Aftermath of the Ditwah Cyclone: Managing the Crisis in Agriculture Sector

Organized by the Sri Lanka Institute of Agriculture
on 11th December 2025, at PGRC, Gannoruwa

The Sri Lanka Institute of Agriculture (SLIAg) organized a panel discussion on 'Aftermath of the Ditwah cyclone: strategies to manage the resulting crisis in the agriculture sector' with the participation of key stakeholders of the agriculture sector of the country. The session brought together expert insights to identify practical solutions in curbing the impact occurred to the sector and to develop measures to mitigate and build resilience for similar crises in the future. This technical session was conducted in line with the Annual General Meeting of SLIAg on 11th December 2025 at Plant Genetic Resources Centre (PGRC), Gannoruwa.

The panel discussion was moderated by Prof. Buddhi Marambe. The four panellists invited were Dr. Thushara Wickramaarachchi, Director General of Agriculture, Department of Agriculture (DoA); Dr. Sanjika Perera, Additional Director General, Department of Animal Production and Health (DAPH); Eng. Tharanga Batagoda, Director, Irrigation Department; and Mr. Dhammika Ranathunga, Commissioner General of the Department of Agrarian Development (DAD).

The discussion was conducted in three rounds, during which the moderator posed focused questions requesting immediate responses to address the prevailing agricultural challenges arising from the Ditwah cyclone. The deliberations centred on assessing current impacts, identifying remedial measures, and highlighting policy decisions/changes necessary for effective and timely implementation of those remedial measures. These three focused question session was followed by an open discussion with the participation of audience.

1st Round – Assessing the impact of the Ditwah cyclone

Moderator – Department of Agriculture is the mandated agency in Sri Lanka for the development of the food crops sector. As the Director General of Agriculture, let us know of the extent of damage to the food crop sector resulting from the Ditwah cyclone

Panellist - Dr. Thushara Wickramarachchi, Director General, DoA

Director General of Agriculture, Dr. Thushar Wickramarachchi, explained the extent of crop damage caused by cyclone Ditwah, highlighting its multi-layered impact on the food crop sector. He elaborated on the damage under three key layers: crop damage, farmer livelihoods, and the systems. Dr. Wickramarachchi reported that a total of 129,000 ha of cultivated land had been lost, including 100,000 ha of rice, 10,000 ha of maize, 7,000 ha of other field crops, 2,500 ha of low-country vegetables, and 3,500 ha of up-country vegetables. In addition to direct crop damages, he reported a severe erosion of top soil in several areas, in some cases exposing the hard pan and rocks that indicates a severe and long-term threat for cultivation. He further

highlighted that these extensive crop losses has resulted in a significant loss of farmer income, necessitating government financial support to help farmers rebuilding their livelihoods and resume cultivation. He further elaborated that the reduced production would lead to an increase in prices of essential food items where strategic interventions are necessary. In bringing such interventions it is important to consider the damage occurred to the whole value chain, including losses to seed storage facilities, cold storage facilities, and office premises, as well as the damage occurred to approximately 500 km of rural road networks, disrupting the movement of agricultural inputs and products. He emphasized that the seed sector has been critically affected, with direct losses in seed stocks and compromising seed quality, creating an urgent need for the supply of quality material to support recovery and replanting efforts.

Moderator – Livestock sector plays an important role in contributing to improved ~~is~~ human nutrition. Representing the Director General of the Department of Animal Production and Health, let us know the impact of cyclone Ditwah on the livestock sector.

Panellist Dr. Sanjika Perera – Additional Director General, DAPH

~~During the panel discussion,~~ Dr. Sanjika Perera highlighted the severe impacts of Ditwa~~r~~h on the livestock and poultry sectors including to the office premises of DAPH, emphasizing both immediate losses and long-term recovery challenges. It was reported that approximately 35,000 cattle deaths have occurred, affecting around 2,200 cattle and buffalo farms, while the small ruminant sector recorded losses of about 16,000 goats and sheep, with damages to nearly 700 farms. In addition, to those specific damages, further 2,000 animals and about 300 farms were reported as across affected areas. Highlighting the damages to the poultry sector, Dr. Perera said that since chicken products are the most common animal products among public and the most demanded protein source, it is critical to recover the sector as soon as possible. The impact of the poultry sector was highlighted with direct losses incurred to breeder farms which include the loss of 50,000 broiler breeders out of a total population of 1.4 million of total breeder birds, and around 16,000 birds lost from the layer breeder population of 150,000 birds. He reported that damages to the breeder populations would cause a significant impact to the survival of the industry as the recovery takes a long time. Highlighting the losses incurred to the production categories Dr. Perera highlighted that approximately 500,000 commercial layers birds and 250,000 commercial broilers birds reported be lost. There were nearly 13,000 village level poultry farms had been destroyed many of which are part of commercial operations. He, further reported that, among village chicken category, losses were estimated as 2,700 birds. Over all, the impact to the poultry sector has been estimated to be 10–15%~~.~~. He noted that the broiler sector is expected to recover within about three months, while the layer sector may require up to six months to return to normal production levels. The milk production and milk collection network of major companies have also experienced losses at a level of 30–40%, and access to factories and processing plants have become severely constrained. The animal production sector had initially planned to achieve a 5–10% growth by 2026 through infrastructure development; however, these projections are no more valid under the current situation. He emphasized~~s~~ the urgent need to develop and strengthen infrastructure across the livestock and

poultry industries to ensure early recovery from the current shock and build resilience to face future crises.

Moderator – Irrigation infrastructure and timely release of irrigation water are requirements for progressive agriculture. As one of the key institutions responsible for this process in the Major Irrigation Schemes, and representing the Director General of Irrigation, let us know the assessment of Department of Irrigation on the impact of Ditwah cyclone on irrigation systems and infrastructure.

Panellist: Eng Tharanga Batagoda, Director, Department of Irrigation

Eng. Tharanga Batagoda emphasized that the Irrigation Department bears a significant responsibility in providing water to the agricultural activities, safeguarding irrigation schemes, reservoirs, particularly in the current context. Priority has been given to the protection of major and minor irrigation dams to prevent further damage and downstream risks. At the central government level, there are 266 reservoirs and 375 irrigation schemes, serving approximately 821,000 acres, out of which 82 reservoirs, 32 anicuts, and 476 canal structures were damaged due to the cyclone Ditwah. To prevent further structural failures, water supplies were temporarily cut off to the downstream in several schemes as a protective measure. Most canal damages in hilly areas were attributed to landslides, while some structures were affected by riverbank erosion. In the Anuradhapura district alone, 102 tanks that were not damaged by the cyclone had to be cut--open to safeguard surrounding areas.

Moderator – Department Agrarian Development looks after the interests and well-being of the agrarian community and managing the Minor Irrigation Schemes in Sri Lanka. As the Commissioner General of the Department, How let us know your assessment on the impact of cyclone Ditwah on Agrarian/ Farming -community.

Panellist: Mr. Dhammika Ranathunga, Commissioner General, DAD

Mr. Dhammika Ranathunga highlighted that the impact of the Ditwah cyclone on the farming community has been severe, widespread and would be long-lasting. He emphasized that the *Maha* season, which has just commenced, is the primary cultivation season and is critically important for livelihoods of farming communities and their financial security, and for the food security of the whole country. It was reported that approximately 100,000 ha of paddy lands have been damaged. The initial plan was to cultivate nearly 800,000 ha for the season. However, according to the present situation the extent to which the damaged areas can be re-cultivated remains uncertain (as of 11 December 2025) and still been assessed. In general there is serious crop damage occurred which has resulted in significant economic losses, severely affecting farm households.

~~Being the head of the governing body of minor irrigation scheme in the country, Mr. Ranathunga~~ Mr. Ranathunga further explained how deep the problem caused by the damages

to the infrastructure of those schemes. He highlighted that about 982 minor tanks, 835 anicuts, and 2,511 canals were damaged by the catastrophic event where 197 minor tanks were completely destroyed. The renovation and rehabilitation of those irrigation schemes will require considerable time. Though there is an expectation to restart the cultivation as early as possible, there is a question of feasibility. He therefore stressed that there is a dire need to implement urgent interim measures to ensure water availability in affected areas. His deliberations further stressed that the situation is far more serious because in several locations, farming families have lost their assets; their property, houses, and household belongings, leaving them extremely vulnerable. Therefore, bringing them back into cultivation remains a critical challenge.

2nd Round – Proposed interventions and remedial measures

Moderator – While recognizing the impact, we would like to hear the key interventions lined up by the Department of Agriculture in responding to the Ditwah disaster.

Panellist - Dr. Thushara Wickramarachchi, Director General of Agriculture

Dr. Wickramaarachchi explained that a comprehensive three-phase recovery plan has been proposed, comprising short-term, medium-term, and long-term interventions to address the impacts of the Ditwah cyclone on the agriculture sector (food crops). He highlighted that short-term actions would focus on rapid damage assessment and the immediate release of relief packages for affected farmers, with priority given to the most valuable and delivering timely assistance. Damage assessments were expected to be completed within three weeks, with initial estimates prepared promptly, verified subsequently, and relief packages disbursed immediately based on the level of damage incurred. Dr. Wickramaarachchi further emphasized the need for an efficient input supply mechanism to ensure the timely distribution of essential inputs to the most affected farmers, supported by discussions with private sector stakeholders, input supply agencies, and development partners to mobilize resources and expedite assistance.

The medium-term recovery and rehabilitation, are to be implemented over approximately six months, focusing on restoration of damaged agricultural lands and infrastructure, with particular attention to areas affected with exposed hardpan in the soil. There is a plan to carry out targeted interventions guided by a technical committee.

Highlighting the long-term interventions, he described that the DOA aims at building resilience of the sector by integrating modern technologies with disaster risk management strategies and redefining agricultural practices to better withstand future climate-related hazards.

Moderator: With a higher extent of damage, let us know the key interventions proposed and adopted to remedy the impact of Ditwah cyclone on the livestock sector.

Panellist: Dr. Sanjika Perera, Additional Director General, DAPH

Dr. Perera described that the Provincial Department of Animal Production and Health (PDAH) plays a primary role at the field level, and necessary instructions have already been issued to field officers by the Head Office of DAPH. Cattle and other animals are now been exposed to several disease conditions, including pneumonia, diarrhoea, and malnutrition after the calamity. Veterinary teams have been advised to conduct field examinations, assess the level of infections, and provide appropriate treatments. It was further emphasized that available funds should be utilized immediately, and additional funding requirements should be communicated where necessary.

Dr. Perera's explanations further highlighted that there is a risk of post-disaster contingent diseases such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) and Haemorrhagic Septicaemia (HS). The DAPH has confirmed that adequate vaccine stocks are available and can be released promptly as required. However, vaccines stored at the provincial level could not be utilized due to extended power outages, which has affected cold chain maintenance. He explained that in addition to the disease risk to animals, another form of environmental threat is emerging with respect to disposal of animal carcasses. Quoting the Ministry of Health, he highlighted the risk of groundwater contamination. In this connection, DAPH has recommended proper disposal through deep burial, with assistance from local government authorities.

Feed availability was identified as a critical issue, particularly following heavy rainfall. Free-ranging cattle were reported to have limited access to feed, as drawdown area of tanks and paddy fields remain inundated. In the Northern Province alone, approximately 60,000 ha of grazing lands have been submerged, causing severe feed shortages. Dr. Sanjika stressed the urgent need for financial allocations to supply cattle feed, anticipating that a substantial amount of finances would be required.

Further, the loss of animal shelters was reported, and funding support was requested to facilitate the reconstruction of livestock shelters. Finally, Dr. Perera emphasized the need for urgent field visits, sanitation measures, and immediate interventions, underscoring the requirement for adequate funding to implement these actions without delay.

Moderator – Damages to irrigation infrastructure needs urgent attention to support revival of agriculture and livelihood of people. Let us know the key remedial interventions implemented by the Irrigation Department, in this regard.

Panellist: Eng. Tharanga Batagoda, Department of Irrigation

Eng. Batagoda explained that provision of safe locations for affected communities for their cultivation activities is a challenging task since most farmers were reluctant to abandon their paddy fields. Rather they prefer to remain in their homes. Accordingly, priority actions were taken to repair damaged infrastructure to enable farmers to continue cultivation safely.

As the mandated organization, the Department of Irrigation has to clear the silted area prior to planting and canal systems are to be restored as a priority. Since many tanks/reservoirs had been deliberately cut-off to reduce the impact of devastation, the most urgent repairs have been carried out using temporary measures such as using jumbo bags and sandbags. With the North-

Eastern monsoon approaching, it is essential to maintain appropriate water levels and to release water strategically to minimize further damage.

As a long-term measure, Eng. Batagoda highlighted the need of designing and constructing resilient irrigation structures capable of withstanding similar extreme events. The need for a robust early warning and alarm system was also highlighted, as power outages prevented timely communication to rural communities. A user-friendly warning system with the guaranteed functionality even during power outage, is therefore required.

Eng. Batagoda also underscored the importance of developing inundation and risk maps. Based on rainfall patterns and geographical characteristics, such maps would enable advance prediction of flood prone areas. It was noted that risk mapping is being already developed for 22 river basins, and the importance of operationalizing and utilizing these systems was strongly emphasized.

Moderator – As the entity that address issues related to the agrarian community, let us know the key interventions implemented by the Department of Agrarian Development to support and improve the livelihood of the farming community.

Panellist: Mr. Dhammika Ranathunga, Commissioner General of Agrarian Development

Mr. Ranathunga described that the interventions are done focusing on two areas. Firstly, a rapid damage assessment is to be conducted in order to facilitate affected farmers accessing the relief packages and compensation allowances. He further stressed that payments must be expedited and disbursed within a very short period to ensure timely support for farmers.

As the second, but as a parallel approach, immediate renovation of damaged irrigation infrastructure are to be carried out. Therefore, the damages were categorized as minor, medium, and major in order to prioritize the actions of rehabilitation~~s~~. Accordingly, ~~a~~ priority was given to quickly repairable minor damages to restore water supply enabling cultivation during the ~~the~~ *Maha* season. However, Mr Ranathunga underscored the fact that the major damages would require a longer rehabilitation period, in some cases extending beyond six month.

3rd Round – Policy decisions/changes necessary for interventions

Moderator – In your opinion, let us know the level of policy support that is required to strengthen food supply system during this post-disaster period.

Panellist: Dr. Thushara Wickramaarachchi, Director General of Agriculture

Dr. Wickramarachchi emphasized that the current food system tends to be reactive rather than resilient, highlighting the urgent need to embed resilience within the national food system. It was noted that there are no effective regulatory mechanisms to guide farmers toward climate-resilient agricultural practices. Dr. Wickramarachchi proposed the introduction of regulatory

provisions requiring at least 10% of cultivation to be under climate-resilient crop varieties. Although scientists are actively developing climate-resilient varieties, it was revealed that there is no structured mechanism to ensure their adoption by farmers, even at a minimum threshold.

The seed system remains highly centralized, with limited community–based seed production, making farmer level mobilization challenged. Dr. Wickramarachchi also emphasized gaps in flood and drought management policies, which need to be revisited to incorporate the aspects regarding land productivity and land use. Noting the provisions that exist under the Soil Conservation Act, he emphasized that the enforcement is inadequate and currently covers only certain regions. It was recommended that the Act be amended and implemented nationwide to ensure comprehensive coverage.

In addition, Dr. Wickramarachchi mentioned that farmers largely operate individually rather than as organized farming communities, which limits collective action and resilience building. Therefore, he emphasized the necessity of establishing producer groups.

Concerns were also raised regarding data gaps and inconsistencies, which hinder effective planning and decision making. The need for a strong, policy-driven data collection framework, such as through CROPIX, was emphasized to enable evidence-based decisions. Dr. Wickramarachchi also highlighted that this would require a clear policy mandate to collect reliable data, potentially through a structured system.

Moderator: In the livestock sector, let us know the level of policy support needed to recover from the damage and build resilience.

Panellist: Dr. Sanjika Perera – Additional Director General of Animal Production & Health

Dr. Perera emphasized that, regardless the occurrence of disasters, the livestock sector cannot be sustained in the long term, without a clear and strong land policy. He noted that although the country's road network ranks around 49th globally and road density is approximately at the 30–35 level., Even countries smaller than Sri Lanka have more effective road systems that better support economic activities. In Sri Lanka, roads are primarily used for human transportation and are not adequately aligned with the needs of agricultural and livestock value chains. He further highlighted that nearly 83% of land is managed by the government, and therefore a defined proportion of this land should be allocated specifically for livestock development.

Highlighting the limited provisions in the national animal breeding policy to introduce new breeds, Dr. Perera pointed out the need of broadening the provisions in introducing or developing climate-resilient livestock breeds. In addition, he strongly stressed importance of introducing crop and forage varieties capable of surviving submergence and other climate stresses. He requested consideration of the authorities in introducing forage varieties suitable for the country to support the livestock production. Dr. Perera also identified access to credit as a major constraint, pointing out that financial disbursements rarely prioritize the livestock sector, underscoring the need for stronger and more targeted financial policies.

Furthermore, it was recommended that import--policies be made more liberal, particularly to facilitate the importation of maize and other essential feed ingredients required for the sustainability of the animal sector.

Moderator: In restoring and strengthening the irrigation infrastructure, let us know the policy support needed.

Panellist: Eng. Tharanga Batagoda, Director, Irrigation Department

Eng. Batagoda emphasized the need to provide compensation for property loss to those farmers who were affected by the recent disaster immediately, and facilitate their relocation to safer areas. Those decisions need to be supported by regulations. She highlighted the importance of timely loan schemes and mechanisms to ensure agricultural inputs and financial support are delivered on schedule. Medium-term policies promoting diverse irrigation methods were recommended to enhance resilience against climate variability. Additionally, the establishment of an effective early warning system with district-level coordination and community training was strongly advocated. Finally, Eng. Batagoda stressed the importance of slope adaptation policies to mitigate risks in hilly and vulnerable areas.

Moderator: In the recovery process of the agrarian community, let us know the policy support required to uplift the livelihood of farmers.

Panelist: Mr. Dhammika Ranathunga, Commissioner General, DAD

Mr. Ranathunga noted that the government has already taken an important policy decision to provide a generous relief package and has appointed a Commissioner General of Essential Services with special powers to operate beyond normal rules and regulations. However, he emphasized the need for additional supplementary policies to enhance effective implementation of the relief packages proposed. In particular, the establishment of a robust data policy was highlighted as essential to address existing bottlenecks within information and coordination networks. Further, he pointed out the limitations of the current systems which require adherence to prolonged procedures, need to be relaxed within the frameworks to ensure timely and efficient responses during crisis situations.

Open discussion

The questions raised by the audience and the responses given by the panellists are as follows.

1. **Q**: What is the damage caused to crops under protected agriculture?
   A: Damage assessments are currently underway. The government has also proposed compensation for damaged crops and/or structures.
2. **Q**: Is protected agriculture the best option for addressing climate change?

A: Protected agriculture currently covers only 400–500 ha, which is insufficient to feed the country. However, it is a good option for to mitigate impact of climate change.

3. **Q**: What type of inputs are expected from the private sector?
   A: Private sector participation in the recovery process is essential. Provision of agricultural inputs should be supported through social initiatives. The contract grower system requires improvement, and private sector involvement in research and development for long-term sustainable development is also needed.

4. **Q**: Is there a mechanism to calculate water inflows to reservoirs?
   A: Mechanisms such as area-capacity curves are in place, allowing water volumes to be calculated accurately.

5. **Q**: Are we technically prepared to avoid such damage if it occurs again?
   A: Currently, technical preparedness is limited. A long-term plan is a need, including an early warning system, responsive mitigation strategies, relocation of farms away from riverbanks, development of resilient breeds and feed, and training people to handle such situations. In the future, empowered and knowledgeable stakeholders can manage farming under these conditions.

6. **Q**: What are the livestock sector feed requirements with respect to maize?
   A: The target cultivation area is 100,000 ha, with a loss of approximately 10,000 ha due to damage. Adopting good management practices, however, will help achieve higher yields from the remaining areas.

7. **Q**: Will this damage affect the national food security?
   A: The Food Security Committee has conducted thorough discussions and concluded that the damage is less than initially expected. In cases of low production, food imports will be utilized to maintain supply.

8. **Q**: How can land use policy be implemented quickly?
   A: Technology and knowledge exist, but implementation is a challenge. Vulnerability and crop suitability maps are available. Relocation of people requires additional employment opportunities in cities. Suitable areas for cultivation above 5,000 ft must be studied carefully.

9. **Q**: How can fair prices for producers and consumers be ensured?
   A: Vegetable prices fluctuate with two peaks in retail and wholesale markets. Minimum prices for maize and rice have been established, and the government purchases certain quantities to stabilize the market. Significant improvements are being made in vegetable price management.

10. **Q**: If re-cultivation is planned, what extent of land can be brought back under cultivation?
    A: Severely damaged fields will need to be removed from cultivation for 10–20% of the area this season.

11. **Q**: At what level will government efforts succeed according to the plan?

A: Mechanisms at the government and departmental levels are strong, and the farming community is actively engaged in implementing the plan.