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Are we delivering the seeds for change? A critical analysis of the Sustainable Rice Platform in Cambodia.

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The Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP) aims to address environmental problems caused by rice intensification by providing incentives to farmers who engage in alternative practices. In this paper, we provide a critical analysis of an SRP project located in central Cambodia. Our case study documents the project implementation and its impact pathway, offering perspectives to improve the certification process and the platform management. We used a mixed-method approach that involves qualitative interviews with farmers (n=60) as well as quantitative surveys of 275 households with different forms of engagement with the project (participating, dropped-out, and never participated). The study seeks to answer three main questions: (1) how and why were the SRP sites selected, (2) who were the farmers who joined, who dropped out and those who never joined the project and what were their motivations and constraints, and (3) to what extent did farmers change their farming practices once they joined the SRP project, and what were the constraints they faced? Results showed that the area selected for the SRP project was fertile ground for project development, where people tend to have less intensive rice farming practices. Our study revealed that all farm types joined the project with the same main motivation, i.e., accessing a niche market with higher prices for their rice production. However, this reason for adoption was also one of the main reasons for abandonment, as the market outlet provided at the beginning of the project no longer existed a few years after the project began. Finally, the level of farmers' adoption of SRP practices revealed the limited effective changes induced by the SRP project. This situation is exacerbated by rice millers prioritizing high-quality rice over verifying farmers' agricultural practices. Beyond the importance of the market as a driver to adopt alternative practices, the study further questions the implementation and its impacts of the SRP in the field and emphasized the need for simplification of the SRP guidelines. Our findings can inform the adaptation and improvement of the SRP platform and contribute to the promotion of sustainable rice production in Cambodia and beyond.

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