LEARNING APPROACHES FOR SUPPORTING SOIL HEALTH IN MALAWI

Frank Tchuwa (26th November 2019)

Introduction

- This talk focuses on different learning approaches applied in Malawi to support soil health innovations
 - Lead Farmer,
 - Farmer Filed School,
 - Farmer Research
 - Farmer Research Networks
- They share the following characteristics
 - Active involvement of farmers in the learning process
 - Farmers are given responsibilities to facilitate learning
 - Based on experiential learning
 - Learning by doing
 - Based on social learning
 - Learning from peers



Definitions

- Lead Farmer
 - An individual expert farmer who delivers extension services to other farmers in a community (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security [MoAFS], 2010).
- Farmer Field School (FFS)
 - a collection of farmers who get together to study a particular topic. Farmers drive the learning process while working with scientists to co-produce knowledge and solutions suitable to their local context (Nederlof and Odonkor, 2006; Braun *et al*, 2000).
- Farmer Research Team (FRT)
 - a group of farmers selected by the community to conduct research (Bezner-Kerr and Chirwa, 2004).
 - similar to the Local Agricultural Research Committees (LARC) promoted in Latin America (Ashby et al, 2000)
- Farmer Research Network (FRN)
 - an association of farmer groups, working together with research and development organizations to facilitate sharing of information and data access as well as access to technical, institutional and financial support (Nelson and Coe, 2014).

Timeline for application of learning approaches in Malawi



Analytical framework

Feature	Description
Purpose	Why the learning approach was applied
Topics	Content covered/delivered in the approach
Structure	Actors and their interaction
Scale	Geographical coverage

- 1-Purpose: Different purposes for applying learning approaches
 - Lead farmer and FFS
 - aimed at diffusing information and technologies to broader farming communities through farmer-managed demonstrations and school plots
 - FFS deviates from stipulated principles
 - FRT and FRN
 - aimed at supporting farmer-led experimentation to help farmers identify soil health innovations that suit their local contexts.



- 2-Topics: different scopes of topics
 - FRN-based intervention emphasised soil health
 - Lead farmers, FFS and FRT worked on a wide range of topics besides those related to the improvement of soil status
 - Different from original approaches
 - Emphasise production level topics
 - No marketing



- 3-Structure: Multiple actors involved but different power levels and modes of interaction at village level
 - E.g., Lead farmer, FFS, and FRT-based interventions had a vertical structure
 - model farmer (lead farmer, facilitator, and promoter) managing other farmers (e.g., follower farmers),
 - FRN had a horizontal structure with farmers in a research group at village level interacting as equals.
 - No farmer was regarded as responsible or owning a group of fellow farmers (as in the lead farmer).



- Scale: Differences in geographical coverage
 - LF scaled national wide
 - FFS, FRT, FRN scaled project areas.
- Approaches integrated in existing systems were widely scaled
 - But affected by inherent challenges associated with existing systems
- Approaches restricted to projects not widely scaled
 - Effective in project sites but lacking sustainbaility



Main lesson

- Learning approaches applied to support soil health in Malawi had distinct features related to
 - their purpose, the topics covered, structure, scaling.
- Approaches were different from each other and original principles because they were adapted to suit varying contexts.

Thank you!