

Notes to the people

Sri Lanka: For a National Agricultural Plan

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At the third reading of the Budget 2021 the Minister of Agriculture, Mahindananda Aluthgamage informed the house his Ministry would prepare a national agricultural plan within a period of twelve months. In the context that under the present administration, the subject agriculture is fragmented into separate sub-fields and placed under three or four separate Ministers or State Ministers, it may be difficult to prepare an integrated national agriculture plan. Hence, what the minister would have in his mind is a plan for what is generally known as peasant or subsistence agriculture, the phrase in itself has now become a misnomer notwithstanding. So let us call it food crop agriculture to distinguish it from plantation agriculture.



The buzz word that has been incessantly resonated in the development of agriculture is agricultural modernisation meaning an application as far as technically feasible of industrial modes in agricultural production. This has been the policy especially since the 1960s with advent of the so-called green revolution. The extant weaknesses of agricultural production and the prevailing poverty in the rural sector have been often times explicated as the absence or inadequate presence of the modernised methods and techniques in production. Hence, the Governments since 1977 have resorted to the methods that include leasing large tracts of land to commercial agricultural companies, national or multi-national. The base documents of the Millennium Corporation Compact Agreement (MCC) has recognised the nature of land rights as one of the principal causes of abject poverty of the island. So, the hidden agenda is to generate a space that benefits agricultural production based on large and concentrated land ownership. As a part of this so-called agricultural modernisation, it has been posited that the large portion of bare land and forest land are to be directed to agricultural production.

The experience in the last 42 years have shown that this policy package has miserably failed to protect the country's food autonomy and to increase the living conditions of the majority of agricultural producers. Therefore, I submit that in preparing a new agricultural plan, this old baggage is to be left behind and new thinking that integrates traditional and indigenous agricultural practices is needed.

Food Autonomy

The extant area under food crop agriculture is around 900,000 hectares. Any agricultural plan should be based on the projected estimates of the level of consumption, direct and indirect, of agricultural products in order to maintain and improve food autonomy of the country. This of course does not mean that total consumption needs of food products should be locally produced because of the fact that food autonomy in any country is partly culturally conditioned. Moreover, as quite a large portion of animal protein in our diet comes from meat and egg production, an increase of production of animal feed in adequate quantity should also be a part of the plan. There is no difficulty in obtaining these quantitative data and making projections of future needs in order to meet the demands of the growing population that is around one per cent per year and to improve the nutrition level of peoples' diet.

Hence, both quantitative and qualitative increase of food production should be the principal objective of the new agricultural plan. However, the critical issue is how and in what way this goal should be achieved taking the both short-term and long-term goals into consideration.

Metabolism and Metabolical Rift

In answering the issue of how the agricultural production, basically the food production, be increased, I deploy two concepts advanced by Karl Marx, namely, metabolism and metabolical rift. Let me briefly define the terms although Marx did not proceed on the basis of definitions, but on determinations. The dictionary definition of Metabolism refers to "the chemical activity in your body that uses food to produce the energy you need to work and grow". Marx employed the notion of social metabolism to refer to "the complex, dynamic interchange between human and nature". As John Bellamy Foster noted, human beings are a part of nature depending on eco-systems to sustain themselves and their actions in turn affect those same eco-systems. So, "As a result, there is a necessary metabolic interaction between humans and the earth that influence both natural and social history". Hence, if this social metabolism does not keep at a manageable level, the system would move to a 'metabolical rift'. For example, the dependence of food crop agriculture on chemical fertiliser and pesticides is so heavy that peasants are forced to use increasing doses of fertiliser in order to get the expected yield. Moreover, they have to depend on pesticides in larger quantity. This metabolism forced on small scale agricultural producers has created a kind of vicious circle that has been exacerbated by making about 70,000 people kidney patients. I argue that this mode of production has now reached the level of metabolical rift.

What does this mean? Why would it be a critical element in the articulation of an agricultural plan? Marx was greatly influenced by agricultural research of agronomists, chemists and other scientists. The German chemist, Justus von Liebig in the 1850s referred to English agriculture as a robbery because of its use of intensive methods of agriculture in order to raise production for the market destroying the vitality of the soil. Thus the mode of production in English agriculture forced it to depend later highly on artificial and chemical fertiliser in order to maintain the quality of the soil.

Recently, giving an interview to a Sinhala newspaper, Prof S. A. Kulasuriya, a well-known micro biologist from the University of Peradeniya has opined that agricultural production can be increased by using bio-fertiliser instead of chemical fertiliser. According to him, the cost of production would be substantially reduced by this alternative system. Explaining further, the professor notes that bio-fertiliser is not in fact a kind of fertiliser as it is inoculum that helps to rejuvenate the fertility of soil by an organic process. So, the social metabolism between humans and nature in the sphere of agriculture will not lead to a metabolical rift affecting soil fertility, polluting water resources and

causing unknown diseases while enriching multinational fertiliser companies and their village level merchants. The most attractive part of Prof. Kulasuriya's proposal is that he argued that an introduction of the alternative system package may tend to reduce the price of rice to Rs 70 per kilo. Moreover, he posited that reversing to more eco-friendly system would help to reduce imports of agricultural products spending valuable foreign exchange reserves.

What are the Obstructions?

If Sri Lanka has generated a new scientific knowledge that is eco-friendly and less costly, one may wonder why we had waited so long to go into this alternative system. Minister Aluthgamage's proposal to have a new agricultural plan is commendable. Nonetheless, if he does not seek advice from an academic like Prof. Kulasuriya when drafting the plan, but from pseudo-scientists that are in the pay roll of multinational chemical fertiliser and pesticide companies, the "new" plan would be another disaster profiting the minority in the upper echelon of the Sri Lankan society.

Sumanasiri Liyanage

P.S.

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- The writer is a retired teacher of Political Economy at the University of Peradeniya.

sumane_l@yahoo.com