

## Decentralizing the Farmer-to-Farmer Extension Approach to the Local Level

Shiva Kumar Shrestha<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract:**

*As the Government extension services fail to reach the remote areas of the mid-hills of Nepal, the research examines the potential for community-based management of the Farmer-to-Farmer (FtF) extension approach for technology transfer to smallholder farmers. The objective is to develop a more accessible and regular system of providing effective services to farmers. With enthusiastic permission from two Ministries, lead farmers were trained as extension agents, and agricultural committees were established and funded at over 200 Village Development Councils (VDCs, sub-district level). The results show that:*

- *the FtF is a cost-effective service delivery mechanism for extending basic and innovative technologies to rural farmers especially in remote areas;*
- *the extension services provided through this approach can be accessed by poor and disadvantaged groups, often excluded from mainstream assistance, and has led to beneficial impacts on productivity and livelihoods;*
- *there is much local support for the establishment of agricultural committees at the VDC level as it is directly accessible and accountable to local farmers, has led to increased participation in the planning, budgeting and implementation of agricultural development programmes, and has empowered the discriminated through providing opportunities to become extension agents or committee members;*
- *many challenges remain however, one being the management capacity of the committee members, who derive from the local community.*

*Linking the FtF approach with management at the VDC level is shown to be empowering, effective at providing services to remote farmers, and highly popular.*

*Key words: agricultural extension, farmer-to-farmer, decentralization, empowerment.*

SSMP is a Swiss-funded and implemented programme that began in 1999; it is now in its fourth phase. Currently the programme has two main themes – firstly the promotion of a package of simple and appropriate sustainable soil and farm management practices aimed at improving soil fertility, productivity and income; and secondly, the decentralization of the FtF approach to the lowest rung of the GoN administrative ladder, the Village Development Council, the VDC.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Programme Officer, Sustainable Soil Management Programme, HELVETAS Nepal  
e-mail: shiva.shrestha@helvetas.org.np , Tel: (+977 1) 5523075

## **1. BACKGROUND**

Decentralised extension services have long been a feature of federal countries. Many developing countries including Nepal are now decentralising extension in the expectation that the service will be closer to the client, and thus more relevant (Smith, 1997). Such extension systems have shown evidence of increased resource mobilization and reduced strain on central finance, greater accountability, and more responsive administration (Bird, 1994).

### **1.1. *The Nepalese Context***

Decentralising extension is very important in Nepal as agriculture is the mainstay of the Nepalese economy – it contributes about 36% of the national GDP and employs over 66% of the economically active population. The majority of the rural population, over 83%, resides in rural areas relying on agriculture and agriculture-related enterprises for their economic progress and food security (MoAD 2012). Of the total 75 districts, 44 are considered as food deficit districts, poor access to services and inputs being considered the main cause. In such circumstances, systematic and effective agriculture extension plays a pivotal role in technology transfer for improving farm productivity and farmer income (World Bank 2003a). The agricultural sector in Nepal, however, is neglected in terms of financial inputs, human resources, and programme planning and management.

### **1.2. *The Current Extension System***

The existing public agriculture extension system of the Government of Nepal (GoN) remains in most regards centralized and top-down, meaning that full participation of farmers in programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, decision making and overall programme management has not occurred. The existing programmes are thus not owned by farmers, rural communities, or even district level stakeholders. Extension from the Districts is weak with limited coverage, low effectiveness and low cost efficiency, and responds poorly to the problems, concerns and priorities of the poor farmers, women or the disadvantaged especially those in rural areas far from the district headquarters. Such centralised top-down systems are often criticised for not pursuing extension programmes that foster equity (Rivera 1991).

Most government structures supporting the agriculture sector are located at central and regional level, and at the district headquarters. There are 1,377 Agriculture Service Centres (ASC) and Livestock Service Centres distributed across the 75 districts, but they are understaffed, deprived of resources, lacking motivation and declining in number. In the field, one ASC has to cover over 8,000 farming households (Dahal 2010), and the frontline extension worker to farm family ratio is 1:1,500. Such a high ratio indicates the poor access of farm families to technical manpower, especially considering Nepal’s difficult and remote physiographic setting (Shrestha SG, 2012).

This current situation is not improving due to the persistent scarcity of financial resources for extension, poor policy implementation for supporting agricultural extension, unavailability of sufficient technical human resources, inadequate local level functionaries, centralized authority.

### **1.3. *Investment in Extension in Nepal***

Adequate funding for local level extension units is an essential element for the successful implementation of decentralized extension systems. The total investment of the government of Nepal in the agriculture sector was less than 3% of the national budget in 2011/12 (MoF 2011), and per capita household investment from the public sector for extension ranges from US\$ 0.26 to 6.5 (RADO, 2012). Both the DDC and VDC receive central government funds for development, but fund allocation for agriculture has been minimal, as local political influences ensure that funds are spent on glossy infrastructure projects such as access roads. Agricultural extension services in developing countries are currently grossly under-funded (Anderson and Feder 2003). Private sector investments in agriculture extension services in Nepal are virtually non-existent.

### **1.4. *The Conceptual Framework and Policy Background***

There is a need to establish a legal frame work and structure of authority that defines the decentralized extension levels, and how they relate to each other (Silverman, 1992). In order to

combat the long-realized tendency for top-down planning and the lack of responsibility taken at district and sub-district level for rural development, the Government of Nepal enacted the Local Self Government Act (LSGA) and Regulation in 1999; amongst other aspects, this Act and its regulations foresee the devolution of public agricultural extension from the central government to the local government – the District Development Committee (DDC), the Municipalities, and the Village Development Committee (VDC) with the vision of effective extension service delivery at local level through transfer of authority, responsibilities and resources. Devolution of authority for agricultural extension services to the district level has not been very successful.

Considering the seriousness and longevity of the issue, this paper examines this new modus operandi for a decentralized agriculture extension approach in order that the main stakeholders (eg. policy makers, development practitioners and the media) are better informed of the advantages of a fully decentralized participatory agriculture extension system.

## **2. DECENTRALIZED EXTENSION IN NEPAL – SSMP’S INTERVENTION**

### **2.1. *The Farmer to Farmer Approach-a Potential Solution***

It is recognized that Farmer-to-Farmer extension has been carried out for generations, and that it is an existing dissemination process. In relation to Nepal, where there is a scarcity of agricultural technicians working in the remote areas, spontaneous FtF agricultural extension is common, and informally used by both government and private sectors. Ordinary farmers can learn much from their more innovative neighbour (learning by seeing), and in the process, adopt a few promising technologies (Dhital, 2009). However, it is a slow process and it takes a long time for a successful technology to reach from one place to another –and sometimes such technologies are confined to one place only. It is therefore seen as essential that an improved service delivery mechanism is introduced, one that is decentralized to the local level, ensures accountability of local government, encourages participation by all members of society, is oriented toward demand driven results, and is responsive to farmers’ needs, especially the problems and concerns of the disadvantaged in more remote areas.

In this context, the *Sustainable Soil Management Programme* (SSMP)<sup>2</sup> has promoted a system of decentralized and participatory extension, the Farmer-to-Farmer (FtF) agriculture extension approach, in order to:

- a) Combat the poor delivery of extension services to the rural communities, especially those located some distance from the district headquarters, and to:-
- b) stimulate a socially equitable extension service that is more responsive to local needs, that promotes bottom-up planning with local participation, that ensures ownership of programmes and projects by farming communities, and that fosters cost-sharing

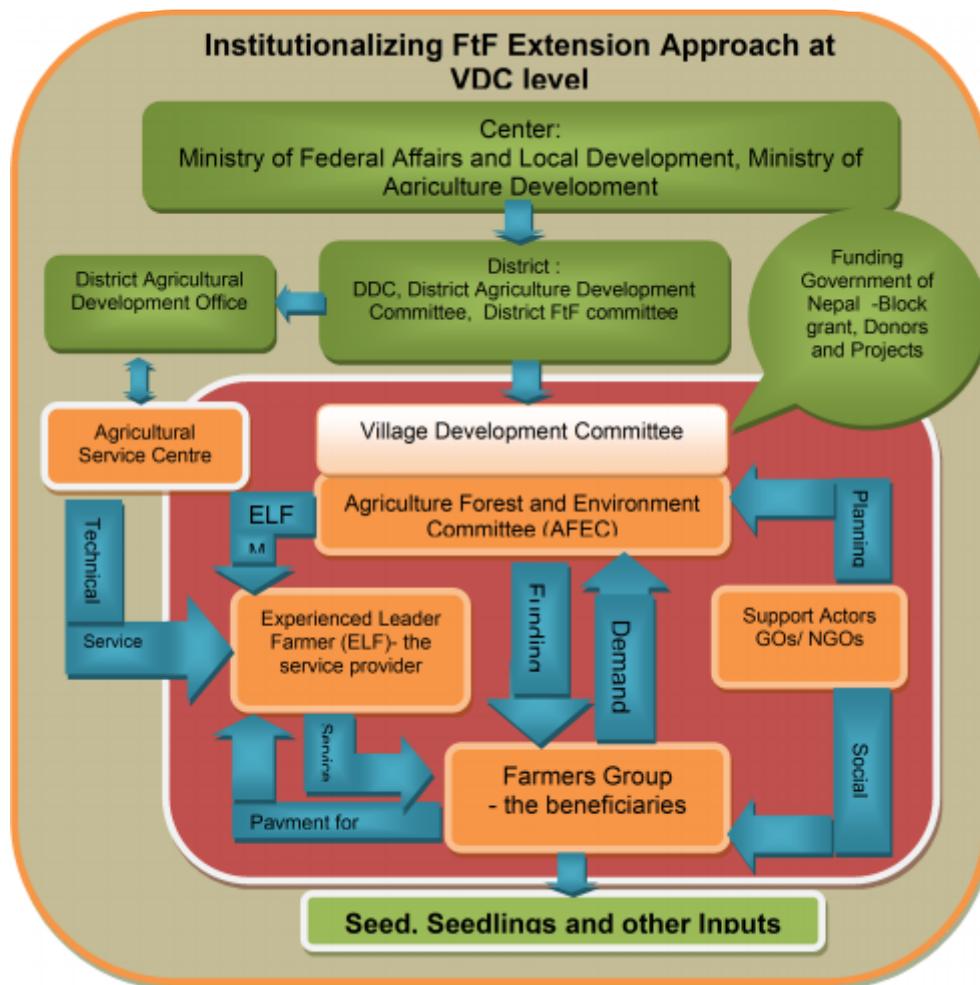
In Nepal, programmes are now being implemented, like those of the SSMP, in which farmers with experience in relevant subjects are mobilized for technology transfer in remote areas, especially where the services of the Government technical staff do not reach.

In this approach; an *Agriculture Forestry and Environment Committee* (the AFEC) is established at the VDC level to fulfil the structural lapses at local level, establishment of agriculture development funds and its judicial operation through AFEC in regards to service provision to farmer at local level, development and mobilization of the Experienced Leader Farmers through AFEC-as service providers based on the demands of the farmers groups who prepare a proposal which is submitted to the AFEC for approval and support. On approval of the proposal by the AFEC, funds are then provided to the farmer group for both inputs and for paying for the coaching services delivered by the ELF. The ELFs are paid for their services by the demand farmer groups.

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<sup>2</sup>SSMP is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and implemented in Nepal by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation.

Key operational aspects of a local FtF extension service, which are described in the diagram below, are therefore:



Operation of FtF Approach

### 2.1.1. The Experienced Leader Farmer (ELF)

All farmers cannot be leaders, and all leaders may not have the technical competence, skills, personality or desire to become ELF. ELFs are not classroom trainers and are not envisaged to become full time trainers. Only the following farmers can become Leader Farmers:

- those who are continuously involved in farming, are able to try, test, and regularly experiment with new technologies by establishing demonstration and test plots,
- those who have experience of increasing profits and improving their own livelihoods through agriculture.

The best Leader Farmers then receive further training to become Experienced Leader Farmers, the responsibilities of whom include:

- training, coaching of and demonstrating to other farmer groups,
- maintaining a model farm for demonstration of good practices and technologies,
- experimentation of new technologies.

The ELFs are able to provide support and basic services to other farmers through providing practical coaching and backstopping in, for example:

- a) preparing a farm plan through an agricultural and livestock calendar,
- b) improved and sustainable soil, water, crop, livestock and farm management linked with key income generating commodities with potential in the area.

The role of the ELF in the Farmer to Farmer extension approach is crucial - hence, special attention needs to be given to identifying and developing the ELFs. For those with the appropriate ambition, attributes and skills, the ELFs can go on to take skill tests at the National Skills Training Board (NSTB).



Participants at an ELF training session, practicing the preparation of a table nursery for off-season tomato production in Diyale VDC in Okhaldhunga District in the east of Nepal (June 2012)

### **2.1.2 The Agriculture, Forestry and Environment Committee**

Due to the political instability in Nepal since 1996, elections at District and VDC level have not taken place for the past 12 years, thus these days there are no elected representatives nor executive structures at these levels. This has adversely affected the establishment of a mechanism for implementing agriculture activities at VDC level. SSMP initiated to establish locally elected AFEC at VDC level for the management of agriculture development programmes to grater possible extens. The committee generally comprises 9 to 11 members of the local community who are elected by the community. Most of the members are not very well educated and are in need of much coaching and support

Moreover, committee members are currently undergoing coaching and training to ensure that they are capable of undertaking their responsibilities, as summarised in the box below. One result of the coaching is that all the established AFECs have developed by-laws for the management of the committee and funds received. Once the AFEC members are sufficiently trained, the committee then becomes responsible for the local agriculture development, and for the FtF extension approach.

The SSMP efforts to establish AFECs has had much enthusiastic cooperation from both the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, and the Ministry of Agriculture Development who have fully supported the establishment of a workable decentralised extension system.

#### **The Specific Responsibilities of the AFEC**

- preparing the necessary by-laws and fund operating guidelines for effective and efficient use of the agriculture development funds received;
- establishing the agricultural priorities of the VDC and developing annual plans;
- monitoring and evaluation and reporting of the fund utilization;
- tapping resources for funding the FtF approach and the overall agricultural development of the VDC;
- transparent management, recording, disbursing, accounting for, and auditing of the funds;
- undertake technical and social assessments and evaluations of project proposals before approving those selected, and disbursing funds against a contract;
- mobilizing the ELFs with the appropriate required skills and experience and maintaining an up-to-date roster of ELFs.

### **2.1.3. Role of the Government, Non-Government and Others for Strengthening Extension at VDC**

Since 2008, the Local Governance and Community Development Project (LGCDP), supported by many international and bilateral donors active in Nepal, has been providing significantly increased funds to the VDCs for local development activities. Much of the funding support has been spent on infrastructure programmes, and very little on agriculture.

However, lobbying of the two Ministries supporting this initiative has resulted in two recent important breakthroughs:



AFEC members after the election process in Gela VDC, of Kalikot District in western Nepal (June 2012)

a) in September 2011, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development directed all the VDCs to allocate at least 15% of their VDC grants for agriculture development – this amounts to at least NRs 200,000 (~ US\$ 2,350), sufficient to support a minimum of 12 farmer groups in the VDC through the FtF programme. As this letter went to all 3,915 VDCs in Nepal, this was a very important directive to stimulate local agricultural service delivery;

b) the Ministry of Agriculture and Development very recently issued a letter to all 75 District Agriculture Development Offices (DADOs) directing them to ensure: a) their active involvement in the establishment of the AFECs, and b) the appropriate utilization of the budgets allocated for agriculture development. In addition, the DADOs were instructed to incorporate the FtF extension approach as a mandatory activity in their regular annual plan and programme.

In addition to the above, all of the District Development Councils of the 7 SSMP districts have committed themselves to establish AFECs in all the VDCs.

### 3. RESULTS, LEARNINGS AND CHALLENGES

#### 3.1. Results

The key results to date of the initiatives taken by SSMP, summarized in the table below, are;

- a) to date, the FtF extension approach has been introduced and is up and running in 240 VDCs;
- b) of the total, 378 VDCs in its seven operational districts, over 288 AFECs have been established to date, the committees trained, and bye-laws and guidelines developed for the operation of local agriculture development programmes;
- c) due to the support from the DDCs and the Ministry directives, 48 VDCs where SSMP has yet to work, have formed their own AFECs (over and above those recorded in the table above);
- d) to date, 755 ELF's have been developed, and 151 ELF's have begun to provide extension service to farming households through 87 AFECs, serving a total of 904 farmer groups to date;
- e) 42% of the ELF's developed in the last two years are women – leading to a significant increase in self-esteem of the female ELF's, as documented in numerous case studies;
- f) a roster of available and competent ELF's is maintained at all the VDCs, and at the DADO and DLSOs, and is available to all;
- g) both Ministries have decided to upscale this approach to other districts; in the first phase, to 39 mid-hill districts and gradually to all 75 districts of the country. For this, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture Development is in the process of developing an operational guideline for the smooth operation and management of agriculture development programmes at VDC level.

Table 1: Status of SSMP Progress to December 2012 (source SSMP progress report 2012)

Name of the districts	No of VDCs in the district	Total No of VDCs covered by SSMP	No of AFEC formed with SSMP Support	Total No of ELF Developed	No of Groups served	Total No of HHs served	Funds (NRs) co-financed by VDC in 2011/12	Funds (NRs) co-financed by VDC in 2012/13
Achham	75	47	47	208	52	858	3,252,276	7,191,001
Dailekh	56	35	37	94	6	82	2,601,000	5,499,576
Jajarkot	30	20	20	68	15	179	3,585,200	3,210,830
Kalikot	30	20	29	58	71	1,207	2,111,800	2,495,382
Khotang	78	48	45	127	54	879	3,403,100	4,000,000
Okhaldhunga	56	35	55	106	305	5,876	3,114,400	8,877,994
Ramechhap	55	35	55	94	401	7,385	3,492,500	5,616,265
<b>Totals</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>755</b>	<b>904</b>	<b>16,466</b>	<b>21,560,276</b>	<b>36,891,048</b>

### 3.2. Learnings

- development of ELFs, empowered women and the disadvantaged through providing opportunities to become an ELF, a confident trainer and a respected member of the community.
- technology dissemination from the ELFs is much more effective- both technically and costwise than coaching from an outside technician.
- the FtF approach is a cost effective service delivery mechanism;
- the extension services provided through this approach can be accessed by poor and disadvantaged groups, often excluded from mainstream assistance, and has led to beneficial impacts on productivity and livelihoods;
- the FtF approach has led to increased participation of local people in the planning, budgeting, implementation and evaluation of agricultural development programmes;
- there is much local support for the establishment of agricultural committees at the VDC level as it is directly accessible and accountable to local farmers, has led to increased participation in the planning, budgeting and implementation of agricultural development programmes, and has empowered the discriminated through providing opportunities to become extension agents or committee members

### 3.3. Challenges

Challenges in relation to AFEC establishment and management of the FtF approach at the local level include the following.

1. There is a clear and urgent need for much training of the committees to raise their management capacities in many different areas. This requires much support from stakeholders at different levels.
2. There have been delays in the receipt of funds at the VDC from the District Development Fund due to late release of funds from the centre – this leads to poor response to farmer demands, and does not build the confidence of the community in the ability of the AFEC to deliver services.
3. As in other sectors of Nepal, there is the unfortunate potential for corruption and cronyism leading to extension support being provided to elite groups, political allies or inappropriate programmes.
4. There remains a policy gap at the national level - for example, there is a lack of a clear pro-poor focus in policies relating to agricultural extension and decentralization policy.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Transformation of Farmer-to Farmer extension approach to VDCs management - the lowest political unit of the government has proven to be more effective for empowering disadvantaged farmers and effective delivery of services, thus highly popular.

The modality promoted by SSMP also increases the accountability of local government to the farmers, enhances transparency, and significantly improves the participation of the local communities in the planning and implementation of agricultural development.

SSMP is further trying to establish the AFECs as the institution for entry to the VDC – a one window approach so that all funding and development programmes go through the AFEC, in order to reduce the duplication of resources and to ensure local participation in all initiatives, programmes and projects.

The effectiveness of the AFEC in its role as local service deliverer has been observed by many participants in the development field, and there is an increasing interest and demand from stakeholders in both districts and at national level policy arena to scale up this approach of agriculture extension and development.

The establishment of the AFECs as managers of the FtF approach at the local level is a long term initiative, but this decentralized approach offers particular hope for improving the relevance, responsiveness and sustainability of extension services provided to local communities of rural Nepal.

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### Acronyms

AFEC	Agriculture, Forestry and Environment Committee
ASC	Agriculture Service Centre
CTEVT	Council for Technical Education & Vocational Training
DADO	District Agricultural Development Office
DDC	District Development Committee
DLSO	District Livestock Service Office
DoA	Department of Agriculture
ELF	Experienced Leader Farmer
FtF	Farmer-to-Farmer
GoN	Government of Nepal
HICAST	Himalayan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology
HH/s	household/s
IAAS	Institute of Agriculture & Animal Science, Rampur
LF	Lead Farmer of a farmer group
LSGA	Local Self Governance Act (1999)
MoAD	Ministry of Agriculture Development
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoFALD	Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Government
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRs	Nepali Rupees
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SSMP	Sustainable Soil Management Programme
VDC	Village Development Committees