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05 May 2021

His Excellency President Gotabaya Rajapaksa,
President,
Presidential Secretariat,
Colombo 01.

Your Excellency,

Points to be considered when making the decision to ban agrochemicals achievable

Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) is a nongovernmental organization, operating since 1990, that represents the rights of small-scale farmers and have been promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

MONLAR appreciate and congratulates the decision taken by the Cabinet of Ministers, on 27 April 2021, to ban the import of all agrochemicals with immediate effect. We are also grateful for your decision to approve the said Cabinet decision on 29 April 2021.

Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform has been promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices for the past 30 years and we have a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge about it. We wish to inform you that this knowledge is the basis of this note.

The use of agrochemicals has had disastrous consequences in the past decades. The widespread use of these chemicals has contaminated the soil and the water, which has directly led to the increase in cancers and kidney diseases. Not only have this negatively affected public health; but the overuse of agrochemicals has also undermined food sovereignty, unraveled the ecological balance, and had led to the extinction of many animal and plant species. Since almost all agricultural inputs, used by Sri Lankan farmers are imported, it has allowed certain companies to build oligopolies. Currently agriculture amounts to about 7% of the GDP but about 26% of the workforce are involved in agriculture. Often these workers are poor and receive government welfare assistance, most of them are malnourished and trapped by microcredit companies to be

eternally in debt. Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform believes that promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices can be a solution to all these problems.

Given this, we would like to make several proposals that will help realize your vision of making Sri Lanka the first nation to succeed without the use of agrochemicals.

1. Making this political/ policy decision a reality at the grassroots
2. Presenting a solution to practical challenges that might come up
3. Drawing lessons from local and international experiences

The previous government also took a decision to promote organic agriculture in 2016. Unfortunately, that initiative failed completely by 2018 and Strategic Enterprise Management Agency (SEMA), which was entrusted with implementing the program, was also closed.

When the current administration decided to ban the import of agrochemicals from 2021 - 2022 Maha season, several groups, including farmers, have become worried. Given this context, several things need to be considered to ensure that commendable initiative does not meet a similar fate as the program initiated in 2016.

- Many people believe that the government is not serious about the ban of agrochemicals from 2021 - 2022 Maha season. They point that the government has taken several contradictory decisions on agriculture in recent years; for example, the government initially announced that agrochemicals will be given to farmers free of charge, then it has presented a draft of the National Agricultural Policy, then it released 18,000 metric tons of fertilizer which contained high amounts of heavy metals, despite an initial decision not to release it to the market. These are policies that are contradictory. many people believe that the recent ban on imports were taken because the government could not afford to do so and that this too will change as political and economic context changes.
- If environmentally friendly agricultural practices are promoted without a proper policy framework; farmers might lose all faith in such practices.
- Around the world large scale agricultural companies are trying to drive out medium and small-scale food producers. If medium and small-scale farmers are adversely affected by this scheme, they will believe that this initiative might also look like a part of this scheme.

We must also understand that there is no systematic government program to promote carbonic agriculture among farmers. Given this, it is quite likely that many obstacles and challenges will bring, in the short, medium, and long term. The government must come up with a plan that addresses these challenges and mechanism that can lead to a change in attitudes and grassroot realities. It is vital that the government builds a strong coordinating mechanism between the national policies, tactical and strategical programs (to make the policies a reality) and various institutions that have been entrusted with carryout these programs. However, from what we can see, not even the Department of Agriculture

and Department of Agrarian Services have not come to an agreement on this policy. This is something we saw during the previous government as well. The two institutions did not coordinate with each other nor did they back the policy to go organic in a serious manner. These are two of the largest ministries, in terms of physical and human resources. If these ministries do not fully back a government initiative; such an initiative has little chance of success. We would also like to point at the below mentioned contradictions.

1. What is the relationships between the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Lands, the Ministry of Wildlife and Forest Conservation, the Mahaweli Authority, the Department of Irrigation, and other institutions that are directly related to agriculture.
2. Most of the seeds currently used by Sri Lankan farmers are imported hybrid seed varieties. These seeds have particular agrochemical needs, including chemical fertilizers, we need locally produced seed varieties that responds well to organic fertilizer. However, such a program, related to the conservation and distribution of local seeds, which is vital to the success of environmentally friendly agricultural practices have not been initiated.
3. There is no calculation of the time needed to develop knowledge; through research, technology, training etc. that is required for the expansion of environmentally friendly agricultural practices. There has also not been a proposal on how to do this.
4. Shifting from agrochemical-based agriculture to environmentally friendly agricultural practices is a paradigm shift for many farmers. During the initial stages there may be some failures and farmers need to be assured that there is a mechanism to mitigate such losses. Many farmers have had a bitter experience about the shortcomings of agricultural insurance and crop damage compensation schemes that have been in operation in the country. Given this, farmers will not believe that the government is serious about helping them navigate the initially turbulent times unless there are concrete mechanisms in place.
5. Countries such as China, India, multinational corporations, and financial institutions are engaged in large-scale organic fertilizer production. Thus, there is a possibility that the government might import organic fertilizer or micro-organisms and again create an unfair system where farmers do not benefit.
6. In the recent past, the government has given large tracts of land and water for companies and investors to expand large scale monoculture crops such as maize and sugarcane. These cultivations do require significant volumes of agrochemicals. A few months later a decision has been taken to ban the import of agrochemicals. The government must clearly tell the public how it plans to overcome these contradictions.

Despite these challenges, Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform believes that Sri Lanka can fulfill its agricultural needs through environmentally friendly agricultural practices. We say this based on domestic and international experience. There is a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge in the country about such practices. The government must make use of this knowledge and experience and come up with a plan to address short, medium, and long-term challenges. We believe that the approaches given below will help in that.

- Introduce a program to counter the pressure exerted by agrochemical companies, the media, so called intellectuals and advisers who will do their best to prevent the decision taken by your government from becoming a national policy.
- Zero Budget Natural Farming has been identified by certain Indian states as the most suitable farming system. For example, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, with the support of the Central Government, promote such practices greatly. Over the past 10 years, the above technologies have also been successfully applied in Sri Lanka. These experience and technical knowledge must be popularized across the country.
- Taking steps to promote indigenous cattle among the rural and estate communities to meet the local demand for liquid milk and to facilitate Zero Budget Natural Farming.
- With the imposition of economic sanctions on Cuba in the early 1960s, there was a concerted effort to transform existing systems to support environmentally friendly agricultural practices. Accordingly, a cooperative system for the production and distribution of inputs required for agriculture in the country was established. Sri Lanka has the experience necessary to such a revolutionary transformation. We just need a concerted effort.
- Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform has been promoting environmental friendly agricultural practices for the past 30 years and we have a wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge about it. During that time, we have worked with civil society organizations, government agencies, universities, and farmers, as well as with international businesses. Thus, we have a wealth of experience needed to make your initiative a success. There should be a way to develop a program to disseminate this experience.
- We have a team of experts on environmentally friendly agricultural practices. They work in farms, universities, research institutes, mass organizations covering all districts of Sri Lanka and they will be willing to support the government, if their assistance is sought in formulating and sustaining a long-term program.

Finally, we would like to say that all these endeavours need to be aimed at protecting medium and small-scale farmers and consumers. We must also end the practice of depending on markets to solve our problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the world of the danger of taking away food production from farmers and placing it with mega corporations. If the government carries this forth, a large group of powerful individuals will be unhappy, and they will do their best to apply pressure to change your decision. To ensure that your vision is successful, we must use your ideas and formulate a national agricultural policy that represents above stated ideas.

If given an opportunity Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform is ready to share all our experience on environmentally friendly (Ecological) agricultural practices.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,



Chintaka Rajapakse,
Moderator - MONLAR

Copies :-

1. Hon. Mahindananda Aluthgamage - Minister of Agriculture
2. Hon. Shasheendra Rajapaksa - State Minister - Paddy and Grains, Organic Food, Vegetables, Fruits, Chilies, Onion and Potato Cultivation Promotion, Seed Production and Advanced Technology Agriculture
3. Hon. Mohan Priyadarshana De Silva - State Minister of Production and Supply of Fertilizer and Regulation of Chemical Fertilizer and Insecticide Use
4. Mr. M.B. Rohana Pushpakumara - Secretary - Ministry of Agriculture
5. Dr. Anil Jasinghe - Secretary - Ministry of Environment
6. Dr. W. M. W. Weerakoon - Director general - Department of Agriculture
7. Mr. A. H. M. L. Abeyrathna - Commissioner general - Department of Agrarian Services
8. All media institutions