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“Competing pathways for equitable food systems transformation:
Trade-offs and synergies”

On the feasibility of an agricultural revolution: Sri Lanka’s move to go one-hundred per cent organic

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Abstract

In April 2021, the Sri Lankan Government announced a ban on importation of agrochemicals including chemical fertilisers to make Sri Lanka the first country in the world to go fully organic and be free of chemical fertilisers.

Going “organic” was not a novel approach since there were several attempts over the years to support organic farming in the country. The National Agricultural Policy of 2007 recommended increasing the usage of local organic fertilisers gradually, like from January 2021 by up to 30% within a 3-year period. While such a step-wise transition has obvious advantages, the announced immediate ban took the sector by surprise, but was ‘supported’ by the emerging economic crisis the country faced with declining foreign exchange reserves to import chemical fertilisers. As described by the President, the motive for the ban was however to reduce the impact caused by agrochemicals on environment and human health, including the common cases of kidney failure in some parts of the island. This could be considered a visionary (pre-emptive) move as clear scientific evidence for such a link is missing so far.

Without any transitional time, a run for ‘organic fertiliser’ started but could not satisfy demand on short notice resulting in severe agricultural losses, e.g., in the important paddy and (export) plantation sectors. Under growing protests, the Government eventually lifted the chemical fertiliser ban via a gazette notification on 1st December 2021.

The failed ban posed a range of questions related to transformative processes, in particular on the best institutional pathways for such a drastic transition, and possible alternatives. But also questions on the reasoning were posed and on the actual feasibility of such a change.

This presentation will shed light on the feasibility of such a transition in terms of the actual and potential availability of biomass (i.e., crop nutrients) to ‘replace’ chemical fertilisers at national scale, also under consideration of regional variations in demand and supply. The focus will be on paddy rice and the plantation sector, resulting in recommendations for any repetition of such a transition in the future, in Sri Lanka, or elsewhere.

Keywords: Agricultural transformation, biomass, chemical fertiliser ban, organic farming, Sri Lanka