



Farmer Business School Approach

Learning from three years of implementation

Business knowledge for farmers

In 2012, the project *Linking smallholders with local institutions and markets+* (LINK) piloted 7 Farmer Business Schools. These schools aim at increasing the farmers' knowledge with regard to the business side of agriculture and thereby enhancing farmers' entrepreneurial skills.

Based on the positive findings of the review conducted in 2012, and with adjustments made based on the first year's experience, additional 45 Farmer Business Schools under the LINK project were conducted in 2013. At the same time, two other projects of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal designed and launched their adapted version of Farmer Business Schools (totally 12 schools).

With the aim of learning from these different experiences, it was decided to conduct another internal review in February 2014. Based on interviews with participants, facilitators and traders as well as on a workshop with stakeholders, the review team collected findings and recommended some improvements in its report.

Review findings

The biggest achievement of the schools is that many farmers know their cost per unit and do not feel cheated by the other market actors anymore. Thus, the trust and collaboration has improved. The schools also increased the awareness of participants of the need to be more market oriented. Participants generally understand the role of the different actors in the value chain better. Improvements were particularly high in one school where the LINK programme had been working over a long period and where the farmers had access to the market already.

The review team found a number of areas for improvement and made recommendations. Most problems were found to be rooted around the fact that the majority of participants are illiterate. Another major factor is that the theory was taught in monthly or biweekly intervals rather than at the very moment the farmers had to apply it in practice. Both issues translate into difficulties of participants to use the tools proposed by the schools and to internalise and apply the knowledge and skills.

Given the rather weak results in the other projects, learned during the review as well as during implementation by the projects themselves, they decided not to run any schools in 2014. They chose to wait for LINK programme to improve their model and see if they want to take up the adjusted model in 2015.

Recommendations

- Use farmer business school facilitators who know about business.
- Give facilitators appropriate training, depending on their background
- Experience of facilitators in providing several schools improves quality
- Curriculum should be in sequence with production cycle and practical, involve market actors
- Literacy classes are insufficient enable illiterates to participate in classes. Use pictorial material, games, practical session.
- Where possible, use (literate) market actors, e.g. input retailer to produce input plan, traders for marketing plan
- Find sustainable distribution system for business plan material (e.g. via input retailers)

Changes incorporated in 2014

LINK project, which showed better results in the review due to its longer experience, took up many of the recommendations of the internal review as well as of their mid-term review and from visitors. Major changes include:

- The lessons are now held biweekly (before monthly). The course now takes only half a year instead of one year. Thus, farmers learn the content close to the time when they need it and can more easily remember it.
- The lesson on input planning now coincides with the moment in which farmers need to plan. Depending on the duration of the crop cycle, the rest of the content is also much closer to the actual practical application.
- The business plan booklet is filled out by the agro-vet, the collector/trader or another literate person from the group or family.
- More role play/relevant games have been introduced. Pictorial training material is being elaborated.
- There are some refresher lessons after harvesting.
- NGO staff co-facilitates with local business person (normally an agro-vet/input retailer or collector/trader). Through this the farmer business school strengthened the link of the farmers with the market.
- Training of Trainers of NGO staff and local business person: 4 days basic training and 3 days refresher training during the course (before: all 7 days before the farmer training started). Depending on capacities of facilitators, the training needs more time.
- Local business person gets additional 3-day training related to their business. For this, regional input/output traders are invited, provide technical inputs and thereby linked with local business person.



One of the recommendations has not (yet) been implemented by LINK:

- There is no distribution system for the business plan booklet. Because of this, farmers outside the Farmer Business School do not have access to it. Also, participants will not have these booklets in coming years. LINK is thinking of distributing such booklets through market actors.

Way forward

According to LINK programme, the changes brought significant improvements. It is confident that the model works well. The programme plans to implement another 82 Farmer Business Schools in 2015. Out of these, 20 are planned to be financed by the Dutch ICCO Cooperation. Within this collaboration, the programme will review the approach again.

The project identified further room for improvement regarding the participation and learning of illiterate participants. It is therefore elaborating pictorial training material and more role plays and games. It also sees a challenge in implementing the schools in very remote areas where capacities of farmers and local business people are very limited.

Various upscaling options have been discussed with regards to their sustainability:

- HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal/other NGOs
- Financial institutions
- Public extension services at local level
- Public extension services at district level
- Cooperatives



HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Nepal projects will consider these options when thinking about moving forward and institutionalising this approach.