

PUBLIC RELEASE: 15-MAR-2006

# The Green Revolution comes to Laos

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INTERNATIONAL RICE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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But the spark for this revolution came from half a world away, from the government of another small, mountainous land-locked country - Switzerland.

It was the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) that provided the financial resources needed for a 16-year effort - led jointly by the Lao national rice research system and the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). The accomplishments of the project, which effectively closes in September, were celebrated during a completion workshop in Laos this week.

Between 1990 and 2004, rice production in Laos increased from 1.5 million to 2.5 million tons - an average annual growth rate of more than 5%, making the small underdeveloped nation one of Asia's star performers in rice research and development.

This increase in production - largely attributed to the adoption of Lao modern varieties - has been valued at \$8 million to \$19 million per year, with households adopting these varieties having more than triple the cash income of households growing traditional varieties. A third of Laos' lowland rice area is planted with these improved varieties today, pushing average rice yields up 35 percent from 2.3 tons/ha in 1989 to 3.1 tons/ha today - well above the average yields of bigger neighbors such as Thailand.

"What's particularly impressive about these achievements is the commitment of the SDC in providing such long-term support, and the hard work and dedication of Lao rice researchers and government officials," said Robert S. Zeigler, IRRI director general. "Seventeen of the 18 modern varieties now being used in Laos were developed inside the country."

Since 1990, more than 4,000 training opportunities involving Lao personnel have extensively boosted Laos's rice research and training capacity and played a key role in establishing a rice research network covering the entire nation. "IRRI is very proud of the role it has played in supporting this achievement, but the real credit must go to the Lao rice research community and the Swiss government for providing the financial support," Dr. Zeigler added.

"Fifteen years ago, most Laotians were subsistence rice farmers and Laos was a net importer of rice," Dr. Zeigler said. "Now the country is in the second stage of rice-based economic development, where the intensification of production is enough to meet local market demands. With further research and development, Laos can move into the third stage, where lowland rice exports create a sustainable source of revenue and help fuel economic growth, as has happened already in Vietnam and Thailand."

Although the Swiss-financed Lao-IRRI Project is nearing its end, much work remains to be done. IRRI is to base its Greater Mekong Regional Office in Laos. "We foresee that Laos will reap substantial benefits from increased involvement in regional rice research initiatives, and will play an important role in the overall development of the Greater Mekong Region," Dr. Zeigler concluded.

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The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is the world's leading rice research and training center. Based in the Philippines and with offices in 10 other Asian countries, it is an autonomous, nonprofit institution focused on improving the well-being of present and future generations of rice farmers and consumers, particularly those with low incomes, while preserving natural resources. IRRI is one of 15 centers funded through the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), an association of public and private donor agencies. Please visit the Web sites of the CGIAR ([www.cgiar.org](http://www.cgiar.org)) or Future Harvest Foundation ([www.futureharvest.org](http://www.futureharvest.org)), a nonprofit organization that builds awareness and supports food and environmental research.

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INTERNATIONAL RICE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION/ECONOMICS   AGRICULTURE   PLANT SCIENCES

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