

CHAP Helps Reduce Spread of COVID-19 among Liberian Farmers using System of Rice Intensification (SRI) Principles

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Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 global health crisis is also affecting food security across Liberia and throughout Africa, CHAP has initiated ways of keeping the out-grower scheme farmers under the “Rice Investment for Empowerment” (RISE) program growing food during this crisis period in support of the Government of Liberia’s C-19 Food Security Plan through the Ministry of Agriculture, calling on everyone to grow more food during the lockdown. The farmers supported by CHAP, who are located in Nimba, Grand Gedeh, Cape Mount, Montserrado, Lofa, Bong, and Bomi counties, were already engaged since last year in raising rice production and were at different levels with their improved farming activities at the onset of the health crisis.



Figure 1 SRI field in Lofa

CHAP is promoting the principles of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) for growing more rice under the current health crisis as it did during the Ebola crisis in 2014-2015 under the regional SRI-WAAPP program. CHAP is continuing supporting farmers in Grand Gedeh, River Gee, and Montserrado counties.

The principles of SRI are:

- Plant just a single plant per hill
- Transplant young seedlings @ 2-leaf stage
- Adopt wide spacing – planting seedlings in a grid pattern
- Alternative wetting and drying (AWD irrigation)
- Use mechanical or manual weeders that aerate the soil as they remove weeds
- Use organic soil amendments as base fertilization



Figure 2 Seedling beds in Boma



Many of the SRI farmers under this scheme are actively farming now, and our Farmers Advisory Service (FAS) is supporting our team in the field. Several farmers are currently harvesting in Lofa, and Bong, while others are in different stages: scaring birds, doing land preparation, caring for the nursery, transplanting, overseeing farm management, and marketing paddy.

An interesting development is that many farmers have come to see the SRI principles as similar to the COVID 19 awareness messages as shown in the table below.

SRI Principles as They Relate to COVID-19 Prevention Measures

	COVID 19 Awareness	SRI Principle
1.	Social distancing	Wider spacing of plants (25cm x 25cm) than before
2.	Frequent handwashing to reduce the spread of the virus	Alternative wetting and drying of the rice field to enhance plant growth
3.	Timely report of all cases for isolation and treatment	Quick and timely action; transplant seedlings very quickly after they are uprooted from the nursery
4.	Observe any exposed person for 14 days	Transplant your seedlings when they are 8-14 days old
5.	Avoid crowded places	Transplant just one plant per hill
6.	No touching and hand shaking	No touching of plants during flowering or pollination period
7.	Keep yourself healthy by eating nutritious food	Improve soil health with more organic matter, and eat the organic rice that you grow

CHAP has also engaged the Ministry of Agriculture to make use of one of the four industrial rice mills in the southeast of Liberia that are financed by African Development Bank under the Smallholder Agriculture Productivity Enhancement and Commercialization Project (SAPEC). These are intended for use with ongoing programs of MOA and require collective efforts of all actors in the sector to operate efficiently. If the proposal is approved, this will boost rice production in the Southeast, using SRI methods to increase yields and double the crop cycle to grow rice twice a year.

In an effort to ensure that what farmers produce is bought at a fair price in a timely manner, CHAP under the *I Love Liberian Rice* initiative has introduced the *Farmers RISEpaymentApp* to promote farmers' use of the better technology. Training will commence in two weeks with registration of the first 10,000 farmers across the RISE investment counties along with Lonestar MTN. This will enhance timely service delivery for inputs and payment for our farmers.

To make the opportunities of SRI more widely available within Liberia, the above efforts should make farming a more profitable business for smallholder farmers. This investment initiative is aligned with the Government of Liberia's "Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PPAPD)." The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is being promoted as an agroecological methodology that is an excellent example of Climate-Smart Agriculture.

