

**F-32: Recent land use changes in Monaragala district**

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Monaragala is one of the economically most disadvantaged and less developed districts in Sri Lanka. Lands in the district have severely degraded due to poor management and unsuitable land use patterns. Study of present land use changes is essential to implement a proper land-zoning plan. Therefore the objective of the present study was to investigate the recent land use changes which have taken place in Monaragala district.

Most of the information was based on the usual anthropological methods such as field observations, interviews, casual conversations and questionnaire survey. Base map prepared using existing data were updated with the help of Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi Niyamakas. Agricultural lands cover about 45% of the extent, while 41% of the lands is under forest cover. About 10% of the lands are scrublands and grasslands and balance 3.5% is urban lands, marshes, water bodies and barren lands. Out of agricultural lands, only 17% are under permanent crops. Land use changes which have taken place during the past 10 years could broadly be categorized into three types: (1.) Forests and scrublands transform into cultivated lands; (2.) Changes of cultivated crops in agricultural lands and (3.) Croplands transformed into non-agricultural activities.

Recent land use changes in Monaragala district show that most of the changes are not environment friendly and sustainable. Sugarcane has dominated in these changes. These changes have already caused a lot of environmental problems such as topsoil erosion, siltation of water bodies, groundwater depletion, decreasing bio-diversity etc. Therefore, implementation of proper land zoning plan for Monaragala district is urgently needed to minimize future environmental damage.