

Development of alternative agricultural strategies for abandoned paddy lands in urbanised areas of Gampaha District

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The aims of the project were to find out the potentials for retaining urban paddy lands in agriculture, to identify physical, social, economical and infrastructural constraints for paddy cultivation and to explore the potentials for introducing agricultural alternatives such as commercial level crop cultivation, allotment farming and agro-tourism. Primary data were collected by field survey between two categories of respondents i.e. land owners and neighbouring community in three selected urban locations. Conversational interviews, focus group interviews and field observations were also used. Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). From the land owners only about 20% engage in full-time farming. The most recent cultivation season in the study period i.e. 2003 Maha and the period between 1998-2003 were considered to identify the status of paddy cultivation. From the respondent farmers, 77% of farmers did not cultivate their paddy lands in 2003 Maha. In considering last five years 13% of paddy lands were extensively utilized for cultivation while 61% was totally underutilized and 26% was moderately utilised for cultivation.

The assessment of constraints for paddy farming disclosed that irrigation related problems, weeds/pest/disease problems and labour scarcity were major problems for paddy cultivation. The views of technical officers of the Irrigation Department were considered. It was found that due to abandonment damages occurred in irrigation channels & to renovate or to make the land suitable for other crops a large amount of money is required. The study revealed that Leptospirosis (*Mee-Una*), mosquito problem and ground water pollution have increased due to abandonment of paddy lands.

From land owners 46% preferred to rent or lease their paddy lands for agricultural purposes. The most preferred alternative among paddy land owners was commercial level paddy cultivating (92%) followed by agro-tourism (77%) and allotment farming (53%). In commercial level crop cultivation most preferred crops were leafy vegetables, vegetables and traditional paddy varieties. From the neighbouring community 83.3% liked to make use of proposed agro-tourism projects for educational purposes. Seventy percent indicated that agro-tourism would be a remedy for pollution in the area. From neighbouring community 60% would like to engage in allotment farming. The options introduced in the study were preferred to practice by farmers if whole group of farmers in the same tract are in one decision. They emphasized the importance of involvement of a responsible body for such projects. From the above findings it could be concluded that there is a strong social feasibility for proposing alternatives in the area.