

Role of natural capital in rural livelihood strategies: a case study of land use related issues in Hambantota District of Sri Lanka

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Since the Independence from Colonial rule, successive governments have implemented diverse development strategies ranging from irrigation and settlement schemes to poverty alleviation as a national priority. Although some of these efforts have realized in terms of increasing access to land, agricultural production and employment generation, there are yet most smallholder farmers, known as peasants, who have been further improvised, marginalized and led to vulnerable situations due to deteriorating ecological and economic bases of their livelihoods.

SRL framework put forward by Chamber and Conway, followed by the initiatives taken by DFID and others, emphasize the importance of five main capitals (assets) in certain livelihoods in total households. The new paradigm provides among other things the natural capital as a prime necessity in generating, substituting, and transferring accumulated wealth through generations.

Land as a basic natural resource has multitude of functions that can provide the rural households with an acceptable level of living. Hence, the assurance of access to use the land resources is pivotal to any development strategy aimed at sustaining rural livelihoods. Ensuring food security and continued surplus income of peasant households cannot be achieved unless there is a favorable equilibrium of man-land balance. Present paper examines the value of land resource as an asset base in the rural society in Sri Lanka, with special reference to peasant livelihood strategies.

Sri Lankan government since the early 20th century, even under the Colonial Rule, has taken steps to provide land for the landless and other assistances to make them peasant proprietors. Many thousands of families earn their living in land settlements schemes today, while many others in traditional villages make their major source of income from land. However there are yet unsolved issues related with land tenure and use, due to legal and institutional as well as policy interventions. This paper highlights the impact of current land alienation policies, on peasant livelihoods and subsequence socio-economic implications due to changing local and global situations in peripheral rural areas.

Case studies have been selected from Hambantota District representing different socio-economic and environmental settings. The study revealed that the natural capital still plays an important role in poverty alleviation and livelihood improvement strategies. Although the relative importance of farming sector in household income declined, there are yet possibilities for diversifying and increasing production in peasant agriculture. The income differentiation of households also depends on the possession of basic resources like land. Therefore the study revealed that strengthening natural assets base by appropriate means would help in further improving the living conditions of rural households.

Key words: Peasants, SRL framework, Man-land balance, Peasant livelihoods

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