

TRIP REPORT FROM SRI VISIT TO MYANMAR -- JUNE 2002

Norman Uphoff -- June 14, 2002

After a visit to Sri Lanka at the beginning of the month, I spent three days in Myanmar, hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Metta Development Foundation. This is a very quick report, not as detailed as my usual trip reports.

Seng-Raw Lahpi and Humayun Kabir from Metta Foundation met me at the airport and helped organize a very productive visit. Mr. Winn Kyi, Deputy General Manager of the Myanmar Agricultural Service, arranged for me to give a seminar on SRI at the Ministry on the first day of the visit. This was very well attended and I think well received. Humayun could reinforce my presentation with data and pictures from northern Myanmar where Metta has had good SRI results as he reported at the Sanya conference in China two months earlier.

On the second day, I visited Bago, one of the centers for rice production, and gave a seminar on SRI, again reinforced by Humayun, to about 25 farmers and a number of Ministry officials. The Deputy Manager was very supportive because in recent years he has started experimenting with 15-day-old seedlings, planted singly and widely spaced, with very good results. Around Bago, there are problems of excess water during the rainy season that will require some adaptations in crop management or infrastructure for best utilization of SRI.

Winn Kyi said that only his General Manager and this Deputy Manager had been interested in SRI when he brought information on this back to Myanmar after he and I got acquainted in Sri Lanka in January. He said that after the seminar, just about everybody is interested to try it. The areas on northern Myanmar where Metta is working have better-drained soils, so it will be easier to introduce SRI there, but there is a lot of scope in the rest of the country.

On the drive to Bago, Humayun and I came up with a nice concept for thinking about SRI. In the U.S., we have a joke about there being two kinds of lawyers: can't-do lawyers and can-do lawyers. The first kind thinks of dozens of reasons why something cannot be done, given the various constraints set by existing laws and regulations. The second kind knows all these constraints, but approaches problems with an attitude of "how can we find a way to proceed successfully?"

Some of the questions raised at the previous day's seminar had suggested that there are similarly two kinds of agronomists: can't-do and can-do. The latter are needed for SRI, to consider realistically all of the problems and constraints with the goal of devising adaptations and strategies that can cope with difficulties and accordingly capitalize on SRI potentials.

The third day of the visit, my hosts thought that I should see some of their beautiful country while I was there, and I would have been a fool, as well as an ungrateful guest, to object. The drive through the Burmese countryside and the visits to ancient temples, some old, small and rustic, and the final evening visit to the huge, old Schwedagon Pagoda in central Yangon, more than a thousand years old, was splendid and very memorable.