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MKLF 2018 Innovations/Good Practices

Small farmer dreams big with natural farming techniques

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Background

Saw Htoo Baw is a farmer from Tha Bite Kone village, Hle Gu Township in Myanmar. In 2015, the Agricultural Farmer Federation of Myanmar (AFFM) went for a field trip to Hle Gu Township and met Saw Htoo Baw who expressed his concern about the increasing use of synthetic and chemical inputs amongst farmers in the region. He knows that these practices were damaging the environment, destroying soil structure, and burden the farmers financially. "I see the life of the farmers in our area is so poor and miserable. They are struggling just for their day to day needs. I would like to promote their level of living," he said.

Saw Htoo Baw was aware that returning to natural traditional farming was the long term sustainable solution. AFFM recognized his potential and selected him to attend an intensive training program at Net Work for Environment and Economic Development (NEED-Myanmar), an Eco Village Farm School. After graduating from NEED in 2016, Saw Htoo Baw did not waste time and immediately went to work on his family's land that largely consists of rice paddy. The first major change and foundation he made was creating and using high quality organic compost on site.

Innovations / Good Practices

It has been difficult to increase rice farming from current system of rice farming method due to a lot of chemical fertilizer have been use in the rice field at the movement. With conventional methods, only by using expensive chemical fertilizer, pesticides and hybrid seed can farmer increase their production. It is increasingly difficult for ordinary farmers to afford all these expensive things. It is also known that using chemicals is harmful to the environment and health.

The SRI (System of Rice Intensification) rice plantation is a method of growing rice which can use local seed and organic compost while still increasing rice production. In SRI Paddy Cultivation Less Seed (2kg/ac) is required and fewer plants per unit area (25x25cm) where as in general Paddy Cultivation 20kg seed is required per acre. SRI requires less expenditure on fertilizers and plant protection chemicals. SRI Rice plantation method does not apply chemical pesticides because the animal systems are also in place. Applying the animals manure, animals waste and farm waste to the field are enough to increasing the rice production of SRI method.

Saw Htoo Baw understands that the transition to organic farming will be slow. He feels that due to intensive chemical farming, lots of the beneficial predators disappeared with a huge increase in crop damaging pests like snails. Saw Htoo Baw wants to emphasize that partnering with animals can be done without the need of investing in commercial animal food and in turn animals provide food, labour, manure, and even income.

Besides paddy (rice) cultivation, he is also uses other techniques like no-till beds to grow organic vegetables during the winter (non-rainy season). He shares these techniques like using rice husks, biochar, etc. with other farmers as well to encourage their participation and improving their off-season yield.

Seeing his success, he is further motivated to continue improving and using these natural techniques learned at NEED and also shares with the community. He feels that small changes on the community level should be supported by the government through education initiatives. According to Saw Htoo Baw, his next challenge is that of marketing and presenting the produce to consumers. The farm to customer logistics is important to ensure that more farmers can adopt and succeed in natural farming, otherwise farmers will not have the final incentive to make the change to alternative farming.

Impact

Saw Htoo Baw was able to share what he learned from NEED-Myanmar not only among his neighbors, but also to farmers outside his community. Thus, he is further motivated to continue improving and using the natural techniques learned and also share what he learns to his community.

Among the benefits of the SRI technique are: increased in rice production, less water is needed, less seeds are needed and there less external inputs and expensive investment needed. Saw Htoo Baw and his neighbors can also use local/traditional seeds. Natural/organic method of farming also protects the biodiversity and environment. Organic fertilizers and pesticides are used to replace expensive and harmful chemical fertilizers and pesticide.

Facilitating Factors / Challenges

- Lack of information and training for the farmers in implementing the techniques.
- Building trust among the farmers. When Saw Htoo Baw shared his newfound knowledge in his community for them to adopt and apply, most of the farmers were not keen to cooperate.
- Other challenges faced during implementation were bad weather, a volatile exchange rate and a slump in exports.

Lessons Learned

The farmers need to know how to maintain record of their activities (including financial records) so that they can reflect and understand their progress and position as compared to previous years and the techniques used.

Recommendations

SRI Rice farming method can be used with organic material such as animals waste and farm waste. It is increasingly easy for ordinary farmer to use this technique. Further, this method protects biodiversity and environment.