Cameroon may soon gain fame as a rising star in rice production

The Republic of Cameroon is often described as “Africa in miniature” because of its rich diversity of climate, ecology, landscape, and culture. Few are aware that the country has huge potential to not only achieve rice self-sufficiency but also become the rice granary of Central Africa.

The country is endowed with large areas of arable land, abundant water resources, and favorable agroclimatic conditions that are conducive to rice production. Recognizing its agribusiness potential, and in response to the food crisis that severely affected Cameroon in 2008, the government is taking measures to boost its rice sector.

These government efforts to improve the country’s food security are supported by the World Bank, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the African Development Bank (AFDB), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Reviving the rice sector

Rice is still a relatively new crop in certain areas of Cameroon although the Far North, Northwest, and West provinces have a long tradition of rice cultivation. Moreover, rice is increasingly becoming a major commodity fueled by shifts in consumer preferences and rapid urbanization. In Tonga, for example, homage is paid to the rice field to which it is believed that rice grew from.

Connecting researchers and farmers

The Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (IRAD) is a public institution that has been collaborating with international partners to develop improved rice varieties and technologies to increase rice productivity in the region. Technology packages developed by IRAD are shared to farmers for faster adoption.

“We multiply the foundation seed of improved rice varieties received from IRAD and provide seeds to farmers at subsidized rates,” said Ms. Lilian Yaoucomo, UNVDA chief officer.

Overcoming challenges

Another constraint is the long distance between the major rice production areas and the main cities, which are filled with import rice rather than “Cameroon-made” rice. “Thus, JICA has launched a program to support mainly the production of upland rice in the Center, South, and East provinces of Cameroon, so that people living in these areas can eat their own rice,” said Dr. Yoshimi Sokei, a JICA advisor based in Yaoundé.

The National Rice Development Strategy, drafted in 2009 within the framework of the Coalition for African Rice Development, has an ambitious aim to raise domestic production to 627,250 tons by 2018. To achieve this vision, the Cameroon government has deployed the following strategies.

Building rural enterprises

Some challenges are being tackled through collaborative research such as the innovative Common Fund for Commodities (CFC) funded project on “Improving the competitiveness of local rice in Central Africa.” Carried out by AfricaRice and its national partners from Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Chad, it aims to build rural enterprises through co-sharing mechanisms.

Upland and lowland rice varieties selected through participatory varietal selection were introduced along with improved crop management practices to boost rice productivity. After that, the project established a “rapid-impact” seed program, postharvest technologies, processing activities, and links with input dealers and microfinance institutions.

“Strengthening the capacity of rice stakeholders throughout the value chain, from farmers through millers and parboilers to marketers, is a major part of the project,” said Dr. Jean Moreira, AfricaRice project coordinator.

Looking forward

The Cameroon rice sector is increasingly benefiting from collaborative research for development activities carried out by AfricaRice with support from several donors, including the AFD, CFC, Canada, the European Union, Japan, the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Global Rice Science Partnership, the CGIAR Research Program on Rice.

IRAD is involved in all the Africa-wide Rice Task Forces covering breeding, agronomy, processing and value addition, mechanization, policy, and gender. It has welcomed an approach, rice sector development hubs, and impact and has identified three hubs representing the main rice ecosystems in the country.

With all these measures in place, Cameroon is well on its way to realize its vision for a high-quality rice sector serving the entire region.

Ms. Mohapatra is the head of Marketing and Communications at AfricaRice.