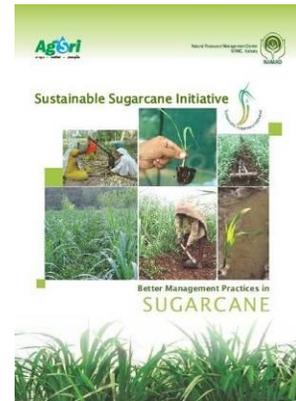


The Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative “internets” its way to Cuba

Dr. Rena S. Perez

Several months ago, I received from Dr. Norman Uphoff of Cornell University, an email message with an accompanying file labeled with the letters 'SSI'. I thought it a mistake that he had meant to write 'SRI' not 'SSI', certainly an easily made keyboard mistake. The email explained how a friend in India, Dr. Biksham Gujja, an ecologist and formerly a senior advisor with the Worldwide Fund for Nature in Switzerland, was working with something called 'the sustainable sugarcane initiative' (SSI).

Dr. Gujja had given leadership for SRI dissemination in India from 2004 on after sponsoring three years of scientific evaluation of SRI by leading research institutions in India. After some SRI farmers started extrapolating and adapting the new ideas to improve the production of sugarcane, he launched SSI with support from WWF and an international agricultural research center based in Hyderabad, India (the International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Topics, ICRISAT).



SSI Manual

I read the email immediately, being struck by the report that a first on-farm trial in India had increased the farmer's cane yield from 35 to 110 t/ha. Then I hurriedly opened the file to find a training manual on Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative.

Having worked 156 sugar mills in the cane sector (advising on animal production, as an animal nutritionist) for 17 of the 52 years that I have lived in Cuba, I couldn't believe my eyes. Cuba, which at one time had produced almost 10% of the world's production of sucrose from sugarcane, between 7 and 8 million tons) is at present barely able to reach 1 million tons, from harvesting a national sugarcane crop that averages only 37 t/ha. It broke my heart.

I was reminded of a 1986 visit to the "La Romana" sugar mill in the Dominican Republic where I saw the incredible results from pig-fattening based on free-choice sugar cane juice and a restricted daily amount of soybean meal. From this visit, I worked with the CPA "Camillo Cienfuegos" in Bahia Honda, Cuba, to set up a similar system there.

In 2000 when Dr. Uphoff provided us with information on the methodology on SRI (now known as SICA in Cuba and elsewhere



Dr. Norman Uphoff and Dr. Rena Perez with a rice farmer Mr. Roman Armelo



Location Map



in Latin America), this same cane coop, with 16 ha dedicated to rice to feed its workers, tried out the new methods, and these quickly caught on, almost doubling the CPA's yield. I will never forget that they had to double the size of their concrete rice drying area because of the yield increase with SRI.

The day after I received the file related to SSI, I forwarded it to this same coop. However, no one ever acknowledged receipt. It's the way things often happen in Cuba. That was more than three months ago.



Mr. Jose Antonio Espinosa and Dr. Norman out at the rice field

Last week, I was scheduled to give a talk on rice -- on SRI -- in a research center at Los Palacios, in Pinar del Rio. When I arrived, and didn't see many cars, so I thought: maybe I made a mistake, wrong place? wrong day? It was the latter, so in order to sort of self-vindicate I drove across the Sierra de los Organos (mountains) to Bahia Honda on the north coast with the objective of visiting the "Camilo Cienfuegos" cane coop, to leave them a copy of the SSI document that I had on my



Two months old SSI fields.

flash stick (Since they hadn't acknowledged having received the file, quite possibly too large for the island's digital setup, I assumed they never had received it.)

When I entered the coop head office, I asked if they had ever received the file on SSI which I sent. Blanco, the chief economist answered: "But the first plants have been in the ground already for two months. Let's go see them!"



SSI Nursery

Rena Perez
Havana 11/11
renasperez@hotmail.com



Dr. Perez graduated from Cornell University in 1958 with a B.S. degree in agriculture, and a major in entomology. She has lived and worked in Cuba with her Cuban husband since 1959. She worked in the Institute of Animal Science in Havana, 1964-70 while getting a PhD in poultry science. For the next 20 years, she worked in pig production and following that until her formal retirement in 2000, she worked in animal production in the Ministry of Sugar. When she learned about SRI in that year, she began promoting the new methodology through the sugar cooperatives with which she had previously worked. For the past decade, she has served as volunteer coordinator of SRI activities in Cuba and is now trying to get the Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative (SSI) introduced and evaluated in Cuba.