

Press release, 30 October 2014

Award for research into climate-friendly rice

The 2014 research award from the Swiss Forum for International Agricultural Research (SFIAR) goes to the former ETH Zurich researcher Dr Gurbir S. Bhullar. He explored an interesting possibility for farmers to cultivate climate-neutral rice while also creating added value. The SFIAR has also honoured Angela Deppeler for her Master thesis, which she completed at the School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences (HAFL), on the certification of cocoa production in Ghana.

Numerous Swiss institutions are engaged in agricultural research for development. With the aim of supporting this research effort, the Swiss Forum for International Agricultural Research (SFIAR) has been honouring innovative Swiss projects with an annual award since 2008. The award is sponsored by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture.

The 2014 SFIAR award: optimised rice cultivation

The 2014 SFIAR award for the best PhD/post-doc research project, endowed with CHF 5,000 prize money, goes to Dr Gurbir S. Bhullar for his project entitled 'A novel cropping system for climate-neutral and bio-diverse rice farming'.

In order to feed a growing global population, rice farmers must increase their production. This, however, is problematic for the global climate: flooded paddy fields are one of the most significant sources of the greenhouse gas methane. In response to this conflict of interests, Dr Bhullar investigated new, less climate-damaging cultivation methods for rice. He established the potential of certain aquatic plants to reduce methane emissions from soil. Dr Bhullar demonstrated that a larger diversity of plants reduces greenhouse emissions from paddy fields. He also identified which aquatic plants are generally suitable for co-cultivation with rice. Finally, he proved that certain aquatic plants could halve methane emissions from rice cultivation without adversely affecting rice production.

These results open interesting perspectives for rural development in rice-growing regions. The co-cultivation of rice and aquatic plants would not only have a positive effect on the climate and biodiversity but would also contribute to improved nutrition for the farmers and create new income-generating opportunities.

Dr Bhullar was engaged in research at ETH Zurich until 2013 and now works at the Research Institute for Organic Agriculture (FiBL).

SFIAR Master thesis award: cocoa certification

The 2014 SFIAR award for the best Master thesis (CHF 1,000) goes to Angela Deppeler for her thesis entitled 'Who benefits from certification? Analysis of third-party audited certification schemes in the cocoa sector in Ghana'.

Cocoa is mainly produced by smallholder farmers. In Ghana, the second largest cocoa producer in the world, around 15% of the cocoa is produced under audited certification programmes. These programmes claim to improve both revenue and general production conditions. But how do they operate in practice? For her thesis, Angela Deppeler conducted numerous interviews with local cocoa producers in order to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of participating in such certification programmes.

Results: Thanks to the training offered within the programmes, many cocoa producers have been able to increase their productivity and consequently often their income, too. However, they criticise the lack of transparency, particularly concerning the distribution of the profits generated by certification. Furthermore, hired labourers working in cocoa production hardly benefit at all from the certification programmes.

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Angela Deppeler did her Master's degree at the School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences HAFL, where she now works as a research assistant.

Further information about the projects together with photos can be found at www.sfiar.ch/award.

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