

# THE CITRONELLA SUBSIDY SCHEME AND THE SMALL HOLDER

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## Introduction

In a previous issue of this journal the scheme of assistance provided by Government to owners of citronella land under 20 acres in extent who wish to plant their lands in coconuts has been briefly outlined. The scheme as mentioned therein was initiated during the latter part of 1959 when applications for assistance, to plant during 1960, were invited by a press notification.

The scheme is in no sense a small one and demands the services of the field staff at every stage — advice and demonstrations on planting methods, distribution of seedlings and fertilizer at central points, inspection of lands for the payment of cash subsidy and follow-up advice on the proper maintenance of the planted seedlings. Of these, inspections for the cash subsidy in particular have to be carried out annually for a period of eight years and the follow-up advice too has to be given at least for the same period of time.

## Organization

As originally proposed the issues of fertilizer and planting material has been spread over a period of three years with the possibility of an extension covering in each year two planting seasons namely the South-West and North-East Monsoons. Thus in such a form of distribution a certain number of persons will first be provided with planting advice followed by the issue of seedlings and fertiliser during one season. During the next season there would be a different group of people who would receive similar assistance, and so on for the three years or more. But this is not all, lands that have been planted with seedlings during one season, will have to be inspected immediately afterwards for the cash subsidy by a separate set of officers and thereafter annually. This procedure will likewise have to be adopted in the case of all other lands that are planted in subsequent seasons in the years following.

Thus it will be seen that the preplanting service and distribution of seedlings on one set of lands would coincide with the cash subsidy inspections and follow-up service of another set of lands, and the follow-up

service on this set of lands will in time coincide with the follow-up of a third set of lands. Thus if as anticipated 24,000 acres are planted in coconut at the end of the third year, then from the fourth year onwards the field staff will have to cover annually 24,000 acres of land which they would have to inspect for the cash subsidy and render follow-up advice.

As planting material was available only for 2,000 acres for the Yala and for 3,500 acres for the Maha or North-East of 1960, it was decided to limit the distributions of fertilizer and seedlings to these acreages during the two seasons in 1960, allocations to be made beginning from the smallest unit of land until the total of 5,500 acres was covered. On this basis of distribution it was found that only those persons whose lands were 2 acres and under in extent would receive assistance under the scheme during 1960.

Certain unavoidable limiting factors such as inadequate staff, time at their disposal and the situations of the holdings in remote areas, which in most instances could be reached only by foot, made planning of field work somewhat difficult. Therefore, with a view to overcoming this difficulty, a number of Advisory Field Officers from the Advisory Division were temporarily transferred for service in the Citronella Subsidy Scheme and posted in different areas in the Matara and Hambantota Districts. But even with this number it was not possible to give individual attention to the applicants as envisaged earlier. Utilizing more staff from the Advisory Division on the other hand would have seriously affected the extension work that is being carried out by this division. And therefore group demonstrations on correct methods of planting was the only alternative left. Another difficulty is the hardships these officers have to undergo in obtaining suitable accommodation for themselves.

#### **Problems of the Small Holder**

Next we come to the applicant himself.

During the first year of operation of the scheme, only applications from persons whose lands were under 2 acres in extent were considered. Generally, holdings belonging to such a category do not yield an entire livelihood for a man and his family and living thereon has necessarily to be supplemented by casual work outside. It is therefore obvious that such a holding would normally have to be cultivated by the owner himself as he would not be in a position to employ hired labour. A family owning a holding of such size is unlikely to provide more than two effective working adults — the man and his wife; the children with recent developments in education are not available for such work. Again, a full time effort cannot be expected from a woman. Such a family would thus be left with only one person to cultivate the land.

The difficulty with such a type of owner is not that he is conservative. He appreciates advice and is keen to adopt improved methods of planting and cultivation. He is not ignorant of the advantages of using cheaply procurable manure such as farm yard manure, ash and green manure in agriculture. He is keenly interested to know how best artificial fertilizer, that is supplied free of cost with the coconut seedlings, should be applied. The problem in most cases is their apathy due to their poverty, uneconomic land holdings, and in certain instances illiteracy.

These citronella holdings are practically all open, unfenced and neglected blocks of land. In some cases the owners reside on them; in others the lands are away from their homes. In both instances, as such lands are not sufficiently productive, these people, more often than not, work elsewhere as casual labourers. In view of this, full time self labour especially during the planting season is not easily available as this means work without wages which they cannot normally afford to lose. Alternatively, employment of outside labour is not possible owing to the lack of capital.

That a good soil and favourable climate are essential to the successful establishment of seedlings are well known.

But the vagaries of the seasons, in most parts of the citronella growing areas, especially the Yala or May/June monsoon affords another difficulty in these areas. Coupled with this, is their immediate interest, not unnaturally, in short term crops like paddy and vegetables.

During this season therefore these small holders would, where available, be engaged on paddy fields as they are certain of quick returns in the form of wages or produce itself which is such an important constituent of their daily diet. Once this work is over, only then would most of these small-holders turn over to the planting of coconuts. The main reason presumably is that coconuts are a long term crop, which would not give them any returns for at least 6 — 8 years. Their indifference is not because they are negligent cultivators but because the time they can devote falls short of what is needed for developing their own lands at the correct time.

This inevitably leads to belated planting with poor results. Ample testimony of this was manifested during the Yala of 1960. The applicants were given the option of collecting their quota of free seedlings and fertilizer direct from the nursery or obtaining them at distributing centres after informing the local field officer. But with the rains only one had collected his quota of seedlings from the nursery while of the balance only an insignificantly small number of persons had informed the range officer that their lands were ready for planting. This naturally created a serious problem as the rainy season would have been over and, it was feared that, the planting would have been too late. It was then decided to inform all

the applicants that their quota of seedlings and fertilizer would be delivered to them free of cost at an appointed place and time. This was necessary in order to get the owners to expedite the work of holding their lands.

In this manner distribution of seedlings and fertilizer to those to whom allocations were made for Yala planting was completed in June 1960. Some of them have planted the seedlings in the lands for which they have applied; others have planted a portion of such lands and the balance seedlings in other lands not specified in their applications and quite a number of applicants, who in spite of this arrangement have been late in preparing their lands, have planted the seedlings in their own nurseries and informed the inspecting officers that they would plant them out in the field during the next Maha as this is a better planting season than the Yala.

Even among those who have planted the seedlings there were a number of instances where owing to their poverty, smaller size of planting holes have been cut. The reason mainly being that cutting of a larger hole, in the type of soil largely prevalent in the districts, means longer hours spent on their lands at the expense of earnings which they would otherwise make outside. Perhaps they desire to finish unpaid work as early as possible. In the absence of any available data and convincing proof that a larger planting hole pays in the long run, it is difficult to impress in the minds of these small-holders that a larger planting hole  $3' \times 3' \times 3'$  would off-set the financial loss to them in cutting such holes.

Soil-conservation practice should not worry most of these holders at this stage as soil erosion on their lands would for sometime at least be considerably reduced by the citronella cover already on them. But the burial of husks in such areas would undoubtedly be very useful for moisture conservation in the soil. Unfortunately owing to the scarcity of husks in these areas the cost to the small-holder would be something which they cannot reasonably be expected to afford. Besides, they also believe that husks attract white ants. This is correct, but at the same time termite damage can be avoided by chemical control. Recommending the use of insecticides against white ants too could be futile as these poverty stricken people will not be able to afford them.

Then there is still another more serious pest which endanger coconut seedlings, namely, cattle. Fencing material for the construction of a live fence is not always easily procurable and besides does not provide a suitable fence for a long term crop like coconuts. The construction of a barbed wire fence would be completely outside their means. It would thus mean that the seedlings planted by these small-holders would be at the mercy of such serious pests as termites and cattle against which they would normally not be able to afford protection.

## Summary

From the foregoing it would be clear that the capability of the owner, the amount of his capital in relation to the needs for proper cultivation and maintenance of coconuts are matters which should deserve serious consideration, if any reasonable degree of success is to be achieved. Aid to purchase fencing material such as barbed wire and fence posts and insecticides for the control of termites (white ants), as it is essential that sufficient protection be given to seedlings planted in holdings that are mostly open unfenced blocks of land infested by termites and stray cattle, is suggested.

If these are forthcoming, and on the assumption that the areas selected in the Matara and Hambantota Districts are suitable for planting with coconuts during the Yala and Maha season, the small-holder should evince a greater interest and desire in the cultivation of coconuts on correct lines otherwise the scheme must be regarded as being in the nature of an experiment.