

# Rice for peace

by Savitri Mohapatra

**War-torn African nations turn back to rice to rebuild lives and regain peace**



**T**he hills of Rwanda are once again alive with the sound of farmers singing as they harvest their crops. Rwanda, known as “The Land of a Thousand Hills,” is the most densely populated country in Africa and nearly 90% of the population depends on subsistence agriculture.

As the country moves on from the horrors of the 1994 genocide, it tries to build a new future for itself based on peace and sustainable growth. But, this is a difficult task because the civil war destroyed most of the seeds, crops, and livestock, and its farmers either fled the countryside or were killed in the strife. With them, knowledge about local crop varieties also disappeared.

## The rise of rice

The Rwandan government has identified the improvement of rice production as a cornerstone of Rwanda’s fight against poverty and malnutrition. Domestic rice consumption has risen substantially and the country currently imports about 30% of the rice it consumes. Thus, the need for the country to improve its rice productivity is urgent.

The Africa Rice Center (AfricaRice) has been helping rehabilitate Rwanda’s rice sector by working closely with the national program in distributing

appropriate rice varieties and training national research staff. In order to build new seed supply systems that farmers can rely upon, the AfricaRice has recommended a comprehensive strategy to rebuild the country’s rice seed sector.

In addition, AfricaRice and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) are carrying out several important joint projects with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through these projects, the country benefits from the recent advances in rice science, targeted training of researchers and seed producers, and the exchange of elite germplasm.

## Rebuilding Africa

AfricaRice has been helping postconflict countries across Africa (Burundi, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda) rebuild their national rice sector by restoring rice agrobiodiversity and strengthening human and institutional capacities.

These efforts have been made in partnership with national research

**A POURING rainstorm does not stop Project participants of the Japan-funded Emergency Rice Project in Sierra Leone from posing with AfricaRice Deputy Director General for Research, Dr. Marco Wopereis, IRRI Deputy Director General for Research, Dr. Achim Dobermann, and African Rice Coordinator from AfricaRice, Dr. Inoussa Akintayo.**

systems, nongovernmental agencies, and farmer organizations with support from the African Development Bank (AfDB), Belgian Development Cooperation, Canadian International Development Agency, GTZ, IFAD, the Japanese government, Swedish International Cooperation Development Agency, United Kingdom Department for International Development, and United Nations Development Programme.

When necessary, AfricaRice has provided infusions of seed of improved varieties, such as WITA and NERICA varieties, and helped restore lost germplasm collections. For instance, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, which have suffered years of civil war, over 5,000 rice varieties were restored to the national programs between 1994 and 2002.

## Sierra Leone

With 70% of its population living below the poverty line, Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranked 180th out of 182 nations in the Human



◀ SIERRA LEONE is one of the seven pilot countries of the African Development Bank (AfDB)-funded NERICA project carried out by the African Rice Initiative (ARI). Dr. Inoussa Akintayo, Regional ARI Coordinator (front left), and Ms. Chileshe Paxina, AfDB representative (right) with project participants.



IN RESPONSE to Liberia's request, the African Rice Initiative provided about 60 tons of NERICA-foundation seeds to the national seed bank for multiplication and distribution to farmers.

Development Index. Rice is a strategic crop for Sierra Leone, where about 120 kilograms per capita of rice are consumed annually compared with 80 kilograms in Asia. Domestic production meets only 70% of the country's requirements.

The AfricaRice intervention in Sierra Leone after the war was mainly carried out through the AfDB-funded NERICA rice dissemination project in partnership with the national agricultural research system. As part of this project, 42 NERICA varieties were tested between 2005 and 2008, from which 10 were selected and seven adopted by farmers for cultivation.

About 415 farmer groups representing 65,500 farmers (including over 21,000 women) were involved in the testing program. More than 140 tons of foundation seeds and 3,880 tons of farmers' seeds were produced. Yield rose from 0.6 ton per hectare in 2005 to 1.8 tons per hectare in 2008.

### Liberia

AfricaRice has also been actively helping Liberia, where rice is the staple food and problems in supply have caused deadly riots and civil strife in the past. The



country is still trying to recover from more than a decade of civil war. Despite its natural wealth in gems, rubber, and timber, Liberia remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

Liberia produces only about 40% of the rice it needs to feed its population, relying on imports to cover the rest. With support from UNDP, AfricaRice, through its African Rice Initiative (ARI), is rebuilding the capacity of smallholder rice farmers in postconflict Liberia. AfricaRice is also training technicians and farmers on seed production within the framework of the Millennium Village Project.

Through this collaborative project, the ARI is providing technical assistance and guidance across the rice value chain from seed production to harvest and postharvest processing in partnership with the national agricultural research and extension system.

AfricaRice has recently provided about 60 tons of foundation seeds to the national seed bank. The linkages forged by AfricaRice with international development agencies have led to stronger capacity of farmers for seed production and increased rice cultivation. Specifically, the linkages have resulted in the development of a national seed policy with a seed certification framework and a seed strategy, which will include a national seed service and national variety release agency for rice in Liberia.

### Uganda

AfricaRice technologies, such as NERICA varieties accompanied with

AfricaRice has trained extension workers and farmers in Liberia as part of the Millennium Village Project with support from the United Nations Development Programme.

rice training videos, have played a key role in helping displaced farmers in northern Uganda. After more than 20 years, about 1.5 million refugees are gradually returning to their original lands. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations NERICA project is helping the farmers by introducing rice-based farming systems to increase food security and reduce poverty in Uganda.

### A rice initiative

In 2008, the food crisis caused by soaring prices of rice sparked violent riots in several West African countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Senegal, etc.), illustrating the continent's vulnerability to international rice market shocks.

The Emergency Rice Initiative launched by AfricaRice in the wake of the food crisis in 20 countries across sub-Saharan Africa, with support from Japan, has been able to help more than 58,000 vulnerable farmers get access to quality seed and, at the same time, reinforce or rebuild seed systems.

Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development-supported Famine Prevention Fund Project launched in partnership with IFDC, the Catholic Relief Services, and national programs, in response to the food crisis, is seeking to help about 10,000 farm families in each of the four project countries (Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal) to have better access to improved seed, fertilizer, and knowledge on rice production practices.

Hopefully, such concerted efforts to stimulate agricultural growth and reduce hunger can help prevent conflicts and reduce vulnerability among resource-poor people in Africa. 🌾