

Story from the Field: The Gambia

1 of 1

FACE THE FAST

In Gambia, Better Rice Allays Hunger Fears

By Lane Hartill

Amie Bayo knows rice. For most of her 48 years, this mother of four from the Gambian village of Jahaur has walked barefoot to her rice plot, pausing only to hike up her skirt and wade through the brackish streams that crisscross her path. When the spring rains come, the streams swell, often washing out the bridge. Amie will balance her lunch on her head, sing a soft song, and, with water up to her necklace, walk straight through it.

She's grown up with the soft mud of the paddy between her toes. Growing rice, it's safe to say, is in her blood. She remembers sitting in the fields as her grandmother worked, banging pots and shouting away the birds that treated the fields as a buffet table.

But this planting season it wasn't the birds; it was fish. Amie's field is on the shores of the Gambia River where tides of fresh water lap in twice a day to irrigate her rice. But that fresh water also brings Amie's nemesis: tilapia. The big-lipped fish came en masse and chewed her rice seedlings down to a nub. "I thought I wouldn't have anything this year," she says. "I thought I would suffer."

Amie knew if she didn't get help she wouldn't have enough rice to feed the eight people who live in her compound. Or enough to sell for extra money. She would have to resort to digging the roots of a wild plant and selling it in the market as a kind of natural potpourri. But that wouldn't be enough to cover the cost of a bag of rice. The Gambia imports some 78 percent of its rice, and Amie knew she'd have to pay. At the time, a 100-pound bag cost \$47. That was up from \$29 in January 2008. Amie knew she was in trouble.

But Catholic Relief Services, through the Association for Village Support, a local nongovernmental organization based in the area, gave Amie—along with 1,500 other families—a \$20 voucher to buy fertilizer, something she had never used on her rice. She said she thought that river water was enough. And, besides, the fertilizer, she figured, would just wash away. But with a field full of gnawed rice stalks, Amie was desperate; the fertilizer couldn't have come at a better time.

With 50 pounds of fertilizer and advice on how to apply it, Amie's rice not only grew back, but she thinks she's going to have her best harvest ever: 35 bags, minimum, she says, standing amid the golden piles of rice drying next to her field. That will top her best year of 30 bags. She's going to have plenty to feed her children, buy clothes for them, and pay their school fees. She'll even have enough to sell so she can invest in a \$30 bag of fertilizer for next year.

"Now I have seen the benefit," she says, as she threshes the golden rice kernels in the hot Gambian sun. "It's worth selling the rice to buy fertilizer. Before, I never thought of it."

CRS also gave a new, fast-maturing seed to 280 "seed multipliers," women who grew the high-quality seeds for the next planting season. Along with the seed, CRS gave each a \$40 voucher to buy fertilizer. The seed multipliers should grow more than 22 tons of seeds to ensure enough will be on the market for next year.

Read more about the Gambia at <http://crs.org/the-gambia>.

Lane Hartill is the West Africa regional information officer for Catholic Relief Services. He is based in Dakar, Senegal.



Photo by Lane Hartill/CRS

FOODFAST
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

foodfast.org