

Going organic in Sri Lanka

This article discusses the impacts so far of Sri Lanka's ambitious plan to go 100% organic. The agricultural sector has become volatile since then with farmers finding it difficult to proceed with their day to day agricultural activities. Both quantity and quality of vegetable supplies to collection centers have decreased in the absence of a gradual process of conversion. On the other hand, manufacturing compost fertilizers at commercial scale has started in some places. Farmers in some provinces have started their main cultivation season as a result of the guarantee given by the government that they would pay compensation to farmers if their yield drops due to use of organic fertilizer.

Apparently, Sri Lanka needs a thorough plan and preparation to avoid possible food shortages. Dutch knowledge and technology could play a crucial role on longer term basis to cut down the (over)use of agro chemicals and chemical fertilizers while still increasing productivity levels, and becoming more sustainable and organic. Interested Dutch parties are advised to follow the situation closely and stay in touch with the Embassy on possible opportunities and support.



Dutch supported agricultural fields in Sri Lanka

How it started

The Sri Lankan government has the commendable ambition to make the agricultural sector more sustainable. In April 2021 the Sri Lankan government took the decision to go 100% organic and imposed a ban on the import of chemical fertilizers and agro chemicals. This sudden decision might have been linked to the need to ease the pressure on the ongoing forex crisis. Sri Lanka spends around 400 million on the import of fertilizer annually. Another reason may have been the popular claim that agro chemicals and chemical fertilizers are linked to the Chronic Kidney Disease with Unknown Etiology (CKDu), which has been affecting the people living in five provinces in Sri Lanka since the mid-90s. However, there are doubts about the accuracy of this assumption and it is challenged by both local and international scientists.

Agricultural experts immediately warned about a possible food and livelihood crisis because the country was not prepared for going organic. Wide protests by farmers and plantation sector growers erupted across the country within few months. As a result of the ban, prices of many locally grown agricultural commodities have increased. The ban also caused significant damage to the tea industry; a major export sector of Sri Lanka. This is causing serious challenges to entrepreneurs and farmers, who have already been affected by series of import bans since March last year.

However, in August 2021 this ban on chemical fertilizers and agro chemicals was partly reversed. Despite the partial reversal of the ban, the Ministry of Agriculture announced that the government decision to go 100% organic will remain unchanged. As per the Ministry, urea fertilizer, widely used in tea and rice cultivation, will still remain banned. Instead, plant nutrients rich in nitrogen will be allowed under licensing control.

Imposing emergency law

Amidst the turmoil caused by the chemical fertilizer and agro-chemicals ban, the government declared a state of emergency in September 2021 with the aim of preventing traders from hoarding food stocks and controlling ever increasing food prices. The measure was followed by strict price controls on essential goods announced by the government. Indeed, inflation, depreciating currency and foreign debt burden have grappled the country over the last few years. As per the statistics from the Department of Census and Statistics, prices of essential food items like sugar, rice, onions and lentils are still on the rise. Prices of LP gas and fuel were also increased recently by a significant amount. The government however assured that there are enough food stocks in the country and all essential food items would be readily available. Still, long queues are seen in front of government run supermarkets while stocks at other supermarkets are running low.

As a result of the food shortages caused by the price controls, the government had to end the price controls imposed on essential food items allowing sharp rise in food prices. The state of emergency was not extended beyond September.

Local organic fertilizer production and import

As a result of the government decision to ban the import of inorganic fertilizers, many started to produce compost fertilizer for commercial use. Ministry of Agriculture sources revealed that there are twenty seven new compost producers registered this year and last year alone. In August this year the government allocated 3.8 billion Sri Lanka rupees to purchase organic fertilizer from local producers to be used for the main cultivation season. A decision was also taken to import organically derived nutrients to enrich the locally produced compost fertilizers.

In another development, an effort to bring compost fertilizer from China was stopped after the National Plant Quarantine Service (NPQS) claimed that microorganisms and pathogens found in the stock were, harmful to the soil, plants and humans. The Chinese Embassy blacklisted the State run Peoples Bank citing breach of Letter of Credit conditions. The supplying Chinese company has also demanded USD 8 million from the National Plant Quarantine Service as a compensation for the loss and damage caused to the company. This situation reiterates the fact that thorough preparations are needed in advance when going organic.

Dutch engagement in recent Sri Lankan agriculture

The Netherlands has been and will be actively engaging in the Sri Lankan agricultural sector by way of facilitating the transfer of Dutch knowledge and technology. Many programs have been carried out including bilateral missions, webinars, capacity building training programs, exposure tours, fellowship programs etc. The Embassy executes these activities as a part of the Dutch objective to promote sustainable, circular and climate resilient agriculture globally. Going organic can play an important role in that ambition. Dutch knowledge and technology can continue to contribute to Sri Lankan agriculture in the ambition of cutting down the overuse of agro chemicals and chemical fertilizers while still increasing productivity levels, and becoming more sustainable and organic.

Way forward

It is still not clear what the real effects of Sri Lanka's ambitious goal of going fully organic will be. Many fear a food crisis since the majority of farmers have not yet started the main cultivation season, risking missing the season. And those who have started the cultivation are complaining that their crops are at risk due to lack of fertilizers and chemicals. Prices of rice and perishables are already increasing significantly in the market. Food security could be at stake since both food availability and affordability is worsening day by day. The need of the moment is to bring the agricultural sector back on track to safeguard the country's food security and farmers' livelihoods. The question is how soon this will happen? And how can the Netherlands contribute? A food crisis as a result of the decision to go organic unprepared will set a negative example for the efforts elsewhere to go organic. Can Sri Lanka avoid this? The world will know soon enough.