

Farmer Field Schools in expanding cultivation to newly reclaimed land in Ismailia in Egypt

O. Niemeläinen¹, M. Komulainen², Y. Ahmed³, M. El-Sayes³ and A. El-Adawy³

¹*MTT Agrifood Research Finland, Plant Production, FIN-31600 Jokioinen, Finland, Email: oiva.niemelainen@mtt.fi*, ²*ProAgraria MKL, Association of Rural Advisory Centres, PL251, FIN-01301 Vantaa, Finland*, ³*EFARP Project, Ismailia Agricultural Research Station, P.O. Box 320, Ismailia, Egypt*

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Introduction The use of irrigation systems is expanding in Egypt to facilitate cultivation on sandy areas that were previously desert. Many of the farmers starting on the new areas are undergraduates and others with no background in farming. Much support is required when they start farming. In addition, farmers moving to the new lands from the Nile Delta meet completely new challenges because the poor and infertile sandy soils require different management from the clay soils at the Delta. Ismailia Agricultural Research Station (IARS) of the Agricultural Research Center of Egypt focuses on research on how to cultivate the newly reclaimed sandy soils. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland has supported the research and advisory work of IARS for the last fifteen years through the Egypt – Finland Agricultural Research Project (EFARP). This has been implemented as a twinning project between the Agricultural Research Center of Egypt and the equivalent organisation in Finland: MTT Agrifood Research Finland. In this paper we describe the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach applied to forage and animal production on smallholder farms from 2000-2004.

Background The EFARP has had three main phases: I) Support to research infrastructure and human capacity building (1990-94), II) Interdisciplinary research (1994-98), and III) Extension activities (1998-2004). During the years of the EFARP research activity (involving the disciplines of soil science, forage production, plant protection, animal husbandry and veterinary science), research results were obtained to facilitate the production of recommendation packages for extension agents and for farmers. Close collaboration between the research and advisory services was encouraged in EFARP. The project also tried to involve farmers in the process of choosing research priorities. In the Extension phase, 64 facilitators (advisory persons running the FFSs) were trained both in technical matters and in training skills to run the Farmer Field Schools in the villages. Most of the training programmes were carried out at IARS and training on technical matters was provided by the research staff. When facilitators were working on the field, refreshment training was provided twice a month on new subjects. These training sessions proved to be a fruitful opportunity to exchange experience amongst the facilitators themselves and with research personnel.

Application of Farmer Field Schools to forage production and utilisation Each facilitator was responsible for four FFS groups and 6-14 farmers in each of her/his group. The FFS groups were formed twice a year: in September for winter season and in May for summer season. Each group was formed to operate over the coming growing season but the majority of the groups continued to meet over the following season, thereby covering the whole year. In winter season 2003/2004 of the 196 FFS groups 108 were men's groups, 10 were women's groups, and 78 were mixed groups. The total number of members in these groups was 1893. Fifteen of the 64 facilitators were women. These groups met every second week at the same point (field) where the facilitator gave a special introduction to topics related to the activities on the field or animal husbandry and they studied the growth of the demonstration plots. The facilitator participated in the follow-up discussion. Exchange of ideas and experience between the group members was important and the introduction of personal decision-making ideas by group members was encouraged. The project supported activities to be demonstrated at the FFS meeting sites, e.g. testing of new forage species or cultivars, and arranged materials for demonstrations, such as silage making, urea treatment of straw, Rhizobium inoculation. A 'Farming Guide' book (Anon, 2004) was produced in collaboration with research and advisory personnel as one tool to help facilitators to carry out their work in the field.

Results and conclusions The results obtained through the FFS activity were excellent. The facilitators were very motivated and the participants gained valuable information for their profession and established valuable information channels and networks for future needs. The FFS approach proved to be a valuable way to increase interaction between research, advisory and farming activities and to help all of them.

Reference

Anon. (2004). Farming Guide. Practical Help for Smallholders in Ismailia. (In Arabic) Eds M. Komulainen, O. Niemeläinen, R. Ojala, Y. Ahmed, Y. Shawky & A. El-Adawy. Egypt – Finland Agricultural Research Project. University Printing Office, Ismailia. 192 pp. (CD in English of the text without pictures is available from the Ismailia Agricultural Research Station, Ismailia, Egypt).