

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO HMMM...THE AGRICULTURE EDITION

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I am not an agriculturist. In fact, I'm quite a bad gardener. For four seasons in a row, I've tried to grow vegetables in our garden and I'm being generous when I say the results have been lacklustre. Carrots stunted because I planted them in soil too shallow, the neighbour's cat pooping all over my lettuce because I didn't have the foresight to cover it with netting, and a mushy courgette the size of a sausage dog when I didn't pick it in a reasonable amount of time.

So, I'm not an expert. But I'm very curious about how I can grow better vegetables – or just any vegetables, really – and how people whose livelihoods depends on this can earn more income from their efforts. My curiosity extends beyond technical bits of information to why we do and don't do certain things. And I recently read two things that have made go hmmm.

When I first encountered the term FFS, I assumed it was the well-known expression that rhymes with 'for ducks sake'. Alas, it referred to farmer field schools in this case. Farmer field schools, a popular way to transmit information on good, climate smart, [insert trend du jour] agriculture practices to farmers. The more I learned about them, which full disclosure, is not a lot, the more questions I had about their effectiveness, scale, and sustainability.

Enter the International Initiative for Impact Initiative (3i)'s systematic review of the effectiveness of farmer field schools. As they put it, [*“although FFS has been used to train 12 million farmers in over 90 countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, the effectiveness of this approach has long been a subject of debate.”*](#) Systematic reviews look at not just one piece of evidence, but aggregate evidence over hundreds or thousands of documents. In this case, they looked at 500 documents and concluded that *“FFSs have changed agricultural practices and raised yields in pilot projects, they have not been effective when taken to scale”*. Low marks for both scale and effectiveness. The review goes on to say that *“for scaled-up programmes implemented over longer periods there is no evidence of positive effects”*, suggesting sustainability also scores poorly. So, some big questions about the effectiveness, scale, and sustainability of a widely popular tactic used in traditional and MSD programming.

At the other end of the research spectrum, I found hope, rather than despair. A lone randomised control trial from Malawi wanted to learn how the messenger matters when delivering agricultural extension information. The bread and butter approach of agricultural information providers are government extension agents, who are notoriously under-resourced in nearly all contexts, or lead farmers, typically better educated and often wealthier than the 'average' farmer, who provide information on using new seeds, applying fertilisers, different planting or harvesting techniques, or pest management solutions. In this case, researchers introduced a third variable to this scenario – that of a 'peer' farmer. A peer farmer was somebody who had a similar land size, education background and income level.

What they found fascinates me. Of the three extension agents, the most effective at persuading farmers to change their behaviour were the *peer* farmers. In their words:

“Peer farmers whose farm sizes and input use are the most similar to those of the recipient farmers are the most persuasive. In other words, farmers appear to be most convinced by the advice of others who face agricultural conditions that are comparable to the conditions they face [themselves](#).”

Data geeks can read the regression models they used in the full study, but the findings, albeit in a single study, are something that's made me go hmmm.... Even more so given the limited evidence base for the effectiveness, scale, and sustainability of the dominant approach to agricultural extension. FFS, let's try something new!