



Spreading Sustainable Agriculture: SOA
Review - May 2009 Ethiopia



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Executive Summary

Send a Cow Ethiopia has been promoting Sustainable Organic Agriculture (SOA) for the last four years across its partner projects. This has included two Learning Events facilitated by Kulika Uganda. A first assessment of the potential for SOA to be used in the projects took place in 2005, and recommended a strategy for training. Progress was reviewed in 2007 after the first Learning event. This current review was commissioned to evaluate how well SOA is taking root and spreading in the communities and specifically how grass roots trainers for these principles and practices can be developed.

Visits to SUNARMA, SEDA and HiCoDeP projects took place in May 2009 and included field visits, discussions with group committees, group members and staff. FOMDALS (Farmer Owned and Managed Demonstrations Sites) farmers were visited where possible.

Field observations assessed how well farmers were able to implement the techniques from the Learning Events, and interviews with farmers evaluated the level of understanding of the method principles, and also the spread of the techniques in the groups and wider communities.

In all three projects the preparation and use of compost for growing vegetables has been well incorporated into the members' farms. The compost itself could be better prepared, particularly in SUNARMA and SEDA, and give even better results to the farmers. Most farmers did not have much evidence of whole farm planning, but there were some notable good exceptions amongst the FOMDALS farmers. Natural resource assessment and management needs to be further emphasised, although SUNARMA and SEDA projects have both identified and addressed constraints, or bottle necks, particular to their local situation. Fuel saving stove provision, and shallow wells are enabling the farmers in these two areas to go ahead with SOA. The pass on mechanisms for such non-self reproducing items (in contrast to livestock), needs to be revisited periodically to ensure it is effective.

The use of trees in SOA greatly enhances soil and water conservation, can provide fodder and fuel, fruit and other products. Greater emphasis on tree planting would be beneficial.

SOA has significantly spread in the groups in the last two years, creating visible changes in the communities that have SAC-Eth partners' groups. Backyard vegetable growing has changed unproductive home areas into sources of food and income. The challenge is to move this success into the whole of the farm for those people who have land for staple foods and other cash crops.

Vegetable growing, as an entry point for SOA methods, provides an immediate improvement in livelihood for farmers. The next stage is to mainstream the use of SOA so that it becomes a sustainable farming system. Unless farmers are able to fully plan for, and practice, methods that integrate the whole farm it is hard for SOA to be sustainable. Some farmers may be constrained by lack of land and therefore not be in a position for SOA methods to fulfil all their needs for human nutrition, income, animal fodder, fuel and replenishment of the natural resource base. Using SOA on the land they have can provide a base from which to move into other activities.

SOA principles are relevant to different farming systems and to different groups of people in the community. It should be ensured that both men and women's agricultural needs due to gender role differences, are considered, and the best method of reaching them for training: time, place, length of time are known and project training accounts for this. Strong groups and sub-groups will enable farmers to support each other and provide help and experience sharing for all members.

For SOA to be the predominant farming system there needs to be a critical minimum amount of knowledge within the community group. This knowledge should be deep enough to deal with unexpected outcomes of SOA methods, local variations in climate or soils that require method adjustment, and applications of innovative ideas springing from an understanding what the methods are trying to achieve. The community knowledge also needs to be spread widely enough for all farmers to be able to access somewhere to see the methods, ask questions, and receive follow up help if needed.

To provide these things, it is recommended that peer sharing goes on at every level: in sub-groups, groups, between FOMDALS farmers in a project, region or nationally, with other staff SOALFs (Sustainable Organic Agriculture Learning Facilitators), and with other like minded Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or government departments. This can be through workshops, visits and refresher training days.

To build a truly sustainable agriculture programme, the use of SOA principles and practices should be mainstreamed within the groups. This would be most effective if some active, literate, practical SOALFs are selected for further training as Farmer Extensionists. The best way to undertake their training would be through mentoring process in which learning takes place *in situ* whilst running learning events, and undertaking field follow up in different agro-ecological zones.