

Forging a rice partnership for Africa

by Savitri Mohapatra



IRRI BOARD MEMBER
Ruth Oniang'o admires
a NERICA plant.

"When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion!"—so goes a well-known Ethiopian saying. This could be an apt description for the new partnership being forged among international research centers to address sub-Saharan Africa's enormous rice challenge.

According to the latest figures from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), paddy (unhulled rice) production in Africa has gone up for the sixth consecutive year, reaching 21.6 million tons in 2006, 6% above the 2005 total.

FAO attributes the record harvest to favorable weather conditions and the positive effects of the adoption of New Rice for Africa (NERICA) varieties developed by the Africa Rice Center (commonly known as WARDA) and its partners.

Rice is successfully and economically produced in a wide

range of agroecologies in Africa. Advances have been made in understanding the dynamics of rice production systems and in developing technologies designed for African conditions.

However, many challenges remain, and smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa continue to face a blitz of problems, many of which are compounded by new challenges such as climate change.

Demand for rice is soaring across much of sub-Saharan Africa and 40% of this demand is being met by imports at a staggering cost of about US\$1.5 billion per year.

WARDA economists caution that Africa would be ill-advised to rely heavily on rice imports for its growing demand, because only 4% of world rice production is subject to trade, with most rice being consumed

in the country where it was grown. Moreover, global rice stocks are declining and some recent predictions have rice prices doubling in the near future.

To effectively address some of these daunting challenges, WARDA is joining forces with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT by its Spanish acronym) as part of a new alliance aimed at creating a strong synergy for rice research in Africa. The three research centers are supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

"This research alignment seems very relevant to us because we work on the same commodity and there are certain areas of collaboration that have not been fully tapped before," said WARDA Director General Papa Abdoulaye Seck.

Dr. Seck explained that some of the agroecologies in Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa are alike and rice farmers in developing countries face many similar challenges. "Therefore, a research alignment where the comparative advantages of these centers are combined can have a large-scale impact in Africa," he said.

Taking this into account, five thematic areas have been identified for joint research to boost the



R.V. RAMAN (3)
PROF. ONIANG'O (left) with
WARDA board members
Tsekede Abate (center) and
Mary Uzo Mokwunye.

development of the African rice sector: genomics, seed systems, policy and markets, postharvest technology, and the commodity chain.

One of the priorities of this alliance is to strongly support the International Network for the Genetic Evaluation of Rice (INGER)-Africa, which is coordinated by WARDA.

Based on IRRI's model and adapted to African conditions, INGER-Africa has been so successful that an impact study by WARDA economists showed that, thanks to its catalytic effect, rice varietal improvement in seven West African countries generated a producer surplus gain of about US\$360 million in 1998.

WARDA recently recruited a new coordinator for this network, which serves as a vital link between national programs in Africa and international centers, promoting genetic diversity through the exchange and evaluation and use of improved breeding materials originating from worldwide sources.

Capacity building in all the rice-related research and development activities is another thrust of this collaboration, which will be carried out with support from partners such as FAO and the Rockefeller Foundation.

These selected priority themes as well as the proposed strategy of the new rice partnership for Africa were unveiled at the CGIAR Annual General Meeting in 2006 through a joint presentation by



WARDA DIRECTOR GENERAL Papa Seck (left) and IRRI Director General Robert Zeigler at the 2006 annual general meeting of the CGIAR.

the directors general and research directors of WARDA and IRRI.

Several donors, including the Rockefeller Foundation, Japan, Canada, and France, as well as international nongovernmental organizations such as Sasakawa Global 2000, endorsed the initiative of intercenter collaboration for bigger impact in Africa. Participants from Africa also expressed eagerness and enthusiasm.

As an indication of their genuine interest in this partnership, for the first time and at WARDA's invitation, IRRI representatives—Board Chair Keijiro Otsuka and two board members, Ronald L. Phillips and Ruth K. Oniang'o—took part as observers at WARDA's board meeting in March 2007.

"This testifies to IRRI's firm commitment to work closely with WARDA," remarked Dr. Otsuka, who, as a strong advocate for IRRI-WARDA partnership, is also enthusiastic about the potential of NERICA, after carrying out impact studies on the NERICA varieties adopted in Uganda.

WARDA Board Chair Gaston Grenier warmly welcomed the IRRI delegation at the board meeting. "I agree fully with Dr. Seck that it would

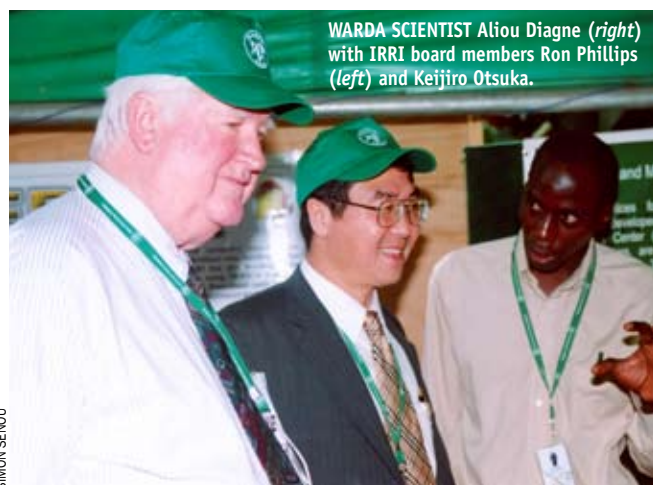
be impossible for any single organization to implement an effective research for development agenda in Africa," he said.

Building on this momentum, senior scientists from the centers have already started attending each other's research planning meetings and WARDA and IRRI scientists are contributing to joint scientific publications. IRRI sent a big delegation to WARDA's First Africa Rice Congress in 2006 and has proposed to jointly organize with WARDA and other partners the next Africa Rice Congress, planned for 2009 in Dakar, Senegal.

Already, three joint proposals that were submitted to donors—the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development—have been approved. The proposals include the organization of a planning workshop, rice germplasm collection in eastern Africa, and improvement of rice production in East and southern Africa.

With support from CIDA, the planning workshop is scheduled for June 2007 to advance this joint initiative. Research directors of the three centers are expected to attend.

Congratulating WARDA on the new developments, Ren Wang, IRRI's deputy director general for research, who is set to become CGIAR director in July 2007, said, "WARDA is on its way toward a center of excellence under Dr. Papa Seck's dynamic leadership and we at IRRI are excited about it." 🍌



WARDA SCIENTIST Aliou Diagne (right) with IRRI board members Ron Phillips (left) and Keijiro Otsuka.

SIMON SENOU