

## Beyond the Trauma : From Killing Fields to Smiling Gardens in Northern Sri Lanka

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The killing war has ended but the struggle for economic survival is just beginning for the Tamil population of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Peace has come but for this to last, union of hearts is essential. Thus, the Tamil population of Sri Lanka need both peace and bread with human dignity for becoming proud citizens of this beautiful country linked spiritually to India through Buddhism. While such issues have to be settled politically, the immediate need is livelihood rehabilitation.

Over 80% of the population of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, comprising the districts Jaffna, Kilinochi, Mullaithivu, Mannar and Vavuniya depend on farm enterprises for their work and income security. Prior to the conflict, the Province had a cultivable area of about 300,000 ha, of which over 100,000 ha were under rice. The remaining area was planted with onion, chillies, mungbean, sesame, groundnut, yams, fruits, vegetables and coconut. At the moment, it is not known how much area can be farmed, since there has been much damage to the ecological foundations of agriculture, like soil, water and biodiversity, due to mines, protective structures and security measures. Collecting fresh agricultural statistics is a priority task.

The Northern Province was an agricultural paradise before the conflict. Currently, it is estimated that crop production may be of the order of 150,000 tonnes, as against 800,000 tonnes earlier. A large proportion of farms is in the form of home gardens of about 0.1 ha producing a variety of horticultural and animal products. There is great scope for dairy, goat and poultry farming. There are also large numbers of fisher families along the coast. The Tamil farmers of the Northern Province have been the major custodians of Sri Lanka's food security, much in the same way as the Sikh farmers of the Punjab, who contribute much of the wheat and rice for our Public Distribution System.

The Northern Province had over 2300 minor tanks and about 50 medium and 11 major tanks prior to the war but most of them now need restoration. Building an irrigation

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security system is essential for agricultural revival. Forests need to be replanted and rejuvenated. Thus, the pathway to livelihood rehabilitation in this area is agricultural renewal. India with its vast infrastructure in agricultural research and education, is in the best position to usher in an era of hope in the lives of the Tamil farm and fisher families. Because of the loss of life and livelihoods, the working population among men has been reduced considerably. The feminization of agriculture calls for making all agricultural research, education, extension and development programmes gender sensitive.

During a recent visit to Sri Lanka I had an opportunity to discuss issues relating to agricultural research, education and development with the President, Prime Minister and other concerned Ministers of Sri Lanka. The suggestions contained in this article are based on these discussions.

#### **Strategies for the Wannu Region:**

The Ministry of Agriculture of Sri Lanka has prepared a strategy for "Vadakkinn Vasantham" (Revitalization of Northern Province). The President mentioned that because of very high subsidy (96%), chemical fertilizers are displacing compost and other organic manures. An Integrated Nutrient Supply System comprising of vermiculture (earthworm), biofertilizers, compost, cereal-legume rotation and green manure crops will help to reduce the dependence on mineral fertilizers. Green manure plants like *Sesbania rostrata*, fix nitrogen both in stem and in the roots. Seeds of such plants should be multiplied and distributed. At the same time, Soil Health Cards giving data on the physical, chemical and microbial status of the soil should be issued to each farm family.

Every calamity presents an opportunity for progress. A new chapter in the agriculture of the Northern Province can be opened up by introducing farmers to conservation farming and integrated pest management and integrated natural resources management. Soil health care and enhancement, and more crop per drop of water techniques developed by the International Water Management Institute will help to increase yield and reduce the cost of production. Post-harvest processing and value addition will help to generate more off-farm employment and increase earning opportunities for women.

India's assistance in strengthening agricultural research training, and development will be timely. There is need to move fast, since the internally displaced population urgently need a message of hope. India can also provide the necessary seeds, biofertilizers and biopesticides, farm equipment and post-harvest infrastructure. Good quality seed is a major constraint. Under the Government of India supported programme, Seed Villages can be organized. Immediately, seeds of appropriate varieties and crops could be supplied to help in initiating farm operations. Long term measures to take the river water now going to the sea to the Northern Province are also needed. This will help farmers to take 3 crops a year. The following 5-pronged action plan will help to improve the well-being of the farm and fisher families of the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

**Technology:** Institutions designed for technology development and dissemination are in a weak state. Besides strengthening existing institutions, it would be useful to develop an Institute for Agricultural Transformation and Capacity Building at Vavuniya and a Fish for All Research and Training Centre at Mannar. These institutes can function on a hub and spokes model, with link Centres at different locations in the north and eastern regions. From the beginning, these institutions should concentrate on the development and spread of ecotechnologies by blending traditional ecological prudence with frontier technologies. Farmer participatory research and knowledge management should be the approach to fostering green technologies like integrated pest management and integrated nutrient supply. Mixed farming involving demand-driven animal enterprises should be promoted to increase farm income and household nutrition security.

Improved post-harvest technology will help to prevent post-harvest spoilage, and add value to primary products. Women friendly implements and institutional structures like the organization of Seed Villages will help to accelerate agricultural revival. In view of the damage caused to arable land by mines as well as the movement of tanks and heavy military vehicles, soil health restoration is an urgent task.

**Techno-Infrastructure:** Seed and Grain banks, farm machinery, repair of farm ponds, water harvesting and storage structures, animal sheds, storage godowns, post-harvest

handling, rural roads and communication are priority areas for attention and action. Mobile soil testing vans can help to assess the organic matter content and macro- and micro-nutrient status of the soil and to issue Soil Health Cards to farm families. In view of energy shortage, solar and wind energy will have to be tapped in a systematic manner. Similarly, in the case of fisheries, the infrastructure needs of all links in the capture to consumption chain will need concurrent attention.

**Training:** The pedagogic methodology adopted should be learning by doing. Farmer to farmer as well as scientist to farmer (Lab to Land) learning will help to bridge the gap between scientific know-how and field level do-how. Women farmers can be trained in organizing Seed Villages and in the production of the biological software essential for sustainable agriculture, such as biopesticides and biofertilizers. Training in food processing, packaging, storage and marketing will help to promote value-addition and producer-oriented marketing.

**Trade:** Opportunities for assured and remunerative marketing determine the economic viability of farming. The cost-risk-return structure of farming should guide the fixation of the minimum support price. A market intervention scheme may be necessary during the next few years, until life returns to normal and the damaged rural infrastructure is rebuilt.

**Biovillage:** Because of the small farm size, multiple livelihood opportunities are essential for achieving a satisfactory level of household income. Hence, increasing on-farm productivity and expanding off-farm employment opportunities should receive integrated attention. The Biovillage model of sustainable human security could be the chosen pathway for rural development. This model lays equal stress on the conservation and enhancement of natural resources, improving the productivity and profitability of small farms, and the generation of market driven non-farm enterprises based on agro-processing and agro-services. Key centralized services could be provided to improve the efficiency of decentralized production.

**What next?** During my discussions, it was suggested that a Sri Lanka-India Consultation may be held at Vavuniya in July 2009 to discuss and finalise the agricultural revival plan. In addition to experts and input supply agencies (credit, seed, farm equipment etc), representatives of farming families from the Wannu region should be invited. Farm women and men will be able to articulate their felt needs and priorities. This will help to make the action plan realistic and demand driven. **Time is of the essence since sowing operations will have to commence in October.** Soil testing vans, seeds, nutrients and implements will have to reach the region by September. Training and capacity building activities will have to start in August.

In the past, India had rendered timely assistance to Vietnam and Kampuchea in getting their agriculture into a high growth trajectory after the end of the war with USA on the one hand, and the termination of the Pol Pot tyranny on the other. Both these countries are now exporters of food grains. We should extend similar timely help to Sri Lanka, so that the Tamil farm and fisher families are able to regain their original fame and bread basket status.