



SPARKING A RICE REVOLUTION

Expert farmers in Vietnam train neighbors in better ways to grow more.

BY CHRIS HUFSTADER | WINTER 2017

On a bright October morning, the view out the door of Dang Thi Hong's home in Vietnam is a world of green. She's surrounded by rice fields, and two weeks before harvest the plants are chest high and a vibrant, verdant, green in the early light.

Hong walks through her rice plants in the sweet, windless morning air. Apart from briefly checking for pests or a little weeding, she's mostly just waiting. "We'll sell the entire two-ton harvest," she says. It's her second harvest of the year, and because she has already grown enough rice to eat in the first one, all of this second crop of a special variety of sticky rice will be for sale at a premium price to help fund her son's university studies in Hanoi, a few hours south of her home in Thai Nguyen province.

Having this extra income is new for Hong—and a far cry from the starvation a fellow farmer warned her of in 2010 when she

started using the System of Rice Intensification, or SRI. It's a different way of growing rice that encourages farmers to sow fewer seeds and give each seedling more space. This practice allows the plants to get more nutrients and sun, develop stronger roots, and grow more grains of rice. The plants are bigger and can better resist bugs and diseases. So in addition to planting fewer seeds farmers can also save money on pesticides.

PROOF

When Hong first heard about SRI, she and her husband were not sure it would work.

"We were skeptical," she says. "We were afraid that reducing the amount of seed would not get the same results." After training funded by Oxfam through the local branch of the Agriculture Ministry, she and her husband tried SRI on a small portion

of the nearly one acre of land they farm. "At harvest time we saw the increased yield," Hong says. "We were happy."

Hong's farm is divided into eight *saos*—chunks of about 3,875 square feet. Each used to produce 396 pounds of rice, but with SRI Hong is able to harvest 528 pounds from each *sao*, an increase of roughly 33 percent.

Hong volunteered to help other members of the local farmers union to learn SRI. But her neighbors were as skeptical as she had been; at one meeting a man stood up and told all the others "If we follow her advice, we'll all starve."

Hong was not discouraged: "I formed a team, and together we learned SRI collectively. After they all saw the results they agreed to try it."

KEY ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

Hong is what Vietnam's Agriculture Ministry calls a "key farmer." In addition to relying on key farmers to demonstrate SRI, the ministry is also encouraging them to take on an array of community roles, broadening local exposure to agricultural ideas.

With help from Oxfam, the Thai Nguyen Farmers' Union and the ministry have been training key farmers in leadership skills. Hong, for instance, also heads a village animal husbandry committee.

"In two years, key farmers arranged more than 700 community consultation meetings without any outside assistance from Oxfam or any other organization," says Luong Dinh Lan, a program manager for Oxfam in Vietnam.

SRI INVESTMENT RESULTS

Through its collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Oxfam has reached 800,000 small-scale farmers and trained them in SRI, adding \$100 million to the rural economy. Over 10 years, Oxfam's \$3.5 million investment in the initiative has returned \$30 for every \$1 invested. The government and other development organizations contributed \$286 million to the farming economy through promotion of SRI.

Although all farmers in her village now use SRI, Hong says some farmers found it hard to change: with tiny plots of land



ABOVE: Along with working in her rice fields, Dang Thi Hong, left, a mother of three sons, also raises pigs and chickens. Savann Querm/Oxfam America

that they depend on for all their food, they can't afford to make a mistake. That's why when one family of ethnic Tay farmers moved to Hong's village, they watched other farmers for four years before daring to try SRI on their two-*sao* plot.

But when Hong finally convinced them, SRI began to change their life: They now have money to invest in livestock and in their house. "They said it was less work and less

investment, but the outcome was a higher yield," says Hong. "They said to me, 'It's good you taught us this method,' and I told them I was happy for them. It's what I felt from the bottom of my heart."



DO ONE MORE THING TODAY

Your support makes it possible for Oxfam and our partners to deliver programs in sustainable agriculture systems like SRI that help farmers work their own way out of poverty. But you can also fight hunger and protect the environment right in your own kitchen: Check out our Eat for Good initiative, and learn about five simple ways you can cook and eat that can make a difference for people all over the world.

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