

# A Farmer's Primer on Growing Rice: 20 Years of Editorial Success

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Rice. Rice. Rice.

Most Asians eat rice 3 times a day. Yet many rice consumers do not understand the whys and hows of rice production.

More than ever, rice farmers, agricultural extension workers, teachers, journalists, students, scientists, and the general public need to understand the whys and hows of this crop—if only to gain a better understanding of the staple eaten by one of every 3 persons on Earth!

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), an autonomous, nonprofit agricultural research and training center with headquarters in Los Baños, Philippines, developed the first semidwarf breeding lines for rice in the middle 1960s, and it triggered the Green Revolution. This was followed by the development of dozens, then hundreds, of semidwarf varieties by IRRI and its partner scientists in national agricultural programs.

IRRI rice germ plasm served as genetic building blocks in the development of more rice varieties for the world's increasing population, but the institute is also concerned with protecting the environment and sustaining natural resources. It complements its efforts in research and development by providing training programs to partners in rice research and development.

## Origin of the Primer

While conducting rice-production training courses at the institute, former IRRI plant physiologist Benito S Vergara became aware of the lack of simple but precisely written information that clearly explained the rice-growing practices essential in rice production. "I gave lectures in various training programs at IRRI. During the early years, we were training mostly agricultural extension workers, who usually had a college degree in agriculture. However, most of them did not have an adequate and basic foundation in agriculture", Dr Vergara noted.

Instructions during training programs were "how to do it" and not "why do it", Dr Vergara emphasized. "While conducting the training courses, I patiently listed the questions trainees often asked. While accumulating these questions, I started to illustrate them, hoping that the basic principles would be understood better."

Why not develop a farmer's primer on growing rice? Dr Vergara thought.

The rest is history.

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Since A Farmer's Primer on Growing Rice was published in 1979, 48 editions have been published in 40 languages and in more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Dr Vergara has periodically revised the primer to update and improve presentation of the information—with more illustrations and less text.

"I have not kept track of the number of copies published in various languages and dialects", Dr Vergara said. "I never expected the book to become popular or that it would be translated into so many languages and studied by so many people."

When Dr Vergara completed the manuscript, he approached editor Zac Sarian, who at that time was managing a publishing and printing house in Los Baños. Mr Sarian agreed to publish the primer on the condition that he could include advertisements so that the book could be sold at a lower price. The primer was published, and IRRI Director-General Nyle Brady took a copy, with other IRRI publications, to Cuba. President Fidel Castro was impressed but asked, "Why is this book full of advertisements?"

The primer featured illustrations covering the growth phases of the rice plant on every page. It also provided information on select-

ing good seedlings, increasing the efficiency of nitrogen fertilizer, and selecting the rice variety to plant.

## Revisions and Uses

The primer was very well received, and IRRI decided to publish it as a book. An artist was commissioned to work on improving of the illustrations.

The initial print run in 1982 was 2000 copies. When the copies came off the press, an unexpectedly large number of requests to translate it started pouring in.

Tom Hargrove, then head of IRRI's Communication and Publications Services, further promoted the book. A second edition was published with several modifications, including the addition of a section on water management and varietal selection.

Soon, the primer was used as a reference not only by farmers and agricultural extension workers, but also by students.

Vicky Cabanilla, in her doctoral research, found that some farmers stopped reading the primer when they got to the section on photosynthesis, which they found difficult to comprehend. Dr Vergara revised the section by simplifying the concept. "With a nontechnical person—a layman—in mind, it was challenging to revise the sections on photosynthesis, physiology, and ecology as I tried to explain these concepts in relation to rice production", Dr Vergara said. "Many colleagues helped me in modifying the text. The Science Education Center in the Philippines helped me evaluate the book with the primary feedback coming from teachers."

Ian Montagnes, editor of the Editing and Publication Training Manual, used the primer as a case study in the Editing and Publication Training Course jointly sponsored by IRRI and the International Development Research Centre of Canada in collaboration with the University of Toronto Press. The participants, mostly agricultural-communication editors from different developing countries, were among the respondents.

The primer also found its way into other outlets. "It was serialized in a local magazine for men in the Philippines! Why? I do not

know. I guess many farmers buy this local magazine!” noted Dr Vergara.

Teresa Stewart, professor at the Los Baños Institute of Development Communication, University of the Philippines, serialized the primer in a radio program that included a question-and-answer period. Questions were collected twice a week from designated community stores and answered during farm broadcasts. “On the basis of the responses received from the farmers, I would say that the primer was very popular”, Dr Vergara noted.

The primer was also used to teach English. “One time, I was visiting an experiment station in China and saw a classroom full of students studying the primer. I found out later that, aside from studying it for the principles involved in rice production, they were also trying to improve their English!” Dr Vergara exclaimed.

Several private companies in the Philip-

pines and other countries used parts of the primer in their sales and product presentations to farmers.

Having written, drawn, and prepared

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most parts of the publication himself, Dr Vergara learned an important lesson. “If something is good and useful, people will take it up and use it. You do not need to work hard scouting for sponsors. Translators themselves look for funding”, Vergara said.

### **Copublication in Various Regions**

The primer started IRRI’s innovative copublication program. The institute provided the drawings and illustrations to any organiza-

tion interested in publishing it.

Dr Vergara explains: “Since the illustrated pages have practically very minimal texts, it was easy to paste the text according to the language of the translator. The only changes made were the pictures of the farmer. The features and clothes were modified to look like the typical clothes worn by farmers in the region or country.”

Today, Dr Vergara looks back—happy and satisfied that demand for copies of *A Farmer’s Primer on Growing Rice* continues. A well-known plant physiologist, Dr Vergara has recently retired from IRRI and is now working with the Philippine Science Heritage Center, where exhibits and contributions of Filipino scientists are featured. Surely, the *Farmer’s Primer on Growing Rice* is on exhibit at the center. 