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Verité Research is an independent think-tank based in Colombo that provides strategic analysis to high level decision-makers in economics, law, politics and media.

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Organic Fertiliser Transition in Sri Lanka: Farmers Were Providing an Early Warning of a Food Shortage

Sri Lanka introduced a ban on chemical fertiliser importation, and a shift to organic fertiliser starting April 2021. As existing stocks were beginning to deplete Verité Research conducted a survey in July to capture the views of the farmers on the policy and its impact on them. The farmers were broadly supportive of the policy; but expected a much reduced harvest due to the lack of knowledge and time to make the transition.

85 PERCENT
Expected a decline in the next harvest under current fertiliser restrictions

64 PERCENT
Supported policy on transitioning agriculture out of chemical fertiliser and agrochemicals

78 PERCENT
Requested more than one year for the transition

On April 22, 2021, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced a ban on the importation of chemical fertiliser to make Sri Lanka "the first country in the world to be free of chemical fertiliser"[1]. The decision was passed into law by a gazette published by the Ministry of Finance on May 6, 2021[2].

Verité Research conducted an all-island phone survey among farmers from July 1 to 10, 2021, to find out the views of the farmers and the impact of the decision. The survey covered all nine provinces and included 1,042 farmers cultivating all major crops: paddy, fruits,

1. Zulfick Farzan 'Sri Lanka will become first country to be free of chemical fertiliser; President', News First 29 April 2021, at https://www.newsfirst.lk/2021/04/29/sri-lanka-will-become-first-country-to-be-free-of-chemical-fertilizer-president/ [last accessed 12 December 2021]
2. A revised gazette with the notification number 2238/45 of 31 July 2021 has relaxed the regulations on the import of chelated minerals and micronutrients for the purpose of producing fertiliser.

vegetables, coconut, tea, minor export crops (spices) and cereal.

The survey had four major findings that were important for the decision-making of the government. (1) farmers were broadly supportive of the government policy to transition to organic fertiliser; however, farmers: (2) expected huge reduction in harvest under current restrictions, (3) lacked knowledge as well as sources of knowledge to transition to organic farming, and (4) wanted more time to make the transition.

The survey findings suggested, overall, that Sri Lankan policymakers should attempt to avert a policy-induced shortage in agriculture output and food production by considering the pragmatic views of the farmers, most of whom are supportive of the government's chemical fertiliser-free agriculture policy. Failing to do so will further aggravate the pains caused by the pandemic.

Context of the new fertiliser policy

The dependence of farmers on chemical fertiliser was high (according to the survey responses). Over 90% of the farmers surveyed use chemical fertiliser. For a majority of them (76%), chemical fertiliser accounts for more than half of their total fertiliser usage. Paddy farmers who provide the country with rice, its staple food, are the highest users of chemical fertiliser (94%).

Broad support for the organic fertiliser policy

At the time the survey was done (i.e., two months after the ban was introduced) the support among farmers for the government policy was high. Almost two-thirds agreed that the country should transition into organic agriculture: 64% of the farmers surveyed answered "yes" to the question, "Do you agree that Sri Lanka should transition to 100% organic agriculture?"

The majority of the farmers expect the next Harvest to reduce almost by half

Even at the time the survey was conducted, the ban had created a shortage of chemical fertiliser in the market, denying the farmers the required quantity of fertiliser. 63% of farmers surveyed said "yes" when asked in July 2021 whether they were compelled to reduce the quantity of chemical fertiliser used in the current/most-recent cultivation cycle in comparison to normal usage. Nearly half of those surveyed (44%) said that the recent overall reductions made in chemical fertiliser and/or agrochemicals negatively affected their most-recent harvest.

When asked what they think would be the future impact on harvest/ quantity produced if they could not use chemical fertiliser or agrochemicals, an overwhelming majority (85%) said that they expected a reduction in their future harvest. Half of the farmers surveyed expected the harvest to reduce by more than 40% (Exhibit 1).

Lack of knowledge and guidance

The survey found that the farmers lacked the necessary knowledge and guidance on chemical fertiliser-free agriculture. While 35% of the farmers believed they had adequate knowledge to cultivate without chemical fertiliser, when that group was probed further, only 23% said they were also aware of the suitable organic alternatives for their crops and only 20% said they also knew how to correctly apply the suitable organic fertiliser (Exhibit 2).

When asked whether they have received guidance/instructions on how to engage in agriculture without using chemical fertiliser or agrochemicals, nearly two-thirds of the farmers (63%) said "no". Over half of the farmers said "no" when asked whether they know

Exhibit 1: Current and future crop reductions

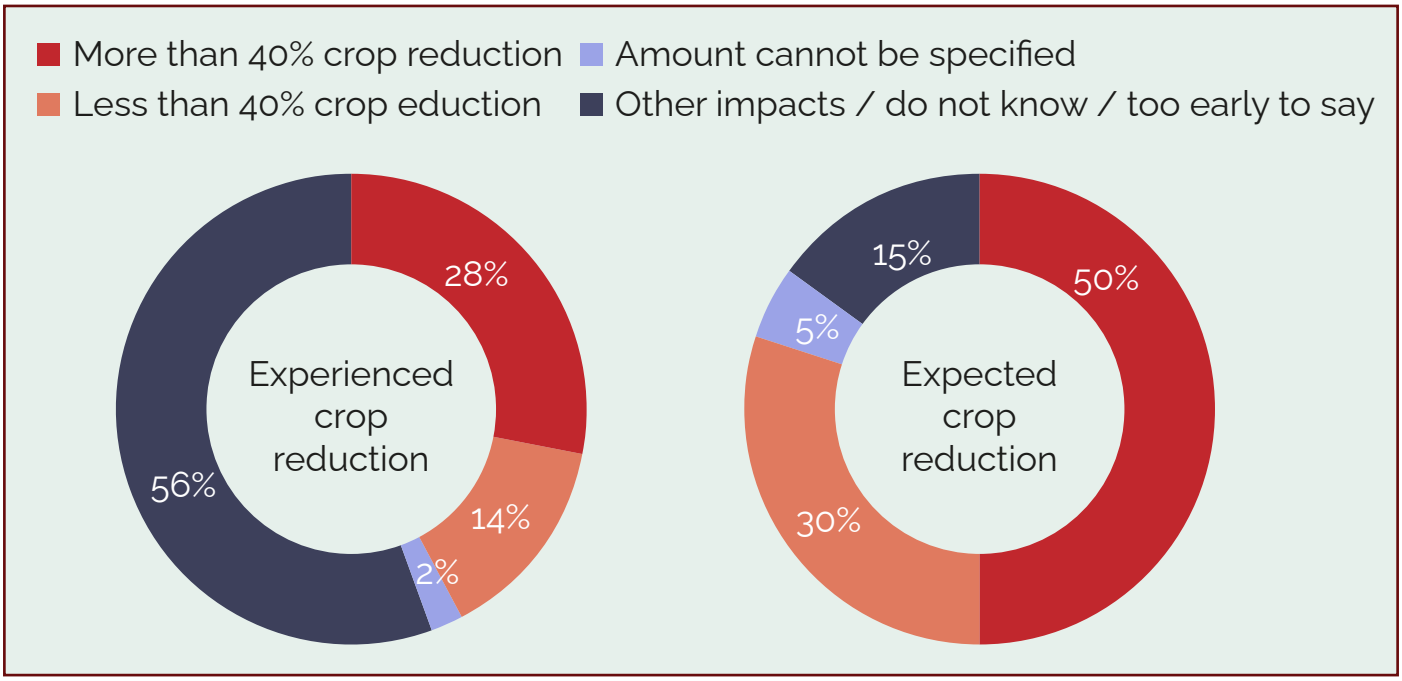
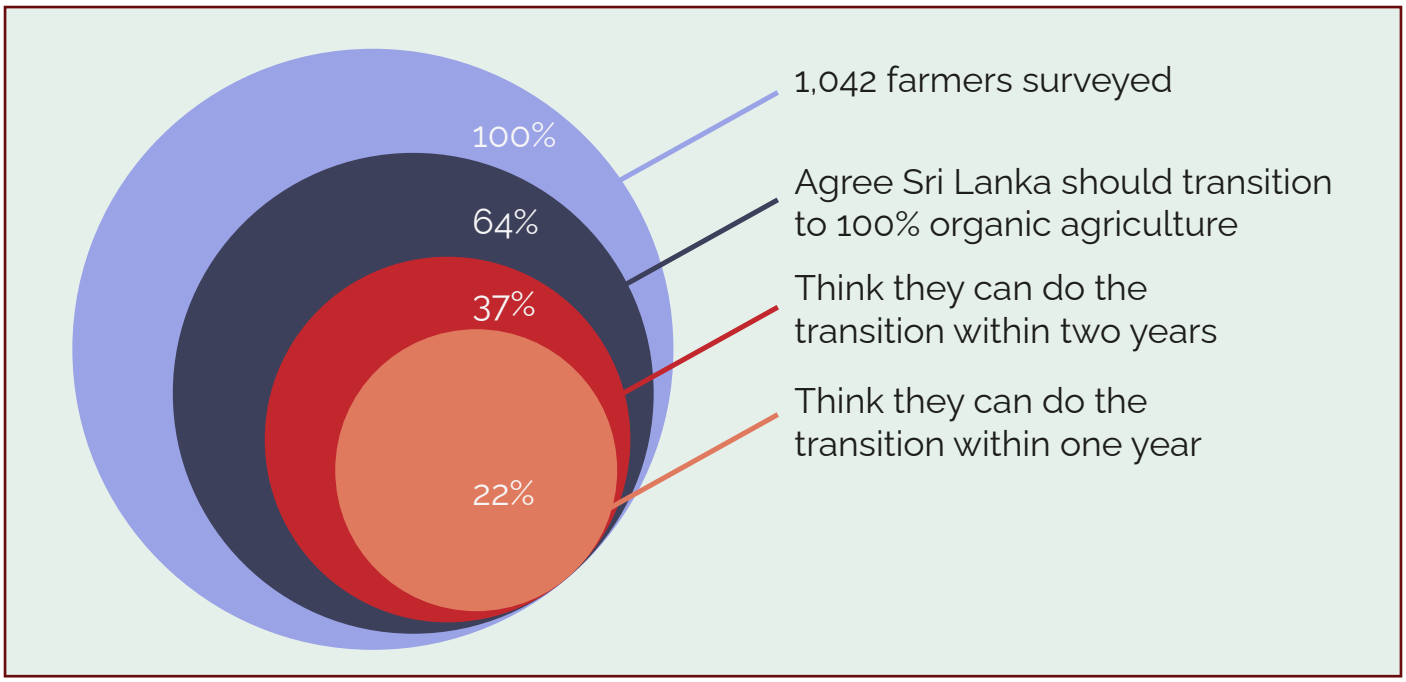


Exhibit 2:Access to knowledge on organic farming



people with knowledge and experience who can advise them on how to cultivate without using any chemical fertiliser or agrochemicals.

Farmers need more time and government assistance to transition

Almost two-thirds of the farmers agreed that Sri Lanka should transition to 100% organic agriculture. However, when asked how much time they need to successfully transition to 100% organic agriculture, 78% of those who supported the policy said they need more than a year to transition.

In response to the question "what advise/suggestions will you give to the government on transitioning to organic agriculture successfully?", the following three requests topped the list; 1) more time to make the transition, 2) necessary guidance/instructions, and 3) standardised organic alternatives.

Conclusion

The voice of the farmers captured in this survey revealed that a majority of them were not asking for a change in policy but asking for an adoption of a more pragmatic approach in the manner the policy was being implemented.

The survey findings were an early warning sent to the government by farmers of a possible food shortage. Sri Lanka would do well to avert a policy-induced food shortage by taking note of these early warnings and the pragmatic requests by the farmers for more time and assistance in implementing the transition towards organic fertiliser.◆