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Impact of the current crisis in Sri Lanka towards paddy cultivation: Perspective of farmers

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Abstract

Rice is not only a staple food in Sri Lanka but a part of the main livelihood of the majority in rural areas in the country. Agriculture plays a pivotal role in contributing to the national Gross Domestic Production in Sri Lanka like many other developing nations. Despite the fact that Sri Lanka's paddy industry has long served as the backbone of the economy, the country's present economic crisis has resulted in severe shortages and price hikes for essential goods, such as food, agricultural inputs, fuel, and medicine, which has severely disrupted agricultural production. Further, Sri Lankan government has enacted an immediate ban on chemical fertilizer imports to address the foreign exchange crisis. Nevertheless, switching to organic farming is not an overnight process, it takes at least two years to rebuild the soil and reach a point where it can produce comparable crop yields. Since the snowballing economic and political crisis deepened by the bungled agricultural transition, the study aims to examine severely undermined causes toward paddy farmers and to their harvest. A qualitative approach included 20 paddy farmers interested in participating in the study. In-depth interviews and observations revealed the several impacts on the paddy farmers by the prevailing economic status of Sri Lanka. The collected data were analysed using the thematic analysis method. The study has identified several pressing issues confronting paddy farmers in Sri Lanka, stemming from the prevailing economic and political crises. These include a decline in rice production, limited access to fertilizer and fuel, which hinder harvesting and paddy cultivation, mounting pressure and uncertainty among farmers about their next crop season, and the exacerbation of economic challenges and dwindling currency reserves. The government's ban on the import of inorganic fertilizer and agrochemicals has had a significant impact on the agricultural supply chain, resulting in limited access to essential agricultural inputs. Although the ban was eventually lifted, the damage had already been done due to the impact of the global pandemic on agricultural productivity. As a result, there has been a decline in paddy productivity, leading to increased food insecurity and income losses for small farmers who are already living on the brink of poverty. As recommendations, the study suggests implying macro-economic policies rather than organic-only policies, and as a long-term intervention strategy, the government needs to plan a holistic approach that improves food security, through economic development and agriculture. Further, appropriate revisions for the current agricultural policies should be executed to be more effective and efficient to support the livelihood of paddy farmers, achieving self-sufficiency in rice, and curtailing transaction costs and inefficiencies associated with distribution by the proper intervention of government in the paddy market.

Keywords: Agriculture, Economic crisis, Food insecurity, Paddy farmers

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