

CHAPTER 6

FARMER INFORMATION NEEDS ASSESSMENT

6.0 INTRODUCTION

Farmer Information Needs Assessment (FINA) is one of the five key principles of the revised extension approach. It is the process of finding out the key problems and opportunities which farmers face, and the types of information that they require, in order to provide a responsive extension service.

FINA is important because it helps:

- ensure demand driven extension;
- gain farmers participation in extension;
- improve cost-effectiveness;
- ensure proper targeting of extension programmes;
- develop accountability towards farmers.

The results of FINA are used by DAE to:

- plan extension activities;
- determine the best extension methods to use;
- determine the most appropriate messages to deliver;
- plan staff training and work programming;
- guide monitoring and evaluation programmes; and
- provide baseline information.

Extension staff learn about farmers needs in a variety of ways:

- regular reporting by field staff to thana staff of problems and information needs raised by farmers during extension events, meetings and farm visits;
- informal information needs identification using participatory rural appraisal;
- problem census, a participatory rural appraisal technique specifically adopted by DAE in which field staff meet with groups for farmers to review their agricultural situation, identify their main problems and discuss opportunities for overcoming them;
- formal farmer information needs surveys conducted periodically by field workers;
- feedback from field staff on the situation in the field during regular meetings and training sessions at thana level;
- sharing information with other extension providers during TAECC meetings.

6.1 MEETINGS AND FARM VISITS

Whenever Block Supervisors come into contact with farmers, there is an opportunity for discussing problems, constraints, scopes and information needs. For example, Block Supervisors may come into contact with farmers:

- during other extension events, such as field days, or method demonstrations;
- informally at communal places such as the market or community centres;
- during individual visits, when the Block Supervisor visits one farmer.

There is no structured format for such occasions. They are more likely to be informal discussions and might start with farmers asking a question or raising an important issue. They might also start with the Block Supervisor asking a question. However they start, the Block Supervisor should identify if there is a problem, and record the result in the diary. Of course, if the problem can be solved on the spot, the Block Supervisor should give the

solution. If not, he or she should promise to find out what can be done and to return with a response. If it is likely that the problem applies to other farmers in the area, the Block Supervisor should think about whether to include some extension events in the annual extension plan.

6.2 PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a flexible set of techniques designed to enable rural people to appraise and analyse their situations. The information generated can be used to plan development activities. PRA is used by the Department to assist farmers analyse their constraints and opportunities, identify ways of overcoming problems or exploiting opportunities and implementing agreed solutions.

PRA comprises a menu of techniques, which can be used according to the context. Nine techniques are listed below, each of which is described in detail in **Annex VII**. They include:

- physical maps;
- social maps;
- transect walks;
- wealth ranking;
- Venn diagram;
- daily routine;
- seasonal diagrams;
- matrix ranking and matrix scoring; and
- problem census.

The Problem Census is one of the techniques listed in **Annex VII** because it is classified as a PRA technique. It is informal, participatory, and helps farmers to analyse, plan and act themselves.

For each technique, or combination of techniques, staff should:

- **select an area** - choose a village, a farm, or a sub-block;
- **visit the area** - walk around the area, and meet local farmers;
- **build rapport** - build an open relationship with local farmers. Explaining that they are there to understand their lives and farms, in order to help provide effective services;
- **select materials** - to implement each technique, materials are needed. Flip chart paper, marker pens, card, scissors, leaves, seeds, sticks, crop samples and other locally available items can be used.

The list of techniques is not a blueprint, and is not exhaustive. Extension staff should be encouraged to select and try any of the techniques that are appropriate. For each technique, there is a procedure. But these procedures are very flexible. For example, there are some suggested questions to ask during each type of PRA session but staff should be flexible and only ask questions appropriate to the circumstance. The different techniques can be used together, or in a sequence. For example, farmers could be encouraged to construct a physical map or model, then put a social map onto this, then use the map to identify a route for a transect walk.

There is no standard reporting format for a PRA. When a number of techniques are used with the same group of farmers, it is often best for a group of Block Supervisors to be involved with an Agricultural Extension Officer. Research staff from nearby research stations could also be invited to provide specialist input. The results of the PRA would be

written up as a brief report, including the results and an analysis that explains actions that need to be taken to address farmer needs.

Block Supervisors could also be encouraged to try some of the techniques individually. In this case, the results should be recorded in the Block Supervisors diary.

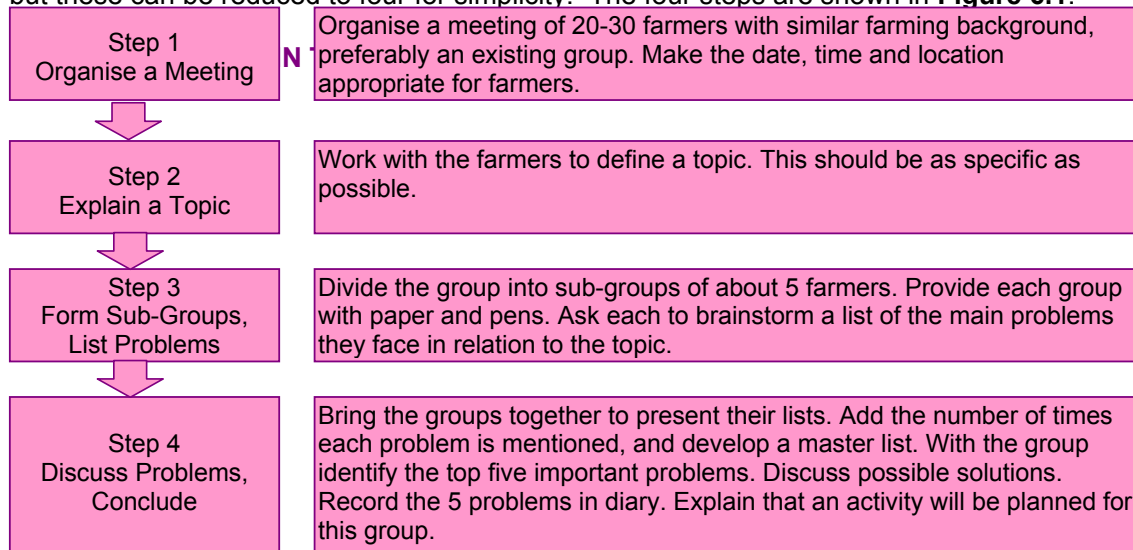
6.3 THE PROBLEM CENSUS

The Problem Census (PC) is a participatory technique used by DAE to assist farmers in analysing, planning and developing agriculture. In practice it is a focus group discussion where farmers identify their problems and suggest possible solutions through the facilitation of the BS.

Ideally, Block Supervisors should, conduct at least four Problem Censuses each year. Two should be conducted with small and marginal farmers (one with female farmers, and one with male farmers). Two should be conducted with medium and large farmers (one with female farmers, and one with male farmers). Where it is not possible to conduct PCs with large female farmers individual problems identified by this category should be recorded in the BS diary.

PCs should be conducted between April and July each year, as an input to annual planning. All the problems, and their relative importance, should be recorded on a result sheet. Results should also be included in the Block Supervisors diary, showing details of the five most important problems for each group, and proposing at least one specific extension activity for that group for discussion at the Thana Planning Workshop. This ensures that the specific needs of farmers participating in the Problem Census are dealt with.

The Department has produced a Problem Census guidebook and video, which describe the method, and how it relates to thana planning. The guidebook and video describe six steps, but these can be reduced to four for simplicity. The four steps are shown in **Figure 6.1**.



Important points to remember in a Problem Census are:

- participants should be from similar socio-economic backgrounds, otherwise it may be difficult for them to identify common problems;
- the event should be conducted informally. This encourages farmers to participate meaningfully;
- a specific, clear topic should form the basis of the event. If there isn't a general topic it may be difficult for farmers to identify specific problems;
- farmers should feel comfortable. For example, if farmers cannot write they can use simple drawings to illustrate problems or explain the problem verbally to the Block Supervisor, who can write a description;
- at the end of the event, the extension agent should explain that a) the Department will use the information to prepare an extension plan; b) that the five top problems will be considered during the Thana Planning Workshop and an activity for this PC group will be included in the Thana plan; c) the Block Supervisor will return to the farmers to discuss the next steps;
- the Problem Census results should be recorded. An example of a results sheet is shown below.

EXAMPLE PROBLEM CENSUS RESULT

Thana: Banarupa

Block: Rupali

Village: Ramangar

Target Group: M (S)

Date: 29th May 1998

Group Type: Rupali Water Users Association

Block Supervisor: Fatima Haque

Topic: Specific Problems with Soil and Fertiliser Management for Boro Rice Production

Problem	Frequency	
1. Poor understanding of use of gypsum fertiliser	IIII	4
2. Soil is becoming harder to plough and prepare fine tilth	III	3
3. Unable to prepare compost	I	1
4. Do not know how to grow Dhaincha	II	2
5. Need more information about good cropping pattern	III	3
6. Need to know about current chemical soil fertility	II	2
7. Do not know how much urea to apply per ha	IIII	4
8. Fertiliser dealers do not provide advice on fertiliser	III	3
9. Fertiliser dealers mix fertilisers and bags	II	2

A list of farmer names and summary information about the five most important problems identified during the Problem census and follow-up action should be written in the Block Supervisor Diary. The diary stays with the Block Supervisor for future use with the group. An example of a completed page in a Block Supervisor Diary is shown in **Figure 6.2**.

FIGURE 6.2: BLOCK SUPERVISOR DIARY EXTRACT

29th May 1998

Ramangar Village, Rupali Block, Banarupa Thana

Conducted Problem Census with 23 marginal and small scale male farmers, all members of Rupali Water Users Association

Problem Census Topic was soil and fertiliser management in Boro rice production

The Problem Census farmers identified five major problem areas from their master list:

Poor understanding of use of gypsum fertiliser (III 4)

The group does not know how and when to apply gypsum, and with what type of soil. The group requested soil analysis and advice on gypsum application.

Do not know how much urea to apply per ha (III 4)

Farmers are applying fertiliser to all crops throughout the year, but don't know if they are applying an appropriate amount. Requested me to visit fields with them, to talk about application of balanced fertiliser, and to see if they can reduce the amount of fertiliser they apply in order to reduce cost.

Soil is becoming harder to plough and prepare fine tilth (III 3)

The group explained that many years ago, the soil seemed to be easier to plough and manage. It seems to be becoming harder, and it cracks more often. It is difficult to make a fine bed for growing Boro. The suggested solution from the group was to leave the land fallow, but they cannot afford not to grow rice. They requested that I visit the fields.

Need more information about good cropping pattern (III 3)

The farmers are growing three crops on their Boro land - one crop followed by another followed by another. They have noticed the land becoming less fertile, and they apply fertiliser to all three crops. They wonder if this is related, and if there is an alternative cropping pattern that will be better for the soil.

Fertiliser dealers do not provide advice on fertiliser (III 3)

The group explained that they buy fertiliser from the open market. Though it is expensive, it is essential. When they buy fertiliser, the market seller cannot help them decide which one is best for which crops, or how much to buy. Sometimes, there is no label on the bag, and the seller claims it is one thing, when it is clearly another. The group suggested that I visit the market and talk to the fertiliser sellers, and give them some leaflets on fertiliser types and uses.

Action:

1. Need to provide Problem Census outputs to AEO for use in planning. Next visit to thana office scheduled for 8th June.
2. Need to return to this group to follow up some of their specific points - appointment made for 15:30 on 5th June.

The Problem Census can be used many times with the same group of farmers, to break problems down and find the real issues. A first round may identify broad areas, a second round can break these into more detailed problems and so on, until specific issues are identified. For example, farmers might identify "poor soil fertility". This has little meaning for planning purposes as soil fertility might be caused by any number of problems. A PC specifically about soil fertility might identify "inability to use green manure" as a problem. Even then, DAE needs to find out from farmers why they cannot use green manure. It might be because they do not have the necessary skills, or it might be because it does not fit into the cropping pattern. FINA using the PC is an on-going process to gain meaningful insight into the real needs of farmers.

Results from Problem Censuses should be provided to the Agricultural Extension Officer, who is responsible for preparing a Thana Master List of problems to use in thana planning.

6.4 SURVEYS

Sometimes, extension agents are asked to collect farmer information needs using formal survey techniques such as questionnaires. Although these can provide valuable data, such as information on farm size, crops grown, costs of inputs etc., they do not usually enable farmers to share ideas or discuss requirements in any detail due to their formal nature. Informal approaches using PRA enable farmers to participate in planning extension activities and are the preferred approach recommended by DAE.

6.5 THE BLOCK SUPERVISORS DIARY

The Block Supervisors diary is a basic time management and recording tool. It is one of the most important parts of the extension approach, as it is used during FINA, planning, monitoring and evaluation. It is used to record daily extension activities, farmer's problems and their identified needs. A detailed description of the BS diary is provided in **Chapter 5**. For the purposes of recording FINA, BS should use the diary to write:

- the place, person or group visited;
- what they found there, in particular problems that farmers are experiencing;
- a note about any advice given or action taken;
- details of any problems that the BS could not solve and which should be passed on to Thana Officers;
- any follow up action which should be taken.

In addition, the details of the most important problems noted during every Problem Census are recorded in the diary for use with the respective group of farmers during day-to-day extension work.

6.6 EXCHANGING AND SHARING IDEAS WITH OTHER EXTENSION PROVIDERS

FINA can also be conducted during Thana Agricultural Co-ordination Committee (TAECC) meetings. TAECCs are partnership meetings held four times a year at thana level. They have been established as a forum for agricultural partners (government and non-government) to meet together to discuss forthcoming activities and to plan, where possible, collaborative activities. It presents the opportunity for all local extension providers to share ideas, information and resources. One of the TAECC meetings occurs before DAE annual and seasonal activities are reviewed and finalised. The detailed role of the TAECC is discussed in **Chapter 7**. However, for the purpose of FINA TAECCs provide the following opportunities:

- a forum where different extension partners can share their FINA results for discussion. DAE is not the only organisation which uses FINA, many NGOs have their own systems for assessing the needs of communities;
- to discuss any FINA results from partner agencies which should be incorporated into DAE's extension plan;
- to learn lessons from other agencies about activities they have conducted to address identified needs;
- to identify the potential for collaborative programmes for problems which cannot be addressed by one agency alone.