

PRESS RELEASE

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At Time of Food Crisis, New Rice Varieties Boost Africa's Rice Production

On Eve of TICAD, Experts Warn Current Dependence on Rice Imports Is 'Recipe for Disaster' for Africa; Production Still Lags Far Behind Consumption

COTONOU, Benin (22 May 2008) — As African governments and tens of millions of poor African consumers faced a dangerous rice crisis in 2007, new rice varieties adapted to African conditions helped achieve a 6 percent increase in the continent's output. Though this represents a major advance, it is still far short of meeting demand, according to a report released today in advance of a key international conference in Japan on Africa's development.

The new rice varieties, which are suited to drylands, were distributed and sown on more than 200,000 hectares during the last five years in several African countries, notably Guinea, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Uganda, according to the Africa Rice Center report.

The results of the New Rice for Africa (NERICA®) Project, which is funded by the African Development Bank, the Japanese government and United Nations Development Programme, will be discussed next week at the Fourth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Yokohama, where world leaders and development experts are meeting for three days, starting May 28, to talk about pressing development issues in Africa.

The gains from the new rice varieties came against a worrisome backdrop of rapidly increasing consumption of rice in Africa, which imports 40 percent of its rice. Africa Rice Trends, a report released earlier this year by the Africa Rice Center, notes that rice production in West Africa – the continent's main rice belt – increased 5.1 percent annually from 2001 to 2005, while consumption increased 6.5 percent annually during the same period. Africa imports more than one-third of the rice traded in the world; in 2006, when prices were much lower, the region's rice imports cost US\$2 billion.

"Relying so much on rice from other countries is a recipe for disaster for this continent," said Dr. Papa Abdoulaye Seck, Director General of the Africa Rice Center, one of 15 centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). "Unless government leaders take strong action now, the economic recovery experienced in so many parts of Africa will evaporate. We need short- and long-term solutions that boost domestic rice production." The Center's African Rice Initiative is managing the \$35 million, five-year project, which started in 2005.

In less than three years, the project has shown tangible impact in seven countries – Benin, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, Guinea achieved a record harvest of 1.4 million tonnes in 2007 – 5 percent higher than in 2006 and the highest in its history, largely because of the government's massive support for NERICA® dissemination. Domestic rice production now covers about 70 percent of consumption.

In Nigeria, the government announced that the country's rice imports had declined from 2 million tonnes in 2003/04 to less than 1 million tonnes in 2005/06. And officials in Uganda reported that the country had reduced its rice importation from 60,000 tonnes in 2005 to 35,000 tonnes in 2007, saving Ugandans roughly \$30 million. The initiative has helped disseminate improved rice varieties in about 30 African countries, including post-conflict countries.

Overall, since 2005, the project has produced more than 10,000 tonnes of improved rice seed. Experts from the African Rice Center estimate that 1 tonne of that seed is enough to plant 20 hectares of land. The project has trained 6,500 farmers, more than half of them women, to produce high-quality seed. In addition, the initiative has helped train 1,225 technicians.

At the TICAD meeting, Africa Rice Center experts will discuss the importance of boosting the continent's agricultural production to increase food self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on imported food staples and food aid. Researchers said that while people around the world have been feeling the impact of the soaring prices of key staples like rice and maize, no one has been hurt more than Africans.

Over the last several months, food riots have broken out in several rice-importing countries in Africa. According to the Africa Rice Center, the best option for Africa is to combine emergency responses in the short term with measures that favor sustainable expansion of the continent's rice supply in the longer term.

Short-term measures include reduction of customs duties and taxes on imported rice and setting up mechanisms to avoid speculation in rice markets. At the same time, governments must avoid undermining incentives for domestic rice production. In the medium- and long-term, taxes on all critical inputs, cost-saving agricultural machinery and equipment as well as post-harvest technologies need to be reduced.

Governments should also facilitate access to financial services and credit for stakeholders in the domestic rice sector; increase investment in water-control technologies; expand rice areas under irrigation; increase investment in regional research capacity to support the development of rice varieties resistant to major pests and diseases and sufficiently robust to withstand drought and climate change-induced shocks; and boost investment in rural infrastructure to enhance rice farmers' access to markets and capacity to respond to market signals.

Already, concerns about food import dependency in the region have led to a mobilization of resources for the rice sector in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and several other countries, which are planning to step up their domestic production by scaling up the use of improved technologies. Africa has proven capable of significantly increasing rice production before. From 1985 to 2005, production in West Africa more than doubled, from 2.76 million tonnes to 5.75 million.

"We're convinced that the future for rice farming lies in Africa," Dr. Seck said. "This continent has more potential than any other area of the world because of its land and water resources. Our studies have found that local rice production under irrigated conditions can be as competitive as in Asia and much cheaper than in the USA."

Prior to the meeting in Japan, the Chair of the Council of Ministers that has oversight responsibility for the Africa Rice Center signed a declaration commending Japan's long-term investment in science and technology toward sustainable development in Africa. In particular, the Council noted not only the current investment in high-yielding rice varieties, but also said that Japan has sent hundreds of agricultural scientists to Africa over the last few decades and contributed a total of \$593 million to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) since its inception in 1971.

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About the CGIAR:

The CGIAR, established in 1971, is a strategic partnership of countries, international and regional organizations and private foundations supporting the work of 15 international Centers. In collaboration with national agricultural research systems, civil society and the private sector, the CGIAR fosters sustainable agricultural growth through high-quality science aimed at benefiting the poor through stronger food security, better human nutrition and health, higher incomes and improved management of natural resources. For more information, please visit www.cgiar.org.

About the Africa Rice Center:

The Africa Rice Center (WARDA) is an autonomous inter-governmental research association of African member states. It is also one of the 15 international agricultural research Centers supported by the [Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research](#) (CGIAR).