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Good Practice Note

Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment Project (SHEP) for Agroecology

Introduction

The Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment Project (SHEP) is a market-oriented extension approach that aims to improve farmers livelihoods. The approach is anchored on two pillars of "farming as a business" and "empowering and motivating farmers". SHEP underscores the importance of motivation in supporting positive actions towards change. SHEP achieves motivation and empowerment by facilitating farmers autonomy, relatedness and competence. Farmers autonomy ensures that farmers feel they are in control of farming processes and are in charge. This way they are able to keen observe, practice, reflect and continuously improve on their practices to achieve better returns. Besides, farmers get to interact with market stakeholders and jointly address market access challenges relating to poor networks and lack of market information which increases transaction costs. Through relationship buildings actors are able to jointly develop market access strategies geared towards addressing specific market needs. Therefore, farmers do not produce blindly but instead produce targeting a specific market and its needs. To help farmers meet demand for specific markets, SHEP extension agents adopt participatory on-farm trainings to build technical and managerial skills for farmers. These processes ensures that farmer is continually motivated, is acquiring skills and is keen to improve their farming practices for better livelihoods. Success of SHEP in addressing farmer needs in anchored on key success factors which are cohesive farmer groups, commitment from stakeholders and data for decision making. This practice note describe use of SHEP for promotion of agroecology based on experiences of the Global Programme "Soil Protection and Rehabilitation for Food Security (ProSoil)" in Kenya.

Principles and philosophy of SHE for promotion of agroecology

- **Fostering knowledge co-creation:** Appreciating farmers in agricultural knowledge co-creation and not treating farmers as recipients of extension messages. Besides, emphasis on market, stakeholders interactions bring out useful insights and builds knowledge on market access.

- **Interlinkage between motivation and knowledge development:** Motivation and knowledge influence each other. When farmers are motivated to take action, they seek knowledge. Further, as they acquire knowledge and observe results, they are determined to take further action to realize change.
- **Gender mainstreaming:** SHEP emphasizes the importance of both male and females in agricultural production. The approach adopts gender mainstreaming strategies including joint decision making, reviewed gender roles and providing equal opportunities for both men and women. Therefore, SHEP is instrumental in addressing gender barriers to uptake of agricultural practices and knowledge acquisitions and ultimately agricultural development.
- **Market orientation:** SHEP starts with the market and ends with the market. SHEP approach is anchored on addressing market barriers. Market barriers are inherent in most developing countries production systems which affects to overall outcome of agriculture in improving livelihoods of the farming communities. By addressing market barriers farmers are able to earn income from agriculture to meet their livelihood needs.
- **Competence development:** SHEP supports the psychological needs for autonomy of growers to make informed and well-thought-out choices through technical and managerial skills development. Besides technical skills SHEP empower farmers with soft skills.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** SHEP can be adapted to any context and any crop, this is attributed to the encompassing nature of principles guiding SHEP implementation.

Application of SHEP extension approach to promote agroecology

The adaptability and flexibility of SHEP approach implies that it can be effectively applied to integrate agroecology principles in any farming context. Agroecology practices such as agroforestry, conservation tillage, sustainable land management, integrated pest and disease management practices, soil and water conservation, improved varieties, crop-diversification, crop-livestock integration, use of organic manure, can be easily integrated within different farming contexts for different agricultural value chains. Therefore, the important thing is determining which practices are suitable for which agricultural context and value chain. Based on this information the SHEP extension agent then offer agroecology extension services customized to farmers needs. Since SHEP is focused on farmer motivation and autonomy, it is imperative that SHEP extension agents jointly with farmers and other stakeholders enumerate, outline benefits and create awareness on the multiple benefits of agroecology. These benefits then act as impetus for uptake of the practices among farmer communities. Also, by prioritizing market access SHEP effectively ensures that markets identified understand the benefits of agroecology and align to agroecology principles and hence demand farm produce through agroecology principles. This is critical so that as farmers integrate agroecology practices into their farms, they are assured of markets that appreciate agroecology practices and therefore demand such produce. Moreover, by targeting consumers with favourable perception towards agroecologically produced farm produce, farmers could benefit through price incentives

as the case may be. Nonetheless, in overall, the benefits of agroecology in general provide enough motivation to foster uptake.

Steps for implementing SHEP extension approach for promotion of agroecology

Step 1 - Sensitization workshop: The extension provider organizes a workshop during which SHEP and agroecology visions are presented and elaborated on for shared vision in application of SHEP principles for promotion of agroecology.

Step 2 – Participatory baseline survey: The extension officer convenes the farmers and explain the purpose of the baseline survey which is to determine the current farm-based and produce marketing practices. The extension provider supports farmers to fill the baseline survey tool. Once farmers complete the tools, the farmers hold discussions to discuss the results of the baseline survey by asking key questions based on shared vision of application of SHEP pillars for promotion of agroecology.

Step 3 – Business linkage forum (FABLIST): The SHEP facilitator organizes a forum with market actors to identify business opportunities and create linkages with the actors. During this stage, the farmers supported by extension agent should seek to identify unique markets that can offer incentivized prices for agroecologically produced food. These requires deliberate efforts to identify most relevant market actors in terms of input agro-dealers and traders who have aligned their practices to agroecology.

Step 4 – Market survey: The purpose of the market survey is to expose farmers to how markets work and consumer needs. It is also a channel through which farmers get to negotiate with identified traders for their produce. In the process farmers acquire business negotiation skills. Farmer representatives are selected and trained on how to conduct market survey. Jointly with the extension provider they undertake an actual market survey in a local market.

Step 5 – Crop selection: After the survey, the farmer representatives share their feedback with the other farmers. During the sharing process, farmers jointly identify the specific markets they prefer to target and prioritize the crops and agroecology practices that align with the selected crops and markets. The crop and agroecology practices prioritized should be informed by the market survey.

Step 6 – Crop calendar making: After the selection of the crop, farmers need to synchronize their production and marketing activities during the entire production season and possibly the year. Therefore, they develop a production calendar highlighting the time for the different production practices for the priority crops. The calendar should be such that farmers take advantage of market shortages of the produce supply so as to fetch better prices. Further, farmers should organize their product such that they can consistently supply the demanded volumes in the right quality so as to sustain the market.

Step 7 – Infield trainings: The extension provider disseminates skills and knowledge that is need to produce the target crops in line with the market demands. The trainings are demand driven and should be aligned to farmers' needs. Therefore, the extension provider should first conduct capacity needs assessment to understand the farm based

practices and skills and knowledge gaps for production of the crop and implementation of agroecology practices. For each production practice the extension provider should identify important agroecology practices that need to be implemented. Based on the needs assessment, the extension provider jointly develops a training schedule with the farmers synchronized with the production stages. This is then implemented accordingly.

Step 8 - Follow-up and monitoring: The extension provider conducts follow-up visits to see how the farmers are implementing the practices. The provider offer supports where necessary.

The entire cycle should integrate agroecology principles as well as gender mainstreaming.

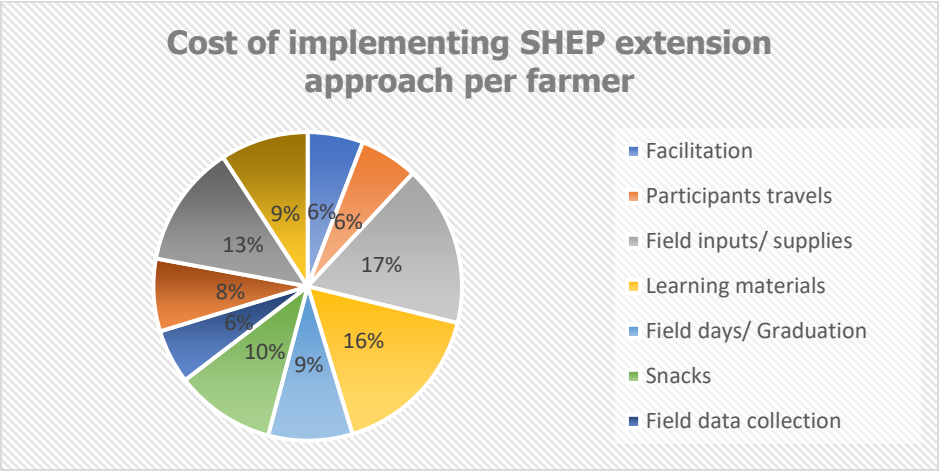
Resources needed to implement SHEP

SHEP is a cost effective approach that can be integrated within any extension system. It can be used by any extension agent as long as they understand the pillars of SHEP and are motivated and patient to progressively work with farmers to achieve the SHEP vision. To successfully implement SHEP under different crop contexts, the SHEP extension agent should posses the knowledge for the production of the different crops as well as have an understanding of the agroecology. This way, they are able to integrate agriculture with agroecology knowledge through SHEP for agroecology sensitive agriculture food systems.

SHEP approach utilizes available local resources and resources within farmers reach to deliver extension messages and transform farmers lives. Therefore, SHEP does not require massive infrastructural investments but mainly facilitation for extension workers to reach farmers as well as necessary training materials. It is estimated that the total cost to train a farmer for 1 training through SHEP is Kes. 414. Field inputs account for the high cost of 17% followed by learning materials.

The SHEP approach is anchored of the "software rural development" such that the extension approach is not dependent on infrastructural development to deliver extension. It is thus affordable under different extension contexts.

By fostering autonomy SHEP reduces farmers dependency on extension agents to take action. Therefore, farmers are empowered to generate resources for their own benefits.



Success Story: Transforming farming fortunes with SHEP extension approach in Rongai, Nakuru

Meet Mr. Z, a dedicated farmer from Rongai, Nakuru, whose journey with agriculture has undergone a remarkable transformation thanks to his participation in the SHEP extension approach. Before SHEP, Mr. Z and his fellow farmers at Kampii ya Moto faced numerous challenges, from struggling to find markets for their produce to grappling with unpredictable yields and pest infestations.

Mr. Z recalls the initial struggles vividly, "We were initially growing maize and beans, but this was quite a challenge. Even when we formed a group, to collectively decide on crops, market access remained a major hurdle. We incurred significant losses due to the lack of reliable buyers."

However, everything changed when SHEP entered the picture. The approach offered comprehensive training that addressed critical aspects of farming, including market dynamics, crop selection, pest management, and networking with stakeholders. Mr. Z recounts, "The training was a game-changer. It opened our eyes to the importance of market surveys and strategic crop selection. We learned not to grow crops randomly but to choose based on market demand and suitability to our environment."

Empowered with newfound knowledge and motivation, Mr. Z and his fellow farmers embarked on a journey of exploration. They conducted market surveys, engaged with potential buyers, and honed their crop selection strategies. Through collaborative discussions facilitated by SHEP extension officers, they identified peppers and French beans as a promising crop, resilient to adverse conditions and with steady demand.

Mr. Z reflects on the transformation, "Now, I apply these skills with confidence. I understand pest management techniques, and I have valuable contacts in the agricultural industry. SHEP linked us with seed and input suppliers, enabling us to access quality inputs at affordable prices through bulk purchases."

The impact of SHEP on Mr. Z 's farming enterprise extends beyond technical knowledge. His attitude towards farming has undergone a positive shift, and his income has seen a significant boost. "Previously, I incurred losses due to poor marketing. But now, I have a steady income that supports my family's needs, including school fees. The hassle of hawking produce is eliminated, as buyers now contact us directly."

Moreover, Mr. Z 's produce, such as French beans, enjoys a ready market, further enhancing his profitability. "When my produce is ready, buyers reach out, and we coordinate harvest schedules. This streamlined process has been invaluable to us."

In conclusion, John's success story exemplifies the transformative potential of initiatives like SHEP in empowering smallholder farmers and fostering sustainable agricultural practices. With continued support and collaboration, farmers like Mr. Z are not only securing their livelihoods but also contributing to the growth and resilience of local agricultural communities.