

Roles for the Public and Private Sectors

The **orientation and capabilities of public sectors** vary across countries as governments range from being quite effective and functional to being, at least at present, much less so. Some are very focused on promoting and achieving development, including for the poorer and more vulnerable sectors of their societies, while others show less concern. Where public sectors are not very capable or seriously engaged with development tasks, the roles of NGOs and of the private sector in development — and specifically in SRI dissemination — will have to be greater.

SRI offers government agencies an **unusual opportunity** to assist rural households to improve their food security and also to benefit urban populations as well, by raising productivity and eventually lowering real food prices. Whether this opportunity will be seized remains to be seen.

SRI is a **holistic approach**, with a number of components having synergistic effects. When taken up by governments, the system is likely to be “pulled apart” by bureaucratic interests that emphasize one practice over others. Examples would be the water-saving interest of the irrigation department, extension programs’ preoccupation with achieving high yields, and the food security impacts being of most concern to a planning office. NGOs and the private sector may find the holistic approach of SRI more feasible than do government agencies, but efforts should be made to persuade the latter of SRI’s synergistic aspects as well as potentials.

Government agencies relevant for promoting SRI include: the Ministry of Agriculture and relevant research departments; publicly-funded universities; parastatals in the agricultural sector; the Irrigation Department which should be interested in water-saving methods and which should be involved in efforts to conserve water; Agricultural Promotion Boards, etc. Governments are used to thinking in terms of “**projects**” that can be specially funded by a donor or

finance ministry and are usually implemented by one particular government agency. It will be a challenge to undertake SRI through “projects” without losing its integrative core

Getting government cooperation and initiative is most likely to come through **interested and supportive individuals**, building on personal contacts and networks. There can be some slowness and resistance emanating from governments’ “standard operating procedures,” such as their requiring three years of formal testing before “approval” is given (even though SRI does not present any environmental risks). Agencies often feel a proprietary interest in controlling innovations and taking credit for them, which could retard SRI acceptance or promotion. Motivated individuals who understand fully the opportunities and intentions of SRI should be able to minimize such impediments.

SRI will often have to be “sold” in terms of certain **policy objectives** that are currently attractive to donors or government decision-makers, e.g., poverty reduction or conservation of natural resources. The fact that SRI is a low-input approach could make it less attractive to some donors that prefer large, expensive projects that “move a lot of money.” Conversely, SRI could be very attractive to those donors that put a high value on environmental protection or food security. The treasury department might consider the low financial requirements of SRI a positive feature.

It may be attractive to combine SRI with “organic” approaches to agriculture. From Sri Lanka it was reported that producing “eco-rice” for export, thereby earning foreign exchange, has made SRI more attractive to government officials as well as to environmentally-conscious farmers.

Rather than stress yields, **increased total factor productivity and farming profitability** with SRI with **reduced costs of production** will probably be the strongest selling points. Under present economic circumstances where farmers get a low price for their rice

and they are financially squeezed by high costs of production, a low-input approach like SRI may appeal to politicians as well as farmers (page 26). The lower cost of production with SRI methods needs to be thoroughly evaluated and well documented.

There may be some **vested interests** that resist SRI, e.g., ones opposing its reductions in the use of agrochemicals. However, it should be possible to mobilize strong countervailing interests in favor of cost-reduction — and environmental and human health advantages.

Political backing for SRI will probably be gained most quickly and strongly where there are **enthusiastic farmers** who support its use based on their personal experience and who are able and willing to lobby on its behalf. Successful SRI farmers will be more effective in talking to politicians than researchers can be.

The **cooperation of universities** should be fairly easy to enlist as they are likely to be interested in the many research opportunities and challenges that SRI presents, especially if funding for such research and evaluation is likely to be forthcoming. Research on SRI has the advantage of being fairly inexpensive, especially if done in a participatory way on farmers' fields, just varying management practices as farmers proceed to do what they would have done anyway to grow rice. Many of the subjects for SRI research should be quite amenable to Master's or Ph.D. thesis projects as they can be

finished in one season, though some multi-year research should be done to **assess changes over time**, for better or for worse. Universities are in a good position to follow such changes if encouraged to do so.

The role of the **private sector** will vary by country. Private companies and organizations are necessarily profit-oriented. Since SRI does not involve new capital expenditures or any innovations that are patentable, it may be less attractive to private sector actors than are some other innovations in agriculture. However, the private sector can benefit from SRI innovations such as their water saving or from greater efficiency in seed multiplication. Such opportunities have already proved attractive to Syngenta in Bangladesh.

There should be some **profitable opportunities** for SRI services such as providing high-quality young seedlings or plastic trays for growing seedlings with minimum root trauma. In Sri Lanka, some grain millers have begun offering a higher price per bushel for SRI rice because their outturn is higher (fewer unfilled grains). Agricultural promotion companies may take an interest in SRI for increasing the profitability of their production operations. While this would not be of particular benefit to farm households, it should benefit urban consumers, including the poor. Where the private sector enterprises cooperate with NGOs in philanthropic undertakings, SRI could be provide them a new opportunity for beneficial collaboration.