

Can rice crisis be turned into opportunity for Africa?

In the last few months, rice prices in the global market have jumped to record high levels not reached since the 1970s food crisis. While people around the world have been feeling the impact of the soaring food prices, no one has been hurt more than Africans.

With nearly 40 percent of the total rice consumption of Africa coming from the international market, African national rice economies are more exposed to unpredictable external supply and price shocks than those of other continents. A third of the volume of rice traded globally is sourced for Africa. Except for Egypt, Africa is a net importer of rice.

Africa is also by far the most vulnerable continent because of its high prevalence of poverty and food insecurity. The eruption of recent riots mainly because of high food – particularly rice – prices in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Senegal, and Mali, testifies to this vulnerability. Unless government leaders take strong action now, the economic recovery experienced in so many parts of Africa will evaporate.

Many factors explain the current high price of rice. First of all, since 2002, the global rice production level has fallen short of consumption, requiring continuous recourse to globally held rice stocks to compensate for production shortfall. This has resulted in the decline of world rice stocks from a high level of 147.3 million tons in 2000 to their lowest level of 74.1 million tons in 2008.

A compounding factor has been the export ban by major rice exporters. Other factors are the rising price of oil and freight, depreciation of the

US dollar and additional pressure on agricultural resources because of bio-fuel production. Africa faces not only problems of affordability of rice but also of availability in the international market because of the rice export bans by several countries.

Making use of African still high agricultural potential

However, rather than being a threat, the increasing rice price is a unique historical opportunity to use latent potential for production and break from decades of policy bias against agriculture which accounts for 35 percent of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) GDP and 75 percent of employment. To capitalise on the improving incentive for rice production, smallholder farmers need help in raising productivity and increasing the domestic supply of rice.

Africa's potentials for enhanced production are multiple and include availability of modern rice technologies, large tracts of land and underutilised water resources. Regional collaboration to capitalise on the improving incentives for rice sector development in the short- and longer terms is needed.

Short-term measures include reduction of customs duties and taxes on imported rice and setting up of mechanisms to avoid speculation in the rice markets. However, governments should take care not to undermine incentives for domestic rice production for the benefit of social peace in the major urban centres. The rising trends in rice price levels improve farmers' incentive for producing more rice.

Access by Africa's 31 million small rice farmers to proven improved rice varieties such as NERICA® could be expanded, along with provision of subsidies on fertilizers and accelerated rehabilitation of existing irrigation schemes.

Governments and donors must also invest in building rice research and extension capacity. We cannot fight against poverty and achieve food security in Africa without strong science providing the knowledge and technologies which can make a difference in the lives of resource-poor farmers. However, it is also important to remem-

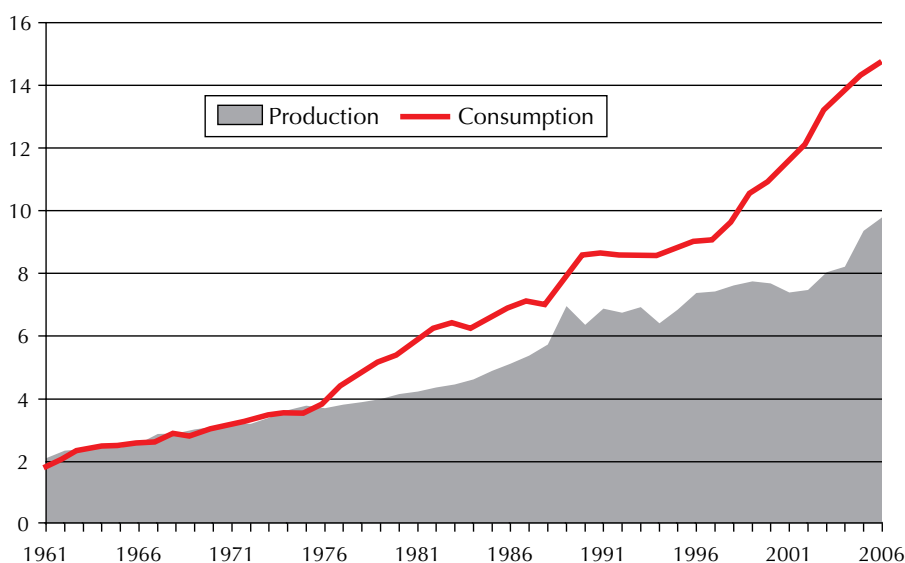
Women farmers are happy with the harvest of NERICA – a new rice variety developed by the Africa Rice Center.

Dr. Papa Abdoulaye Seck
Director General
Africa Rice Center (WARDA)
Cotonou, Benin
s.mohapatra@cgiar.org



Photo: WARDA

Evolution of rice consumption and production in sub-Saharan Africa (million of metric tonnes)



ber that science can have high impact if and only if we have along with good technologies, a suitable environment thanks to political will.

In the medium to long term, SSA governments should step up investment in water-control technologies for lowland rice production and reduce import duties on low-cost, small-scale machinery for land preparation and harvest and post-harvest activities.

In addition, governments need strategies for sustained investment in new irrigation schemes to raise the share of irrigated rice in domestic production from less than 10 percent on average presently to more than 50 percent. Africa urgently needs to build its capacity to train rice scientists, technicians and change agents from government, NGOs or the private sector to interact with farmers in technology adaptation and dissemination that will contribute to increased rice harvests in the long run and also acknowledge that most rice farmers are women.

More strategic research is needed at continental level, e.g. to develop rice varieties resistant to major pests and diseases and robust enough to withstand the vagaries of climate change such as erratic drought spells, extreme temperatures and flooding.

Already, concerns about food import dependency in the region have led to a mobilisation 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.

The Emergency Rice Initiative for Africa

As an immediate follow-up to the Rome World Food Summit, an Emergency Rice Initiative for Africa was launched recently to provide urgent assistance to rice-growing countries in the continent in four major areas: seed; fertilizer; best-bet technologies; and post-harvest and marketing. Launched jointly by the Africa Rice Center (WARDA), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), IFDC, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Emergency Rice Initiative will operate under the framework of the FAO Soaring Food Prices Initiative.

We are convinced that the future for rice farming lies in Africa. Unlike Asia this continent has great untapped potential, which can be seen in its large tracts of land and underutilised water

Zusammenfassung

Afrika leidet sehr unter dem rapiden Preisanstieg für Reis, denn 40 Prozent des gesamten Reisverbrauchs müssen auf den internationalen Märkten gekauft werden. Die steigenden Preise können jedoch auch eine Chance bieten, um das bisher ungenutzte Potenzial von Anbauflächen und Wasser für die Ausweitung des Reisanbaus zu nutzen. Vor allem Kleinbauern benötigen Hilfe durch die Einführung moderner Technologien, um ihre Produktivität zu steigern. Es sind umfangreiche Investitionen in Forschung und Beratung sowie in moderne Bewässerungssysteme notwendig. Im Nachgang zum Welternährungsgipfel wurde kürzlich eine Reis-Nothilfeaktion für Afrika („Emergency Rice Initiative for Africa“) gestartet.

Resumen

África es el continente más afectado por el alza vertiginosa en los precios de arroz, ya que el 40 por ciento del arroz consumido proviene de los mercados internacionales. El aumento de los precios puede representar una gran oportunidad para aprovechar el potencial latente de tierras y de agua e incrementar así la producción de arroz. En primer lugar, los agricultores de pequeña escala requieren ayuda para elevar su productividad mediante la introducción de nuevas tecnologías. Existe asimismo una gran necesidad de inversión en investigación y programas de extensión agrícola, al igual que en sistemas modernos de irrigación. A raíz de la Cumbre Mundial de Alimentación, se ha lanzado recientemente una iniciativa de emergencia para el arroz en África.

resources. Africa has already demonstrated a capability to double rice production in a much shorter time than did Asia during its Green Revolution. Production in West Africa went from 2.76 million tons (milled rice equivalent) in 1985 to 5.75 million tons in 2005. Our studies also show that local rice production under irrigated conditions can be as competitive as in Asia and much cheaper than in the USA.