

TRIP REPORT FROM SRI VISIT TO SRI LANKA -- JUNE 2002

Norman Uphoff -- June 14, 2002

While in Sri Lanka as a resource person for a seminar on irrigation management, organized and funded by the Asian Productivity Organization (which covered all my costs for the trip), I was able to visit the SRI farms of two participants in the Sanya SRI conference in China two months before (Salinda Dissanayake and H. M. Premaratna) as well as make a field trip with Gamini Batuwitage to an irrigation system where SRI is being introduced with support from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB).

1. The most encouraging 'discovery' from the trip was that Prema and Salinda are working with a **new weeder design that greatly reduces labor time for weeding**. In Madagascar, we have figured that it takes about 20-30 days per hectare for one weeding, i.e., 8 to 12 days per acre. This has always seemed a high figure, but it nevertheless pays off in terms of increased yield.

With the new design, similar to the 'cono-weeder' design that TMT has been using in Tamil Nadu, Prema and Salinda say that **weeding a hectare can be done in only 1 to 1.5 days**. I had dinner with them and Gamini last Saturday, and they had earlier spent part of the day using the weeder on Salinda's field, both personally pleased with the opportunities for considerably lowering the labor requirements for SRI.

The weeder is effective by being simply pushed ahead, not needing to be pushed and pulled forward and backward. It is light weight and very maneuverable, so weeding can be very quick. Our Sri Lankan colleagues will get me technical drawings done so these can be posted on the Web for everyone. Meanwhile, I can send a picture of the new weeder electronically to anyone who would like to see it (jpg format).

2. We have now some data, not a large set but systematically collected, suggests that SRI rice is of **significantly higher quality**, enough so that some millers in Sri Lanka are starting to offer a **higher price per bushel** for SRI rice, and even to make commitments to purchase SRI farmers' crop while it is still standing in the field.

U. G. Abeygunawardena, Gamini's most active colleague supporting SRI within the Ministry of Agriculture, got data from 9 farmers practicing SRI in one of the Mahaweli schemes. Their rice weighed 6% more per bushel (a measure of volume rather than weight), and the number of bushels of unfilled grains remaining after milling an acre's yield was 1 to 3, compared with 5 to 8 bushels more usually left from milling rice regularly grown. Salinda confirmed this, saying that from his 2 acres of harvest last season, he had only 2 bushels of unfilled grains, the better grain filling probably due to the better root development.

This needs to be documented more extensively before we make any public claims, but I would encourage you to see what data you can gather on these two measures (weight per volume, and filled/unfilled grain percentages). In Sri Lanka, if millers will begin paying more for SRI rice because it has a better outturn, this will be an additional incentive for farmers to use the methods over and above higher yield and lower costs of production.

3. The resistance to SRI from some rice scientists in Sri Lanka continues, though more and more senior person in the administration and even the Cabinet are supporting it. I was able to meet the Minister of Lands and Irrigation, who has the Mahaweli schemes under his jurisdiction and who pledged "full cooperation" in introducing SRI trials in major irrigation projects, appreciating the results of initial trials. The CEB as noted above is backing SRI because it wants (needs) to reduce water issues that compete with water use for hydroelectricity generation. The water in its reservoirs has a very high economic value, so it is anxious to promote water-saving methods. One farmer whom Gamini and I visited in the Kaltota scheme was in his second year with SRI. He got 8.5 t/ha the first year and has a lot of confidence in the methods. His fields were some of the most nicely planted and maintained that I have seen anywhere. About 50 farmers in his area have started SRI cultivation this season.

While I was in Sri Lanka, the Minister of Agriculture approved Gamini's continuing to work on SRI promotion under his "export agriculture" portfolio, despite objections from some quarters of the Ministry that SRI has not yet been "approved." Indicative of the degree of hostility toward SRI in some government circles, one CEB official who wanted to try SRI methods himself told us that the local cooperative refused to sell him certified seed because SRI was "not approved" by the Department. At the same time, I was pleased to learn that the chairman of the Agricultural Development Authority has himself become a "SRI farmer." An Additional Director of Irrigation who was a resource person for the APO seminar likewise identified himself as a SRI farmer and said he had gotten very good results last season.

Farmer enthusiasm for growing traditional varieties with yields 3-4 times higher than usual when SRI practices are applied continues, and exports of "eco-rice" have now been sent to three countries in Europe. Salinda has gotten a yield as high as 13 t/ha from one popular traditional rice (Pachchiperumal), which normally does not produce more than 2 t/ha. It commands a market price 3 to 4 times higher than most improved varieties, so this becomes quite paying. That SRI reduces his costs of production per kilo, adds to his margin of profit. There is much more I could report but these are the highlights.