

Learning cycles continue in Myanmar

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Iterative learning cycles involving different stakeholders target learning not only on technical aspects but also on changing the wider dimensions and values under which farming communities operate. While the key problem is that farmers do not receive good profit from their rice crops, introducing new technologies alone will not be enough since the success of improvements will depend on many actors along the value chain (e.g., traders, seed producers, local manufacturers). Identifying and trying suitable entry point technologies is one key factor, but helping groups within communities to support these entry points is also essential.

Laying the groundwork

In Myanmar, a village-level learning alliance (LA) approach was used to gather people from various sectors to address a problem in which they have a common interest. LA members in Bogale and Maubin townships wanted to learn about producing good-quality rice for higher profit. They tried using threshers, dryers, or new varieties that are suitable to the area and that will give farmers more time to manage their produce to improve rice quality.

In the first learning cycle in Bogale, the group explored whether setting up a dryer and linking it with an existing communal storage system managed by GRET, a partner nongovernment organization, would work. Private sector

partners locally manufactured lightweight threshers and a flatbed dryer for village trials. Topics in the second cycle included training operators, coordinating users, defining the terms for ownership and equipment use, and orienting millers and traders were topics in the second learning cycle. While the technology has been made available and there is interest or knowledge among users, the LA encountered concerns about additional investment costs, no market incentives for improved rice quality, and much distrust between farmers and market actors.

The LA members in Maubin were introduced to lightweight threshers and new varieties. Through participatory trials, farmers learned about suitable new rice varieties as options. The goal to improve timing of cropping activities through new varieties and improved quality and selling time to obtain higher profits is yet to be reached.

New topics, new cycles

While some learning cycles continue, a new goal is to find avenues to link farmers with markets that could provide incentives (e.g., pay higher prices) to produce good-quality rice. LA members composed of farmers, millers, NGO partners from GRET and Welthungerhilfe, and private sector partners interacted with actors from the local wholesale depot in Wadan and the export wholesale market in Bayint Naung, Yangon, to observe how grains are priced, how trade happens in the local and export market, and to meet people who can make selling to this market an option. Links with members of the Myanmar Rice and Paddy Traders' Association could potentially help farmers understand how market actors value quality and what other options they have to sell their grains aside from local millers and traders. LA members also learned about possible seed sources and production through a visit to a government-owned seed farm at Hmawbi.

Plan-act-reflect-share

A key part of these iterative learning cycles are facilitated reflections on what happened, what they experienced, and what resulted for future planning and implementation. From an activity to learn about markets, U Kyaw Ei, a Bogale rice farmer, shared the farmers' observation that, "rice produced in Bogale is priced the lowest of nine townships trading the same variety in Wadan." They also noticed that the low price has a lot to do with low-quality grains. The market visit enabled them to connect with agents at the wholesale rice trading center in Wadan. The next step is to try and produce better quality rice and assess how that would work with this new market link.



Farmers interact with wholesale market actors in Wadan to observe trading practices and pricing mechanisms.

For the upcoming cycle, farmer volunteers from the Bogale group will mechanically dry their harvest and assess the quality. Other farmers who have committed to store their harvest in GRET communal storage will try to sell their produce in the Yangon market. The group from Maubin will try and learn about adjusting timing of harvest by using threshers and short-duration varieties. An LA meeting will be scheduled at the end of the 2014 monsoon season to reflect and share about this learning cycle.

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Rica Flor (standing, right) facilitates a reflection activity among participants.