

'It will be hard to find a farmer left': Sri Lanka reels from rash fertiliser ban

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Harvests have collapsed, and the way President Rajapaksa introduced the policy angered even organic farmers

Driving through the verdant landscape of Rajanganaya, a rural district in north [Sri Lanka](#) where the hibiscus flowers pop out of rich green foliage and the mango trees are already weighed down by early fruit, it is hard to imagine this is a community in crisis. Yet for many of those who have farmed this land since the 1960s, mainly with rice and banana crops, the past year has been the toughest of their lives.

"If things go on like this, in the future it will be hard to find a farmer left in Sri Lanka," said Niluka Dilrukshi, 34, a rice paddy farmer.

Sri Lanka is grappling with the worst economic crisis since its independence in 1948, and foreign currency reserves sit at their lowest level on record due to what many see as gross economic mismanagement by the government. There is barely a citizen of this south Asian island who hasn't felt the bite of catastrophic inflation and fuel, food and medicine shortages in recent weeks.

For the farmers of Sri Lanka, their problems began in April last year when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who now stands accused of pushing the country into financial ruin, implemented a sudden ban on chemical fertilisers.

The full implications of the ill-advised policy - which has now been reversed - are only just being realised. Farmers say their livelihoods are under threat and for the first time in its modern history, Sri Lanka, which usually grows rice and vegetables in abundance, could run out of food as harvests drop and the government can no longer afford the food imports the country has become overdependent on in recent years. The rice yield dropped to 2.92m tonnes in 2021-22, down from the previous year's 3.39m, and the [speaker in parliament last week warned of imminent starvation](#) among the island's 22 million people.

"We are a tropical country full of rice paddies and banana plantations, but because of this stupid fertiliser ban, now we don't even have enough food to feed ourselves," said Rajith Keerthi Tennakoon, 52, former governor of the southern province. "We have had past economic crises, security crises but never in Sri Lanka's history have we had a food crisis."

On the face of it, a push to organic farming would be seen as laudable, given concerns over the use of chemical fertilisers. Yet it was the sudden and obtuse manner in which the ban was introduced - imposed virtually overnight and with no prior warning or training - and the questionable motives behind it, that have left even organic farming advocates furious.

Prior to the ban, successive governments had encouraged an overdependence on chemical fertilisers by the country's farmers, who, thanks to subsidies, would receive hundreds of kilos of fertiliser.

Aside from a few select farmers, most had no idea how to successfully implement organic farming practices, and in protest many refused to farm altogether. Some believe the policy was meant to save valuable foreign dollars, others believe it was part of a more sinister agenda, following a growing intervention into the farmers' lives by the government.

"There was no proper plan, no training or education, so it's clear to the farmers there was an ulterior [motive] here," said Vimukthi de Silva, an organic farmer in Rajanganaya.

"Prior to this policy, the government had unsuccessfully tried to commercialise farm land, which is the biggest commercial asset the country has. So many of us think this was another way to try and get farmers to leave their land, or to weaken the farmers' position and enable a land grab."

In Rajanganaya, where most farmers operate on a small scale with no more than a hectare apiece, the majority of those the Guardian spoke to reported between a 50% to 60% reduction in their crop harvest. Last week, more than 300 farmers from the area staged a protest calling for Rajapaksa to resign.

"Before the ban, this was one of the biggest markets in the country, with tonnes and tonnes of rice and vegetables," said De Silva. "But after the ban, it became almost zero. If you talk to the rice mills, they don't have any stock because people's harvest dropped so much. The income of this whole community has dropped to an extremely low level."

For his whole life, 55-year-old HP Sarah Dharmasiri, had farmed udu (black gram) and rice on little more than a hectare, which was enough to feed his family and sell the rest at market to provide necessary income.

But without the chemical fertiliser he was used to, his harvest from his rice crop was so little that he didn't even have enough to bring to the market. Meanwhile, the price of pesticides needed for his gram crop had increased in price so much that he was forced to take out a high interest loan just to afford them. By the end of the last harvest he was crippled with debt and no profits to pay it off, and he has now taken up work as a daily wage labourer.

"I don't think I can be a farmer any longer," he said. "We have some fruits and vegetable in the garden so we can survive for the moment but I think in the future there will be a time when we go starving."

Several farmers told the Guardian that last season they barely sold any of the rice or vegetables they cultivated, instead keeping it just for their own consumption to ensure the family wouldn't go starving. It was a decision that led to a drop in the amount that went to the markets to feed the rest of the country, further driving up prices for consumers on top of already sky-high inflation.

Paddy farmer Dilrukshi will only cultivate 0.2 hectares of rice this season, as opposed to the 1.6 he usually harvests. "We can't afford the expense of cultivating any more, as the yield has gone down while prices have gone up," he said. "We will be able to sell a little bit of that but not much, the rest we will eat ourselves."

The problems have been heavily compounded by the domestic economic crisis, rising global inflation and more recently the war in Ukraine, which has sent the price of fuel, pesticides and fertiliser soaring. Seeds have tripled in price, so have become unaffordable for some, and farmers who used to rent additional land for cultivation have stopped for this coming season. Farmers rely on diesel to run their tractors to harvest the land, but prices are so high and availability so limited – some farmers have been forced to wait in queues of over 24 hour to refuel – some have had to abandon this season's paddy cultivation or will plant late, which means a reduced crop.

The power cuts, lasting upwards of eight hours, have meant that water pumps that send water to higher areas have stopped working, cutting off the water supply for fields of vegetables and bananas. The mills, which turn the paddy into rice, also rely on power and some of the rice crop has gone bad as it couldn't be milled in time. Farmers also don't have the petrol or diesel to transport their crops to the market. As the next season approaches, many fear that severe crop shortages are on the horizon.

The prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, announced this week the government would be reintroducing the fertiliser subsidy for farmers, but that was met with scepticism by many. "We know they don't have the dollars to buy fertiliser," said farmer Piyasiri Atalugama. "They think they can fool us farmers with false promises."

In recent months, Atalugama, 49, lost most of his banana crop, which is heavily dependent on chemical fertilisers, and has now decided to stop cultivating the fruit altogether after losing 150,000 rupees (£350).

"I campaigned for Gota [Rajapaksa] - he had huge support from the farmers," he said. "I am betrayed and sad by what he has done to us."

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