

ECHO Asia Organized a Northern Thailand SRI Experience Workshop, June 2016

A two-day System of Rice Intensification (SRI) Workshop, conducted by ECHO Asia in Chiang Rai province during June 8-9, 2016, was successfully implemented with 42 participants from five countries; Thailand, Laos, Singapore, India, and USA. This number included 15 farmer representatives from northeastern provinces of Thailand, who are participants in the SRI Lower Mekong River Basin (SRI-LMB) project being implemented by the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok.

Workshop speakers included **Napaphan Jamnan** (Fah Mui), a farmer from Chiang Rai who has been successfully practicing SRI for many years; **Dr. K. N. Bhatt**, a professor from India who shared his experience in India with System of Finger Millet Intensification (SFMI), which is similar to SRI and focuses on finger millet; **Dr. Monamorn Preecharattana**, a lecturer from Mahidol University who has conducted SRI research in Northeast Thailand and who works as a self-identified 'Farmer Trainee'; and **Dr. Suphathida Aumtong**, a professor from Mae Jo University who shared what is being learned from Reduced-Water Rice Cultivation research.



SRI workshop participants at Fah Mui's rice paddies.

The workshop started with the fascinating and inspiring story of Fah Mui, who found herself struggling with debt after her husband's sudden death a few years ago. Amidst mounting problems, Fah Mui was trying to find a way to pay off her debt when she found out about the SRI rice farming technique. With no formal education and a background in agriculture, Fah Mui pursued SRI by self-taught methods of reading and practicing. To begin, she started SRI in only a few plots and planted the rest of her field with traditional rice farming methods. The SRI plots yielded a very good crop, so the following year she used SRI throughout her entire paddy field. Sadly, her field was flooded that year which destroyed almost of her crop. However, this obstacle didn't stop her ambition. She connected with a professor at one of leading universities in Bangkok, Thailand, and started growing SRI rice on his farm in Chiang Rai province. The 30 rai (about 12 acres) produced double, with some plots producing even triple, what was grown on her neighbors' traditionally-planted paddy fields. Today, Fah Mui sells organic rice and uses some of her rice to make instant "Gaba" rice powder. Her organic rice is sold at 300 Thai Baht (8.5 USD) per kilogram, while the market price for non-organic rice is 35 Thai Baht (1 USD) per kilogram. She sells her product online with assistance from her son who operates the social network page.



Napaphan Jamnan (Fah Mui)



Lt. Gen. Dr. Manit Boonprong presents certificate to Dr. Bhatt

The following speaker was Dr. Bhatt from Allahabad Central University in India. Dr. Bhatt shared information about the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and about his experience with the System of Finger Millet Intensification (SFMI). According to studies conducted in India, SRI can be applied to other crops, including vegetables. The idea and principles of SFMI (also known as the System of Crop Intensification, SCI, for other crops) is similar to SRI, but its practices are adapted for finger millet. Dr. Bhatt emphasized that finger millet is highly nutritious, drought-tolerant, offers a food-security solution for poor marginalized farmers, and gives resiliency in the face of climate change.

Dr. Monamorn is a university lecturer during the week and a farmer on the weekends, which has led her to open a social media page: "A Farmer Trainee". In spite of her daytime profession as a physics lecturer at Mahidol University, she practices SRI on Saturdays and Sundays on her rice paddies in Udonthani, a northeastern province of Thailand. She also has experimental plots in Nakhonratchasima province near Bangkok. Dr. Monamorn represents a new generation of farmers whose concerns include food security, which has led her to try SRI techniques under difficult farming conditions. She continues to keep learning and practicing. Some of Dr. Monamorn's findings from her SRI experiment were shared with the workshop audience, including considerations about modern technology versus local wisdom. She shared that while using a machine to make ridges along the paddy is faster than using manpower, it doesn't retain water in the paddy as well as the traditional way, which required more manpower and was slower, but traditionally retains water much better.



Boonsong Tharnsritong presents token of appreciation to Dr. Monamorn Preecharattana

Dr. Suphathida Aumtong from Mae Jo University shared her study on “Reduced Water Rice Cultivation”. Her research has been done to correspond with the expected changes in rice demand, environment, and socioeconomic conditions that affect the productivity and management of paddy soils in intensive rice systems in Asia. Water shortage is also a major problem for farming, so Dr. Suphathida is trying to find the way to grow rice productively while using less water. However, her study is still in the experimental stage. Once it becomes feasible, this technique may become one option for climate adaptation appropriate for Thai farmers.

Farmers from northeastern Thailand provinces, working with the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) SRI project, also shared their experiences, best practices they’ve discovered, and challenges related to SRI. Rice farming conditions in the northern and northeastern parts of Thailand are different, so it was good for farmers at the event to have a chance to exchange their knowledge, experiences, and challenges with one another. Participants also got some hands-on experience on the second day as they planted Fah Mui’s field – during which they learned that people in the north transplant rice moving forward while in the northeast, they transplant stepping backward.



Participants practiced SRI at Fah Mui’s rice paddy on the second day

This event was successfully organized and implemented as a testament to the collaboration from all stakeholders. The original plan was a small event with approximately 15-20 participants. Surprisingly, more than 40 people joined the workshop, with good feedback received from all. ECHO Asia will stay in touch about future SRI and SCI advances and techniques with ECHOcommunity and Asia publications. It hopes to organize a similar workshop in the near future which will include other interesting topics related to SRI, potentially including the use of the SRI techniques for other crops aside from rice.

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