



# Partnering through farmer field school facilities

**WORKING FOR** 500 000 West African farmers, their families and neighbours

**WORKING TO** promote field school teaching to improve farming practices

**WORKING WITH** local, district, national governments, private sector, local NGOs, farmer organizations

**WORKING THANKS TO** Global Environment Facility, Netherlands, Canada, Spain, European Union and IFAD funding

# FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

A three-country programme that began in 2001 to improve West African farmers' agricultural skills and increase their awareness of alternatives to toxic agricultural chemicals has adapted to changing needs in the region and well exceeded its initial target for success. Its "Farmer Field Schools" reached more than 130 000 farmers in its first two phases, resulting in increased yields, reduced use of chemical pesticides, diversified cropping systems and improved incomes. Building on this successful example of South-South cooperation, the project has now expanded to eight countries with projections of reaching 500 000 farmers in its third phase. But that's just part of the story. FAO now shares its field school programme with partner organizations that have other curricula to pass to the region's farmers.

By establishing Farmer Field Schools at the request of West African countries, FAO instituted an educational system and approach that has added a new level of sustainability to their development and training efforts. But this is not an infrastructure of buildings. It is a network made up of trained facilitators and established relationships with local farmers. It is also a network of trust, which includes working with local, provincial and national governments, farmer organizations, NGOs and the private sector, ensuring they understand, support and can engage with the activities undertaken in the field schools.

Today, the field schools are run entirely by national staff trained by FAO, who willingly share this educational programme with other organizations that have related curricula they want to take to the farmers of West Africa. This sharing multiplies the impact of the Farmer Field Schools by providing an opportunity for collaboration with partners, allowing them to take advantage of the trained facilitators and the trust the project has already established with local farmers and government officials.



# FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS

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## Adaptable system

In Mali, for example, some 30 percent of project funding comes from resource partners who came in after the programme was established, bringing small projects to introduce farmers to new crops or farming techniques. Rather than setting up parallel management units and starting from scratch, they linked with the FAO project facilities. In Mali alone, the project has trained 884 facilitators and worked with 60 000 farmers – farmers who both understand and appreciate the types of hands-on experience they receive in Farmer Field Schools and thus remain open to new topics of training the partners offer.

Opening the field schools to partners and expanding the curricula increased the programme's ability to meet local needs in areas such as improved marketing, soil management, water harvesting and crop diversification. The curricula continue to expand, with other partners now introducing courses for managing fruit trees and for aquaculture and rice-fish farming. The Global Environmental Facility (GEF) has recently begun funding Farmer Field School projects related to climate change adaptation.

## Field schools institutionalized

FAO's collaboration with its partners works well with the current focus on development of national strategic plans for investment in agriculture. Under this new approach, resource partners in a particular country pool their resources and use the government's investment strategy as a guide for their sectoral support. Mali and Burkina Faso already have institutionalized Farmer Field Schools within their national strategies.

FAO launched the concept of Farmer Field Schools in Asia in 1989–90, as a way to introduce integrated pest management to farmers whose indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals was proving harmful to yields, human health and the environment. To date, more than 5 million farmers in Asia have gone through the season-long farmer-field school training, learning to monitor their fields and make judicious decisions to cut back on pesticide use. Building on its success in Asia, FAO took Farmer Field Schools to West Africa in 1996, with the first field schools set up in Ghana and facilitated by Vietnamese and Philippine trainers who had worked in the Asia programme.

Farmer Field Schools are best suited to support knowledge-intensive activities that have no simple formulas. This blends well with teaching an agricultural curriculum which requires hands-on practical training over the course of an entire growing season. Farmers must develop observational skills and be prepared to adapt what they have learned because their field situations will change greatly from season to season. Field schools, as the name implies, are held in the fields where the shade of a tree becomes the classroom and the field itself is the laboratory.



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