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Special Topic

A sixty-day battle to tackle food security – Response of the Sri Lankan government to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the global status to a new position where Sri Lanka has been impacted many ways among which Agriculture is a prime when the food security is concerned. This editorial has evaluated the situations by elaborating the opportunities created in expanding the agriculture sector. Importance of holistic approach, informed decision making and collective actions with a focus, have been highlighted as the key elements in facing the post pandemic in the anticipated new normal era.

Keywords: Agriculture, COVID-19, Food Security, Responses to pandemic, Sri Lanka



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new dimensions at all corners and all sectors in the globe. Globalization and its much talked about benefits have been heavily questioned and challenged. As a result, the pandemic-induced global economic recession has started impacting Sri Lanka at all levels. The negatives of heavy-reliance on food imports to feed our nation, costing a colossal sum of foreign exchange, have been realized day-by day, indicating the importance of becoming self-reliance in national food security. Political will and directive to strengthen the production economy, and

highlighting the priority in agriculture have been well demonstrated recently in many ways. The national food production and productivity enhancement drive, which started even before COVID-19, has enable the country to make a leap jump forward. Though Agriculture is not the only economic sector that contribute to national food security, “growing what we can grow best”, and “doing what we can do best” seem the key to success beyond any reasonable doubt under ‘new normal’ situation to come (Figure 1).

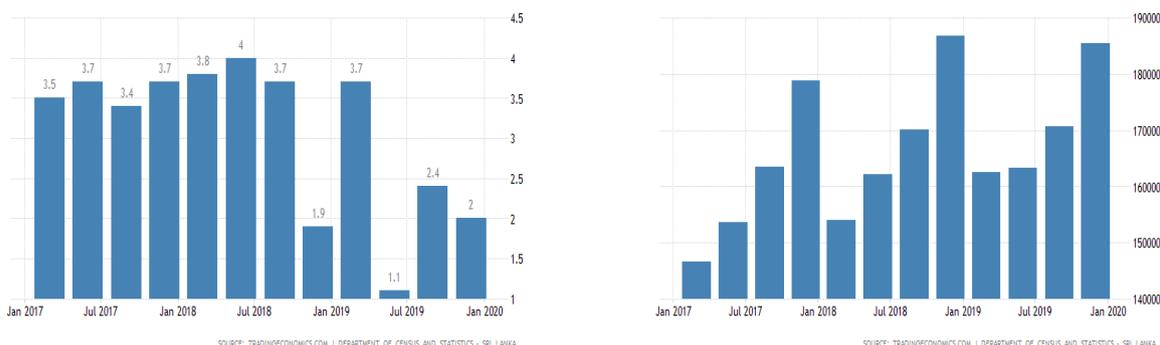


Figure 1. Changes of annual growth rate of GDP (A) and agriculture GDP (B) during the past twelve quarters (Source: DCS, 2020)

Collective actions

All indications to date proves that COVID-19 has hit hard on countries economy which is going to impact all the sectors across the country. Hence, all parties across all sectors have finally teamed-up together, start thinking together, to achieve a common goal – to ensure a ‘normal life’ in a ‘new normal’ country and the world. Given the magnitude of the task of achieving the perceived success in the post-crisis ‘new normal’ era, meticulous planning and unconditional sharing of responsibility in putting those plans into action with a focus is essential. Agriculture sector, in particular, need to change gears in its production drive by making sound evidence-based decisions, while having a holistic view of the agriculture sector. At present the country

has the benefit of having agriculture and allied sectors under one umbrella of administration creating significantly positive environment to make correct holistic approach in driving the sector in correct path. Agriculture sector in the country has bitter experience in the past as it has fallen apart in making correct decision at crucial junctures owing to exploitations of the sector on individual’s whims and fancies instead of having national goals and targets. The COVID-19 pandemic has put the sector on test as many decisions focusing the uplifting of agriculture sector have been taken collectively starting from top level to ground implementation providing directives to support the agriculture sector in Sri Lanka.

Activities adopted

In national level crisis management, the decisions made will change with continuously emerging scenarios. Agriculture is not an exception. Some of the key decisions made by the Government of Sri Lanka during the 60-day period from March 11, the

day of reporting of the first COVID-19 (+) Sri Lankan in-country, to May 11 (official removal of the lockdown) in its efforts to maximize the contribution of agriculture to national food security are highlighted in Box 1.

Box 1: Chronological order of events of directives, orders and regulations from 11th March to 11th May 2020

January 27		First COVID-19 (+) person reported in Sri Lanka
1	March 11	First COVID-19 (+) Sri Lankan National reported in the country
2	March 12	Maximum retail price imposed for Broiler Chicken Meat (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2166/29) – Consume Affairs Authority
3	March 12	Maximum retail price for Maize (used for any purpose) (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2167/30) – Consume Affairs Authority
4	March 17	Maximum retail price imposed for Red Lentil (Mysore dhal), Big Onion and Canned fish (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2167/9) – Consumer Affairs Authority
5	March 19	Temporary restriction of imports of non-essential goods (schedule B of the Banking Act Directions No 1 c 2020) to curtail imports and foreign exchange restrictions – Central Bank of Sri Lanka
6	March 24	Closing down of shops is not allowed until the last customer has purchased goods even after the curfew is re enacted – Sri Lanka Police
7	March 25	Facilitate cultivation of vegetables, paddy, maize, black gram, green gram, cowpea and finger miller, and fisheries activities without any interruption even during curfew time – Presidential Secretariat
8	March 25	Distribution of food items to consumers commence while protecting domestic farmers and the national economy – Presidential Secretariat
9	March 26	A special Presidential Task Force appointed to coordinate with the relevant authorities to facilitate the import of essential foods and drugs as well as the export of goods such as tea and sanitary clothing – Presidential Secretariat
10	March 30	Circular issued to provide essential food items at concessionary rates to low income and vulnerable families / persons and allowances – Presidential Secretariat (later approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on 8 April 2020)
11	April 4	The “ <i>Saubhagya</i> National Program on Harvesting and Cultivation” which aims to develop 1 million home gardens was launched, coupled with reimbursement of the seed costs up to 1 acre, 50% up to the next 4.0 acres, comprehensive agriculture insurance and guaranteed price for crops – Ministry of Mahawel Agriculture, irrigation and Rural Development
12	April 4	The first ever e-auction of tea was launched – Colombo Tea Traders’ Association & Sri Lanka Tea Board
13	April 9	The first ever e-auction for coconut was launched – Coconut Development Authority
14	April 10	Maximum retail price for different rice types/varieties (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2170/7) – Consume Affairs Authority
15	April 10	Rice mills declared as an essential service – Presidential Secretariat

16	April 15	Sri Lanka Railway to deploy special trains to transport vegetables fruits, grains, rice and other essential commodities cultivated from various parts of the country to ensure availability of these products during the curfew, imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 - Ministry of Transport Services Management
17	April 16	Temporary suspension on imports of several agricultural items for a period of three months (Gazette Extraordinary No 2171/5) - Minister of Finance, Economic and Policy Development
18	April 17	New Comprehensive Rural Loan Scheme (NCRLS) launched to be repaid via state banks within nine months to grow paddy, chilli, onions, cowpea, green gram, soya beans, finger millet, maize, sesame, sunflower, potato, sweet potato, manioc, coffee, yam and vegetables - Presidential Secretariat
19	April 17	Alternative arrangements to procure fruits and vegetables owing to the closure of Manning Market in Colombo - Department of Government Information
20	April 21	Maximum retail price Turmeric powder imposed (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2172/5) - Consumer Affairs Authority
21	April 22	Establishment of the Task Force for Economic Revival and Poverty Alleviation in terms of powers vested in His Excellency the President by Article 33 of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (Gazette Extraordinary No 2172/9) - Presidential Directive
22	April 23	Guaranteed price for 16 main crops for the Yala season 2020 in a bid to strengthen the income of local farmer by uplifting the country's agriculture sector - Cabinet Decision
23	April 28	Maximum retail price for white sugar fixed by Extra Ordinary Gazette 2092/64 rescinded (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2173/6) - Consumer Affairs Authority
24	April 30	Maximum retail price fixed for "Mysore Dhal" and "Canned Fish" from Order No. 61 published in Gazette Extraordinary No. 2167/9 on 17.03.2020 removed (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2173/9) - Consumer Affairs Authority
25	April 30	The Order made under Section 2 of the Special Commodity Levy Act, No. 48 of 2007 and published in the Extraordinary Gazette Notification No. 2160/63 of 01.02.2020 in respect of Big Onion (HS Code 0703.10.20) is rescinded with effect from 1 May, 2020 (Gazette Extraordinary No. 2173/12) - Ministry of Finance, Economic and Policy Development
26	April 30	Allocation of Rs. 10 million to import 150,000 mt of fertilizer to cultivate 253,000 acres in Yala season and distribution of fertilizer from May 20; Encouraging the cultivation of 16 additional crops for which the government has provided a guaranteed price; Introducing a new loan scheme 'Aswenna' up to Rs. 3 million through the People's Bank and establishment of 200 Specialized Agriculture Cluster Villages; Establishment of 50 Green Gardens and 200 harvest selling outlets and use 10,000 acres for special crop cultivations - Cabinet Decision
27	May 4	Fixing a certified price to purchase 16 crops as per the cabinet decision No. 20/0737/217/036-i date 23.04.2020 - Ministry of Mahaweli, Agriculture, Irrigation and Rural Development
May 11		A New Beginning - Removal of the 49-day lockdown imposed on 18 th March 2020

Making food available, accessible and affordable

The Sri Lankan economy is badly hit by the actions taken in containing and fighting the global crisis of COVID-19. As a result, the country was totally locked down since 18th March to 10th May 2020. Almost all industries were shut, apart from some essential services, such as water, electricity, fuel and food distribution and those producing food (farming) and medical supplies. Continuation of food production as an essential service was a crucial decision taken by the authority in order to assure food availability and accessibility. However, increasing both the crop and animal productivity and land productivity are important approaches to enhance availability of food in Sri Lanka in the medium and long run in 'new normal' Sri Lanka.

(a) Making food available:

In 2018, Sri Lanka has spent Rs billion 422.5 to import food and beverages (11.8% of the total imports). Being a country with the capacity and high

potential to produce the requirement of our main food crops, and all efforts of the Department of Agriculture, the country still produces only about 69% of maize, 10% of big onion, 58% of cowpea, 84% of ground nut, 49% of black gram and 80% of red onion as of 2018. However, rice sector achievements are commendable, With 3.2 million tons of bumper paddy harvest from 2019/2020 Maha season obtained recently, before COVID-19 lockdown, and anticipated harvest of 2.03 million tons from 2020 Yala season with the new production and productivity drive, is sufficient to make rice available in the country for approximately another 16 months (according to the Department of Agriculture).

There is ample opportunity to progress in many of the other food crops, having considered the economies of scale. However, evidence-based decision making has not taken place once again for

example in determining the agricultural input requirement. An enhanced demand for agricultural inputs was obvious with the country-wide homegarden development program (Box 1 - item 4) and increased cultivation extent in the *Yala* season. We now hear complains of unavailability of fertilizer even to be purchased at market prices. The cabinet decision taken on 30 April (Box 1 – Item 26) would help, but with a significant delay. Ground realities should have been understood better. It is needless to say that delayed cultivation due to non-availability of inputs or due to any other effect, and untimely input supply that does not match with the growth stage of the crops could adversely affect their productivity.

Temporary restrictions imposed on food imports until 15 July 2020 (Box 1 – Item 5) and introduction of a guaranteed price for 16 priority crops identified and agricultural insurance (Box 1 – items 11, 22, 26 and 27), subsidized inputs (Box 1 – Item 11), allowing farmers to continue cultivate irrespective of the island wide curfew (Box 1 – Item 7), etc., no doubt have encouraged the farming community to support this massive food production and productivity enhancement drive. Directive given to “Work from Home” had to be re-defined to suit the agriculture profession without hampering the momentum gained amidst the crisis. To make food available, several efforts were made by the GOSL focusing on the consumers by fixing maximum retail price for essential food items (Box 1 – Items 2, 3, 4, 6, 14 and 20) and allowing customers in the queue to purchase items irrespective of the time of imposition of curfew (Box 1 – Item 6). However, the imposition of maximum retail price had to be withdrawn owing rapid devaluation of Sri Lankan Rupee (Box 1 – Items 23 and 24).

The appointment of a task force (Box 1 – Items 9 and 21) economic revival and poverty alleviations is an important move forward to make the country food secure. However, the country urgently requires an agriculture task force to include the Director Generals of Departments of Agriculture (DOA), Export Agriculture (DEA), Animal Production & Health (DAPH), Directors of the relevant Provincial Departments, Directors of Tea, Coconut, Rubber and Sugarcane Research Institutes, other relevant state institutions, academia from Faculties of Agriculture, and private sector, who have been leading the task forces in reality by implementing agriculture related actions on the ground with the farming community, including education and awareness creation. This is

a serious drawback in the system as knowing the ground reality is a must in making national level decisions. Despite these drawbacks, the efforts made by the authorities to support farming and also making some important agricultural operations in the supply chain as essential services (Box 1 – Item 15) are commendable.

(b) Making food accessible and affordable:

The perennial problems such as failure of having timely availability of required high quality inputs including seed and fertilizer, high priced-technology due to tariff related matters, unavailability of skilled labour, ineffective food distribution mechanisms, etc. have overshadowed the efforts made by the authority during this crisis situation. Historically, the inefficiencies in the supply chain and market chain has resulted in lower farmer profits and higher consumer prices. These perennial problems are an accumulated outcome of unwise decision making. Absence of evidence-based decisions when it comes to food importation has become a habit of every government.

Some important decisions have been taken by the Government of Sri Lanka as solution to support marketing of agricultural produce from farm-gate (Box 1 – Item 8), reduce food miles by introducing new transport options (Box 1 – Item 16), facilitating introduction of alternate marketing systems (Box 1 – items 12, 13 and 19) such as online systems, reducing post-harvest losses of perishables, etc. The e-auctions of tea (first time in 126 years of tea trade) and coconut (first time in 26 years of coconut trade) are land mark events. The ideas have been floating around for some time (e.g. 20-year dialogue on having e-auctions for tea) have got materialized. An activity thought as ‘mission impossible’ is now a reality. Though there was a panic buying of tea at the e-auction started in April 4th, both tea and coconut auctions would have eased the country’s economic situation to some extent, supporting food security. The sustenance in these and many other improved mechanisms such as online delivery of food to doorstep introduced during the pandemic requires strong partnership among the stakeholders, especially through the involvement of private sector, while ensuring food quality and safety.

At this juncture, there is a need to focus on making technology affordable to the farmers, especially to enhance the productivity. This requires revisiting the custom tariff imposed on several imported technologies, including seeds and micro-irrigation

systems, to help their adoption by farmers contributing to the overall agricultural economy and food security. Agriculture need to be modernized by

infusing modern technology. Precision agriculture is the need for now and the future.

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