



SRP Plenary Meeting in 2019 in Cambodia with WAPRO Manager Jens Soth sharing experiences from WAPRO.

# LEARNING FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

## Benefits and challenges from the collaboration with three Multi Stakeholder Initiatives: Insights from eight years of cooperation

In the frame of the Water Productivity Project (WAPRO) in 2022 more than 80,000 rice and cotton farmers applied water saving technologies, not only increasing water use efficiency but also increasing their income on average by 130 USD per year. A crucial factor adding to this success was the engagement of three renowned multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs). This capitalisation of experiences from eight years of collaboration aims at analysing potentials and challenges of MSIs and how they could contribute to increasing water productivity in two key commodities, namely rice and cotton, and at the same time improve the well-being of small farmers in the global South.

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## BENEFITS OF MULTI STAKEHOLDER

### INITIATIVES (MSIs)

Multi Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) bring together businesses, government authorities, civil society organisations and additional stakeholders such as research institutions to deal with topics of mutual concern or interest. The MSIs that collaborate in the context of WAPRO all aim at an inclusive development based on the sustainable use of natural resources (see the box “Participating Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives”). To reach their objectives, MSIs typically establish dialogue among the stakeholders through, for example, periodic conferences, offer opportunities for joint learning and establish links and collaboration among members. To foster the shared concern MSIs often develop a standard, support its application by the involved stakeholders and arrange for verification of compliance.

One of the fundamental hypotheses at the start of the WAPRO project was that its ambitious goals regarding outreach and impact on all three elements of the “Push-Pull-Policy” approach would only be achieved through collaboration involving MSIs (refer to box on WAPRO). On the push side, the introduction and compliance with the MSI's standards would first provide guidance for the producers. Second, the interaction with manifold partners in the frame of the MSI would help to reach scale. And third, the MSI would foster the expected compliance with the standards and thereby contribute to the sustainability of the interventions. On the pull side, the MSIs were seen as the vehicle to assure a growing market for more sustainably produced goods, beyond the lifespan of a development project. The exchange with other members of the MSIs would allow for crowding in of new partners. As regards policy influence the MSIs were seen to potentially serve as a platform to raise awareness

### Participating Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

The three MSIs that engaged in the WAPRO project unite businesses, civil society organisations and government representatives on a global level under the shared objective of making the world a more sustainable and fairer place. Two initiatives (Better Cotton – BC and Sustainable Rice Platform – SRP) are organised along globally relevant commodity value chains (cotton and rice), while the third initiative addresses core concerns for the joint interests of the involved parties, namely water stewardship (Alliance for Water Stewardship AWS). The MSIs foster interaction and learning guided by a transparent governance system. All three of them develop and own their own standards. Their application by value chain actors combined with an independent mechanism for verification of compliance aims at a more sustainable use of resources to the ultimate benefit of producers, consumers and the planet.



#### **Alliance for Water Stewardship:**

**AWS** is a global membership collaboration comprising businesses, NGOs and the public sector. Its members contribute to the sustainability of local water resources

through the adoption and promotion of a universal framework for the sustainable use and management of water – the International Water Stewardship Standard, or AWS Standard – that drives, recognises and rewards good water stewardship performance.



#### **Better Cotton Initiative:**

**Better Cotton** is the world's leading sustainability initiative for cotton. Its mission is to help cotton

communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment. In just over a decade, Better Cotton has convinced stakeholders who span the industry to be partners. They include farmers, ginners, spinners, suppliers, manufacturers, brand owners, retailers, civil society organisations, donors and governments. This adds up to more than 2,300 members in the Better Cotton network. They buy into Better Cotton's approach of training farming communities to produce cotton in ways that improve things for everyone and everything connected with this staple fibre.



#### **Sustainable Rice Platform:**

**SRP** is a global multi-stakeholder alliance established in 2011. Together with its over 100 institutional members from public and private sector stakeholders, research, financial institutions, and NGOs, SRP aims to transform the global rice sector by

improving smallholder livelihoods, reducing the social, environmental and climate footprint of rice production and offering the global rice market an assured supply of sustainably produced rice to meet the growing global demand for rice.



Better Cotton is the world's leading sustainability initiative for cotton with 2,300 members spanning the entire industry from producer to retailer.

among government representatives of policy gaps that prevent the efficient use of water. A donor such as Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and an implementing INGO such as Helvetas recognised the engagement with MSIs as an opportunity to influence global standards. Above all, the MSIs were expected to serve as a forum for exchange and learning. A crucial benefit of MSIs from a development perspective is the assurance of sustainability in the long term. Even though a development project may have ended, the value chain partners continue to follow the standard, thereby ensuring sustainable production. In return, by joining WAPRO, the three MSIs saw an opportunity to increase the application of their standards, to further develop them based on field-level experience especially among smallholders in the global South and to shape strategies of participating members including a donor such as SDC and an INGO like Helvetas.

## TENSION FIELDS RELATED TO MSIs IN

### THE FRAME OF WAPRO

In the literature there are also critical assessments on the performance of MSIs. The challenges that were identified partially resonated with the reflections among the

MSIs partnering with WAPRO and Helvetas. For example, the question of true stakeholder participation was a topic of concern in WAPRO, too: How do the producers of rice and cotton in countries of the South influence and participate in the shaping of the MSIs' standards? The issue of the rigour of the standards appeared as a key concern from the point of view of Helvetas: the dilemma between reaching scale through comparatively less demanding standards compared to – at least in certain aspects – more stringent or comprehensive ones, such as organic production. The third challenge discussed in more detail below refers to being potentially associated with the misuse of the standard, which relates to issues related to compliance. The fourth point discusses how to cope with fast growth, and also deals with questions related to compliance. These four main challenges have been discussed in a spirit of a critical self-reflection among the team of authors and are presented below.

### Representation of producers

Who has the power to shape an MSI? This is not only a question regarding the governance system of the MSI including the proper representation of the primary stakeholders in the decision-making bodies but also one that relates to resources in terms of skills and time. With the growth of the number of members, achieving true rep-

resentation is a challenge. In the case of Better Cotton, producer organisations hold three seats – which corresponds to one quarter of all seats – on the governing council. While CSOs are represented on the SRP Board, engagement with producer organisations is mainly via member projects and audit activities, and will be more formally established, e.g. through the planned inclusion of farmer representation on a revamped Technical Committee and through membership of individual farmers and farmer groups in SRP National Chapters. In the case of AWS there is farmer representation on the Technical Committee. But generally, AWS sees Helvetas and other INGOs as representatives of smaller producers building on their networks and the experience of their field staff. Whilst for primary stakeholders there are no process barriers to engaging in AWS governance, on a practical level it is not feasible for a smallholder rice farmer in Pakistan, for example, to attend international meetings and engage in dialogues, which are primarily global in scope. Instead, AWS sees it as the responsibility of the large INGO members, who have the knowledge, expertise and resources, to represent the interests of these groups. A key moment in terms of influencing an MSI is when its standards are revised. For its second standard revision Better Cotton successfully reached out to smallholders through its cascading structure. SRP actively seeks support from its registered projects and CSOs to solicit farmer feedback on standard implementation, as that received from farmers under the WAPRO Myanmar project. But generally, despite all efforts, involving producers in the shaping of an MSI remains a challenge. Having INGOs representing them is only the second-best solution and even in this case there is a resource imbalance in comparison to private sector representation.

### Stringency versus scale

In its strategies Helvetas is promoting sustainable agriculture, which includes support for many organic initiatives. Certain requirements for organic agriculture are more stringent than those established in the standards of Better Cotton and SRP. In other areas, such as social aspects and water use efficiency, the standards of Better Cotton and SRP are more rigorous. Internally the WAPRO team has had to repeatedly defend its engagement with these MSIs. The key argument was the outreach – in the case of Better Cotton, this was 2.3 million and in the case of SRP, this represented almost 0.5 million farmers. In the end, as the MSIs have argued, it is the market demand that decides which standard is applied by large number of producers. In addition, the WAPRO cotton sub-project in Pakistan is an example where production techniques were introduced (e.g. habitat creation for beneficial insects) that are also compliant to organic production. Better Cotton clearly served as a steppingstone from a soft standard towards more stringent sustainable practices. All three MSIs emphasise that implementing partners appreciate the exchange and learning within the MSI and across the MSI regarding



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Water Stewardship, the power of smallholder farmers to shape the use of their water resources, turned out to be a key success factor of WAPRO. The Alliance for Water Stewardship is the organisation that globally provides the standard for this.

### Water Productivity Project

**WAPRO** is an eight-year project aimed at enhancing water productivity in the cultivation of rice and cotton, two of the most water-consuming crops globally. It is a joint undertaking of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with renowned private sector partners such as Mars and Coop, global platforms such as Better Cotton, the Sustainable Rice Platform and the Alliance for Water Stewardship, and numerous local private and civil society partners. The project consists of ten sub-projects active in six countries: India, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. Helvetas has been mandated to coordinate project implementation through a “Push-Pull-Policy” approach. In its “Push component”, it has worked with 80,000 farmers to help them adopt water saving technologies. Through its “Pull component”, global as well as smaller domestic companies are now sourcing rice and cotton more sustainably, encouraging supplying farmers by providing them with a market. With its “Policy component”, the project has contributed to shaping global production standards, influenced national and sub-national policies to allocate scarce irrigation water fairly, and empowered thousands of farmers to claim their right to access to irrigation water via local water stewardship actions.

different standard systems. To summarise, field evidence from WAPRO sub-projects supports the thesis that among participating farmers a gradual shift from softer towards more stringent ecological production practices happens, if supported with knowledge exchange and learning within and across MSIs.

### **Reputational risk of being associated with dishonest MSI members**

In the development scene MSIs may be accused of being misused by private sector members that only pretend to adhere to a standard but don't take intrinsically motivated steps to fully comply. For donors such as SDC or an INGO raising funds publicly such as Helvetas, this is seen as a reputational risk. The MSIs engaged in WAPRO respond to this challenge in four ways: First, campaigners and the public often overlook the actual scope of an MSI, and the actual commitments the MSI and its members make. In the case of Better Cotton for example the key promises entail getting rid of the most hazardous pesticides and child labour. Second, the MSI processes are set up in such a way that compliance can be guaranteed. On top of that grievance schemes are in place to help uncover any misuse. Third, MSIs improve their standards continuously. In the case of WAPRO the exchange among the three MSIs has been particularly

rewarding. WAPRO for example served as field test for AWS water stewardship, which then served to significantly revise the water component of the Better Cotton standard. Fourthly, through multi-stakeholder ownership and participation: For instance, the SRP includes members spanning the stakeholder spectrum and embraces stakeholder consultation and engagement as a fundamental tenet of standard governance. This level of scrutiny helps mitigate potential for capture by any vested interest and upholds good governance principles of fairness, robustness and transparency, e.g. during standard revision processes.

In summary, even with the best standard and assurance system the misuse of an MSI as a fig-leaf to hide violations may happen. Beyond well-functioning compliance and governance processes, to deal with this uncomfortable situation it is important to clearly communicate what an MSI stands for and ensure the continuous improvement of the system in response to learnings from the field and from exchange with others.

### **Assured compliance in times of rapid growth**

Over the last couple of years, all three participating MSIs experienced substantial growth in terms of participating members and producers covered, and the



The Sustainable Rice Platform that unites global stakeholders committed to a more sustainable rice production expects a growing demand for rice that is good for people and the planet.

collaboration in the frame of WAPRO also made its contribution in this regard. As in the case of any growth this came with a set of challenges, in particular how to guarantee that the assurance systems are fit for the new mass of producers and other value chain actors to be certified. The three MSIs unanimously highlight the importance of the periodic overhaul of the assurance systems and the partnering with capable service providers such as the Water Stewardship Assurance Services in the case of AWS and Global GAP in the case of SRP.



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## CONCLUSION

The participating organisations experienced the collaboration with and among three MSIs in the frame of WAPRO as being beneficial for all involved. The initial hypothesis that MSIs can serve as a vehicle to reach scale held true. The commodity-based MSI Better Cotton and SRP do play an important role in ensuring markets for participating farmers, whereas in the case of SRP – whose assurance scheme was launched only in 2020 – there is considerable scope for market growth and upscaling. Both offer solutions for the marketing of smaller quantities, too, which results in a market levelling effect to the benefit of smaller producers. WAPRO, which organised periodic implementors and partners meetings, served as a forum for cross-fertilisation among the MSIs, which helped to improve standards but also provided insights into the strategic thinking of Helvetas particularly with regard to its engagement with private sector partners. The red line stemming from the discussion of four challenges faced in the frame of WAPRO is that MSI and their standards are and must be learning organisations that improve their governance and tools based on the feedback from its stakeholders, including the primary producers. The ten sub-projects of WAPRO in six countries thereby served as an important testing ground and source for learning.

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