

Towards a relevant health Policy in Sri Lanka

Some thoughts towards a relevant health policy for Sri Lanka

Introduction

Health policies in any country should obviously aim at keeping people healthy. In a country such as Sri Lanka, where a big majority of the people cannot access the existing health services, since they are so poor and the health services have become unbearably costly such a health system is totally irrelevant. There is a need to have an approach to health that is radically different from what we have today, if we accept that the poor people should also be healthy.

Those who can and are willing to pay high prices for their health should have the freedom to do so. However, the National Health Policy in a country such as Sri Lanka should not look at only the rights and the freedoms of the rich. It should not in any way be the guiding philosophy and the principle, in formulating its health system. Therefore it is extremely important to look at the potential that we have in Sri Lanka to make health available free of cost.

This can be done in two ways. Even in countries where the average citizen is much richer than most of our people, there are arrangements made to ensure that no person, rich or poor, is deprived of the health services. This is done through various forms of health subsidies, public health schemes and social insurance schemes.

If we look at the type of social security schemes that we have introduced in the recent times and the functioning of programs of poverty alleviation, the actual functioning of the systems described as “free health” and “free education” and other subsidies and the way these have been cut down or weakened in the last two decades it is difficult to expect any such schemes to meet the requirements.

It is in this context that we have to look at the potential in the country to achieve health at practically no cost. What has been attempted below is to look at some of these potentials

The ancient knowledge in nature farming (ecological agriculture) is a science and a way of retaining the rich contribution that nature makes, free of charge in providing food, nutrition and good health without destroying the nature’s regenerative capacity, which was the source of life for human population for over 240,000 years when human kind survived only on what was given by nature, free.

Aurvedha (science of long life) is a three thousand year old system of knowledge in understanding the relationship between the body systems and the plants. It is a science, evolved through experimentation and application, that teaches us how the proper, balanced functioning of the body systems could avoid disease and ill health and also how nature’s free gifts such as medicinal plants could bring back this balanced functioning when disturbed.

Ancient religions and philosophies such as Buddhism was the understanding of “impermanence” and the foolishness of accumulation which is an absolute necessity if the modern world is to find a way of preventing total destruction of environment and restore the type of human relations that can prevent a tremendous social catastrophe. A combination of these sciences and philosophies with the tremendous advantages that Sri Lanka has in terms of ecological conditions, such as rain, sunshine and diversity of life forms (bio diversity). Could provide us with a very powerful strategy towards achieving health for not only the poor, who can not buy health, but also of the rich who often buy ill health and pay exorbitantly to cure themselves.

This could also be a powerful means of achieving health for all, in the world, heading for serious destruction through the present trend making health a commodity in the hands of profit makers and not wisdom in the hands of genuine healers

Small scale ecological agriculture as an approach to prevent ill health and diseases

As we know, some of the major causes of ill health and sicknesses are anemia among mothers, low birth weight and lack of sufficient nutrition and healthy food. Some other diseases caused by chemical pollution of water and food are becoming common. It is now increasingly recognized that artificial foods, fast foods have become major causes of diseases such as diabetes.

Rural poverty in Sri Lanka and poverty in plantation areas have been major problems that we have failed to solve. The present trends of small scale food producing agriculture being neglected by the main stream policies and becoming weak, have made this situation worse. War, displacements, and natural disasters such as droughts and floods, soil degradation and erosion, add to the situation of increasing poverty and hunger among such people. High and increasing cost of food is adding to urban poverty and malnutrition even among the urban poor.

Samurdhi Program figures say that 2.1 million families receive less than Rs. 1,500 per month. Figures given in the ‘Regaining Sri Lanka’ plans of 2004 say that 39% of our people receive less than Rs. 980 /month. There can be doubts about the accuracy of these figures. However, the fact is that a very large proportion of our population can not afford to buy their essential food, nutrition and health requirements in the market at prevailing prices.

Therefore, our organization and many other organizations working with poor rural agricultural communities have adopted an approach, that we describe as “ecological agriculture” or “ecological home gardening” as a way of people increasing the availability of food at affordable cost. In fact our experiences in many, many agricultural villages have shown that this approach can provide them with a considerable portion of their food and nutritional requirements at practically no cost. The ecological agriculture approaches that we are talking of are not just a few isolated experiences.

In a research that we, MONLAR, conducted in 2003 and 2004, we were able to list over 500 organizations in Sri Lanka from all geographical areas that were engaged in this type

of ecological agriculture. Some call it organic home gardening, some others use other names such as agro forestry, sustainable agriculture etc. We have briefly documented these and have initiated a program of training in ecological agriculture. Over 180 such organizations sent their activists and staff for these training programs that were conducted by some of the best experts in this subject.

Also there are such international experiences. We are able to provide details of such experiences and findings of researches that have been conducted by very recognized institutions

What are ecological home gardens / agro forests?

A family having access to a small home garden which can be as small as 1/8th of an acre, or as big as 1 to 2 acres, can easily engage themselves in a process of improving soil fertility, food production, food diversity (bio diversity) and improving the capacity of soil to absorb and retain water, which will also increase the possibility of improving the quality and quantity of water, including ground water.. Such a home garden should have as much diversity of plants and trees in a way that maximizes the absorption of sun light, by growing trees that reach different heights (canopies). They can be a combination of plants that are short term crops and multi year crops. This can be designed to include vegetables, pulses, fruits, yams, leafy vegetables, medicinal plants and plants for fertility, fodder, fuel wood and timber.

The net effect of such a cluster of home gardens or agro forests or a cluster of such villages or even a bigger region, would be

1. An abundance of food, a variety of healthy, nutritious food. Such a cluster has the possibility of producing a marketable excess. Say 200 home gardens with two mango trees in each will have a production of 400 mango trees, a few bananas or papaya trees in each of the home gardens could give the yield of several thousand plants in the area, a similar excess of other fruits, vegetables, yams is possible.
2. In such home gardens it is necessary to prevent erosion of top soil which can be achieved through a simple process of making low earthen ridges with certain types of grass grown to strengthen them and prevent them from getting washed off or adopting systems such as SALT (sloping agricultural land technology).
3. Recycling of organic matter should be maximized and avoiding use of chemical fertilizers, weedicides and insecticides, sufficient recycling of organic waste can keep the soil very fertile. It can improve the top soil and reduce erosion by keeping the top soil covered (mulched).
4. Maximum diversity of crops is a way of avoiding crop diseases and reducing pest damage and other losses such as those caused by lack of rain etc.

This is not very new to us in our village home gardens but, what we would like to add to this approach is the proposal that we promote this in all home gardens in all villages and in all agro- ecological zones, the dry zone, the wet zone and in the intermediary zone. This has been proved to be possible even in arid areas and drought prone areas such as Hambantota and Puttalam. It should work very well in the hill country. This then would be solutions to most of the problems that have implications on health and nutrition at national scale. As we know the plantation people are the worst victims of malnutrition, the war affected areas and those displaced by the war are becoming another important group that has joined this category.

We are presently engaged in studying the potential for promoting this in the plantation areas where there is a lot of “unproductive” land, not properly utilized by the plantation industry. Conversion of such land into such ecological agriculture has the potential in not only reducing malnutrition. It has tremendous potential to provide new livelihoods to the increasing numbers of unemployed youth. They can be mobilized with some basic training, and motivation to become a very effective force to be agents of this massive transformation of land and agriculture from the present approach of unsustainable and ecologically destructive agriculture in to a new approach that rebuilds the regenerative potential of land and natural resources. Our experience is that this initial training can be done within a month or so..

This can become a “new profession” for educated youth in the plantations and in all rural areas in Sri Lanka this may become a new attractive profession even for urban educated youth. It is not just the type of unattractive agriculture that is presently unaccepted by most of the young people. It is a new, challenging scientific profession and should be presented as such, with tremendous potential for improvement with practical training and continued academic education possibilities.

Last year (2005) 116,000 out of 250,000 young people, who sat for the Advanced level Exam qualified to enter universities, but the universities did not have capacity to absorb more than 16,000. Thus, a hundred thousand young people out of the most intelligent, selected youth were left out. They can be easily trained with very little resources and within a very short period to become a new group of “professionals” to propagate ecological agriculture in the country. In fact the “increased productivity” from this approach can easily provide them with a very attractive remuneration, without the need of the Government allocating large sums of money to pay them a salary. They are very capable of making a valuable contribution to the whole development process in the country. If this is to be achieved it should be supported with a national policy framework, which should be worked out together through collaboration between the Ministries of health, agriculture, plantations, land, Irrigation and water resources, food, and trade.

Rebuilding of the “regenerative capacity of land and environment”

The whole process and strategy can be summarized as one aiming at the recovery and rebuilding of the “regenerative capacity of land and environment”.

In this relation some of the potentials that we have in utilizing nature's contribution for better health, needs to be looked upon. The system of indigenous medicine, particularly the vary valuable historical knowledge that we have had for over 3,000 years, particularly the knowledge of the medicinal and nutritional qualities of plants, the herbs should be seen as a tremendous strength for the poor, the rural and the urban poor to retain their health and nutrition, to prevent and cure diseases at affordable cost. The market as it is working today has allowed the private businesses to set any price to the medicines that they sell. Patenting of medicines has allowed the manufacturers and dealers in medicines and drugs to do this as they wish, with hardly any social controls. Therefore, It is essential to assist the poor who are pushed out of finding their health needs in the market to meet their requirements out side the market, to the maximum possible degree. We have the potential to do this. This knowledge is not yet dead and the bio diversity necessary is still surviving in the country. Ordinary people and their specialists, who are the ayurvedic physicians are the rightful owners of this wealth of knowledge. The efforts made by big businesses to plunder this valuable knowledge , making use of the possibilities granted to them by various international agreements such as GATT and WTO should be prevented.

Some of the questions that arise in considering this approach are dealt with below:

Is this workable in all parts of Sri Lanka?

Ecological agriculture is workable in all parts of Sri Lanka. When it is done in small plots conditions necessary can be created by changing the microenvironment. Our studies have shown that this approach can be adopted in all agro ecological zones with necessary variations to suit the particular agro ecological zones. Internationally carried out studies have shown that this approach is now increasingly adopted in Asia, Africa and Latin America too. When Cuba faced difficulties of using machinery and expensive agrochemicals, the Government adopted a policy of introducing small scale ecological agriculture and what is named bio-dynamic agriculture and it has succeeded in eliminating hunger to a great extent.

How does this answer the problem of land fragmentation? Land plots becoming too small to be economically viable?

The land ownership pattern in Sri Lanka has a special feature compared to many other countries. It is often said that the size of land plots owned or possessed by the rural peasants is too small to be economically viable and that they are getting smaller and smaller through a rapid process of fragmentation. What is meant is that these land plots are too small to provide enough income to a family. Therefore, it is proposed by the WB that a free land market should be created so that these small plots get sold to bigger operators who can undertake more economically viable agriculture. This is based on the assumption that each of the small holders are individual operators using their plot as a separate unit. But in the proposed approach these house holds do not operate as completely separate units. They work in clusters so that the unit of production becomes a cluster of households or cluster of villages. In this approach the small holding has considerable comparative advantage over the large scale agriculture. Its possible to give

better attention and requires practically no external inputs. Patterns and technologies developed in countries with large scale industrial agriculture are often being applied in Sri Lanka and the advantages in small scale farming are ignored. Large scale monocrop commercial agriculture is very different. Overall productivity in this form of multicrop farming is obviously much higher as explained.

Can it meet the food requirements of the country? What about other food requirements such as rice that does not grow in highland home gardens?

There are proven methods of low cost rice farming without the use of external chemical inputs. These methods such as integrated pest management (IPM), Nawa Kekulama and System of Rice Intensification (SRI system) have proved that the cost of production of rice could be reduced by about 50%. These approaches have not yet been given sufficient attention and the control of agrochemical companies over the agricultural department's work, agricultural education and propaganda through media have become big obstacle. Therefore it is necessary to undertake research and studies about these alternatives. This has become a rapidly growing trend in many other countries and there are enough experiences that provide us sufficient opportunities for such research and studies.

How do people meet their other money requirements?

Food alone is not enough, who do people meet the other financial requirements? This is a question often raised by those who question the validity of this approach. However, it is known that most of the poor people spend as much as 80 % of their incomes on essential food. Even with this they do not meet their food needs sufficiently. Therefore if they have the possibility of meeting their food requirements at a considerably lower cost, they will have considerable savings for other needs. This approach reduces not only their food needs but also reduces other important costs such as cost of health. As already explained the improved overall productivity will generate a marketable excess.

While we emphasize the necessity of meeting the immediate food and nutritional needs of the people, before exporting, this approach has the potential of making Sri Lanka a country that produces an abundance of organic food. The demand for organic food is growing rapidly in the world. Although a marketable excess has to be produced if we work towards earning financial incomes, this need not mean that we have to convert the small scale, multi crop farming into large scale, monocultural, commercial farming owned by a fewer number of rich farmers or companies. What is necessary is to organize this form of clustering of a large number of small scale home gardens in to some form of cooperative marketing. Such cooperative farming arrangements could be adopted not only in marketing, but also in organizing the farming activities too. Other activities of value addition such as processing, packaging and industries related to such activities can be incorporated.

If we look at the other efforts of reducing poverty and generating incomes, particularly for rural poor, attempted for nearly three decades, the only approaches that have had some success are the export oriented garment industries and migrant workers to Middle

East countries. Both these have serious disadvantages and limited capacity. The expectation that there would be a rapid growth of economy, through exports with large inflow of foreign investments have not succeeded.

What about the urban needs?

Increased food production at low cost in rural areas will benefit the urban poor too. Better livelihood opportunities in rural areas will reduce the need for rural to urban migration of the poor displaced due to lack of opportunities

What is the health component in this approach? How much of the health expenditures can be reduced?

What we have given is only a brief indication of the ways in which some major health problems of the poor can be solved, by maximizing the nature's potential to meet the health needs of people. A more accurate assessment could be made by studying the possible reduction of diseases caused by Malnutrition, anemia through such increase of food availability and also the possible reduction of other diseases caused by chemical pollution of water and food etc. It could also include the potential of improving health using the knowledge of indigenous (ayurvedic) medicine and availability of medicinal plants and plants of food and nutritional value.

What about employment generation in the country? All people can not become farmers

This does not suggest that farming is the only area where livelihoods could be provided. Also it does not say that all people should become farmers by profession. What it suggests is that the entire population becoming conscious of the way in which revival of nature's potential to "regenerate itself" and there by contributing to this process of revival would get the country in the right direction in poverty eradication and achieving a much healthier life. We have already described the tremendous potential that we have in creating a new profession for educated youth in being agents of this transformation.

Will the youth of today accept this proposal?

It is clear that a majority of the youth today will not be happy to accept "farming" as it is now, as their livelihood. But what is proposed for youth is a scientific profession of advising and guiding the people of the country, beginning with rural and plantation communities to revive the regenerative potential of land and natural resources in order to have better food security, nutrition, overcome poverty and remove disease from society and from nature's resources. In this sense it has a similarity to the profession of a medical doctor. A doctor treats a human person who is sick using his knowledge about the functioning of the body systems and the way medicines react on the human body. This profession is similar since its objective is to treat earth and natural resources to recover from the diverse forms of sicknesses affecting the earth, the soil, the plants and

water. It involves advising people to engage in “healing the earth”. Therefore, it’s a challenging profession in which they could fully utilize their intellectual capacities, to perform a great service to society and therefore would be a respected profession. It is a subject area in which there is tremendous potential for improvement of knowledge and professionalism. It could also become a highly remunerative form of livelihood.

Are we proposing a return to ancient history, to a primitive age? Are we meeting the needs of a 21st Century modern society, a modern world?

What is proposed has to be understood not as a way of going back in history. It is a way of facing the most modern challenges facing the whole world. The type of agriculture and land use proposed is based on the latest findings in the field of agriculture, ecology and environmental studies. It can be described as the agriculture of the 21st century. What is presently described as modern scientific agriculture is in fact not modern. It is something that has proved to have failed to solve most of the problems of modern and future society

This approach is in a way an answer to some of the global issues such as climate change, loss of bio diversity and global trends of disappearance of small scale farming that provides livelihoods to about half the population of the world. The major problems facing the world that were taken up at UN Global summits during the last decade were, the environmental crisis taken up at the Earth Summit in 1992, issues of world hunger taken up at the World Food Summit in 1996 and 2006.

Issue of poverty taken up at the UN Social Summit in 1995. It addresses one of the most serious issues that the world is grappling with today. This is the problem of sustainability. The approach that we have discussed so far is the best possible answer to ecological, economic and social sustainability.

We hope that the proposed Forum for dialogue on health Policy would provide opportunities to take these ideas for wider discussion at some point in the future.

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