

Never an empty bowl

by Savitri Mohapatra

African countries come together to work toward self-sufficiency



The Council of Ministers of the 23 member countries of the Africa Rice Center hailed the new harmonized international partnership for rice development in Africa during its 27th Ordinary Session held in Lomé, Togo, 2-3 September 2009. It also greatly appreciated the strong research alignment forged between the Africa Rice Center and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

“By pooling together our resources, our intelligence, and our efforts,

we have to generate knowledge and technology that can benefit Africa,” commented Africa Rice Center Director General Dr. Papa Abdoulaye Seck. “The advantages of our collaboration can help us have critical mass and very high impact.”

On behalf of IRRI, Dr. Achim Dobermann, deputy director general for research, conveyed IRRI’s strong commitment to the partnership.

Referring to the ongoing reforms of the Consultative Group on International

Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the Council of Ministers called for a mega-program on rice as this cereal is the fastest growing food staple in Africa. Hence, it is regarded as an engine of economic growth and political stability that can affect poverty and hunger.

The mega-program would represent a global rice science partnership providing synergies for research conducted by the three CGIAR-supported centers working on rice (Africa Rice Center, IRRI, and the Centro



Internacional de Agricultura Tropical in Colombia) and other partners, most notably, the national research systems. Also included are other advanced research institutes, in conjunction with development partners.

Recognizing the geographic expansion of the Africa Rice Center, the Council of Ministers made a historic decision to officially change the center's name from the West Africa Rice Development Association (WARDA) to Africa Rice Center (AfricaRice).

"This change reflects the current reality," the Council of Ministers declared. "Today, our center is very different from when it was established in 1971, in view of the increasing number of member countries beyond West Africa and the continent-wide adoption of the public goods generated by it."

The Council underlined that the pan-African ownership of the Center has increased, particularly since 2007, during which six countries from central, eastern, and northern Africa joined the Center. As a result, the number of member countries rose from 17 in 2006 to 23 in 2009. The Council noted that, in fact, the Center's technologies and services greatly benefit 34 African countries, including 11 nonmember countries.

The Council of Ministers Session was inaugurated by the prime minister of the Republic of Togo, Mr. Gilbert Fossoun Hounbo, on behalf of the president. "We salute the prominent role that the Africa Rice Center has been playing in the fight against poverty through the intensification of rice research in Africa," stated the prime minister. He also appreciated the efforts made by the governments of the Center's member countries and the support of the

international donor community.

The current session of the Africa Rice Center Council of Ministers, which was chaired by Mr. Kossi Messan Ewovor, minister of agriculture, livestock, and fisheries, Republic of Togo, was held against the backdrop of the recent food crisis, particularly the rice crisis that affected several African countries.

The Council commended the Center for not only assisting the member countries in responding to the rice crisis, but also for alerting them and recommending strategies to effectively manage such crises in the future.

Following the food crisis, several member countries of the Africa Rice Center adopted key policy measures recommended by the Center in 2007 to support the rice sector. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, this contributed to an 18% increase in the

region's 2008 rice production compared with that of 2007.

Most notable was the 241% increase in Burkina Faso's rice production in 2008 compared with 2007. Burkina Faso was one of the countries rocked by food riots. FAO attributes this turnaround in Burkina Faso's rice fortunes to government support to farmers. Senegal, the world's eighth-largest rice importer, also increased its rice production by 90% in 2008 through a presidential initiative.

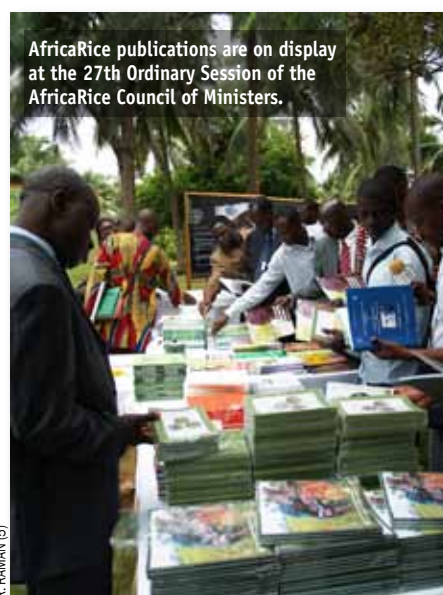
Other African rice-producing countries that have recorded double-digit increases in national rice production in just 1 year are Mali, Benin, Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Uganda.

Many African governments have now prioritized local rice production. They strive to create conditions that will enable farmers to begin to use Africa's largely untapped land and water resources to produce affordable rice.

"This is a step in the right direction, but governments still need to do more in order to significantly reduce dependence on rice imports for national food security," says Dr. Papa Seck.

In realization of the critical role played by research in developing technology innovations and solutions required to increase rice production and food security, Africa Rice Center member countries invested ten times more in 2007-08 in rice research through their contribution to the Center than between 2001 and 2006.

These achievements and the challenges of the African rice sector were discussed by the Council, which concluded by making several key resolutions. 🍌



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1. INAUGURATION of the 27th Ordinary Session of the AfricaRice Council of Ministers: (foreground from left to right) Papa Abdoulaye Seck, director general, AfricaRice; Hon. Florence Chenoweth, minister of agriculture, Liberia; and Gilbert Fossoun Hougbo, prime minister of Togo.

2. AfricaRice-IRRI research alignment hailed by the AfricaRice Council of Ministers: (from left to right) Inoussa Akintayo, regional coordinator, African Rice Initiative, AfricaRice; Marco Wopereis, deputy director general for research, AfricaRice; Achim Dobermann, deputy director general for research, IRRI; and Kossi Aboua, scientist, Togo National Program, ITRA.

2. TOGO'S PRIME Minister Gilbert Fossoun Hougbo (third from left) inaugurates the 27th Ordinary Session of the AfricaRice Council of Ministers. Sitting with him are Getachew Engida, board chair, AfricaRice (first from left); Kossi Messan Ewovor, minister of agriculture, livestock, and fisheries, Togo (second from left); Leopold Gninevi, minister of energy, Togo (fourth from left); Papa Abdoulaye Seck, director general, AfricaRice (fifth from left).



NERICA-based dishes are displayed at the 27th Ordinary Session of the AfricaRice Council of Ministers.

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