

RAINFED FARMING AS A DEVELOPMENT OPTION FOR THE DRY ZONE

J Handawala
Kotuwegoda, Rajagiriya

From about 1930's the development policy of Sri Lanka has been discouraging Chena farming and promoting irrigation. The main argument against Chena is felling of forest to clear Chena plots, though in the case of Chena it is only contribution but in irrigation it is a total sacrifice.

After many decades of irrigation development we are still without enough food, intended double of cropping out of reach, fuelwood and timber becoming scarce and costly and imbalance between flood flow and base flow ever increasing.

Historically, Chena farming has been at least at par with irrigation if not more important. Contrary to general opinion the British rulers gave due credit to it and declared 1897 Wastelands Act to facilitate it. In 1930's they attempted stabilization of Chena farming by introducing draught tillage as in Deccan Plateau. The experiment failed and the effort was given up for good. Irrigation only was promoted thereafter. Even the Moneragala IRDP that was specifically instituted to help the Chena farmer has spent only Rs 1.86 million on rainfed farming in comparison to Rs 57.2 million spent on irrigation, from 1984 to 1995.

Despite falling out of favour with the Government rainfed farming continues on its own strength as the commonest farming practice in the country. As much as 33% of paddy land in the country is rainfed, more than half of it in the dry zone, recording a cropping intensity comparable to minor irrigation and producing 25% of national paddy output. It accounts for 80% of the country's nonrice food production. In some irrigation projects the settlers live more on rainfed farming than irrigation. Rainfed sugar cane is doing better at Pelwatte and Sevanagala compared to irrigated Hingurana and Kantalai.

Inspired by the rainfed farming potential, studies conducted in southeast dry zone since 1994 show that it is possible to improve on its merits and its demerits can be easily overcome by application of appropriate and farmer adaptable technology. Following are some of the technologies applied in farmers' fields with farmer participation.

1. Construction of contour bunds with hillside ditches on contours traced by graduated tube level.
2. Wind rowing of debris into contour bunds instead of burning.
3. Erasing the fear the people had of *Gliricidia* as a soil degrading plant.
4. Promotion of compost heap instead of pit.
5. Application of P fertilizer to legumes.

Results observed are;

1. Soil fertility improved and soil conserved.
2. Fodder, green manure, vegetable stakes, fuelwood etc from *Gliricidia*.
3. Weed flora changed from difficult to manage graminiae to easy to control broad leaved species.
4. Need for ploughing reduced and manual weeding costs reduced.
5. Crop yield increased.
6. Well water quality improved.
7. Farmer confidence in rainfed farming improved.