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# **1. Situation of food crisis**

Sri Lanka is undergoing an economic crisis rife with food insecurity, imperiled livelihoods and dire shortages of essential items such as medicine. Severe food shortages and continuous increases in food prices are forecasted in the months ahead. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, food inflation increased upto 90.9%.

According to data released by the World Food Programme in September 2022, 6.3 million people, or over 30 percent of Sri Lanka's population, are "food insecure" and require humanitarian assistance. Of these, around 5.3 million people are either reducing meals or skipping meals, and at least 65,600 people are severely food insecure. This situation is likely to worsen as the crisis unfolds in the island nation due to higher inflation, loss of livelihood, weak purchasing power, and an acute shortage of essential items like food, medicine, cooking gas, and fuel.

The United Nations estimates that over 50% of Sri Lankan children already require emergency assistance specially for food and nutrition. Surveys conducted by the WFP reveal that 70% of Sri Lankan children were stunted even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis erupted. That means their height was lower than their age and around 15% were wasted, and 17% of children under 5 are stunted, which means they were too thin for their height. With this crisis, the nutritional situation is expected to further worsen in the coming days. UNICEF in an appeal published this year states that 56,000 children aged 6 to 59 months with severe acute malnutrition admitted for treatment.

Imposing of import restrictions and subsequent shortages of key commodities such as wheat flour, lentils and milk powder resulted in these goods being exorbitantly priced whenever available. The reduction in agricultural production has inevitably resulted in a rapid increase of staple food such as rice and vegetables. Restricted access to and inability to afford the aforementioned staple food items have a direct impact on the household level and food security status. [1]

The overall annual food inflation had increased throughout 2021 and was about 22 percent from one year ago. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has increased the Value-Added Tax (VAT) from 8 percent-12 percent as well as corporate tax expecting to increase the government revenue by 65 billion to ease the debt. [2]

It has been recorded that amidst inflation increasing at a rapid rate urban populations have resolved to depleting their savings to buy food as a coping mechanism against rising prices, while estate communities are relying on credit to obtain food and essential items. [3]

About 2 million people, or 9% of the total population in Sri Lanka are farmers, and about 40% of the country’s population -representing 2.1 million households are engaged either in agriculture or livestock production. While in some districts goods are locally available, data presented in the referred WFP assessment of June 2022 reveal that Trincomalee reported a rapid and sharp reduction in consumers' access to the market, up to 80-90%. Vegetable traders in Trincomalee and Mullaitivu reported a reduction in total daily sales from 500kg to 50 kg, as consumers reduced the quantity of purchased items as their immediate coping strategy.

# **2. Importance of small scale food producers in overcoming food security**

It is evident that Sri Lanka cannot continue to depend on food imports to ensure our food security any longer. We have to increase our local food production. Hence, any plans of overcoming the food crisis should prioritize the protection of the country's food producers. All the efforts of pushing small scale producers, which represents the majority of farmers in Sri Lanka, away from agriculture over the last 40 years contributed in escalating the crises in the food and agriculture sector in Sri Lanka.

Our response to the food crisis should recognize the importance of small scale producers and should adopt measures to increase their productivity and sustainability given that approximately 1.65 million smallholder farmers operating on an average of less than 2 hectares contribute to 80 percent of the total annual food production.[1]

Globally, the discourse about the importance of small-scale producers have shifted significantly after the world food crises in 2008. It is now recognised globally that small-scale producers hold key positions in the global food system that cannot be neglected or replaced. The FAO’s State of Food and Agriculture, 2014 report[2], notes that five of every six farms in the world consist of less than two hectares, operate only around 12 percent of all agricultural land, and produce roughly 35 percent of the world's food. The report further notes that, nine out of 10 of the world's 570 million farms were family farms and produced around 80 percent of the world's food. The declaration of UN Decade of Family Farming (2019-28)[3] and with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas recognises the increased importance of small producers in the global food system.[4]

**Ensuring land rights of small scale producers:** Prioritizing small scale food producers (including women farmers) will also require reforms in policies which governs land and other natural resources in Sri Lanka. Policy decisions in relation to land use, governance and administration should prioritize the security of livelihoods of small producers an in ensuring the protection of sensitive environmental systems.

# **3. Land for small scale food producers**

Ensuring the ownership and access of food producers for their land and other natural resources is an essential requirement in their livelihood security and enhancing their food production capacities. But the conflicts, macro-economic and development policies and majoritarian politics over the last few decades have resulted in thousands of food producers losing their vital natural resources and hence their livelihoods.

The People’s Land Commission, convened by People’s Alliance for Right to Land (PAR) in 2020 and 21 has found out following key land rights violations of local food producers.

1. Militarization **-** The lands that were acquired, especially in the North and East, during the conflict remain under military and police control. As a result, many of the communities who have previously lived in those areas cannot return to their original lands. In Mullikulam, Keppapulavu, Jaffna and Kilinochchi[WU1] the military occupies lands owned by Tamil families. Similarly, military occupation of land has prevented Sinhala and Muslim fisheries and farmers in accessing their land in several places in Ampara and Batticaloa districts[WU2] . Military is also engaged in the local economy by farming and selling their produce in local markets, capturing the market space of local producers.

2. Acquiring agricultural land of local farmers as forest land for wildlife conservation or archaeological sites **–** commission has met with a number of communities in North and East, whose land they have been used for food production being suddenly and arbitrarily acquired by wild life, forest and archaeological conservation purposes. This has prevented local communities from accessing their resources for food production.

Such cases were brought to the notice of the Commission in areas like Mullaitivu where the minority Muslims were deprived of their land. Similar complaints were brought by communities in Wilpattu and in Trincomalee. The Forest Department acquired lands from Kirankomal, Komarimanal, Kanagar Kirmam (Potuvil DS division) and Palattawatta (Irakkamam DS division in Ampara), which were previously taken by the army from farmers who were permit holders. In Vegamam (Pottuvil) in Ampara, a farming community fled during the war in 1990 and upon their return between 2010 and 2011, discovered that their lands were cordoned off for the Lahugala National Park. The Forest Department also acquired lands from communities in Idayapuram and Karankovai West, Amavettan and Vegamam, Mathuran velli (Ampara), who fled from their lands (for which they have permits) in 1987 due to the war. Upon returning to their land, they found the Forest Department had acquired it. Communities such as Thukvella and Sembavelli in the Pottuvil DS division and Velveri (near Trincomalee) are also finding it harder to practice their farming livelihoods due to acquisitions by the Forest Department. In Thonikkal South Kandam (Thirukkovil DS division), Vattamadu (Thrukkovil DS division) and Komari (Potuvil DS division) in Ampara, farmers who have been farming for over 80 years (even during the war) found that their lands were taken over by the Forest Department when its officers and the police forcefully removed them and filed cases against them. The establishment of the national park in Chundikulam has also affected the lives of the community by obstructing access to the agricultural lands they work on.

3. Acquisition of land for tourism, infrastructure development and large scale export oriented agriculture – In many districts communities met with PLC have complained that urban sprawl, allocation of agricultural lands to private enterprises and forceful acquisitions by various ministries have shrunk the plots of land owned by local farmers. This also makes it harder for farmers to manage their lands using traditional methods (e.g. alternating between different agricultural plots during consecutive seasons), and affects the livelihood profiles of communities, as some have opted to open shops rather than practice agriculture.

Several private sector companies have acquired land that is important for local livelihoods, including the Riu Hotel in the Galle District, which acquired a section of the sea shore; the Bar Village hotel in Hambantota, which acquired lands provided to the community by the Department of Wildlife Conservation; banana and mango plantation companies in Hambantota; the Forest Rock Hotel, built on land belonging to the Andarawewa Forest and causing damage to the Kuda Wewa; waste management initiatives in Kosgoda, which are acquiring paddy lands; and several hotels and private businesses in Trincomalee. In Panama (Ampara), the community complain about commercial establishments and hotels which have acquired beach properties, interfering/imposing restrictions to use *ma-dal* (Beach Seine net) fishing (international interventions and investments and World Bank policies[5] are among the reasons why tourism is booming in the area). In Polonnaruwa, CIC Holdings was allocated a 50-year lease for 2,000 acres which was supposed to be used for seed research; however, according to neighbouring farmers, CIC is cultivating crops on that land. The people also complain that as an organisation, CIC does not consider their impact on the environment, and overuse pesticides. Recent efforts were reported from Rideemaliyadda (Badulla District) and in Anuradhapura to hand over thousands of acres of farmland for foreign companies for export oriented commodity production.

Taking away the land that has been used for the food production for other purposes has endangered the food security of local communities and in the overall country.

4. Land rights of plantation communities - Disenfranchisement and systemic exclusion of plantation communities from decision-making processes have detrimentally affected their living conditions. Bureaucratic failures have also perpetuated landlessness in the plantation sector, despite policy changes introduced to distribute land to plantation communities.

With the lack of access to housing and agriculture land plantation families face the biggest risk of food insecurity. 7 perch land that has been allocated for some families under various housing schemes remains grossly inadequate for them to grow any crops even for their consumption.

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# **4. Recommendations**

People’s Alliance for Right to Land strongly urge the Government in ensuring the land rights of local food producers, by implementing following recommendations, as an urgent and essential prerequisite in overcoming the current food crisis in the country.

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1. The State must immediately implement a programme to return land taken by the military to people and communities. Government should provide adequate support for the people to restart their agriculture and other livelihoods in returned land. Compensations should be provided for the losses occurred during the times of occupation.

2. If people cannot return to their original lands due to security threats (or any other legitimate reason expressed by them) and are willing to accept alternative lands, such alternative lands should take into consideration people’s livelihood needs, access to education, public transport and basic services .

3. Military businesses such as hotels, farms and other commercial ventures must be ceased.

4. Implement an immediate program at divisional level (under Divisional Secretary) to identify private agriculture land that has been demarcated as forest and wildlife conservations arbitrarily, and release them back to farmers for cultivation. Support farmers to develop these land as forest gardens with mixed crop cultivation to ensure the protection of surrounding environmental systems. Identification of such land should be done case by case basis considering the proof of ownership and previous use, environmental sensitivity and importance of that land for local communities for their livelihoods and food security purposes.

4. Any attempts of acquiring the land that has been used by local food producers for their livelihoods, for development projects, tourism or industrial agriculture projects should be ceased immediately. Alternatively communities should be supported to develop community based tourism and other development project which integrates their livelihoods and food production systems into development plans.

5. For food producers, who’s land has already been acquired and used for development projects, immediate steps should be taken to provide them with suitable alternative land, with necessary infrastructure, to start their livelihoods. Proper compensations should be provided for their losses.

6. At least 20 perches of land, with a house each should be granted to whole resident families of plantations as a consequence of working for the plantation. Full ownership of this land should be provided by way of a proper deed, so they have the freedom to decide how to utilize this land for housing and household food productivity. Ensure women get equal ownership for land.

7. Distribute non cultivated and abandoned plantation land among plantation workers for food crop cultivation. Support plantation workers to develop mono-cultural plantation land as diversified agro forestry, thereby promoting the plantation community to get involved as plantation small holders.

8. Remove livelihood controls and limitations placed over lands provided to plantation workers for living and accommodation, such as requiring permission to grow food for consumption or use resources upon such lands.

9. Provide adequate compensation for farmers who suffered financial losses due to the haphazard chemical fertilizer ban which was imposed suddenly.

10. Introduce an agriculture subsidy scheme for small scale farmers in an effort to fortify household level and community-level food security.

11. Promote climate-resilient agroecological farming practices through government extension services (distribution of organic fertilizer, indegenous seed varieties, relevant technical trainings)

[1]<https://www.agrimin.gov.lk/web/index.php/home-1/12-project/841-agriculture-sector-modernization-project>

[2] https://www.fao.org/3/i4036e/i4036e.pdf

[3] https://www.fao.org/family-farming-decade/home/en/

[4]<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1650694?ln=en>

[5] Society for Threatened People, Dark clouds over the Sunshine Paradise - Tourism and Human Rights in Sri Lanka, Pg. 55 -<https://www.gfbv.ch/wp-content/uploads/pdf-e.pdf>

[1] https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/sri-lankas-economic-crisis-spiralling-food-crisis

[2]<https://www.fao.org/3/cb8383en/cb8383en.pdf>

[3] https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/wfp-sri-lanka-situation-report-6-july-2022