

Rice, more rice?

By Carly Learson

Every week ships enter Monrovia's Freeport laden with sacks of Chinese rice. In 2007 Liberia produced 40 per cent of the rice its people needed. Why, when the country has so much rainfall, more than nearly any other in the world, good conditions and fertile land, is there such a dependence on imported rice? This question has become the focus of UN agencies, including FAO, WFP and UNICEF, as they try to help the government of Liberia address the issue of food security.

Surveys show that annual consumption of rice in Liberia is around 240 kg per person. For every hectare of land planted, an average of 815 kg of rice is produced. For upland areas the yield is even lower. The average size of a plot of land, which is farmed either by one family or collectively, is 0.9 hectares, enough to feed only three people. Thus, at current levels, there are few reasons for a family to start planting rice when it is cheaper to buy Chinese rice while growing other crops to sell.

Dependence on imported rice has made Liberia vulnerable to rising food prices. But when it doesn't make sense for

an individual farmer to grow rice, self-sufficiency on a national scale becomes difficult to achieve.

This is not a new phenomenon. President Tolbert was faced with a similar market dynamic. Almost every Liberian was buying imported rice while farmers were planting other crops which were subsidised by the Government to encourage exporting. The Government recognised the vulnerability of its position and intervened by applying huge import tariffs, effectively doubling the price of imported rice, in the hope that this would make it more viable for poor farmers to start growing their own rice rather than buying it. But the decision simply meant rural people couldn't afford to eat, a consequence that led to the 1979 rice riots believed to be the precursor of the civil war.

Now the sharply rising food prices are making many Liberians unable to afford enough rice for their families. Since December 2007 rice prices have risen by 60 per cent internationally. Given the failure of market intervention to force people onto the land, the Government, in collaboration with UN agencies, is instead focusing on increasing productivity. Liberia's yields are incredibly low at less than one tonne per hectare. The average yield in

sub-Saharan Africa is 1,500 kg per hectare. Worldwide, average production is 3,500 kg per hectare.

Chinese rice is cheap because it is efficiently produced. Liberian rice is grown in some of the most labour-intensive, inefficient environments in the world. Chinese farmers have state-of-the-art equipment such as tractors, processing mills and harvesting machines, so that rice can quickly be planted, harvested and processed. Processed rice is transported on high-grade roads through an established logistics chain to an efficient port where it is shipped in bulk. In Liberia most rice farmers don't have a road connected to their farm, they have problems with pests and work is mostly done by hand. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is now working on implementing sustainable and effective programmes to increase the productivity of Liberian rice farms.

Rebecca Sumo and Lydia Flomo are two women who are trying to make rice farming work for them. Their 75-acre farm in Careysburg was bought for them by Oxfam. The rice is at harvesting stage, so they work by cutting the long stalks with a small knife.

Sumo, Flomo and the other women used to grow rice in Lofa before the war. When they fled as refugees they lost all their property. Now living in Monrovia, they got together to form the Gbarlin Women's Cooperative, and approached Oxfam to get help to start their farm again. "We started when we were in the refugee camp," Lydia says. "We begin to cry around for help. Farming is hard work – it takes a woman to do this."

Back in Lofa they used to thresh the rice manually, using their feet to separate the grain from the husk. On their new farm FAO has provided two threshing machines, built by local blacksmiths. For a farm like this the machines are ideal. There is no access to the farm by road, so tractors and large scale threshing machinery is impossible to transport. When the rice is packed into the 50kg sacks they will



carry it back to the road on their heads. The women at the Careysburg farm are dealing with huge challenges to make rice farming work.

Further into the country's interior the problems only increase. The poor state of the roads makes transport prohibitively expensive, so rice is generally grown for subsistence only. Even then the pre- and post-harvest losses add a huge burden. Pre-harvest losses include crops being destroyed by animals such as grass cutters (groundhogs), which eat the entire crop, and birds, which attack the grains. The main culprits of post-harvest losses are rats, which find their way into huts where the grains are stored. Estimates put average losses from rats at up to 19 per cent of the total harvest.

FAO has developed cheap and effective ways to tackle pre- and post-harvest losses. One farm that benefits from FAO belongs to Tamil Gortor. Until recently birds had been regularly attacking the farm located in the jungles of Bong County. Today however, the farm is eerily silent. That's because FAO has provided them with 352 metres of reflective tape, which have been strung across the crops. The tape, shimmering red and silver, seems to instil mortal fear in the birds, keeping them away from the farm since Tamil strung it up. A fence has been built round the perimeter and trap wires, also from FAO, installed to catch the groundhogs. The harvested rice is now stored in a structure up on stilts, with zinc sheets attached to the legs. The zinc is incredibly slippery, and rats cannot get past it to reach the rice. With tape costing just US\$4 per roll, FAO has been able to help 81,000 farmers across Liberia through the provision of pest management inputs and training.

"Already we have seen higher yields where the zinc, reflective tape and trap wires are being used," says J. Kanie Merfee from FAO. "It's great to be able to make such a difference for so little cost." Tamil is optimistic about her farm. "The help has been welcome," she says. With the help of FAO, Tamil and others like her may be able to move beyond subsistence farming and start growing rice for sale. And that may lead to fewer ships with Chinese rice docking at Monrovia's Freeport. ♦

