



PARTICIPANTS at the Africa Rice Congress included (front) Josephine Maseruka, a journalist from New Vision, Uganda; (second row, left to right) Mpoko Bokanga from the African Agricultural Technology Foundation, Kenya, and rice breeder Susan McCouch from Cornell University, USA; (third row, left to right) Yousouf Dembele, Leonard Ouedraogo, Thio Bouma, and Ibrahim Ouedraogo, all from the Institut de l'environnement et des recherches agricoles, Burkina Faso.



PAPA ABDOULAYE SECK (left), who is set to become director general of WARDA in November 2006, prepares to speak while WARDA entomologist Francis Nwilene (center) and IRRI agronomist Vethaiya Balasubramanian assist.

Putting rice on the African agenda

by Savitri Mohapatra

The recent Africa Rice Congress in Tanzania helped chart the course for the future of the rice industry in sub-Saharan Africa

Rice was one of the cornerstones of the Asian Green Revolution. Will it play a similar role in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)? Participants at the Africa Rice Congress in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on 31 July–4 August 2006, urged African governments to recognize the strategic role of rice and urgently put in place policies and infrastructure to transform the rice sector in the region.

The first of its kind in SSA, the Congress brought together more than 200 participants, including national and international rice scientists, policymakers, economists, international nongovernmental organizations, representatives from rice networks in West and East Africa, farmers' associations, the private sector, the donor community, and media. The main purpose of the Congress was to chart the way forward for rice research and development in SSA.

Rice is of significant importance to food security in many African countries. Although per capita rice consumption in some Asian nations is declining, it is growing rapidly in most countries in SSA. Annual demand for rice in SSA is increasing by 6% per year, fueled by rapid population growth and changes in consumer preferences.



VICKY NTEHEMA, BBC Bureau Chief in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, interviews a Tanzanian rice farmer during the Africa Rice Congress.

Although rice production in SSA rose from 6.2 million tons of paddy (unhulled) rice in 1980 to 12.6 million tons in 2005, it has not been able to keep pace with increasing demand. As a result, the quantity of rice imported yearly by the region increased from 2.5 million tons in 1980 to 7.2 million tons in 2005. Rice imports cover more than 45% of SSA's consumption and represent a third of world rice imports.

Since only 4–6% of world rice output is subject to trade, Aliou Diagne, impact assessment economist from the Africa Rice Center (WARDA), cautioned that SSA would be ill advised to rely on this relatively "thin" world rice market for its growing rice demand. "SSA should urgently review its rice import policy to avoid a crisis in the near future," he said at the Congress.

Dr. Diagne emphasized the need for African smallholder farmers to get a more level playing field to access markets, inputs,

and credit. "While SSA's 36 million farmers scrape a living out of rice farming in a liberalized market, Asian and American rice farmers are highly supported by their governments," he said.

Confirming the vital need for government support to the rice sector, World Food Prize Laureate and former International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) principal breeder Gurdev Khush said that the development of high-yielding varieties alone could not have provided the boost in rice production that led to India's Green Revolution in the 1960s.

"It was a combination of success factors that included the government's decision to support its rice farmers by providing a fertilizer subsidy, price support, and a ready market, in addition to irrigation, roads, and machinery," said Dr. Khush.

The Congress participants acclaimed the achievements of WARDA's partnership-based research, especially its New Rice for Africa (NERICA) varieties. "We are just witnessing the beginning of the NERICA revolution in Africa," stated Keijiro Otsuka, chair of IRRI's

Board of Trustees. Discussions began on the development of next-generation NERICAs.

The need to strengthen the capacity of human resources of the whole range of rice stakeholders—from researchers to extension workers, farmers, and processors—was underscored.

A Committee of Eminent Persons comprising mainly the keynote speakers at the Congress provided overall guidance to the discussions on some of the critical issues relating to rice research and development in SSA.

The committee included Dr. Khush; Ruth Oniang'o, member of parliament, Kenya; Eric Tollens, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium; Susan McCouch, Cornell University, USA; Marco Quinones, Africa director of Sasakawa-Global 2000; Toshiyuki Wakatsuki, Kinki University, Japan; Prof. Otsuka; Oumar Niangado, Syngenta Foundation, Mali; Mpoko Bokanga, African Agricultural Technology Foundation, Kenya; Kallunde Sibuga, Sokoine University, Tanzania;

and Richard Musangi, Kenya.

The Congress was organized by WARDA, in association with the West and Central Africa Rice Research and Development Network and the East and Central Africa Rice Research Network, under the aegis of the Tanzanian Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Cooperatives. Sponsors were the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Canadian Fund for Africa, the Sasakawa Africa Association, the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development, the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa, the European Union, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The first Congressional Honor was bestowed on Kanayo F. Nwanze, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to rice research and development in Africa during his term as WARDA director general from 1996 to 2006.

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Resolutions of the first Africa Rice Congress

- Given that Africa has to import almost 50% of the rice it needs and that demand is increasing at the rate of 6% per year, rice should be one of the cornerstones of a Green Revolution for Africa that anticipates the needs of future populations.
- Transform the low level of available scientific expertise in sub-Saharan Africa, where there are only 83 scientists per million people, compared with 1,100 scientists per million in industrialized countries and 785 per million in Asia. The Congress resolves that for the Green Revolution to succeed in Africa, a new capacity-building program focusing on the development of a multidisciplinary cadre of scientists and extensionists is urgently needed.
- To accelerate farmer adoption of New Rice for Africa (NERICA) varieties and other improved technologies, concerted actions by a broad partnership including governments, research institutions, the private sector, and local, regional, international, and nongovernmental organizations are needed. The Congress recognizes the value of micro-financing and participatory learning as powerful means both for technology dissemination and for developing appropriate infrastructure to improve access to seeds, fertilizer, mechanization, and market systems.
- The Congress is deeply appreciative of the support and hospitality of the government of the United Republic of Tanzania. It recognizes the role played by the Africa Rice Center (WARDA), not only in African agriculture and, therefore, in the continent's economic growth but also in providing leadership in rice science and development. Desirous, therefore, of the necessity for the Center to continue to provide such leadership in rice development in Africa, the Congress resolves and urges all stakeholders to maintain the Center's identity, as previously resolved by the WARDA Council of Ministers in September 2005 and the National Experts Committee in June 2006, and to strengthen its capacity for the welfare of African rice farmers.