

Scientists meet to ensure supply of Asia's staple, rice

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An Indian farmer sows rice seedlings. Scientists from around the world meet in Vietnam on Tuesday aiming to ensure a steady supply of rice -- the staple food for Asia's poor -- against threats that include climate change and urbanisation.

Scientists from around the world meet in Vietnam on Tuesday aiming to ensure a steady supply of rice -- the staple food for Asia's poor -- against threats that include climate change and urbanisation.

"Amidst constant pressure on global food production, worsening poverty, and climate change, the need to find ways to ensure there is enough affordable [rice](#) for everyone is critical," said a statement from the International Rice Congress.

The event, held every four years, is the world's largest gathering of the rice industry, and will bring together more than 1,000 researchers,

traders, agricultural ministers and other delegates from [Asia](#) and beyond.

"Our foremost concern... is how to fully extend advances in technology, biology, genetics and IT to deliver benefits to the rice industry, and especially to the poorest people dependent on rice," To Phuc Tuong, chairman of the congress's organising committee, said in the statement.

Rice is the staple food for more than three billion people, about half the world's population.

The three-day meeting in Vietnam comes after a report said Asian countries need to sharply increase and better manage rice stocks to improve food security in the region, where 65 percent of the world's hungry live.

"As Asia's population continues to grow and to urbanise at unprecedented rates, food insecurity in the region could worsen unless action is taken now," said a September report by the US-based Asia Society and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Manila, a co-organiser of the Hanoi conference.

"Declining trends in agricultural research and rural investment may lead to long-term food supply shortages and increased vulnerability to the famines that used to plague the region," the report said.

Rice-producing areas are home to nearly 560 million extremely poor people who live on less than 1.25 dollars per day. This is more than for any other crop, the report said, adding that about 90 percent of rice is grown in Asia, on more than 200 million rice farms.

"Rice is the staple food for most of the poor in Asia, where poverty remains staggering, particularly in South Asia," it said.

Vietnam is the world's second-biggest exporter of rice, behind Thailand.

IRRI estimated that annual investment of 120 million dollars in Asia between 2010 and 2030 could increase rice productivity by 8.5 percent.

This could lower the region's poverty rate by 15 percent, it said.

Among the topics to be discussed at the Hanoi meeting is the impact of climate change.

Researchers from the United States, the Philippines and the United Nations food agency said in August that even modest rises in global temperatures will drive down [rice production](#) in Asia, leading more people to slip into poverty and hunger.

"If we cannot change our rice production methods or develop new rice strains that can withstand higher temperatures, there will be a loss in rice production over the next few decades as days and nights get hotter," said Jarrod Welch, lead author of the study.

The Hanoi conference will also look at Africa's rice potential.

"Riots broke out in 2008 because of high rice prices and unavailability of rice on the market in major African capitals," a conference document said. "Relying on the world market to supply rice to African consumers is becoming a very risky, expensive and unsustainable strategy."

It said there is huge potential for growing rice in Africa, where consumption is growing by at least five percent annually.

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