

## **Economic Development and Socio-environmental Conflict: A Case Study of Oil Palm Cultivation in Southern Sri Lanka**

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### **Abstract**

Oil palm is extending in Sri Lanka about 6000 ha where 67 % is available in Southern Province. Watawala, Namunukula and Elpitiya are three regional plantation companies involved with cultivation. Oil palm has been in existence as a plantation crop in the southern province for more than five decades strengthening the economy of the country and there is hardly any difference between rubber cultivation and oil palm. Despite the similarities of benefits of palm oil and rubber planting on estates, it is a paradox that people in the area oppose only the oil palm plantations. Most of the objections have come up against oil palm from Galle district. Therefore, the study was limited to Galle district and was conducted in the year 2010. Primary data was collected by interviewing people, holding discussions and providing a questionnaire to identify groups. For this purpose, 125 stakeholders were randomly selected. The views and related data of the three main regional plantation companies were taken to consideration while assessing the importance of oil palm cultivation in Galle District. Secondary data consisting of journal articles, newspaper articles and electronic data on oil palm were analyzed. Rainfall data, snake bite related incidents, information on oil palm based accidents, dogs and other animal related data, fertilizer and chemical usage data, affluent disposal methods were collected by consulting veterinary surgeons, government hospitals and other respective institutes in the area. Reviewing the data of other oil palm planting nations in the similar circumstances and their counter arguments too were scrutinized when completing the research. The majority of the concerns addressed were related to the environment. This includes high water absorption, changes in weather patterns, land degradation, deforestation and affluent disposal issues. Some of the social concerns were increased risk of snake bites, higher usage of agrochemicals and fertilizer and skin diseases spread among dogs. Loss of job opportunities for the plantation workers caused the most distress amongst the community. 65.4% of the sample population believes that oil palm cultivation will not have a negative impact on the environment and 65.5% stated that there are no direct benefits from oil palm. The majority (54%) believed that oil palm was not a suitable crop to cultivate mainly due to the myths they have heard. Furthermore, 61% of the sample population agreed that there was insufficient knowledge regarding oil palm cultivation 56% believed that the cultivation of this crop has no impact on the job opportunities. According to the findings, lack of awareness on oil palm cultivation in the area leads unrest of the community.

**Keywords:** Environmental issues, Oil palm, Stakeholders perception

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