

“Ecological Agriculture is a Political Question”: Two Farmers Speak



The government’s overnight ban on the import of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and weedicides, to make Sri Lanka’s agriculture “100 percent organic”, of 6 May 2021, caught everyone by surprise. No preparation had been made. Local production and supply of organic inputs was nowhere near the level needed for substitution. There had been no prior restoration of land long contaminated by chemicals. Neither had there been consultation with large and small-scale producers of food and cash crops, their suppliers and buyers, nor public officials and experts, on the switch to organic techniques. While promoted as being in the interests of public health, an underlying reason for the policy switch is the massive charge in foreign exchange on the state exchequer, as chemical inputs have been heavily subsidised by successive regimes: most recently as much as 86% of the world market price, amounting to 35 billion Rupees, or more than 53% of total government expenditure in agriculture.

Disbelief and fear among farmers, already hit by the pandemic and supply chain disruptions as well as fluctuating prices, drove tens of thousands onto the streets

of nearby towns to demonstrate outside the offices of the Department of Agrarian Services or the Divisional or District Secretariat. Without chemical inputs, farmers foresaw steep decline in production and therefore their incomes, increasing rural poverty; while reduced supply and rising consumer prices would hurt urban households and necessarily force the government to manage prices through imports of food (produced with chemicals) depleting scarce foreign exchange reserves.

The political cost to the government, through anger and loss of support of one of its core constituencies, as well as alarm over loss of revenue from lower tea yields and decline in food crop production, finally resulted in a reversal of the ban on fertiliser imports at the end of November 2021, with partial relaxation in preceding months for tea, rubber, and coconut. However, this came too late in the paddy cultivation cycle, while the withdrawal of the government subsidy as well as shortages of imports due to the foreign exchange crisis and rising world market prices drove up the cost of chemical inputs, resulting in significant shortfalls in production and loss of income for farmers.

During this turmoil in September 2021, Polity¹ asked **Sandun Thudugala** of the People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) to interview two agroecological activists, **M.K. Jayathissa** and **Vimukthi de Silva**, to understand more the context of the rural protests.

ST: Please introduce yourselves, and how you came to be agroecological activists.

MKJ: I am an active member of the farmers' community of the North-Central Province, and President of the *Pragathisheeli Govijana Sammelanaya* (Progressive Farmers Congress). Presently, I am also Chair of the Movement for National Lands and Agricultural Reform—MONLAR.

I was formerly Co-Secretary of the *Samastha Lanka Govi Sammelanaya* (All-Island Farmers' Congress). After my release from the 'rehabilitation' camps set up for detained youth after the 1971 insurrection, I entered the farmers' movement as an activist of this organisation [affiliated with the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*—Peoples Liberation Front], influenced by Kularatne Wickramasinghe.

My father was himself a farmer. He was the President of the Kaudulla Cooperative Movement Society from its inception. What influenced me to become a farmers' activist was this inspiration, and my familiarity with agriculture. Although my father provided me with one kind of education on farming, with my political perspective and training, our ideas diverged.

As farmers' activists, initially our slogan was that we could not farm our lands without subsidised (chemical) pesticides and fertilisers. However, our encounter with Mr. G.K. Upawansa [former Deputy-Director of Agriculture and expert on small-scale integrated agriculture] in 1995, and the guidance of Mr. Ranjith de Silva [of *Gami Seva Sevana* ('Umbrella for Rural Service') – a model organic agriculture farm set up by the Christian Workers Fellowship in 1981 in Galaha], challenged our thinking and introduced us to poison-free agriculture. Since 1982 I quit the use of chemical fertiliser and began experimental farming on one hectare of chena. Since 1995 I began farming two acres of indigenous paddy varieties using traditional knowledge.

The peasant farmer struggle against water taxes; the Monaragala movement against sugar-cane plantations; the farmers' [debt-induced] suicides during 1993-1994; the socio-economic catastrophe of the 'Green Revolution'; the hunger strike of farmers in Hingurakgoda in 2000, etc., in brief, are some of the

milestones in my journey – after I withdrew from party politics, with the determination to build the power of citizens within civil society.

VDS: I am the coordinator of the Movement for National Lands and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) for the North-Central Province. I am also part of the South Asian coordination of the international small farmers' network, *La Via Campesina* (The Peasants' Way).

Although my family is engaged in farming, I am a software engineer by education. In fact, I worked in that field until 2015. The turning point was when I began to think of agriculture politically. My father and two of his brothers [then members of the *Nava Sama Samaja Party*], had stopped using chemical fertiliser since 1997. In 2015, based on that experience, a group of youngsters including myself formed a Young Farmers' Association that met for discussions on the weekend. This was my entry into ecological agriculture. But I still did not have a clear understanding of the concept.

This changed in 2015 when MONLAR nominated me to attend a 60-day international political camp of *La Via Campesina*, organised by the Landless Workers' Movement, (MST—*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) in Brazil. Through this training, I understood how corporations and the 'Green Revolution' displace small-scale producers from the land and promote consumer capitalism. Through the MST, I learned about ecological agriculture, and became an ecological farmer. From that experience, my family began collective farming on agroecological principles. My starting point is that the question of ecological agriculture is a political question.

ST: The government issued its directive to shift to organic farming methods in May 2021. But earlier governments, actively supported by the Department of Agriculture, university agricultural faculties, and research institutes, have promoted chemical agriculture and hybrid-seed agriculture. When all of these actors were against organic farming, why did both of you support it?

MKJ: As I mentioned earlier, my father was a farmer and in the cooperative movement. He cultivated approximately eight acres of paddy. Somewhere in the 1960s, two new varieties of paddy (IR8 and 'Taiwan') were introduced into Sri Lanka. After that, instead of indigenous varieties such as *Suwandal*, *Kurulu Thuda*, and *Heen Thuda*, my father started to cultivate high-

yielding hybrid varieties. Farmers were so enthusiastic with the harvest, that they embraced these new types and abandoned traditional seeds.

My father's death was by cancer. What he said to me on his death bed was, "We have made a mistake in our journey. Your generation can correct this. Something bad entered our cultivation. That is where we went wrong". We had been cultivating with poison [chemicals]. There were so many experiences of the death of fish, and the disappearance of sparrows following the spraying of chemical pesticides on our farms, as well as deaths by suicide through consumption of chemicals used in agriculture. These experiences enabled us to understand why cancer was fast becoming a common cause of death among our elders. Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) [of unknown etiology] had not been detected at that time.

The *Desheeya Beeja Rakaganeeme Vyaparaya* (Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds) and the *Devasarana Sanwardana Kendrasthanaya* (Devasarana Development Centre) [founded by Rev. 'Sevaka' Yohan Devananda] intervened from the 1970s onwards. Along with MONLAR and the *Govi Thorathuru Madyasthanaya* (Farmers' Information Centre), there was an exchange of experiences regarding organic farming methods. Charitha Wijeratne and Alex Thanthiarachchi were influences on me; as was Sarath Fernando, who brought experiments from around the world to us.

We decided we should turn away from chemical agriculture. But I couldn't do this alone. We formed a collective of farmers in Hingurakgoda and Kaudulla. We waged many struggles together, including against the proposed water-tax. There were setbacks, but the courage of farmers against the oppressive actions of successive governments has brought us this far.

VDS: My journey is very different. Along with my training in Brazil, and the discussions among young people in my area I mentioned earlier, we developed a new political understanding of peasant farming, beyond traditional Marxism. We identified chemical agriculture as a global factor that converts land-owning farmers into landless labourers. Capitalists exploit natural resources while forcefully snatching away what fairly belongs to the farmers. This includes the land, labour, water, and seeds of the farmers. Since the Industrial Revolution, natural resources have been commercialised.

Our handbook was the Sinhala translation of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). It revealed the role of corporates in the exploitation of nature and the dispossession of farmers. I also learned the role of the United Nations Organisation, the International

Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and especially the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in contributing to this. By now, we all know how agricultural companies have patented and monopolised seeds to deprive farmers of free access to them. Out of three million edible plants, we have been limited to only 200 food types.

In my work with small farmers, I generally focus on questions such as: Who decides our production and consumption cycles? Who benefits from it? Why do people starve? How is agriculture dominated by the competition between companies? Our primary objective is to emphasise the need to strengthen small farmer agriculture. We stand for food sovereignty. We want the right to our resources, to freedom of thought, the right to food, etc., while also being sensitive to different values. A political organisation is required to protect the rights of farmers.

ST: *Both of you represent the small farmers' movement. We know that in a country like Sri Lanka, the majority of the farmers are of this type. In your view, what are the main problems encountered by them? Can there be a solution for their problems through the alternative of organic farming methods or agroecology?*

MKJ: I believe that there are now 12 districts which supply paddy in Sri Lanka. But the farmer is enslaved because all governments have formulated State policies entirely under the Mahaweli Development Programme. We are trapped in this larger complex and are compelled to heavily use chemical fertilisers in our cultivation.

As a result, most farmers today suffer from about seven diseases due to the use of agrochemicals. It is well-known that the reason behind chronic kidney disease [of unknown aetiology] is still undiagnosed. In new farming settlements ('colonies'), this is a serious health problem. That is one aspect. The other is cancer. Now it has come to a stage where buses in rural areas ply specifically to cancer treatment facilities. Recently, on the initiative of former president Maithripala Sirisena, the largest kidney disease treatment hospital in all of Asia has been built in his home district of Polonnaruwa. Nobody asks why this disease is prevalent. There is a massive health and pharmaceutical mafia operating in Sri Lanka, exploiting these miseries for profit.

The main thing I see is that the farmer is losing good health. Also, with the chemicals used, it is clear today that the soil has been poisoned. It has long been said that the soil is dead. These realities are swept under the carpet because the interests of multinational

corporations have always been prioritised in government policy. This is why monoculture is the norm now, and millionaire entrepreneurs have emerged in that sector. Never has there been a right for the farmers to price their own produce. The power to name a price is firstly of the government. After the government, it is the leading businessmen who set the price. And then there's the 'broker' as the intermediary, also involved in price-fixing. The farmer is only snared in this system.

This is why the farmers have had to protest on the streets even during a pandemic. The government's attempt to shift to organic agriculture in the midst of all these issues is really making farmers helpless. Today, many of the people involved in farming do not have ownership of the land they cultivate. The land belongs to either a businessman, or the village school principal, or a bank employee, or someone who has gone abroad. The other issue with land is that it is passed down to the eldest male child of the family. This is a tragedy as others in the family do not help develop the land. They exit agriculture without making any improvement to the land. There are a lot of serious issues faced by farmers that need solutions.

VDS: In addition to what was just said, enforced monoculture cultivation is a major problem that farmers are facing. By now, in Sri Lanka, people engage in monoculture solely because of the market. As Jayathissa *mama* says, this has changed our pattern of consumption, as we have been restricted to cultivating only a few kinds of food, including varieties of rice. Many farmers have moved on to cultivate a single crop, depending on the demands of the market. Paddy, plantains, and certain kinds of vegetables are good examples.

There is another problem. Sri Lanka does not, unlike India, have a programme of minimum support prices to stabilise farmers' incomes. Often, when a season ends, the government imports the same produce. The farmers who produce these crops within the country must then face an economic and financial crisis, through competition with cheaper imports.

Also, because of the government, the rights of farmers regarding the usage of resources have been violated. For example, to minimise damage from insects caused when taking irrigated water, we need to have a correct process for the management of water. At present, it is operating in a way that is completely unsuitable for agriculture. They release water for crops such as paddy cultivation after the season has ended. Then the damage from pests increases.

Some companies also decide what we should cultivate. When I was a child, the Prima corporation introduced corn cultivation in Rajanganaya. They would supply the seeds. But after the harvest, they would only buy the quantity they needed, which was far less than the total harvest. That is just one example. The same thing is happening now with aloe vera and sugar cane too. The farmer has become a labourer for those companies. Farmers have had no other choice than to continue with chemical-based farming. This is why they are on the streets now, protesting the shortage of chemical fertilisers.

Under the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme, the number of farmers has increased greatly. For instance, my grandfather, who was a fisherman from the south, migrated to Rajarata to do agriculture. Apparently, he was sent to one of the new agricultural colonies with hybrid paddy seeds and chemical manure. There is no strong State mechanism with regard to agrarian extension services; and there is a deliberate attempt to not strengthen them. Also, the process of buying produce by the State has caused more harm than good. The price control mechanism, and market power of the big traders who are politically connected, are serious problems for farmers.

ST: *Can these problems you discussed be solved by the agroecology movement? Can there be a solution to these problems within the market economy?*

VDS: This is why we favour food sovereignty. What is the difference between food security and food sovereignty? It is this: Who decides our food production? From where does that decision come? Who has the policy making power? This relates to the food necessary for consumption. We know that there is a food surplus in the world. However, there is no proper mechanism to distribute it. Farming depends on the climatic zone. Capitalism has disrupted those practices. At least 30% of the food we produce goes to waste. We do not consume according to the season. Our pattern of food consumption is messed up. We have been taught to drink Coca-Cola and to eat fried rice. We do not understand the context of food production and consumption.

The way forward should be through understanding ecological farming, diversity, peoples' nutritional requirements, and enhancing their ability to buy the food they require. This is a process that can be executed easily. By now in India, agroecology is already in

motion, spanning over five million farmers in several states including Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. What we say is that if the farmer cultivates with a real understanding of the land and the environment, agroecological farming can move forward.

ST: *During the Coronavirus lockdowns there were restrictions in access to and operation of markets. What are the challenges farmers faced in such a situation, especially those engaged in conventional chemical agriculture?*

MKJ: Things went from bad to worse. The space was expanded for businessmen to torment the farmers. The government worships businessmen. This is how the paddy we cultivated was bought for a very cheap price in the market during the coronavirus period. That was the biggest pressure the farmers faced during the pandemic.

The next is the disaster that happened with the water supply. As Vimukthi said, farmers are never given water on time for the *Yala* and *Maha* [rice cultivation] seasons. Farming is a science. There is a monthly cycle for cultivation in *Yala*; and another for *Maha*. When those two are disturbed, pest problems increase significantly. That is a scientifically proven matter. Farmers have known this for generations. The other calamity was the police curfew [lockdown restrictions], not allowing some to go to their fields, and to wholesale markets such as the Dambulla Economic Centre.

ST: *The opinion of youth is that farming is not good for their future, especially subsistence agriculture. What is the position of agriculture in the national economy in this pandemic context? And how should it be positioned?*

VDS: It has become a challenge for farmers to continue with agriculture. Farmers are entirely dependent on commercial agriculture. Their entire production is decided based on the market. My experience in Rajanganaya is that farmers engaging in banana cultivation have nothing to eat other than bananas. This is because farmers have become entirely market-oriented cultivators. Therefore, they live in hunger. Due to the pandemic, these farmers did not have the means to market their produce. As a result, these farmers have begun cultivating crops for their daily sustenance. There was no help from the government. This is how the lives of people are decided by the market. This has become a pattern, especially within farming families, where people live by selling what they produce, and then purchasing them again, for their consumption. The

costs related to machinery, labour, seeds, purchasing of fertilisers and such, are not manageable for the average farmer. Farming now requires a large amount of capital.

Therefore, selling off their paddy land, and going to work in a garment factory, or in tourism is more practical. But during the pandemic, even those who migrated to the towns and cities for work had to return to their villages, as they lost their employment or source of livelihood. A self-criticism I would make of civil society organisations is that we did not have a programme for those returnees to clear their abandoned fields and adopt agroecological practices. Instead, they had to labour for commercial farmers or agribusiness.

While this government is ready to grant thousands of acres of land to corporate agriculture, there is nothing on offer for landless farmers. All of this discourages the youth from taking to farming. Today you sell your rice harvest at the market, but by the time you reach home tomorrow, you do not have a cent left in your hand.

ST: *In the past, agriculture benefited from the chemical fertiliser subsidy which was at a huge economic cost to the State. How has this fertiliser subsidy impacted the farmers, as well as the State, in terms of social, economic, and political factors?*

MKJ: In 1956, only 156g of fertiliser were used for an entire hectare of paddy. But today many types of fertilisers are applied over that same area. The quality of these new fertilisers has been in question for years. Experts have explained the health problems farmers experience when they use such fertilisers with their bare hands. These fertilisers are given free of charge, because of a huge deal between the companies, government, and commission-taking politicians. These chemical fertilisers are unbearable for the soil. It has been scientifically proven that nitrogen is the only nutrient that remains after their use. Many other nutrients die. For example, due to the increase of molybdenum, zinc, and potassium, other nutrients are lost. The Department of Agriculture is directing people in ways that are utterly useless. There is the continuous use of chemical insecticides in paddy as well as other crops. So, fertiliser is not the only factor.

ST: *Despite knowing the problems associated with the use of chemical fertilisers such as various sicknesses including kidney disease, why are farmers reluctant to convert to organic methods in farming?*

VDS: One reason is that the government fertiliser subsidy scheme is a completely political process. In these farming areas, votes depend on these schemes. The only kind of farming that farmers know is chemical-based agriculture. The main concern for farmers is the harvest. If there is no fertiliser, there will be no bountiful harvest. Even small-scale farmers feel the competition from commercial and capitalist farmers, who use a lot of machinery and capital-intensive inputs and production methods.

Now, if I cultivate cucumber for my own and local consumption, such competition would not be a problem. But it's not grown for my community. For example, banana farmers have told me that they apply four times the usual amount of fertiliser per hectare, because when you take the banana combs to the Thambuththegama market, traders are looking for the bigger-sized plantains. So, their sales and profit depend on the quantity of fertiliser used. Much fertiliser is being used for vegetables because farmers want larger sizes and bigger harvests.

The government doesn't care about the quality, quantity, nor the market value, that individual farmers receive. And you can't expect anything from the Agriculture Department. To be frank, the Agricultural Research and Production Assistants only know how to distribute fertilisers. In Sri Lanka, there are weak methods to maintain stable producer prices due to the absence of proper technology and procedures. If farmers want to consume *dhal* (lentils), potatoes, or soya, they need funds to purchase these in the market. Even their diet is decided depending on how much of their produce can actually be sold. As a result, they have to always respond to the market.

Their biggest distrust regarding organic farming methods has to do with the fact that when they convert production, their yields decline. In the traditional *suwandel* rice variety, there are around 250 paddy seeds, whereas in a hybrid variety, there are about 400-450 paddy seeds.

MKJ: The other issue is the water supply policy. Earlier in a cultivation *kanna* (season) water was given for 45 days. What is being done now is that it is provided only for 15 days, so people have to sow the seeds in one go. These new seed varieties are genetically modified to respond to chemical fertilisers. They are bred according to the needs of companies. Farming is usually a last resort for the young who prefer construction work or to work on a corporate farm or a rice mill. Before farming can shift to organic methods, these underlying issues need to be tackled.

Additionally, when we speak of 'farmers', the perception is of a male figure. However, it is women who have greater motivation to adopt agroecological practices. We cannot do this without women. Policies in this country oppress women, such as through microfinance loan schemes. The burden on women is so great that it pushes them to leave the country for domestic work overseas. Instead of channelling them to garment factories, we need a way to use their skills in agriculture.

Kaushi Dammalage (SSA): *What are the practical problems farmers experience when lands that have been cultivated with chemical fertilisers are to be converted to organic cultivation? Is the land ready for it?*

MKJ: That is the biggest challenge. The overnight ban on chemical fertilisers was a failure and pushed farmers to agitate on the roads. When I made the switch to organic agriculture, I gradually and systematically applied changes. One thing is clear: the land can be used after cleaning out the poison [chemicals]. Farmers have to take some action to restore this ruined soil. Now that most farmers cultivate under a hectare of arable land, it is not that difficult. Some researchers have found that earthworms and micro-organisms can regenerate the soil. Measures should be taken with regard to rearing of cattle, application of proper methods of animal husbandry, and the development of infrastructure facilities. We have three problems to solve: timely cultivation; utilisation of labour; and right cultivation during the right season. Only then can food security, food availability, and survival of the home economy be realised.

ST: *President Gotabaya Rajapaksa suddenly decided to stop the import of chemical fertilisers, and to switch to organic farming. What is your opinion of this decision?*

MKJ: Out of 100 decisions this government has made so far, 99 are the wrong ones. Whether we take the Kotelawala Defence University Amendment Act or the teacher's salary struggle, or any other problem, the government is using its authority in a very bad way. It is not clear to me what actions this government will take except to make decisions in a way that are somehow advantageous to allied business interests. Neoliberal politics rule the State. Over many years and successive governments, attempts were made to take away the land of small farmers. Commercial cultivation of gherkin,

banana, asparagus, and melon was introduced on those lands. Earlier the same was done with sugar cane. I believe that this decision is likewise not taken for the wellbeing of the common people.

VDS: I too distrust the motives of this government. What is the purpose of this decision? The previous [Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe] government designated the Mahaweli ‘F’ sector as an organic zone. The Export Development Board was involved in the certification of crops. However, what they call organic farming is related to the application of organic compost only.

This government is joining hands with agribusiness to produce organic compost. Their interest is in commercial crop cultivation, as stated in the ‘National Physical Plan’. Paddy is not included, but instead it is aloe vera, cashew, GMO bananas, corn, and soya. We do not see any joint programme between the government and farmers to convert to organic agriculture. There is no coordination between the Agriculture Department, the Irrigation Department, and the Livestock Development Department. In Africa, projects based on organic agriculture target the European organic fruit market, not the local market. Sri Lanka’s ‘one crop-one village’ programme is aimed at export-oriented agriculture. It is not to meet the consumer needs of the home market.

The Agriculture Department doesn’t have a proper programme to manage the shift away from chemical agriculture at all. What will happen to the crops to be cultivated in this season? The best way to fool the Sri Lankan farmer around every election is to say: “We will give [chemical] fertilisers for free”. Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa in his election campaign promised fertiliser for

farmers without any shortage. Agricultural officials say that according to State policy, the subsidy on chemical fertilisers is to be reduced over time. This is forgotten by both the government and the farmers. What is the plan for compensation of farmers for the reduction in production, damage to crops, loss of income due to the pandemic, closure of wholesale markets, etc.? The government is trying to get away with giving Rs.5,000 per acre for six months. This is not sufficient at all. It should be at least twice as much.

The Left in Latin America is committed to agroecology; but the political solutions to the agrarian crisis that are proposed by the Left in Sri Lanka are very unclear. In India, Dr. Subash Palekar’s ‘zero budget natural farming’ programme operates as a social movement, with supportive government policies in Andhra Pradesh. We need such a programme for Sri Lanka.

ST: *Thank you for sharing your stories and insights.*

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Image credit: Daily Mirror (https://www.dailymirror.lk/front_page/Farmers-protest-against-chemical-fertilizer-ban/238-222870)

Notes

¹ **Kausi Dammalage** and **Suresh Amubena** of the Social Scientists’ Association of Sri Lanka supported the recording of this interview via zoom. The discussion in Sinhala was transcribed by **Kausi Dammalage** and translated into English by **Shafiya Rajaitbu**. It has been edited, with annotations in square brackets, for clarity.