

Celebrating the International Year of Rice in Africa



Features

Rice is a staple food and lifeline for more than half the world's population. Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice-based production systems for their main source of livelihood. Today, rice is the most rapidly growing food source in Africa.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) designated 2004 as the International Year of Rice (IYR). The Africa Rice Center—dedicated to research and development activities on rice for Africa—led the IYR celebration in sub-Saharan Africa in collaboration with its partners.

The dedication of an International Year to a single crop is rare in the history of UNGA. But rice is worthy of this distinction, because it has a major influence on food security and human nutrition throughout the world.

However, rice is more than just a source of nutrition and livelihood. It is woven into the culture and way of life of millions of people. It has been shaping mythologies, customs, festivals and cuisine over the centuries. Therefore, the theme chosen for the IYR was *Rice is Life*.

The IYR theme recognized the special relationship that links people to this vital crop. IYR celebrations highlighted the central role that rice plays in agriculture, food security, the environment and culture.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was the lead agency for the implementation of the global IYR vision in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), national programs, NGOs, the private sector and CGIAR.

CGIAR Centers, such as the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (CIAT) and the Africa Rice Center have developed improved rice technologies for more than a quarter century. These groundbreaking efforts have made a difference in the lives of billions of farmers and consumers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

One of the 2004 IYR priorities was to improve rice production through greater emphasis on rice research, development and policy. A sustainable increase in rice production will reduce hunger and poverty and contribute to environmental conservation.

As part of the IYR celebrations, public awareness campaigns on rice were organized in many countries and national committees for the IYR were formed, which served as focal points for the campaigns and linked up with the global IYR vision.

“The need for a sustainable increase in rice production affects everyone. We are all connected to the rice system, and by spreading awareness now we can ensure that the work of the International Year of Rice will reach far beyond 2004,” stated Dr Jacques Diouf, FAO Director-General.

IYR Celebrations in SSA

Rice is generally associated with Asia. But it is also an integral part of Africa, where it has been grown for more than 3000 years. It was so widely grown in West Africa when the first European sailors reached there, that they called the region from Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire the 'Rice Coast'.

Rice continues to be a symbol of cultural identity for many Africans. For example, according to the *Diola* people living near the Casamance River in Senegal, in the beginning of creation their ancestors received from the Rain God the *Diola* rice, which carried a life-giving power. The rice they refer to is *Oryza glaberima* (African rice), which is still grown by some of the *Diola* people and used in rituals to preserve the link with their ancestors.

Rice has now become a commodity of strategic significance in Africa. It is grown and consumed in about 40 countries in the continent. The demand for rice in West and Central Africa (WCA) is growing at the rate of about 6% per annum—faster than anywhere else in the world.

Since the Africa Rice Center is in the frontline of doing research on rice-based technologies that are adapted to SSA, it actively participated in the country-driven IYR celebrations that were organized in SSA. IYR celebrations were held in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Uganda, among others.

Under the theme of *Celebrating the International Year of Rice in Africa*, the Center organized the Fourth Meeting of the National Experts Committee (NEC)—which comprises the Directors General of its member countries—in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire. The Meeting was preceded by a festival *La Journée du Riz*, which kicked off a series of major IYR celebrations in Côte d'Ivoire and in other African countries.

La Journée du Riz included among its programs a colorful parade by farmers, displays of rice samples and farming tools, a debate by rice experts from all parts of the continent on rice policies in Africa as part of a Round Table discussion, and a cooking competition on NERICA rice preparation.



WARDA Director General Dr Kanayo F. Nwanze (2nd from left) with representatives from the Ivoirian Government and the diplomatic corps at the International Year of Rice (IYR) celebration in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire

Another major highlight of the IYR celebrations in the continent was the pan-African IYR event titled *Rice is life for Africans* that was jointly organized under the sponsorship of the Government of Ghana, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), FARA, the Africa Rice Center, UNDP, FAO and NEPAD at Accra, Ghana.



Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo (right) and Dr Olumuyiwa Osiname, WARDA Coordinator in Nigeria, at the WARDA pavilion during the IYR celebration in Abuja, Nigeria

The event was an opportunity to formally felicitate Dr Monty Jones, who was selected as the 2004 World Food Prize co-winner for the development of the NERICA. Recognition of specific African governments for their successful promotion of NERICA, scientific awards, prizes to rice producers and an exhibition of rice technologies featured prominently in the celebration.

An important component of the pan-African IYR was the African Rice Conference, which included the Third Biennial Regional Rice Research Review (4Rs), coordinated by ROCARIZ—the Rice Network hosted by the Center. The Conference brought together about 70 rice experts from SSA.

“Thanks to the 2004 IYR celebrations, improved rice technologies, such as NERICAs will increasingly reach villages, farms and homes of millions of poor rice farmers and consumers across SSA,” said Dr Kanayo F. Nwanze. ❖

International Year of Rice — Mission Statement

The International Year of Rice promotes improved production and access to this vital food crop, which feeds more than half the world's population while providing income for millions of rice producers, processors and traders. Development of sustainable rice-based systems will reduce hunger and poverty, and contribute to environmental conservation and a better life for present and future generations.