

Sri Lanka's transition to organic farming

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On August 30, 2021, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared an emergency. The decision was taken to curb the hoarding of essential items and to control inflation, since the country is faced with a shortage of food items and a steep rise in prices of essential commodities.

Sri Lanka is under a pandemic-induced economic crisis, with a rising foreign debt, depleted foreign exchange reserves and a devaluing currency. Media reports have linked the food shortage and economic crisis to a government decision earlier this year.

In April, President Rajapaksa announced that only organic farming would be allowed in Sri Lanka, aiming to become the first country to do so. On April 27, the Sri Lankan Cabinet banned the import of over 600 items, including chemical fertilizers and foods like oats, soya milk, dairy goods and apple juice. In his address to the pre-summit of the United Nations Food System Summit held on July 26-28, 2021, Rajapaksa cited widespread chronic health problems and ecological destruction in the country due to agrochemicals as reasons for the ban.

Earlier, a Government press release dated February 3 had linked excessive use of agrochemicals to the rise in kidney ailments, cancer cases and non-communicable diseases.

Apart from health reasons, Rajapaksa also talked about the need to cut imports due to the economic crisis in a special address to the nation on June 26. Sri Lanka's chemical fertilizer import in 2020 was 1.26 million tonnes, according to its National Fertilizer Secretariat.

"In 2020, Sri Lanka imports (both state and private sector) of foreign fertilizers reached US\$ 259 million, representing 1.6 per cent of the country's total imports by value," stated Sri Lanka Restricts and Bans the Import of Fertilizers and Agrochemicals, a report by the United States Department of Agriculture's foreign agriculture service dated February 28, 2021. The report also suggested that Sri Lanka's fertilizer import bill for 2021 could be US\$ 300-US\$ 400 million, given current high international prices.

Wrong target

Media has wrongly blamed organic farming for the food crisis in Sri Lanka. There are two cultivation seasons in the country — Yala (April-May to August-September) and Maha (September-October to February-March). Most Sri Lankan farmers have already used chemical fertilizers provided by the government in the current Yala season.

Media reports have quoted the country's Agriculture Minister, Mahindananda Aluthgamage, saying that the country faces a chemical fertilizer shortage of just 5 per cent this season. The yield loss, if any, after the harvesting of this Yala season, will be related to chemical fertilizer-based farming and has nothing to do with organic, Suresh Del Mel, member of Sri Lanka presidential task force on organic farming, told Down To Earth (DTE). The crisis is linked with economic factors leading to depleting foreign reserves and restriction on the import of food items.

However, the sudden move to ban chemical fertilizers and pesticides triggered hoarding by traders and companies, leading to black-

marketing. There were widespread protests in July by farmers, who complained of a fertilizer shortage, and led to government raids against hoarders. The Military was deployed to stop hoarding of essential commodities and to seize food stocks held by traders and retailers.

Aluthgamage blames the fertilizer mafia for stoking fear among the public and creating disruptions. During a media interaction on June 14, he said chemical fertilizer was the third largest business with an annual turnover of Sri Lankan Rs 100 billion (US\$ 0.5 billion) and it was never an easy task to defeat this mafia. He also said that farmers are not against the use of organic farming.

Old plan

Sri Lanka's successive Governments, including the previous one, have discussed up-scaling of organic farming in the country. Before the President's announcement, the Government's National Agriculture Policy 2021 planned to increase organic fertilizer use in Sri Lanka from 1 per cent to 30 per cent within three years.

However, a majority of Sri Lankan farmers are yet to learn and start organic farming. Only 2.8 per cent of Sri Lanka's total agricultural land is organic, according to World of Organic Agriculture 2020 published by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement, an umbrella organisation for the organic agriculture movement with affiliates in over 100 countries.

However, the actual number of farmers practising organic and natural farming can be higher in Sri Lanka as only certified organic farmers get counted, said Anuka Vimukthi, member of the International Coordination Committee, La Via Campesina, an international farmers' organisation headquartered in Belgium.

A smooth transition from chemical-based farming to organic or natural farming needs a well-thought plan. Sri Lanka lacks a roadmap and transition plan, and it seems that the decision to shift to organic farming has been taken under economic compulsion.

Farmers approve

Civil society and organisations promoting organic and natural farming in Sri Lanka are happy about the announcement to go organic, said Linus Jayatilake, a former trade union leader who is now working to promote natural farming and indigenous cattle breeds.

Many farmers want to shift to organic farming in Sri Lanka but lack proper support, said Shammika Liyanage, senior lecturer, public policy, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka.

Chintaka Rajapakse, moderator of Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform, a non-profit based in Sri Lanka, congratulated the Government for the initiative but warned that if this is done without a proper policy framework, farmers might lose faith in such practices. We need to learn from the experience of similar work done in other countries, said Liyanage.

Sri Lanka need not look too far. India's experience with organic farming shows the necessity for a proper plan for such a mass transition.

TVijay Kumar, ex-officio special chief secretary, Natural Farming, Andhra Pradesh, who has helped 128,000 farmers shift to natural



gan, CEO, Organic Mission, Sikkim, the first state in the world to become completely organic. The transition from chemical farming to organic takes time as one has to overcome several challenges, Anbalagan said.

Organic growth

There is growing research on the success of organic and natural farming and the number of farmers adopting organic has also increased across the world.

Several publications by the Food and Agriculture Organization indicated that sustainable agriculture methods, such as organic farming, are more viable and sustainable than chemical-based farming in terms of yield, nutritious quality food production, ecological and economic sustainability.

N. Ravisankar, National Principal Investigator of All India Network Programme on Organic Farming of Indian Council of Agriculture Research-Indian Institute of Farming Systems Research, said that long-term evaluation of cropping systems under organic farming in different agro-climatic conditions of India indicated that the organic farming yield is on par or marginally higher in about 18 crops compared to conventional chemical farming, especially after the conversion period of 2-3 years.

Rajinder Chaudhary, former professor of economics, MD University, Haryana agreed. Any farmer adopting and practicing all principles of organic farming — changing whole set of agronomic practices — is able to get comparable or even better yields in all crops under organic than chemical farming, he added.

farming from chemical-based farming since 2016, said it can take a farmer 3-5 years to shift to organic farming completely and an entire village might take 5-8 years.

The coverage increases gradually, and only after farmers change their mindset and learn and adopt organic practices, he said. It should also be voluntary.

As of now, the Sri Lankan Government is only talking about promoting organic fertilizers and increasing farmer awareness. Financial incentives of Sri Lankan Rs 12,500 per hectare up to a maximum of two hectares will be provided to farmers to encourage organic farming.

Government officials said that the mechanism has been formulated to provide organic fertilizer required for the Maha season. President Rajapaksa instructed officials to import the required quantity of high quality organic

fertilizer if the quantity of fertilizer produced locally is not sufficient.

The government has allocated Sri Lankan Rs 3.8 billion for the purchase of organic fertilizers in the coming season. However, G V Ramanjaneyulu, an agriculture scientist working on organic farming with the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, a non-profit research organisation based in Telangana, told DTE that transition is not only about providing subsidy or organic fertilizers; focus need to be on capacity building of important stakeholders like farmers, agriculture department officials and scientists.

It also requires hand-holding, quality organic inputs and support for transition losses. We started with small initiatives around organic farming in 2003 and became a 100 per cent organic farming state in 2016, said S Anbala-

(Down to Earth)