

## The Growing NERICA Boom in Uganda



NERICA gets off to a flying start in Uganda thanks to successful public-private partnerships

Rice is a relatively new crop in East Africa. According to FAO, the region produces less than 0.4% of the world's total rice output. It is, therefore, all the more surprising, that within 3 years of its introduction in Uganda, NERICA has got off to a flying start in the country.

Thanks to successful public-private partnerships among the national program, NGOs, seed companies and farmers, more than 10 000 hectares are under NERICA cultivation. NERICA's success story in Uganda serves as a new model for its adoption in East Africa where rice is perceived more as a commercial product than a food crop.

In 2002, when a NERICA variety was released in Uganda by two independent sources, the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and the NASECO seed company, under two different names—NARIC 3 (NARO) and SUPARICA 2 (NASECO)—no one could have foreseen the amazing rice boom that it sparked off in the country, where rice farming was neither traditional nor popular.

NERICA has become so popular in certain areas of Uganda that some farmers are even abandoning tobacco—the country's second largest cash crop—to grow it. A team from the Africa Rice Center that visited Uganda in February 2004 reported NERICA yields of up to 4–5 t per ha in farmers' fields. One of the major attractions of NERICA for the Ugandan Government, rice farmers and traders is its short duration (90–110 days).

In January 2004, the Vice President Prof. Gilbert Bukenya initiated a NERICA-based rice initiative as part of Uganda's poverty eradication campaign. "He was impressed by its performance in the war-devastated Gulu district, where an NGO called Hunger Alert was helping the war-displaced people to grow it," stated former WARDA/IITA Research Assistant Robert Anyang, who has been closely associated with NERICA introduction and dissemination in Uganda.

President Yoweri Museveni officially launched the initiative in March 2004, in the Vice President's farm in Wakiso district. NERICA seeds were distributed to representatives of farmers' groups from 11 districts. The initiative will be eventually expanded to cover many more districts. It will include a housing mortgage scheme, which will allow farmers to buy houses using their rice harvests as mortgage.

An important factor for the Government's promotion of upland rice varieties is its concern to save the fragile wetland ecology of the country from further damage caused by paddy rice production. Cultivation of upland rice varieties, such as NERICA, offers an attractive and sustainable alternative.

"Uganda is clearly poised to become as big a success story for NERICA in East Africa as Guinea is for West Africa," stated Africa Rice Center Director General Dr Kanayo F. Nwanze. "However, the pattern of NERICA uptake in Uganda is quite different from that of Guinea, because in Uganda, rice is considered a commercial product rather than a food crop, in contrast to West Africa."

A survey covering several hundred rice farmers in five districts, conducted by the Head of the Cereals Programme, Namulonge Agricultural and Animal Research Institute, Dr George Bigirwa and his partners, to find out the potential of upland rice varieties in Uganda confirms this view. The survey revealed that rice is grown by Ugandan farmers mainly for cash. Nearly all the farmers said they were hoping to rely on it as a source of income in the coming years.

Rice is now widely grown in many parts of the country, especially in the eastern and northern regions. Domestic rice production has not been able to keep up with the demand, which is growing because of rapid urbanization and changing food habits. Uganda resorts to about \$90 million-worth of rice imports (the third largest import in the country) every year to meet the demand.



Rice in East Africa is perceived more as a commercial product than a food crop

The Government is, therefore, keen to increase local rice production and reduce imports. The release of NERICA in Uganda has thus come at an opportune moment. The Vice President is convinced that poor people in Uganda can get out of the poverty trap by growing the variety. According to him, by planting NERICA only on one hectare, a farmer can obtain up to 4 t of rice per season and sell it at sh400 (US \$0.2296) per kg.

The New Vision, a leading daily of Uganda, reports a trader stating that the new variety has a good market. “A kilogramme goes for between sh800–900 wholesale and sh1000 retail.” It cites a farmer who was wonderstruck when he was paid sh1.6 million (about US \$900) for his first harvest of NERICA grown

on less than a hectare. “They told me that I would get a lot of money but I didn’t think that it would be this much. I still have a few sacks at home which my family can consume,” the farmer exclaimed.

NERICA’s potential as a cash crop has quickly captured the attention of Uganda’s seed companies. “The NASECO Seed Company, for example, has been part of the rice success story in the country right from the beginning,” commented Robert Anyang. “It continues to be closely involved in the marketing of SUPARICA 2 seed, having sold about 100 t in 2002, 158 t in 2003 and 205 t in 2004.”

The two NGOs—Sasakawa-Global 2000 and the USAID-funded Investment in Developing Export Agriculture (IDEA) project of the Agribusiness Development Centre (ADC)—that have played a pivotal role in the NERICA dissemination in Uganda, purchased breeder seed from the NASECO seed company for formal seed multiplication during the initial promotion of the variety in the country. They also promoted informal seed multiplication using farmers as seed producers.

NERICA's growing popularity in Uganda is drawing rice breeders from Kenya to visit the country to familiarize themselves with the new upland varieties; Uganda's climatic conditions are similar to those of western Kenya.

Following the successful introduction of NERICA in the country, NARO and the other rice stakeholders were very keen to collaborate with the Africa Rice Center. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Center and NARO in October 2003 to facilitate joint activities on rice R&D, exchange of germplasm and information, and capacity building.

As a follow-up to the MoU, exchange visits by scientists have taken place in 2004. A workshop to assist NARO design a long-term proposal on rice research and development strategy for Uganda was held in February 2004 at NARO headquarters. The workshop was attended by a team from the Africa Rice Center and representatives of all the major rice stakeholders in the country, including Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Sasakawa-Global 2000.

Participants discussed issues relating to rice research, seed, processing, marketing and training. The respective roles of NARO and the other stakeholders in the rice sector, i.e., farmers, seed companies, rice millers, NGOs, extension agencies and policymakers were also delineated.

To maintain the NERICA momentum in Uganda, the Africa Rice Center plans to provide a wider pool of rice germplasm for upland, lowland, and irrigated ecologies so that promising material for the country can be identified.

The workshop also found that there was a good opportunity to introduce the ASI rice thresher that has been so successfully fine-tuned and adapted to several countries in West Africa by the Africa Rice Center in association with local partners.

Speaking of the importance of the Center's future collaboration with Uganda, Dr Nwanze said, "In Eastern Africa, Uganda is our entry point by virtue of the comprehensive work-plan we have engaged in with the Ministry of Agriculture, NARO, NGOs, private seed companies and the sub-regional organization—the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA), based in Entebbe." ❖



NERICA's potential as a cash crop captures the attention of private seed companies in Uganda