

# Lessons from Sri Lanka's agrochemical ban fiasco

Sunday 11 September 2022, by [GRAIN](#), [MONLAR](#) (Date first published: 25 November 2021).

**In April 2021, Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced a ban on the import of agrochemicals. The move was meant to save Sri Lanka around \$300 - \$400 million in foreign exchange, which the country spends each year importing agrochemicals. The President also justified that [the right of Sri Lankans "to a non-toxic diet" was guaranteed with this policy](#). Furthermore, according to him, the country's huge expenditure on agrochemicals has not increased agricultural production. Rather, he insisted, agrochemicals are exacerbating soil infertility, the decline in yields and the loss of biodiversity. Rajapaksa even promised to compensate any farmer that faced a decrease in production after switching to organic farming. The savings made from the agrochemical ban and ending fertiliser subsidies would provide the money for this indemnity.**

Fast forward to November. After several months of upheaval instigated by an acute food crisis, on 21 November, Sri Lanka's Agricultural Secretary declared that it was easing agrochemical import restrictions and that chemical fertilisers, agrochemicals, and essential plant nutrients required for a large category of crops would be once again allowed. The widespread assumption that the country's food security was at risk without agrochemicals forced the government to seemingly backtrack. A few days later, on 24 November, it [announced](#) the complete withdrawal of the agrochemical import ban.

So, what went wrong? Having followed closely the situation in Sri Lanka these past years, we have found that in reality, the food crisis has been triggered by the ongoing economic crisis and the depleting foreign exchange reserves. But the constant news reports of angry farmers' protesting against the ban from their fear of losing production due to the lack of fertilisers was powerful enough to distort facts.

According to a nationwide [survey](#), almost two-thirds of farmers supported the transition to organic farming, even if the majority felt that to be successful, the transition period needed to be spread over more than a year. Of the farmers surveyed, only 20% declared not to have adequate knowledge about organic fertiliser and its proper application, hence their low confidence level in the ban. Farmers expected the government to provide them with adequate advice and instructions on the preparation and application of organic fertiliser and a guaranteed supply of organic alternatives and extend the period needed for the transition.

Deeply opposed to the import ban on agrochemicals, several [scientists, agricultural professionals, and agribusiness firms](#) accused the government of embracing this policy at the wrong time, when food prices were rising, and the country was in the grip of a Covid-induced economic slowdown. They argued that the comparatively higher market price of organic products -accessible to mostly wealthy consumers- could lead to greater food insecurity among the poor majority if the country went 100% organic. Other scientists [suggested](#) a gradual decrease in the use of agrochemicals instead of the sudden change carried out by the government. An ideal transition implied

implementing proper monitoring and presupposed the gradual introduction of organic compost to avoid excessive use and prevent significant food production loss.

For local groups defending agroecology and promoting sustainable agriculture, the situation was more complex. This was the case for MONLAR (Movement for Land and Agricultural Reforms). They welcomed the ban on the use of all agrochemicals and the transition towards organic. Still, they also questioned the hasty planning process and transition strategy.

In a [letter](#) to President Rajapaksa in May 2021, MONLAR pointed out no systematic government program was in place to promote organic agriculture among farmers. MONLAR asked the government to build a solid coordinating mechanism between the organic agriculture policies, tactical and strategic programs at the national level, and the various institutions entrusted with carrying out these programs, especially with the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Agriculture Agrarian Services. These two departments currently disagree on the organic agriculture policy and don't earnestly back it.

Sri Lanka is indeed facing a food crisis, but it may not be the consequence of a sudden shift to organic farming. There shouldn't be too much of a drop in food production in just one farming season to the level that would trigger a food crisis. Instead, the food crisis was already there when the decision to shift to organic was taken. This is why to reduce its foreign exchange outlays last year, the Sri Lankan government took on preventive measures to ban the import of essential goods, including food items. MONLAR maintains that the mismanagement of food supply chains during the Covid-19 pandemic is also somehow responsible for the food crisis.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, Sri Lanka's economy has plummeted because one of the country's most important sources of income, tourism, has been completely shattered. This has led to an unprecedented drop in the country's foreign exchange reserves, from over \$7.5 billion in 2019 to merely \$2.8 billion in July 2021. The government's colossal payments to buy the foreign exchange needed to import essential goods has sunk the Sri Lankan rupee. This foreign exchange crisis has been so bad that in 2020, in a bid to save foreign exchange, the government banned the import of vehicles, edible oils, and turmeric, an essential spice in local cooking.

Sri Lanka is currently a net importer of food and other commodities. The depreciating rupee has triggered a price rise of essential items, causing great hardship for ordinary people, including farmers. But the Sri Lankan government denied this. In an interview with [the BBC](#) in September, State Minister Ajith Nivard Cabraal, affirmed that there was no food crisis in Sri Lanka to come out from. According to him, the government was confident that the transition to organic cultivation would take place smoothly.

But the Sri Lankan government's organic farming campaign doesn't seem to be over. Both President Rajapaksa earlier this week and the Agriculture Minister on 24 November have emphatically stressed that there is no change in the country's organic agriculture policy. President Rajapaksa said that the government would only provide subsidies for organic farming and distribute organic fertilisers. Speaking at the agroecology event of the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS), Sri Lanka's leader said that his government's decision to ban agrochemical imports enabled a long-needed national transition to a healthier and more ecologically sound agriculture.

The attempt to shift to chemical-free agriculture practices can be a step in the right direction to deal with many societal problems, including the climate crisis, of major importance to Sri Lanka. As MONLAR points out, however, the focus must be on promoting agroecology in a sense that it isn't only technology-intensive or organic inputs intensive because this will only shift farmers' dependence from chemical to organic inputs. Agroecology and organic agriculture policies should

support ecological conservation, help combat biodiversity loss, and enable people to achieve their economic aspirations in more sustainable ways. But agroecology cannot happen overnight, which is also why we needed to make a move now.

---

**MONLAR** is a member of La Via Campesina, a network of farmer organizations, NGOs, and civil society organizations in Sri Lanka that has been promoting sustainable agriculture or agroecology for the last three decades and providing practical training and technical assistance to small farmers.

**GRAIN** is a small international non-profit organization that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.*

---

**P.S.**

La Via Campesina South Asia

<https://southasiaviacampesina.org/2021/11/25/lessons-from-sri-lankas-agrochemical-ban-fiasco/>