

## **TAPPER SHORTAGE IN SRI LANKA – REASONS, REPERCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO MINIMIZE IT**

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Sri Lanka has ca. 161,000 ha. of rubber out of which about 120,000 ha., *i.e.* 75% of total extent, are in tapping. According to the mean mature stand in our rubber lands, *i.e.* ca. 300/ha. and the trees assigned per tapper, *i.e.* 500-550 trees in both blocks, *i.e.* d<sub>2</sub> system, the total tapper requirement of the country is ca. 72,000.

The magnitude of tapper shortage in the country is different in the plantation and the smallholder sectors, which is ca. 40 and 60% of the total rubber extent in the country respectively. The mean tapper shortage is ca. 10% and further about 10% of the available tappers are unskilled in the Plantation Sector. In the smallholder sector the tapper shortage is highest in holdings of about 5-50 acres in extent. Further, the tapper out-turn is also poor in such smallholdings. Therefore, in both Plantation and Smallholder Sector/Sectors there is a direct crop loss due to vacant tapping blocks and due to poor intakes of unskilled tappers. Further, in the long-term there is a crop loss due to the damages done to the tree by the unskilled tappers.

### **Possible reasons for tapper shortage**

#### ***Dignity***

The present society does not consider rubber tapping as a dignified profession. Tappers does not like to see their children under taking this profession. This is evident by the fact that the majority, *i.e.* ca. 80%-90%, of the tappers in the country are over 40 years of age.

#### ***Income***

In the smallholder sector the income of a tapper depend much on rubber prices. Further, in both smallholder and plantation sectors the tapper is a daily wage earner. Generally, in the main rubber growing areas of the country ca. 100-120 days of tapping is lost due to wet weather. Therefore, the poor rubber prices and interference of rain on tapping does not permit tappers to earn a reasonable wage for living. The poor yield potential in both Plantation and Smallholder Sectors also lowers their intakes and income levels.

## ***Training***

There are no systematic training programmes done in the country to train the new generation for this profession. Such programmes have been done in the past in the plantation sector. In other rubber growing countries, eg. Thailand training centers are found in rubber growing areas for this purpose.

## ***Difficulty***

The tappers task is made more difficult due to poor land preparation, weeding and long distance head carrying of latex. Therefore, a tendency is there for the new generation to not to engage themselves in this profession.

## **How to overcome the tapper shortage**

Development of easy methods of tapping *i.e.* puncture tapping and also automation may attract the new generation for this profession. Nevertheless, such systems are not commercially adopted in any rubber growing country to-date.

Further, tapping systems which require lesser number of tappers could be adopted, *i.e.* low frequency tapping system with stimulation. Low frequency tapping also has the advantage of enhancing tapper productivity and their income levels. This method is widely adopted in other rubber growing countries.

Division of labour is one other way of reducing the tapper requirement. In this method the skilled tapper is used only for tapping whilst another person is employed for unskilled activities such as removing of tree laces, placing of cups and latex collection. This will allow the skilled tapper to tap a higher number of trees, lowering the tapper requirement whilst enhancing tapper income.

Low frequency tapping and division of labour when adopted together will reduce the tapper requirement considerably.

The adoption of rainguard technology by the rubber growers will increase the number of working days of the tappers and will help them to enhance their income.

Educating the new generation at school level, especially in the rubber growing areas on the importance of the rubber industry to the country and constraints the industry is facing is a necessity. School leavers in these areas could be trained at technical colleges on tapping techniques, new developments and the ways a good income could be obtained through this profession. Calling them productivity assistants and helping them to improve their income levels will bring about recognition for this profession, which forms the backbone of the rubber industry.