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The Empowerment Route to Well-being: An Analysis of Farmer Field Schools in East Africa

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Summary. — The study explores empowerment and well-being related outcomes of Farmer Field Schools (FFS), an extension approach that has gained popularity with agriculture development programs in many African countries. This is done by examining the empirical relationships between FFS participation and increased well-being; as well as FFS participation and empowerment; and finally between empowerment and enhanced well-being. Data analysis from the two thousand household questionnaires show a relationship between these aspects, despite contextual differences in the three countries studied. It is thereby argued that there could be scope to talk about an empowerment route to well-being. The paper further suggests that the most significant impact of FFS could be viewed in terms of building the capacity of local people to make choices and make decisions that ultimately lead to increased uptake of agricultural innovations, access to services, and market access as well as collective action. A major conclusion of the study is that agricultural development programs should focus more on processes of empowering farmers as opposed to technical solutions that characterize most programs, in order to create an appropriate mix of technological and social advancement for a development process that is sustainable in nature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

(a) *Introduction to key issues*

A majority of the rural population in East Africa continue to live in poverty despite the increased efforts by governments to achieve the millennium goals. Reducing poverty, therefore, requires a thorough understanding of the factors that generate poverty and an assessment of policies and interventions designed to support rural poverty reduction. The *World Development Report 2008 (WDR, 2008)* marked the culmination of a long row of international reports that all point toward small-holder-based agricultural growth as being the most effective way of reducing poverty in Africa (IAASTD, 2009; IFPRI, 2006; NEPAD, 2007). However, how best to facilitate agricultural growth among smallholders still remains widely debated. A large proportion of small-holder farmers are not able to engage with profitable markets for agricultural products, nor can they effectively engage with local agricultural service providers. Scoones and Thompson (1994), Chambers (1993) and Leeuwis (2004) argue that existing approaches to transfer of technology do not fit the resource-poor farming context of the South. To achieve agricultural and rural development, new methods for extension and training are needed that make better use of knowledge among farmers and provide for them a stronger voice to demand advice, services, and negotiating power (Christoplos, 2003; Haug, 1998).

East African countries are undergoing a progressive policy change toward more demand-driven and market-oriented agricultural services. This includes a policy shift from centralized extension systems, for example, Training and Visit, to decentralized, demand-driven agricultural advisory systems.

In East Africa there are a number of national extension programs that all recognize the important role of farmer empowerment, public/private partnerships and local participation. In Uganda the National Agriculture Advisory and Development Services (NAADS) program started in 2001 and is today present throughout the country. In the case of Tanzania, the Agriculture Sector Development Program (ASPD) started in 2007 and is currently expanding its scope. In Kenya the National Agricultural and Livestock Extension Program (NALEP) is operating nationwide extension services. To be effective these programs assume that farmers are organized and capable of articulating informed demands to external service providers. However, experience from NAADS indicates that, without a very deliberate external support for farmer empowerment, farmers are often subject to manipulation by external actors, and as a consequence access to agricultural services remains limited (Government of Uganda, 2005).

Farmer empowerment is thus generally seen as an important element in developing demand-driven advisory services (Barlett, 2005). The concept was first recognized by the Bank in its World Development Report 2000/2001 (Bank 2000) as one of the three pillars of poverty reduction. Empowerment is an advanced form of participation that entails farmers making their own decisions rather than adopting recommendations (Friis-Hansen, 2004) from others. Despite the lack of robust data (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005), empowerment is increasingly seen among donors and development actors as a major contributor to development outcomes (World Bank, 2002; Narayan, 2005).

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This study rests on the assumption that the need for individual and collective agency among smallholder farmers in East Africa is on the increase. The current transition in small-scale farming requires farmers that are innovative and able to adapt to changing situations. Rivera and Alex (2004) conclude that, before demand-driven extension systems can take root in practice, farmers must be empowered to develop their capacity to articulate their demands and exert pressure on the system to deliver what they want. The privatization of markets has created opportunities for increasing agricultural production and marketing. However, a high level of individual and collective agency and coordinated action is required if small-scale farmers are to engage successfully with commodity markets, for example, by meeting quantity and quality standards and negotiating effectively with traders (Leeuwis, 2004). Secondly, access to local public services, such as education and health, also increasingly requires the active participation of citizens.

Despite their recognized importance, efforts to assist the empowerment of farmers and their organizations still seldom form an integrated part of agricultural programs and projects. Conceptual support for farmer empowerment comes from donor agencies and only rarely from governments and their agricultural ministries. Likewise the empowerment components of joint government–multi-donor projects are most often funded by external donors. Finally, the implementation of such components is frequently sub-contracted to national or local NGOs. A low priority is also given to human resource development support in new agricultural development policies and a lack of a “human” side of the poverty debate in, for example, policy processes such as the NEPAD comprehensive plan for agricultural development. Furthermore, major global investment programs such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (www.agra-alliance.org/) funded by the Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation primarily emphasize input and technology options rather than capacity-building as ways of solving rural poverty challenges.

Following the collapse of T&V (Anderson, Feder, & Ganguly, 2006; Gautam, 2000) there has been a search for improved methodologies that respond better to farmers’ demands and a shift toward more broad based, participatory, and group focused approaches (Davis, 2006; Friis-Hansen, 2004). Farmer-to-farmer extension, group extension methods, Participatory Rural Appraisal and Farmer Field Schools (FFS) are some of the recent methodologies applied on larger scale (Neuchatel Group, 2006; Qamar, 2006). Working with farmer groups has been found far more effective than working with individual farmers (Friis-Hansen, 2004; Heemskerk & Bertus, 2004; Heemskerk *et al.*, 2003; Leeuwis, 2004; Umali-Deininger, 1997) and thereby most extension methods of today are group based. Current thinking in extension also emphasizes an innovation system where research-extension-farmer experimentation is closely interlinked rather than seen as a one-way flow of communication (Leeuwis, 2004). Client orientation is encouraged and extension messages need to have a broadened scope and cover rural livelihood in general as opposed to just agricultural techniques (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Qamar, 2006). Market oriented agricultural advisory services are also increasingly mainstreamed in extension (Neuchatel Group, 2008). Within this context, FFS is gaining attention among development actors in East Africa as a community-based, demand-driven, non-formal education program that appears to stimulate both empowerment and agricultural growth. The FFS approach embraces most of the concepts above and is fully in line with the current thinking in extension. However, a distinct difference between FFS and many other modern approaches is the focus in FFS on experiential

learning tools and development of analytical and problem solving capacity among farmers and the use of highly trained facilitators rather than technical advisors to support farmer group activities. Due to the focus in FFS on human development this study found it appropriate to use FFS as the entry point to explore further the linkages between farmer education, empowerment, and the increased well-being of the rural poor.

(b) *Accumulated knowledge and gaps*

A wide range of unpublished literature describes the successes and impacts of the FFS approach, as well as the emerging challenges. Aspects commonly pointed out include both increases in agricultural production and individual and collective agency. Published research indicates substantial impacts of FFS in terms of increases in farm productivity, reducing farmers’ use of pesticides, and improved farming knowledge (Mwagi, Onyango, Mureithi, & Mungai, 2003; Praneetvatakul & Waibel, 2003; Rola, Quizon, & Jamias, 2002). A number of studies discuss the role of FFS as an extension model, though with contradictory arguments. For example, Quizon, Feder and Murgai (2001) challenge the fiscal sustainability of the approach when implemented on a large scale due to the high costs per trained farmer. As a response, van den Berg and Jiggins (2007) have argued that FFS should not be considered as mainly an extension model but as a complementary educational instrument that provides intangible public goods that cannot be measured only in agricultural terms.

Few studies have focused specifically on empowerment and FFS, but wider developmental benefits are reported in terms of poverty reduction and human and collective action (Mancini, van Bruggen, & Jiggins, 2006; Van den Berg & Jiggins, 2007; Züger, 2004). A recent study carried out by IFPRI in East Africa demonstrated significant impacts of FFS on the lives, productivity, and incomes of especially women-headed households and people of low literacy levels. While the study refers to empowerment-related impacts, it lacks concrete measures of them (Davis *et al.*, 2010). Friis-Hansen’s (2008) study of FFS and NAADS groups in Soroti Uganda shows that FFS served as a platform and catalyst there for the success of demand-driven advisory services. This study also points at poverty reduction among the studied groups, but it does not attempt to explain the relationship of FFS to potential empowerment and poverty reduction. Overall, established research on the FFS approach covers bits and pieces of the anticipated impact. However, this study is the first to aim more systematically at establishing links between FFS, empowerment, and increased well-being among participants.

(c) *Study objectives*

This study sets out to determine whether the effectiveness of external investments in support of African agricultural development can be enhanced by being combined with support for farmer empowerment and rural institutional development. This contradicts a main line of thinking in current interest and investment support for African agriculture that continue to be based on the hypothesis that there is a “transfer-of-technology and liberalized market” pathway out of poverty. The entry point of this study is a critical view of purely technical approaches that lack support for human resource development. The hypothesis of this study is that a joint learning process leads indirectly to enhanced well-being among resource-poor communities through empowerment that translates into transformation and action at both personal and collective levels,

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