Documentation on the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

August 2024

Introductory Note

This fact sheet has been produced as part of a study to map innovative methods and tools in agricultural advisory services in West and Central Africa. This study was commissioned by CORAF/WECARD (the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development) and carried out by RESCAR-AOC (the West and Central Network for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services) across 13 West and Central African countries.

The overall objective of the study was to compile a descriptive directory of innovative agricultural advisory methods and tools for scaling up agricultural technologies and innovations in West and Central Africa.

Several individuals within CORAF, RESCAR-AOC, and beyond, across the 13 countries covered by the study, contributed to the success of this initiative. We extend our gratitude to everyone involved for their contribution.

1. Overview of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

The Agricultural Entrepreneurship School or Farmer Business School (FBS) is an adaptation of the farmer field schools designed to strengthen the business management skills of smallholder farmers (David and Cofini, 2019). The FBS approach is a comprehensive adult learning method that aims to change the mindset of smallholder farmers by raising their awareness of market opportunities and the possibilities for improving productivity, family income, and nutrition (GIZ, 2019).

The FBS method was developed by GIZ in 2010 and has been used in various projects to train 480,000 male and female cocoa farmers in 4 West African countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo) and one Central African country (Cameroon) according to GIZ (2024a). After a successful pilot in 2017, during which 7,206 smallholder farmers were trained in the soybean, groundnut and cassava value chains in Malawi, FBS was expanded in 2018 to reach 15,510 smallholder farmers in the old and new value chains adopted (GIZ, 2019). Globally, more than 1,930,000 African farmers (35% women) across 25 African countries have been trained in Farmer Business School (FBS) since 2010 (GIZ, 2024b) and the method is widespread in more than 16 countries in West, Central, and East Africa (Matthess et al., 2017).

2. Brief description of the types of beneficiaries supported by the Farmer Business School (FBS) method

The FBS method is primarily used to support agricultural cooperatives as well as small family farms, which typically average around 2 hectares of land and generally practice manual, minimally mechanised agriculture. Cooperatives usually have between 15 and 30 members with varying individual landholdings depending on the crop, averaging around 5 hectares for cocoa. In addition to cocoa and plantain, the beneficiaries also produce cereals, legumes, roots and tubers, as well as engage in livestock production (poultry, small ruminants, pork) and tree crop cultivation (oil palm).

3. Necessity and Objective of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

The introduction of the FBS method was primarily aimed at transforming cooperatives into true enterprises capable of creating sustainable wealth. The goal was to elevate cooperatives to an entrepreneurial level by making them autonomous and revenue-generating, rather than operating as simple groups waiting for government subsidies. This transformation was intended to change the perception of cooperatives by demonstrating their central role in entrepreneurial development. The method was thus designed to address shortcomings observed in the functioning of cooperatives, particularly their dependence on subsidies and their lack of autonomy in managing businesses. Furthermore, the FBS was developed to strengthen farmers' skills, improve their productivity and incomes, promote the adoption of agricultural technologies, and enhance resilience to climate change. The FBS also aims to empower youth and women and contribute to rural development while improving food security and promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

4. Methodology for implementing the Farmer Business School (FBS) method

The FBS is implemented in several steps: Identification of farmer groups, awareness-raising among potential beneficiaries; identification and prioritisation of problems, organisation of FBS training sessions, monitoring and evaluation of training sessions, development, implementation, and follow-up/supervision of beneficiaries' business plans, overall coordination of activities

The FBS method is inclusive, taking into account women, youth, and other vulnerable groups. For example, in Nigeria, of the 650 FBS established, 173 were entirely composed of women and 37 were mixed groups.

5. Impacts of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

The Farmer Business School (FBS) approach has a positive impact on agricultural yields by helping farmers adopt an entrepreneurial perspective (David and Cofini, 2019). Through this approach, farmers improve their efficiency, profitability, and ability to adapt to market fluctuations (Imorou and Afouda, 2018). Trainings based on experiential learning also enable farmers to practically apply the concepts learned, which can lead to significant increases in yields.

GIZ (2024a) data indicate that 50% of FBS graduates interviewed have savings in a bank or within their cooperative, and 41% have accessed agricultural loans. According to the same source, 40% of the groups that were trained have registered or reactivated farmer organisations; 74% use FBS tools for planning, record-keeping, and calculating losses/profits; more than 50% of FBS groups organise group purchases and sales of inputs; and 45% of groups have joined a cooperative or association.

According to interviews conducted during case study documentation, the adoption of technologies through the FBS in Nigeria significantly improved agricultural yields—from 2 to 3 tonnes per hectare up to 5 to 7 tonnes per hectare, representing an average increase of about 250%. This yield increase has led to higher incomes for farmers, with some beneficiaries experiencing income increases of over 100% due to higher production.

6. Technologies and Innovations Promoted Through the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

Several technologies and innovations have been promoted through the FBS method, including:

- Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
- Water management
- Row planting and single-plant transplanting
- Use of deep placement technology for urea (PPU)
- Adoption of new crops and crop varieties
- Diversification of crops

7. Average Costs for Implementing the Farmer Business School (FBS) or Cooperative Business School (CBS) Method

It is difficult to define the exact cost of implementing the FBS method, but an estimate is possible based on feedback from projects and programs that have used the method. According to GIZ (2015), in various projects—excluding trainer salaries—the direct cost of FBS training is between an average of 8 and 13 euros per farmer, which is approximately 5,250 to 8,500 FCFA per beneficiary. This amount reflects the actual cost that each organisation must consider before organising an FBS training, assuming personnel are available (GIZ, 2015). In some countries, projects have managed, after extensive awareness campaigns, to reduce the direct cost to 7 euros (approximately 4,600 FCFA) per farmer. When trainer salaries are included, the total direct cost varies between 11 and 17 euros (7,215 to 11,150 FCFA) for each farmer trained in the FBS approach (GIZ, 2015).

For example, in Nigeria, according to project data from interviews during the method's documentation, the cost to deploy an FBS is about 1.5 million naira (approximately 1,000 USD) for two seasons of 4 to 5 months each, or about 3.0 million naira (2,000 USD) per FBS—an investment that proves relatively effective given the number of beneficiaries reached and the scope of the activities.

8. Strengths and Limitations of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

The main strengths and limitations of the FBS method, as identified during national discussion and evaluation workshops and through documentation interviews, are as follows:

Strengths of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

The FBS method has several remarkable strengths. It builds farmers' capacities through learn-by-doing, enabling them to actively participate and become experts in their field. The participatory approach fosters strong involvement from farmers, reinforcing their sense of ownership and commitment. Additionally, the method promotes group cohesion, facilitating knowledge sharing and the adoption of innovations

FBS contributes to the professionalisation of the agricultural sector by making cooperatives more empowered and professional, with improved management and profitability. The method is flexible and can be adapted to different contexts and the specific needs of producers. It offers a structured training framework that facilitates the implementation of innovative agricultural practices.

Limitations of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method

Despite its strengths, the FBS method has some limitations. The method focuses on only one crop per season, which limits the immediate diversification of skills. Additionally, the success of an FBS depends on the unanimous agreement of group members on the choice of a company, which can be challenging in cases of disagreement. Moreover, the FBS method requires a minimum level of literacy, which may exclude some individual farmers. Furthermore, FBS primarily targets farmers organisations, whereas individual farmers are more numerous, which can limit the method's overall reach.

9. Prerequisites for Success of the Farmer Business School (FBS) Method and the Role of Various Stakeholders

Key success factors for FBS include the engagement and training of farmers, political support, especially through agricultural promotion policies that emphasise agriculture as a business, and the support of well-trained master trainers and facilitators, which are essential for the method's effectiveness.

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