

Farmer Empowerment through *Farmer Life Schools*

adapted from Farmer Field School Approach



By Srer Khmer, a Cambodian NGO dedicated to the development of ecological agriculture and farmer empowerment



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ABSTRACT

Farmer Empowerment through Farmer Life Schools, *Adapted from the Farmer Field School Approach*

Farmer Life School (FLS) is a participatory learning process that helps farmers develop their critical thinking skills to address a number of important livelihood issues. The FLS has evolved from the Farmer Field School approach to Integrated Pest Management (IPM). The learning processes in the FLS are very similar to those of the FFS. The concepts that farmers learn about agro-ecology in the FFS – relationships between organizations and their role in the environment – are revised to focus on “human-ecology”. During the weekly meetings, a set of learning exercises is conducted by different groups of farmers. These exercises include brainstorming to identify and prioritize the problems, visits to selected families, discussion and analysis of special topics, making conclusions, sharing results through presentations and group dynamics. These activities enhance farmers’ ability to recognize and analyze the inter-related elements and issues of their daily lives in much the same way as they apply their mastery of ecological concepts to the field crops via Agro-EcoSystem Analysis (AESAs). Issues which farmers have addressed in FLS range from poverty, loss of land, domestic violence, alcoholism and the attendance of children at public school to specific health problems concerned with different diseases such as dengue fever, malaria and HIV/AIDS.

The core process in the FLS is linking human ecology, group organization and farmer-centered learning through what is termed, “Human Eco-System Analysis” (HESA). In the same way that farmers observe pests and natural enemies in their fields through AESA learning processes, HESA involves groups of farmers investigating how various threats and adverse factors affect their lives as well as identifying factors that have a positive impact. In HESA, such “supporting” and “non-supporting” factors are divided into six categories including family economics, health, education, social relations, environment and culture.

These processes enable farmers to build their skills in identifying and analyzing problems they encounter, take appropriate actions to prevent and reduce risks and take positive action to solve problems in their communities. Importantly, FLS are being organized and managed by farmers within their own communities rather than by outsiders.

This initiative began with financial and technical support from the FAO Community IPM Programme and the UNDP South East Asian HIV Program. Sreer Khmer, a local NGO which was established in December 2001 to replace the FAO Community IPM Programme in Cambodia, has taken over this activity and comprises one of its major program areas.

Table of contents:

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
Goal of Farmer Life School	3
Objective of Farmer Life School	3
From Farmer Field School to Farmer Life School	4
What is Farmer Life School?	4
The Curriculum of FLS	4
Human Ecosystem Analysis (HESA)	4
Special Topics	6
Follow-up Activities	6
Impact of Farmer Life School	6
Important Lesson Learned	6
References	7

Farmer Life School,

A farmer empowerment process adapted from the Farmer Field School Approach

Srer Khmer

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia is one of the major centers of HIV/AIDS infections in South East Asia and as a result HIV/AIDS is having a devastating effect on rural populations that are already living in poor conditions and food insecurity. HIV/AIDS is a threat to sustainable agriculture and rural development by means of its systemic impact on agricultural livelihoods. This situation has created highly vulnerable populations in which the HIV epidemic can develop even more rapidly.

The border of Thailand and Cambodia opened in 1998 after being closed for 30 years. Since this time traffic and cross border trade has increased in parallel with an increase in the mobility of people along its route. The highway is part of the Trans-Asia highway linking India, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam (UNDP and FAO, 1999) and is being upgraded to increase the flow of goods, services and people. This is also a potential route of transmission of HIV/AIDS and it is likely to increase with trade.

In 1999, the UNDP South East Asian HIV Programme collaborated with the FAO Community IPM Programme to pilot FFS-based farming community strategies to combat HIV epidemic along this route (UNDP and FAO, 1999). The learning principles and processes of Integrated Pest Management in FFS were successfully applied to HIV/AIDS work and are now being used to strengthen the resilience of Cambodian farming communities to HIV/AIDS along National Route 5 in what is termed, “Farmer Life Schools” (FLS). Importantly, FLS are organized through a network of farmers who have completed IPM Farmer Field Schools and who are motivated to work on additional issues in their communities, including the threat of HIV/AIDS.

GOAL OF FLS

The goal of FLS is the mobilisation and empowerment of farming communities to reduce HIV/AIDS vulnerability and to address other livelihood threats. [Indeed, HIV/AIDS is seen as only one part of the issue of chronic illnesses which affect farm families.]

OBJECTIVES OF FLS

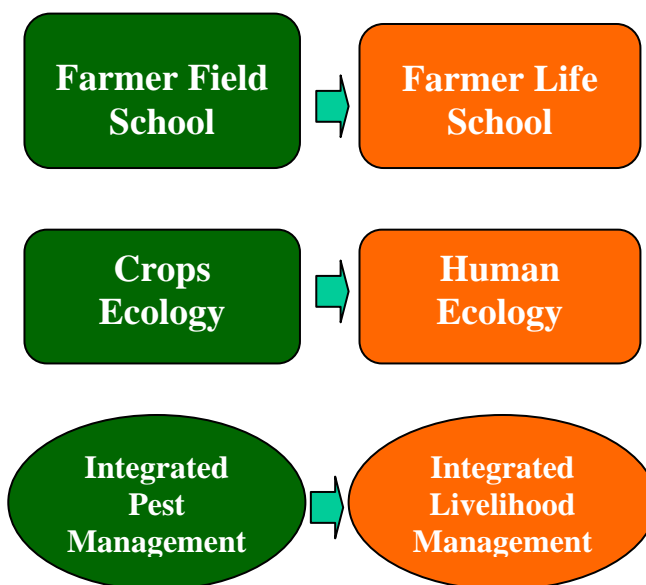
FLS are implemented to achieve the following immediate objectives:

- To strengthen farmers' understanding of how their socio-economic vulnerability leads to risk-taking behaviour;
- To prevent adverse social and economic effects from HIV/AIDS and other threats in farming communities in the project areas; and
- To establish a farmer network to better address local issues in the interests of sustainable farm livelihoods.

FROM FARMER FIELD SCHOOL TO FARMER LIFE SCHOOL

The FFS is potentially an excellent entry point for a wide range of community development activities. The discovery-based learning approaches applied in FFS help farmers to generate a deep understanding of ecological concepts and their practical applications. This approach of identifying problems and finding solutions has been developed to help with understanding of agro-ecology in fields but the same processes have also been found to be easily translated to HIV/AIDS and other farmer livelihood issues as well. FLS approaches help to develop farmers' understanding of the relationships between human behaviour and important livelihood issues much like the study of field ecology

helps to understand relationships between plants and other organisms which affect their growth.



WHAT IS A FARMER LIFE SCHOOL?

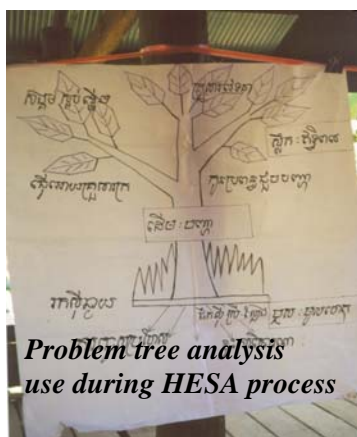
Farmer Life Schools have been developed using non-formal education methods grounded in experiential learning approaches led by a facilitator team of Farmer Trainers who work with a group of farmers within their communities. Often, the FLS is a natural follow-up activity coming from a previous FFS. An FLS is comprised of a group of about 20-25 farmers who meet somewhere in the village for one morning per week to identify critical issues related to their livelihoods for a period of 18 weeks. In the FLS they observe, discuss and learn about these critical issues, develop and implement strategies to take positive action to reduce risks and problems.

Curriculum of FLS:

The curriculum design of the FLS follows the same general processes used in the ecology-based FFS but incorporates different content. While the primary learning material in an FFS is the field, the FLS uses the community where there is a complex of issues related to farmers' livelihoods. At each weekly meeting farmers prioritise issues and divide into groups to work, observe and visit different families to find and document information about the issues. They discuss, analyse, share their findings with other groups make decisions on how to deal with the issue. They then select topics for further discussion and follow-up. This process is termed "*Human Ecosystem Analysis*" (HESA).

Human Ecosystem Analysis (HESA):

In FFS, farmers learn through the process of agro-ecosystem analysis (AESA) and implementing studies. It is a discovery-based learning method using field observations, discussions, analyses, sharing among different groups and making appropriate decisions to manage their crops better.



In FLS a similar learning process, the HESA, has been developed and used during each week. In HESA, farmers research issues related to their daily lives. They prioritise issues and select families for further investigation in smaller groups. They share their findings and select topics for achieving a more holistic understanding on the way people live which contribute to or detract from positive livelihoods. From this they can make decisions on how best to eliminate risky behaviours [in the case of HIV/AIDS] or other threats and adjust their lives to achieve a healthier and more peaceful living. The HESA process is used as a basis for group discussion and decision-making as well as individual decision-making. Discussions identify factors which

support and which don't support positive behaviour and livelihoods and usually include topics in six categories including health, family economy, family education, social relationships, environment and culture. The selected topics for discussion during HESA process depends on the farmers needs and interests.

An important process of HESA is the observation and interview of selected families. Usually, three families within the village are identified for further learning for each issue. Participants are divided into three smaller groups to observe and discuss these issues with each of the three families to help understand the root causes of the issues being examined and the present and future impacts they have on the family. Farmers use a problem tree method to discuss and analyze issues. After that they further discuss what alternatives are available to resolve the issues faced by the families. Farmer Trainers play a key role to facilitate this process and provide appropriate inputs/suggestions to the person interviewed to improve his/her life situation. No specialists or experts are involved to offer solution or strategies (Du Guerny 2000:10).



Discussion and analysing issue with the farmer who had a problem with a chronic disease [HIV/AIDS-related] , Kampong Chhnang Province



Farmer Life School in Battambang province

After all groups compile their findings and draw their conclusions they make presentations and share them with other groups. Then they discuss together to compare the root causes and the impacts of each issue on the different families. The interviewees are informed of the discussions and suggestions by the group .

The HESA promotes learning, critical thinking and analysis by farmers of real life situations in their own communities. They learn from different experiences and lives of people in their communities and use it to help strengthen the livelihoods of other families within their farming communities. By understanding how various factors impact upon their lives they are willing to make changes to reduce risky behaviour which might lead to chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS and plan to achieve healthier and more peaceful lives based on their rural farming conditions.

Special topic:

After the presentation of HESA, farmer participants discuss and select the topics for further investigation and study. The topics can be health, problem cycles, ageing, human needs, daily behavior of farmers, resources in the community, life skills, communication related to farmers' living in the community, farming, marketing, social issues etc.. These topics contribute to increasing the farmers' knowledge, awareness and realization of what they need to do to improve their livelihoods. Group dynamics activities are also included in the curriculum to help participants to relax and develop closer friendship and trust.

Follow-up activities:

The FLS is not the end of the learning process. Farmers need to increase their knowledge and capacity gained from FLS. After the FLS the graduated farmers and Farmer Trainers meet each other regularly to discuss and review the decisions and actions plans they have developed. They discuss what they want to learn or do to improve their life skills related to health and agriculture. They often initiate training, exchange visits or start farmer associations/groups to build their networking capacity and eliminate poverty in the rural areas.

IMPACT OF FLS:

The following illustrates the types of impacts resulting from FLS as documented in studies (Kevin Kamp 2002).

- Farmer ability to identify and analyze issues facing their communities, including the threat of HIV/AIDS.
- Farmer reduction in in risk-taking-behavior related to HIV/AIDS infection and other public health threats.
- Farmer Trainer leadership, networking, training, planning and organizational skills in their communities.
- Farmer-initiated activities to help their communities after the FLS, such as the establishment of a self-help group or farmer association (eg: saving account, research group on rice or vegetable, animal rearing).

IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED

- ✓ FLS provides farmers an opportunity to learn in a way that relates directly to their own lives and fully participated to manage over their daily lives within their farming communities;
- ✓ FLS helps farmers to become more positive change, express their feelings and share experiences with each other (before the FLS they always felt shy and kept the problems for themselves and never discussed with others, even among their families members);
- ✓ FLS allow farmers to forms a network naturally/informally with its own identity that they have created themselves. These activities will become increasingly important in the future fight against poverty, HIV/AIDS and other social issues in their communities.
- ✓ FLS provides the chance for farmers to take charge of their futures, rather than waiting passively for help from outsiders once a threat has arrived.
- ✓ FLS is making a valuable contribution to the sustainable livelihoods of farmers in rural farming communities.

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