

Peasant farming in semi arid areas: Vulnerability and coping strategies

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Farming is the most important form of livelihood for the peasantry in the semi-arid areas in the district of Hambantota. It is associated with a high element of risk which stems from covariant and idiosyncratic shocks. The former refers to shocks arising from sources such as droughts while the later refers to shocks arising from sickness or crop damage caused by wild animals. Incidentally, these semi-arid areas are characterised by the persistence of chronic poverty. According to records maintained by the Samurdhi office of the district, more than 60 percent of the households received poverty assistance.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain how those predominantly peasant households respond to different forms of shocks that undermine their prospects for economic mobility. The paper aims at identifying the major forms of shocks, the degree of vulnerability of the peasants to these shocks and the different forms of coping strategies adopted by the peasantry. This study was conducted in the Suriyawewa Divisional Secretariat area for which a sample of 155 households was surveyed using a combination of techniques including a questionnaire survey, and focus group discussions.

The impact of shocks and vulnerability as identified in this paper is twofold. First, it undermines the production potentials of the peasantry. Periodic droughts for instance make even the Maha crop difficult when rainfall fails to provide adequate water. Even when the rainfall is adequate, crop damage caused by animals including wild elephants and stray cattle, or pest attacks brought the production levels much below their potential. Moreover, price fluctuations of output during the harvesting period aggravate the situation as crops like paddy, gingerly (Tala), cowpea and finger millet etc., recording a sharp fall in their market prices. The response of the peasantry to these shocks takes the form of cutting down food and health expenses etc., which cause malnourishment, sickness and unattended morbidity conditions. They eventually lead to a severe form of poverty trap among those who are adversely affected by these changes.

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