

Sri Lanka: Garden at home, work abroad: Practical or pipe dream?

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Public sector employees' opinions on new measures to increase efficiency

In a context where Sri Lanka has very limited and not-so-promising options to face the possible food crisis and the worsening economic crisis, preparing the country to minimise the impacts of the same and save resources seems to be one of the best available options.

One measure that the Government took in this regard was introducing a four-day work week for public sector employees with Fridays being declared an off-day for those in non-essential sectors, encouraging them to grow food crops in their gardens and lands, and instructing them to consider foreign employment on non-paid leave which would however not affect their seniority or pensions.

How these novel measures will pan out remains to be seen. However, according to several public sector workers who spoke to *The Morning* on the condition of anonymity, even though these measures seem attractive as far as the country's overall economic situation is concerned, their practicality is highly debatable.

Going abroad

Even though it has been announced that the laws and regulations affecting the seniority and pension of public sector employees who go abroad for studies or employment would be amended to prevent impacts on such, some public sector employees remain sceptical about going abroad for employment. Their main concern is not with regard to working abroad, but how practical it is.

In this regard, 40-year-old public sector employee Kasun Perera (name changed), said: "The Government does not have to request us to find foreign employment. Sri Lanka does not have good living conditions, and therefore, going abroad is the best solution that is available. However, it is not an easy solution. If public sector employees are to go abroad for employment, we need some kind of formal qualifications or years of experience in a skills-based field.

"The most common formal qualification public sector employees have which also has a place in the local job market is a bachelor's degree. However, such qualifications are not at all adequate to find a job in foreign job markets. What is more, with many qualified people leaving the country looking for jobs, there is competition when it comes to being a migrant worker from Sri Lanka.

"I think that this is also problematic due to many people attempting to leave the country. Sri Lanka has already been identified as a country from which people would leave even through illegal methods, and foreign countries are reluctant or are extra careful when accepting job applications from Sri Lanka. In fact, Sri Lankan migrant workers are seen as refugees."

Perera noted that these factors will also play a role when applying for foreign employment, and that finding a job abroad has become far more difficult than before. In addition, he said that if the

Government genuinely wants public sector employees to find foreign employment, it should assist them by finding jobs that match the qualifications and experiences of those willing to go abroad.

Meanwhile, 44-year-old public sector employee Chanaka Silva (name changed) sees the Government encouraging public sector employees to go abroad as a warning sign. He revealed that some public sector employees fear that the Government's next step aimed at reducing costs would be pay cuts or layoffs. He explained: "The public sector being a burden to the Treasury is a concern that has been raised from time to time, and even the present Government has said the same. However, the fact that this concern is being brought up amidst a grave economic crisis gives a different impression to many public sector employees I personally know. They are of the opinion that by asking public sector employees to go abroad, what the Government is essentially saying is that those who can afford to leave the public sector should do so. Asking employees to do so is the first and most common step of getting rid of unwanted and surplus employees. We are concerned as to whether layoffs or pay cuts would be the next step."

He further said that many public sector employees are concerned about the possibility of this happening, because, in the event the Government decides to opt for layoffs, even if employees were given compensation, the value of money is decreasing, and therefore, how long a person can survive with compensation is also decreasing. Even if adequate notice was given to find jobs, he noted, elderly public sector employees are likely to find it difficult to find jobs due to the private sector being reluctant to hire elderly persons unless in exceptional cases.

Home gardening and four-day work week

Another measure that the Government came up with to reduce expenses, save fuel, and increase the food security situation was introducing a four-day work week for the public sector, which however received mixed responses from public sector workers and the society in general. Again, its practicality and expected results were the main concerns that many raised.

Thirty-seven-year-old public sector employee Eran Fernando (name changed) was of the opinion that even though this measure would be welcomed by elderly public sector employees whom he said would like more freedom for their personal lives, overall, this would just contribute to decreased outcomes from the public sector.

He said: "Various countries have taken measures to reduce work hours and work days. However, they did it with a proper plan, and their intention was to increase productivity through decreasing pressure on employees and through giving them more time for their personal lives. However, our reasons and expectations are different. We want employees to stay at home and farm in their lands."

Fernando added that this decision is likely to cause newer issues in the country's workforce and productivity. "On the one hand, this would result in decreased efficiency in the public sector, and would cause more stress to the general public seeking services from the public sector. It is likely to cause more issues when it comes to services that are sought by thousands of people on a daily basis. On the other hand, this will create issues in the overall workforce, because private sector employees do not get the same opportunity."

One of the objectives of introducing the four-day work week was giving public sector employees the opportunity to engage in farming in their gardens and lands, and the announcement with regard to the same mentioned that they would be provided with the necessary facilities to do that. It was also stated that such a measure would help Sri Lanka ensure food security in the near future, in a context where concerns have been raised with regard to a possible food crisis.

Forty-three-year-old public sector employee Yasith Wickrama (name changed) noted in this regard that even though introducing the four-day work week concept could help save fuel and reduce expenses, this measure is less likely to encourage them to engage in farming. He said that there are several practical issues in this regard, which the Government should address urgently.

He added: “The Government seems to be considering farming in gardens a simple matter. Even though any person can plant some seeds and water it until it grows and gives a yield, to actually help manage the possible food crisis, more organised and advanced farming is necessary. Except for public sector employees working in an agriculture sector-related field, only a handful of public sector employees have the knowledge and skills that farming requires.

“Personally, I do not even know what types of food crops can be farmed in my garden. I do not know whether I should use fertilisers. Even if I had to, I do not know what types of fertilisers to choose and how much to use. There are a plethora of other knowledge-related concerns as to how to choose suitable seeds, how to water them, and how to prepare the soil. Without this knowledge, this is merely an attractive but ineffective proposal.

“In addition, encouragement is necessary. Farming food crops in gardens is not a new proposal, and the Government has been asking the people to do it for months. I remember that at some point the Government announced that it would give an allowance to farm crops in gardens. The issue is, despite such encouragement, I do not see many people farming in their gardens. It is one thing that most people still do not understand the seriousness of the warnings about a food crisis, regarding which they should take measures including growing as many food crops as possible. However, the Government will have to find innovative ways to encourage people, including public sector employees, to grow food crops. Giving money and making requests do not seem to have worked thus far.”

Moreover, Wickrama said that most public sector employees not having adequate space in their lands is another major issue, and that the Government must consider giving those interested in farming unused, State-owned lands temporarily to farm.

Even though there is no debate that immediate measures are necessary to prepare the country for more difficult times to come, those measures being effective is as equally important as them being immediate. In the case of introducing the aforementioned measures to the public sector, according to those who spoke with The Morning, there appears to be several practical challenges that are yet to be discussed.

To actually benefit from the Government’s efforts, therefore, it is crucial to address the practical aspects of these measures immediately.

Sumudu Chamara

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