Farmer Engagement in Agriculture Extension

Brian Flanagan, summarized from MEAS Tips and Facts Sheets

In EDN *127, we mentioned that a number of MEAS (Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services) documents were being summarized and distilled for ECHO's audience. This article on effective ways to engage with farmers is one of the write-ups from that project. Other ECHO summaries of MEAS docs can be found on ECHOcommunity.org.*

Introduction

Good intentions and viable solutions will have little impact unless we engage with farmers in ways that are meaningful to them. Farmers put a great deal of confidence in what they learn from fellow farmers' experiences, and they are more likely to trust what they see over what they hear. Interacting with peers (Fig. 1) also helps farmers to learn from and share with each other.

Figure 1: *Haitian rice farmers meeting to discuss irrigation issues with an international NGO's staff.* Source: Brian Flanagan

This document, drawn from three MEAS Tips and Facts Sheets (*Farmer Meetings (https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bWVhcy1leHRlbnNpb24ub3JnfHB1YmxpY3xneDoxODVkNDExODdkZmViMDQw)*, *Test Strips for On-Farm Demonstrations (https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bWVhcy1leHRlbnNpb24ub3JnfHB1YmxpY3xneDoyYzZlODEwNGZjMGI5NzM)*, and *The Farm Walk Farm-Led Demonstrations (https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bWVhcy1leHRlbnNpb24ub3JnfHB1YmxpY3xneDoyNGI3N2I0YTBiNTIxN2Y2)*), discusses practical agriculture extension methods that development workers can use to more effectively engage with farmers and foster the kind of farmer-to-farmer interaction that leads to positive change.

Farmer Meetings

Farmer meetings are conducted to promote farmer-to-farmer learning; provide training related to new technologies; and gather input on needs, challenges, solutions, and technologies. When conducting a farmer meeting, be sure you understand the audience and make sure their interests are addressed. Keys to a good farmers' meeting are the ability to analyze the audience, facilitate the meeting and ensure that the meeting is beneficial to the participants.

Analyze your audience

- **Ensure relevance**. Cover topics in the meeting that are relevant and of interest to the group.
- **Factor cultural norms into planning**. Hold meetings at times and places that are culturally appropriate and politically, socially and religiously neutral. Consider gender dynamics and equity; decide what mix of men, women or both is appropriate.

Meeting facilitation

- **Articulate objectives**. State and realize a desired output (e.g., collect information on problems and possible solutions or teach a technique).
- **Be open-minded**. Demonstrate a genuine interest in what the farmers do and think. Listen to what they have to say. It is okay to highlight a technology or practice you are promoting, but do not push your own agenda.
- **Schedule breaks**. Have breaks so people stay fresh and engaged.
- **Gather feedback**. Farmers' meetings are opportunities to learn about their needs and ideas. Farmers have valuable knowledge and experience that can help direct agriculture development projects.
- **Engage with the audience**. As much as possible, encourage group discussion and participation rather than relying on lecture. Use visuals to explain points and tables.
- **Build trust**. Trust between you and a farmer will give the farmer more confidence in trying a new technology. Engage the farmer participants in conversation, empathize with their needs, and get to know them better. Spend time on their farms and sharing food with them.
- **Be Clear**. Use language the audience can understand.

Offer something that benefits and motivates farmers

Often farmers are giving freely of their time, so it is important that the meeting provides them with something in return. Meetings should provide extension information or training that relates to a major issue that farmers are concerned about. At times, it may be appropriate to provide food at the meeting or something to return home with such as a cap or a shirt.

Test strips for on-farm demonstrations

A test strip is a narrow band of land running across a farmer's field in which:

1. Typically one treatment is applied (examples of treatments are: a factor added [e.g., herbicide], omitted [e.g., no early spray] or modified [e.g., a different variety]; and
2. The farmer manages the test strip along with the rest of the field.

Test strips have limitations. They only highlight the effects of one treatment at a time, and conclusions may be incorrect or misleading if a field is used that is not typical of the rest of the region. However, test strips are easy to implement and offer a simple way to assess and demonstrate a treatment under farmers' current practices. To maximize their impact, plan and implement test strips with the following characteristics:

- **Representative**. The test area should be representative of the majority of land on the farm and in the district so that results can be duplicated elsewhere.
- **Believable**. Have a test strip area wide enough so that the results will be believable (a width of 4 to 10 meters is generally adequate).
- **Visible**. Test strips should be located in areas of high visibility (e.g., near a road) and placed so that easy, side-by-side comparison can be made with current farmers' practices.
- **Collaborative**. The test strip should be established in collaboration with the farmer and extension worker. This is especially important when a treatment is being applied (e.g., different variety being planted, herbicide application).
- **Farmer-managed**. Except for the factor being demonstrated, the farmer manages the whole field, including the test strip, using the same practices.
- **Well-marked**. Use a sign to indicate the treatment and whom to contact for more information.

Farm walk farmer-led demonstrations

The farm walk is a chance for farmers to present their experiences in their own fields to other farmers (Fig. 2). While solutions to farmers' problems can be validated and demonstrated in researcher-led settings (to help minimize risk), farmer-led demonstrations are more likely to lead to change. The first step to planning a farm walk should be to make certain that farmers' major needs are addressed and that the solutions being tested are viable and relate to true causes of the problems farmers face. Once felt needs and viable solutions are identified, farmers are invited to choose a technology,

Figure 2: *Ugandan farmers visiting a local citrus nursery to learn about proper tree nursery care.* Source: Brian Flanagan

treatment or practice they want to test
for their own on-farm “walk” or
demonstration. Demonstration plots can then be established in preparation for the farm walk.

Establishing on-farm demonstration plots

- **Determine field placement**. New practices are tried in just part of the farmers’ field (e.g., test strips). As mentioned in the previous section, demonstration plots should be close to roads for easy access and good visibility. Plots should also be representative of other field conditions in the area.
- **Determine plot size and arrangement**. Size matters. Plots must be large enough so the results can be trusted, while not so large as to expose the farmer to undue risk. Suggested minimum dimensions are 4-10 m wide x 10 m long. Arranging plots to show the new technique side-by-side with the old method is an effective way for farmers to compare and contrast the practices. For the sake of simplicity and ease of management, it is advisable to have as few plots as possible.
- **Mark and monitor the plot(s)**. Use a sign in the field to identify what is being tested and who can be contacted for more information. With the farmer present, visit the farm during the season to check on plant growth, assess the farmer’s understanding of what is happening in the plot, note any suggestions the farmer may have and address any problems that may be occurring.

Conducting the farm walk

- **Inform and invite**. Use local community channels to promote farm walk events.
- **Ensure host-farmer understanding**. Make sure the farmer who conducted the demonstration plot(s) is ready to explain what he or she has learned or observed to farm-walk participants. Discuss the effects of the plot treatments with the farmer before the farm walk.
- **Handle logistics**. Make transport arrangements for farmers if they will be traveling between farms, and consider providing refreshments or food for the participants.
- **Allow the farmer to lead**. Although the extension or development worker can be available for support, the farmer who carried out the demonstration plot should lead the field walk and explain the plots.
- **Accept feedback**. Be willing to accept criticism of the technology and use feedback to improve the technology and/or how to present it.
- **Assess efficacy**. Informally (and in a non-threatening manner), by mingling and talking with the farmers in attendance, try to understand how they view the technology, whether or not they will put it into practice, and what other farming needs they have. As appropriate, accept questions or suggestions related to technologies other than those featured in the farm walk.
- **Ensure comfort of attendees**. Hold general discussions where all the participants can hear, see and be comfortable (e.g., in a shaded area). If it is a large group, a portable megaphone may be appropriate.

Conclusion

Farmer meetings, farmer managed test strips, and farmer walks are strategies that extension and agriculture development workers can utilize to better engage with farmers and promote farmer-to-farmer interaction. Each approach can be effective in helping agricultural workers to learn from farmers and promote improvements in ways that are more likely to lead to positive change. Foundational to these methods is that interactions are guided by the farmers' needs and interests.

References

Bell, Mark, and Joe Rickman. 2012. Tips and Facts Sheet: The Farm Walk Farm-Led Demonstrations (https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=bWVhcy1leHRlbnNpb24ub3JnfHB1YmxpY3xneDoyNGI3N2I0YTBiNTIxN2Y2). Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services & UC Davis College of Agricultural and Environmental Science.

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