

Boosting rice yields

TUESDAY, 21 JUNE 2011 15:01
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CAMBODIA'S average rice yields sit below most regional neighbours, though experts say improved farming methods would assist with boosting harvests of the staple crop.

The Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture introduced the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) growing methods to Cambodia in 2000 with the aim of increasing productivity of farmland, though some say take-up across the Kingdom has been slow.

With some 60 to 65 percent of the Kingdom's population directly dependant on growing rice to generate income, increasing harvests translates directly to income growth for the majority of the domestic population, according to CEDAC President **Yaing Sang Koma**.

SRI farming involves measures such as transplanting seedlings from the nursery at a younger age than practised in conventional farming, and planting the seedlings further apart in a more disciplined pattern. Proponents of the SRI system say it decreases the need for costly inputs, while making land more productive.

"SRI increases productivity of land and labour by using less seeds and fertilizer," said Yaing Sang Koma.

Improved farming methods would increase domestic yields and incomes, he said, adding Cambodia generally lags behind neighbours in production.

The average Cambodian yield per hectare sat at about 2.75 tonnes, below that of regional countries such as Laos and Thailand, according to a 2010 report from the United States Department of Agriculture. But farmers in Prey Veng province say the introduction of improved farming techniques has helped boost yields.

Kruol village Chief Heoung Chab said SRI has resulted in increased productivity for farmers since its introduction last year. "Before we used to yield two tonnes [per hectare], but now we are yielding four tonnes," he said.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries first set up a national SRI secretariat to promote the techniques in 2004, though efforts to spread SRI methods in Cambodia are often donor-driven.

Oxfam Cambodia has provided US\$180,000 over three years to local NGO Partnership for Development in Kampuchea to introduce the SRI method to Prey Veng and Svay Rieng provinces. Oxfam officials say they have trained 58 of Kruol village's 358 families in SRI-style farming, but aims to double the number this year.

Kruol village farmer Chea Yos said he was initially skeptical about the methods after receiving SRI training.

"I went to the training and I did a small experiment and after, I looked at one rice seedling and counted forty-one sprouts; normally, two or three seedlings only have about ten sprouts total."

Although some 100,000 Cambodian farmers currently use the method, officials said promoting a wider take-up of SRI farming was a challenge.

Oxfam Regional Communication Officer Soleak Seang says that it can be difficult to change peoples' growing methods, as some farmers have used the same practices their entire lives. "It takes time to spread the word around the communities."



A woman in Prey Veng province tends a rice field, which is planted in the SRI grid pattern style. PHOTO SUPPLIED
Prey Veng province