

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Paddy lands are important for different purposes such as for paddy production, water retention, and natural drainage. However, farmers face different issues in paddy cultivation such as irrigation issues, labour shortage, and low profit. Thus, there is an increasing trend in abandoning of cultivable paddy lands. After 5-10 years of abandonment of paddy lands, people tend to fill those lands and allocate those for alternative purposes. The situation leads to a reduction of cultivable paddy lands in Sri Lanka and it is more acute in the Western Province of the country where rapid urbanization is occurring. The study examines reasons for paddy land filling, emerging issues and socio-economic impact of it. The study was conducted in Gampaha, Kalutara and Colombo districts and GIS technique was used to identify the locations. Data was collected from a sample survey of given number of the filled paddy lands and officers attached to Agrarian Service Center. Data was analyzed using SPSS software.

According to the findings, a greater part of cases on paddy land fillings (71%) are related to abandoning lands while 18.3% accounts for reserves/Owita/Deniya. Approximately 92% of filled paddy lands in the sample were not cultivated for 10 or over 10 years. And also the majority of filled paddy lands were cultivated under rain-fed irrigation system. People do paddy land filling due to the increasing demand for highlands (70%), abandoning of land in long-run (33%), employment transition from agriculture to another field (58%) etc. People use those filled paddy lands mainly to construct buildings (64%) and cultivate highland crops (19%). However 10% people could not use those filled lands due to legal issues. The majority of cases of paddy land filling (85%) were done ill-legally. About 77.7% of them had even not sought of the Agrarian Service Center (ASC) and the rest 22.3% resorted to illegal filling after their request to ASC was rejected. On average it takes about one year to grant permission as it is a lengthy process. People fill paddy lands in 2-3 days. Especially they do this on weekends or public holidays to evade the attention of responsible authorities. In many cases, people tend to fill lowlands close to another abandoned paddy land (40%), highland (38%), irrigation canal (18%) and the main road (44%). About 64% of cases related to paddy land filling are obstructions to irrigation canals. This situation has caused floods in the area. The majority of the cases (52%) in paddy land filling were stopped by ARPAs by advising the owners. However about 38% of the cases were pending legal action and 5% were stopped by an order of Police. In many cases the court decision was to stop further filling/construction (56%) while 44% were ordered to remove the soil and restore the paddy lands. In general, ARPAs or ASCs are reluctant to grant permission for paddy land filling except for an unavoidable reason. If they issue permission that based on the reasons that, (i) No other land owned by the individual- 40%, (ii) paddy cannot be grown in those lands - 25% and (iii) that land is a highland in nature (20%). About 20% of officers said they cannot take action against illegal filling of paddy lands due to political interference. When ARPAs act against such an illegal case they have to face serious implications such as coercion/forced to drop the case (56%), assault (2%), criticism in public

(19%), deplore of official duties (27%) and loss of goodwill with villagers (30%). According to the majority of officers (50%) is no one helped in such a case. Even they have to bear the cost associated (travelling, photocopies etc) with the cases other than the litigation chargers.

Officers at ASCs (15%) suggest to take swift action to cultivate abandoned paddy lands to stop further paddy land filling. They also seek acceptance at police when they make an entry against illegal filling (11.1%) and measures to ensure their security (7.9%).

In general, a substantial number of ARPAs (43%) are extremely opposed to paddy land filling. But they said permission should be granted only for the cases with justifiable reasons and such move should not obstruct irrigation canals. However, it should be done carefully. They mentioned that rules and regulations in Paddy Land Act should be strengthened further (24%) while ensuring secure environment for the officers to carry out their duty independently (16%).

The recommendations are: the government needs to take immediate and practically reliable action to re-cultivate abandoned paddy lands to stop further filling of those lands, alternative rules and regulations should be incorporated into the Paddy Land Act to address paddy lands where farming is not viable. Further, officers face various issues when they act against illegal paddy land fillings. Therefore, establishment of a separate unit to take prompt action against those filing cases are noteworthy and it should be controlled through the Agrarian Development Department.