

# A Farmer's Perspective on SRI from SRI LANKA

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I am very happy to have this opportunity to present my views as a farmer who practices SRI at this very important conference. I learned paddy cultivation during my childhood from my father. Then I learned its science at school and tried to practice it according to the recommended methods. Having experienced financial losses with conventional rice-growing methods, I turned to the practice of environmentally friendly paddy cultivation, seeking both to save production costs and to preserve ecological values.

I first came to know about the System of Rice Intensification during early 2000 from reading a newspaper article by Dr. Gamini Batuwitige, who was interviewing Joeli Barison from Madagascar who visited Sri Lanka on behalf of CIIFAD and was hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture. Since then I have been practicing SRI in all of my paddy fields.

Not only have I obtained some remarkable yields hitherto not produced in those fields—10 to 15 t/ha—but also I have been getting as high satisfaction from my farming as a person can have in this profession. I feel that my relationship to the ecosystem and to my fellow farmers and human beings is now more fulfilling.

At this time of crisis in paddy farming in Sri Lanka arising from problems of economic profitability and environmental effects, I voluntarily manage a training centre that offers extension information to farmers from all around the island for the expansion of SRI and the use of other ecologically favorable practices, while operating my paddy farm of 1.5 hectares.

During the past 13 years we have been trying to find environmentally friendly solutions for paddy farming in Sri Lanka, and we have indeed been able to get some good results from such approaches. However, it has not been possible to obtain yields from such efforts that are comparable to the results that we could get so far from SRI.

Why do I accept SRI as a farmer? From my experience, I have observed that the rice plant becomes a healthier plant once the basic SRI practices are adopted. There is nothing that brings more satisfaction to the farmer than the sight of a really healthy paddy field. At present, the excessive use of agrochemicals is making rice production less attractive to farmers the world over, both in terms of cost and in terms of health. However, not seeing alternative, it has been difficult to reduce the use of chemicals. The yields we obtained during the past 13 years when not using agrochemicals were low. We can change this now by practicing SRI. SRI is giving us promising outcomes, showing that the use of pesticides can be avoided. We use the principles of biodynamic farming and practice timely cultivation with SRI.

## Evident Advantages of SRI

The favorable results that we have obtained from using SRI methods include:

1. Greater stability of production, getting a better harvest in water-stressed seasons with SRI even when other farmers do not get any significant yield. This is more important to farmers than maximum yields.
2. Use of less water, thereby reducing demands on the ecosystem and reducing conflicts among farmers.
3. Opportunity to use the best quality seeds, and ones most appropriate to local conditions, since SRI requires very few seeds and we can be very selective.
4. Growing rice in ways that are completely environmentally friendly.
5. More reliance on organic fertilizers, and
6. Improved soil biological conditions which have increased the macro- and micro-organisms in the soil, facilitating land preparation and even reducing its cost.

Beyond this, SRI has made it possible for us farmers to build up a network of country expertise and methodologies for its extension, as well as to participate in a network of information-sharing that goes beyond the boundaries of Sri Lanka. These are gratifying developments.

## Problems for Farmers

We in Sri Lanka are facing several serious problems as paddy farmers. First, there is the high cost of production, which continues to rise. Much of our expenses are for purchase of external inputs. Also, the inability to maintain biodiversity at an optimal level in our rice paddies is another serious problem, contributing to greater occurrence of pests and diseases. There are various other problems also created by the use of agrochemicals and the use of poor or defective farming methods.

Another problem arises from the inability in paddy farming to deal with changing weather conditions and risks. Paddy farmers suffer from these conditions and from pest attacks growing to epidemic proportions. We need systems of production that are robust and not dependent on large amounts of water. There are also considerable losses that farmers experience caused by the deteriorating quality of rice produced, increased rates of unfilled grains, and poor storage.

In the present methods of farming, there is no protection for the micro and macro organisms in the soil environment. Serious damage is caused by the use of weedicides in soil preparation, by those types of chemicals that kill all weeds before planting, and other weedicides that are used for selective killing of weeds after planting.

It is true that the SRI system of farming does not have 100% solutions to all of these problems. But it has been established through our own experience that the SRI farming system has more solutions than do any other systems.

As to the question of increased labor requirements with SRI, except for weed control we find that this system can be actually labor-saving compared to others. If we stop spending so much time doing chemical sprayings of the crop, we then have time available for doing the requisite weeding. The time demands for weeding can be minimized by using the most appropriate types of hand weeders that are suitable to different soil conditions and by making certain adjustments and adaptations in their use. We should count as a plus the increase in yields that result from more frequent and better weeding, rather than see this activity only as a cost.

## Methods of Dissemination and Research

The methodology adopted in Sri Lanka for extending SRI to farmers is one of farmer-to-farmer sharing of information, supporting free interaction among participants. We offer detailed practical training, on demand, regarding every operation of SRI at our Ecological Farming Center in Mellawalana. We are grateful for support from CIIFAD to make audio-visual equipment available with which presentations of field operations can be made more effective.

The popularity of SRI methodology is now going beyond the current capacities of our farm, as we are called upon to respond to requests for practical training and interactions with farmers from almost all the districts in the country. With visitors now coming from abroad to visit us, our work in innovative farming and training has become recognized by several agencies and in publications with information published about our work.

We should reconsider the present approach to most agricultural research being conducted on paddy rice. At the result of most of this research is recommendations that call for increased use of inputs and lead to more and more mechanization or use of chemicals. In contrast, the fundamental principles applied with SRI fit nicely with the dynamics of nature. This system helps us to make farming more compatible with natural processes, which is one reason why SRI can lower the costs of production.

In Sri Lanka and in many other countries, the availability of food and the food security of millions of people around the world will continue to depend heavily on what happens in paddy farming. I strongly believe, as a farmer, that moving back to a more natural and sustainable, low-cost approach in paddy farming is an essential part of any effort to create a better world for all people.