

“Dgroups is the most dynamic part of the Farmer Field School Platform. It keeps growing in members and contributions, resulting in a very positive experience for everyone.”

Suzanne Phillips, Farmer Field School Team – FAO Plant Production and Protection Division

Using Dgroups for stakeholder engagement and participation in the FAO Farmer Field School



The **Farmer Field School (FFS) approach** is an adult informal education approach that uses learning by doing to empower farmers to understand their ecosystems. Extension workers, farmer organization staff, and private company staff are trained as facilitators and help a group of farmers to experiment on different practices throughout the cropping season. This has different impact in terms of yield increase, sustainability of practices, growth margin, to name just a few.

The FFS approach was **first developed by the FAO in 1989** in Indonesia with the rice growing farmers to deal with some specific problems faced by these farmers. Since then, the approach has **expanded massively to over a hundred countries as of 2018** and it went from just looking at integrated pest management of rice crop to a variety of other crops and production systems, and the different problems that farmers encountered in these areas. Moreover, this approach has been taken up by several other organizations such as IFAD, national and international NGOs and governmental agencies. As a result, there are now between 4 and 10 million farmers who have been trained, in addition to all extension workers, farmer organization staff, and private company staff trained as facilitators.

This **scale and success** of the FFS brought also some **new challenges**. How to maintain the quality of facilitation in this fast-growing number of field schools? How to create synergies and avoid duplication of efforts? And

ultimately, how to support the growing FFS global community? To answer this question, in 2017 FAO decided to set up a **Global Farmer Field School Platform** with the objectives to: (1) Facilitate the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and information among all the different practitioner in the FFS community of practice; (2) help document and improve the visibility of FFS achievements globally; and (3) promote the quality of the field school through the harmonization and collaboration among the different FFS community members.

How does FAO FFS use Dgroups?

FFS maintains a website, hosted and managed by FAO with the support of growing number of institutional partners. The website brings together relevant documentation on the FFS approach, news and events, as well as a Roster of FFS Experts.

However, in addition to the website, the FFS team also wanted a way to **connect and allow the different FFS practitioners across the globe to talk together** and exchange together in a dynamic way. Most important, this **dialogue space needed to be inclusive and allow access and participation to different people**, including the ones in remote areas, often without good internet access and with limited IT skills.

For this reason, the **FFS team decided to use Dgroups to connect all the members in a global, growing, community of practice**. Members of the community on Dgroups are mostly from Africa and Asia. The community already has about 1,000 members from 107 countries, mostly in Africa and Asia.

So far, members have engaged in more than 117 discussions, contributing in different ways and around a variety of topics. Some discussions have been led by the Dgroups facilitators, for example asking members questions on issues such as climate change and how they have been dealing with its effect in FFS. Other discussions have been started directly by community members. Members of the community have reported using the content of the discussions to help write documentations and publications.

Why would FAO FFS recommend Dgroups to others?

The FFS experience provides some clear, useful insights on the advantages of Dgroups to connect a global community of agricultural practitioners:

- ❖ Dgroups is **free of charge for end-users**
- ❖ Dgroups is **easy to use** - it doesn't require elaborated IT literacy to use, which makes it inclusive
- ❖ Dgroups is **email based** - it doesn't require strong bandwidth and users don't need to remember their login and password to participate, as once signed up all messages go directly into their email inbox
- ❖ Dgroups is **easy to moderate** - this makes it light for administrators, who can then focus on content and community facilitation.

"The Dgroups is the **most dynamic part of the FFS platform** and it keeps growing in members and contributions, resulting in a very positive experience for both community administrators and members." Suzanne Phillips, Farmer Field School Team – FAO Plant Production and Protection Division.

This case study was prepared by Pier Andrea Pirani (Euforic Services), based on a presentation by Suzanne Phillips (Farmer Field School Team – FAO Plant Production and Protection Division) during a FAO-Dgroups webinar on 22 March 2018. [See this case study in a 6-minute video presentation.](#)

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