The Role of Livelihood Diversification in Enhancing Household Food Security: A Case Study of Tea Plantation Communities in Loolkandura, Sri Lanka

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Tea has remained central to Sri Lanka's economy and identity for over a century. The Loolkandura Tea Estate in Kandy, recognized as the first commercial tea plantation in Sri Lanka, exemplifies both the historical importance and present-day vulnerabilities of tea estate households. Despite their contribution to national export earnings, estate households remain highly dependent on tea wage labor, exposing them to economic shocks, limited livelihood opportunities, and persistent food insecurity. This study investigated livelihood diversification as a pathway to enhancing household food security among tea estate households in Loolkandura. It aimed to identify livelihood diversification strategies, assess their contribution to household food security, and examine socio-economic and institutional barriers affecting their adoption. The mixed-method research approach was employed, combining structured household questionnaire surveys, focus group discussions, field observations, and secondary data from the Department of Census and Statistics and the Ministry of Plantation Industries, Sri Lanka. Primary data were collected during March–April 2025 through a field survey of 45 households selected using systematic random sampling. Descriptive statistics summarized household characteristics and livelihood practices, while the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) assessed food security status. The Mann–Whitney U test examined differences in HFIAS scores between tea-dependent and diversified households, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The study identified several livelihood diversification strategies beyond tea production, including home gardening, petty trading, small-scale services, livestock rearing, and handicrafts. Tea-dependent households recorded significantly higher HFIAS scores (Median = 8.0, Mean = 8.30 ± 1.36), indicating greater food insecurity. In contrast, diversified households recorded lower HFIAS scores (Median = 2.5, Mean = 2.82 ± 1.50), reflecting better food access and stability. The Mann–Whitney U test confirmed a significant difference between the two household groups ($U = 505.0$, $Z = 5.72$, $p < 0.001$). Although livelihood diversification significantly enhanced household food security and resilience, barriers including limited land access, inadequate credit, lack of training, and weak institutional support continue to constrain its adoption. Strengthening vocational training, agricultural extension services, market linkages, and institutional support is therefore essential for promoting sustainable livelihood diversification in Sri Lanka's plantation communities.

Keywords: livelihood diversification, food security, estate households, Loolkandura