How to… generate messages for farmer friendly ISFM materials using a write-shop approach

The Africa Soil Health Consortium (ASHC) has been refining its approach to generating farmer-friendly materials through write-shops, which it has piloted across Ghana. This approach has helped ASHC to develop a series of exercises to help with the task of generating messages. This write-shop approach is an intuitive process, designed to make it easier to produce farmer-friendly information for production in any media.

Who should attend a write-shop?
The ASHC approach is designed to pool skills from different disciplines. A good mix of skills for a write-shop would include:

- Researchers and/or extensionists with a detailed working knowledge of the ISFM technology to be scaled up
- Extensionists/NGOs/agri-dealers with a good knowledge of farmers current practice, constraints and cultural practices
- Farmers or members of farmers' representative organizations
- Communications specialists aligned to the materials you wish to develop (print, radio etc)
- Other specialists, as required

Who should lead?
It is advisable to have someone independent to facilitate. A facilitator can work with a group of around 15 people. Alternatively the facilitation role can be taken by one of the group or shared for different tasks. The facilitator can be someone with expertise in leading participatory processes but no specialist knowledge; it is better, however, if they have both facilitation skills and specialist knowledge, so they can take a more active role in the write-shop, using their knowledge to challenge others to meet the task.

At the end of this guide is a detailed facilitation plan – setting out of the steps included in an ASHC write-shop. The ASHC experience is that these facilitation plans rarely survive beyond the first break: the process can and should be adapted and changed to respond to the opportunities or constraints that emerge.

Tip 1 – don't let a 'helpful' delegate derail the process
The objective of the write-shop is to challenge experts' thinking about how they communicate ISFM. It is essential that you don't let anyone 'help' you by tabling a prepared document. Editing a document by committee is a thankless and inefficient task. The result is that you will usually end up with a longer and more complex document than if you have taken the group through a process of drafting purpose-built farmer-friendly materials.

ASHC has two guides to help you prepare for this session:
How to… produce farmer-friendly printed information
How to …produce materials for low-literacy farmers

You may want to use these guides as hand-outs, but feel free to amend them to suit

your particular needs.

Stage 1: What do we mean by farmer-friendly?
The first stage is to make sure that everyone is familiar with the ASHC fact sheet '**How to… generate farmer-friendly printed information'**. This is because as soon as you start on the subsequent exercises it is essential that you adopt farmer-friendly terminology.

You can easily turn this into an exercise for the write-shop to come up with their own guide-lines to being farmer friendly. This may include some lists of local words and culturally specific ways that farmers use to measure. In northern Ghana, for example, the delegates suggested that a 20 cm measurement should be called a '*hanglin'* (the maximum stretched distance between a thumb and middle finger). It is very useful to have discussions about the terms and expressions farmers use and try to apply this terminology to the products you are designing.

Stage 2: Clarify what farmers do now
You need to map out a step-by-step guide to farmers' current practice. For ASHC the emphasis is on how to improve farming practices and the role ISFM can play in that, but the essential first step is to understand the key farming operations, as they are currently undertaken.

These processes may be informed by culture, practice or pragmatism. ASHC deliberately includes on-farm post-harvest value additions, although it is arguable whether they are part of ISFM. These are included because many women are involved in these practices and ASHC wanted the materials to be as inclusive as possible.

ASHC organizes this exercise by covering a wall in paper (you can join up several sheets of flipchart paper), divided up to create 10 sections that participants fill in – this is the basic time line for the crop. For the first exercise you should fill in the current technological approaches – this goes in the first five boxes.

	Pre-planting steps	**Planting**	**Care and support of growing crops**	**Harvest**	**Post harvest activities by farmers**
Typical current approach	Fill in these five sections first – log things as they are said and keep going back to earlier sections to ensure what you have is comprehensive				
ISFM technology					

This could be done on a flip chart – but having the whole story of the cropping system on the wall will make the drafting tasks easier.

The facilitator should start a conversation with the group following through each of the steps in the farming calendar until the typical current approach is completed.

When using this pro-forma for developing time lines, it is suggested that you start with planting. All dates are then added plus or minus days from planting. This approach helps to identify dependent relationships. Many agricultural processes are triggered by the arrival of rains, but from this point it is possible to work out a timetable of events.

Try to keep to a consistent time measure – xx days after emergence or xx days after planting, i.e. choose one starting point and measure everything from this reference point. An alternative approach is to define the time between the processes.

It is important to look at risk mitigation strategies at all stages of the process of creating development communications.

Tip 2
It is helpful to nominate someone from the group to write down the different steps on the sheets on the wall. It is also sensible to type up this information on a laptop as you go along – this means that you can give people copies of the timeline to work with when they are drafting materials.

So an ideal team is:

- Someone to facilitate – it is useful to have someone neutral in this role who can keep asking questions
- Someone to write on the chart
- Someone to transcribe the material on to a Word or Excel table

Accurate recording in language and terms that are farmer friendly is an important step in the process.

The facilitator needs to challenge any lazy descriptions or anything that would not be clear to a farmer (usually too much jargon). Some farmers say they rely on their children to read for them – so they should be kept easy to read and comprehend. It is also essential to keep testing the summaries and ensure that nothing is missed.

Stage 3: Mapping out ISFM (and other technologies) that will increase productivity and profitability for smallholders

Time line	**Pre-planting steps**	**Planting**	**Care and support of growing crops**	**Harvest**	**Post harvest**
Typical current approach	Local custom & practice and a timeline for pre-planting	Local custom & practice and a timeline for planting	Local custom & practice and a timeline for care and support of growing crops	Local custom & practice and a timeline for harvest	Local custom & practice and a timeline for post-harvest
ISFM technology	Now it is time to fill in these five boxes				

Now it is time to spell out step-by-step the improvements you want to recommend. Once again it is important to set these out in farmer-friendly terms.

It is also important to be sure that any risks and/or economic data is also clearly spelt out in ways that farmers can understand. Smallholders are not able to withstand risk, so only proven technologies should be developed into information for scaling–up.

When benefits of new approaches are being mapped out, it is important to be conservative and based estimates on average farmer trials, not the best possible outcomes from research trials. ASHC also attempts to map out options and not be too prescriptive, but this is challenging in low-literacy environments.

Step 4: Thinking through the cultural and socio-economic perspectives that the technology will challenge

Time line	**Pre-planting steps**	**Planting**	**Care and support of growing crops**	**Harvest**	**Post harvest**
Typical current approach	Local custom & practice and a timeline for pre-planting	Local custom & practice and a timeline for planting	Local custom & practice and a timeline for care and support of growing crops	Local custom & practice and a timeline for harvest	Local custom & practice and a timeline for post-harvest
New technology	ISFM best practice	ISFM best practice	ISFM best practice	ISFM best practice	ISFM best practice
Attitudes and behaviours – critical and desirable change	**Now think about what you need to address in your messages! Thinking about the critical changes and the desirable changes will help if you have to make editorial choices to make your materials fit a timing or a space.**				

It is useful to note any behaviours and attitudes that may need to be challenged. For example in northern Ghana young people burn stubble to flush out small animals that are hunted for bush meat. This is a cultural practice and it supports food security in the short-term. However, the long-term impact on the soil of stripping out the soil organic mater and killing the micro-organisms in the soil is depleting the soil. This is a cultural practice not a farming practice and so is much harder to challenge.

Step 5: What are the benefits to smallholders?

In step 3 you spelt out honestly the impact of the prosed technology. The next step is to find suitable ways to stress this impact as benefits in a farmer-friendly fashion.

Benefits might include specific improvements to the farmer's cash income or economic empowerment, food security, or more intangibles such as the farmer's standing in the community from having a farm that others admire.

You need to think about the benefits to the individuals (double your maize yield) rather than national benefits (such as helping the country to be self-sufficient in maize production): national targets rarely motivate people to change their behavior.

You need to make the farmers aware of the susceptibility of the technology to drought, pests and diseases, and market fluctuations and other risks.

You need to be sure you are promoting a proven technology and that you have evidence to back up your recommendations.

You should consider producing a simple cost benefit analysis, detailing the additional costs and benefits of the technology and an estimate of the overall quantitative benefit to the farmer. Some projects are reluctant to share this information because they are concerned that they cannot guarantee that research results can be replicated. Without economic information farmers cannot make rational decisions.

It is a good idea to add details of a farm and farmer that has successfully implemented the technology.

If you have identified a number of critical behavior changes that are time sensitive, you can think about how you could reinforce the messages about behavior change.

Step 6: What constraints might prevent uptake?
Constraints might include the inputs and equipment required (time/labour, quantities of fertilizers, seeds and tools).

It is important to also look at the constraints that traditional gender work allocations may place on the uptake of the technology. If women are overburdened at particularly times as a result of the new technology, this might undermine its effectiveness or applicability. So these gender relationships need to be understood and factored into the planning (these should have emerged as and when the technology was field tested).

You may find that you need to deal with issues leading from the constraints. Another significant constraint will be myths, fears and misinformation; for example the fear that fertilizer can ‘poison soil’ is a widely held belief.

Step 7: Decide on the best messages for the smallholder farmer
The next stage in the write-shop process is to agree which steps need to be included in the farmer-friendly communication. This is a judgment call: farmers will want to see enough of the familiar processes from their agricultural year to be confident in the materials and recognize it is relevant to them. But for the sake of simplicity you may not be able to spell every step.

For low literacy farmers each key step needs to be led by a photograph or a graphic. This makes it easier to follow for people with limited literacy to follow what is going on. It also helps to jog the memory even if the text cannot be read or fully understood.

Remember: only use abbreviations for well-known organization names – or crop varieties – never for a process such as biological nitrogen fixation (BNF) – even when they have been explained.

The logic is:
Picture + simple description of the process + simple statement of the benefit

It is useful to try to come up with an overall benefit statement
e.g. **10 techniques to double your soybean harvest and improve your soil**
Rather than:
Using rhizology to boast soybean production and achieve BNF

Step 8: Start drafting the material
Before you start drafting it may be helpful to review the contents of **'**How to …produce a dissemination plan to scale up ISFM approaches.'

Check list

- be sensitive to the culture of the target audience
- make sure that you are aware of levels of literacy
- make sure your message is easy to read/understand and implement
- stress the benefits to the individual and their family
- avoid unnecessary technical language – jargon, abbreviations
- share only essential information
- commission images easily understood by the farmers
- where photographs are used, name farmers
- create a logical flow to the information - step-by-step guidelines
- avoid ambiguity
- aspire to allow farmers to make informed choices about the application of the new technology
- assume that the farmer will pilot the new techniques in a small area first as an on-farm trial
- be honest
- include harvest and post-harvest advice to help spread benefits of learning to all groups
- either include useful sources of information or leave a space for local information to be added

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