

Evaluating the success of recultivation efforts in abandoned paddy lands of the low country wet zone in Sri Lanka

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The abandonment of paddy lands in the Low Country Wet Zone (LCWZ) of Sri Lanka presents a critical challenge, leading to the reduction of rice production and causing the degradation of interconnected ecosystems. Despite government recultivation programs, the region has not exhibited a substantial increase in cultivated land over time. This study evaluated the success of recultivation programs implemented from 2016 to 2020, focusing on coastal administrative districts within the LCWZ region, namely Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Galle, and Matara, which have been highly subjected to abandonment. The study population included farmers who participated in programs to re-cultivate their abandoned paddy lands. Using a multi-stage random sampling method, 100 farmers were selected, with 20 farmers from two Agrarian Services Centers in each district, focusing on areas with the highest number of abandoned paddy lands. Data were collected via a semi-structured questionnaire survey. Results revealed that multiple factors drive paddy land abandonment. Seventy-three percent of farmers pointed out more than one reason for abandonment, with degraded irrigation structures, poor drainage conditions, low yields, labor shortages, lack of agricultural inputs, water scarcity, and wild animal damage being predominant reasons. Re-cultivation initiatives prioritized reconstructing and maintaining waterways, canals, and anicuts. The majority of farmers demonstrated a positive attitude towards development programs of abandoned paddy lands. However, delays in fund disbursement, challenges in securing labor and machinery, unfavorable weather conditions, and insufficient commitment and active participation from farmers have caused setbacks in re-cultivation efforts. Ninety-five percent of farmers expressed positive feedback on the quality of re-cultivation programs, though ongoing encouragement was found to be crucial for sustained participation. Financial support reached 63% of farmers, with 87% receiving assistance in the form of seed paddy and fertilizers. Challenges include poor youth involvement, implementation delays, flood damage, wildlife interference, poor soil conditions, low-quality seeds, and ineffective part-time farmer management. The study suggested a systematic design and timely implementation of re-cultivation programs coupled with strict enforcement of regulations against non-cultivating farmers along with measures to conserve active paddy lands in LCWZ.

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