

Plant With Purpose DRC – Environmental and Economic Activity Descriptions

Farmer Field Schools

Farmer Field Schools are set up by Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) as an outdoor laboratory and classroom to try out new agricultural techniques learned through training workshops. VSLA groups establish their own Farmer Field Schools, usually on a members' farmland, or on communal land that everyone can access. At the participant's request, Plant With Purpose staff will teach and manage trials of new agricultural techniques and/or technologies. Groups may have multiple Farmer Field Schools, meeting a few times per month (not necessarily with Plant With Purpose trainers) in order to try out many new techniques.

Sustainable Agriculture Techniques Training

Plant With Purpose participants go through an intensive 6-unit training on sustainable agriculture techniques. Each unit, lasting four hours, is a combination of theory and practice. The topics that are covered include: soil conservation (using A-frames, rock barriers, living barriers, trash barriers, gully plugs, contours, and terraces), Agroforestry, including FMNR, bio-intensive agriculture (discussed more in vegetable garden sections), conservation agriculture, soil fertilization with fertilizer trees, green manures, and compost, and watershed and ecosystem planning.

After a two-hour theory lesson on each topic, participants then move on to practical trainings. This involves a participant volunteering their farmland to be used as an outdoor classroom where trainers and participants can apply newly learned techniques.

Following the training, Plant With Purpose staff is available for troubleshooting. Staff members also conduct regular follow up visits and spot checks to collect information on application and adoption rates.

Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR)

FMNR is the promotion of native tree species, which communities have identified as beneficial. In the DRC, Plant With Purpose has been promoting two tree species. These trees provide beneficial ecosystem services, most notably in terms of soil regeneration. Plant With Purpose promotes FMNR through the encouragement of these trees in farms and public areas. In addition, Plant With Purpose staff teaches participants about the benefits of trees for the environment, how to incorporate them into their land, and how to safely prune them.

Furthermore, FMNR provides economic benefits as well as environmental restoration. As these trees help soil fertility and erosion control they, in turn, increase productivity on farmers' lands.

Plant With Purpose also works to get community support for this program by holding meetings and raising awareness with local government and community leaders. In order to engage local leaders in FMNR, Plant With Purpose DRC's head staff attends quarterly meetings with them.

Environment Protection Meetings with Local Leaders

Plant With Purpose organizes quarterly meetings with local government and community leaders in order to promote environmental restoration within the community. These meetings act as a means to raise awareness and encourage change within local practices that harm the environment and cover topics such as water source protection, tree planting, fire protection, and FMNR. Although primarily an awareness raising activity, these meetings strive to influence local policies and encourage behavioral change on the part of the community as a whole, ultimately reaching more than just Plant With Purpose farmers. After Plant With Purpose staff engages with these leaders they are encouraged to spread this awareness to the community at large.

Vegetable Gardens

Participating farmers are taught about bio-intensive vegetable gardens, mostly to be constructed in their homes. Training involves both theory and practice, and includes lessons on composting, mulching, double-digging, close spacing, companion crops, and a whole system approach. These training workshops, which take place in Farmer Field Schools, often take several days to complete due to the array and depth of topics.

Plant With Purpose provides vegetable seeds for the garden, but only for trials conducted at Farmer Field Schools, all other materials are provided by participants.

Tree Nurseries

Plant With Purpose provides training to VSLA group members on tree nursery establishment. Workshops follow a training of trainers methodology, where Plant With Purpose staff instructs VSLA leaders on how to establish a tree nursery, teaching them how to select the best available ground for a nursery site, providing information on which trees may be most beneficial, and on the care and maintenance that trees will need. Training also covers the use of materials, like water pumps and plastics used to grow seedlings. This training is usually only 2 to 3 hours long.

Newly trained VSLA leaders are then expected to relay this knowledge to the rest of the group and utilize these new techniques by actually setting up a nursery site. All topics learned in training are re-taught to the whole group, this time in a practical, hands-on way that ends with the establishment of a new tree nursery for the group to use in tree planting activities within the community. Plant With Purpose village agents are on hand during training to answer questions, correct mistakes, and to troubleshoot throughout the entire process.

Plant With Purpose provides some start up materials for this activity: plastics to plant seeds, seedlings, water pumps, and certain seeds. Tree nurseries provide multiple benefits for participants, including income generation from the sale of fruits and timber, as well as environmental restoration.

Water Source Protection

Plant With Purpose works with communities to identify and take steps to protect local water sources. These steps involve helping community members understand the role of watersheds, and promoting tree planting campaigns and the construction of erosion barriers like contours in degraded areas.

Plant With Purpose staff mobilizes community and VSLA leaders to identify, and protect priority areas where trees need to be planted and erosion barriers constructed.

Village Saving and Loans Associations (VSLA)

In order to spread awareness about the groups, Plant With Purpose organizes general meetings within new communities, presenting on the methodology and expected outcomes of VSLA. After holding these meetings, hopeful participants will come to Plant With Purpose staff to register a VSLA group. Once a group has 25 to 30 members they are ready to begin receiving training. All members receive training in the formation and functioning of a VSLA, which covers VSLA methodology, the importance of saving money, how to take out and repay loans, and how to kickstart income generating activities. More specifically, VSLA leaders receive special training (although all members may attend) focused on management and leadership, record keeping, and monetary safekeeping. Finally, although Plant With Purpose provides plenty of guidance throughout the process, individual groups are given the freedom to set their own terms and conditions, such as interest rates and repayment schedules. All in all, VSLA initial training takes up to three months, and groups usually meet once per week.