

## Pastoralist Field Schools: discovery based learning in practice

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A Pastoralist Field School (PFS) can be described as a 'school without walls', where groups of pastoralists can learn through observation and experimentation within their own context. Through experiential and participatory learning techniques participants are empowered rather than advised what to do.

The purpose of the PFS is to improve the decision-making capacity of its participants, and their wider communities, and to stimulate local innovation. It allows pastoralists to improve their management skills and become experts in their own resource use practices. A PFS usually comprises a group of about 30 pastoralists (including elders, men, women and youths) who meet regularly over a defined period of time, often between 1-2 years. The group make observations that relate to their daily lives, particularly concerning their livestock production system and the rangeland ecosystem. A trained PFS facilitator, usually from or living in the community, will guide the learning process.



*PFS participants learn through practical activities involving reflection and discussion among peers*

traditional knowledge and practices. And it is this new knowledge and innovation that can best be realized through participatory learning approaches, such as PFS.

The PFS approach, in contrast to most conventional extension approaches, strengthens the capacity of local communities to analyse their livelihood systems, to identify their main constraints, and to test possible solutions. By merging their own traditional knowledge with external information, pastoralists can identify and adopt the most suitable practices and technologies to their livelihood system and needs—to become more productive, profitable and more responsive to changing conditions.

### The origin and evolution of PFS

The PFS approach is an adaptation of the Farmer Field School (FFS) approach that was developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in South East Asia in 1989. The FFS were a means of empowering farmers to develop their own solutions to problems that research and extension could not provide answers for. Around 1995 the FFS approach was first applied in Eastern Africa, originally in more high potential agricultural areas. In 2006 ILRI, together with VSF-Belgium, embarked on adapting the FFS approach to a pastoralist context in Northern Kenya. Numerous NGOs and other actors across Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia have now taken up the PFS concept.

### Why PFS is different

Research and extension institutions have traditionally used capacity building of rural communities as the mechanism for transferring technologies to land and resource users. However this approach has often proved inadequate in complex situations, where community members need to adjust their practices frequently to the changing conditions. Technology packages, delivered in a 'top-down' manner, have often been too complex, too expensive or poorly adapted to the real needs of people. The pastoralist system of livestock production is complex, based on rich experience and culture that is passed down from one generation to the next. New developments—such as climate change or emerging diseases—mean that pastoralists have to supplement their

### The learning process

PFS activities are guided by some key principles and core activities. Learning is by doing i.e. through practical activities and exercises. The herd and the landscape are the main learning grounds—around which all PFS activities are organised. Pastoralists learn directly from what they observe, collect and experience in their surroundings—instead of through textbooks, pictures or other extension materials. The learning is problem based. Participants apply different analytical methods to help them identify and solve problems they encounter in their daily life and discovery-based learning tools trigger a spirit of curiosity and innovation. The participants, not the facilitator, decide what is relevant to them and what they want the PFS to address. Trained facilitators guide the learning process, by mentoring and supporting the participants to take responsibility for their own learning.

All Pastoral Field Schools follow the same systematic action learning process, where the key steps are observation, reflection, group discussion, analysis, decision-making and action planning. One of the core activities of the PFS is to establish and monitor comparative experiments. The PFS group provides animals and other resources to use for these experiments. These animals form the group's study herd, on which different (but not risky) treatments are tried out, observed over time and eventually evaluated. Examples of trials might be the effects of supplementary feeding, traditional

versus veterinary recommended treatments of diseases, different methods of pasture management etc. Changing environmental conditions and factors affecting the study herd—such as disease outbreaks—form so called special topics to be addressed each week during the PFS session. Tools such as illustrations, practical demonstrations and real-life exhibits are used as learning aids, especially adapted for illiterate group members.

Pastoral-ecosystem analysis (PESA) is a cornerstone of the PFS approach. It involves making field observations, data collection and analysis, and finally coming up with recommendations on the herd-livelihood system. Through regular exercises PESA helps establish the interaction between the herd, the landscape and other living and non-living factors. Data are collected based on key observed factors to help put in place a process for decision-making. The analysis is performed in sub-groups to enhance participatory learning.

Each sub-group presents their observations and recommendations in plenary sessions for collective decision-making on management actions. The exercise—apart from enhancing observation, analytical and recording skills—also generates discussion among members and stimulates collective decision-making. Group dynamic exercises are used to create a pleasant learning environment, facilitate learning and create space to reflect and share. They also enhance capacity building in communication, problem solving and leadership skills. In addition, group dynamics, such as drama and song, can be an effective way to deal with sensitive topics such as domestic violence, alcoholism etc.

**The evidence of impact**

Though PFS is a young concept, some evidence of impact is starting to emerge from the initial sites in Northern Kenya and Uganda. PFS participants have taken up new and improved practices—especially related to animal health, pasture management and production—and this has contributed to

healthier herds and increased milk and meat production. A strong shift has been seen from a previous mindset of subsistence, to a more business-oriented attitude. Some PFS groups have gained substantial income, through for example, fodder production and sale, animal fattening etc. An understanding of the need for planning and the mitigation of disaster have also taken root, in which many groups have diversified their livelihood sources and taken up, for example, crop production or poultry keeping as complimentary activities to their livestock keeping.

PFS has also triggered a range of empowerment related outcomes. Participants have become more prepared to deal with their challenges and obstacles, using critical thinking and collective action, as expressed through local networks, savings and social support schemes, for example. Socially the approach has had dramatic impact on local gender relations, with men and women interacting with each other in a more equal and respectful manner. Trying out new ideas collectively has also supported a break through on certain practices associated with taboos and traditional beliefs, again often associated with gender roles.

**Lessons learnt and ways forward**

PFS has proven itself to be an innovative and successful means of supporting the transition from emergency and relief to more longer term development. In order to achieve its potential impact however the approach has a number of requirements that are not always easy to meet. Ensuring there are well trained and competent facilitators at local level is key to the quality of PFS activities, and this requires considerably more investments in human capacity than most actors are used to in regular capacity building efforts. It is also a challenge to find suitable facilitators locally. Community Animal Health Workers have been shown to be of great value as PFS facilitators, if trained in the approach, but they are not available everywhere. Implementing agents have to internalise a participatory spirit for a more longer term demand-driven service delivery, which is a shift from the current quick relief mode of operation common among pastoral actors.

Ensuring experimentation and innovation in PFS groups has also been a challenge, and even more so when trying new management options on a broader herd or landscape level. Close linkages between the PFS group and the community at large has proven crucial in this regard and to ensure the wider impact of the PFS intervention. In this context PFS is highly complementary to community mobilisation approaches such as CMDRR. Savings and credit mechanisms (such as VSLA and VICOPA) also add much value to PFS and enhance sustainability.

Good practice principles on PFS are available at: [http://www.disasterriskreduction.net/projects-and-activities/detail/?dyna\\_fef\[uid\]=191](http://www.disasterriskreduction.net/projects-and-activities/detail/?dyna_fef[uid]=191)

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The PESA cycle; observation, sub-group analysis, group presentations and final plenary decision-making