

1st Fieldwork Report: Multi-Agency Partnerships in West Africa

During May and June 1999 field work was carried out in West Africa at the start of the Multi-Agency Partnerships project. The work began with research in Nigeria, identifying and investigating rice-growing areas and practices; collaborators are on board in Ghana and Mali, and surveys of rice production will take place across the region in the coming months.

In Nigeria a series of visits were made to institutions concerned with the breeding and distribution of seed. This was complemented by a preliminary survey of rice producers, interviewing farmers on rice varieties and technologies, and the constraints faced. This gave an overview of rice production, and will form the basis for the wider survey. Interviews were conducted in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, where the potential for rice growing is highest; starting in Jos Plateau, and continuing through Lafia, Makurdi, Cross River, Abakaliki, Lokoja and Minna. The interviewees were smallholders, growing rice along with a number of other crops for household consumption and for sale. Rice is an important crop, which is expanding in some areas, being relatively easy to grow, and requiring fewer inputs than maize. In many areas rice has been grown in swamps for generations, although upland rice is generally a more recently acquired crop.

The Agricultural Development Programmes (ADPs) have responsibility for the extension of new varieties and technologies to the farmers, and for testing seeds, but many are run-down, with limited funding and weak lines of accountability. Farmers lack confidence in the ADPs and also in the National Seed Service which is responsible for the multiplication and distribution of seed. It seems that there are problems both in getting timely deliveries and in the quality of seed once it is delivered. The major constraint to rice production, from the farmers' point of view, is the price and availability of inputs, particularly the cost of fertiliser. There are few tractor services, and most farmers now do all land preparation by hand. Naturally this limits the area farmers are able to cultivate, and exhausts the land more quickly as nutrients cannot be ploughed from deep in the soil. Insects and disease are other limiting factors.

In Nigeria, the mandate for rice is held by the National Cereals Research Institute (NCRI) in Badeggi. [WARDA](#) has an office within the IITA complex in Ibadan and runs its trials in adjacent areas. WARDA under the terms of its contract is required to pass all its varieties to NCRI before distribution.

Channels exist through which farmers learn about different varieties and technologies, but the processes are slow, and many farmers have been growing the same variety for ten or more years. New seeds are acquired from other farmers nearby and are multiplied at farm level; at harvest, seeds are kept for the following years sowing. In virtually all villages there were at least five varieties of rice grown, demonstrating farmers ability to maximise the potential of different micro-habitats. Virtually no farmers buy seeds from commercial producers, and what firms exist supply only government organisation such as the NSS. Farmers Organisations (FOs) are weak as communications and infrastructure are poor.

One major obstacle to the success of the rice industry in Nigeria is that imported rice, preferred for its long white grains and lack of stones, forces down the price and demand for local rice. The damage done to the industry could be limited if the quality of local rice could be increased to rival that of imported rice. Some farmers perceived the depression of the price of local rice to be a direct result of the lifting of the restrictions on rice importation in 1997, whereas others seemed unaware of the impact of the policy. There has been some attempt made by the milling associations and research institutes to lobby the government to reverse its policy on rice, but to no effect thus far.

The challenge is to identify NGOs with potential to expand their links with the research establishment and act as conduits for new technology, while at the same time feeding back commentaries to the researchers. At present it is extremely unlikely that FOs will do this directly, since the transaction costs are too high. This in turn will be crucial in helping WARDA adapt its strategies and addressing a broader constituency than simply disease resistance.