

Sri Lankan govt. allows India to play bigger role in island's agriculture

Wednesday 1 December 2021, by [KURUWITA Rathindra](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2021).

The government has allowed India to play a bigger role in Sri Lankan agriculture due to its recent actions regarding agrochemicals, moderator of Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR,) Chinthaka Rajapakshe alleged yesterday.

Rajapaksa told The Island that the government had banned agrochemicals to break the existing cartel that controlled fertiliser imports and thereby help its business associates.

Rajapakshe said that the actions of successive governments had greatly undermined the country's food security and sovereignty.

"The government's impotence was shown during the rice issue. It put out a number of gazette notifications to control the price of rice and the mill owners ignored these gazettes and created a shortage. The government finally allowed mill owners to determine prices. This shows that the government does not understand the ground realities, i. e. that it can't influence the market because all the tools it has at its disposal are ineffective, and it has no plan."

Rajapakshe said that since banning the import of agrochemicals, the government had not held any discussions with stakeholders involved in organic agriculture in the country.

"It is now obvious that the government has no intention of going green. All it wants is to ensure that its associates will control the agrochemical market in the future. However, the government is bungling that up, too," he claimed.

Rajapakshe added that if the government held discussions with those already involved with organic farming, it would have learnt that the first thing to do was to restore the microbes in the soil biodiversity. A healthy soil had a variety of living organisms.

"Plant roots can also be considered as soil organisms in view of their symbiotic relationships and interactions with other soil components. These diverse organisms interact with one another and with the various plants and animals in the ecosystem, forming a complex web of biological activity. Because we have been overusing agrochemicals for decades, most of our soil is dead. While supplying compost is a component of this, it is not everything that we can do. There are so many other things we could have done."

The government was compelled to ban the import of fertilizers because it faced a dollar shortage, Rajapakshe said. If the government was serious about reducing the cost of importing fertiliser it could have worked with farmers and introduced easy compost making methods, he said. "Instead, the government tried to give their associates an opportunity to mass produce compost and when that failed it resorted to importing organic fertiliser," he said.

"This has also allowed India to come into our agriculture. Adani is already working in Sri Lanka and

he plays a major role in Indian agriculture. I don't think he is here only for the West Container Terminal," he said.

MONLAR worked with a large number of farmers and most of them were ready to switch to organic farming if a transparent and feasible path was made available, he said. The ground reality was that the government's actions were increasingly driving out small scale farmers and those lands were being taken over by large companies.

"This has been happening for a while and farmers are highly suspicious. The government keeps on transferring land owned by small farmers to large companies. These companies are export oriented. During the first phase of shifting to organic agriculture, there has been a drop in the yield. We must take that into account and increase the area of farmlands but we are doing quite the opposite," he said.

On the other hand, the government had done nothing to educate the farmers on how to engage in organic farming. Those who planted tea used compost the way they used agrochemicals, which is not an effective way of using compost, he said. MONLAR had introduced certain practices used in Andhra Pradesh, India, to some Sri Lankan farmers on recovering lost soil diversity. Those practices have been embraced by farmers with great enthusiasm, he said.

"There are ways of boosting soil biodiversity within days. They have not been explored. Having TV programmes on organic agriculture is not enough, the government has to go to the farmers," he said.

Moreover, compost is only one component of organic agriculture. There are a number of specialised equipment and machinery needed to successfully engage in organic agriculture. We also need things, like cutters and crushers, to make compost on a large scale. There are a number of Sri Lankan companies that produce these machines, but they have not been given the necessary support to expand production, he said.

Rajapakshe said that Sri Lanka also needed to gear its waste management system towards compost making. Although a large quantity of biodegradable waste was collected daily, most of it was thrown into dump sites. Compost could be created with the biodegradable waste and systems should be introduced to prevent heavy metal contamination.

"Heavy metals can come from things like batteries, bulbs and e-waste. We need to establish protocols to prevent such items from mixing with biodegradable waste," Rajapakshe added.

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