



FFS

Discovery Learning in Dryland Farming

(A Newsletter on Farmer Field School experience)



Issue 5

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Learning to communicate effectively

Good communication skill creates an effective learning environment among adult learners and hence assumes importance in a FFS situation. In a simulated role-play, participants understood the importance, elements and methods of communication and barriers that affect effective communication. In group discussions, they could relate their experiences and evolved a set of best practices for communicating effectively in FFS sessions.

Participants also learnt two related topics to strengthen their non-formal education skills. Discussions on giving and receiving feedback and management of different types of difficult participants in FFS sessions, helped them to relate effective communication in various contexts.

Effective communication - Some tips

1. Know your audience
2. Prepare your audience
3. Be cautious
4. Be coherent
5. Be brief and precise
6. Avoid monotony
7. Maintain eye contact
8. Observe & respect social norms

Family support indispensable for effective participation

When Smt. Maheswari landed up at the MTof on the first day in June, she was not aware that the programme involved a full week's workload. She is a home maker, mother of two children, care taker of two acre farm (her husband works 200 km away) and the animator for five SHGs, responsible for the accounting and loan repayment. She had to decide on these multiple responsibilities which would be affected by her participation in the programme.

Maheswari was determined to continue this training to empower herself with the knowledge. Luckily, her father, aged 63 and living 150 km away at Erode agreed to support her by staying in her house for those three days a week, while she was away at the MTof sessions. In the remaining three days, after completing practice FFS sessions, Maheswari managed her farm and the SHG functions. Thirteen weeks have gone in this manner, and she is happy to have participated in the programme in spite of the constraints.

This is the case not limited to women alone. Even men share similar situations, some managing the hard deal with the support of their family members and some without. The motivating factor behind this commitment is different for each of them, the common one being the confidence created by the programme, to deal with difficult situations not only in their farming, but in their day-to-day affairs, too.

Contributed by G. Mathumalar, MTof participant

Celebrating Independence Day

Independence day was celebrated with participants taking part in the flag hoisting ceremony in the nearby Achettipalli panchayat union middle school. Together with the students and villagers, tree seedlings were planted in the school campus as part of the celebrations. Back in the campus, participants proved their talents in cultural programmes and sports events. At the end of the day, it was a winning moment for all participants, many of them expressing that this was the first time they celebrated Independence in such a manner.



Rangoli competition during I-Day Celebrations

- Launching of Modified Training of Facilitators (MTof)
- Organising FFS with CBOs
- Broadening FFS Curriculum to include dryland farming technologies for the first time...

Coordinator's column

The MTof programme has completed eight weeks, generating a lot of new and interesting experiences. Half way through, the programme has started yielding visible outcomes, in terms of farmers learning new technologies, adopting them and innovating ideas for further trials. With active participation in the MTof process and the practice FFS, the participants are expressing more confidence in every activity they take up.

Independence Day celebrations at the end of this period stood as a testimony to the group cohesion and togetherness among participants. Visitors, including those from AME Foundation Area Units, brought in some new ideas with their feedback and experiences. We hope that this issue, focusing more on people's experiences and views, will make it different and interesting.

G. Ravi Kumar,
MTof Coordinator

Thanks to some late rains, the crop stand is now established and the participants have their own learning plot. In practice FFS villages, the effect of the long dry spell is more visible, with farmers now deciding to go for ragi and short-term pulses, to cope with the prevailing climatic conditions.

The participants learnt the four stages in the AESA process - field observation, analysis, illustrating the findings and taking group decisions. They were convinced with AESA as a decision making tool in crop management, instead of the conventionally used monetary criterion. AESA was immediately put into practice to address the moisture loss in soil due to the prevailing dry weather. A short study was taken up to identify the best mulching material and an effective anti transpirant.

As a part of the nursery raising process, subabul (*Leucaena leucocephala*) seedlings raised in the nursery beds were transplanted to poly bags. Participants learnt the skill, experiencing the advantages of transplanting younger seedlings to older ones in simulated conditions.

Staff from AME Foundation and its partner NGOs from Raichur, Mehaboobnagar and Bijapur Area Units visited MTof. Discussions, field visits and sharing sessions enabled cross-learning.

AME Foundation promotes ecological agriculture among small and marginal farmers in the semi arid areas of the Deccan Plateau by generating farming alternatives, enriching farmers knowledge, linking development agencies and sharing experience.

To,

BOOK POST

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Mulching with newspapers

Technology focus – SA support activities

Animals in farming systems

Rearing livestock is one of the risk minimising strategies adopted by farmers in the drylands. Animals add value to the biomass generated on the farm, recycling it into manure, besides providing draught power, thus supplementing livelihood needs of dry land farmers.

Milch animals as a source of income, supported widely by SHG credit, has become a major livelihood activity in many areas. But the care of this 'high value' enterprise is at stake, owing to lack of awareness on minimum husbandry measures like appropriate feeding and a good housing environment.

The MToF provided an opportunity to learn aspects related to animal health and the required living conditions. Supported by a Veterinarian, a small exercise was carried out. Participants identified visible signs of a healthy animal and the vital characteristics needed for a good animal shed (Box 1), under different situations.

Based on the learning, each group assessed a cow and cattle shed and presented their observations. Although most of



Participants learning signs of a healthy cow

Box 1: Outcome of the exercise

Visible characteristics of a healthy animal

1. Active
2. Moist muzzle
3. Slightly pink eyes. (Red eyes – fever, White – Parasitic infection)
4. Hair should not come out when pulled
5. Shining skin and tits
6. Large and branched milk vein
7. Soft udder
8. Udder not too small or big
9. Not too excited
10. Good milk yield
11. Visible flank region

Maintaining a good animal shed

1. Should be spacious and ventilated
2. Floor surface should not be too smooth
3. Feeding mangers can be provided to reduce wastage and to avoid the mixing of fodder with urine and water
4. Slight slope should be given for urine to drain off
5. Thatched roof is sufficient
6. Should be away from human noise
7. Should not be directly under the hot sun
8. The shed should not be used to store pesticides and chemicals

the participants are familiar with cattle and their rearing methods, this session helped them to consolidate their previous experiences with the new learnings. The topic generated lot of discussion points, which in turn kindled the interest of participants to learn more about animal husbandry.

This enthusiasm continued in the practice FFS sessions, as well. When this exercise was conducted in the villages, farmers, mainly women who are the care-takers of animals, participated enthusiastically. They were surprised at knowing visible symptoms, which were not 'noticed' before. Elderly farmers added some more signs and symptoms, endorsing farmers' wisdom in livestock management. ■

AESA - beyond the normal use

The problem faced by the FFS participants at *Sekkarapatty* was routine, but they could address it differently, with the help of their FFS learning. The farmers could not decide whether to take up sowing with very little moisture available in their sandy soils. On the other hand, they could not risk losing the available moisture because they were not sure when they would get the next rain. They were in a dilemma.

This was discussed during the FFS session and they agreed to take a decision based on AESA in their unsown plots. There was slight apprehension on what to observe and how to consolidate the results. The skill of observing the ecosystem factors in relation to crop growth, helped them in deciding how the moisture level in the soil will influence sowing. There was unanimous decision in all sub groups that the moisture level was not sufficient and they have to wait for the next rains. They also decided Ragi as their next crop choice, if the rain got delayed beyond a week. For the first time, participants were happy for having made a crop decision based on ecological factors and not on monetary terms alone.

J. Krishnan, MToF participant

What others say about MToF

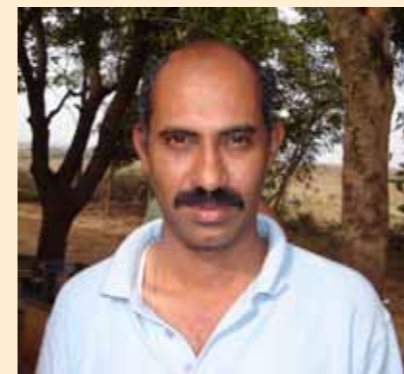
Facilitator's impressions

I have been working as a facilitator in ToFs since ten years. This is my first MToF in a dryland situation and with participants from community based organisations. The large number of practice FFS and their specialities are of great interest. For example, majority of them are 'all women' FFS. Here, I hardly see men in the practice FFS, posing a different type of gender imbalance. Participation is almost 100% in all cases, which is another rare phenomenon I have experienced, that too, in situations where there is no crop in many villages.

Though the presence of SHG and organised groups have made a lot of difference, there are other factors as well, which have helped in making these possible. The curriculum, which directly addressed the broad based needs (like Azolla production, kitchen gardening and animal husbandry) of the SHG women, is the most vital among them. For the first time, I have experienced and learnt rainwater management, soil fertility building and other support activities, using the FFS methodology. I am happy to be a part of this pioneering and trend setting initiative.

Mr. B.V.R. Moorthy, MToF Facilitator

Resource person's views



Mr. Kondareddy

When I landed at Hosur, participants were busy filling gaps in the field. I learnt that they had taken a risk in sowing the main field with the available moisture, two weeks before. The crop stand was good, justifying the hard work put in by the group. This hard work and commitment was visible throughout, during my sessions on the two days, 07–08 August 2006, which made me continue my sessions beyond 8 pm in the night. When I completed the session on 'giving and receiving feedback', they applied the learning immediately, giving me the most appropriate feedback on my session. It was a good experience to be with participants drawn from community-based organisations and it is nice to see the participants improving their facilitation and communication skills, gradually.

*Mr. P.M. Konda Reddy,
Project Associate, World Education, Hyderabad*

Dr. S. Jayaraj visits MToF

Dr. S. Jayaraj, AMEF Trustee, visited the MToF on 16 August to see the proceedings and enrich the process with his vast experience. After visiting the field and discussing with the participants and facilitators, Dr. Jayaraj made many valuable suggestions on improving the various practices like seed hardening, pre-monsoon sowing, inter cropping, compartmental bunding etc., adopted on the MToF field.



Dr. Jayaraj discussing with participants

Our visit to practice FFS....

The one-hour drive to the *Nagasandra* practice FFS hardly went like a few minutes, with the facilitator traveling with us explaining details about the village and the outcomes from the sessions completed so far. We had particular interest in learning how the natural resources management and utilisation aspects were addressed, using the FFS methodology. The enthusiastic participation by the farmers, the wide range of activities taken up on an experimental mode and the way the outcomes were articulated, visibly showed us the difference.

We learnt three essential aspects during the visit and the discussion with the facilitators' team - the strong, flexible and need based curriculum, which supported the process; the way it was used, with constant reworking based on situational needs, feedback and review systems; and the extensive outreach through a number of practice FFS. The support of the facilitating teams in the field, rigorous planning and critical feedback, have helped them tuning their facilitation skills.

Back home, we made it a point to ensure that these three aspects find a place in the MToF structure, when we start the same.

*Mr. Yogesh G.H. and Mr. Rudragouda
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