

TRANSFERRING AND PASSING KNOWLEDGE ON TO FUTURE GENERATIONS



TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE

In the rural areas, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has led to the collapse of many extended family networks, taking with it the local knowledge of agro-ecology and farming practices that are fundamental to their survival. Moreover, the loss of so many from the productive generations puts an burden on those surviving to cope with the severe labour shortages and increased household responsibilities, particularly in caring for sick or dying family members. In this process, a good deal of local agricultural knowledge is not transmitted in order for family members to carry on effectively, and as their coping mechanisms are stretched beyond capacity, their horizons become more and more constrained. Without development and due to their constraints, farmers tend to adopt a day-to day, hand-to-mouth crisis management strategy of survival in which there is little room for

concern about HIV prevention. However, once farmers understand that they can have a future – and even shape that future – investing in the future becomes meaningful. As the farmers' world view evolves and they build future-oriented strategies, preventing HIV/AIDS, along with other risks that threaten their lives and survival, falls into place.

Thus, it is critical to build resilience to HIV/AIDS at the grassroots level of rural, farm communities to avert potential, explosive HIV/AIDS epidemics. Building this resilience can be achieved by developing strategies if they are designed to reduce HIV/AIDS vulnerability. Farmers must be empowered to protect themselves, their families and communities from HIV infection. And empowerment takes the form of knowledge.

FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

The concept of the Farmer Field School is based on experiences of the Integrated Pest Management Programme in Asia, which pioneered the concept in the early 1980s. The underlying principle behind the field school is that farmers can become experts in their own field.

Farmer Field Schools provide an exceptional “school without walls” for farmer learning, discussion and experimentation on agricultural strategies for improving their food and livelihood security. They have proved to be an effective means of reaching farmers and helping them to gain access to the knowledge and skills required for crop production and pest management. Currently, there are more than 50 countries using field schools and more than two million graduates.

Field schools are based on sound community-based adult-education practices and are an effective way of transferring knowledge (both local and external) through learning by doing. They are organized by community-based groups of 25-30 farmers under the facilitation of an extension worker. The “classroom” is actually a plot of land where farmers carry out studies without personal risk, allowing them to take management decisions that they might not otherwise attempt in trials on their own fields. Some schools explore a variety of community-based strategies for food security, such as creating multiplication plots, conserving crop genetic resources, and sharing local knowledge. In addition, the active participation of women and the close co-operation between men and women farmers help to sensitize both men and women to gender issues, as the knowledge, skills and concerns of men and women are brought together and

conferred on an equal status. For example, in United Republic of Tanzania, male farmers, particularly those with many orphans and children in their homes, have learned to cultivate certain crops traditionally grown by women to enhance their food security and earn extra income for their families. Besides offering technical skills, the Farmer Field Schools provide an excellent vehicle for organizing or strengthening groups, thus providing a basis for sustainability of group activities.

SELF-FINANCED FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

Self-financed Farmer Field Schools in East Africa are an important evolution in the Farmer Field School concept. The process was developed by women's groups participating in extension activities in Western Kenya under an FAO/IFAD-supported project. The study plots are complemented by "commercial plots," where the group can raise crops to sell and raise funds. This internal method of fund raising allows groups to use education loans start the process but then pay back with commercial plot proceeds as well as increase their own group funds. The groups are also able to define their own programmes, including paying for extension staff to visit.

Self-financed groups typically focus on cash crops and livestock but the Farmer Field School also includes special topics of about one hour that cover related issues: food crops, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, saving group methods, on-farm seed production and others. In areas where soil fertility management is critical, the field Schools take place over 30 weeks across a yearly cycle. On perennial crops, monthly meetings are held for 18 months, and can be combined with an initial vegetable or poultry curriculum, as is the case with the Field School in United Republic of Tanzania, where preparing banana and cassava is included.

FARMER LIFE SCHOOLS: FROM FIELD ECOLOGY TO HUMAN ECOLOGY

Farmer Life Schools are based on the learning cycle of the Farmer Field School. In the Farmer Life Schools, originally developed by FAO and UNDP, farmers examine the problems that threaten their livelihoods, weigh available options and make decision about what action they should take. The issues addressed range from poverty, loss of land, pesticide use, family planning, alcoholism, domestic violence and the attendance of children at school, to specific health problems such as dengue, malaria and HIV/AIDS. The schools strengthen communities by helping farmers learn to analyse how their behaviour exposes them to HIV/AIDS. They learn to farm more wisely and use for both food and medicinal purposes the plants and herbs around them, which may have been forgotten with the introduction of modern seeds and chemicals.

The core process is the linking of ecology, group organization and student-centred learning applied through what is termed "Human Ecosystem Analysis", in which groups of farmers investigate various threats to their lives, and in which solutions are identified and categorized. The Farmer Life Schools seek to build on the risk assessment knowledge that farmers already have through a holistic approach. Combined with a long-term outlook, farmers are then more able to address problems and the impact of their decisions over time. The ultimate goal is to enable them to become effective decision makers in their own lives, the lives of their families and in their community network. It is a process of empowerment.

FARMER LIFE SCHOOL MANUAL

In November 2003, UNDP, FAO and World Education published a Farmer's Life School Manual. The manual describes the 16-week course designed to help the agriculture sector, AIDS programmes and NGOs to facilitate farming communities to face their local concerns, build their resilience and thus reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.



PASSING KNOWLEDGE ON TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

One of the most troubling consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is the number of children it has orphaned. Currently, more than 12 million children under the age of 18 have lost one or both parents to AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa. By 2010, the number is estimated to jump to more than 18 million. These children suffer psychosocial distress and increasing material hardship. They are often required to drop out of school to care for ill and dying parents and help with farm or household work, or find themselves with reduced access to food and health services. Many are at risk of exclusion, abuse, discrimination and stigma. Indeed, the trauma and hardship that children affected by HIV/AIDS are forced to endure cannot be overstated.

The increasing number of orphans and the collapse of extended family networks lead to a loss of local knowledge of agro-ecology and farming practices. Parents die before they are able to teach their children the farming practices that have evolved over generations. Rural farming systems depend upon a wealth of local agricultural knowledge that is essential for maintaining production. The loss of productive generations takes with it the channel for passing livelihood skills and agricultural knowledge from generation to generation. The result? A young population ill-equipped to manage the impacts of the epidemic and to maintain successful agricultural production. The death of a generation means a break in the chain.

To keep the “chain” unbroken, FAO is developing and promoting Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools to assure that the expertise and life skills of the farmers are preserved, enhanced and passed on to their children.

JUNIOR FARMER FIELD AND LIFE SCHOOLS

The mechanisms for transferring knowledge need to be created through informal and formal community institutions that are reoriented to meet the information needs of households that have lost an adult. Orphan and female-headed households need information to be able to maintain agricultural production. Moreover, households without an adult need to be able to draw up cropping plans, maintain animal husbandry practices, store grain, market agricultural production, and be knowledgeable about gender-specific production practices. And the orphans need to learn general life skills, as well as to develop self-confidence and self-respect.

In response, FAO, in collaboration with WFP, is developing a model for a Junior Farmer Field and Life School (JFFLS). The objectives of the school are to respond to the basic needs of orphans and other vulnerable children in rural areas by developing an innovative approach through which these children can be reached and made an integral part of agricultural initiatives. Improving their agricultural knowledge, skills and self-esteem could reduce the risk of these children pursuing HIV-risky survival strategies. The activities pursued in the school will be geared toward increasing their access to appropriate food, satisfying their basic dietary needs, enhancing their self-esteem and generating a vision for their future, thus empowering them.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR THE JUNIOR FARMER FIELD AND LIFE SCHOOL: GRANARIES FOR LIFE IN MOZAMBIQUE

At the end of 2003, FAO began to establish a model for the JFFLS in Mozambique, which is part of a broader national strategy of agricultural development and modernization in which the survival skills of the orphans are essential if they are to build their future through development strategies.

Approximately 100 orphans and vulnerable children from 12-18 years of age will be trained for 12 months using the methodologies established in the Farmer Field and Farmer Life Schools, adapted to children. The first two-month period corresponds with the school holidays in Mozambique as well as to the crop season, and will include teaching and activities adapted for children by the team trainers, such as field preparation, sowing and transplanting, weeding, irrigation, pest control, utilization and conservation of available resources, utilization and processing of food crops, harvesting and storage. The second session will focus on the Human Ecosystem Analysis, adapted to the children's needs. During the school holidays, children will attend the JFFLS three times per week in open centres and guided by an inter-disciplinary team of one extension worker, one school teacher and one social animator from the local social theatre. Sessions will last about five hours, and meals will be provided to the children by the World Food Programme.

Four sites have been chosen, and in each a demonstration field will be grown containing a variety of crops for food and nutrition, income-generation and medicinal purposes. The crops cover the entire season cycle. In this way, the children will be guided through a learning process that will enhance their agricultural skills, empower them individually and as a group, provide a future vision, enhance self-esteem and promote a healthier life. The use of social animation and theatre to establish bridges with the community and to explore sensitive issues such as gender roles in agriculture and HIV/AIDS will provide for meaningful communication and enable the children to build trust, explore risks, solve problems and develop more gender-equal attitudes.

USEFUL REFERENCES

FAO HIV/AIDS programme

<http://www.fao.org/hivaids>

Mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on food security and rural poverty

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/Y8331E/Y8331E00.htm>

Community Integrated Pest Management

<http://www.communityipm.org>

Farmer Field Schools

<http://farmerfieldschool.net>

Farmer Life School Manual

http://www.fao.org/hivaids/publications/knowledge_en.htm