

Vocational Skill on Sustainable Agriculture: a response to the food insecurity of vulnerable children



Background and Objectives

Rural areas of Swaziland suffer of a dramatic problem of food insecurity. Agriculture is still the core of Swazi economy, especially in the rural areas, but this sector has seen a decline in the last 10 years due to drought and soil depletion caused by the adoption of not sustainable farming practices. HIV/AIDS is strongly aggravating the situation creating a big gap in terms of labour committed in farming.

COSPE strongly believes that a relaunch of Swazi agriculture is possible through a review of the farming approach. For this reason COSPE has supported farmers association and promoted sustainable agriculture and conservation agriculture. The main advantage of this approach is that farmers can cultivate their lands through the use of local available resources. Contrary to conventional agriculture where farmers rely on external inputs that are expensive such as hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers, sustainable agriculture make farmers to be self-reliant as much as possible. Besides, through good farming practices such as crop rotation and association, minimum tillage, soil mulching and the application of organic fertilizers the soil improves its fertility resulting in long-term benefits in terms of yields and crops drought resistance.

Beside this constrain another problem that affect rural areas is the difficulty for children in attending school. As a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic many children do not afford to pay school fees and are left apart from the mainstream education. Some of them have the means to attend at least some form of complementary education (e.g. Sebenta classes), other end up attending NCP even if they are over-aged, others just stay at home without getting any possibility of education, socialization and protection. It is frequent to find teenagers (aged 13-18) with a very low level of education or even without any education at all. This condition affects the future of the children that have very scarce possibilities to find a job or to create a form of income. The problem is even more dramatic considering that some of these children are requested to provide means for their families: the HIV/AIDS pandemic left them orphan with the responsibilities of siblings or grandparents.

COSPE is planning to put in place a vocational skill course on sustainable/conservation agriculture, with the aim of responding to the constraints underlined: **taking the sustainable/conservation agriculture approach as the core of a Vocational Skills Training will allow vulnerable children to learn a farming system which will assure food security in their families.**

Target

The training is addressed to **20 OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN**. Criteria:

1. age between 14 and 20.
2. children that never attended formal school (but attended some forms of complementary education and know at least how to read and write)
3. children that are in need of supporting their families since they are single or double orphan, even if they got to complete the primary cycle of education

Other intervention will be planned in order to respond to the literacy/numeracy needs of children that never attend any form of education.

The process of selection of the beneficiaries is currently on going. Major role is played by Mafucula OVC committee (*see paragraph: Implementers and stakeholders*)

Course contents

The course will combine two different aspects:

- 1. technical skills on sustainable/conservation agriculture.** The content of the course will cover topics taught by farmers association who are already putting them in place in their own fields.

Course topics:

- Local crops, Nutrition and Diet Improvement
 - Introduction to Sustainable/Conservation Agriculture
 - Soil as a living organism
 - Soil and Water Conservation
 - Soil fertility and Organic fertilization
 - Land preparation and Minimum tillage
 - Planting
 - Crop association and Rotation
 - Crop development
 - Organic pests control
 - Organic weeds control
 - Harvest and Crop residues management
 - Seeds selection and storage
- 2. life skills** (health, relationships, problems of growing up, gender, ...). This part will enhance a system of care and protection for the children, in order to equip them with tools to face the difficulties of adult life. The approach to the life skill section is mainly “learning by playing”: the children are introduced to the topics through games, group activities, sports, drama. Creating a good and pleasant environment

is the first step to build confidence, self-esteem and a positive group spirit. Positive socialization and sense of belonging are essential steps for the success of the program.

The **pilot experience will last 12 months** and will follow the planting season, starting from September 2010.

The activities will be **carried out twice a week** and will combine theoretical lessons and field practices.

For the course implementation will be required to have a **demonstration plot** where the students will put in practice whatever learnt in class. Technical assistance and field monitoring will be part of the weekly activities for the duration of the whole project.

Trainers

The trainers will be:

1. three farmers belonging to farmers association already trained and working with COSPE on conservation/sustainable agriculture
2. three peer educators
3. one social animator

The trainers have a complementary role and need to work in close collaboration in order to ensure a good result of the action.

The **farmers** will be responsible for the facilitation of the technical contents of the course.

The **peer educators** will facilitate the part on life skills

The **social animators** will have a double role:

- to act as mentors/supervisors for the group and to facilitate the communication between the facilitators and the students
- To report to the OVC committee and to COSPE on the course strengths, challenges and problems

The human resources involved in the facilitation have been already identified, in collaboration with the farmer association and the OVC committee (*see paragraph: Implementers and stakeholders*)

All the lessons have to be facilitated in a child-friendly and attractive way; for this reason it is important that the facilitators constantly discuss and plan the lessons together in order to find the most appropriate way of conveying even the more technical contents.

The facilitators will have a monthly allowance.

1) An initial ToT program (1 week) could be set up in order to fill facilitators' lack of skills according to the course's objectives.

- Technical skills on agriculture: the facilitators will be trained by Cospe staff. The content of the training refers to the course topics (sustainable/conservation agriculture).
- Life skills: the facilitators has been already trained by UNICEF/UNESCO and other experts on social animation and youth mobilization/empowerment. A refresher course is foreseen in order for them to be empowered.

2) After the first ToT program **periodical meetings (once a month)** will be held with the aim of discussing challenges, empowering abilities and finding way forward.

3) Besides the training sessions a good **planning scheme** must be put in place. The trainers will meet twice a month to plan the lessons together, following the program given. Part of the planning meetings will be the facilitators (farmers + peer educators + social animator) and Cospe project staff

Implementers and Stakeholders

The stakeholders will follow the program from its beginning with the aim of planning, implementing, monitoring and following up the activities. A first workshop will be held with the aim of identifying different roles and responsibilities.

1. Farmer association:

- to train the students on technical aspects of sustainable/conservation agriculture (first year – 3 farmers selected)
- to monitor/support the OVC fields

2. OVC committee.

- To select the children
- To select the social animator and support his/her work
- To identify the field for the demonstration plot
- to monitor the implementation of the activities, attendance, problems

3. Social animator

- to act as mentors/supervisors for the group and to facilitate the communication between the farmers and the students
- to monitor the implementation of the activities, attendance, problems in close collaboration with the OVC committee
- to actively participate to planning/reporting meetings

4. Peer educators

- to plan the implementation of the course
- to facilitate the part on life skills
- to actively participate to planning/reporting meetings

5. COSPE

- to design and plan the whole concept of the course

- to participate and monitor the organization and implementation of the course
- to actively participate to planning/reporting meetings
- to design a manual for children on Sustainable/Conservation Agriculture

6. MoE

- to develop the contents on life skills in collaboration with COSPE and to be involved in a refreshing course

Manual

A manual on conservation agriculture has been designed by COSPE in order to support the learning process of the students, in collaboration with National Curriculum Centre. The manual has been designed according to a child-friendly style in order to be a useful and attractive tool for the students. Learning cards for the students and support cards for the facilitators have also been produced.

The manual and the cards will be translated in SiSwati in order to be used by the facilitators and the children on a daily basis.