

Rajendra Uprety, an agriculture extension officer in Nepal, came across an article in LEISA Magazine on SRI, the System of Rice Intensification. It was new to him and made him curious. He contacted the author for more information, and then decided to try it out. The results were amazing. Now, eight years later, he has successfully introduced SRI in the region where he works, much to the benefit of the farmers he works with. He was also encouraged to write two articles for LEISA Magazine himself, and to participate in a World Bank competition, which he won!



The large impact of a small article

Rajendra Uprety

One February afternoon, almost eight years ago, I was going through a copy of the LEISA Magazine, looking for a good story to read. A photo of a rice plant, that seemed unusually big, attracted me to read one of



The article that inspired Mr. Uprety. It was called "Update on the System of Rice Intensification" and appeared in LEISA Magazine, Vol. 16.4, December 2000.

Nepal, and the single largest contributor to the national GDP, the yields in my country are low, and most districts are not able to produce sufficient food for their people. At the time, the price of chemical fertilizers had risen again and was by then too costly for most small and marginal farmers. We were therefore very interested in a low cost technology which could help us increase rice yields.

The article did not include a detailed description of the SRI method, the System of Rice Intensification. But at the bottom of it I found the e-mail address of Norman Uphoff. I did not have much experience in writing to foreigners, so I was unsure and thought about it quite a bit, before deciding to write a short e-mail to request more information about

the SRI method. I was very surprised when I got a quick response from Mr Uphoff. He sent a lot of detailed information, and also described the experiences seen in other countries. The article, together with his e-mail, was my first source of information about SRI.

At that time I had just returned home after completing my Master of Science degree, and I was looking for a new job. I was initially planning to go to the capital city, Kathmandu, but the SRI information I had found made me think of trying it out somewhere in the field. So I asked the secretary of the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry if I could start working at the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) in Morang. He was happy to hear my ideas, and

the articles. That short story, written by Norman Uphoff and his colleagues at the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture, and Development (CIIFAD), was surprising and particularly interesting to me. I was especially attracted to the possibility of obtaining higher rice yields by using regular varieties, without increasing the use of chemical fertilizers, or without additional investments. While rice is the main food crop in



Photo: DADO Morang

Rajendra Uprety (left) shows the results of using SRI (System of Rice Intensification) to technicians and farmers.



Photo: Norman Uphoff

A comparison of SRI vs. conventional rice production in the Al-Mishkhab Rice Research Station near Najaf, Iraq.

The positive results we found, together with my increased confidence, encouraged me to enter the "Development Market Place 2005 Award" competition organised by the World Bank. We won the top prize, and the money we received helped us disseminate SRI in other parts of the country. We published a booklet and also a poster, and circulated both all through Nepal. Those publications motivated individuals and other organisations to try out SRI in different areas. One of these, for example, was CARE, an international NGO; another one was Surya Nepal, a large scale industrial conglomerate. Responding to this growing interest, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) organised a one-day experience sharing workshop in Kathmandu (December 2005). My office, together with several governmental and non-governmental organisations, participated in it, and presented the results seen until then. This was a very effective way of disseminating information on SRI, reaching wider areas and farmers and professionals of all sorts. Our office produces a monthly newsletter and a weekly radio programme, with information on SRI and other extension topics. In this way, we are very happy to continue exchanging information and experiences. This is still spreading around the world!

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Mr. Uprety himself later wrote an article in LEISA Magazine, "Performance of SRI in Nepal", which was published as a Field Note in Vol. 21.2, June 2005. His second article, "SRI takes root in Nepal", was published in Vol. 22.4 of the magazine, December 2006. All articles are freely available through <http://ileia.leisa.info>

SRI today

SRI is a method of rice cultivation developed more than 20 years ago in Madagascar. It is based on a set of practices which enhance plant growth and development, and increase yields. It does not increase the use of inputs, but rather reduces their use. The main principles include using younger seedlings (8-12 days old) and wider spacing (one seedling per hill, with 25 x 25 cm as a starting distance). Another principle is to avoid continuous flooding, to encourage the healthy growth of roots and soil micro-organisms.

This method is increasingly being supported by donors and governments. The World Bank has a major project in Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of India, with a goal of 250 000 hectares over 5 years, while the state government itself has set a target of 750 000 hectares for 2008/2009 season (and has already reported 466 000 hectares last December). This is the most extensive uptake, although the province of Sichuan in China reports 204 000 hectares for the 2008/2009 season, and Zhejiang province reports over 130 000 hectares. This has grown since three years ago, when the number of farmers practising SRI was estimated at 100 000, and the total area covered under 50 000 hectares.

Estimates of this sort need to consider the difficulties in determining who is practising SRI. According to Norman Uphoff, "SRI is a matter of degree – how many of the recommended practices are being used, and how well – rather than kind". So while the number of farmers who are using SRI practices to some extent is probably twice as high as those who are fully engaged in it, "I feel comfortable saying that there are by now over 1 million farmers using the methods in a verifiable way, and on over 1 million hectares". These numbers are expected to increase further in the coming years. (JCT)

transferred me to the Morang office.

Although Morang is my home district, I had never met most of the farmers there. I wanted to start trying SRI with a few innovative farmers, but even I had little confidence in such an unbelievable story. At last one farmer accepted to try it in a small plot (100 m²), and we grew seedlings out of a handful of Radha-12 rice seeds. When we transplanted the 10-day seedlings, at a 30 x 30 cm distance, the field looked empty and sad. After two weeks of regular farm management practices (such as weeding) the whole field started to look better: all plants were looking healthy and attractive. The plants' development seemed amazing, and by the end we had a very attractive rice field. We harvested the equivalent of more than 7 t/ha, more than double that of the surrounding rice fields.

That small trial gave me a lot of confidence, and encouraged me and other DADO staff to keep on trying SRI, in even bigger plots. In the second season our trials produced more than 9 t/ha. I then prepared a short report, detailing our work and our results, and sent it to Norman Uphoff and other interested people. One of the directors of the Department of Agriculture and Cooperatives visited our SRI fields and then invited me to make a presentation at a national agronomist's workshop in Nepal. Mr Uphoff liked the report I sent, and suggested that I elaborate it and send it to the LEISA Magazine, where it was published. Seeing it in print made me feel that I was capable of writing something in English, and sharing it with a wider audience. I was very happy to receive several e-mails and letters from different countries. The magazine served as a great networking tool for people from around the world to be in contact.

Photo: Chutiporn



Do you have a similar story to tell?

We are looking for interesting experiences to feature in this section. Tell us about an article you have read in LEISA Magazine, and how it inspired you to try a new idea, or test out a technology – and then what happened next. We would like to hear about why we should feature you or your community. Send us a 300 word outline about your work to jubilee@ileia.nl clearly marked "Inspired by".