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Rice research starts to pay off

By Robert Zeigler

Việt Nam is one of the most important rice exporters in the world, second only to Thailand in recent years. Rice contributes significantly to the national income and is a staple food for all Vietnamese.

As is the case with all Asians, Vietnamese people typically eat rice everyday – usually at every meal. Rice is such an integral part of life that its consumption is often taken for granted – not just as a staple food but as a driver of national food security, regional political stability, economic growth, and its potential to elevate whole communities out of poverty.

But, when rice prices rise, people start to pay attention, because higher rice prices directly affect individuals and their families. Higher rice prices reduce people's capacity to purchase other essential foods and they have less money to invest in health care, housing, and other basics. Alternatively, when rice prices are affordable people have much greater potential to meet their basic needs and then invest in other areas such as micro-business and education – drivers of economic growth.

Without Việt Nam's contribution to global trade, regional political stability and food security would be threatened. Compared with

that of other commodities, the international market for rice is "thin" – meaning most rice is produced and consumed domestically, leaving little for international trade.

So, aside from playing an important national role in feeding its own people, Việt Nam is a critical global player in international rice trade. Changes in international trade dynamics, such as the Thai government's recent decision to implement a rice mortgage programme to pay higher prices to Thai farmers for their rice, can affect trade globally, international prices, and thus the affordability of rice for consumers everywhere.

In 1985, Việt Nam achieved self-sufficiency in rice and then went on to continue to increase its production due to supportive Government policies, and its adoption of better crop management strategies and new high-yielding rice varieties.

In September, the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) released a report looking at the impact and value of rice breeding work of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) between 1985 and 2009 in three key rice-growing countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, and Việt Nam. The report mentioned that over this time and directly due to IRRI's contributions, rice

yields in Việt Nam increased by 9.8 per cent in southern Việt Nam in the Mekong Delta, which produces more than 50 per cent of Việt Nam's rice.

The annual value of IRRI's rice breeding benefits across all three countries studied by ACIAR is US\$1.46 billion – a staggering amount considering that IRRI's annual revenue across this time was around US\$40 million. Around 42 per cent of these benefits – or around \$610 million every year – flowed directly to Việt Nam.

Of course, Việt Nam has made additional investment in its own institutes, scientists, and extension officers to build their expertise and capacity to add value to IRRI's breeding work. Việt Nam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), various universities, and other agencies help test IRRI's rice and adapt it to local conditions and needs. Then they do the hard work of getting the seed of these new varieties into the hands of farmers for planting and production.

In addition, the ACIAR study notes that their evaluation of IRRI's impact in Việt Nam accounts only for IRRI's rice breeding work and that, if the other areas of activities had been included, the impact and value of benefits would have been much more.

For example, with our Viet-

namese partners, IRRI helped MARD develop the *Three Reductions, Three Gains (Ba Giảm, Ba Tăng)* programme that motivated rice farmers in the Cửu Long (Mekong) Delta to modify three resource management practices – seed, fertiliser, and insecticide use. This programme has won multiple awards and has contributed to rice yield increases in southern Việt Nam. We are also looking forward to a plant hopper workshop that will be held in Hà Nội in December that will support efforts to provide innovative and ecologically sustainable ways to reduce pest outbreaks of brown plant hoppers that have been damaging rice crops and have re-emerged in recent years in Việt Nam.

The ACIAR report has evaluated the dollar value of our rice breeding contribution to Việt Nam and demonstrated the value of investing in rice research and development. We look forward to future collaboration with Việt Nam to support the development of the rice sector there. — VNS

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