

AGROFORESTRY SYSTEMS OF THE TEA SMALLHOLDINGS IN MATARA DISTRICT: SELECTION OF TREES AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY

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The tea sector in Matara district is dominated by small-scale holdings as monoculture and mixed gardens. High shade trees consisting of forest trees and perennial crops have been an integral component in tea lands which is analogous to natural forest conditions. Recently, with the rapid increase of demand for timber, there is an increasing trend to remove high shade trees neglecting the sustainable agro-forestry system in tea small holdings.

The study attempted to assess growers' interests, agronomic problems and financial benefits of managing high shade trees in tea small holdings. Findings are mainly based on data gathered from 200 indiscriminately selected small scale (< 1 ha.) tree growers in Matara district by administering a questionnaire based interviews. Direct observations were also made to assess the canopy of high shade trees, tea cultivations and cultivated lands. Prices of timber and marketing process of timber were gathered using participatory approaches.

Study reveals that coconut, jak, mahogany, arecanut and lunumidella are the dominant high shade tree species in tea small holdings less than 0.25 ha. while albizia dominates in the holdings larger than 0.5 ha. Thirty three percent of the growers are not interested in planting new high shade tree species in their holdings except coconut and fruit trees due to prevailing market imperfections resulting from existing timber trade policies. Profit margins of timber trade earned by merchants are very large compared to the low revenues received by the growers due to lack of clear titles for many lands and lack of market information. Discounted financial value of land equivalency ratio (LER) is higher for tea small holdings with albizia trees compared to other tea based agroforestry systems.

Critical assessments and restructuring of policy related to land titles, subsidy schemes for tea cultivation, high shade tree replanting programs, and timber trade have become important issues to sustain the agro-forestry system in tea small holdings.