

Agriculture

Untapped potential of the Coconut Zone

It is widely acknowledged that over 1 million acres of land under coconut need no longer continue to be exclusively occupied by a coconut mono crop — the crop which has traditionally been labelled the 'lazy man's crop'. Some efforts are being made already to bring this vast area under an intensive programme of mixed farming that will not only contribute to increased food production but also generate more employment from the coconut lands while maintaining a steady production of coconuts. Such efforts at introducing additional enterprises under coconut have been successfully attempted in several countries (in India - Kerala) while even in this country examples of intensive land use under coconut are numerous.

Lazy Man's Crop

The total extent of nearly 1.2 million acres of coconut accounts for almost double the acreage under tea and rubber. Even the total extent under paddy - the basic food crop of the country — is slightly less than the extent under coconut.

tea accounts for over 3 times its value. On the other hand, unlike tea and rubber, the coconut industry is essentially indigenous. More than 65% of the holdings are below 20 acres in extent. The holdings over 50 acres in extent account for only a little more than a quarter of the total.

Generally the small scale sector of coconut cultivation has been very inefficient and even the estate sector, as shown by several recent studies, has not been run so efficiently. The cultivation of coconut and the maintenance of plantations generally involve very little labour and supervision. This is one reason why coconut cultivation as a source of investment had been most popular among Ceylonese planters.

The low maintenance requirements allowed a high degree of absenteeism among the owners which in turn contributed to the poor productivity of these estates. The average yield per acre is around 2,500 nuts which in most cases, as research has pointed out, could be more than doubled. The employment generation capacity under low

ture and sunlight especially in plantations less than 5 years and over 20 years in age to be capable of introducing a variety of other enterprises. To overlook the potential of putting such land to maximum use is totally unjustifiable in the present day economic and social circumstances of the main coconut growing areas of the country. One may even wonder whether some of the present coconut lands in the over-crowded wet zone areas should in fact, have been planted at all with a crop like this. The importance of coconuts as a national foreign exchange earner cannot however be underestimated and it should continue this role in the future as well. While conceding this fact, of paramount importance is the use of these lands in the most efficient and productive manner. Much discussion is presently being focussed on this.

The possibility of introducing a variety of crops between the palms and of developing livestock farming on a large scale has been pointed out repeatedly by experts and is in fact being successfully attempted in certain areas. It is noteworthy that many an enterprising and pioneering farmer did interplant crops like pineapples, bananas, various tubers and even cash crops (cocoa and coffee) prior to the general awareness of the need and potential in this area.

Renewed Interest

The production war, no doubt, was largely responsible for eliciting renewed interest in the potential of utilising coconut lands to grow more food. The worsening unemployment situation gave an added impetus to the continued search for untapped employment potential in this zone. The twin objectives of increasing the productivity of land and productive employment which formed the basis of the 1975 Land Reform paved the way for the first serious and organised effort in this direction. The several Janawasas established on Land Reform lands in the main coconut growing areas have clearly demonstrated the feasibility of diversification through a variety of crops and livestock enterprises capable of generating more employment and greater productivity from the land.

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	Tea	Rubber	Coconut
No. acres under Cultivation in 1974 ..	598,466	563,474	1,200,000
Export earnings in 1974 Rs. Mn ..	1,360	738	397

Coconut has a significant place in the national economy as an important foreign exchange earner, as a supplier of industrial raw materials for a wide range of local industries and also as a source of food. 50 per cent of the coconuts produced in the country are consumed locally. Coconut, however, is not a basic requirement in the diet to warrant such a vast area being devoted to this crop.

The contribution of coconut to the GNP is substantial, accounting for 15% of the total output of the agricultural sector and 18% of the industrial sector. However, the value of agricultural output per acre in coconut is the lowest among the three plantation crops;

levels of management of a coconut mono crop has been around one person per every 10 acres, thus making it the lowest employment generator among major crops.

Untapped Resource

The practice of hitherto restricting the use of coconut lands exclusively for the production of coconut is obviously an instance of extravagant use of our scarce land resources. There is certainly no denial of the fact that the coconut palm is a useful source of food and industrial raw material. But it is clear that the coconut lands are blessed with enough ground space between palms which is fertile and is supplied with adequate soil mois-

The potential for such intensification is more marked in the wet zone coconut triangle with a well distributed rainfall; a dense network of roads and a dense population providing a large market. This zone is thus placed at a distinct advantage as a promising region for a vigorous system of mixed farming with coconut as the main crop. The potential is certainly very much higher in the so called Class II coconut lands which represent the relatively inferior segment of the coconut growing areas.

In coconut lands with sufficient sunlight a variety of crops like pineapples, bananas, passion fruit, sugar cane and many tubers could successfully be grown. Even in lands with insufficient sunlight a variety of shade loving crops could be cultivated. It has been repeatedly pointed out that the introduction of additional crops need not affect the coconut crop if both are properly managed. In some cases they even benefit the coconut crop e.g. pasture.

It is encouraging to note that the Coconut Research Institute itself has recently set up a separate division to work on the possibilities of diversification under coconut.

Effective Planning and Co-ordination

The need for coconut lands to be more intensively used is undoubtedly an undisputed fact, but the important and difficult question is how best such a programme of intensification could be launched and sustained. Not only should such an attempt include incentives to the farmer through price support policies, credit and marketing facilities and so on, but should be integrated with a programme of adequate technical and scientific support. More intensive research on mixed farming under coconut too is an urgent requirement. Any intensification programme will obviously call for a strengthening of the institutional infra-structure which has hitherto not been geared to this task. This is more so as the bulk of the coconut holdings are small and to draw in a large mass of people to full participation in any programme of action needs effective planning and co-ordination at several levels.