

PADDY LAND CULTIVATION IN THE WESTERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA: DETERMINANTS OF ABANDONMENT AND UNDER-UTILIZATION

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Paddy cultivation is the most important subsistence agricultural product in the Sri Lankan economy from ancient times. Apart from being the staple food crop, it occupied a prominent place in Sri Lankan heritage and culture. Ironically, in recent times, there has been a significant reduction in paddy cultivation especially in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The main purpose of this study is to examine the determinants of abandonment and under-utilization of paddy lands in this province through a study conducted in three districts, namely, Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara. For this study, a sample of 300 farmers were selected on proportionate sampling from all three districts considering the extent of abandoned and under-utilized paddy lands in the respective districts and D.S. Divisions respectively. The questionnaire was the main method of primary research and focus group interviews, in-depth interviews conducted with 'Krupanisa' officers and self-observation techniques together with secondary data gathered supported the main questionnaire survey.

The analysis revealed important contributory factors which separate paddy farmers from paddy cultivation in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. Among the determinants for abandoning and under-utilization of paddy lands were Irrigation and drainage issues, high cost of production, unavailability of labour, higher income from other occupations, rat fever and animal damage, polluted substances from industries, soil related issues and poor infrastructural facilities. Among other important factors for abandonment and under-utilization of paddy cultivation, were the higher educational standards of the second generation of farmers who moved away for more stable and remunerative employment opportunities, availability of many other employment opportunities, part time farming, land fragmentation, and crop diversification towards better incomes.

The findings may raise many policy implications, and among them, having a stable and strong agricultural policy is shown to be a mandatory requirement. Strong government patronage which will encourage farmers should cover a broader area. Adequate fertilizer subsidy, institutional support including credit, technology, extension, marketing channels, together with realistic 'Guaranteed prices' for paddy are essential. If these are implemented, paddy land abandonment and under-utilization will be reduced to a great extent in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and farming may become a 'viable' occupation once again which will create a true 'livelihood' for poor farmers who are struggling to make ends meet. At the same time, paddy lands which are unused due to unavoidable reasons such as constant flooding, salinity issues, soil related

issues, etc., should be used for other economically viable projects, as the Western Province is the economic hub of the country where land value is considerably high.

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