

Positioning the Africa Rice Center to Address the Emerging Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa

Overview

What kind of a future do we envision for the Africa Rice Center 10 years from now? What is its comparative advantage vis-a-vis its diverse partners in the new African agricultural R&D scenario? What strategic directions should the Center take to efficiently address the emerging challenges in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in order to build a better tomorrow for the millions of poor African farmers and consumers for whom rice means food?

These were some of the key questions that WARDA, in consultation with its broad range of partners, had begun to address as part of the development process of its new strategic plan when the Ivoirian crisis broke out in 2002. Despite the perturbation of the relocation from the WARDA headquarters, the development of the strategic plan remained high on the Center's agenda.



Dr Shellemiah Keya, Assistant Director General, Research and Development

To give a final shape to the Plan, an Institute-wide task force was formed, which brainstormed on the issues during a retreat in July 2003 in Bamako, Mali, and the new Strategic Plan (2003-2012) finally emerged. The Plan came into force after its endorsement by the Center's Board of Trustees in September 2003.

The dynamics of SSA's new agricultural research paradigm following the emergence of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), the unanimous acceptance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a reference point, the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)—all contributed to the final shaping of the Plan.

The task force also took into consideration the Center's greatly increased involvement in all regions of SSA at the request of both the WARDA Council of Ministers and national agricultural research systems (NARS) across the sub-continent, and the evolution of CGIAR in SSA.

As you will see from the section on *Highlights of the New Strategic Plan (2003-2012)* in this report, the Center aims to accomplish synergistic efforts and outcomes, leveraging creatively its comparative advantage in close association with its partners. Partnership-based research for development, which continues to be at the heart of its mode of operation, ensures that the priorities of its NARS partners are aligned within WARDA's broad vision for the evolution of rice research systems in Africa over the next 10 years.

With the appointment of a new Assistant Director General for Research and Development (ADG-RD) and the development of the new Strategic Plan, the opportunity

was taken to revamp and streamline the Center's program structure to focus on two major challenges—(1) Integrated Rice Production Systems and (2) Rice Policy and Development.

The two programs are now headed each by an Assistant Director under the supervision of the ADG-RD. These two programs will function through eight projects with specific outputs and milestones within the Medium-Term Plan (MTP).

Program 1 comprises four projects that will focus on the development of stress-tolerant cultivars and agronomic practices that help to stabilize yields and improve sustainable productivity in the major rice ecologies in SSA and address the challenge posed by drought.

The projects under Program 2 investigate socioeconomic impact, policy and market dynamics; technologies and policies to mitigate the effects of pandemics (HIV/AIDS, malaria) and disasters (natural and manmade) on agriculture and rural communities in SSA; the sustainable development of the inland valley agro-ecosystems; and a better integration of networks for greater resource use efficiency.

As part of its new research agenda, the Center will reach out beyond its traditional partners to a broader range of actors involved in rice development in Africa, ranging from international development banks and bilateral agencies, through government and research institutions to local NGOs and the private sector.

In addition to the launching of the new Strategic Plan, the period 2003–2004 marked a significant strengthening of WARDA's research

for development agenda, carried out at Bamako and at its regional stations in Nigeria and Senegal. Our scientists have been taking active part in all the Challenge Programs; the Center has been especially involved right from the beginning in the SSA Challenge Program.

As reported in the last Annual Report, the Center was able to ensure a safe storage of duplicates of its valuable genebank collection in risk-free zones. Its genebank operations have continued unabated despite the Ivoirian crisis.



Today food means rice for many Africans

The networks and consortia, such as the Réseau ouest et centre africain du riz (ROCARIZ), the Inland Valley Consortium (IVC), and the African Rice Initiative (ARI), convened by the Center have served as powerful allies during the crisis, maintaining the Center's momentum of continent-wide activities. Considered as the hub for capacity building in rice research and development for SSA, the Center is finalizing its new training strategy and procedures manual that will enable it to become even more efficient in this domain.



Manual rice threshing in Benin

The Center's *Research Days* to review and plan activities took place from 8 to 12 December 2003 in Bamako, Mali and was attended by two members of the Board of Trustees, in addition to WARDA Management and senior staff. Scientists from the Institut d'économie rurale (IER), Bamako-based ICRAF and ICRISAT teams also participated in the meeting.

The deliberations during the Research Days facilitated the development of the *MTP 2005–2007: Charting the Future of Rice in Africa* in line with the new Strategic Plan. Heralding a new project-based approach, the MTP was finalized in part through a priority setting exercise, which fully involved the Board, heads of NARS throughout SSA, regional and international NGOs, and a wide range of experts.

WARDA commissioned an internal task force to develop the priority setting methodology and approach and apply the method to prioritize research outputs and activities for the eight projects within the new MTP. As part of this exercise, a workshop was held involving representatives of donors and NARS in addition to WARDA staff.

The participants critically reviewed each project, project outputs and activities against a set of impact criteria developed based on WARDA's mission statement and the new strategic plan. Log-frame matrices were used in the new MTP to ensure the quality of project design.

Underpinning the MTP period and beyond are four key elements:

- Pursuit of coherence and excellence in core research areas
- Adaptation of the network-based model for research collaboration
- Enhancing the institutional capacity of national agricultural research and extension systems (NARES)
- Direct engagement with the rice development sector

Together, these build towards the Center’s strategic goal to “significantly increase the quality, usefulness and availability of knowledge and technology within the rice sector to support and improve the well-being of the poor in Africa.”

The exciting research stories featured in this Annual Report show clearly how the Center is making progress in attaining its strategic goal. The development of lowland NERICAs, a remarkable breakthrough; the growing demand for upland NERICAs in Eastern and Central Africa, exemplified by the NERICA boom in Uganda; and the exploration of new research areas with partners on the diversification of rice-based livelihoods, such as rice-fish and rice-vegetable farming—all these stories testify that the Center is truly expanding its traditional R&D horizon.

The celebration of the International Year of Rice in 2004, the selection of Dr Monty Jones as the 2004 World Food Prize co-laureate for NERICA, and high-level recognitions—such as the Senegal President’s Award for the development and dissemination of the ASI rice thresher—conferred on the Center and its scientists during the reporting period, have given high visibility to rice and the Africa Rice Center.



ASI rice thresher adapted to African conditions by WARDA and its partners: a boon for farmers

The announcement by the African Development Bank to launch a NERICA dissemination project of more than \$30 million in selected pilot countries of West Africa and the selection of NERICA as a priority technology for Africa-wide dissemination by NEPAD’s Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) are further signs of the Center’s capacity to develop relevant technologies for SSA.

These developments show that despite the crisis, the Center has reached higher levels of achievement

in almost every aspect of its R&D activity, thanks to the power of partnership with NARS and the tremendous support of our many donors.

Armed with a new Strategic Plan and a new R&D structure that will enhance the relevance and impact of its research products and services, the Africa Rice Center is well positioned to address the emerging challenges in SSA relating to rice-based livelihoods. ❖