

Lessons from Small Farm Resource Centers

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*The Current and Future Roles of Small Farm Resource
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Introduction

Small Farm Resource Centers (SFRCs) evaluate new ideas, techniques, or crops for their potential to benefit a local community of farmers. Innovations that have succeeded elsewhere are trialed at the SFRC (Fig. 1) to make sure they will succeed under local conditions. The most promising of these are further tested within farmers' fields. The ideas that work best can then be shared through the SFRC's agriculture outreach and community development efforts. Thus, SFRCs have two distinct functions:



Figure 1. The Upland Holistic Development Project in Thailand, shown as an example of a Small Farm Resource Center.

Source: Abram Bicksler.

1. The center tests and adapts ideas, making sure each works properly before being shared with communities that have similar environmental conditions (e.g., climatic, topographic, soil).
2. The center provides a site for demonstrations and training. The location can be a base from which promising results are demonstrated to NGO staff, government officials, or farmers in the community.

Based on a MEAS paper entitled, [*The Current and Future Roles of Small Farm Resource Centers in Extension and Advisory Services: Synthesis Report from Seven Case Studies in Southeast Asia*](#), this document highlights key take-a-ways of an assessment by ECHO of seven SFRCs in Southeast Asia. Through questionnaires, surveys, site visits and various other means, data were collected from December 2012 to March 2013 in order to “illustrate and classify the concept of the SFRC, evaluate their outreach efficacy, and provide recommendations to amplify their extension services.” In summarizing key findings of this assessment, this paper reviews the models of extension and advisory services used at SFRCs, the main challenges and limitations of SFRCs, and key lessons learned to help in starting and running an effective SFRC.

Models of extension and advisory services used by SFRCs

In countries where there is not a strong governmental or university-based extension system, SFRCs play an important role in smallholder farmer education and community development. Such centers are especially effective in reaching neglected or marginalized populations that may not have access to other means of extension. Models of extension employed by SFRCs vary, but the techniques and tools being promoted should always be based on local needs and stakeholder interactions. In the assessment conducted by ECHO, the extension and advisory services being provided by SFRCs were categorized as follows:

On-farm and off-farm demonstrations

The high adoption rate of SFRC-promoted technologies in communities was clearly linked to on-farm demonstrations (i.e., those conducted at the SFRC; an example from the Caribbean shown in Fig. 2) and the accessibility of communities to the technologies promoted through their local center. The assessment showed that SFRCs can be an effective method of disseminating technology if the following occurs:

1. Farmers have access to the technology.
2. The technology or innovation is affordable and appears to be good value.
3. The farmers trust the organization or individual promoting the innovation or technology.

Demonstrations at the SFRC (on-farm) allow for applied research and involve no risk to farmers. Additionally, farmers and other guests can visit the SFRC to view innovations being developed and put into practice.

Off-farm demonstrations (in farmers’ fields), managed by local farmers, make it possible to further validate promising techniques under local conditions and constraints. They generally enable more



Figure 2. Haitian farmers evaluating sorghum varieties demonstrated near a market road. Source: Tim Motis.

be strongly considered as a means to better serve the local community and keep the SFRC abreast of changing dynamics in terms of farmers' needs and priorities.

The challenges and limitations of SFRCs

With any system of extension or research there are challenges and limitations, and the SFRC model is no different. The study conducted by ECHO identified the main challenges and limitations that the SFRCs were facing.

Physical location

Each SFRC relies on a physical location/farm which is the main site for research, education, and training activities. Funding such centers is costly as land, infrastructure and staff are required to establish and maintain a functioning SFRC. This also makes it difficult to 'scale up' or duplicate SFRCs in other locations.

Qualified staff

A SFRC requires staff who are knowledgeable in extension methods and farming practices and who also have experience in applied research and the skills needed to manage the various aspects of a center. Finding qualified staff can be especially difficult in countries where other agriculture programs are competing for the same candidates. If a SFRC is established or led by international staff, it is important to build local capacity and develop a strategy for eventual succession.

Changing needs of the community

Care needs to be taken that the SFRC staff does not become too center-based in focus and work, causing its function to be in isolation of the community. The staff of the SFRC must interact with the target population and adapt to the changing needs of the community so the center does not become irrelevant to its clientele.

Long term sustainability

Funding is often a limitation for SFRCs. With a recommended diversified approach toward funding mechanisms, ECHO's assessment found several ways that SFRCs address this issue:

Core long-term funding

Often SFRCs' core funding comes from charitable foundations, international NGOs as well as local churches (denominations) and international church/mission agencies that may also be the parent organization of the institutions. Such parent organizations often cover the startup cost and annual operating expenses for the first few years.

Grant funding

Some SFRCs have been able to receive outside funding from grants. However, this requires that the SFRC has staff and/or volunteers with the skills to find these opportunities and develop

effective funding proposals, especially as English is often required to fill out applications and network with donors.

Income streams from the farm

Many SFRCs create income streams, often from products generated on the farm. As mentioned earlier, SFRCs have also been able to charge fees to clients seeking training. These and other income generating methods have helped some SFRCs cover large portions of their expenses.

Lessons learned from SFRCs

SFRCs can be diverse, but there are common characteristics that ultimately influence their overall efficacy. Findings of the ECHO assessment of SFRCs in Southeast Asia showed that successful SFRCs employ the following best practices and strategies:

- 1) Focus on local farming communities while taking advantage of appropriate opportunities to extend the SFRC's reach and impact beyond its own location and primary focus groups.
- 2) Engage in a dynamic process of evaluation and demonstration. Rather than being museums, effective SFRCs are dynamic, active and evolving centers of innovation.
- 3) Develop stable income streams. Critically evaluate them to maintain profitability, and utilize them as training tools.
- 4) Develop and maintain strong, vital connections to other centers of innovation such as universities, NGOs (ECHO), CGIAR Centers, etc. This keeps an SFRC from becoming isolated with little impact.
- 5) Grow organically in relation to funding as well as to the capacity of the staff, capacity of the center, ability of the management, and the needs of beneficiaries.
- 6) Acquire the right amount of suitable land for the center to reach a long-range goal. Buildings and other physical facilities must be appropriate for the budget, activities, local environment, focus groups and other stakeholders.
- 7) Think through and weigh the long-term goal for the center in relation to its extension work – are they commensurate? Do they complement or compete against each other?
- 8) Continually nurture and develop a multifaceted project repertoire that includes language skills, cultural identity, and diversified income streams, all of which will ultimately help to develop livelihoods.
- 9) Regularly conduct needs assessments of the beneficiaries to ensure that the SFRC remains relevant and that its outreach methodologies are working well. This also empowers beneficiaries to share and prioritize needs, solutions and approaches to ensure that the center and its extension programs are targeting the most important needs of the community.
- 10) Emphasize sound project management and evaluation, as these are essential to ensuring that goals and objectives are being met, finances are being used wisely, and livelihoods are being improved. If need be, to avoid being blinded by successes and failures, utilize outside consulting services.

11) Use a combination of approaches in developing center and extension methodologies. Regularly include trainings and large group gatherings, as well as site visits to see the success of similar farmer groups who have adopted relevant techniques and ideas. Routine interaction of designated extension agents, who are well-connected with the center and with whom beneficiaries have built a relationship and repertoire, is extremely important

12) As appropriate, strive to meet higher-order needs related to gender issues, citizenship, language and land tenure. Addressing these issues can be more difficult than meeting basic physical needs like food, water, sanitation and housing. However, doing so is often necessary to favorably affect the food security of stateless or marginalized communities. Addressing higher-order needs will likely require an SFRC to build its capacity in terms of legal expertise.

13) Work within existing legal and nation-state frameworks. Though this is often difficult, and may limit the scope and efficacy of the center, doing so is important for building legitimacy. In time, some of the hinderers may become advocates.

14) Look for appropriate champions to advocate on behalf of the center. Ultimately, the fate of centers can rise or fall on the shoulders of these champions.

15) For SFRCs with an income component, profit sharing is important and leads to greater efficacy for all involved.

Conclusion

The SFRCs that were studied varied in location, methods of extension, and often the technologies they were promoting. Even with these differences, the study found that the technologies and practices being promoted by the various SFRCs were being adopted in the local communities they served. It is apparent that SFRCs provide an important method of sharing agriculture information, ideas, materials and techniques to communities that may otherwise not have access. Establishing, operating and funding a SFRC requires both technical and management skills but can be quite effective if the center's programs are based on the needs of the community.

References

Bicksler, A.J., R. Bates, R. Burnette, and B. Thansrithong. 2014. [*The Current and Future Roles of Small Farm Resource Centers in Extension and Advisory Services: Synthesis Report from Seven Case Studies in Southeast Asia*](#). Modernizing Extension and Advisory Services.

Further Reading

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