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RICE

Top rice experts hammer out proposal for Asia-Pacific rice strategy

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Asia and the Pacific region is a step closer to adopting a regional rice strategy, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) announced today after its External Rice Advisory Group (ERAG) came up with an outline to formulate a rice strategy for the Asia-Pacific region following a two-day consultation that ended Friday night.

"A regional rice strategy for Asia will contribute to the betterment of people in this region, especially small farmers a majority of whom depend upon rice for their livelihoods - economically, socially and environmentally. Indeed, without rice, no sustainable development can be achieved in this region and beyond," Hiroyuki Konuma, Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative, summed up the importance of the consultation's two-day effort in a statement released today.

In 2012, at the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific in Hanoi, Viet Nam, FAO member countries asked the Organisation to organize the development of a regional rice strategy because policy-makers in Asia want to make rice farming more environmentally friendly and sustainable. A rice production strategy for Asia and the Pacific must be based on sound assessments of global demand, taking into account that rice is a somewhat differentiated commodity with demand outlook being influenced by various types of rice.

Responding to its member's request, FAO established the ERAG as an advisory body on the formulation of an Asia-Pacific rice strategy. Professor M S Swaminathan, the father of India's green revolution, is chairing the ERAG and the group's team leader is R B Singh, former FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific.

Rice farming is facing several new challenges, such as global climate change and the need to reduce the environmental footprint of rice farming, while increasing the efficiency of inputs like seeds, fertilizer and water. The fact that some rice growing areas lag far behind other regions and the need to ensure that the benefits of rice farming accrue equitably to women farmers, are also the issues troubling rice production.

On the other hand, according to FAO, there are several new opportunities to increase the impact of rice on hunger and poverty reduction. These include opportunities to lower post-harvest losses, raising incomes, and stabilizing the market supply through value chain improvements. There is also the growing realization that responsible markets and agriculture trade policies are needed to reduce the volatility of rice prices and avoid a repeat of the 2007/8 food crisis. Modern scientific developments are also making it possible to increase yield, reduce disaster risk, and also add nutritive value to rice.

FAO warned that increased rice production is vital because Asia's economies are undergoing structural transformation in which agriculture's contribution to the gross domestic product will be smaller, and agriculture will also employ smaller proportion of the population as the economy continues to grow.

Noting that a single regional rice strategy does not capture the diversity that exists in rice production systems and policy priorities across countries, the ERAG consultation decided that the Asia-Pacific rice strategy document would be useful to policy-makers in member countries if the outputs are presented in the form of strategic options and implied trade-offs instead of being prescriptive recommendations.

The rice strategy's goals should be to increase productivity and nutrient content of rice adequately to meet the rising global demand through sustainable intensification of rice production systems; to reduce environmental footprint of rice production and enhance the ecosystem functions of rice landscapes including the protection and promotion of rice heritages and culture; to improve mitigation and adaptation of rice farming to climate change and augment farmers' capacity to manage risk; to improve the value chain by enhancing quality and safety and reducing post harvest losses; to improve the efficiency, reliability and fairness of domestic and international rice markets for stabilizing rice prices and supply, and promote regional collaboration; and to enhance the capacity and well-being, livelihoods of small holders, youth and women farmers, especially in lagging regions, to adapt to long-term changes in demography, farm size and

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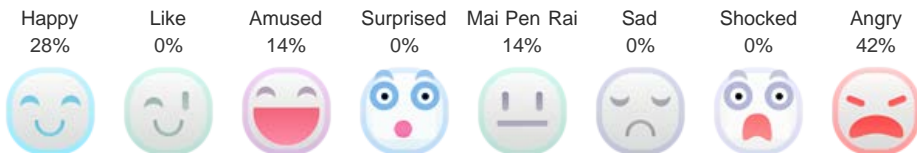
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The ERAG is composed of executives and rice experts from the following organizations, which participated in the consultation:

- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
- International Rice Research Institute (IRRI)
- **International Water Management Institute (IWMI)**
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
- Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF)
- The World Bank (WB)

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