

# Empowerment: Are we all talking about the same thing? Experiences from farmer field schools in Nepal

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## Abstract

Empowerment, as defined by Farmer Field School project designers, is not based on male and female farmers' real life practices, experiences and perceptions in Nepal. Initially in farmer field schools empowerment was considered to be achieved through improved access to resources, in particular farm production and knowledge, later the focus was on increased capabilities of farmers and strengthening their agency. The acquirement of resources alone is not empowerment; it is necessary to consider what people can do with these resources, i.e. the process or agency they exercise and specific historical, socio-cultural and political contexts. Development agencies, such as district agricultural offices or NGOs cannot empower farmers. Agencies involved in farmer field schools may be able to create conditions favourable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen.

**Keywords:** empowerment, rural development, farmer field schools, Nepal

## Introduction

The Farmer Field School (hereafter FFS) is an agricultural extension approach in Nepal in which farmers learn about agriculture, and gain skills to improve their farming. The programme started in 1998 and is still on-going. On a weekly basis a group of 25-30 farmers meet to discuss problems in their crop, and determine which agronomic practices to take to solve these problems. Discovery-learning in

a participatory way is a key element of the FFS. The entire process is facilitated by agricultural technicians from the government or local NGOs. One of the objectives of this programme is farmer's empowerment. FFSs are being considered vehicles for empowerment of farmers (a.o. Ooi, 1998; Pontius *et al.*, 2002; Bartlett 2004; Hounkonnou *et al.*, 2006). Empowerment is an often debated concept in the academic world. However in development practice it seems to be used without discussion, assuming that it is always a 'good' thing and having a positive impact on farmers.

In this paper I like to explore how FFS developers have defined empowerment, what farmers themselves and FFS facilitators or agricultural technicians actually understand by empowerment. Because farmers are not a homogenous group and because women and men have different roles in agriculture in Nepal, I will look at the views on empowerment from a gender perspective.

Empowerment is a word one does not come across in a Basic English course at High School. It is a word that I only became familiar with when I started working in international development. The word empowerment seems pretentious, and has a connotation of 'knowing what is best for others'; often considered as something that can be facilitated by outsiders (Mosedale, 2005). Power, as the key element of empowerment is mostly considered an asset, by practitioners, while in academic debates power is no longer seen as a thing but a relational concept. This change in academic discussions slowly permeated the empowerment discussion.

Bartlett (2004) compares empowerment with

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the taste of mango or the feeling of snow, suggesting that: Empowerment is something almost everybody will recognize, but almost nobody can describe. There is no universal agreement, the experience is contextual. The experience of empowerment is unique for each individual; it entails a very personal interpretation. This complexity and different interpretations has led to various conceptualisations of empowerment. Still empowerment is an interesting concept that is worth debating, and a concept that has for most a positive thought behind it: to gain strength, to get power, to become independent, and so on.

Because I relate 'empowerment' to the farmer field school, I use here the definition of the persons who designed the FFS programme. John Pontius *et al.* (2002) wrote in an overview of the history and status of FFS activities in Asia, that "empowerment reflects the developmental process whereby farmers become able to identify factors that inhibit their control over their lives and the means to resolve those issues". Experiential learning introduced in the FFS facilitates this process. FFS practitioners (a.o. Ooi, 1998; Pontius *et al.*, 2002; Bartlett, 2004) assume that this process of discovery or experiential learning continues after FFS and that farmers practice this in other crops than the one practice in the FFS, and even take it further in their daily existence, and solve problems in their community or social life.

This assumption made me curious: is empowerment in FFS project documents or the way project policy-makers define it actually in line with farmer's views (and implicitly reflect their needs)? How do the junior technicians (JTs) or FFS trainers see empowerment? In the same way as farmers they work with? How do farmers themselves actually define empowerment? And: is there a difference between men and women?

To get more insights in my study I used the model proposed by Naila Kabeer (1999) containing the following three elements: Resources (means) – agency (process) – achievements (outcome). In this formula, agency is the key concept, because it concerns the individual, the subject of empowerment. I see these elements linked, not in a linear way but in a cyclical movement, a continuous process, whereby the outcome influences the resources and so on. In many occasions a change in achievements (ends) brings about a further change in the means or resources of empowerment.

## Methodology

As empowerment very much reflects a personal experience (Bailey, 1992) I asked farmers themselves to define empowerment. In 2008 and 2009, I conducted semi-structured interviews (SSI) with 79 farmers (42 women and 37 men) who had not taken part in FFS (later referred to as non-FFS farmers). These farmers came from places where they did not have a Farmer Field School.

We used the same SSI key words in interviews with 74 farmers (54 women and 20 men) who had completed FFS training (later referred to as: FFS farmers). I compared these two groups to obtain an insight of the difference FFS participation makes in farmers' perceptions of empowerment. Additionally, I conducted five focus group discussions with respectively district agricultural office staff (twice), and with junior technicians (three times). I had two focus group discussions with NGO FFS trainers. They were all men, because the DADO and the local NGO office are dominated by men and there was no female staff present. They all had been involved in FFS. Furthermore I consulted FFS project documents.

## Results

Initially I expected that farmers would be unfamiliar with the word 'empowerment', since it is a word mostly used by well-educated Nepali. Also it sounds quite 'formal' in Sanskrit: sashaktikaran, too sophisticated in my view for farmers. But how wrong my assumption was, how prejudiced I proved to be when it appeared that 95% of the farmers interviewed were familiar with the word and had clear ideas about its meaning.

### *Perceptions of empowerment of women with/without FFS*

In lively interviews women explained their views on empowerment. In the table below (1) the data collected from women who had taken part in FFS and women who had never attended FFS are presented.

For women who never took part in FFS, empowerment meant mostly awareness or being self-reliant. With awareness they meant: becoming aware of gender inequalities. Some added: empowerment means women's development and self-reliance. Ten out of 42 women specifically emphasised

'women': "women awareness, women development, give women freedom". For them empowerment is a term associated in particular with women. They explained that women were often targeted for empowerment by NGOs but also by the governments' Women Development Office. Most of their activities were about raising awareness. Generally speak-

ing, women without FFS experience see empowerment as increasing individual strength, personal growing. This is line with Mosedale who states that "One needs first Power Within: self-esteem and self confidence. In a sense all power starts from here, such assets are necessary before anything else can be achieved (Mosedale, 2005:250).

**Table 1. Empowerment according women farmers with/without FFS.**

Empowerment is...	Non-FFS Women N=42	%	Empowerment is...	FFS women N=54	%
Awareness	17	41	Awareness through education	4	7
Self-reliant, strong	7	17	Self-confidence, ability	13	24
Women development	5	12	Speak	4	7
All in household in good condition	4	10	Take part in decision-making	2	4
Express own feeling	3	7	To involve in groups and development work	22	41
Free, can move from home	1	2	Give women strength, ability and freedom	2	4
Do not know	5	12	enable those who are unable	2	4
			Unite all	3	6
Total	42	100		54	100

Source: Research data 2008 and 2009.

Women who took part in FFS mainly considered self-confidence and involvement in work and group activities as empowerment. In Sindhupalchowk a group of FFS women said:

"We learnt to give an answer. We learnt to become less shy, we learnt to interact with JT/DADO" (Pipalgaun, interview, 2009).

Some women also mentioned an increase in mobility as empowerment:

"My husband encouraged me to participate in FFS, now I have no hesitation in attending training, tours and community meeting." (Kavre, female farmer, interview 2008)

Collective action is one aspect that has been encouraged by FFS participation through the weekly group sessions. Many women mentioned group work as their perception of empowerment. They said that

they achieved empowerment through group work or collective activities. They explained that through the weekly group sessions they felt increased social support and solidarity. Bartlett (2004) calls this the social capital route to empowerment. In a case study from Bangladesh, as in Nepal, social capital has contributed to empowerment rather than individual strength.

I expected that there would be a difference between older and younger women, that age would be a factor of difference regarding their vision on empowerment, but there was not much significant difference. Women from all ages talked about self-reliance and group activities. It must be noted though that women in the age 20-27 talked a bit more about decision-making than the older or younger women. A woman aged 22 said:

“Taking part in decision-making, and reaching decision-making position is empowerment”.

Women who said they do not know what to say about empowerment were all older than 40 and illiterate.

### *Perceptions of empowerment of men with/without FFS*

In interviews with men (37 without FFS and 22 with FFS experience) the answers were different from the women’s responses, as shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Ideas of men with/without FFS regarding empowerment.**

Empowerment is...	Non-FFS Men N=37	%	Empowerment is...	FFS men N=20	%
Group action for society, active in social work	20	54	Group action for society, active in social work	8	40
Self-development, Self-confidence and decision-making power	9	24	Self development	3	15
To use power and knowledge for positive change	4	11	Realise people’s needs; enable those who are unable	4	20
Awareness of development	2	5	Full awareness thru education	2	10
Do not know	2	5	Put balance between men and women	1	5
			Unite all	1	5
			Speak	1	5
Total	37	100%		20	100%

Source: Research data 2008 and 2009.

Men who did not take part in FFS considered empowerment mainly as being active in social work or as one said: ‘group action in society’, or even stronger: ‘to move the group with unity’. From the answers of men in rural areas it is clear that their idea of empowerment is far more focused on individual contributions to social development, on action outside the household. There is not much difference between men with or without FFS experience.

After FFS participation the women’s view on empowerment seems to shift in the direction of the men’s view on empowerment. Their focus on group work and social activities for development has increased. More than men, women look at personal development when they talk about empowerment: involvement in decision-making, becoming self-sufficient and able, becoming self-confident, and taking initiative.

When I asked farmers about how they experi-

enced empowerment as a result of FFS participation women mentioned the group work and the collective singing or speaking in front of others (18/54 = 33%); the actions they were not used to before. Through FFS they were breaking with their habitual shy behaviour in public. Women gained self-confidence, gained a voice in the weekly group sessions, as a result of the social space, the FFS team spirit and solidarity that was provided in the meetings. Indeed, this ‘social capital route’ of empowerment is rather different from the ‘human capital’ route that men follow in empowerment in Nepal (Bartlett, 2005). For almost all the women taking part in FFS it was their first time in participating in an agricultural training, which was previously considered a men’s business. Until recently agricultural technicians only approached men for agricultural training or demonstrations. Women also expressed that they now felt more appreciated as a partner in

farming. “My husband wants to know what I think about agriculture, since I have taken part in FFS. Also my in-laws respect my new skills and knowledge” (interview, Kavre, 2009).

For men speaking and group involvement was also important, but less explicit than for women. The men who talked about gaining confidence through presenting and singing were mostly younger than 20 years.

Most women mentioned that family support was a prerequisite for empowerment, while for men this does not seem an issue. These examples illustrate the level of empowerment that Kabeer (2001) calls the immediate or individual level, there is not much evidence of change related to intermediate or deeper levels, transformation of the institutions and ideologies that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (Batliwala, 1994; 1993). FFS affects daily life choices for women related to farming. FFS does not address strategic choices (Kabeer, 2001), but some participants indicate changes in their relationships which might be influenced by FFS participation.

In some cases FFS participants reported changes in relationships with their husband, in-laws or other community members. Some mentioned that they will treat their children differently than they themselves had experienced. These changes are illustrated by the following answers to my question whether FFS participation had made a change:

“In the time before FFS my father and mother in-law treated me as domestic helper these days that is changed and the relationship with my husband is good, he does not deny what I do.” (female farmer, Lalitpur 2008).

“My relation with my husband and father and mother in-law have changed; I get more freedom, I am free to participate in group and social activities.” (female farmer, Tanahun, 45)

If we apply the theory of Kabeer (2001) on these results regarding the linkage between resources, agency and outcome, it is evident that an increase in knowledge and social capital leads to an increase in agency and capabilities. Through participation in FFS men and particularly women expand their framework of information, knowledge and analysis. It enlarges their room for manoeuvre, their space for negotiation. They get involved in a process that enables them to discover new options, new possibilities and eventually make better informed decisions in farming.

This process, however, does not take place inde-

pendently of its structural and institutional context. For women in particular this process took place in the group they were in with FFS. They felt safe, secure and confident to act in a group with like-minded people with whom they interacted on a regular basis in the weekly FFS sessions. The social space and solidarity that was provided in the group contributed to their empowerment, also in the wider society. This was also found by Bartlett (2005) among women who took part in FFS in Bangladesh.

### *Empowerment according to Farmer Field School facilitators and extension staff*

Interviews with FFS facilitators showed a gap between them and farmers in respect to their view on empowerment. In focus group discussion with respectively 8 and 13 JTs (junior technicians) from the District Agricultural Development Office (DADO), they mainly talked about empowerment as an achievement or outcome when: “women dare to speak or raise their voice” or “when women are not afraid to say their name”<sup>1</sup>. They also often express empowerment in terms of ‘doing what they (read: farmers) have been told or taught’ or “when farmers follow what they have learnt from us”, “when they adapt the technology introduced to them”. FFS facilitators see empowerment as an outcome that can be bestowed by them, in the sense of ‘power to’.

All FFS facilitators have observed a change among farmers who participated in FFS, especially among women. This is illustrated with the following remark:

“When I meet women who have participated in FFS they approach me with a lot of questions related to farming, they are not shy to ask for advice or seeds or other information. This is not the case when I visit women farmers who have not been in FFS. They are more shy and do not talk about agriculture at all with me.” (Kavre, district officer DADO, interview July 2008)

According to the facilitators FFS leads to empowerment, through the field experiments, the trials. The FFS trainers and extension staff consider empowerment as a good or commodity that they provide to the farmers. They assume that they enable farmers to improve their lives. Unlike farmers

<sup>1</sup> In Nepal women traditionally do not mention their name to anyone, they are called mother of..., the sister of or the wife of, women are given a title according to their role or position in the family. This can be kanchi (youngest daughter), maili (second daughter) etc. My husband did not even know his mother's and his older sister's names.

who mainly see empowerment as a process that affects their own lives, or that occurs when they are involved in social work, or in groups interact with others, FFS trainers talk about empowerment in terms of the product of technology transfer (resources) or a behavioural change (agency) that they have observed among farmers. Among the farmers only a minority of women mentioned that improved access to seeds and technology has contributed to their empowerment.

In 2003 in a conference where several key players in FFS like policy-makers, NGOs, FAO staff, FFS facilitators came together, empowerment was discussed in relation to FFS (CIP-UPWARD, 2003). During this conference, it was concluded that FFS can be used as a process tool for empowerment not only by involving farmers in a set of learning steps for improved farm production, productivity and sustainability but also to empower farmers via their collective forum whereby they can discuss existing problems, share experiences and co-develop plans for future work for their welfare (CIP-UPWARD, 2003).

The perception of empowerment as a good delivered, resembles what is referred to as the 'rendering technical' (Li, 2007) of a social process, providing a technical solution for a complex social problem disregarding the wider historical, cultural or political context. In FFS this boils down to a procedure of following a sequence of guidelines: first discovery learning about integrated pest management and crop management. When farmers are skilled in the problem-solving techniques, they are taken through a follow-up trajectory in which community development problems are addressed in a similar fashion. In training sessions such as those in IPM FFS, they are guided through the following steps: identification of the problems, listing the possibilities based upon previous experiences or theories, conducting experiments, drawing conclusions, and taking informed decisions (FAO staff, Bangkok, interview, 2002).

In Nepal also empowerment in FFS is addressed in a technical way: with participatory planning according to a set of top-down pre-defined steps, with action research also through a sequence of clearly set pre-determined steps. Also FFS groups were encouraged to register as an established organisation, as if registration was a prerequisite for collective action and empowerment.

'Empowerment' is thus approached as a technical, neutral tool, or an asset that FFS participants

can be taught to use, that they can learn to 'own'. Consequently, gender differentiation, experiences of women as different from men and the relevance of institutional structures that surround the poor and disempowered farmers who for a long time were excluded from participation, were not addressed.

FFS programme officers or experts see empowerment as a way to mobilise groups and establish a forum for collective action. The following statement from an international NGO programme officer is revealing: "We consider FFS as an important means to empowerment, in the way that the FFS provides a solid and necessary basis for future group formation through the processes of discussion and the need to come to consensus. We see that some groups have matured into actual community development groups that can take responsibility for community development activities e.g. infrastructure, education, health care, etc. However, by far the most groups just continue with the income-generating activities". (e-mail communication, October 2009 with ADDA<sup>2</sup>).

## Discussion and conclusion

FFS has evidently offered opportunities to women through agricultural training that were previously denied to them. It has become an accepted norm for women to take part in agricultural extension activities.

'Empowering' farmers has become a frequently mentioned ambition of development interventions, similarly the case of Farmer Field Schools. In the FFS, like in most development interventions, it was assumed that everybody had the same understanding of the concept of empowerment.

This research provides evidence that empowerment is a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and can be. Male and female FFS participants confirm that they experience empowerment, but not in the way FFS technicians and policymakers have planned.

Data showed that male and female farmers differ in their perceptions of empowerment and there is a big gap between policy makers, FFS facilitators and the farmers regarding their perception of empowerment and how it can strengthen individual or collective action.

In Farmer Field Schools power is still mainly seen as an asset, and empowerment is mainly re-

<sup>2</sup> ADDA: Agricultural Development Denmark Asia, an international NGO.

garded as a tool. Most facilitators see empowerment as an instrument, to achieve increased production and more autonomous farmers, who can manage their own development, who can act autonomously.

Interviews confirmed that empowerment is a complex, multi-faceted process, which is not easy to quantify or measure. Through participation in FFS men and in particular women expand their framework of information, knowledge and analysis. It enlarges their room for manoeuvre, their negotiation space. They get involved in a process that enables them to discover new options, new possibilities and eventually make better informed decisions in farming. An increase in knowledge, skills and income can be important for change. But training by itself does not automatically lead to empowerment. For women gaining voice in a group, the social cohesion and common solidarity provide the space for empowerment.

If we compare the different views of empowerment of men and women with and without FFS experience we see that women, who had not taken part in FFS are more focused on building awareness and self-confidence, whereas FFS women focus on group activities as well as individual growth.

Especially women that have experienced empowerment say that through FFS women they have gained confidence and access to resources such as knowledge and skills concerning farming as well as land. Several female farmers replied that they can now make choices which were previously denied to them historically and/or culturally. They added that this was not the result of the process of discovery learning in FFS as it is assumed by policy-makers, but due to their group participation, collective singing and presenting, and their capacity to speak in public.

Their responses reflect the traditional role of men and women in Nepal, which is for women mainly centered around the household. Where women all said that family support is a prerequisite for empowerment, men do not mentioned this at all. The men seem unaware of this fact, or take family support for granted. For women empowerment seems to be a process of expansion of their comfort zone. They have become more skilled and confident in farming, an area in which they were already active but in which they have gained more control over production processes.

Among the men there is not much difference between FFS participants and non-FFS participants in terms of their definition of empowerment.

In both cases, men's definition of empowerment is more related to involvement in improvement of the society, on their actions outside the household. The men interviewed see empowerment more in terms of 'doing something good for society' through collective action.

It is clear that neither male and female farmers, nor FFS trainers see empowerment in terms of strategic life choices, critical thinking, increased decision-making, in identifying and addressing factors that restrain their lives as it is indicated in the FFS documents by the project designers. The FFS facilitators seemed unaware of the wider objective of 'discovery learning', its link with addressing problems felt in the lives of male and female farmers in Nepal.

None of the farmers talked about solving problems they face, perhaps becoming self-reliant comes closest to the definition that FFS policy makers defined. In short, empowerment, as defined by FFS project designers, is not based on male and female farmers' real life practices, experiences and perceptions in Nepal. Also empowerment cannot be 'bestowed by a third party' (Mosedale, 2005: 244). Rather those who would become empowered must claim it through action in their personal and institutional environment. Development agencies, such as DADO or FAO cannot empower farmers. Agencies involved in FFS may be able to create conditions favourable to empowerment but they cannot make it happen.

Initially empowerment was considered to be achieved through improved access to resources, later the focus was on increased capabilities of farmers and strengthening their agency. A more radical view is that empowerment is only achieved when a transformation of power relations has taken place. The acquirement of resources alone is not empowerment; it is necessary to consider what people can do with these resources, i.e. the process or agency they exercise and specific historical, socio-cultural and political contexts.

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