

## Africa shifts its focus to producing quality rice to support local farmers and reduce the region's dependence on rice imports

“The rice plant produces only rice seeds; it does not produce sand, stones, or other foreign materials,” Dr. Tareke Berhe from Ethiopia wryly observed, referring to the low quality of local rice sold in parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Berhe, who has long been associated with rice development in the region, promotes “from plant to plate,” an approach that emphasizes the significance of all the components in the rice value chain, namely, input, supply, processing, and marketing.

In Africa, rice has become an increasingly popular food as it is tasty and quick to cook. However, most of the rice eaten on the continent is actually imported from Asia. African-grown rice has failed to compete with imports because large-scale local rice production has been weak and urban consumers have become used to the grain and sensory qualities of imported rice. One of the major challenges for Africa is therefore how to produce sufficient and affordable rice that suits the preferences of its fast-growing and increasingly urbanized population.

### Grain quality

In the wake of the food crisis in 2008 that sparked riots in several African cities, several member countries of the Africa Rice Center (AfricaRice) adopted key policy measures recommended by the Center in 2007 to support the rice sector by ensuring farmers' access to high-quality rice seed and other basic farm inputs.

Such support coupled with good weather contributed to an 18% increase in Africa's rice production in 2008 compared with 2007. For the 2009-10 crop season, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated double-digit growth in rice production in several countries.

“This is good news; however, we should realize that it is not only the quantity but also the quality of African rice that is going to be crucial to allow it to compete with the imported rice from Asia,” stated Dr. John Manful, AfricaRice grain quality expert.

According to Dr. Manful, rice research in Africa has mostly focused on the development of technologies to increase production. “But rice, unlike most other cereals, is consumed as a whole grain,” he said. “Therefore, its physical properties such as size, shape, uniformity, and look are of utmost importance.”

Grain quality does not just depend on the variety of rice, but also on the crop production environment, harvesting, processing, and milling systems. Considerable amounts of rice produced get lost in inefficient postharvest systems in many African countries.

“Quantitative postharvest losses in rice in Africa are estimated to be between 15% and 25%, while qualitative losses, which are estimated by the price differential between imported and locally produced rice, range from 15% to 50%,” Dr. Manful explained. “It is important to reduce such losses and ensure a top-quality product that our consumers will want to buy.”

### Preference for imports

Recent experiences in several countries in the region show that African consumers are becoming more demanding when it comes to their rice. For example, the Benin government has announced that it is planning to sell most of the rice (about 160,000 tons) produced this year to Nigeria, because domestic consumers prefer imported rice.

Similarly, Senegal produced about 500,000 tons of rice in 2009, but most urban consumers considered it inferior to imported rice. In many African countries, the urban populations tend to

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prefer imported rice. Bags of imported rice dominate shops and restaurants in cities, and local rice is difficult to find.

Locally milled rice is generally of poor quality and is consumed mainly in rural areas. Often, it tends to have stones and people don't have time to clean their rice before cooking it. Even when it is of acceptable quality, it doesn't sell well in cities, where consumers have been used to imported rice. For some people, eating imported rice has become a status symbol.



1. **BRIGHTLY COLORED** bags of imported rice dominate shops in many cities across Africa.
2. **THE POOR** quality of local rice is a major problem faced by rice consumers in many African countries.
3. **DR. MANFUL John** (left), AfricaRice grain quality expert, is passionate about the need to improve the quality of local rice.
4. **EXPERIMENTAL AUCTIONS** help scientists find out consumers' perceptions about different types of rice and the price they would be willing to pay for them.



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With support from USAID, AfricaRice has carried out a series of studies in collaboration with the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research to better understand the factors explaining consumers' shift to imported rice in Nigeria.

Issues related to rice quality and how this affects consumers' preference for local and imported rice were also examined, as local rice was often cheaper by 30% or more than imported rice, mainly because of its lack of cleanliness.

The studies recommended a comprehensive approach to revitalize the Nigerian rice sector by improving the efficiency of operators at the stages of production, processing, and marketing. They emphasized quality and branding to increase the competitiveness of local rice.

The comprehensive strategy was presented to the stakeholders and the Nigerian government. It was integrated as a major component of the country's presidential initiative on rice production, processing, and export in Nigeria, which raised awareness on the need for public support to stimulate rice production and reduce dependence on imports.

Under this initiative, rice imports were subjected to a high import duty (over 100%) and subsidies were provided to facilitate access to seed (50%) and fertilizers (25%).

#### Partnership with Japan

Since the beginning of its establishment, AfricaRice has given importance to rice postharvest processing and grain quality with support from Japan. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) helped establish a Grain Quality Laboratory in AfricaRice's headquarters in Côte d'Ivoire and, for many years, JICA postharvest processing and grain quality experts were seconded

to AfricaRice. More than 200 national scientists and extension agents were trained in rice postharvest technology and grain quality management under this partnership.

AfricaRice continues to do research on the acceptability of new rice varieties among consumers and the efficiency of processing methods. Farmer-learning videos that address grain quality and processing have been developed and studies have shown their positive impacts on rural women.

As part of its new focus on demand issues, AfricaRice is trying to improve the quality of local rice by collaborating with farmers and processors to develop their capacity for processing, packaging, and branding of local rice.

#### Local rice auctions

An innovative program by Dr. Matty Demont, AfricaRice economist, and his team in Senegal, in collaboration with the University of Ghent, is conducting experimental auctions to find out consumers' perceptions of the different types of rice and the price they would be willing to pay for them. Most of the women surveyed preferred the local quality rice and are willing to pay more for it.

As a development component of this research, in March 2010, AfricaRice organized a workshop in which stakeholders of the Senegalese rice sector were asked to construct a virtual enterprise with a strategic action plan for bringing a quality rice brand to the market.

Inspired by this experiment, 14 Senegalese rice importers launched a joint venture in November 2010 with producers and processors to promote and market Senegal rice. The company aims to buy all the rice grown in the Senegal River Valley—the main rice-growing area in the country—and then mill it and market it to Senegalese consumers.

"The company is planning to govern quality along the value chain through detailed quality contracts with milling factories and farmers," explained Dr. Demont. "We are happy that our work is helping farmers add value to the local rice, raise farmers' incomes, improve rice quality, and expand the market for locally produced goods." 🌾

# LITTY t e r s

by Savitri Mohapatra

#### Support for local rice

Several countries, however, have started focusing on improving the milling, packaging, and marketing of local rice, and developing public awareness campaigns to promote it. In Ghana, for example, a marketing campaign called "Eat Ghana Rice" was recently launched to encourage people to buy local rice. The successful campaign included advertisements in newspapers, on radio, and on billboards showing the president eating local rice.