and interconnected world, facing new circumstances, both social and environmental. Our capacity to cope with these challenges depends to a large extent on our ability to adapt, make the right decisions, build strong inclusive communities and create collaborative social environments. All these elements, in addition to technical agricultural skills, are being either directly or indirectly addressed by the FFS. The FFS approach can be seen within this context as a fully **dynamic process** that is evolving over time and has a significant impact on community dynamics.

**Quality FFS programmes are an important and very tangible tool that can be used to empower rural communities, improving**

their access to information, developing their critical analysis and decision-making, optimizing productivity, improving food and nutritional security, strengthening rural institutions, and positively affecting the sustainable management of natural resources. All these aspects are particularly relevant for vulnerable groups, and may contribute to social protection as a result of community empowerment and the development of community support mechanisms and safety nets. FFS have an impact on human, social and financial capital, and contribute towards sustainability in its social, economic and environmental pillars.

The interviews and focus group discussions conducted with graduates confirm that the FFS experience following FFS principles has had a significant impact on both personal and group/community empowerment. It helps to **develop knowledge, skills, self-confidence, communication (both horizontal and vertical), mutual trust and understanding, the exchange of information, collaboration, solidarity and social safety nets**. The FFS have thus had a beneficial effect not only on farmers' technical skills and capacity to make informed and considered decisions, but **also on the community as a whole, as well as household dynamics**. The participatory nature of the FFS **strengthens community relations, and develops participants' ability to listen to the opinion of others, express their own point of view and find common solutions through communication, while also building mutual trust within**

**the community**. The evidence from this exercise indicates that as a consequence of FFS participation, significant changes are occurring at the household level in terms of decision-making, improved communication, relations and collaboration, as well as to a certain extent the division of labour and shared responsibility for household tasks. Baseline studies at the beginning of FFS programmes should therefore also focus extensively on the social and cultural context and the community to ensure that FFS are **relevant and suited to the specific needs of local people and their communities**. **A crucial element is therefore the FFS facilitators and master trainers, who should have the necessary skills to carry out the work on gender equality, social vulnerability and social inclusion.**

Furthermore, the FFS approach **enables and facilitates access to rural services**, and in some cases creates them. These could be for example financial services/ access to credit provided by a VSLs that was created/developed and managed by the groups themselves, or productive infrastructure provided within the same or a complementary programme. Other examples include inclusive advisory services offered as part of the FFS learning process, and knowledge and experience sharing which is usually easily extended beyond the FFS groups to other members of the community. In such a way, the social and economic opportunities of FFS members, and to a certain extent those of other community members, are broadened.



Usually time is needed in order for changes in dynamics at the community and household levels to become visible, and the findings of this exercise confirm this. The impact was more evident and also better expressed by the graduates in cases where the FFS had already been implemented two or more years before. Moreover, in cases **where FFS facilitators had greater knowledge and more skills relating to social issues, the positive impact on the community and gender dynamics was more pronounced.** To examine the impact of FFS on social dynamics and relations within a community, a careful examination of the context, and therefore the initial conditions, must be carried out.

The findings from the focus group discussions reveal that **the longer an FFS group has been running, the greater importance (perceived) FFS graduates attach to the social outcomes of their participation.** The newer groups considered economic benefits and technical knowledge in particular as the most beneficial effects of the FFS on their lives. Longer-running groups, where members continued to work and engage in activities together, emphasized social benefits, such as social cohesion, more solidarity and mutual help, a decrease in conflicts, (information) sharing, improved relations at the household level and increased participation in decision-making. These groups tended to perceive financial aspects and technical knowledge as still important but more ordinary (see Figure 6). All the participants in this exercise stated that their circumstances in life had improved and their opportunities increased.

It is evident that the FFS are much more than a technical approach or a simple technical tool. What is making the difference is the **experience farmers gained at both the professional and human level.** It should be possible to make use of this huge potential. Experiences from other countries and, possibly, regions may help complete this picture. Discussion and a deeper analysis of gender equality aspects, and identification of examples of good practice, will hopefully continue within the FFS networks regionally and nationally.



One of the FFS members, who shared his experience and contributed to this study, Senegal, Tambacounda.



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According to the interviewees, participation in the FFS had built mutual trust, reinforced community cohesion and inspired its members in terms of how to self-organize.

## 4.1 Next steps

The previous chapters offer an insight into the FFS graduates' experiences and perceptions in relation to their participation in an FFS, and the impact and changes this process has had on their lives and those of their families and communities. The FFS' main social dimensions were presented in order to illustrate and make more visible the potential of the FFS approach in creating this environment of change. The question is therefore what could or should be the implications of this for programme-/project-oriented work? What can programmes working with an FFS approach do differently to boost their potential for producing positive individual and community-wide changes in relation to gender dynamics, and communities' ability to collaborate, take collective action and improve their resilience? And how can FFS be made more inclusive?

Possible next steps could take various directions, involving different emphases and local contexts and responding to a number of needs. Below are some points reflecting the findings of the exercise which were discussed with FFS colleagues involved in it. Furthermore, this work adds another piece of the puzzle. Worldwide, FFS have been introduced to a wide range of different cultural, social and agricultural contexts; they have been adapted to suit local needs using various strategies and under diverse conditions – for example in post-conflict

zones and displaced communities – as well as with various degrees of community involvement and participatory approaches during the preparatory phases.

The majority of **FFS (and FFS programme) components and processes can be analysed and designed in a way that accounts for issues of gender equality and women's empowerment, and social inclusion (including vulnerability analysis), and which also looks at the impact that they might have on community empowerment** (see Figure 13).

- **No positive impact without good human resources** – Facilitators are key in unlocking FFS groups' potential. In addition to their technical and communication abilities, personal characteristics need to be (and in most cases are) carefully considered. This is one of the basic FFS principles that should be followed when implementing FFS programmes. The findings of the group and individual discussions suggest that only a small percentage of FFS facilitators feel comfortable or knowledgeable

enough to pick up on a situation with gender implications arising from group dynamics and interactions and further develop/work with the topic.

- More **tailored opportunities for building capacity** in relation to gender equality and social inclusion (vulnerability analysis) are needed in order to boost social change which FFS can then catalyse or contribute to. Special training for facilitators and master trainers, helping them to develop their own context-specific capacities and tools, is crucial for approaching the above-mentioned thematic areas.
- **Farmer-facilitators are more likely to need more in-depth support**, training, assistance and backstopping, and coaching on specific topics such as gender identity and roles, gender equality, women's empowerment, vulnerability analysis and social exclusion/inclusion – areas they might not be familiar with at a theoretical level.

**Figure 13 Looking forward: programme/project level**



Source: Author's own elaboration



The Dimitra listeners' clubs thus created an even more inclusive environment involving the broader community, Senegal, Anambe.

- National and regional FFS networks can make a significant contribution when it comes to the preservation, development and exchange of FFS-related knowledge and experience through human capacity that has been built up at the national level. **Wider discussion within FFS networks** and a better understanding of these aspects is crucial in order to develop proper response to challenges of FFS programmes allowing the approach to fulfil its potential.
- **A baseline study including a proper analysis of gender equality and social vulnerability issues** (including mobility, and access to and control over assets) and **targeting criteria** (who receives the information, who can/is able/is willing to participate) may have a significant impact on the overall inclusiveness of an FFS programme. The latter is particularly important when accessing farmers through already established groups, cooperatives, associations and networks. The use of quotas as part of FFS programmes is one of the strategies focusing on equal access to the FFS.
- **Social inclusion/exclusion needs to be carefully considered**, analysed and taken into consideration into an appropriate setting of an FFS. The categories to be taken into consideration when focusing on social vulnerabilities include sex, ethnicity, nationality, age, health, family status, membership of a particular social group, and poverty.

- Women (as well as some men) face **particular constraints that may limit their actual ability to benefit from development programmes, and thus also FFS programmes.** These might be literacy and educational constraints, limited possibilities of mobility, limited resources, or time constraints. Lower levels of education, which are more common among women, may limit their active participation or even represent a factor of exclusion. In cases where one of the preconditions for participating in the FFS is that the participant hold the role of decision-maker over land, an agricultural activity or literacy, this may act as a limitation, especially for many women who nevertheless play an important role within the context of family farms.
- (Non-)participation in both the formal and informal groups disseminating information, may also play a key role.
  - One of the series of interconnected questions that should be answered during the preparatory phase of an FFS programme and the formation of groups is: “Who receives the information, what channels are used to disseminate the information, and who is giving out the information?” And another, no less important: “Who can participate, who is allowed to participate, who is able to participate, and is there somebody for whom the FFS experience would be helpful but who is being left behind?”
  - These points need to be considered at all stages of a project cycle. Different levels of analysis combining macro and micro linkages need to be used, paying attention to social relations and inequalities in power within them.
- **Gender equality and social inclusion are cross-cutting issues** and should be treated as such and thus reflected at all stages of an FFS programme. **Facilitators should be able to use points of entry that arise.** Special topics and curricula are a direct and planned way of working with these thematic areas.
- No FFS are alike. Every group has its unique characteristics influenced by a combination of factors: its participants, facilitator(s), curriculum, special topics, and of course the broader social and cultural context. Discussion within the FFS regional and national networks with a possible **contextualization of the FFS guidance document and developing the potential of course modules.**
- **M&E/MEL and impact assessment tools should be used** to understand and communicate social changes resulting from FFS at the individual and community levels (empowerment, gender dynamics, social inclusion, etc.). The exercise could be extended to other regions of Senegal to record a wide range of experiences, local specificities and common patterns, and in order to build up extensive knowledge. The findings from this exercise may offer a starting point. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods would no doubt be an advantage.

- Changes at the community level require enabling environments and time to mature and become visible. There should be a **focus on the process, and a process-oriented approach**.
- **Relevance in relation to broader ongoing changes** – Through its work in agriculture and agriculture-related sectors, FAO is committed to and supports overall social change, the eradication of poverty, and the elimination of hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. At the same time, FAO is making agriculture more inclusive and sustainable, helping communities to build their resilience and face the challenges of a changing climate. FAO therefore needs to look at the broader ongoing social, geopolitical and environmental changes caused by various factors, and use more widely available (and sometimes new) points of entry. Collaboration and complementarity of activities with relevant stakeholders nationally may have a significant impact.
- The interviews confirmed the extent of the **phenomenon of outmigration**, especially apparent among young men, in two of the three regions visited (Tambacounda and Kolda). This phenomenon **significantly impacts rural areas**. Tambacounda also has high numbers of migrants in transit. Some organizations are providing assisted voluntary return programmes with follow-up reintegration projects, mainly focusing on business skills. **Migration (and, more specifically, the issue of returnees) is a strong and relevant point of entry for FAO that should be further explored and developed**. FFS may offer a suitable environment for improving the knowledge, and developing the strategies for diversifying participants' livelihoods and income, which are critical when it comes to ensuring resilience to changes that are increasingly social, geopolitical or environmental in nature. Returnee organizations based in the region could be potential suitable partners.



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# Annex

## Discussion module

### **FFS, gender equality and women's empowerment, social inclusion, community empowerment, and nutrition-related decision-making**

The following text summarizes a set of basic open-ended guiding questions covering the main thematic areas of this case study. They allow for modifications to the discussion flow and its content, for example in case the interview partner expresses something which is, according to him/her, more relevant or important for the discussion. The order, choice and formulation of the questions are decided based on the situation. The questions are grouped into four sections based on the type of discussion/ interview, and each is subdivided into thematic areas.

**Section A**  
**FFS participants:**  
**GROUP DISCUSSION**

**Section B**  
**FFS participants:**  
**INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION**

**Section C**  
**FFS facilitators:**  
**INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION**

**Section D**  
**FFS programme coordinators:**  
**INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION**

## Section A

# FFS participants: GROUP DISCUSSION

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### General/opening

1. *(Where relevant)* How many times a month/week/year does/did your FFS group meet?
  2. How was the group established (how did you find out about it/who suggested that you join)? What were the basic preconditions for participating in the FFS?
  3. What were your expectations before joining the FFS programme? What was your motivation for joining?
    - Please make a list of up to five expectations you had before joining the FFS.
    - Now mark those of them that were met.
  4. Can you see a positive impact in comparison with the period before you joined the FFS?
    - What are the biggest positives/benefits you have derived from participating in the FFS programme?
    - Please prepare individually (or in groups of three or max. four) a minimum of five positive aspects/benefits you have derived from participating in the FFS. *(Each item on a separate sheet of paper. Sheets collected and farmers invited to order the replies from the most to least valued in their opinion.)*
  5. What was the main problem(s) you faced before the FFS programme began?
    - How did you use to tackle these problems before joining the FFS?
    - How did you use to solve them? Using the knowledge that you learnt through FFS or using traditional approaches?
  6. Has knowledge and practices adopted and used by your FFS group spread outside the group? Are there other people who have learned from you and who are using the know-how and approaches you shared with them?
    - If yes, which knowledge (what know-how, practices and approaches are they using most)?
    - If yes, how many non-group members in this village/area are using the know-how, practices and approaches developed by your FFS?
-

## Gender equality and women's empowerment

7. Are there women involved in your agricultural domain? What are their typical tasks?
  - Please write down together a list of these tasks.
8. **What percentage of the FFS group and the community was/is women?**
9. Your FFS group has been/was working on the production of .....
  - What are the main tasks related to this production (across the whole year)?
  - Now, please indicate which of these tasks are typically performed by women/men? (If a task is typical for young women/men or elderly women/men, please indicate that too.)

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### Mixed groups only:

10. **You were able to meet regularly and work with women/men for quite some time. How has this changed your perception/opinion of women/men?**
  - *Possible additional question: Has this changed the way you see your wife/ husband?*
  - **Please write down three main points.** Please write it in a way that it is readable. *(Women's and men's replies collected separately. Men read women's replies and women men's replies. Discussion.)*
11. Daily activity clock
  - Please tell me about your average day. What do you do from the time you wake up until the time you go to sleep? *In single-sex groups, the men and women prepare a list of their typical activities during the day (using a large sheet of paper). The lists are displayed and women check the list prepared by men and vice versa and express their remarks. Discussion.)*  
*Possible discussion questions:*
    - What are the points in common?
    - Do the activities of men and women differ? Why?
    - What activities do they share?
    - What can be seen as typically male and female tasks? Why this division?
    - Is there a fair division/workload of activities/tasks?
    - Who is involved in decision-making
      - relating to agricultural work?
      - relating to the household?
    - Could a man do the tasks of a woman and vice versa? If not, why?
    - How can a man and a woman in a household help each other with their daily activities?

- Women's groups:**
12. Can somebody describe a typical day at the FFS?
  13. Has the way you see/appreciate yourself changed in any way (after, during or thanks to the FFS programme you are participating/participated in)?
    - *Please write down up to three examples.*  
*(Then replies collected, read together and discussed.)*
  14. Has the way your family, husband and community see you changed in any way?
    - If yes, could you tell us about it?
  15. What are the decisions you yourself typically make in your agricultural work?
    - *Please write a list.*
  16. Are there some decisions related to your agricultural work that you need to consult your family/husband about and that you cannot usually make yourself?
    - *Please write a list.*
- 

- Men's groups:**
17. Are there women who work in your agricultural domain? What are their typical tasks?
    - *Please write down together a list of these tasks.*
  18. Are there other women farmers you know that are producing ..... as you do? If yes, do you think they should have participated/should participate in an FFS programme. Yes/no and why?
- 

- Social inclusion**
19. How was the group established (how did you find out about it/who suggested that you join)? What were the basic preconditions for participating in the FFS?
  20. When you think of all the people living in your village, are there some who would benefit from participating in an FFS programme such as yours, but who for some reason don't or can't?
    - Please could you all describe such a person, without saying his/her name?  
What characteristics does this person have?
    - *Group discussion, facilitator writing down the characteristics/attributes mentioned.*
    - (Social inclusion/exclusion) How can these people be encouraged to participate?
-

## Social protection, community empowerment

21. (Where relevant) The FFS programme you participated in has formally ended.
- Are you still meeting with the FFS group? Do you still work together/have some activities in common? If yes, can you tell me about them?
  - Have you set up any formal or informal groups/common interest groups (e.g. cooperatives, NGOs)? If yes, can you tell me about them?
22. Do you think that when needed (for example when a harvest is poor for one reason or another), other members/ex-members of the FFS group should help you?
23. Do you think the FFS programme brought together your community? If yes, can you describe how, using examples (e.g. degree of cooperation (or problem-solving) among members of your FFS and within the wider community compared to the past)?
- Please give some examples and try to identify the three most important ones – please write these down.  
(The sheet with the answers is then displayed e.g. on the wall/a flipchart)
24. Is there evidence of an increase in income **for men, women or both** as a result of:
- increased sales of products?
  - any innovative/alternative economic activity that has been engaged in within the context of or as a result of the FFS experience or the knowledge/social capital gained from it?
  - any other factor?
  - Can you describe this in more detail? What is the marketing procedure? Who has the power to make decisions over the income gained this way?
- 

## Nutrition-related decision-making/ knowledge

25. Have you learnt something new about nutrition (e.g. more about nutritional quality/values, a varied diet)?
- Have FFS brought about changes in your household's food consumption (variety, quantity, frequency, etc.)?
  - If yes, can you describe how (greater diversity of products cultivated/produced or purchased)?
- 

## General/closing

26. If you were asked to propose/suggest changes to the FFS programme, what would these be?
- (Group discussion, list of ideas, if attention and energy is still there.)
27. Is there anything important/useful that I haven't asked and that you want to say?

## Section B

# FFS participants: INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION

Some of the questions might have already been discussed and answered during the focus group discussion. The choice of questions will depend on any previous group discussions.

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### Inclusiveness of the programme, expectations

28. How did you find out about the possibility of joining the FFS? Who told you/who suggested you participate?
29. What were your expectations before joining the FFS programme? Which of these expectations were met?
30. Is there something that you didn't expect before joining and that surprised you in some way?
31. Please could you summarize the most important impacts the FFS had on your life and life in your community?

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### Gender equality, women's empowerment, social dynamics

32. Has the way you see/ appreciate yourself changed in any way (after, during or as a result of the FFS programme)? Could you describe how?
33. Has the way your family, husband/wife and community see you changed in any way (after, during or as a result of the FFS programme)? Could you describe how?
34. You were able to regularly meet women/men and work with them as part of the FFS for quite some time.
  - How has this changed your perception/opinion of women/men?
  - Has this changed the way you see your wife/husband?
  - Has the way you communicate with your family/partner changed? If yes, how?
35. Has participating in the FFS given you something new/useful? Do you feel you have more opportunities (in your professional and personal life)?
36. (FOR WOMEN) Would you recommend FFS to other women and why?



37. (FOR MEN) Do you think FFS is good for women farmers? If yes, why? If not, why?

38. (FOR WOMEN) Are there some constraints you face in relation to your participation in the FFS?

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**Community empowerment, social protection**

39. What are the biggest positives/benefits **you** have derived from participating in the FFS programme?

40. As a result of being a member of the FFS, have you **as an individual** developed alternative economic activities to earn a living or increase your household income?

41. What do you see as the biggest benefits/positive effects of this FFS programme for your **group and the local community**?

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**Marketing, decision-making**

42. Is your spouse involved in your agricultural work?

43. When (/if) your produce is sold, who sells it? Men, women, both, groups?

44. Does your husband/wife ask you before selling it or is it his/her individual decision?

45. When (/if) your produce is sold, who keeps the income? Men, women, shared? How do you decide/who decides how it's used?

46. Are other members of your family involved in agricultural work? If yes, who, and what are their main tasks?

47. Do you hire other farmworkers? If yes, occasionally or permanently? Who are these workers? Where do they come from?

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**Sustainability, IMP, natural resources management**

48. Did your use of pesticides on your farm change in any way during and after your participation in the FFS programme? If yes, could you describe how?

49. As a result of participating in/having experience with the FFS, has your income increased? If yes, can you tell me about this? Can you explain why/how in your opinion this came about?

50. (Where relevant) Has there been an increase in crop production and/or variety as a result of the FFS programme? If yes, could you describe this in more detail and give some examples?

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## Land access

51. Do you own any land, either individually or jointly with someone else?
52. Do you own the land you work on personally (or share ownership with others in your household)?
- If no, how do you access land?
    - Do you rent it from someone?
    - Exchange labour for access?
    - Have a communal or group plot?
    - Other (please explain)
53. What is the area of land you own/rent/work on?
54. Does your husband/wife have separate plots he/she farms?
- 

## Other/closing

55. Were you involved in the evaluation of the programme you participated in?
56. Is there anything important/useful that I haven't asked and that you want to say?

## Section C

# FFS facilitators: INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION

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### Formal programme set up, curriculum

57. May I see the curriculum of your FFS? *(If possible, ask before)*
58. Did the curriculum you followed during the FFS programme also contain some social/life topics (e.g. gender equality or women's empowerment)?
59. Have you been involved in this FFS programme from the beginning (before the groups were established)?
60. What stages and what steps in an FFS programme are, in your experience, crucial to the inclusion/deliberation/realization of gender equality?
61. Have you received training and/or support in relation to issues of gender equality or women's empowerment?
62. Were nutrition-related issues (e.g. dietary diversity/improved diets) included in the FFS curriculum?

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### Social inclusion

63. How was the group established (how did participants find out about it)? Can you describe the process of identifying and selecting the participants?
64. What were the basic preconditions for participating in the FFS?
65. Are there people in this area that, in your opinion, would have benefited from being included in such a programme but weren't?
  - Could you describe them? Who are they?
  - What would be the best strategy for involving them, in your opinion?
66. In your experience, who are the most marginalized groups in society/the community (in this area) and why?
  - Are they involved in agriculture and how?
  - If yes, were they involved in the FFS programme?

- If not, do you think the FFS could be suitable for them?
    - Yes/no and why? If yes, what is the best way to involve them?
    - Do you see any obstacles (e.g. access to land)?
  - 67. Were any of the topics relating to vulnerable groups in society raised during the FFS? If yes, could you describe them?
  - 68. What should be done differently in FFS programmes to further enhance the inclusion and participation of marginalized/vulnerable groups in society?
- 

**In-group dynamics, gender equality and women's empowerment**

- 69. Did any gender equality topics arise during the FFS meetings (even without being introduced by you)? If yes, could you mention in what circumstances and what exactly they have talked about?
  - 70. What are the difficulties that used to affect women and where women play a key role in influencing decisions on change or other important topics? Could you give examples?
  - 71. Do women speak their minds? Do they have a voice when the group meets? Do women hold leadership roles?
  - 72. Is there any evidence of improved/altered dynamics and collaboration among female and male participants that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS, or which have been significantly advanced by them?
  - 73. How can men be encouraged to become involved in the work on gender equality and women's empowerment? Could you describe some concrete strategies that you use or would suggest using?
  - 74. What should be done differently in FFS programmes to further enhance gender equality and women's empowerment, and to unlock the FFS' potential of FFS in this regard?
- 

**FFS group, community empowerment, sustainability**

- 75. What do you see as the biggest benefits/positive effects of this FFS programme for your group and the local community?
- 76. Is there any evidence of an increase in cooperation (or problem-solving) among participants of your FFS in comparison with the past?

77. Could you indicate the farmers from your group that, in your opinion, have made the biggest progress and why/how you think this happened? Is there any interesting story you can share with me (examples of what went well – good practice examples or success stories)?
78. (Where relevant) The FAO programme has finished. Was the group continued in some way after external support was terminated? Do you know if the group still meets even though the programme has formally ended? Or do they have some activities in common (professional/social)? If yes, on what basis (self-funding, other funds, other methods, etc.)?
79. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a social nature (social capital: membership of organizations and groups, social and professional networks – formal and informal) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS?
80. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a human nature (human capital: education, skills, knowledge, health, nutrition) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS?
81. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a financial nature (financial capital: savings, credit, inflows) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS?

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**Recommendations,  
needs, closing**

82. What do you think should be done in order to involve: a) more women in FFS (both as participants and as facilitators); b) more of society's/the community's vulnerable groups?
83. What would you personally appreciate or need in order to work better/feel more comfortable when working with topics such as gender equality, women's and community empowerment, and social vulnerabilities?
84. Is there anything important/useful that I haven't asked and that you want to say?

## Section D

# FFS programme coordinators: INDIVIDUAL DISCUSSION

Some of the questions for facilitators are also used for programme coordinators.

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### General, programme set-up, training

85. Did the programme use strategies and tools for the promotion of gender equality or women's empowerment? If yes, could you mention some of them?
86. Did the programme use any strategies for involving women as participants and facilitators? What are the barriers to their participation, if any, in your opinion?
87. In your experience, what stages and steps in an FFS programme are crucial for the inclusion/deliberation/realization of gender equality?
88. Have you received specific training and/or support in relation to issues of gender equality or women's empowerment?
89. Did the programme use any strategies for involving marginalized/vulnerable groups in society? If yes, could you describe them? What are the barriers to their participation?
90. Were nutrition-related issues (e.g. dietary diversity/improved diets) included in the FFS curriculum?
91. Did the programme use participatory methods, involving FFS participants in programme evaluations?

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### Social inclusion

92. In your experience, who are the most marginalized groups in local society/the local community and why? Are they involved in agriculture and how?
  93. If yes, were they involved in the FFS programme? If not, do you think FFS might be suitable for them? Yes/no and why? If yes, how could they be involved? Do you see any obstacles (e.g. access to land)?
  94. What should be done differently in FFS programmes to further enhance the inclusion and participation of marginalized/vulnerable groups in society?
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## Gender equality and women's empowerment

95. What should be done differently in FFS programmes to further enhance gender equality and women's empowerment and unlock FFS' potential of FFS in this regard?
  96. Is there any evidence of improved/altered dynamics and collaboration among female and male participants that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS?
  97. How can men be encouraged to become involved in the work on gender equality and women's empowerment? Could you describe some concrete strategies that you use or would suggest using?
  98. What are the difficulties (cultural, social, other) that affect women? Could you give examples?
  99. What are the areas in which women play a key role in decision-making/influencing decisions? Could you give examples?
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## Community empowerment, social protection

100. Do you think an FFS empowers the community? If so, could you describe how? If not, why? And do you think FFS have the potential to do so? If yes, what needs to be done in order to produce or enhance this effect?
  101. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a social nature (social capital: membership of organizations and groups, social and professional networks – formal and informal) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS or has been advanced by them?
  102. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a human nature (human capital: education, skills, knowledge, health, nutrition) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS or has been advanced by them?
  103. Is there any evidence of improved access to assets of a financial nature (financial capital: savings, credit, inflows) that can be attributed to the activities or efforts of the FFS or has been advanced by them?
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## Recommendations, needs, closing

104. What do you think should be done in order to involve: a) more women in FFS (both as participants and as facilitators); b) society's/the community's vulnerable groups?
105. What would you personally appreciate or need in order to work better/feel more comfortable when working with topics such as gender equality, women's and community empowerment, and vulnerable groups?
106. What should be done differently in FFS programmes to further enhance community empowerment, in your opinion?
107. Is there anything important/useful that I haven't asked and that you want to say?







**NOTE:**

This discussion module has been developed by the author for the purposes of the scoping exercise and subsequent case studies on "Farmer field schools, gender equality, social inclusion and community empowerment" in Jordan, Tunisia, Senegal and Uganda. Some of the guiding questions have been adapted from *Impact Assessment of Pastoralist Field Schools in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda* (Hoeggel and Mbeyale, 2014) and *Independent Evaluation of SDC's Performance towards Empowerment of Stakeholders from the Recipients' Perspective* (Khot, Joshi and Dhamankar, 2007).



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