



# BRIEF COMMENTARY

## CONFLICTS IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR IN SRI LANKA

### Project Title:

*“Creating civic space to promote informed advocacy and social cohesion in Sri Lanka”*

### **Livelihood Rights: Agriculture Issues**

**Conflict Triggers/Conflicting Situations identified by Peacebuilders**

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CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES

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மாற்றுக் கொள்கைகளுக்கான நிலையம்

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka has suffered the consequences of conflict and violence for decades. Additionally, and unfortunately, in spite of such experiences over many years with the effects of irreparable damage to social cohesion and harmony, steps preventing or countering conflict triggers have remained neglected and ignored. This is mainly because the connotation of 'Conflict', in the country context, has mostly been attributed only to the ethnic issue, and thus a range of other causes or triggers of conflict have inevitably been overlooked.

Whether due to ethnic tension or otherwise, any incompatibility of, including but not limited to, needs, ideas, aspirations, interests and purposes vary in different segments of society, resulting in a greater potential to trigger conflicting situations. Such a state of affairs always leads to social unrest, tensions and, at times, devastating loss of property and lives. Therefore, the impact of conflict, in its broader sense, can undoubtedly be on the social, economic and political spheres of individuals, institutions and the broader governance landscape of the country. Thus the more space there is for conflict triggers in society, the higher the risks of detrimental effects on social cohesion, human well-being and the socio-economic and political stability of the country.

Against this backdrop, this commentary provides a non-exhaustive analysis of the 'Conflict Triggers', their prevalence based on a rapid fact-finding mission and potential consequences in the Agriculture sector in Sri Lanka. This analysis is essentially built upon evidence-based information on existing and emerging conflict triggers, gathered from various regions of the country and substantiated by a technical synthesis of problems and conflict dynamics in the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka.

## Chapter 1

# Synthesis Report on Agrarian Problems and Conflict Dynamics in Sri Lanka

**Prof. Kalinga Tudor Silva**

These reports by peace builders located in various parts of Sri Lanka highlight the manner in which agrarian problems have become entailed with conflict dynamics in the country. Agrarian problems refer to problems of small holder agriculture arising from low productivity, low income, crop failures, indebtedness and landlessness and the like. These problems may or may not contribute to social conflict depending on how widespread these problems are, the extent to which they are articulated by the victims of these problems and their leaders and the extent to which and the manner in which they are attributed to the actions of perceived rivals of small farmers such as landlords, officials, rulers, and middlemen that refer to social layers above the small farmers. In the social science literature the cross cutting voluntaristic social ties like patron client relations between individual small farmers and selected persons among those above them are generally understood as a buffer against class mobilization and the resulting class conflict in agrarian societies (Scott 1976, 1985). These defensive mechanisms, however, breakdown at times of social upheavals resulting from events such as forced appropriation of peasant landholdings, imposition of unjustified taxes by the ruling classes and changes in terms of trade between small farmers and middlemen harming the interests of the former. Terms such as agrarian distress and agrarian unrest have been invented by the analysts to characterize situations where agrarian problems become acute grievances leading to outcomes like farmer suicides directed against themselves or farmer uprisings directed against the ruling classes.

The brief field reports presented by selected peace builders have not been influenced or guided by such a broad analytical framework. However, they provide a useful story from the angle of creating civic space and promoting informed advocacy for the purpose of advancing social cohesion in Sri Lanka. The narrative they provide is one that indicates that unresolved and escalating agrarian problems must be understood and assessed in their social, economic, and environmental context in order to contain conflict dynamics in rural Sri Lanka. This is certainly a valid point considering that grand narratives such as ethnic conflict, and majority-minority tension have often served to hide how conflicts over limited resources like land, water and credit facilities are at the heart of wider social conflicts understood in ethnic, class and other identity terms including caste. In terms of conflict dynamics, the resource conflicts get a value addition when transformed into ethnic conflicts involving various other stakeholders besides those directly affected by the resource scarcity, such as politicians, nationalist intellectuals and media personnel. This also makes it difficult to arrive at an accurate analysis of the root causes of the problems and potential remedies for addressing them.

Reading through these reports from the field, one can identify four main current or potential conflict triggers in the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka.

### **1. Conflicts over access to natural resources**

Land being the primary factor of production in agriculture, access to land remains a major driver of politics in rural Sri Lanka. These field reports point out that land resources available for farming have been progressively reduced during and after the war due to a number of factors. One is the widespread establishment of high

security zones and military camps on crown land and land acquired from civilians in Northern and Eastern Provinces. Another is declaration of forest and wildlife reserves on land publicly or privately used by small farmers for purposes such as chena cultivation, pasture of animals and collection and use of non-timber forest products. Yet another is land grabbing by those with political or military influence or those with the backing of such power holders in ways that disadvantaged some of the original users of the relevant categories of crown land. In this context small farmers in parts of the former war zone as well as those in so-called border areas have lost their access to land undermining their established livelihoods and triggering their outmigration to other areas in some instances.

Another factor contributing to agrarian distress during the past several decades is the near collapse of the tank system of irrigation, that was the foundation of the hydraulic civilization of ancient origin. This system has eroded due to poor maintenance, and progressive silting of the reservoirs and water ways due to human action as well as due to non-maintenance over many decades. At least three reports by peace builders indicate politically-motivated haphazard efforts by the state agencies to renovate tanks have sometimes aggravated the situation also producing new forms of tension in dry zone agricultural communities. Charges of corruption are often levelled against those involved in these problematic efforts at tank rehabilitation.

These reports indicate that conflicts over natural resources have been exacerbated due to a combination of natural factors and problematic interventions by the state largely motivated by the self-interest of political actors.

## **2. Environmental conflict drivers**

Many of the reports deal with environmental drivers of agrarian problems. They include human-elephant conflict, crop damage by a range of wild animals including rillavas (macaques), wild boar, dandu lenas, and peacocks and problems relating to absence of common pastureland for livestock and crop damage by stray cattle. Changes in rainfall pattern in many areas may or may not be attributed to long-term impact of global warming. These factors have contributed to human wildlife conflicts, conflicts between farmer groups and state authorities responsible for wild life protection and forest conservation as well as conflicts between different groups of civilians. The burgeoning conflicts between cattle owners and farmer groups in places like Batticaloa and Vavuniya districts reported by several researchers not included in this collection point to the fact that environmental issues can sometimes be transformed into conflicts between different groups of people (e.g. Husbullah and Geiser 2021).

## **3. Market induced agrarian problems.**

The failure of small farmers to get a reasonable price for their produce that covers their costs and assure them a reasonable net income has been a chronic problem faced by farmers of different crops. As noted in many reports reviewed, the farmers often go into heavy debt and mortgage of their limited assets in order to cover the cost of production. The market failures at the time of harvesting for produce such as potatoes, onions and chilly may be partly due to wrong state policies such as import the same produce at cheaper prices at the time local producers supply their produce to the market. This in turn has resulted in disputes between farmers and middlemen as well as tension between farmers and state authorities. The lack of coordination between different state agencies (e.g. Department of Agriculture and Ministry of Trade) has directly or indirectly contributed to this phenomenon of market-induced farmer problems.

## 4. State policies and agrarian problems

As already noted in the previous sections, wrong state policies have contributed to agrarian problems in many different ways. They cover land policies, environmental policies, trade policies and development policies. Not consultative nature of state policy making and its impact on farming reached a climax with the fertilizer and agrochemical ban introduced in 2022. Many peace builder reports have how this policy formulated with no consultation whatsoever with farmers or technical experts in the different domains led to a near collapse of rural agriculture and a sort of agrarian distress which partially contributed to social and political protests in 2022.

## Conclusions

Several tentative conclusions can be drawn from the findings of these reports.

1. The agricultural sector in Sri Lanka is full of conflict triggers emanating from competition over natural resources, environmental factors, market dynamics and problematic state policies. Addressing these problems in an effective manner is important from the angle of agricultural development as well as social harmony.
2. Ex parte decision making on the part of the state agencies without consultation with the relevant stakeholders including farmers in matters such as development, land acquisition and distribution, environmental conservation and imports must be identified as an important contributor to conflict dynamics in the country.
3. There is a tendency to reduce all problems including agrarian problems to ethnic politics in the light of political and ideological developments in the country. This, however, is seriously problematic as ethnic issues are often entangled with various other issues such as environmental problems, resource constraints, efficiency issues in the public sector and the need to rebuild trust in the state machinery.
4. Agrarian problems in Sri Lanka are fast reaching crisis proportions in the former war zone as well as elsewhere in Sri Lanka and addressing them in an effective and sustainable manner is essential for both development and peace building in Sri Lanka.

## References

- Hasbullah, S.H. & Geiser, U. Negotiating Access to Land in Eastern Sri Lanka. Colombo: ICES, 2021.
- Scott, James C.. The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976
- Scott, James C.. Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

## Chapter 2

### Introduction

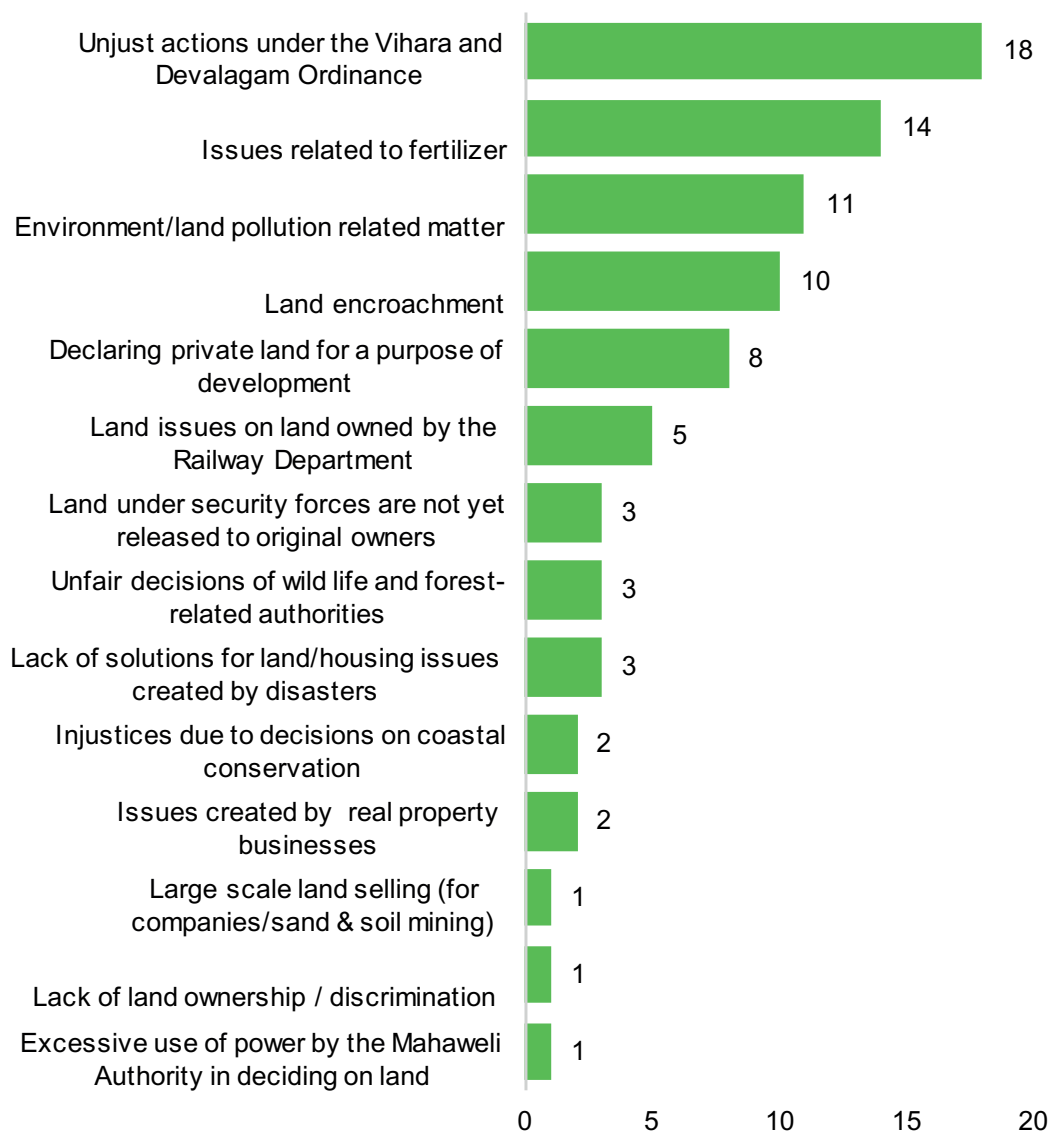
This summary analysis is based on data shared by a group of peacebuilders with improved capacity to ensure early identification of conflict triggers with regard to socio-economic and political issues. In this brief analysis, key issues connected to conflicting situations, parties involved, type of social tensions and key conflict triggers have been identified by the peacebuilders across the country in short period using a structured questionnaire. Accordingly, this note is a non-exhaustive analysis of the existing conflicting situations in the agriculture sector and a brief snapshot of potential incidents that may adversely affect the social cohesion, if unaddressed by relevant mandated authorities. The peacebuilders across the country use these findings to create a sub-national level advocacy dialogues and act as a crisis response mechanism.

### **Summary Situation Analysis – Agriculture Issues (Based on data received from Peacebuilders)**

Description	Key Findings
Agriculture related main issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unjust actions under the Vihara and Devalagam Ordinance</li> <li>2. Issues related to fertilizer</li> <li>3. Environment/land pollution related matters</li> <li>4. Land encroachment</li> <li>5. Declaring private land for a purpose of development</li> <li>6. Land issues on land owned by the Railway Department</li> <li>7. Land under security forces are not yet released to original owners in ware affected areas</li> </ol>
Key hotspots of Agriculture issues	Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Polonnaruwa and Trincomalee
Key parties involved in the conflicting situation - by Ethnicity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sinhala Vs. Tamil</li> <li>2. Sinhala Vs. Sinhala</li> </ol>
Key parties involved in the conflicting situation - by Religion	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buddhist Vs. Hindu</li> <li>2. Buddhist Vs. Buddhist</li> </ol>
Key parties involved in the conflicting situation - by Third party	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Domestic companies/local businessmen</li> <li>2. Close affiliates/supporters of politicians Smugglers</li> <li>3. Smugglers</li> </ol>
Key parties involved in the conflicting situation - by Security forces	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Army</li> </ol>
Main social tensions created due to the issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clashes between/among groups</li> <li>2. Attacks on protesters by security forces/police</li> </ol>

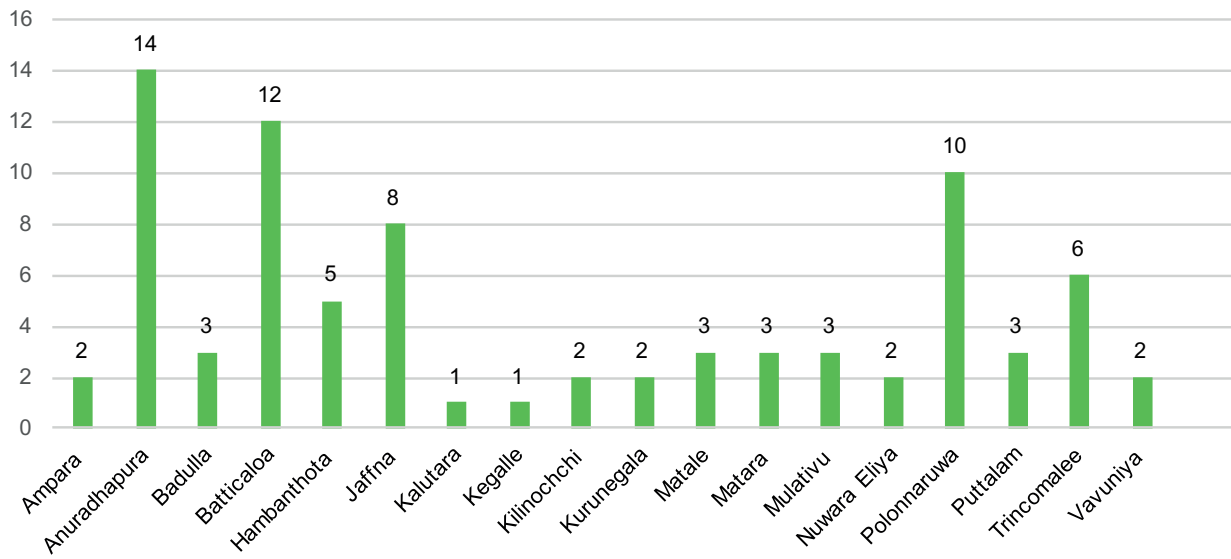
Involvement of different actors in the issue related to the conflicting situation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local level politicians</li> <li>2. Security forces</li> <li>3. National level politicians</li> <li>4. Provincial level politicians</li> </ol>
Main conflict triggers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Unjust administrative decisions</li> <li>2. Hate speech by various individuals/stakeholders</li> <li>3. Interferences/conduct of security forces</li> <li>4. Disinformation/Misinformation circulated by social media</li> </ol>

**Figure 1:** Type of key issues related to Agriculture (Total number cases - 82)

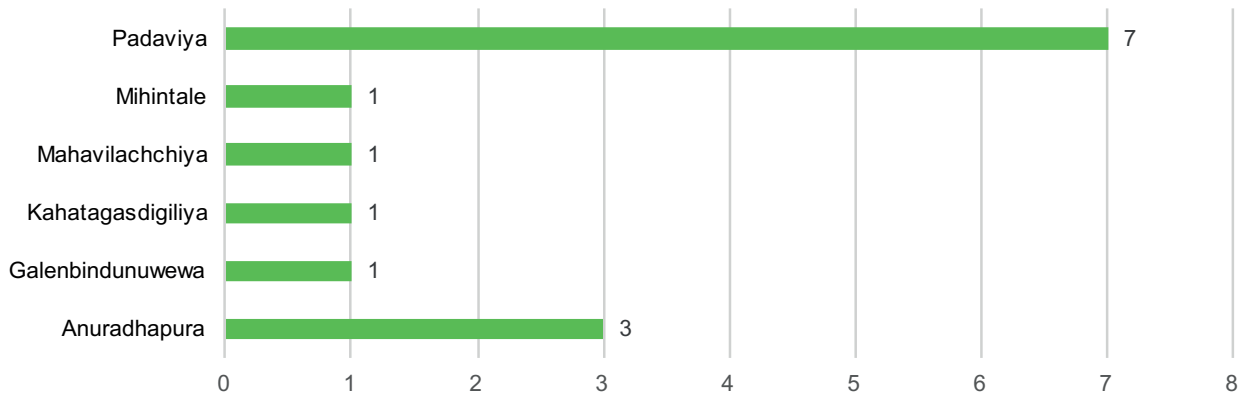




**Figure 2:** Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture - By District



**Figure 3:** Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Anuradhapura District - By Specific Location



**Table 1:**

Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Batticaloa District - By Specific Location

Specific Location – Batticaloa District	No. of Cases
Chtakkane	1
Dhimbulagala	1
Karainagar	1
Koralai Pattu Centrel	1
Koralai pattu East	1
Koralai pattu North	1
Manmunai North	1
Manmunai West	1
Manmunaipattu	1
porathiv patu	1
Thellipalai	1
Valaichchenai	1

**Table 2:** *Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Hambantota District - By Specific Location*

Specific Location – Hambantota District	No. of Cases
Agunukolapelessa	1
Ambalangoda	1
Hambantota	1
Lunugamvehera	1
Sooriyawewa	1

**Table 3:** *Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Jaffna District - By Specific Location*

Specific Location – Jaffna District	No. of Cases
Chavakachcheri	2
Jaffna	1
Karainagar	1
Thellipalai	2
Wakkagama North	1
welanai	1

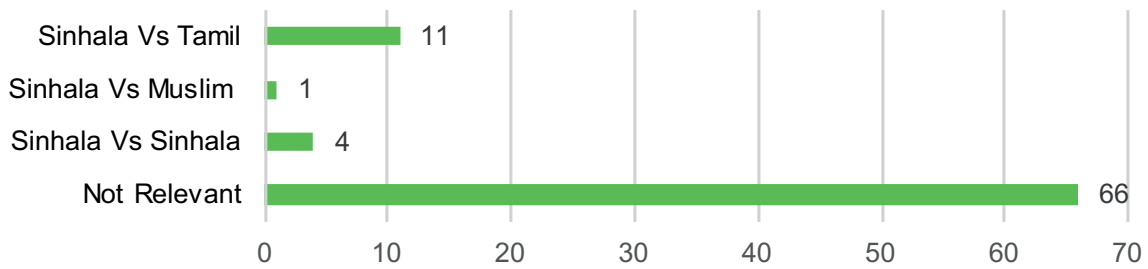
**Table 4:** *Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Polonnaruwa District - By Specific Location*

Specific Location – Polonnaruwa District	No. of Cases
Dimbulagala	1
Elahera	1
Giritale	3
Hingurakgoda	1
Hingurangoda	1
Medhagiriya	2
Melsiripura	1

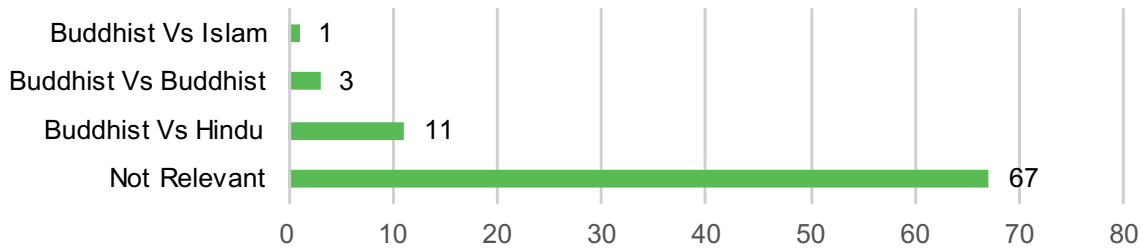
**Table 5:** *Identified Key issues of Conflicting Situations on Agriculture in Trincomalee District - By Specific Location*

Specific Location – Trincomalee District	No. of Cases
Kanthale	2
Thambalagamuwa	2
Trincomalee	2

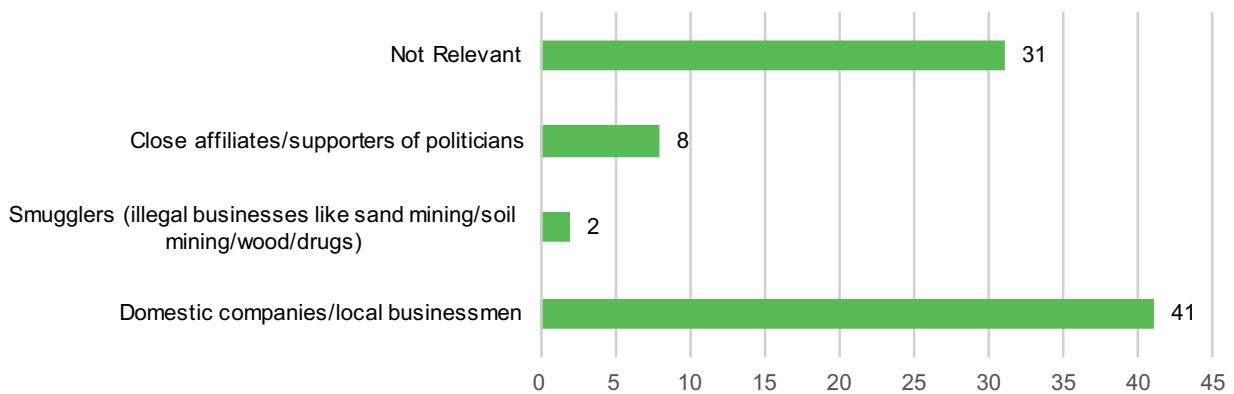
**Figure 4:** Parties involved in the issue connected to conflicting situation – by Ethnicity



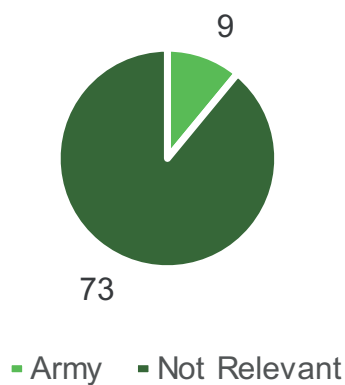
**Figure 5:** Parties involved in the issue connected to conflicting situation – by Religion



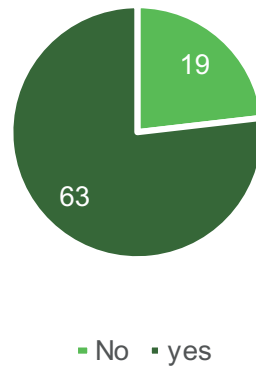
**Figure 6:** Parties involved in the issue connected to conflicting situation – by Other Parties



**Figure 7:** Parties involved in the issue connected to conflicting situation – by Security Forces



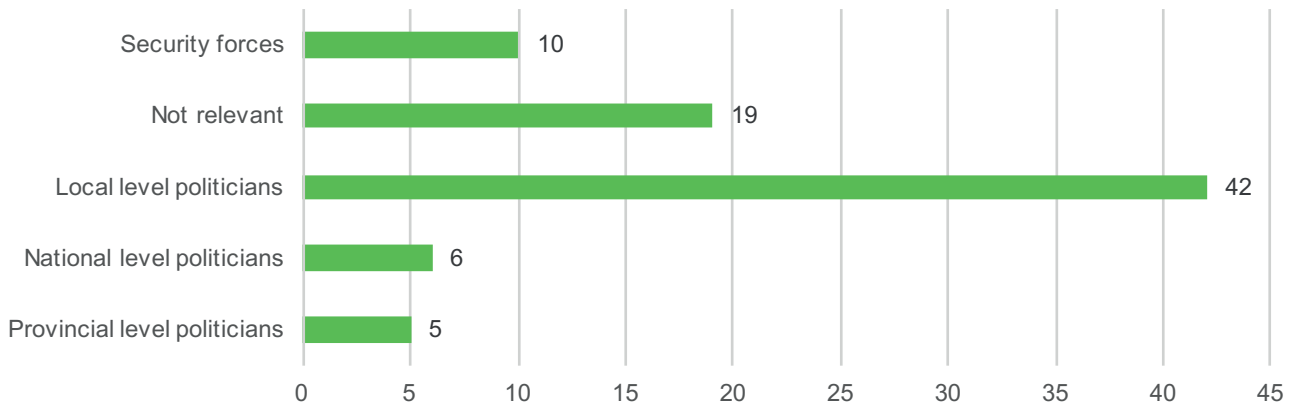
**Figure 8:** *Involvement of government agencies in causing/perpetuating the issue related to the conflict situation?*



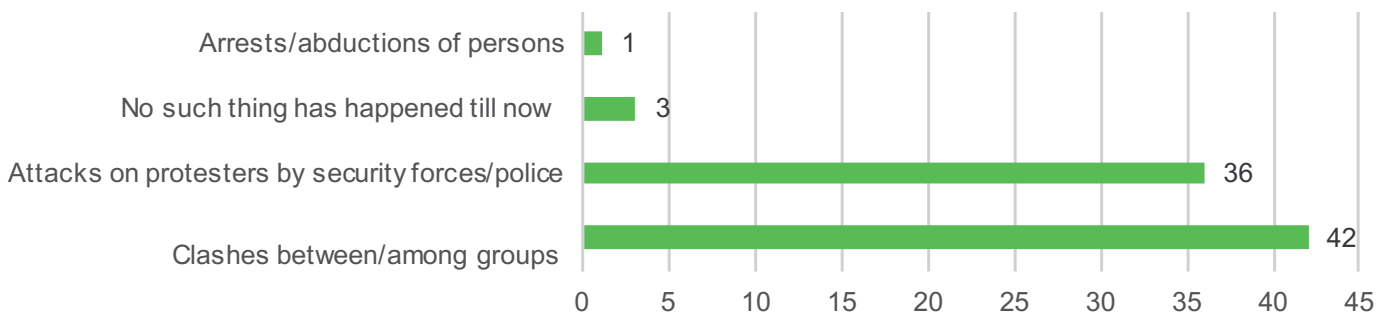
**Table 6:** *Type of social tensions created due to the conflicting situation*

Type of government agencies in causing/perpetuating the issue related to the conflicting situation	No. of Cases
Army / Air Force	2
Department of Agrarian Development	6
Department of Agrarian Development /Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka	3
Department of Agriculture	9
Department of Agriculture / Department of Agriculture	3
Department of Agriculture /Police	1
Department of Wildlife conservation	7
District Secretariat / Department of Agricultural Services / Department of Agriculture	1
District Secretariat / Divisional Secretariat	1
District Secretariat / Ministry of Agriculture	1
Divisional Secretariat	5
Irrigation Department	3
Local Government Institutions	2
Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka	1
Ministry of Agriculture	3
Ministry of Energy/ Electricity Board	1
Paddy Marketing Board Head Office	5
Paddy Marketing Board Office	9
Police	1
Urban Development Authority/Irrigation Department	1
Department of Wildlife Conservation	1

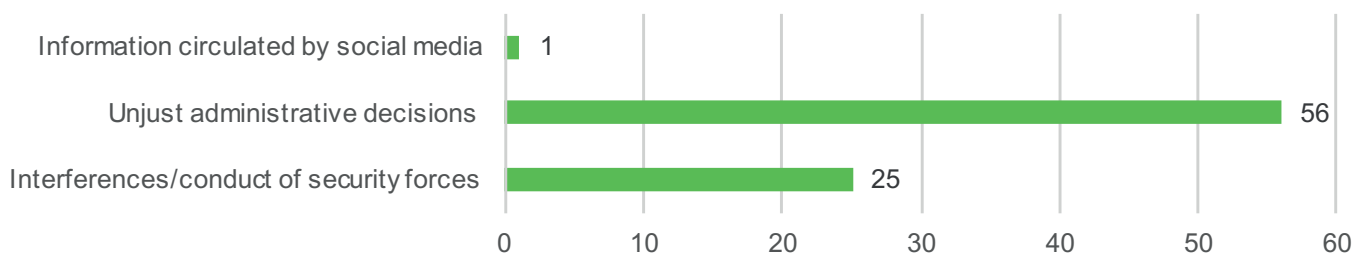
**Figure 9:** *Involvement of different actors in the issue related to the conflicting situation*



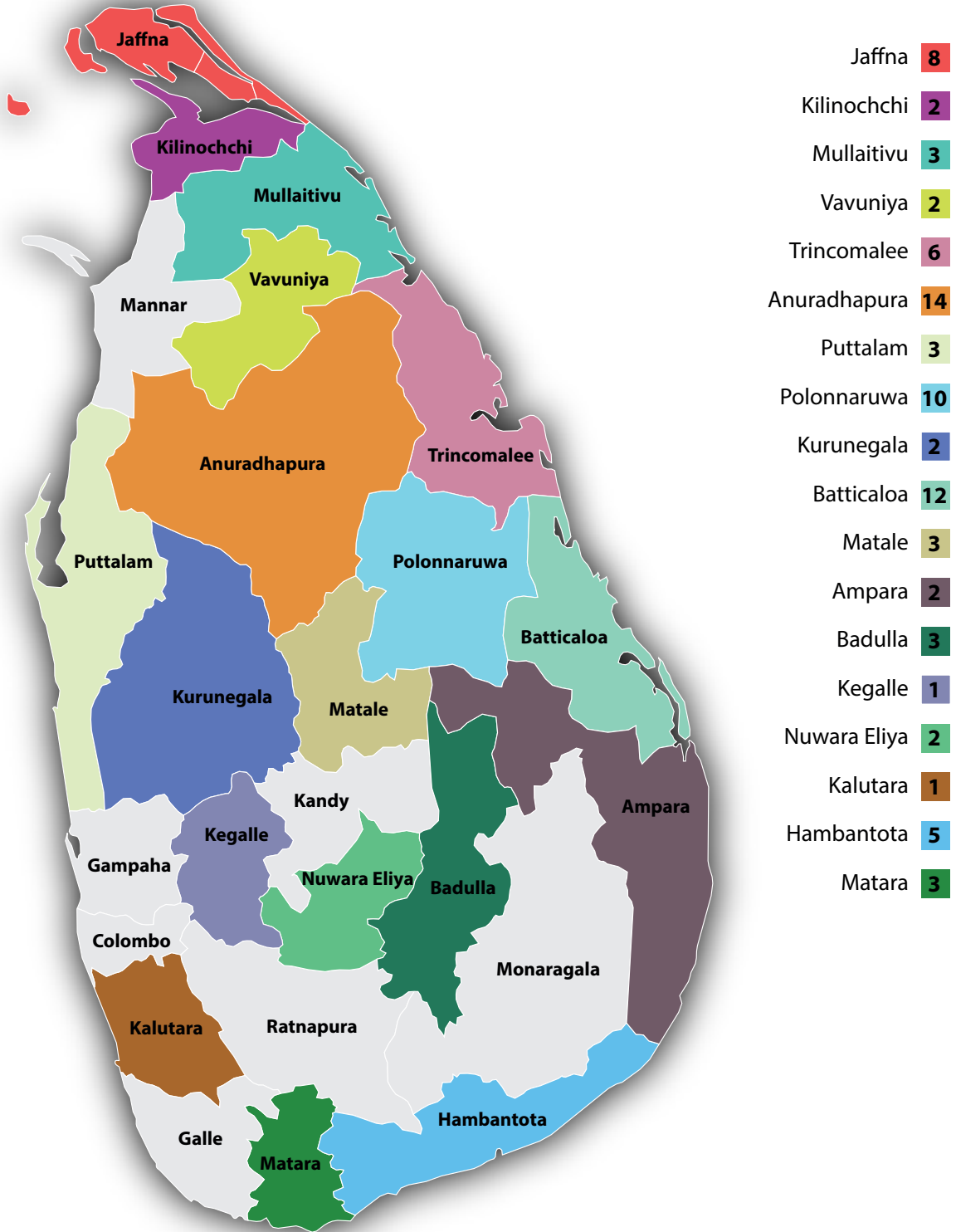
**Figure 10:** *Type of social tensions created due to the conflicting situation*



**Figure 11:** *Main Conflict Triggers caused escalations of social tensions*



*Identified key conflicting situations in the Agriculture Sector in Sri Lanka – June 2023*



## Chapter 3

# Towards a conflict free National Agricultural Development Plan for Sri Lanka

Having considered the data and information shared by peacebuilders whose role was to ensure early identification of ‘conflict triggers’ which could cause social tensions, if unaddressed, and adversely affect the social cohesion of both inter and intra communities. Additionally, it is also expected to create a better civic space and capacitate citizens to be well-informed with evidence based information and data on potential conflict triggers and advocate with alternative crisis response approaches to promote social cohesion.

In this context, in order to establish a conflict free national agricultural development plan, the missing aspect among a range of inconsistent policies and strategies, this commentary presents below key alternative opportunities derived from the analysis of evidence based information gathered by peacebuilders.

- ➔ Appointing an ‘Independent Expert Committee’ to review various policy positions, laws, strategies and regulations relevant to the agricultural sector and identify overlaps, inconsistencies and coordination issues. Such an expert committee should consult representatives of all key concerned state institutions and representatives of people engaged in the agriculture sector in its broader sense.
- ➔ Reviewing the existing ‘agricultural model’ in the country, evaluating the socio-economic impact of short-sighted public policies introduced repeatedly and designing a long term agricultural development modality with broader consultation of all concerned stakeholders, essentially inclusive of farmers and producers who are the driving force of the sector.
- ➔ Reviewing, updating and revising the existing national and provincial level policies and strategies designed for the development of the agriculture sector and ensure logical, pragmatic, cohesive and implementable long term policy framework. Such all-inclusive, validated by concerned parties, formally endorsed and well-resourced policy framework can provide guidance for responding to emerging developments and coordinate actions to create an efficient, diversified, sustainable, market-oriented, inclusive and conflict free agriculture sector.
- ➔ A National Agriculture Development Action Plan and at the same time Provincial Agriculture Development Action Plans for each province to be designed as a devolved subject. The action plan should essentially be designed based on a constructive consultation process with stakeholders including farming communities and consumers.
- ➔ The socio-economic impact at household to national level of the crop damage by animals should be assessed and short, medium and long term strategic measures provided to face the emerging and potential future challenges and minimise likely conflict triggers.
- ➔ Land rights, land ownership issues, acquired lands not returned to original owners, land degradation, unauthorised land distribution, land fragmentation, substandard use of land possessed by various institutions governed under the Ministry of Agriculture and other matters incidental to land use policy, should be carefully reviewed and addressed to ensure mitigating existing conflict triggers regarding land rights.

- Reviewing the existing weak safety nets, including insurance systems, pension schemes and moratorium plans, to protect agricultural workers, farmers, smallholders and producers in the agriculture sector and making long term programs to strengthen institutions of farmers including robust safety nets as an integral aspect of the proposed National Agriculture Development Action Plan. Collective political and administrative commitment is essential to ensure that such a long term plan is implemented with greater consistency regardless of regime changes.
- Institutional capacity of farmer organisations, producer groups, collectives of women engaged in the agricultural sector and other groups in the value chain should be reorganised and strengthened to ensure their meaningful participation in the processes of policy formulation and sector and sub-sectoral planning.
- The lack of compliance with a range of policy positions or strategic stances already designed for the development of the agricultural sector and the weak enforcement of related laws, rules and regulations need to be addressed.
- Mandated authorities should design and implement harmonised policy and program plans to address the lack of robust strategies at both national and provincial levels on utilisation of natural resources, especially water, in various agricultural sub-sectors threatening to the environment and sustainability of agricultural systems.
- Mandated institutions, particularly under the preview of the Department of Agriculture, should immediately address the high level of food insecurity owing to low productivity due to high production cost, high cost and scarcity of necessary fertiliser, inadequate knowledge and coping strategies to be resilient to various shocks, and crop destruction by animals.
- All institutions mandated to conduct research on a range of sub-sectors of agriculture should address the challenges of highly incoherent Agricultural Research and its pragmatic application, lack of transformation of agricultural research into realistic actions, lack of research and policy advisory recommendations on emerging conflict triggers such as crop damage done by animals and lack of inclusiveness of the social impact of agriculture research.
- Authorities at national and provincial levels of the agriculture sector need to address a complicated and large number of institutions with poor inter-departmental and institutional coordination across institutions mandated to work on the development of agriculture. The consequences of institutional disconnect on the overwhelming majority of stakeholders, mainly including farmers, producers, workers, small holders and others of the respective value chains in the agriculture sector and its sub-sectors should be assessed to find meaningful solutions including greater institutional harmonisation.
- Lack of credit facilities to farmers and producers, particularly women involved in agriculture, resulting in them getting trapped in unauthorised money lending schemes including microfinance loans. Thus, farmers tend to mortgage their farmer lands and other movable property on the one hand to secure capital for investing in agriculture while on the other hand, they are compelled more often than not to use the funds borrowed for their survival which exacerbate their indebtedness and dependency. The adverse impact of farmers' indebtedness at various levels ranging from household to rural, local, provincial and national economic levels should be assessed periodically and findings of such assessments should be translated to actions and integrated into policy implementation.



- ➔ Mandated authorities should address discrimination, unjust decision making, arbitrary implementation of regulations, negligence, corruption, bureaucracy and unaccountable administration by government officials. All such concerns essentially lead to creating conflicting situations and social tensions within the agriculture sector eventually affecting the sectoral progression and social cohesion.
- ➔ Mandated authorities, in collaboration with higher educational and vocational training institutions, should essentially examine the extent to which the existing and emerging issues and conflict triggers in the agriculture sector discourage youth involvement in the sector. Accordingly, government policies and programs should reflect adequate innovation, ability to use of technology in combination with indigenous scientific knowledge, stability to enter into the sector as a viable and sustainable vocation and political will and commitment to work on national policies rather than erratic politically motivated policies to attract young men and women to the agriculture sector.



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