

Rice initiatives can help save the planet, NOT JUST FEED IT

Rice is close to my heart, as a consumer, as a career choice and as a member of a “rice community” of billions. My own family has been involved in rice farming for more than three generations – and still going!

So I am also deeply aware that rice is at the heart of two of our planet’s biggest challenges – food security and climate change.

It’s the staple that half the world’s population put on their tables each day – but production methods emit huge amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas (GHG) more potent than carbon dioxide. By 2030, we will have 8.3 billion mouths to feed and by 2050, we could face a 44 per cent shortfall in global rice production.

At last month’s International Rice Congress in Singapore then, much discussion, unsurprisingly, focused on solutions to this “rice paradox”: while rice production currently is a major generator of GHGs it is imperative that we boost production.

What’s clear is that we must re-imagine the entire rice supply chain – from how it is farmed and financed to how it’s marketed and sold. Different but converging vested interests are essential parts of a long-term solution, including:

- Retailers committing to promote sustainable rice to consumers and choosing the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP) as a procurement standard. This would move the nee-

dle in developed countries which consume 23 million tonnes of rice each year and where it would be a relatively easy “environmental” choice for shoppers; not so at a market stall in a developing country.

- Financial institutions finding ways to reduce interest cost for sustainable rice producers. Every 0.25 per cent reduction in interest rates potentially translates to US\$500 million (Bt16.4 billion) per annum in cost savings for producers; this would help farming households prioritise sustainable rice farming.

- Scientists and innovators developing more resilient production systems to reduce variance in production and prices, offset risk and reduce the draw on natural capital for land and water. Current methods of more sustainable farming are capital intensive, making it difficult for smallholders focused on their livelihoods to adopt these practices without intervention and investment from others.

- Insurers improving offerings and reducing premiums for more resilient sustainable rice producers. Such offerings remain out of reach for many farming households, and access to insurance is a necessary first step to better credit offerings at farm-level.

- Governments lowering tariffs and taxes for sustainable rice. With the current global tariff for rice weighted by volume at 32 per cent, a 1 per cent reduction in tariffs for sustainable rice could be worth more than \$150

million per annum in savings for exporters. This saving could be passed down to producers incentivising them to switch to sustainable rice.

The reality is that because rice is grown under many disparate farming systems, it is difficult for any single body or proponent alone to make the critical difference. This does not mean we stop taking action within our ambit, but it is partnerships that are essential to drive change at scale.

Important collaborations are already underway. The German



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development agency GIZ and Olam are working with governments in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia to help thousands of rice farmers improve water use, GHG emissions and generate better livelihoods. The landmark five-year Thai Rice NAMA project that started in July aims to reduce up to 30 per cent of emissions by the 100,000 participating farmers by its fifth year.

Research and development is also making promising progress, such as Cornell University’s revolutionary “System for Rice Intensification”, which requires 80-90 per cent fewer rice seeds, up to 50 per cent less water and often no fertiliser, while yields are boosted by 20-25 per cent and farmers’ costs are reduced by 10-20 per cent.

But to understand how much more needs to be done, we need to establish clear measurement systems that can be a bellwether of progress and we need to do so soon.

For example, UN Environment and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) have co-chaired a platform where government, NGOs and business can create a framework for assessing whether new systems improve or degrade environmental, economic and social impacts of rice farming. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development is working with the corporate sector, GIZ, IRRI, UN Environment and the Food and Agriculture Organisation to further develop metrics through the Global Environment Facility.

Rice production is a global imperative facing a global problem. It needs global solutions. "Feed the World" and "Save the Planet" have become two of the most recognisable and laudable mantras of our time. The global rice community must move forward with a foot planted firmly in each of those camps.

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