

NOTE 20: Farmer Study Circles

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The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to facilitate access to information and know-how on agricultural extension for a wide audience of practitioners. It does so by providing Good Practice Notes, which are descriptions of key concepts, approaches, and methods in an easy-to-understand format. They give an overview of the main aspects, best-fit considerations, and sources for further reading. The notes are openly available at www.betterextension.org. To download, use, disseminate, or discuss this note, access it online by scanning the QR code in the bottom right corner. Feedback is highly appreciated.

Introduction

The overall purpose of farmer study circles (FSCs) is to create learning, capacity, and empowerment among small-scale farmers. FSCs are part of a multitude of approaches to agricultural extension for groups of farmers that are based on adult learning principles. Such approaches are self-directed/autonomous, based on existing knowledge and life experiences, goal-oriented, relevant, practical, and collaborative.

Philosophy and principles

FSCs are developed from the general concept of study circles (Box 1). The first study circles were founded in Sweden in 1912, and the approach has been applied worldwide, for example in the US Everyday Democracy movement¹, the Australian Study Circles Network², Bangladesh, study circles on HIV/AIDS for Swazi women³, and Zimbabwean study circles on community-based human rights⁴. Study circle methods and principles are also applied in related group approaches, such as the discussion groups used in Ireland by Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Development Authority); experience-sharing groups (*erfa* groups)⁵ used by the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service; and farmer field schools⁶.

BOX 1: STUDY CIRCLES

A study circle is a small group of people with common interests who conduct voluntary studies on topics of their own choice. Together they are able to acquire new knowledge, and to scrutinise conditions and opportunities for developing their own society. Participants in a study circle learn from a combination of their peers' experiences and the technical and factual information obtained through all of their studies. This involves interaction, to which all participants contribute.

The basic idea of FSCs is to promote democracy, skills development, education, and access to information through the establishment of small groups of small-scale farmers who come together to learn and improve their skills on topics of common interest. In this way, farmers can discover their ability to change their lives through common study and action.

The principles of FSCs are:

- equality and democracy
- experience sharing and cooperation
- freedom and the right to set one's own objectives
- continuity, planning, and active participation
- use of study materials
- focus on action and change.

Farmer study circles differ from most other group methods in promoting self-governed groups of farmers who study on their own, without external facilitation other than mobilisation and provision of materials.

Implementation

Depending on the context and purpose, FSCs may be implemented in various ways. Usually a network or organisation facilitates the mobilisation of a group and provides study material. The FSCs developed in Africa and promoted by We Effect are supported by farmer organisations. The steps involved in implementing an FSC through farmer organisations are as follows.

1. **Build awareness and capacity at all levels.** The preliminary steps within the farmer organisation are to sensitise the staff, train core and field staff, and train farmers to become FSC organisers.
2. **Mobilise groups of FSCs.** Farmer organisations implement FSCs through their existing local structures, such

¹ Everyday Democracy: www.everyday-democracy.org

² Australian Study Circles Network: www.studyircles.net.au

³ Oliver, L.P. 1996. Study circles on HIV/AIDS for Africa: Swazi women gain a public voice. *Adult Education and Development* 47: 317–331.

⁴ Gweshe, E., Argren, R. and Mawanza, S. 2002. *Community based human rights study circles manual*. Avondale, Zimbabwe: Human Rights Trust of Southern Africa.

⁵ *Erfa* is an abbreviation of *erfaring*, the Danish word for experience.

⁶ Dhamankar, M. and Wongtschowski, M. 2014. Farmer Field Schools. Note 2. GFRAS Good Practice Notes for Extension and Advisory Services. Lindau, Switzerland: GFRAS.



as information centres, cooperatives, and local area associations. The local structures choose representatives to be FSC organisers. The FSC organisers work in the community to encourage people to mobilise and form FSCs; facilitate the election of FSC leaders and orient them; distribute materials; and support activities. Once the FSC is formed, the group elects an individual to become the FSC leader, who takes responsibility for ensuring that everyone takes an active part in discussions.

3. **Choose the study topic.** Participants plan for themselves what and how they want to study, based on the FSC's principles.
4. **Access study materials.** The FSC leader distributes the relevant study materials to the group. The materials are obtained from the farmer organisation via the FSC organiser. Participants decide how to share, use, and keep the material.
5. **Promote action.** FSCs link the participants' acquired knowledge to action and change through experience sharing, hands-on practice, demonstrations, visits, common field activities, and field days.
6. **Produce study materials.** Learning materials may include booklets, radio⁷, or video. The supporting organisations develop study materials to support group learning, based on the farmers' requests.

Monitor the results

The FSC organisers monitor results in the field in terms of how participants' lives have changed as a result of the FSC. They collect and consolidate information from the study groups' self-assessments and pass it on to the farmer organisation.

Capacities required

Institutional

Implementing an FSC requires a well functioning, visionary organisation from national to community level. This is important for planning the process and monitoring achievements, and for providing consistent supervision and support to the FSCs at field level.

Training materials are key to successful implementation as technical study materials support the FSCs with new information and learning. Staff and FSC organisers are guided through an implementation manual.

Human

The capacity and selection of FSC organisers is critical. Field experience⁸ shows that communities tend to select FSC organisers based on their good behaviour, citing criteria such as good literacy level, model farmer, sober, trustworthy, honest, and hardworking.

The FSC organisers are trained in:

- mobilising and forming FSCs
- orienting FSC leaders in conducting sessions and facilitating active group participation and learning
- monitoring, supervising, and supporting FSCs.

⁷ In Malawi, FSCs have access to community farm radio programmes.

⁸ Nissen, J., Chonde, C. and Chipeta, S. 2014. *Evaluation of the We Effect study circle concept*. Danish Agricultural Advisory Service, Knowledge Centre for Agriculture.

⁹ Nissen et al. 2014. Op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

To date, FSCs have mostly used written materials, so it is important that participants are literate. However, this isn't always the case, and the FSC leader must be able to accommodate illiterate participants. Materials must be easy to read and presented in the local language. Discussions must include all participants and bring out their experiences and concrete solutions to problems.

Costs

Training and facilitation

Farmer study circles have few expenses. At the community level, FSCs are based on voluntary participation by both the FSC leader and the participants. An FSC may require external technical support; for example, FSCs in Africa use the links and networks of farmer organisations and government extension services to obtain technical support.

The training of FSC organisers requires a venue and support logistics including transport, accommodation, an implementation manual, stationery, and meals. From the experience in southern Africa, training costs range from US\$120–150 per FSC organiser established. One study circle organiser will typically manage 5–10 FSCs each with an average of 10 members. An organiser managing more than five groups will need support for transport. In Africa, a good bicycle typically costs about US\$85–90.

Production and maintenance of training materials

The most common format used is a printed booklet. There will be costs for writing the text, illustrations, graphic design, and printing. In southern Africa, developing and printing 2,000 copies of a booklet will cost in the range US\$6–10 per book. As the writing and layout are a one-off expense, reprinting is less expensive, at approximately US\$3–5 per book.

If an FSC organiser works with 10 FSCs, each with 10 participants, the approximate annual cost of starting and running an FSC is as low as US\$4–6 per participant.

Strengths and weaknesses

An independent evaluation⁹ of FSCs in Zambia and Malawi identified the strengths and weaknesses of FSCs listed in Table 1.

Best-fit considerations

Target groups

Different categories of farmers and other rural people from all over the world have benefitted from learning through FSCs. The experiences have been particularly good among small-scale farmers.

Farmer study circles are especially beneficial for rural women's participation and learning. As FSCs are self-directed, they address the particular needs of the participants, and women can learn and contribute without being subject to the male bias of conventional extension services. Women tend to appreciate the collaborative and practical way of working in an FSC¹⁰.

Table 1. Strengths weaknesses of FSCs

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides direct benefits to participants • Suitable for organisational development • Effective tool for member mobilisation for farmer organisations¹¹ • Promotes dialogue and deliberations • Provides for social capital • Easy to understand • Strengthens a reading culture • Promotes action • Good for community mobilisation and training • Provides demand-driven access to information and learning • Very cost-effective • Strong tool for women's participation and engagement in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have a limited perspective • Benefits may be apparent only in the long term • Requires commitment to voluntarism • Requires a reading culture • Requires reading resources or materials in other media, in local languages

Innovations and community action

The concept is action-oriented for problem solving and innovation. Groups identify topics for study by identifying common problems. The materials promote new ways of addressing problems through innovation and community action, including the following.

- Links to financial services through group savings and loans associations; and to formal financial institutions such as banks in Zambia, and savings and credit cooperatives in Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda.
- Links to market services through forming produce-aggregation centres and selling in bulk. Similarly, input suppliers sell and deliver to FSCs, reducing the cost of doing business with individual farmers.

Context

Generally, FSCs are most successful with homogenous groups of people in similar situations and with shared concerns. It may not be appropriate to introduce FSCs in contexts of highly hierarchical and authoritarian patterns, or in conflict-driven environments¹², unless ways are found for collaboration of equal members as seen in women's FSCs in Bangladesh and in human rights work in Zimbabwe¹³.

Governance

Farmer study circles are self-governed. The FSC organisers, leaders, and members are trained on principles of democracy, equality, and cooperation.

Evidence of impacts, sustainability, and scalability

Experiences confirm that people working in small groups learn more quickly and reach insights that would have been unavailable to them if they were working alone. Outcomes include increased civic participation and democratic practices, political participation, social change, and self-help activities.

In southern Africa, the implementation of FSCs is monitored in terms of productivity and incomes. The most significant results¹⁴ are described below, along with evidence of outcomes and impact from an independent evaluation in Malawi and Zambia¹⁵.

Improvement in incomes and livelihoods

Participants in FSCs showed 20% improved production and productivity, and 50% improved incomes and livelihoods.

Through FSCs, participants improved the health and nutrition status of their families.

Non-members also benefit from FSCs. For example, information centres built for FSCs also serve as libraries for communities, and some of the income generated from the FSCs is used to support orphans, the elderly, and people affected by HIV/AIDS.

Social change and member empowerment at individual and FSC levels

Participants improve their public speaking skills, and FSCs effectively disseminate information on rights and policy issues and provide participants with a stronger voice in influencing policies or improving rights. Farmer study circles may raise issues and feed these into mainstream organisations for lobbying and advocacy, to influence both the local government agenda and central government policies.

Farmer study circles are a vehicle for further change as members transfer their knowledge and democratic behaviour to other systems of community collaboration. They may also offer adult literacy classes, and there are FSCs on HIV/AIDS that provide a public voice for rural women¹⁶.

Gender equality at household and community levels

Women experience empowerment both in their households and at community level. They voice their opinions and concerns in the presence of men. Women also practise this behaviour in their households, where they communicate more freely. With an improved economic situation and literacy levels obtained through participation in FSCs, women may take part in decision-making and control the resources in their houses and communities.

Realising the power of knowledge for innovation

The methodology promotes the sharing of both indigenous and scientific technical knowledge systems. Participants

¹¹For example, the Cotton Association of Zambia increased its membership from 5,000 to 24,000 members through the introduction of FSCs.

¹²For example, as indicated by experiences of Chilean trade unions.

¹³Gweshe et al. 2002. Op. cit.

¹⁴We Effect. 2015. 'Internal rural development results assessment 2015', unpublished report.

¹⁵Nissen et al. 2014. Op. cit.

¹⁶Oliver 1996. Op. cit.



in FSCs have been able to innovate using locally available resources. In Malawi, women participants shared ideas on producing compost manure, built a raised goat-house, and constructed a clay stove to reduce the amount of firewood used for cooking. Women FSC participants from the Zambia Honey Council made clay/straw beehives as they could not afford wooden beehives.

Unintended effects

Farmer study circles were originally intended to be temporary and to dissolve when the group had finished studying the selected topic. The reality, however, is that FSCs stay together for many years and continue studying new topics¹⁷. Partner organisations support the permanent structure and see FSCs as important in their organisation at grassroots level.

Sustainability

Farmer study circles build sustainable capacity in communities, resulting in long-term empowerment and social

Table 2. What works for successful application of FSCs

Do:	Don't:
Carefully train promoters, organisers, and FSC leaders to encourage equality and democratic processes	Make FSC organisers and leaders 'dictators'
Promote FSCs for 10–20 participants	Have groups smaller than 10, which makes an FSC vulnerable and too small to ensure adequate inspiration Have groups larger than 20, which makes group processes too complicated
Promote homogenous groups in terms of wealth, power, education, and gender in communities with strongly unequal power systems	Promote FSCs with big inequalities in terms of power and voice
Insist on self-direction/governance	Interfere with the FSC's decisions about topics and activities
Provide support for monitoring and backstopping	Promote FSCs where there is inadequate capacity for monitoring and supervision in the support organisation
Facilitate links to service providers and market actors, and enable FSCs to make their own contacts and demands	Provide grant support, except for purchase of technical services
Develop study materials based on requests by FSC participants	Plan services on behalf of FSCs
Provide study materials in non-academic, simple, action-oriented form	Plan and develop materials that have not been requested
Provide study materials in vernacular languages	Provide theoretical materials in scientific language

¹⁷Nissen et al. 2014. Op. cit.

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transformation. Participants are able to sustain the activities and take the resulting innovations into sustainable actions such as savings and loan groups, small-scale businesses, and market initiatives.

Farmer networks and associations have emerged as a follow-up effect, and these units allow small-scale farmers to access more lucrative markets.

Dos and don'ts

Table 2 summarises recommendations by organisations that have successfully implemented FSCs.

Training materials

Australian Study Circles Network: www.studyircles.net.au

eLearning Industry – 6 Top facts about adult learning theory: elearningindustry.com/6-top-facts-about-adult-learning-theory-every-educator-should-know

Everyday Democracy – Resources for changemakers: www.everyday-democracy.org/resources

Participedia – Study circles: participedia.net/en/methods/study-circles

Sekeleti, M. 2015. *Study circle implementation manual*. 2nd edn. Lusaka: We Effect Regional Office Southern Africa

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