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The Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE)

Grains of Change

Thai Rice to Become New Fair Trade Item in US

Change is spreading through the rice paddies of farmers in Northeastern Thailand. It's called fair trade. What it does is ensure that impoverished farmers get a fair price for their rice. It simultaneously improves the environment by helping farmers switch to organic production.

The fair price that farmers get goes a long way. It helps farmers get out of debt, send their children to school, stay on the farm and not need to seek work in low-paying sweatshops, or in the commercial sex industry in Bangkok. Farmers in Thailand are learning with fair trade they can change the world grain by grain.

For the over 7,000 farmers in the northeast of Thailand who grow fair trade rice the benefits have been tremendous. Fair trade farmers get 10-12 Baht/kg (US\$ 0.25-0.34) whereas conventional rice farmers get anywhere from about 5-9 Baht/kg (US\$ 0.13-0.23), thus farmers in the network can significantly increase their incomes by selling fair trade.

This rise in income can be a life-saver for Thai farmers most of whom are economically very poor. In fact, 68% of farmers in the northeast of Thailand are in debt about three times their annual incomes (the average annual income of farmers is 26,822 baht (US\$600) significantly lower than the average household earning of 78,875 baht (about US \$1800). The fair trade price becomes very significant as it can provide a way out of debt for farmers. With decreasing debts farmers feel less pressure to flee their farms and seek employment in sweatshop-like factories, in construction, or in commercial sex in cities like Bangkok. They also have more money left over for things like education and health care for their families.

“Since we've changed to organic production through the fair trade network we've started to be happier as a family. Debt caused a lot of stress. If the kids wanted to go to school further, then we would have to borrow more money. But by selling fair trade we had more money left and could pay for things like sending our children to school. The whole family could sit down and talk with each other about what we are doing. If we could talk and find understanding within our own family, that's happiness,” spoke Wattanasak Sitsungneng, a farmer from the fair trade network in Thailand.

Organic Jasmine Rice a Healthy, Environmentally Friendly Alternative

Not only are farmers able to make a better living with fair trade Jasmine rice they are also improving the environment. All farmers in the network are either already certified organic or in the three year process of converting their fields to receive organic status. Organic production helps farmers lower their input costs therefore decreasing debts, and it also helps farmers improve the fertility of their soil. Going Organic means less

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chemical fertilizers and pesticides, lowering chemical runoff in surrounding rivers and lakes leading to more biodiversity. Farmers have already mentioned that since they have gone organic the amount of fish, frogs and birds have increased in their fields.

In addition to being a more financially stable and environmentally sound practice organic production is better for the consumer as well. Organically grown food has less dietary toxins, higher nutrient value and often tastes better than its conventionally grown counterparts, so the consumer wins too.

“Producing organically is safe both for the producer and the consumer, and it conserves the environment in every way. We can find that natural balance for our fields again. The sustainability of our system goes if we use a lot of chemicals. If we grow organically, we become sustainable,” adds, Paw Thong-Ma a fair trade farmer in Thailand.

In order to raise consumer awareness about fair trade rice the Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE), a network of past study-abroad students and volunteers, is launching a campaign to educate people about fair trade rice. ENGAGE believes that consumers have a right to know what they are eating, where it comes from, and the stories behind their food. We also believe that small-scale farmers and producers have the right to receive a liveable wage, in a fair working environment, allowing producers to live a sustainable and dignified lifestyle.

Other Quotes From Thai Fair Trade Rice Farmers

“If we are able to expand the fair trade network, we would be a country that is able to place emphasis on community. We could place more importance on producers and consumers throughout the world,”

-Dhamma Sungsalı a farmer from the Fair trade network.

“Do you sympathize with the Thai Farmer? I don’t want you to sympathize only, I want you to understand where that rice has come from before it gets into your hand,”

-Thunya Sangsri from the Surin Farmers Support network.

“I was in debt tens of thousands of baht the year I made the transition from chemical farming to organic farming. I have done organic farming for six years, but my debt was gone in two years. The debt was from the fertilizer and the pesticides. Now we don’t use fertilizers or pesticides. We raise animals and use that manure in the fields.”

-Dhamma Sungsalı fair trade farmer from Thailand.

“If you just bought organic food for your health and the health of your family, you should know you are getting more than that because you are helping people to construct another world, an alternative for living.”

-Pahd Poom fair trade farmer from Thailand