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Factors in commercial organic rice farming: Nilwala River basin case study

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By Chatura Rodrigo

Paddy farming accounts for nearly 40% of the total cultivable land in Sri Lanka. However, only 5% of this is cultivated for organic paddy farming while the rest is used for inorganic paddy cultivation. Organic paddy is largely used for private consumption, mainly for subsistence purposes. Most of the time, organic rice goes hand

in hand with traditional paddy varieties.

Over the years, concerns over Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), chemical free produce and environmental sustainability has persuaded many people to consume organic rice. However, encouraging farmers to practice more commercial organic paddy farming is difficult, as they face many issues that need considerable attention. This article is based on a case study of the Nilwala River Basin, in the Matara district, and highlights the issues in organic paddy farming, and farmer driven initiatives to overcome some of these issues.

Farmer constraints



Stand-alone cultivation has increased the cost of cultivation of organic paddy farming. Many organic paddy farmers do not have large land areas. The average paddy land size varies from 0.5 acres to 2 acres. In many instances these are marginalised land abandoned after many years of inorganic paddy farming. Lands in the Nilwala river basin are not machinery friendly. Due to the instability in the top soil layer large machines cannot be operated in paddy lands, forcing the ploughing to be done manually, which is labour intensive. Moreover, these lands are located apart, in between many commercial inorganic paddy lands. This has prevented farmers from enjoying the benefits of "economies of scale".

Finding seed paddy for organic paddy farming is a major issue, especially if farming is for commercial purposes. Even though there are many traditional paddy varieties involved with organic rice farming in Sri Lanka, few have attracted commercial attention. Organic farmers mostly use broadcasting as a way of planting, while some are practising methods such as "Para shooting". Both methods demand more seed paddy. On average 1kg of traditional seed paddy ranges from LKR90/= - LKR100/= However, these are for common varieties. There are high yielding, nutritious varieties that are hard to find even if the farmer wishes to purchase. These varieties are distributed among farmers through their own networks.

Water management and labour discourages farmers in engaging in commercial organic paddy farming. A majority of the commercial organic farming do not have irrigation facilities. At Elipitiya, in the Galle district, out of 180 acres of paddy land only 30 acres were cultivated during the 2014 Yala Season, due to the low availability of water. Local authorities in many areas give priority to providing irrigation water for inorganic farming, ignoring the nearby organic paddy land. Labour is becoming an inadequate and expensive factor of production for organic paddy farming. With two meals and two cups of tea, male labour would cost around LKR1500/= per day and female labour would cost around LKR1000/= a day. Even at that cost, it is hard to find labour for each season and farmers end up employing more and more family labour.

Organic fertilizer is limited and costly and has created many constraints for farmers, limiting their productivity. Organic farmers use a combination of organic fertilizers in their farming. These are animal and plant based. An animal based 50kg fertilizer bag, which is called "Katu Pohora", is around LKR2,500/=, while plant based fertilizer mixture "Kola Pohora" is also available at the same price range. In addition, farmers use liquid fertilizer, which is most often manufactured by them using animal fecal matter and plant matter. This requires farmers to purchase the animal fecal matter if they do not rear livestock, and require family or hired labour in manufacturing. As a result, compared to commercial inorganic farmers - the organic commercial farmers have to pay a significantly higher price for fertilizer.

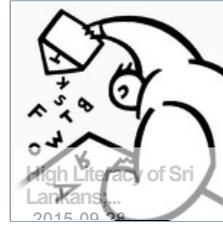
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The cost of weed, pest management and harvesting is another concern. Traditional varieties in organic farming have a tendency to attract various pests and diseases that attack the new improved varieties in inorganic farming. Since organic rice farming does not include any chemicals, pest and disease control needs careful and continuous attention from the farmer. There are many traditional and organic ways to deal with weed and pest attacks; however it needs early detection and prevention. This is not an easy task as applying a broad spectrum chemical. Therefore, unlike in the case of inorganic farming, weed and pests have the capacity to easily destroy the paddy cultivation. Harvesting is again costly since some traditional paddy varieties in organic farming do not accommodate machinery with the height of the plant.

Marketing channels for organic rice is still developing and is not cost effective for many consumers. On average, 1kg of organic rice would cost between LKR170/= -LKR 200/=. However, there are varieties that would be priced above LKR300/= per 1kg. On average, inorganic rice is priced between LKR50/= -75/= per 1kg, which is accessible to the poor and lower middle income consumers. Therefore, organic rice is mainly in demand by the upper middle income and the higher income groups in the country.

Lessons learnt

The farmers from the Nilwala river basin, who belong to Aththudawa, in the Matara district focuses on cultivating a traditional paddy variety called "Maa-Vee". This paddy variety has proven to be effective with the soil type in the area, agro climatic conditions, and has proven resistance to weed, pests and climate change impacts. They also cultivate together- sharing labour, machinery, seed paddy and organic fertilizer thus achieving 'economies of scale' in production. Since all the farmers are practicing organic farming, the water ways are not polluted by upstream cultivations.

There are more than 60 farmers who cultivate on a commercial basis and they are closely linked with the local authorities. Harvesting was an issue for these farmers as they only had a limited number of machinery. Rather than hiring machinery from outside, the farmers have taken the initiative to purchase dedicated harvesting machines, which are operated by other villagers, also providing them secured and continuous employment. Several farmers have got together and established a mill to process the paddy harvest.

These farmers from the Nilwala River Basin provide a valuable example in addressing many issues faced by commercial organic paddy farmers. Working as a group has reduced their costs on land preparation, water management, planting, weed control, pest control and harvesting. They have the institutional as well as political will, which enable them to secure water for agriculture, a market place for the produce and the necessary agriculture extension services to improve farming practices. They also have provided a means of employment for others such as mill operators, harvesting machinery operators, transporters and organic manure producers. Their example provides a ray of hope for those who are keen on taking into organic agriculture as a way of producing healthy and environmental friendly food.

(Chatura Rodrigo is a Research Economist at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). This case study is a part of a forth coming publication conducted in collaborated with the IPS and The South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE).

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