

11. Strengthening Urban Producer Organizations

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The chapter presents the process and results from a project implemented in Accra by the Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF) Foundation to strengthen farmers' organizations for innovative irrigated vegetable farming and marketing. One hundred urban farmers were organized into eight producer groups and trained on technical and organizational innovations along the vegetable value chain towards improved yield and income. Training was delivered through Urban Producer Field Schools (UPFS) on topics ranging from integrated plant production and protection principles, food safety and risk-minimization in wastewater use for irrigation to value addition for marketing. Farmers were also engaged in organized marketing, targeting niche markets.

11.1 Farmers' Production and Organizational Development

In contrast to rural farming, urban farmer organizations in Ghana are less common and also less recognized by authorities. Probably as it is seen as a temporary land-use form urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) is neither valued for its multiple benefits nor accepted as formal urban land use and thus remains largely informal. The challenges urban farmers face (see previous chapter) include restrictive or prohibitive institutional policies and limited support, while internally farmer groups face a higher diversity of members, often including part-time or transient farmers which is not typical in rural areas. These farmers are therefore more difficult to organize and urban producers' organizations often remain loosely organized groups and informal networks. The formal producers' organizations are struggling with management and performance, for example Ghana's National Association of Farmers and Fishermen (GNAFF).

Urban producers have limited support and access to advice, training, credit and other resources. Without organizing themselves, low-income producers have little opportunity to improve their conditions. As individuals, they often lack access to production resources. Whilst they may find space to grow food for themselves and sometimes for sale, their options are severely limited while they act alone. Improving access to production factors, advice, training and so forth become achievable goals once urban producers become organized (FAO 2007). Next to improving their organization and production technologies, urban producers also need to enhance their income by engaging more directly in processing and marketing.

However, most projects and institutions working in micro-enterprise development and marketing are disconnected from the urban producers, often by mandate which focuses on 'rural' stakeholders.

11.2 Farmers' Indigenous Knowledge and Innovations

Farmers have been innovating for centuries. In certain instances, their curiosity, creativity and experimentation have served as foundations for modern agricultural science and engineering. Innovating in the agricultural value chain provides solutions for increasing agricultural productivity and can generate answers to reducing poverty and achieving development goals. Farmers' innovations, however, need to be stimulated and often need to be improved through participatory innovation development processes (Critchley 2007). However, participatory technology development with farmers is more difficult in the urban context due to the variable farming strategies, less organization, diverse personal backgrounds and ongoing commitment to other jobs. The technical knowledge and skills of urban producers may thus be restricted or of less value (Prain and de Zeeuw 2007). However, urban producers may have other factors that are highly relevant for the innovation process such as a high degree of flexibility, mobility and resilience to cope with the risk of eviction. Against this background, it is understandable that good results have been achieved with approaches like Farmers Field Schools (FFS) that combine elements of training with experiential learning and experimentation. This chapter discusses the example of Accra as part of the global RUAF 'From Seed to Table' program (Amerasinghe et al. 2013) which used, among others, the FFS approach to facilitate innovations in the production systems of farmers, to improve their marketing and also to develop the organizational capacities of urban farmer groups.

11.3 From Seed to Table (FStT) Program

The Conceptual Framework

Based on thorough situational analyses of urban farming in 20 selected pilot cities worldwide a number of priorities for intervention and support were determined and these formed the focus of RUAF activities in pilot cities, like Accra, from 2009 to 2010. The main intervention areas for UPA development in Accra were capacity development in and support for:

- Strengthening of urban farmer groups and the networking between them;
- Participatory technology development, like in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) to enhance the productivity and sustainability of urban farming systems;
- Development of the marketing strategies for urban farmers and their organizations;
- Micro-enterprise development related to processing and packaging of UPA produce;
- Financing of urban farming activities.

The main aim of the FStT innovation project was to enhance the capacities of urban producers vis-à-vis farming system innovation in the context of a stronger market chain. Secondary goals were to enhance the benefits that producers receive from their agricultural activities, as well as to improve the sustainability of their farming systems. The main components of the FStT innovation project were:

- Technical changes in the farmers’ production and marketing systems;
- Strengthening of farmer group organization;
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation as well as systematization of lessons learned.

The technical changes were delivered through the Urban Producers’ Field School (UPFS) concept (Figure 11.1).

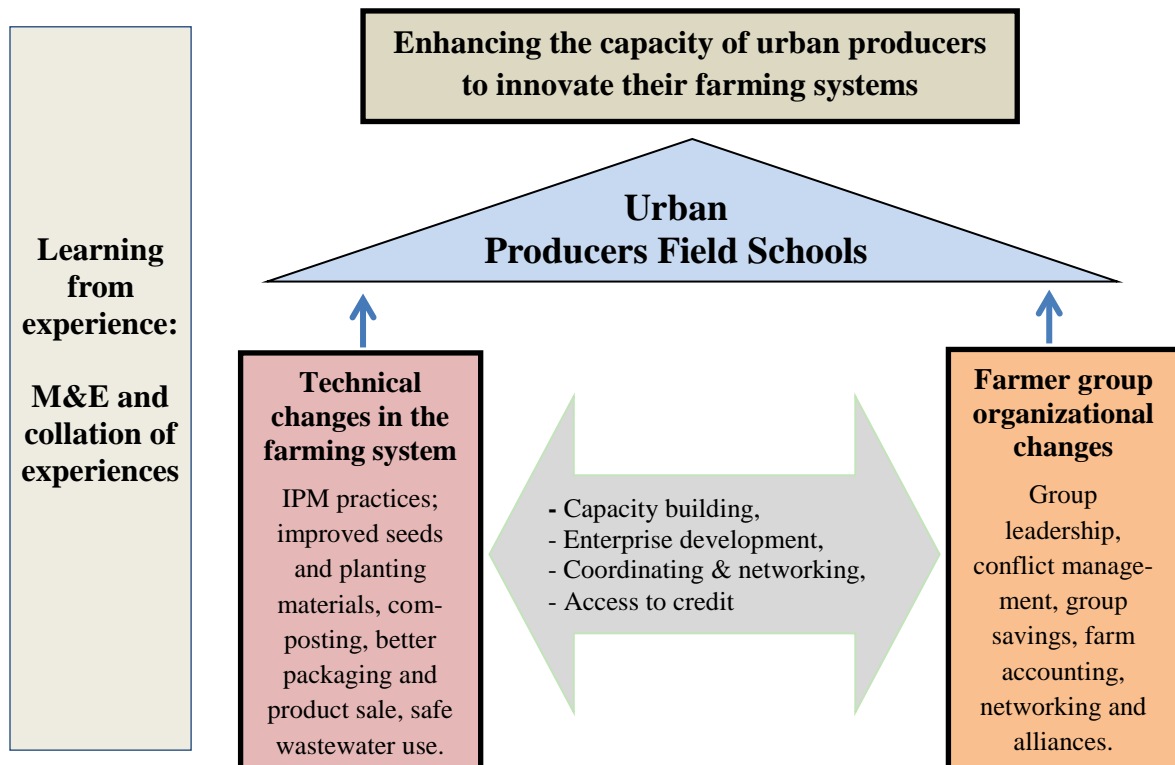


FIGURE 11.1. Main components of the UPFS concept.

The RUAF FStT Methodological Approach

The FStT approach consisted of three main steps: diagnosis and local context analysis; the action planning stage; and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stage (Figure 11.2).

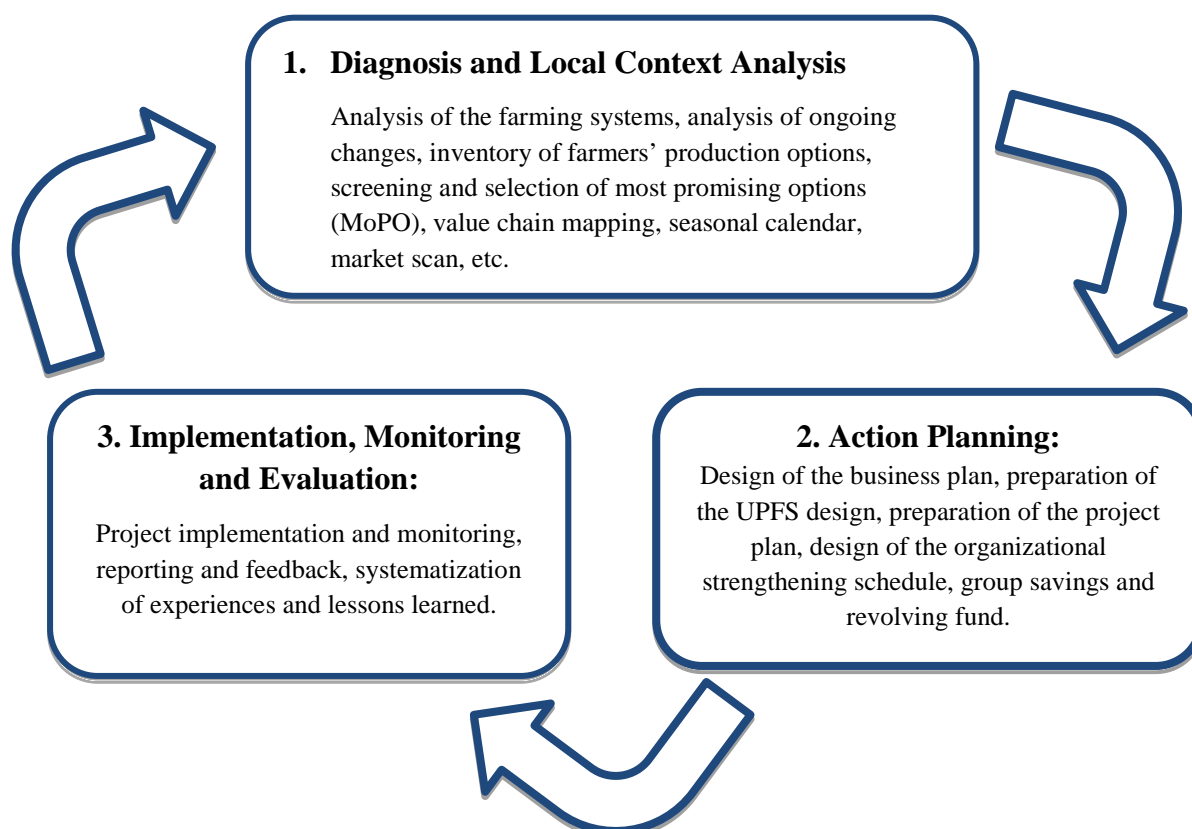


FIGURE 11.2. RUAF FStT methodological approach.

Diagnosis and local context analysis: Sample farmers from each of the subgroups, as well as key informants from different organizations and professional backgrounds related to UPA were interviewed to collect information on the farming systems and to document the major ongoing changes due to urbanization. Focus group discussions (FGD) with farmers and interviews with key informants were used. Secondary data were also reviewed and analyzed. A better perspective of the ongoing changes in urban farming due to urbanization in the target cities was thus obtained.

In the case of Accra, an inventory of farmers' production systems and technologies was conducted with about 30 farmers covering 11 crops (sweet pepper, cabbage, lettuce, spring

onions, carrots, cauliflower, white radish, spinach, mint, beat root, Chinese cabbage) using FGD. An inventory of potential innovations in these farming systems was obtained through interviews with subject-matter specialists. A market scan was conducted on the selected crops in both local/domestic markets and with restaurants/institutional cafeterias. A prescreening of crops with innovation potential was done covering criteria like innovation affordability and acceptability, ease of technology use, possible economic benefits, number of beneficiaries and availability of support services and land for production. Through this process, the 11 crops identified in Accra were reduced to five. Each of the selected five vegetables was then analyzed in detail for possible value chain improvements.

A final screening and selection of the MoPO was conducted with the farmer groups. Lettuce was selected by the exotic vegetable farmers in Accra and amaranth by those more interested in indigenous vegetables. For the selected crops more detailed information on market demand, pricing and distribution was collected. The value chains of the selected crops were mapped to identify strengths and weaknesses as well as possible market chain improvements. A seasonal calendar for each crop was developed with the farmer groups to have a better understanding of the production cycle of each crop and for planning the innovation project with the farmers.

The technical and organizational innovations in the product value chain of the MoPO were proposed and discussed with the various farmer groups for their final approval and commitment. Criteria for participating in the FStT innovation project were developed and discussed with the farmers. Agreements were reached on the next steps and willing and committed farmers were registered for participation in project activities. A total of 100 farmers were registered in Accra. As part of the process, an analysis of the farmer groups was conducted to identify the organizational issues for both the MoPO and the functioning of the groups. Training needs were identified for technical and organizational changes. Training areas included developing the group norms and constitution of the eight subgroups, facilitating the formal registration of the subgroups with the recognized government institution (e.g. the Department of Cooperatives in Accra for training the farmer groups on group processes [leadership and management skills, team building, group dynamics, conflict management]), resource management (accounting, financial management/group savings and revolving fund) and training the farmer leaders on networking and collaboration strategies.

Action planning stage: Information obtained during the diagnosis phase was used as the basis for defining concrete intervention areas for value-chain improvement of the selected crops. The technical innovations to be introduced along the value chain of the two crops became the core of the UPFS. Business plans for the production and marketing of lettuce and amaranth were developed with the farmer groups. The business plans detailed the steps to be followed in the organization of the production and marketing of the selected crops from seed to market, including economic analysis (costs/benefits), operational plans (activities to develop the value chain of the selected crops, formulation of the expected results and time frame), financing plans (budget, funding) and marketing plans (harvesting, packaging, distribution and sale). Schemes for the implementation of the business plans were also developed, comprising main objectives, activities to be undertaken, tasks and responsibilities, time schedules, budget, funding sources and a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan.

Implementation, monitoring and evaluation stage: Project implementation, monitoring and evaluation was done through a local team comprising representatives from the farmer groups, a local NGO [Enterprise Works] in Accra) and representatives from the local Ministry of Agriculture. Capacity development of the farmers' groups was conducted through the UPFS and direct training was based on the UPFS and group strengthening schedules. Specific monitoring indicators and the M&E framework of the project were developed for both outcomes and impact monitoring.

The local teams had monthly meetings to plan, report and receive feedback. Such meetings were also used to review the work plans and make adaptations where necessary. Lessons learned and experiences were documented and analyzed. Concomitantly, various funding mechanisms to finance farming and to sustain its development were explored through a credit study in Accra (see chapter 12). The initiative was to enhance the direct involvement of credit organizations to increase awareness and commitment to urban farmers' needs, and for multi-stakeholder fora through which principles of shared and participatory budgeting could be applied (among farmers' organizations, local governments, civil society groups and the private sector).

11.4. Results and Outcomes

Capacity development: The technical capacities of local team members, comprising farmer representatives and participants from the local NGO and Ministry of Agriculture in Accra, have been built in value-chain development as well as for adult learning and reflective

learning. They have also been trained on participatory data collection and analysis methods, participatory technology development principles, market analysis and work planning. Similarly, the 100 farmers in the city have been trained on technical innovations such as composting, seedbed and vegetable nursery management, sand-seed mixture to obtain uniform plant stands, IPM principles using *Azadirachta indica* (neem) extracts for example, on-farm risk minimization where the irrigation water is of questionable quality, alternative harvesting methods and techniques, and produce packaging.

The monitoring showed that farmers started experimenting with some of the innovations within their production and marketing activities, for instance seed drilling, use of compost, on-farm risk minimization techniques for polluted water use, IPM and so forth.

Farmer group organizational development: Before project inception, all farmer groups in Accra were loosely organized, if at all. The project helped them to change this, for example, by establishing functional executives and formal structures in terms of group regulations and a cooperative incorporation certificate from the Department of Cooperatives, which provides legal status (Figure 11.3). The group executives received training in group leadership and management, conflict management and team building.



FIGURE 11.3. Farmer group executives from the Plant Pool receive their cooperative group regulations and registration certificate from the Accra Metro Cooperative officer (left) (photos: IWMI).

Improved production infrastructure and marketing: As a result of the improvement in the internal organization of the groups in Accra, entrepreneurial abilities and awareness of market-oriented approaches have been enhanced. This, in combination with the enhancement of their technical capabilities, has led to the exploration of niche markets for their produce. The value proposition of the farmers was based on produce safety (via wells or piped water

for irrigation), safe on-farm washing and the use of a packaging shed for protecting produce against sunlight and flooding. The project piloted the establishment of two dedicated sales kiosks and a packaging shed on one farm (Figure 11.4) but did not have the capacity to assess and support their institutional sustainability (ownership, location strength, etc.) to maintain their function over time.



FIGURE 11.4. Sale kiosk at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra (left) and a crop cleaning and packaging shed at the Plant Pool site, Dzorwulu, Accra (right) (photos: IWMI)

11.5 Lessons Learned and Conclusions

Ensuring the sustainable intensification of urban agriculture means converting to best practices from IPM to safe irrigation. Farmer Field Schools offer a well-established approach for the introduction of innovations. The most promising innovations included micro-enterprise development and helping farmers with direct marketing of their produce (farm sales, farmers’/producers’ kiosks, direct sales to shops, restaurants and supermarkets).

The first step required to strengthen urban producer groups is to develop concrete and specific visions and objectives for the groups that should be reviewed periodically. Joining forces with other groups or organizations with similar objectives to establish strategic alliances or umbrella associations helped to improve group ability to influence decision making and access resources. Major support was however needed to strengthen group formation and cohesion, leadership and conflict management capacities. External facilitation has to be initiated to deal with power struggles, mistrust and conflicting interests within the producer groups, making training of trainers crucial. Irrespective of this, smallholder urban farmers need to be organized or they will lose out to larger commercial farmers, especially in

accessing high-value markets. Similarly, in order to access and compete in the high-value markets, producer organizations should add value and be innovative in their production and marketing strategies.

Some key lessons were:

Social mobilization potentials: Trust building among the groups is important. Facilitating structures that build trust, inculcate common group values and a shared vision, goals and rules can improve the social capital of the groups. Farmers' capacity to organize and mobilize for social events (marriages, bereavements, hospitalization, etc.) offers important opportunities for team building. Harnessing such potential for farm activities has the potential to improve the performance of the groups tremendously.

Strategic networks and alliances: The farmers' capacity to negotiate and influence policies and attract strategic attention can be improved by forming intra-group alliances and linkages with strategic partners. These alliances could be forged with other agricultural formal and informal associations to form an 'umbrella organization'. In this way they can gain more political weight and recognition to participate in decision making and policy formulation. Through project intervention the three groups supported in Accra started to collaborate and decided to implement joint actions. This initiative could be taken up with other producer groups like the La Farmers Association, Marine Drive Vegetable Farmers and the Korle-Bu Vegetable Group to form a bigger alliance.

Stakeholder policy platforms: The multi-stakeholder platforms established earlier through the RUAFA 'Cities Farming for the Future' program (Amerasinghe et al. 2013) appeared to be very instrumental for strengthening the urban producer groups. The farmer groups are members of these platforms which allowed them to interact with governmental, nongovernmental and private sector stakeholders for information sharing on best practices, market information, food safety and regulations. One of the outcomes of this dialogue was the piloting of a sales kiosk directly at the 'Ministries' compound in central Accra.