

Scientists wrong to criticize alternative rice growing method

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Bigger harvests using an alternative cultivation method without high-tech. A method developed by a priest in Madagascar. Scientists turn their backs on it, but the African method is reliable and sound.

In 1983, Father Henri de Laulanié developed a new rice cultivation method in the highlands of Madagascar. It can double [harvests](#), apparently, compared to normal wet rice cultivation, without the use of pesticides and requiring less seeds.

The seedlings are transplanted earlier, planted further apart, and not permanently placed under water. This apparently allows the plant roots to develop better, resulting in more and better ears per plant, and thus, a spectacularly bigger harvest in this alternative method of rice cultivation known as the 'System of Rice Intensification' (SRI). The method was later - with the support of donors such as Oxfam and the World Bank - introduced to millions of small farmers in fifty rice growing countries.

The claims of having bigger harvests can't be true, say international rice scientists, among whom are those from the IRRI, the founders of the Green Revolution. These opponents of SRI disapprove of the lack of peer-reviewed studies and argue that the claim of having bigger harvests - if that is based on truth - is due to cultivating on more fertile soils or to more weeding being done on the land. These critics also think that mistakes have been made in measuring the output. The attention given to SRI is diverting attention from real chances of improvement, such as research into genetic modification, say the opposing parties.

Wageningen UR sociologists were commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to look into the SRI controversy. They reported their conclusion during a symposium last Wednesday: although SRI has often resulted in higher yields, it is often unclear if these are the result of the cultivation method or to employing more labor; the method is indeed more efficient in the use of seeds.

The Wageningen UR researchers accounted for the rise of SRI and the criticism from the world of rice science within a social context. They said that although many farmers have adopted SRI, these use just parts of it, depending on the local situations.

What's more, SRI was not formulated by just one priest, related Dominic Glover of the Wageningen University Technology and Agrarian Development Group, but came about from various sources in isolated Madagascar, including experiments by local farmers and instruction manuals, dating from before the Green Revolution, which De Laulanié had.

It is understandable, said Glover, that putting forth SRI as being the discovery of one priest in the countryside of [Madagascar](#) has incurred the wrath of established scientists. Out of nothing, a non-scientific method promised to double harvests and was quickly spread around.

Provided by Wageningen University

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