

FARMERS' PERSPECTIVES: EXPECTATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS FACED BY SMALLHOLDER RUBBER FARMERS IN MONERAGALA

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SUMMARY

The bottom-up approach allows the local people to present, share and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions; to plan, to act, to monitor and evaluate the situations. This study was an initial approach in the Moneragala area, which focused on finding the constraints, expectations and possible ways of improving livelihood conditions of smallholder rubber farmers. This article compiles smallholders' expectations and constraints on rubber cultivation in the Moneragala area. Further, possible approaches to improve livelihood conditions as perceived by the smallholders are presented in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Research on rubber is mainly confined to identification of problems by researchers investigations into problems identified and development of recommendations by the researchers themselves. This results in low adoption levels in most of the recommendations, which are not affordable to farmers, especially for small-scale farmers. There have been several adaptive research trials in farmers' fields conducted by the Rubber Research Institute (RRI). A better success would have been achieved by collaboration with the farmers; by means of understanding their perceptions, local knowledge and specific problems. Approaches like Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) can be of immense importance to collect such valuable information in terms of knowledge and experience gathered in generations by local communities.

This article is based on information gathered in years 2004 and 2005 in the Moneragala district employing participatory tools. The objective of this study was to gather farmers' expectations and the level of satisfaction on them. Further, their solutions were brought together in alleviating poverty in the Moneragala district as a means of improving livelihood conditions in the smallholder sector of rubber.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the information gathered in;

1. Participatory studies in 4 villages representing major rubber growing areas of the Moneragala district and

2. A resident smallholder workshop conducted in the training centre of RRI for the smallholder rubber farmers in the Moneragala district representing 7 *Thurusaviya* societies of 4 Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions.

The details of villages and farmer participation are described in the article “Level of awareness on recommended practices in rubber smallholdings in the Moneragala district” in this issue. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools employed in this study were informal discussions, pair-wise ranking, and scoring.

Constraints as perceived by rubber farmers

A pair-wise ranking exercise conducted with a group of farmers on the 10th October 2005 (Fig. 1), indicated that they are confronted with many constraints as described in the dendogram (Fig. 2) prepared using the ranks obtained through the pair-wise ranking matrix. According to the analysis of pair-wise ranking results the non-availability of plants and their poor quality were ranked as problems with ‘high priority’. During the discussion, they have further added the inadequacy of nurseries and non-availability of plants at the required time.

Adverse impacts of droughts on rubber cultivation and non-availability of fertilizer at the required time were also among the major problems, which can cause low productivity levels. Further, the farmers have pointed out that heavy rains coincide with the high yielding period (October to December) of rubber. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze the profitability of fixing rainguards in the Moneragala area.

The farmers also highlighted poor standards of processing inputs such as acids in the absence of quality certification. During the discussion, they also pointed out the scarcity of processing equipment and inputs and requested to provide them with these through societies.

Market problems also exist as in traditional areas like purchasing of sheets in bulk, large margins kept by middlemen and indebtedness of smallholders to the traders (Edirisinghe *et al.*, 2004). However, farmers appear to have given least thought to grading of their sheets although the majority of the farmers in Moneragala are RSS producers. Further, it was noted that their produce comes as mainly RSS-2 or RSS-3 grades. There may be several reasons behind this; such as negligence, lack of awareness and adoption of recommendations in processing and lack of processing facilities. As a result their rubber is purchased as ‘bulk’. The participants stressed the inadequacy of state involvement in market affairs. Possible institutional approaches to help out the farmers in marketing are discussed in detail in “Rubber marketing and related problems in the Moneragala district” in this issue.

Poor knowledge on rubber farming was identified as a result of poor extension and advisory services during the discussion. They came up with possible causes such as lack of systematic training programs accompanied with demonstrations and practical sessions. Further, the farmers stressed the need for knowledge update on intercropping which is a promising opportunity to improve productivity of lands. Although of low priority, ownership problems of rubber lands,

was a problem to some of the farmers, which obstructs them from obtaining subsidy permits.

a)



b)



Fig. 1. (a) Farmers involved in a pair-wise ranking exercise and (b) a subsequent discussion

These problems need to be considered thoroughly in drawing up appropriate action plans to make rubber farming productive in Moneragala area. Therefore, there is a great responsibility on the shoulders of all the institutions catering to the smallholder rubber sector in devising appropriate management plans to help the farmers in these areas.

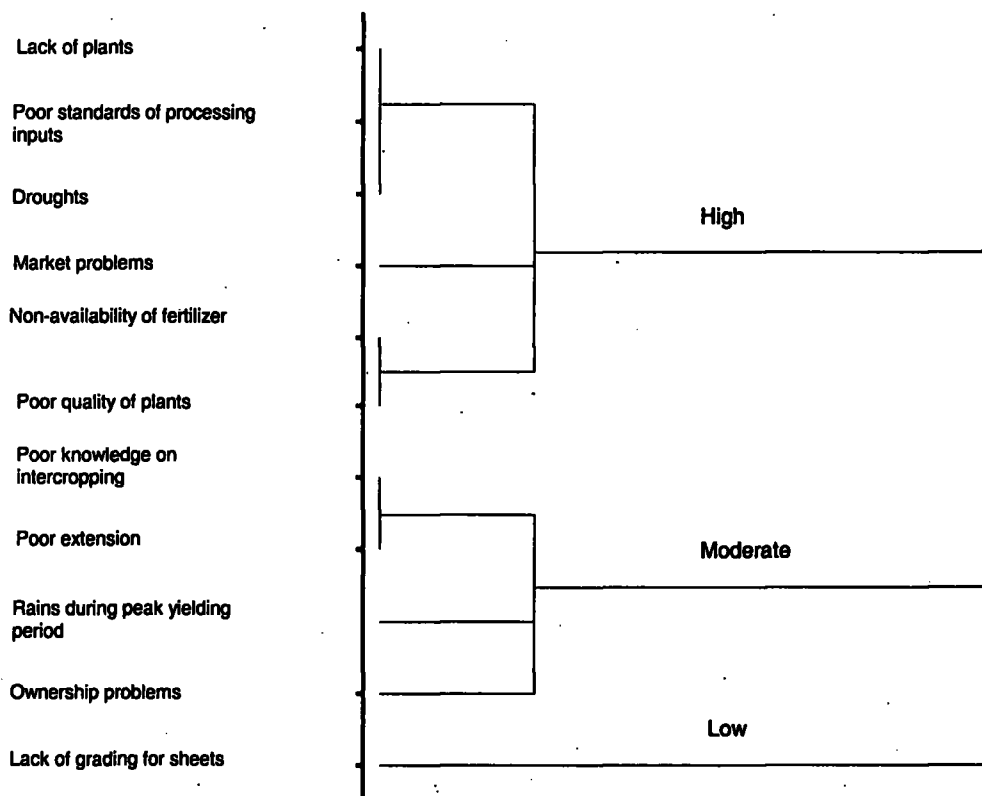


Fig. 2. The dendrogram showing the problems faced by smallholders in the Moneragala district

Expectations of rubber farmers in Moneragala

Case study 1:

This study was done in Tanwatta in the Moneragala Divisional Secretariat (DS) division in September 2004 with 70 participant farmers. A participatory approach was followed using brainstorming sessions, Semi Structured Interviews (SSI) and scoring methods.

The farmers came up with 6 main categories of expectations and scoring was done out of 100 for each main category. The resulting levels of satisfaction are depicted in Fig. 3. According to the results, none of the expectations have reached at least the 50% level. In the next step, they further elaborated on each expectation and listed as depicted in Boxes 1-6.

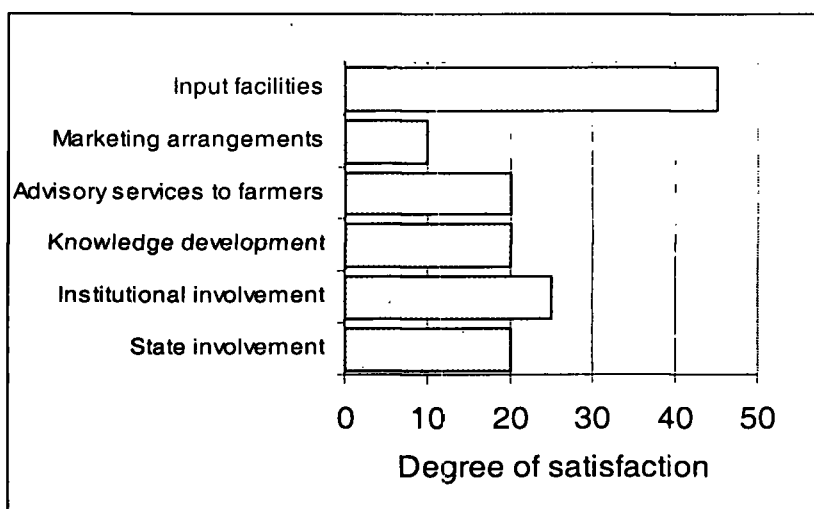


Fig. 3. Degree of satisfaction of farmers on different categories of expectations

Box 1. Farmers' expectations from the Government

Expectations from the Government

- Plans to enhance coordination between relevant Institutions and officials with the farmers
- Implementing Group Processing Centres (GPC)
- Property rights for encroached rubber lands
- Subsidy (money and physical inputs) for intercropping under rubber
- A reasonable subsidy*
- Providing necessary facilities to the Institutions and officials for better functioning
- Providing state lands for rubber cultivation
- Systematic & strategic planning

* The new subsidy scheme has not been implemented at the time of this study

Box 2. Farmers' expectations from the Institutions & Officers.

Expectations from the Institutions & Officers

- Proper institutional framework to support farmers
- Adequate number of officials
- Proper coordination
- Promote inter-relationships between officials and farmers

Box 3. Farmers' expectations on knowledge development

Expectations on knowledge update

- Conducting training programs
- Establishing demonstration plots
- Organizing field trips to traditional rubber growing areas
- Sharing their knowledge
- Dissemination of new knowledge

Box 4. Farmers' expectations on extension & advisory services

Expectations on Extension

- Efficient advisory service
- Dissemination of knowledge
- Targeting the most important areas of rubber cultivation such as; planting, panel marking and tapping

Box 5. Farmers' expectations on marketing

Expectations on Marketing

- State involvement in marketing and pricing
- Strategies to give the farmers a reasonable farm gate price (reducing the intervention of middle men)
- Help the farmers to get a higher price for their produce through a proper grading system
- Market facilities for intercrops

Box 6. Farmers' expectations on inputs

Expectations on Input Facilities

- Make inputs and machinery needed for rubber industry available at regional level
- Timely release of quality planting material to farmers

Case study 2:

Case study 2 was done with a group of farmers who participated in a residential workshop at the in-service centre of RRI in October 2005. They have categorized their expectations as; (1) from the Government, (2) from the institutions, (3) on knowledge and (4) on market and inputs. As presented in Table 1, except for reasonable subsidy, expansion of rubber cultivation and property rights for rubber lands, the level of satisfaction for other expectations are at zero level, which needs attention in formalizing policy issues.

Expectations from the institutions are listed in Table 2. Expectation with respect to provision of high yielding clones was in a satisfactory status. Improvement is needed in the institutions catering to extension activities. Expectation on rainguards is a positive attitude towards this technology, which is new to Moneragala area.

Camps for upgrading knowledge on rubber cultivation and processing is a novel idea came from the farmers in Moneragala (Table 3). Further, organizing training programs, which are of practical nature, and improving the skills of extension personnel need to be given serious thought in the future.

Table 4 lists the expectations with respect to market facilities and inputs needed in rubber cultivation. A satisfaction of 20% was observed for providing essential inputs through societies. The rest of the expectations of farmers also should

be studied in detail and appropriate policies need to be formulated to make rubber farming a productive venture.

Table 1. *Expectations of Moneragala rubber farmers from the Government and the level of satisfaction*

Expectations	Level of satisfaction (%)
A reasonable subsidy	70
Authorizing property rights for rubber lands	50
Expansion of rubber cultivation in the Moneragala district	50
Timely disbursement of subsidies	0
Timely provisions of plants & fertilizer	0
State involvement in purchasing of produce	0
Provision of mills for common use	0
Provision of coagulating trays	0

Table 2. *Expectations of Moneragala rubber farmers from the Institutions and the level of satisfaction*

Expectations	Level of satisfaction (%)
Providing high yielding plants	80
Correct advises to raise a healthier plant	50
Timely disbursement of subsidies	50
Efficient advisory service	50
Provision of rainguards	0

Table 3. *Expectations of Moneragala rubber farmers on knowledge update*

Expectations	Level of satisfaction (%)
Training workshops in the area	50
Practical nature of training workshops	50
Occupying efficient & active extension workers	50
Yearly camps for upgrading knowledge on rubber cultivation & processing	0

Table 4. *Expectations of Moneragala rubber farmers on market facilities and inputs*

Expectations	Level of satisfaction (%)
Essential inputs through societies	20
New rubber based industries	0
Advising mill owners on processing rubber according to standards	0
Purchasing rubber according to grades	0
Preventing corruptions in purchasing of latex from farmers	0
Providing extra plants for casualties	0

Solutions to alleviate poverty in the Moneragala district

This case study was done in Karawila, in the Badalkumbura DS division. Seventy eight farmers in this village participated in this study. The farmers identified 5 possible ways to improve livelihoods of rubber farmers in the Moneragala district. The specific needs to fulfill each identified solution to alleviate poverty are presented in Fig. 4. Planting perennial crops like rubber was identified as a strategy in developing agriculture sector. The other strategies; systematic planting of cash crops, introducing medicinal plants and planting fruit crops can be effectively coupled with rubber in intercropping systems.

There were very valuable suggestions with regard to irrigation as presented in Fig. 4. The ideas listed under livestock and inland fisheries can be useful in improving the living conditions of rubber smallholders as well as the people living in this area. The farmers have mentioned about the importance of rubber based industries in developing the industrial sector in the Moneragala district.

Developing forestry sector was also identified as a strategy to improve livelihoods. The farmers mentioned about introducing forest tree species to non-agricultural lands. Although not mentioned here, the institutions involved in the rubber sector need to investigate on the possibility of developing proposals to make use of the opportunities under 'Clean Development Mechanism' (CDM) under the Kyoto protocol.

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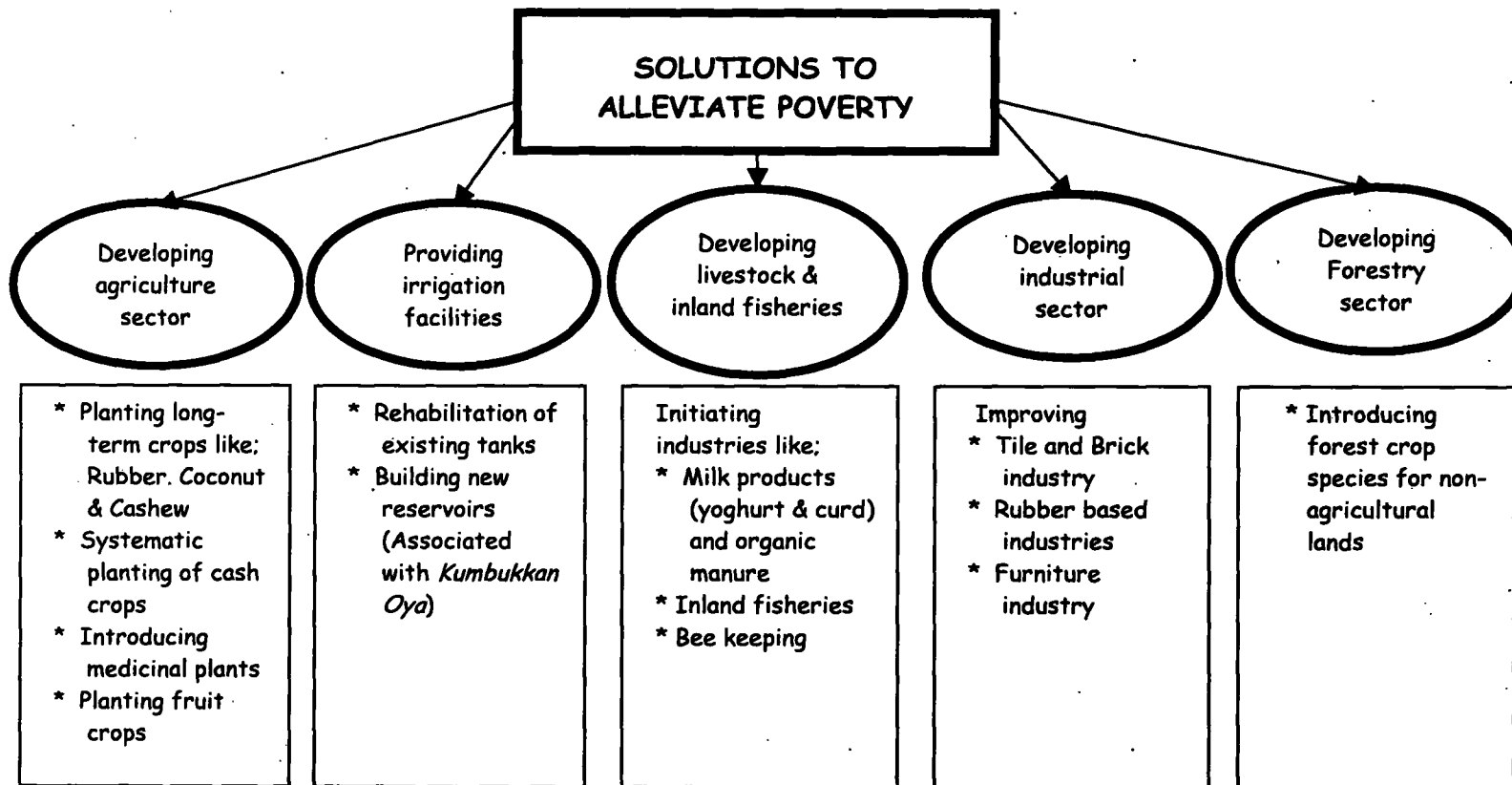


Fig. 4. Solutions to alleviate poverty in the Moneragala district