

# Sustainable rice cultivation: Good for farmers, consumers, and planet

In Uganda, rice is an important staple food for many people, and the demand is rising sharply. Smallholder farmers are the backbone of the local rice production. But is rice cultivation sustainable? Poor cultivation practices of rice farmers contribute to climate change, as they generate large amounts of greenhouse gases: about 10% of global methane emissions come from rice paddies. How can production be boosted to meet the growing demand, while protecting the environment?

## The Sustainable Rice Platform Standard as the solution

The Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP) is a global multi-stakeholder partnership that wants to make rice farming more sustainable, from an economic, social and environmental perspective. Its Standard i.e. the SRP Standard for sustainable rice cultivation serves as a working definition for sustainable rice production and enables benchmarking and objective comparison of the sustainability of any rice system based on 41 requirements.

The SRP Standard covers the areas of farm management, pre-planting, water use, nutrient management, pest management, post-harvest, health & safety, and labour rights. It uses a scoring system that allows for a stepwise compliance to encourage and reward progress in improving agricultural practices. It is not a pass-fail standard. If a farmer scores at least 90 points and meets all the essential requirements, they can claim they produce 'Sustainably cultivated rice' and 'Working towards sustainable rice cultivation' can be used as a claim for farmers that score lower and only meet some essential requirements.



## Our experience with the SRP Standard

Since 2017, Rikolto has been testing and promoting the use of the SRP Standard (version 1.0) in 9 countries around the world. In Uganda, we have piloted the SRP Standard in two rice irrigation schemes in Butaleja district in Eastern Uganda: Doho Irrigation Scheme Farmers' Cooperative Society (DIFACOS) and Manafwa Basin Farmers' Cooperative Society (MBRFC).

In 2017, Rikolto carried out a baseline study to assess which SRP score the farmers would obtain with their practices before starting a pilot project to improve sustainable rice cultivation. The baseline study gave an average SRP score of 58, with an average of 13 missed thresholds, for the rice farmers in the Doho irrigation scheme. The Manafwa Basin Rice Farmers Cooperative on the other hand obtained an average baseline score of 59, with 13 missed thresholds.

The SRP pilot started in 2018 with 281 farmers from Doho, covering 401 hectares of land. By the end of 2019, the number of farmers involved in the pilot increased to 1,281 farmers. In Manafwa as well there was an increase in the farmers involved from 50 in 2018 to 129 farmers in 2019.

Analysing the data gathered in 2018 and 2019 SRP pilots, an impressive increase in SRP scores in both irrigation schemes can be noted: From an average of 58 to 87 in Doho and from 59 to 72 in Manafwa. There's also a decrease in the number of thresholds missed: From 13 on average down to 1 and 5 respectively in Doho and Manafwa. The increase in the SRP scores and reduction in the number of missed thresholds was possible due to farmers adopting more sustainable rice cultivation practices following training and coaching on the SRP standard.

## Good for the environment, good for business

In general, farmers are resistant to change their rice cultivation practices, because they fear the changes will result in increased costs and reduced yields. Mr. Hisa Nuhu, a rice farmer in Doho irrigation scheme, shares how overcoming his initial hesitation led to a positive experience with sustainable practices: "Before the pilot, I used to burn the straws. I also used inorganic fertilizer to improve the fertility of my soil

because I believed that these practices would help me get higher yields. My perspective has gradually changed after receiving guidance from the farmer guides. I decided to try out and incorporate back the straw in the rice field, and I reduced the use of inorganic fertilizer. I was surprised that I actually got the same yield, at a much lower cost".



Farmers in Butaleja District producing rice following the SRP Standard. Photo by Bob Nuwagira

There is also an interest from the private sector in sustainably cultivated rice, which plays an important role in incentivising sustainable rice cultivation. Since 2019, Rikolto has been matching farmer organisations practising sustainable rice cultivation with private companies, such as SWT Tanners Limited, that are conscious about the environment and climate change. Such market opportunities go a long way in addressing the farmers' concerns that there might be only a limited market for rice produced following the SRP standard.



Interest from the private sector in sustainably cultivated rice incentivises farmers to change their practices. Photo by Bob Nuwagira

## Future plans: Improving and expanding the pilot

Building on the success of the sustainable rice cultivation pilot in Doho and Lwoba Irrigation schemes in Butaleja, Rikolto wants to further improve the way it supports farmers and rice value chain actors to change their practices and expand the SRP pilot. The next major steps towards working for sustainable rice sector transformation are:

- Upscaling and outscaling the SRP Standard to other organisations and districts, including Bulambuli, Kween, Nakapiripirit, Bugiri, and Kapelebyong in Eastern Uganda, and Amolatar and Otuke in Northern Uganda.
- Starting to monitor the impact of applying the standard by measuring selected performance indicators in all Rikolto facilitated SRP projects. The selected indicators are: Income, labour productivity, grain productivity, nitrogen use efficiency, biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions reduction, and food safety.
- Deepening business relations between SRP rice producers and private companies, such as SWT Tanners Limited and other companies.
- Presenting lessons and success stories to policy makers and all relevant stakeholders in the rice sector to push for wide-scale adoption of the standard.
- Facilitating business cases with youth-led SMEs to provide innovative services to rice market actors such as farmer organisations and processors.
- Partnering with service providers, one of which is Peterson Control Union, for mobile data collection.

## About Rikolto

Rikolto is an international network organization with more than 40 years of experience in partnering with farmer organisations and food chain stakeholders across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The question that guides our work is: 'What will we eat tomorrow?'. How can we guarantee that future generations retain access to affordable quality food? Rikolto firmly believes that small-scale farmers, who produce 70% of our food worldwide, are part of the solution.

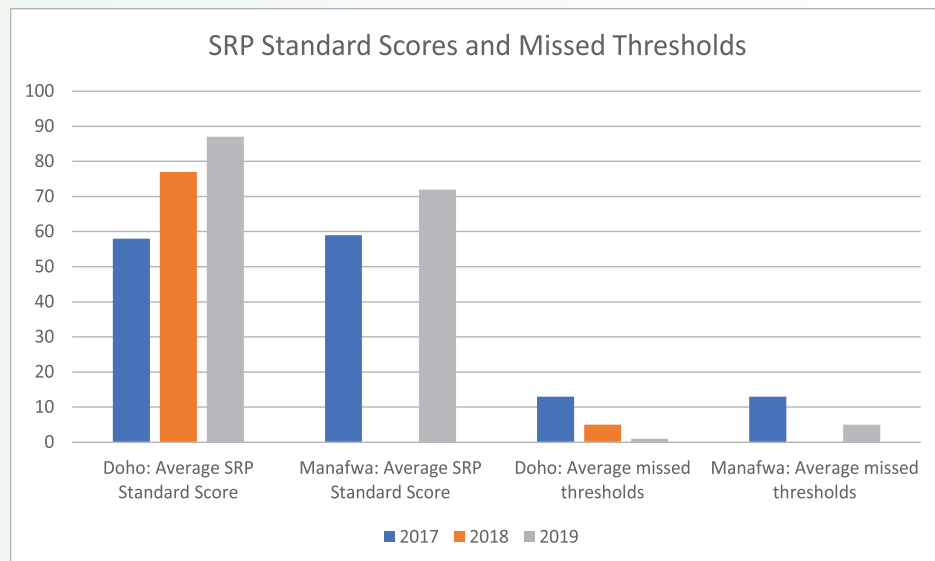
The rice team in Uganda comprises of four experienced and dynamic staff: The Regional Rice Cluster Coordinator is based in Kampala, and three Business Advisors are based in our field offices in Mbale and Dokolo.

## What Rikolto in Uganda can offer

- Training and coaching in rolling out the SRP Standard with Farmer Organisations and Private Companies
- Facilitating the measurement of different SRP Performance Indicators, including income, productivity, water use and nutrient use efficiency, greenhouse gas reduction, biodiversity, and food safety
- Facilitating inclusive business relations between farmer organisations and private companies for sustainable rice
- Facilitating retailer engagement for sustainable rice
- Capacity building of Farmer Organisations for aggregation, data management, internal control systems
- Facilitation of multi-stakeholder dialogues for upscaling and policy influencing

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