

Rice production in Nigeria

Rice is an increasingly important crop in Nigeria. It is relatively easy to produce and is grown for sale and for home consumption. In some areas there is a long tradition of rice growing, but for many, rice has been considered a luxury food for special occasions only. With the increased availability of rice, it has become part of the everyday diet of many in Nigeria.

There are many varieties of rice grown in Nigeria. Some of these are considered 'traditional' varieties, others have been introduced within the last twenty years. Rice is grown in paddies or on upland fields, depending on the requirements of the particular variety; there is limited mangrove cultivation. New varieties are produced and disseminated by research institutes, or are imported from Asia. The spread of these strains is determined by their perceived success, and farmers multiply seed for their own plots when they see a variety doing well in someone else's field, or if a variety is fetching a good price in the market. It seems also that strong political factors affect the dissemination of varieties; the most striking example of this is a rice called "China", imported to Nigeria around twenty years ago by a political figure and now grown everywhere despite the fact that seed trials carried out by NCRI declared it unsatisfactory.

The fields cannot be ploughed until after the first rain, generally in May or June. During the oil boom many farmers had access to tractors, but most now undertake all land preparation and harvesting by hand. Generally tasks are allocated along gender lines, but in some areas men and women work together. Women are typically responsible for the transplanting of seedlings to the fields and threshing, whilst it is often the men who hoe.

Most farmers produce one rice crop each year, but some have made irrigation channels which allow them to reap two or even three harvests in the year. This allows them to plant seedlings when there is less danger from disease or pests. At the same time, frequent planting exhausts the soil more quickly and, as fertilisers are expensive, many farmers are noticing the falling productivity of the soil. Fertilisers and herbicides are expensive, and rice is favoured as a crop because it needs fewer inputs than maize. Some farmers use organic fertilisers, including a method of green manuring by which grass is allowed to grow and is then ploughed back into the soil. The use of organic fertilisers, though, is time consuming, and is not widespread; many farmers resign themselves to buying fertilisers which they consider to be too expensive.

Once the fields have enough water the rice grows quickly with some varieties reaching maturity within three months. Some farmers grow the rice seedlings in nurseries and then transplant them into the main fields, as this reduces vulnerability to disease; others see the transplanting process as too costly in time. Varieties which mature quickly are preferred by farmers, as this reduces risk of exposure to disease and allows the land to be used for other crops. Whereas it was unusual for more than one crop of rice to be grown each year, many farmers relay rice with other crops, particularly sorghum. Fish provide the farmers with another resource; when the river flows into the fields at the beginning of the season, many fish are swept in with it, and can be easily caught with nets or hooks.

The processing of rice generally takes place away from the farm. Many farmers are able to sell their rice before it is harvested as Igbo traders come to the farms to negotiate prices. The rice is then taken away and par boiled to soften the husk, before it is milled and marketed. The par boiling is carried out in huge oil drums.

After the rice has been parboiled, it is laid out on tarpaulins to dry. It is at this stage that there is a danger of small stones getting mixed up with the rice grains, reducing its marketability. Nigerian rice faces competition from imported rice which is favoured for its long white grains. Imported rice, although widely considered less tasty, demands less preparation as it contains no stones. Eliminating stones from Nigerian rice, by using a destoner or building designated threshing and drying floors would allow Nigerian rice to compete with imported rice. Raising the quality of local rice might discourage rice importation, whilst boosting local production.

Much of the milling is done by co-operatives, the largest of which is in Lafia, in Nassarawa State, where there are around 700 mills; rice milled here is transported to all parts of the country by truck.

The millers, though, have noted a downturn in trade since the restrictions on rice importation were lifted.

Rice is not grown in isolation. All Nigerian farmers have a variety of crops including sorghum, maize and sweet potatoes, and many keep animals as well. Animals are grazed on open land and are fed on the crop residues. In the north of the country there is an understanding between the nomadic Fulani people and agricultural farmers; Fulani farmers bring their cattle herds onto the fields after harvesting, allowing them to eat the crop residues, and fertilise the fields with manure. The Fulani are nomadic, following migration patterns which maximise the grazing for their cattle. In the south they are not tolerated to such a wide extent, and agricultural farmers tend to believe them to be destructive; this can lead to disputes between settled and nomadic farmers. Chickens, sheep, goats and pigs contribute to the household food security of many.