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DON'T BLAME ORGANIC FARMING FOR FOOD CRISIS

A new IPCC report wants the world to decarbonise. Sri Lanka was doing just that.

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Yet another IPCC (United Nations Inter-Governmental Panel for Climate Change) is out that warns of dire consequences if the world does not course-correct and pursue a low-Carbon pathway. This means drastically cutting our dependence on all fossil fuels, among a string of other hard-hitting measures. One Asian country did try that by announcing a ban on chemical-based farming and a decision to go organic. But now, the world media is blaming this decision for an unprecedented economic crisis.

Yes, it is true that Sri Lanka is facing a massive shortage of essential goods and services and a plummeting economy. But to blame chemical-free farming for a food crisis not only shows a simplistic understanding of the concept itself, but also reinforces a narrative long promoted by the fossil fuel industry and its backers.

Agricultural practices

For far too long, the fossil fuel industry has promoted the message that food can be grown on a mass scale only by pumping it with chemical fertilizers, weedicides and pesticides, and that there will be a large-scale global food crisis if these inputs are stopped suddenly.

The New York Times carried a piece headlined "Sri Lanka's plunge into organic farming brings disaster", while an Indian news channel ran a headline saying "Organic farming to blame for Sri Lanka's agrarian crisis". Congress MP Shashi Tharoor recently said on Twitter, "I am all in favour of healthy organics, but should not we be aware of how Sri Lanka's shift to organic farming in 2019 proved disastrous for its food security?".

Such narratives largely ignore the perils of chemical-based agricultural practices, such as the steep costs for a country like Sri Lanka in terms of the import of chemical fertilizers, the impact on the environment due to the receding groundwater table and the health impact on the farmers who handle the chemicals on a daily basis, among other concerning effects.

Moreover, organic farming no longer means just the absence of chemical sprays; it means growing a multitude of crops so that in case one of them fails, the farmer has a back-up. While the soil is replenished, the health benefits of organic farming go not just to the consumer but also to the farmer, who is not exposed to carcinogenic chemicals daily. These benefits usually go unreported while weighing the pros and cons of organic farming.

So, before organic farming is dismissed as a failure, what must be asked is, were the thousands of rice and other farmers in Sri Lanka prepared for this transition? Were the necessary supply and demand chains created so that the market was ready for it? Chemical-free farming requires access to bio-pesticides, training in how to make these, knowledge of which crop to plant and when so that the soil does not lose its nutrients, and, finally, a local market that pays a premium for these organic products.

India's 'ZBNF' Model

Opponents argue that organic farming cannot be practised to scale. However, India has a definitive example of how chemical-free farming was rolled out to 138,000 farmers across 13 districts of Andhra Pradesh (AP), bringing almost 150,000 acres of agricultural land under the ZBNF model of agriculture. Popularly referred to as "Zero Budget Natural Farming", it was introduced with a time scale in mind as a grassroots agrarian movement. Farmers were trained in this low-cost, locally-sourced natural farming method, which does not rely on the use of agrochemicals and has the potential to meet the twin goals of global food security and the conservation of the local environment.

Farmers were trained to be self-reliant by developing local seed treatments such as *bijamrita,* preparation of a microbial inoculum *(jiwamrita)* and techniques such as cover crops with mulching *(achhadana)* to enhance soil fertility and to fight crop pests.

The model has been so successful that an analysis by the environmental think tank EEW showed that scaling up ZBNF could lead to massive savings on chemical fertilizer imports and subsidies while reducing the input costs for farmers. Done the right way, chemical-free farming not only empowers the farmers but also helps the environment.

So, while the intentions of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa Government may have been noble in seeking to introduce organic farming, what was not handled well was the transition to this method. An overnight declaration of intent without the necessary background work in place led to hoarding, black-marketing and panic amongst farmers.

Harjeet Singh, Strategic Advisor to the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative, sums it up well: "As countries seek to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels, they will need help in making the necessary changes. That is why we have been insisting on a 'just transition' that is based on support from the international community rather than this haphazard transition that could spell havoc for the poor countries."

He adds: "What happened in Sri Lanka may have been done with good intentions. But any unplanned transition will boomerang. And fossil fuel companies will use these opportunities to justify their existence and products."

What happens in Sri Lanka is a lesson for all countries that seek to make a just transition towards a fossil fuel-free world. For that, we have to start by countering the narratives being furthered by an industry that does not want to wind up its business.

(Bahar Dutt is an award-winning environment journalist and author. This is an opinion article and the views expressed are the author's own)

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