

Addressing Skilled Labour Shortages in Coconut Harvesting: Evidence from Coconut Farmers in Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka

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The coconut sector is a vital component of Sri Lanka's plantation agriculture and is increasingly challenged by human-related nuances such as the shortages of skilled coconut pluckers where traditional coconut harvesting is known as super-skilled task. This study aimed to explore farmers' perceptions and experiences regarding how shortages of skilled coconut pluckers are associated with coconut production, market availability, cultivation practices, and coconut prices in the Kurunegala district of Sri Lanka. Qualitative phenomenological approach, grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 coconut cultivators selected judgmentally, ensuring that each participant owned at least 2.5 ha of coconut land. The data were analyzed using 6-steps reflexive thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns and themes in farmers' experiences and perceptions. The findings indicated that farmers perceive shortages of skilled coconut pluckers as increasing labour costs, delaying harvesting operations, and reducing harvesting efficiency. Participants associated these challenges with lower productivity, reduced market availability, and changes in coconut prices. Farmers also noted that employing unskilled workers may result in premature harvesting and damage to coconut palms, affecting nut quality and yield. Although mechanized harvesting was viewed as a potential solution, its adoption was constrained by high costs, limited technical knowledge, and low farmer confidence. The study highlights the importance of skill development programmes, youth engagement, extension services, and affordable mechanization. These findings provide qualitative insights into labour shortages in Sri Lanka's coconut sector and offer guidance for policymakers and industry stakeholders.

Keywords: Coconut harvesting, Labour shortage, Skilled coconut pluckers, Sri Lanka, Qualitative study