



"FARMERS ARE NOT ALONE"

Oxfam brings together rice farmers from Haiti and Vietnam to learn innovative growing techniques and encourage their governments to support lower-cost, more environmentally friendly agriculture.

BY CHRIS HUFSTADER

When a small group of farmers and agriculture experts from Haiti visited Vietnam in April 2013 to explore new ideas for growing rice, what impressed them the most was not the technical aspects of rice production, such as field preparation, seed selection, transplanting techniques, weeding, and yields.

What was most impressive was the strong collaboration between farmers, who teach each other the best possible ways of growing more rice and earning more money, as well as the positive role the government can play in devoting resources to help farmers.

The experienced Haitian farmers say the innovative rice growing techniques they saw in Vietnam had a familiar look to the training they received from Oxfam: "We were so happy to see we have been taught

properly. Nothing appeared strange to us," says Alexis Mesadieu, president of an association of irrigators in Haiti called the *Association des Irrigants de Bas Maître Rive Droite* (AIBMRD).

INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES

Oxfam is helping Mesadieu and others in Haiti learn a different way of growing rice called the System of Rice Intensification or SRI. SRI consists of a range of techniques that help farmers grow more rice with less seed, and less water. By planting rice seedlings farther apart, and using fewer of them, the plants grow stronger roots and resist pests and diseases, therefore needing fewer expensive insecticides and fertilizers.

Oxfam has been helping farmers in Haiti's Artibonite Valley learn these new techniques as a means of reinvigorating rice growing in

the country, a potential source of employment and income for tens of thousands of Haitians. Along with providing technical training and new processing equipment, Oxfam is also helping Haitian farmers to advocate for more and better assistance from their own ministry of agriculture. The experience in Vietnam (made possible by Oxfam) helped Mesadieu and the five other participants in the Haitian delegation to see how essential government support for agricultural training can be: Rice farmers in Vietnam, using both conventional and SRI methods, produce an average of seven metric tons per hectare (a hectare is about 2.45 acres), which is more than twice the average yield per hectare in Haiti.

"What amazed me there was the level of involvement of the state," Mesadieu says, now

ABOVE: A farmer in Haiti's Artibonite Valley, the country's rice basket, shows visitors rice grains. Oxfam is helping farmers in Artibonite revitalize their production; learning different techniques for growing rice is part of the program. Anna Fawcus / Oxfam America





Haitian farmers, Oxfam staff, government officials, and local farmers from Nghe Anh province in Vietnam at an SRI rice field on a cold and rainy April day. *Barry Shelley / Oxfam America*

back in Haiti. “Farmers are not alone, and that makes all the difference. When you go to Vietnam, there is one thing that you can’t deny: Agriculture is a national issue that is being handled as it should.”

Oxfam has been collaborating with Vietnam’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to promote SRI since 2006, primarily helping fund training for farmer field schools. Farmers regularly boost production by 700 kilos (1,540 pounds) or more per hectare when they switch to SRI growing methods and can earn more than \$400 more per hectare, a significant boost in a country where annual per capita incomes average about \$1,400. The success of the program has encouraged the government to invest more of its own money into training and promotion of SRI as an environmentally friendly and low-cost means of reducing crop loss due to pests and diseases. There are now more than 1.3 million SRI rice farmers in Vietnam, which is about 14 percent of the rice farmers in the country.

ON THE GROUND

The Haitian delegation visited a commune in Nghe Anh province, where they met with expert SRI farmers and compared notes

on growing techniques. “We looked at an experimental plot, and all the Haitians asked a lot of questions, mostly about how to deal with insects, when and if to use herbicides, for example,” says Barry Shelley, one of Oxfam’s experts on sustainable agriculture who worked with staff in Haiti and Vietnam to organize the trip.

“The Haitian farmer seemed particularly interested in the farmer clubs, the network of volunteer promoters of SRI,” Says Minh Le, Oxfam’s representative in Vietnam. “SRI requires people to work together to make it a success.”

POSITIVE ENERGY

Alexis Mesadieu says he returned to Haiti “with a lot of positive energy. I went back and told the people in the Valley that we are going in the right direction. We know the technique and we can adjust it. The association is actually working to plant an entire area with SRI only.”

Mesadieu also says he wants to emulate the level of collaboration he saw in the Vietnamese communities, and he says that with better organization he hopes that farmers in Artibonite can have irrigation channels that

function as well as the ones he saw in Vietnam. “The Vietnamese are really organized and have a high sense of community planning. I have told the people that we can’t wait for the state to clean our channel. The water is what can bring life and wealth to us ... we definitely can’t wait.”

Both Barry Shelley and Minh Le of Oxfam say that one particularly poignant moment came during the final meeting of the trip in Hanoi when Fritz Gerald Guillaume, a representative of the Organization for the Development of the Artibonite Valley (a state body, part of the agriculture ministry), said that he would return to Haiti with a commitment to encourage more government support for the adoption of SRI.

“He said he realized that the results Vietnam is getting with SRI would never have happened without the significant role played by the state,” says Shelley, “and that SRI is not just an agricultural technique for improving rice yields and economic benefits for farmers, but it is an entry point that can promote farmer-led innovations in Haiti.”

With reporting by Stephania Musset in Haiti and Soleak Seang in Cambodia.



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