Crazy? Not at all!

Although hardly enough to meet the national demand, rice yields in Peru are high, reflecting an apparently efficient production system. Working together with other farmers, and not always with the national research and extension system, farmers' initiatives are showing that a much more efficient way is possible.

Divar Moya Zavaleta

"Not only have I spent less money on water and seeds; I have also seen much higher yields."
Photo: Divar Moya

I have been growing rice since 1998, on my own farm at Fundo Santo Tomas, approximately 600 km north of Lima. This is in the Lambayeque-Chancay valley, one of the rivers that cross the desert coast of Peru. Rice is one of the main crops in this area, which benefits from the presence of one of the largest water reservoirs in the country. Average yields in Lambayeque are around eight tons/ha.

In 2004 I came across an old magazine that included an interview with Angel Fernandez, a Peruvian researcher. There he spoke of SRI and of its many advantages, referring to examples from different parts of the world. Intrigued, I asked every extension agent I met, but they all said that it was impossible, and actually silly, to try transplanting young seedlings at larger distances, or to think that rice could be produced with less than the recommended 10,000 m^3 of water per hectare. I met Ing. Fernandez in 2008 and asked him to come and talk to us, so I organised a seminar that was attended by 75 of my neighbours. This lecture, together with information he brought from Cuba, convinced me to try SRI in my fields in the 2008-2009 season.

My neighbours immediately called me "loco", or crazy, for trying to change what apparently is an efficient system. But the results have been surprising, showing that the traditional way of growing rice is not so efficient. I needed only 6,500 m^3 of water per hectare, saving 35% of the amount that I would normally use. Instead of the 80 kg of seed regularly needed, I used only 6 kg. It is true that I needed more help, especially for transplanting the seedlings and for weeding. But these extra costs have largely been covered by the additional income we have seen. Not only have I spent less money on water and seeds; I have also seen much higher yields. Since 2009, my fields average the equivalent of 15 tons/ha.

Who's "loco"? I was convinced that these results would be more than enough to convince all my neighbours, yet this has not been the case. One of the factors behind this may be that most of them are older, and therefore less willing to try new ideas (or less willing

Ensuring high-quality seedlings. Photos: Agro-Corporación COMFIA

to go to the field quite so often, and see what is actually happening there). Most importantly it seems that up to 90% of rice farmers in Lambayeque depend on other "pieces" of the production chain for their decisions: those who sell inputs, those who provide credit, or those who buy the produce. We all find it hard to acknowledge that, even before we sow the seeds, they own the production process – and try to resist changes in the field. Equally sad is the lack of interest by the local authorities, most of whom hardly ever go out to the fields. They are even telling us that we should stop producing rice, as this should only be done in the Amazon region of the country, where more water is available.

Yet, I am making money, and I plan to continue doing so. Last year we started adding compost to our fields. I am saving even more money by not buying fertilizers, and my idea is to start selling organic rice soon. We are also trying some small hand weeders which make this task less cumbersome. And I am interested in improving our irrigation system so as to be even more efficient. I was told that farmers in Brazil are using sprinklers, and am curious to see if this would work.

Getting together

Fortunately, I am not alone any more. Together with some of my neighbours, we have started a small company, which we hope will help us to continue innovating. The objective of Agro-Corporación COMFIA is to provide the necessary inputs, like seeds, and to produce rice seedlings. We are starting with a small nursery where we aim to produce enough seedlings for 20 hectares. We would like to get financial support from one of the different government programmes aimed at small scale farmers, but we are not waiting for this to get going. We are convinced that this is not a crazy idea at all – and are sure that more farmers will join us.

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