

**Non-plantation agriculture, poverty and prospects for crop diversification:
The socio-economic impact of banana cultivation in Hambantota district**

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Recent literature on agricultural production in the developing countries highlight a debate that concerns the problems of non-plantation crops vis-à-vis prospects for high valued cash crop cultivation. It is argued that in a market economy, production of paddy is an economic waste and it is the high-valued crops such as horticulture, and cultivation of other cash crops that must be promoted. Farmers in the district of Hambantota in particular have started to move away from the so-called low valued crops towards high valued crops like 'banana'. The socio-economic implications of this shift are discussed in this paper.

This study focuses on the banana cultivation in the villages of Jayagama and Weheragala where a major shift in terms of choice of crops to be cultivated and an unequal distribution in the farm structures and land ownership has been emerging in the recent years. This paper is based on a set of data collected through a survey of a mixed group of seventy two (72) farmers many of whom have chosen to cultivate paddy and Banana side by side. The data set of the sample survey was supplemented by a series of in-depth discussions.

The study showed that banana cultivation in general is more lucrative as it has the capacity to produce higher economic surpluses and also a flow of income that is regular. To this extent banana cultivation should naturally be preferred to those other alternative cropping mixes such as paddy, maize, millet etc., as these crops do not ensure a regular flow of income. Yet, this study found that successful banana cultivation requires a set of pre-conditions such as a stronger asset base, which includes, irrigated land holdings, draught power, finances, etc. Therefore only those 'well-to-do' farmers are able to reap these benefits. It is revealed that the process of this transformation has contributed to an intense form of differentiation pertaining to asset and income distribution. In fact in most of the villages covered by this study, a few rich farmers who operate large holdings have successfully carried out banana cultivation. Farmers cultivating small tracts of banana plots (say an

Alli), have not been able to make any headway. One of the ultimate outcomes of this process is the creation of a landless class of small holders who have leased out their plots to the rich cultivators to become labourers on their own land.

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