

Vulnerability of Commercial Scale Agriculture Farmers to Marketing Aspects during Covid-19: A Case Study of Selected Districts in Sri Lanka

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COVID-19 does not only impact public health, but also it triggered a major economic recession which negatively influenced all the sectors of the economy. The agricultural sector and agricultural markets are no exception. Although agricultural activities are supposed to be smoothly continued, COVID-19 containment measures cause a huge impact on food production and distribution in Sri Lanka. Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) including commercial scale farmers were among the most affected group. This study was designed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the marketing aspects of commercial farmers and their coping strategies. Forty agribusiness entrepreneurial farmers in *Ratnapura, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya* and *Badulla* Districts were selected by snowball sampling technique. Telephone and online questionnaire surveys were conducted to gather primary data. Data analysis was done using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. According to the results, respondents largely grow five types of vegetables: Salad cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*) (70%), Bell-pepper (*Capsicum annuum*) (32.5%), Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) (45%), Lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*) (13%) and Chilli (*Capsicum annuum* 'Serrano') (2.6%). The main markets for their produce were hotels (56%), nearby restaurants (24%), dedicated economic trade centers (17%) and retails (3%). Reduction in sales was reported by 90% of respondents who were in the harvesting stage and Paired t-test confirmed a significant reduction in sales ($t=4.267$, $p<0.05$). The causes were identified as lack of transport facilities (92%), closure of hotels, restaurants and dedicated economic trade centers (88.6%) and inability to deal with middlemen (12.3%). A few amounts of the harvest have been sold by market alteration into direct selling home delivery vehicles (78%) and nearby fresh markets (12%). Although the government permitted to transport of vegetables during curfew hours, respondents have experienced a 50-60% of post-harvest loss during transportation. Further, a price reduction was reported for certain varieties of vegetables grown by these commercial farmers and the paired t- test confirmed the farm gate price reduction as significant ($t=3.89$, $p<0.05$). As for coping strategies, farmers have adopted new market orientation, nearby supermarkets, (75%), orientation for new dealers (70%) and home consumption of the produce (30%). The study recommended the need for a smooth continuation of market-related aspects and practices to strengthen the commercial scale farmers in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Agriculture; Commercial farmers; COVID-19; Marketing; Sales