

CHANGING LAND USES AND RAPID DECLINE OF FOREST COVER: THE ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Sri Lanka provides a classic example for rapid tropical deforestation. Just over a period of a century, its forest cover has been reduced to a quarter of what it used to be. Consequences of this degradation process have been discussed widely. However, little attention was directed to identify the causes and nature of this process in detailed manner. Therefore this paper attempts to identify and discuss some of the important causal factors responsible for decline of the forest cover in the country. The main objective of this exercise is to derive useful policy implications that are important for sustainable management of forest resources.

A wide variety of factors could be identified as causal factors of this trend. Broadly, they can be categorised as physical and socio-economic factors. The paper direct its attention mainly towards socio-economic factors associated with agricultural development efforts of the country.

The history of deforestation was traced in relation to the historical evolution of policies responsible for expansion of agricultural land uses in the country. Emergence of competing uses for forestlands and other economic activities were reviewed comparatively, giving attention to development priorities of different time periods. Simultaneously, it draws from variety of sources on demographic and socio-economic development of the country too. The factors that are important in national and local scales also were discussed.

Based on the above exercise, some policy implications were derived. They are discussed in the context of priorities of the forest policy identified by the Forestry Sector master Plan (1995). Some recommendations also were made based on the findings of the study.