

Shashe Agro-ecology School for Farmer-to-farmer Training, Zimbabwe



Above: Figure 1: The school administration and conferencing center



Figure 2: Example of the center for excellence



Figure 3: Members of the school

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Introduction

In 2000, twelve smallholder farming families, which had gathered extensive experience on agroecological methods by working closely with a grassroots organization called the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmental Conservationists (AZTREC), organized themselves into a group. They initiated a project to set up a school for farmer-to-farmer training in Zimbabwe which would showcase agroecology as an effective way to improve the living standards of smallholder farmers. The project sought to address the following problems: agricultural extension service delivery gaps, household food insecurity and poor nutrition, low household income, climate change and land degradation.

The Shashe Agro-Ecology School is a group that is a member of Shashe Smallholder Farmer Organization, located in the Shashe block of farms in Ward 6 of the Masvingo Rural District Council. Eight smallholder farmer organizations (SFOs) have joined hands with the Shashe smallholder farmers and are presently involved in the school project which is still operational. Each SFO has an average of 150 family units which are organized into an average of six groups. The smallholder farmers' organizations are an affiliate of the Central Cluster of the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers Forum (ZIMSOFF). The families believe that true development must come from within what they call their "cosmivision", i.e., building on their own local resources and enhancing the in-situ development of their local spiritual and technological knowledge systems.



Figure 4: Shashe SFO women assembly members meeting

Besides further strengthening and upscaling the agro-ecological efforts of smallholder organic farmers in Zimbabwe, the school seeks to increase their capacity in advocating for a national policy agenda that supports local farmer-led solutions in agriculture. By strengthening the institutional capacities and membership affiliation of smallholder farmer organizations, the project hopes to reinforce the national bottom-up struggle for the recognition of agro-ecological practices to ensure food sovereignty and long term environmental sustainability in the country.

Good Agro-ecological Principles and Practices

Various good agroecological practices have been developed and taught by the school such as local and traditional seed multiplication, water harvesting, organic soil fertilization, integrated crop and livestock management, local and appropriate technology utilization for value addition, and community natural resources conservation. More importantly, several fundamental principles were found to have contributed to the success of the project thus far. These principles and the lessons learnt from putting them into practice are shared below.

- **Starting slow and small.** This principle allows for continuous evaluation, reflection and the rectification of errors. It diminishes the magnitude of risks. It also enables a high level of farmer engagement while giving the farmers time to manage their other work on the farm.
- **Limiting the introduction of technologies.** It is not necessary to introduce many new techniques at one time to farmers. It is more efficient to let them gain competence in new innovations one by one, then stabilize these, and integrate them into the whole farming system little by little. We began by introducing those techniques that had low initial investment needs, focusing first on what most smallholder farmers were doing, but which targeted their biggest production problems. In this way, new techniques were easier to implement and achieved quicker results.
- **Attaining quick and recognizable success.** Enthusiasm generates new ideas while success is the most effective motivator. Recognizing the advances made by the farmers from day by day was the 'moral engine' which drove the growth of the school.



Figure 5: Local farmers on a working party to dig kraal manure



Figure 6: ZIMSOFF Chair and local women sharing

"The word may convince, but examples prevail."



Figure 7: Center of excellence local maize demonstration plot



Figure 8: Local seed maize varieties

- **Experiment on a small scale.** Experimentation is nothing more than just testing, sharing, adapting, and adopting new techniques or solutions, based on need. By learning to experiment, the farmer becomes an active innovator on his/her farm, a rich and permanent laboratory. The farmer can now test which technologies will work and will not work on the farm. This shields him/her from technological "one size fits all" packages that often do not work.
- **Develop a multiplier effect.** Sharing information among farmers about results and lessons learned is the best way to upscale this new production system which brings positive environmental and economic impacts. In this way, farmers who share their experiences become promoters, skilled in both production and communication. Teaching is the best way to learn a subject in depth, and much of this teaching lies in creating a living example, and communicating farmer to farmer.

Positive Outcomes

The key successful outcomes achieved by the project include the following:

- Increased awareness of agro-ecology and food sovereignty among smallholder farmers in the vicinity of the school.
- The rural women and youth, who constitute the majority of the population in the project environment, have been exposed to information and farmer exchanges on good practices are now able to put some of the lessons learnt into practice. Their social cohesion has improved as demonstrated by collective action on issues that concern their livelihoods.
- Nutritionally improved diets and increased food production among participating smallholder farming families.
- Increased number of seed varieties per household.
- Increased number of participating farmers from one group to eight smallholder farmer organizations.
- Increased visibility and participation of farmers in decision-making processes.
- Improved collaboration between the smallholder farmers and service-provider organisations.
- Improved asset base for the school and participating smallholder farmers.
- Improved agro-ecological land use design within the school premises which reduces soil erosion.

Challenges

The greatest resource needed by the project was the participation of all the farmer household heads from project design to implementation stage, in decision-making, agro-ecological practices, and their contribution towards sustainable development. Financial resources had to be found for meetings, workshops and infrastructure development of the administration and coordination centre and other centres of excellence. In addition, the school is in a very dry area receiving an average of 400 mm or less of rainfall per year. Dryland agriculture has failed on occasion due to drought.

Conventional agriculture is still the dominant mode of food production in the country. The government is pushing for an industrial agricultural approach, which over the years has vested more and more power and profit into the hands of a few corporations. The Government of Zimbabwe has committed to implementing the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Program (CAADP), which threatens the food sovereignty of local farming communities. There is still a need to advocate for smallholder farmers' seed rights, women and youth empowerment, and the mainstreaming of agro-ecology as the best adaptation and mitigation response for farmers to climate change.

Value of the Project

The leaders of this project say that the most successful factor for promoting food sovereignty in Africa is a community-facilitated farmer-to-farmer framework. The horizontal communication process leads to sharing and learning between innovators (those who have developed local solutions to common problems) and their peers. Farmers are more likely to believe and emulate a fellow farmer who has been successful in trying out a new approach on his/her own farm than to take the word of say, an agronomist from the city. This is more so when they can visit the farm and see with their own eyes the difficulties faced, the steps taken and the results achieved. Many answers lie in farmers' fields and knowledge. The Shashe Agro-Ecology School is showing the benefits of a system where farmers play a key role in finding their own solutions by learning from, working with and sharing experiences with one another.



Figure 9: Local seed sorghum demonstration plot



Figure 10: Local market of organic vegetables