

Sri Lanka: Challenges to food security: Seed, fertiliser scarcity worsen farmer woes

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Shortages of required seeds and fertilisers are resulting in poor yields for vegetable and paddy farmers, despite steps being taken to assuage the crisis.

The lack of seeds and fertiliser risk negatively affecting future harvesting cycles and leading to long-term impacts for the country's agriculture sector.

Policy missteps accompanied by an economic meltdown of unprecedented proportions have taken a severe toll on Sri Lanka's agriculture sector, with last year's sudden ban on chemical fertilisers by then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa destabilising the entire agriculture chain.

The full implications of the ill-conceived policy are still being realised, with farmers abandoning their livelihoods, while rice and vegetable shortages loom in a country that once grew its produce in abundance.

Total paddy production has dropped to 1,931,230 MT for the 2021/2022 Maha season, down from the previous Maha season's 3,061,394 MT, as per data from the Department of Census and Statistics.

In such a background, without the required chemical fertiliser, farmers are no longer harvesting enough from their crops to bring produce to the market and keeping it for their own consumption instead.

Meanwhile, the high prices of pesticides and other inputs such as seeds needed for farming are making it impossible for farmers to be able to afford the expense of cultivating while further driving up prices for consumers, in addition to sky-high inflation.

Shrinking vegetable and fruit crop yields

Addressing the multi-pronged issue plaguing the country's farmers today, All-Island Farmers' Federation National Organiser Namal Karunaratne noted that vegetable farmers were at present affected by issues relating to seeds.

"Sri Lanka uses about 90% hybrid seeds for cultivation. These seeds are not manufactured in Sri Lanka and importing these seeds has become an issue with the dollar crisis. Along with this, the price of seeds has increased enormously."

Accordingly, in concert with these factors, there has been an influx of low-quality seeds to the market, Karunaratne explained. "For instance, people mix substandard seeds with the good quality seeds, leading to a crop yield with malformed vegetables or no yield at all."

The proliferation of adulterated seeds constitutes a significant concern, as noted by Karunaratne, as

it means that the seeds have low germination strength, leading to lowered or no crop yields.

Farmers are paying for these low-quality seeds mixed in with the actual seeds, which means they are purchasing dud seeds at a high cost. Thus, once these seeds are planted, it results in a loss-making harvest or failed plants.

“For instance, low-quality seeds are usually mixed in with papaw seeds. A kilo of seeds is currently Rs. 1.3 million. When substandard seeds are mixed in, there will be a yield of failed plants alongside the good ones. This constitutes a huge loss to the farmer, who pays for both the successful and the failed plants while expending energy on cultivation and allocating land.”

Karunaratne further stated that fertiliser issues were also ongoing. While paddy farmers were receiving certain measures of assistance from the Government, the fertiliser issues affecting vegetable farmers were not receiving sufficient attention, Karunaratne noted – more so because vegetable farmers require fertiliser all year round, unlike paddy farmers, who only need it for the two harvesting seasons.

Karunaratne shared that in addition to the fertiliser issue being a pressing concern, there was a scarcity of pesticides, fungicides and weedicides, along with exorbitant costs of these inputs.

“Based on issues surrounding seeds, fertiliser, pesticides, fungicides and weedicides, vegetable and fruit cultivation has undergone a massive collapse,” Karunaratne asserted.

Paddy farmers’ issues

While noting that the seed issue was not affecting paddy farmers to the same extent, he did however state that seed paddy cultivations were receiving lower yields and that these farms had not received sufficient quantities of fertiliser, leading to a host of problems.

A lack of proper nutrition means that the paddy fails to produce a yield at the proper time, generating weaker seeds and constituting a lower harvest of usable seeds.

In addition to the impacts of fertiliser issues, seeds are also affected by the inability to harvest crops in a timely manner.

“The major reason for the inability to harvest crops is the shortage of fuel for the machines. Moreover, the rent of a combined harvester is about Rs. 25,000-30,000 per acre. Farmers cannot bear these costs. On top of this, the fuel shortage ensures that the reaping of the harvest is delayed. The result of these delays is that paddy stalks are overexposed to sunlight, leading to scorched paddy seeds. Once these paddy stalks are subjected to the harvesting machine, they become damaged. Thus these paddy seeds will not be suitable for cultivation,” Karunaratne explained.

Accordingly, poor seeds would create generational and long-term issues in paddy farming, Karunaratne noted, adding that farmers were at present helpless in the face of the multiple crises and urging the Government to immediately address the shortcomings unless it wished to face another uprising.

Authorities weigh in

Addressing the seed and fertiliser issue faced by farmers, Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute Agricultural Resources Management Division Head and Research Fellow P.R. Weerakkody shared that research was ongoing.

"The Agriculture Ministry expects to issue sufficient quantities of fertiliser as required by farmers. Meanwhile, analysis is currently ongoing as to the required quantities of seeds and how to assess and provide the seeds to farmers for the Maha season," she said.

She added that research was underway on any reductions in vegetable and paddy harvests, especially stemming from the organic fertiliser policy. "At present, we are collecting data to scientifically analyse the actual losses experienced during the 2021/'22 Maha season and 2021 Yala season by cultivation sectors, including vegetable and fruits and paddy," she said, noting that this data was likely to be available at the end of the year.

Meanwhile, speaking to *The Sunday Morning* Agriculture Minister Mahinda Amaraweera shared that the issues were in the process of being resolved. "Paddy farmers' fertiliser issue has been resolved and fertiliser is being supplied to maize and tea cultivators as well, so these problems are being somewhat resolved."

The Minister further asserted that the seed scarcity was also being addressed. "There was a shortage of dollars to import seeds, but I have secured dollars required to import the shortfall by contacting the Central Bank. Accordingly, seeds are being imported. Therefore we don't expect this to become a significant problem. We anticipate a good harvest from the upcoming Maha season in terms of paddy, maize and other crops."

Noting while there was a global food shortage which was affecting Sri Lanka as well, the Minister stated that they were taking all possible steps to minimise the impacts, providing farmers with fertiliser, pesticides and weedicides as well as the required fuel.

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