

Importance of Minor Food Crops

Over the last decade paddy production has shown a regular increase almost every year making the goal of self sufficiency appear a possibility. This increase in production occurred due to the increase in the areas under cultivation particularly under major irrigation schemes such as the Mahaweli project, and also due to the increase in average yield per hectare as a result of a better input package for the paddy sector. But in contrast to the paddy sector the production situation in the minor food crops sector has been relatively unsatisfactory.

last few years as shown in the table 1. Cowpea production has dropped continuously from 1981 by more than 50 percent. Soya bean production has fallen drastically from 1982. Production of maize, red onions, ground nuts, green gram, bombay onions, red onions, kurakkan and mineri have all indicated a considerable decline, though there were some fluctuations. Only potato cultivation was able to record a gradual increase in production while chillie production has increased slightly over the period though there was a drop in 1984.

TABLE 1

EXTENT CULTIVATED (HECTARES) 1981 -85

Crop	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Manioc	37,068	52,934	37,498	38,334	22,634
Maize	28,087---	44,873	47,230	45,414	37,808
Chillies	24,112+	28,422	32,019	30,778	30,512
Red Onions	8,181 ---	8,213	11,435	8,281	5,985
Ground Nuts	12,065	14,420	13,619	7,621	8,310
Greengram	18,180	21,205	28,548	29,568	21,420
Soyabean	2,213	17,377	14,625	11,818	2,455
Potato	4,648 + + +	5,700	6,643	7,909	8,397
Bombay Onions	96	170	217	---	163
Kurakkan	13,275 --	16,028	19,854	16,968	10,934
Gingelly	25,078	32,704	35,089	4,998	14,300
Meneri	876 ---	1,846	897	---	89
Cowpea	38,158 ---	35,739	45,811	31,321	24,264
Blackgram	10,050	10,046	17,488	33,362	12,542
Sweet Potato	8,963	9,135	7,899	9,573	4,904

Production of most minor food crops have recorded a decline in the

In a situation where paddy production is about to reach the self-suffi-

TABLE 2

PRODUCTION (MT.TONS) 1981-85

CROP	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Manioc	440,185	637,772	737,586	476,713	245,995
Maize	35,297	44,567	51,012	39,096	29,942
Chillies	21,415	26,820	29,400	26,804	31,286
Red Onions	92,183	92,667	134,823	37,649	53,845
Ground Nuts	14,474	13,826	17,269	6,520	9,359
Greengram	18,908	17,697	15,130	17,477	14,414
Soyabean	2,388	11,120	10,608	7,982	2,723
Potato	63,399	65,170	82,470	98,412	105,047
Bombay Onions	883	1,816	2,384	---	1,390
Kurakkan	11,714	13,302	11,662	7,101	6,758
Gingelly	13,987	23,179	9,192	2,485	8,167
Meneri	777	1,304	1,124	---	45
Cowpea	39,319	35,628	26,111	22,455	18,575
Blackgram	7,350	8,993	12,851	5,432	8,381
Sweet Potato	77,457	85,771	86,750	102,042	35,950

ciency level and minor food crop production is falling considerably, it is very important to give more consideration now towards the increase of minor food crop production. The importance of this measure is many fold. Some of the minor food crops like manioc, sweet potato, kurakkan, mineri, and green gram are substitutes for rice and thus by increasing production of these crops, the requirement of paddy needed for self sufficiency in rice can be reduced to an equal extent. By increasing minor food crop production a fair amount of foreign exchange which is now being spent on import of certain crops such as chillies, onions and green gram could be saved. The farmer could earn a higher income by cultivating certain minor food crops like chillies and potato rather than cultivating only paddy and therefore, any increase in the production of these crops could help to increase income and the living conditions of the small farmer. A number of minor food crops such as cowpea, soya bean, kurakkan and mineri contain considerable nutritional ingredients and are used for consumption in various forms particularly by rural people. Hence, by increasing production of these crops the nutritional requirements of low income earning people in the rural sector could also be improved. Since some of these crops, such as kurakan and mineri which have a high nutritional value, are now out of reach of these

people, a revival of cultivation and increase of production of these crops is important not only to fulfil mass nutritional requirements but also to cater to their variety of tastes and preferences.

The drop in the production of most of the minor food crops was mainly due to a drop in extent cultivated; though it was also due, to a certain extent, to the drop in average yield obtained per hectare.

The average yield per hectare obtained now from a large number of minor food crops is much lower than the maximum average yield per hectare that could be obtained from these crops. Thus there is a clear potential for increasing total quantity produced

by increasing the productivity levels of these crops. In order to increase productivity, the use of a more efficient input package is very essential. By upgrading farmer practices through use of improved seed varieties, proper fertilizer application and other scientific practices, productivity of these crops can be increased to a higher level. At present a good number of farmers use the traditional 'old' varieties as a result of non-availability of improved seed varieties in sufficient quantity. Application of fertilizer is inadequate in most cases; while for certain minor food crops farmers use no fertilizer at all. Improvement of systematic cultivation methods among the farmers could also help in increasing productivity of minor crops. In regard to increasing productivity of these crops, assistance of a good extension service is important in the short run while improvement of research activities is important in the long run.

The extent of land brought under cultivation for minor food crops is partly decided by the availability of water for paddy cultivation. When water is not sufficiently available for paddy cultivation, particularly in the Yala season, in areas under irrigation, farmers tend to cultivate minor food crops which need less water. By increasing economic viability of minor food crop cultivation farmers could be encouraged to cultivate these crops.

TABLE 3

YIELD PER HECTARE (MT.TONS)

Crop	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Manioc	11.9	12.0	19.7	12.4	10.9
Maize	1.3	1.0	1.1	0.9	0.8
Chillies	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0
Red Onions	11.3	11.3	11.8	4.5	9.0
Ground Nuts	1.2	0.9	1.3	0.9	1.1
Greengram	1.0	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.7
Soyabean	1.1	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.1
Potato	13.6	11.4	12.4	12.4	12.5
Bombay Onions	9.2	10.7	11.0	---	8.5
Kurakkan	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.4	0.6
Gingelly	0.5	0.7	0.3	0.5	0.6
Meneri	0.9	0.7	1.3	---	0.5
Cowpea	1.0	1.0	0.6	0.8	0.8
Blackgram	0.7	0.9	0.7	0.2	0.7
Sweet Potato	8.6	9.4	11.0	10.7	7.3

Once it becomes an economically viable cultivation a certain number of paddy farmers who earn a marginal profit would also shift to minor food crop cultivation. A good price and a good demand and other marketing facilities for these products are equally important factors in this regard.

When the Paddy Marketing Board (PMB) and other institutions such as the Co-operative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) and Markfed compete with private traders in purchasing these crops at the field level the farmer can be prevented from exploitation by private traders and can earn better profits. The PMB continues its Floor Price Scheme (FPS) for purchasing a number of minor food crops; though the inefficiency of this scheme is closely related to the poor performance of some of these crops. The import and marketing of these products at relatively low prices in the local market has been harmful to the cultivator. It is evident that in the long run import policy should be decided in favour of the local cultivator. It has been argued that even though a nominal rate of protection has been given to the farmers, by providing subsidies, the general price distortion caused by imports has not helped much to ease the eroding profit margins of the farmers in the minor food crops sector.

A good part of the area under minor food crops belongs to the rain-fed areas and thus farmers have to face a comparatively high risk from the possible damage through unexpected weather conditions. Therefore a good crop insurance cover is more important for encouraging farmers in cultivation of these crops. Just as in paddy cultivation, the institutional credit scheme would also have to play an important role in providing the financial requirements of minor food crop farmers. Establishment of successful export villages where farmers are encouraged to cultivate minor food crops for export markets could also be an incentive in increasing the production of these crops.

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