

## “The WAPRO live” - On a visit to rice farmers in India

by Manuel Flury

**Asked, why consumers in Switzerland should buy their organic Basmati rice, the women farmers said: it is because of its taste, its quality, its purity and the labor we put into it, this to get a good value!**

Since 2011, rice farmers in Saunjala village in the State of Uttarakhand, situated a five hours express train ride north-east of Delhi, right at the foot slopes of the first range of the Himalaya mountains, sell their Basmati rice to the Indian food enterprise Nature Bio Food Ltd from which they get the advice on how to produce organically. Nature Bio Food Ltd sells this rice to Switzerland, to COOP, one of the two big Swiss retailers. COOP sells it under the [Naturaplan](#) organic and Fair Trade labels. Seven years ago, this value chain was developed and during the final session of the SDC Director General's visit, the representative of COOP - member of the board of directors - promised to be willing to continue buying such rice for another seven years.

In 2014, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, together with Intercooperation India, leading a consortium of private and public sector partners, won a tender opened by the Global Programme Food Security on “reduced water consumption in food production for enhanced food security”, from which the Water Project ([WAPRO](#)) emerged. Whereas previously COOP would have invested just in the availability of water at the field level, through the WAPRO and the public fund made available by SDC, water governance at the village level became the focus and main concern of the consortium. As one of the partners mentions, the water became the convening factor of the consortium. Through technical advice, made possible by the project, the farmers now apply cropping techniques that use less water, which qualifies them in being paid a premium price.



During the visit we meet with committee members of the Water and Environment Group in a school compound, sitting on colorful carpets. The chairperson explains that the Group follows the so-called [International Water Stewardship Standard](#), a globally applicable framework for water users to understand water use and impacts. The Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) is one of the partners of WAPRO. The Chief Executive of the AWS listens attentively to the man. The chairperson explains the projects to improve and maintain the village water infrastructure and shows pictures of stabilizing inlet structures for irrigation canals at the main river and of repair work along water canals. He tells us that the water stewardship standard makes them understand the challenges within the village water system. With a lot of pride, we are shown a newly installed communal water tap in this school compound, which was also made possible through Fair Trade premium paid in the context of WAPRO. A sustainable water balance, good water quality, healthy water-related areas and good water governance are the four values of the standard. Mitigating water risks, addressing shared water challenges in the catchment and ensuring that measures are in place to

minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts for everyone. As the Government allocates a certain portion of the river water to the village, reducing use of irrigation water will increase the water for other uses in the village explains a woman committee member. Village level water management is included in the public water governance set-up in the wider catchment, overall ensuring sustainable use of the available river water.

Back on the fields and adjacent to the decent house built from cement stones of the farmer family – a satellite dish is fixed on the roof – the woman farmer shows us the use of a simple mechanical implement for row sowing. She tells us that sowing is mostly the job of the women and she explains how early morning dew on the leaves of the plants are a relevant factor for plant watering. Row sowing is one of the water saving methods the WAPRO promotes. The Sustainable Rice Platform, a partner of WAPRO, includes water management related aspects into its [Standard for Sustainable Rice Cultivation](#). This is the world's first voluntary sustainability standard for rice and a tool for improvement for practitioners in public and private sectors to drive wide-scale adoption of climate-smart sustainable best practice among rice smallholders. The standard is designed for farm-level impact at smallholder level, under the farmers' control.



“Would the private sector invest anyway, without public money?” “What is it WAPRO brings in addition”, these were two of the questions that accompanied the group throughout the visit and the discussions during the travel and the breakfast in a nice river side lodge. COOP and MARS, the second large buyer of Basmati rice through WAPRO were clear: Yes, we would invest anyway! But WAPRO speeds up innovation, practices are tested earlier, the value chain becomes more stable. Nature Bio Foods highlights the social and environmental benefits brought about by WAPRO. WAPRO also contributes to the revision of the global standards on rice production and water stewardship.

As a conclusion from the visit, sharing responsibilities of different public, private and civil society actors in particular partnership settings constitute a core concern of the Agenda 2030. Such partnerships under a Global Programme perspective envision change at the global level, at the level of the governance of a global public good, in this case of scarce water resources. They only emerge when objectives are aligned, and benefits are of mutual, both public and private interests.

COOP having expressed its commitment for another seven years and thus being far from phasing out of the SDC public funding illustrates the feasibility of such public-private partnerships. Public contributions to private initiatives, however, need to be carefully designed in order to create the public benefit and building the capacity among private sector actors (as well as farmers) to include such benefits into their daily work and ventures.

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