

**SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS OF  
PLANTATION RESIDENTS IN ABANDONED ESTATES  
OF SRI LANKA: THE CASE OF CENTRAL  
SABRAGAMUWA AND UVA PROVINCES**

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# Contents

Acknowledgment .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
List of Abbreviations.....	- 4 -
Chapter 01 .....	- 5 -
Introduction and background of the study .....	- 7 -
Objective of the Study.....	- 8 -
Methodology of the Study.....	- 8 -
Limitations of the study .....	- 9 -
Chapter 2.....	- 11 -
Background of the State Corporation Estates .....	- 11 -
Changing Patterns of JEDB and SLSPC estates.....	- 13 -
Extent of Estates .....	- 15 -
Changes in Labour force in JEDB and SLSPC estates .....	- 17 -
Chapter 3.....	- 19 -
Abandoned Estates in the Study Area: some background information .....	- 19 -
Abandoned Estates in the Study Area .....	- 23 -
Status of Abandoned Estates in Matale District.....	- 19 -
The Status of Abandoned Estates in Kandy and Kegalle Districts.....	- 23 -
The case of abandoned estates in Monaragala district.....	- 27 -
A Comparative Analysis of Socio –Economic Political Status of Plantation Residents in the Abandoned Estates.....	- 29 -
Poor Status of Social Welfare.....	- 29 -
Status of Labor and Human Rights .....	- 30 -
The Impact of Trade Union Factor.....	- 33 -
Chapter 4.....	- 35 -
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	- 35 -
Recommendations.....	- 36 -
List of References.....	- 39 -

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## List of Abbreviation

CDC: Child Development Centre  
CEDAW: Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women  
CRC: Child Rights Convention  
DSD: Divisional Secretariat Divisions  
EMA: Estate Medical Assistant  
EPF: Employees Provident Fund  
ETF: Employees Trust Fund  
FGD: Focus Group Discussions  
GN: Grama Niladari  
ICES: International Centre for Ethnic Studies  
ICESCR: International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights  
ISD: Institute of Social Development  
JEDB: Janatha Estate Development Board  
NADSA: National Agriculture Diversify Settlement Authority  
NBRO: National Building Research Organization  
NIPM: National Institute of Plantation Management  
PHDT: Plantation Human Development Trust  
PS: Pradheshiya Sabha  
RPC: Regional Plantation Companies  
RTI: Right to Information  
SIPC: Statistical Information on Plantation Crops  
SLSPC: Sri Lanka State Plantation Cooperation  
TU: Trade Union

## **Executive Summary**

*The report is an output of a commissioned research to explore the socio-economic, political, and cultural status of the plantation community in the abandoned estates in selected districts such as Kandy, Kegalle, Matale, and Monaragala. For this purpose, the study has focused on two state owned corporations—Janatha Estate Development Board and State Plantation Corporation. A mixed-method research approach was employed to elucidate the status of plantation people in the selected abandoned estates. As such, qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews from November 2021 to March 2022. Importantly, some basic quantitative data was collected through a structured questionnaire and*

*Indeed, the abandoned estates were identified as the primary tea estates with ideal locations inherited with natural climatic conditions to grow high-quality tea in the country. Many of the estates had been performing reasonably well from the inception of the estates to until implementation of nationalization of plantation in the 1970s. The nationalization and coincide with other several administrative changes introduced in the plantation sector, have eventually led to the closure or abandonment of several estates across the country. Abandonment or closure has not only suspended the production process, but also deprived the socio-economic security and human security of the community that relied on this industry for their livelihood and other welfare services. It is safe to argue that the study dealt with one of the most vulnerable communities living in the abandonment tea estates in the country, subjected to socio-economic and political exclusions by the government of Sri Lanka.*

*The study also shows the dismal conditions of entrapping a massive amount of liabilities for provident funds, wages, gratuities, and other benefits have gone unpaid and put them into vicious cycle. The story of the abandonment of tea estate workers being unable to manage their food and the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing severe economic and political crisis of the country have put the lives of this community at risk and caused untold suffering.*

*The field data shows that the workers are exposed to multiple diseases due to a lack of clean drinking water, a lack of safe sanitation, living in the un-maintained old line rooms, a worst senior was found in Bambaragala estate, ignorance about proper hygiene due to low literacy, and a low standard of living and the sexual abuses prevalence in these sample estates.*

*Therefore, participants in the study repeatedly stated that government intervention should focus on sustainable income generation programs to address chronic poverty and poor social wellbeing. Abandoned estates have the potential to be eco-tourism attractions—which would be another feather in the cap of developing tea industry-based eco-tourism. Similarly, Matale, Monaragala, Kandy, and Kegalle are well-known domestic tourist destinations for nature lovers. This is possible through public –private partnerships, which will support and generate an alternative source of income to overcome the gloomy livelihood situation of abandoned estate*

*workers. Further, collaboration (Management- Workers-Governance) and bona fides are needed to reopen the abandoned estates.*

*In most of these estates, plantation people do not have political representation, even in the local government authorities, so that there seems to be a kind of political exclusion in the sphere of development and public service delivery. Due to the absence of political representation, the aspirations and demands of this community have not been taken into account in the public policy making and implementation process. They also have lost some of their ethnic, linguistic, and religious identity as a result of the influence of neighboring villages including cultural practices. In some cases, this becomes evident in school education, where estate residents tend to have a propensity to send their children to Sinhalese schools.*

*Yet, there is a need for a detailed study in these districts to further understand the identity crisis of this community, because it is not a key mandate of the present study. In other study areas such as Matale and Kandy, plantation people have been following their cultural identity, which was visible in terms of their attire, language, religious practices, and lifestyle. The study provides a range of recommendations to address underlying issues of abandoned estates based on the findings.*

### Introduction and background of the study

Export-oriented, labour intensive Sri Lankan tea plantations have a history dating back more than 150 years. Despite a number of institutional changes, such as the nationalization of British-owned plantations, the transformation of nationalized plantations into state management, the distribution of state-owned plantation management to private regional companies, etc., the tea plantation is playing a major role in the economy of the country. In 2021, tea exports earned \$1.32 billion, or 10.6 percent of total income, and accounted for 48.62 percent of total agricultural exports. Nevertheless, the institutional changes also brought many distortions in the tea plantation sector. On the one hand, neglecting the marginal unproductivity of tea land by the privatized management of the Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs), and on the other hand, abandoning the tea estates managed by state-owned corporations. The latter exclusively abandoned the resident workers, whereas the RPCs are only the tea bushes. Thus, this study is an attempt to shed some light on their crux livelihood reality and suggest some long-term strategies for sustainable livelihood, and socio-economic development of the residents in abandoned estates in Sri Lanka.

As illustrated above, the category of ‘abandoned estates’<sup>1</sup> is a recent phenomenon formed in the aftermath of the nationalization of the plantation sector in the 1970s in Sri Lanka. The majority of the estates nationalized under the Land Reforms Act No.2 in August 1972 and Act No. 39 (Amended) in October 1975 were managed by two government corporations namely, the *Janatha* Estate Development Board (JEDB) and the State Plantation Corporation of Sri Lanka (SLSPC). “Abandoned estates” are commonly found in the plantations managed by the state corporations of JEDB and SLSPC. The abandoned estates that are found in the JEDB and SLSPC do not have a formal institutional structure to manage the day-to-day affairs of estates -welfare activities have been suspended including health services, plantation lands are being owned by individuals, there remain ad hoc development works and families of these estates are deprived of public services provided by state institutions in their vicinity. Their livelihoods rely on outside the estate –mostly employed in neighboring villages and cities doing manual labour. These estates have extremely poor infrastructure

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<sup>1</sup> There are discussions and debates in finding a proper term for ‘abandoned estates’ and the existing literature does not provide any definition, so that we have given a definition to the term abandoned estates based on the evidence collected. During the validation workshop held in Colombo, some suggested to use the term “mismanaged plantations” “unproductive plantations” but these terms are unlikely to capture the larger picture of the problem explored in this study. This is the first study on this topic taken place in Sri Lanka – there is a need for lot more studies to explore different dynamics of abandoned estates. Thus, it is possible to find out a commonly acceptable term through series of studies on this theme.

amenities and remain geographically isolated from main service centers. Furthermore, plantation residents in these estates are politically disempowered and lack representation in elected political bodies, making them more vulnerable. We, in this study, considered the above factors to define ‘abandoned estates’. This study also shows lack of literature on abandoned plantations across the world so that the authors of the report have given a working definition for ‘abandoned estates’.

## **Objective of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to identify the nature and the characteristics of ‘abandoned’ estates that come under the management of the State Corporation of JEDB and SLSPC. Secondly, to map out the socio, economic, political, and cultural implications of the resident community on abandoned estates. Thirdly, the study will also shed light on the income-generating activities of workers on the abandoned estates. Finally, to develop national and regional advocacy strategies to improve the living standards of the plantation community on abandoned estates as well as to propose evidence-based recommendations to policymakers and civil society to improve the workers’ social and economic lives to be on par with the rest of the society in the country. At the outset, there is not much evidence and studies in Sri Lanka in relation to abandoned plantations and the plight of the communities in those estates. Thus, this seems to be the first attempt to explore the socio-economic and political dynamics of the plantation resident communities in these estates so that the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on changing patterns of the plantation industry in Sri Lanka.

## **Methodology of the Study**

The study is qualitative in nature and used both primary and secondary data. The qualitative approach enabled the researchers dig into details and multiple aspects of the problem under study. The primary data was collected from selected abandoned estates in the districts of Kandy, Matale, Kegalle, and Monaragala from December 2021 to March 2022. A total of thirteen abandoned estates were identified based on the convenience of accessibility to communicate with estate workers. Primary data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) in the selected estates. A total of 13 FGDs were conducted on the abandoned estates while among them eight estates were located in the district of Kandy. The rest were from the districts of Matale and Monaragala with a representation of three FGDs and one FGD respectively. Around eight to ten members from those residing on the abandoned estates were invited to participate in the FGDs. In addition to the primary data collected from the field survey, the necessary information on the background of the abandoned estates was collected from published



reports and other relevant articles. Among the publications: the annual publication of ‘Statistical Information on Plantation Crops’(SIPC) published by the Ministry of Plantation Industry; ‘Annual Reports’ of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka; and the ‘Household Income and Expenditure Survey’ were profoundly used for the study. Apart from that, other relevant publications were also used for this study.

The term "abandoned estate" is not readily defined. Therefore, the study has given careful attention to identifying abandoned estates in the country. Accordingly, the following criteria was used to identify abandoned estates: (1) the estates that are managed by the state corporations of JEDB or SLSPC or Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd or Chilaw Plantation Ltd with existing plantation crops such as tea, rubber or coconut, and in which the maintenance of estate crops have been either completely or partly neglected; (2) absence of regular jobs provided by the estates; (3) inattention to workers' residences; (4) non-existence of stipulated daily wage and other statutory contributions like EPF/ETF for the resident workers on the estate; and (5) absence of trade union membership. A considerable number of estates owned by individuals were nationalized, and many of these nationalized estates were subsequently continued with plantation crops or other activities. Such estates were also covered in this study. Therefore, the study is mainly focused on the plantations that come under the purview of JEDB and SLSPC estates in the country. It should be noted that the majority of estates that come under the management of the JEDB, SLSPC, Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd and Chilaw Plantation Ltd were not identified as abandoned estates and only a few estates or divisions of these fell into the category of abandoned estates. It was observed in some districts that, part of the estate is functional while another part is abandoned so workers tend to seek jobs in functional estates, but which are not secured.

## **Limitations of the study**

This study was conducted during an unfolding pandemic situation with various government-imposed travel restrictions, lockdowns, and difficulties encountered by potential respondents and the research team in meeting, establishing rapport and validating the information received with each other. At the beginning of the project, the research team could not meet and discuss issues as freely as they would have wanted due to travel restrictions and multiple commitments during the pandemic. Nevertheless, we took necessary measures to visit the study locations physically while keeping the health restrictions in mind. However, there was a clear aversion on the part of respondents to freely interact with research team and share their experiences. The research team was unable to visit all study locations due to time, financial and pandemic constraints so we employed research assistants for sample districts and

collected necessary information using a detailed interview guide. We also had regular meetings with research assistants to share their experiences in relation to the socio-economic and political status of the people in these estates. Due to lack of ICT literacy among respondents, the study team could not use e-research methods and we largely relied on research assistants to gather necessary data. Information received was particularly useful for understanding the social and political dynamics of abandoned estates. The research team adhered to the established ethical considerations throughout the study. It should be cognizant that the terminology of ‘estate’, ‘plantation,’ and ‘large scale estate’ are interchangeably used in this study.

## Chapter 2

### Background of the State Plantation Corporations

The 'plantation sector' was a newly introduced economic system by the British during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka. The system was first evolved in the Caribbean Islands, Northeast Brazil and subsequently extended to Sri Lanka (Beckford and Benn, 2008). The system with the whole process of a single crop, imported labor, production for the export market, labor-intensive, and the dependency model was accomplished by multinational companies like Sterling Companies (companies registered in the UK) and Rupee Companies (companies registered in Sri Lanka) until it was nationalized under the Land Reforms Laws of 1972 and 1975 in Sri Lanka. Tea has been the major commercial crop and brought huge wealth to the nation's development, an undeniable truth in the economic history of the country. It should be noted that the aforementioned Sterling and Rupees companies nationalized a total of 25% of their plantation lands. Apart from multinational corporations, the government acquired approximately 26 percent of total land from Ceylonese individual estate ownership and approximately 18 percent from Ceylonese smallholdings under the Land Reform Laws (Fernando, 1978).

A total of 419,101 hectares of plantation crops in Sri Lanka were nationalized through the implementation of the Land Reforms of 1972 and 1975. Out of the total hectares nationalized, the extent of tea crops was 166,405 hectares while the extent of rubber and coconut was 74,494 and 48,130 hectares, respectively. Apart from that, a total of 130,073 hectares of uncultivated land was also acquired through land reforms; however, an overwhelmingly large share of the land acquired was plantation crops in the country (Peiris, 1984). A large extent of nationalized plantation sector was hand over to the state own plantation corporations such as Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB) and Sri Lanka State Plantation corporation (SLSPC).

The SLSPC was established in 1958, whereas the JEDB was established in 1976. These two state corporations were established to manage the agricultural farms in the country. Meanwhile, the government had decided to transfer the management of the nationalized plantation sector to these two state corporations and to gain the bulk of the revenue from the plantations which previously mainly benefited the British owned multinational companies in the country. As it is mentioned above, most of the plantations nationalized under the Land Reforms Laws of 1972 and 1975 were transferred to the state corporations, JEDB and SLSPC. Aside from these two state corporations, the *Udarata Samupakara Wattu Sanwardhne Mandalaya* (USAWASAM), Electoral Co-operatives and

JANAWASA were also formed by the government to manage the nationalized plantation sector in the country.

The government that formed in 1977 disbanded the cooperative system of plantation management on the grounds of inefficiency and the properties were reallocated among the SLSPC and JEDB. Accordingly, towards the end of 1978, the SLSPC had an extent of 53,497 hectares and the JEDB 65,179 hectares, the combination of which accounted for 48.8% of the total extent of tea land in the country. In comparison, prior to the nationalization of the plantation sector, the Agency Houses had only managed a total extent of 28,300 hectares. As such, the extent of plantation crops managed by the SLSPC and JEDB was unusually large compared to those managed by Agency Houses, and thus, these were considered massive organizations that controlled the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. These two principal estate managing organizations were brought under two separate Ministries since 1980 and their management structures were also decentralized through a system of Regional Boards, thus granting freedom and decision-making powers to the Regions with a view of improving productivity.

The SLSPC and JEDB continued more or less the same style of the British hierarchical system of plantation management on the estates. In many instances, the same characteristics of the managerial and supervisory systems were imposed on the estate workers. Thus, the routine engagement in estate tasks by the workers and clerical staff remains unchanged. The management of the state corporations also thought it is important to continue with the implementation of British-style labour management on the estates. Locally recruited estate superintendents also followed the roles played by the British superintendents prior to the nationalization of the estates. The newly recruited estate superintendents were either from the Burgher community in the country or from the members of the upper-class families who were actively involved in sports, particularly in rugby from schools such as Trinity College in Kandy, St Thomas in Colombo, etc. A recruited person has to undergo management training, which includes training on peculiar Tamil dialects that will be used on the estates. Irrespective of whether the superintendent comes from a Tamil or Sinhala community, the National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM) provides training to the recruits on the particular Tamil dialect to be used on the estates. In addition, a guidebook titled 'Plantation Tamil' was revised by the NIPM to cater to the Sinhala speaking recruits. The original version of this book was compiled by W.G.B. Wells as 'Colloquial Tamil' from which subsequently a Sinhala version was edited by S. Balagalle and published by the NIPM.

However, the two public corporations continuously proved that they not only lacked proper management strategies, but also failed to increase productivity and improve working conditions and welfare of the workers among other things. Apart from that, the two state corporations had borrowed

heavily from the banks. By the end of 1989, together they had overdrafts amounting Rs. 1.7 billion and long-term loans to the value of Rs.3.2 billion. Total indebtedness inclusive of outstanding interest payments amounted to Rs.5.5 billion (Sinnathamby, 1993). The two state corporations were also not sufficiently equipped with any market incentives in any of their operations and hence ended up in bureaucratic gridlock. Therefore, it was decided to transfer the management of these two corporations to private management companies (Gamage and Wickramaratne, 2020). A total of 457 tea estates comprising 94,521 hectares of state owned tea plantations of both the JEDB and SLSPC were handed over to the 23 RPCs in 1992. It should be noted that, while transferring the tea land to the RPCs, the state corporations; JEDB and SLSPC had also retained a total of 12,058 hectares of tea land along with their labour force to continue tea plantation activities (Peires, 1994). The JEDB is proud to be managing these two famous plantations in the central highlands of Sri Lanka – Loolecondera and Hantane Estates. The Loolecondera was the first estate where tea was first planted in 1867, and carried out the first commercial tea manufacturing by James Taylor in 1872. In addition, many valuable properties are being managed under the wings of JEDB. The ‘Janawasama Jana Tea’ brand of the JEDB offers the best quality tea from the Plantations in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka.

### **Changing Patterns of JEDB and SLSPC estates**

Despite several administrative changes, as discussed above, the changes that occurred in: the distribution pattern of the number of estates; the extent of plantation crops; the deployment of labour; and the trend in the production of plantation crops by the state corporations, JEDB and SLSPC also significantly contributed towards creating the category known as ‘abandoned estates’ in the country. According to the statistical data provided by the various issues of SIPC, a total of 668 estates (tea, rubber, and coconut) with a total extent of 281,747 hectares were managed by the state corporations in the 1980s. However, by the time privatization began in 1992, the state corporations did not retain either the number of estates or the extent of estate sector land. In fact, in the aftermath of land reforms in the 1980s, the state corporations had already lost 162 estates out of the 668 estates that were distributed to them initially. The Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) reported that they had received 442 estates, with an extent of 239,398 hectares, and a total of 64 estates, with an extent of 22,079 hectares, which had been under the management of the state corporations JEDB and SLSPC respectively since 1992. Nevertheless, the number of estates managed by these two state corporations changed with the entry of other new state institutes after 2010. Table 1 depicts the distribution pattern of state corporation estates in the country.

**Table 1: Distribution of Number Estates Managed by the State Owned Plantation Corporations: 1992 – 2018**

Year	Number of Estates		Total	Year	Number of Estates		Total
	JEDB	SLSPC			JEDB	SLSPC	
<b>1992</b>	33	31	<b>64</b>	<b>2006</b>	17	12	<b>29</b>
<b>1993</b>	25	21	<b>46</b>	<b>2007</b>	17	12	<b>29</b>
<b>1994</b>	23	21	<b>44</b>	<b>2008</b>	17	12	<b>29</b>
<b>1995</b>	22	16	<b>38</b>	<b>2009</b>	17	12	<b>29</b>
<b>1996</b>	22	16	<b>38</b>	<b>2010</b>	17	12	<b>29</b>
<b>1997</b>	19	15	<b>44</b>	<b>2011</b>	57*		<b>57</b>
<b>1998</b>	18	15	<b>33</b>	<b>2012</b>	57		<b>57</b>
<b>1999</b>	18	15	<b>33</b>	<b>2013</b>	56		<b>56</b>
<b>2000</b>	18	14	<b>32</b>	<b>2014</b>	55		<b>55</b>
<b>2001</b>	18	14	<b>32</b>	<b>2015</b>	57		<b>57</b>
<b>2002</b>	18	14	<b>32</b>	<b>2016</b>	57		<b>57</b>
<b>2003</b>	16	14	<b>30</b>	<b>2017</b>	57		<b>57</b>
<b>2004</b>	16	11	<b>27</b>	<b>2018</b>	57		<b>57</b>
<b>2005</b>	16	11	<b>27</b>	<b>2019</b>	57		<b>57</b>

Source: Compiled from the various issues of Statistical Information on Plantation Crops, (1998,2000,2011 and 2020), Ministry of Plantation Industries: 55/75, Vaxuhall Lane, Colombo 2

\*Includes the number of plantation estates managed by Chillaw Plantation Ltd, Kurunegala Plantation Ltd, Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd, JEDB and SLSPC from 2011. There is no separate information on these corporations anymore since 2011 and they are provided under one single column combining all five corporations.

According to Table 1, the total number of estates allocated to state corporations is not static. The number of estates managed by these two state corporations has been steadily declining from 64 estates in 1992 to 30 estates in 2003. It is a precipitous decline, with these two corporations accounting for nearly half of the reductions. Since 2003, the number of estates managed by the two state corporations, JEDB and SLSPC has not changed significantly. It should be noted that after 2011 the Chillaw Plantations Ltd and Kurunegala Plantations Ltd were included under the Ministry of Plantation Industries alongside the JEDB and SLSPC estates changing the distribution pattern of the estates in the SIPC where the details of these estates were given under a single category. Thus, they were amalgamated into one category as ‘State Corporation’, as a result, the number of estates under this category suddenly increased by 28, bringing the total to 57 estates. See table 1 for more details.

As of 2021, a total of 57 estates are currently under the purview of the state corporations of JEDB and SLSPC. As far as the distribution of the estates is concerned the JEDB and SLSPC are managing 17 and 12, respectively. In addition to that, a total of 28 estates are distributed among the Chillaw Plantation Ltd, Kurunegala Plantation Ltd, and Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd.

### Extent of Crops in the State Owned Plantations

As far as the distribution pattern of plantation crops (tea, rubber, coconut, etc.) is concerned, these plantations were under the management of state corporations until the 1980s. In the latter part of the 1990s, they were jointly managed by the state corporations and the RPCs. Table 2 gives the compilation of the five-year average of the extent of plantation crops that were distributed since 1982.

**Table 2: Extent of Five Years Average of Plantation Crops Managed by the State Owned Plantation Corporations: 1982 to 2018 (in hectares)**

Years	Extent of Plantation Crops by			Total Extent of Plantation crops (Five years average)
	JEDB	SLSPC	RPCs	
<b>1982 - 1986</b>	136,632	142,422	-	279,054
<b>1987 - 1991</b>	140,010	135,319	-	275,420
<b>1992 – 1996</b>	12,903	14,466	239,120	287,200
<b>1997 – 2001</b>	9,404	11,214	178,001	218,244
<b>2002 - 2006</b>	5,851	6,564	168,725	181,140
<b>2007 - 2011</b>	6,203	5,928	162,417	174,548
<b>2012 – 2016*</b>	9,446		158,058	167,504
<b>2017 – 2018*</b>	9,233		156,822	166,055

Source: Compiled from the various issues of Statistical Information on Plantation Crops, (1998, 2000, 2011 and 2020), Ministry of Plantation Industries. 55/75, Vaxuhall Lane, Colombo 2.

\*Includes the extent of plantation crops in Chillaw Plantation Ltd, Kurunegala Plantation Ltd, Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd, JEDB and SLSPC from 2011.

Table 2 illustrates the declining trend in the extent of plantation crops managed by the two corporations and RPCs in the country. It should be noted that the five-year average was calculated in order to provide a clear picture of this changing trend. Accordingly, the declining trend in the extent

of plantation crops continues, and it appears to be the general direction of the sector. It is also observed that an extent of around 20,000 hectares of plantation land declined every five years from 1982/86 to 2017/18. It should be noted that a drastic fall in the extent of plantation land amounting to 68,993 hectares (a decline from 287,200 hectares to 218,244 hectares) took place mainly during 1992/96 when the state-owned estates were transferred to RPCs. This trend is similar in the other two state corporations as well. Subsequently, the land extent fell to 6,751 hectares which is a decline of 25.09 percent between the years 1992/96 to 1997/01. This declining trend slowly changed during the last two decades with the reduction in plantation land amounting to 213 hectares and 1,236 hectares in the state corporation estates and RPCs estates respectively. The reasons for the fall in the extent of plantation crops are not easily available. However, certain assumptions can be made based on the changes that have taken place in the relevant plantation crops in the private sector such as in the tea-small-holding sector and the privately owned rubber sector in the country. For instance, the five year average in the extent of tea-small-holdings increased massively and more than doubled from 55,105 hectares to 121,471 hectares between the periods 1982/86 and 2012/16. Likewise, the average annual extent of private sector rubber land also increased from 65,354 hectares to 79,943 hectares during the same period. Thus, it can be assumed that the extent of new land acquired by tea-small-holdings and the private rubber estate holders was the land that originally belonged to plantations managed by the state corporations. Apart from the land transferred to privately-owned tea and rubber plantations, a substantial extent of plantation land had been acquired for diversification projects in the country. Around 10,000 hectares of plantation land were allocated to the National Agricultural Diversifying and Settlement Authority (NADSA) in the 1980s. Apart from that, a total of 29,560 hectares of land was also allocated mainly for palm oil (9,410 hectares), fuelwood (1,889 hectares) and forestry (25,855 hectares), etc.

During the *Yahapalanaya* government in the country from (2015 to 2019), a proposal was made by Ministry of Public Enterprise Development Minister Kabir Hashim to implement a restructuring program to improve the performance of state-owned plantation companies. Among five plantations, two were JEDB and SLSPC. Then Minister Kabir Hashim highlighted the fundamental weaknesses of state plantation companies such as weak financial management, outdated agricultural practices, inefficient management practices, poor working and living conditions, illegal encroachment, and environmental degradation. He convinced the cabinet to implement this program, and the cabinet approved his proposal as well. He proposed Public Private Partnership, leasing land to small and medium scale investors, and other initiatives, but they were not implemented due to agitations of the political party of Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), which represents Hill Country Tamils. Hill Country civil society organizations, including the Institute of Social Development, were also part of



the agitation and vehemently opposed this move to distribute plantation lands to outsiders for business purposes. A similar kind of land distribution program was initiated during the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, which was also unsuccessful, and now the present government –SLPP is considering restarting this program amidst public outrage in the plantation sector.

## Changes in Labour force in JEDB and SLSPC estates

The declining trend in several registered estates and the extent of plantation crops (tea, rubber, and coconut) corresponds to the trend in the number of registered workers in the state corporations, JEDB and SLSPC, and the other managing institutes in the country. The trend in the average number of registered workers during five-year periods from 1982 to 2018 is given in Table 3.

**Table3: Five Years Average of Number of Registered Plantation workers in the State Owned Plantation Corporations in Sri Lanka -1982-2018**

Years	Registered Plantation Workers in			Total Registered Workers (Five years average)
	JEDB	SLSPC	RPCs	
<b>1982 - 1986</b>	219,238	223,332	-	464,129
<b>1987 - 1991</b>	205,454	186,201	-	413,592
<b>1992 – 1996</b>	11,566	11,234	294,532	347,332
<b>1997 – 2001</b>	8,961	8,808	268,227	295,996
<b>2002 - 2006</b>	7,837	7,248	250,742	275,827
<b>2007 - 2011</b>	6,633	5,932	230,091	281,934
<b>2012 – 2016*</b>	12,326		178,129	189,618
<b>2017 – 2018*</b>	11,587		161,557	172,357

Source: Compiled from the various issues of Statistical Information on Plantation Crops, (1998, 2000, 2011 and 2020), Ministry of Plantation Industries. 55/75, Vaxuhall Lane, Colombo 2.

\*Includes the extent of plantation crops in Chillaw Plantation Ltd, Kurunegala, Plantation Ltd, Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd, JEDB and SLSPC from 2011.

Similarly, the total number of registered workers in the state corporations of JEDB and SLSPC declined by 62.86 percent between the periods 1982/86 and 2017/18 from 464,129 workers to 172,357 workers. The data from 1982/86 as well as data for 2012/16 shows that during each five-year period,

around 10 percent of registered workers have dropped off from estate work. The trend is common across all three management institutions in the plantation sector (JEDB, SLSPC and RPCs). It should be noted that even though the management organizations of Chillaw Plantation Ltd, Kurunegala Plantation Ltd, and Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd were amalgamated to JEDB and SLSPC, the number the of registered workers did not increase. It is possible to assume that the organizations that were amalgamated with the JEDB and SLSPC did not have any registered workers.

There is another point worth noting here in relation to the ‘estate sector population’, that is, the population of ‘registered workers’ is not in compliance with the ‘estate population’, as reported in the census & statistic report, 2012. According to Table 3, the average number of registered workers in the estates was 172,357, but the SIPC remains silent in revealing the information on none -workers in the estates. However, according to the estimated report on census & statistics, published in 2019, the total population living in the estate sector was 901,660. Thus it becomes clear from the fact that 25 percent of none labour categories are less than 15 years old, which is around 675,000 ( $675,000 - 172,357 \text{ worker population} = 503,643$ ). This indicates that some 503,643 children under 15 years old are too considered as none estate workers, living in the estates sector. Accordingly, the population of ‘registered workers’ is not compliance with the ‘estate population’. It could be argued that even though the number of registered estate workers has fast diminished over the years, they have continued to live on the estates. This trend was also observed when we conducted the FGDs in selected estates managed by the state corporation.

Apart from that, a considerable number of workers were given their termination through premature retirement and it was promoted by the RPC and the state owned plantation as well. However, it was agreed to discontinue at premature retirement in the 2003 collective agreement. A sizeable number of workers who retired under these conditions subsequently joined as casual, or temporary workers in the same estates. The workers who live in some of the estates continue to cultivate tea and are absorbed as casual workers. However, they are not entitled to receive any additional allowances that are added to the daily wage and thus, only receive the minimum wage for their work. A considerable number of casual workers employed mainly as tea pluckers receiving less than the minimum wage were also found in the selected estates. This type of casual, or temporary workers could be considered free labour, and they conveniently operate based on the needs of the estate management.

### Background Information on Abandoned Estates in the Study Area

The section gives background information about the abandoned estates and a list of the abandoned estates based on the criteria adopted in the study. Apart from that, the section also illustrates a complete list of the estates that come under the management of the state corporation in the country. Moreover, the district level distribution pattern of listed estates is also marked on the maps.

Table 4 shows the estates managed by state corporations, which include JEDB (17 estates), SLSPC (13 estates) and Elakaduwa Plantation Ltd. (10 estates). The remaining (13 estates) are managed by Chillaw Plantation Ltd and Kurunegala, which cultivate coconut and rubber, respectively (SIPC: 2018). The listed estates in Table 4 and 5 are dispersed mainly in the districts of Matale, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Kegalle and Monaragala. However, the listed estates in the table cannot be considered abandoned estates, and none of the reports reveals anything about the list of abandoned estates in the country. Therefore, the study is compelled to develop a criterion and identify the abandoned estates. Accordingly, most of the abandoned estates were found in the district of Kandy, which contains around 10 estates, followed by the district of Matale with almost 07 estates. The districts of Nuwara Eliya, Kegalle and Monaragala had 02 abandoned estates each. Thus, a total of 21 estates were identified as abandoned in the country. However, it can be assumed that many estates managed by these state corporations (state agencies) tend to be categorized as abandoned estates in the near future. As reported previously, the number of estates that fall under the category of abandoned estates is not static. It is the decision of the Ministry of Plantation Industries to consider whether an estate should be included or excluded from the management of the state corporations in the country.

**Table 4: Estates managed by *Janatha* Estate Development Board – 1998  
(in hectares)**

Districts	No	Name of the Estate	Region	Extent of Plantation crops				Distance from the nearest city
				Total	Tea/Rubber	Forest	Other	
Kandy								
	1	Galaboda	Nawalapitiya	752.50	210.25	327.3	214.95	
	2	Malgolla	Nawalapitiya	237	125	78	34	25.6 Km from Nawalapitiya
	3	Monte Cristo	Nawalapitiya	365	306.8	55.2	3	9.6 Km from Nawalapitiya
	4	Nagastenna	Nawalapitiya	1147.7	266	653.45	228.25	17.6 Km From Nawalapitiya
	5	Bowhill	Nawalapitiya	480.13	127.4	340.98	11.75	3.2 Km from Nawalapitiya
	6	Balakotuaw	Kundasala	28.88				12 Km from Kandy
	7	Galaha	Galaha	365.73	120.01	137.26	108.46	0.8 Km from Galaha
	8	Amblamana	Galaha	258.4	242.7		15.7	2.4Km from Galaha
	9	Hantana	Kandy	1149.61	537.4	334.71	277.5	4Km from Kandy
	10	Bopitiya	Deltota	321	120.25	68.5	132.25	4Km from Deltota
	11	Deltota	Deltota	410.1	259.92		150.18	2Km from Galaha
	12	Greatvalley	Deltota	490.50	196.53	293.97		1.6Km from Deltota
	13	Loolecondera	Deltota	1082.75	500.5	421.75	120.5	
	14	Hope	Hewaheta	664.2	332.2	222.7	109.3	4Km from Hewaheta
	15	Rahatungoda	Hewaheta	479.47	224.62	116.46	138.39	
	16	Rookwood (LRC)	Hewaheta	426	320	37	69	8Km from Hewaheta
	17	Mahavilla/Kanapediwa tte	Ulapana	389.19	229.37	159.82		2.4Km from Ullapana
	18	Le Vallon (Govt)	Pupuressa	933.5	525	181	227.5	30.4Km from Pupuressa
	19	Puppuressa	Puppuressa	321.40	158.51	63.39	99.50	25.6Km from Gampola
Nuwara Eliya								
	20	Kolapatana	Kothmala	382	214.5	73.25	94.25	16Km from Nawalapitiya
	21	Mount Jean	Hatton	301	149	84	68	3Km from Watawalla
Kegalle	22	Yakdessa	Nawalapitiya	423		140	283	25Km from Nawalpitiya
	23	Kandaloya	Nawalapitiya	989.93	167.4	445.63	376.9	25Km from Nawalapitiya

<b>Monaragala</b>								
	24	Kumarawatt e	Moneragalla	1822	756 Rubber	631	435	2Km from Monaragala
	25	Monerakelle	Momeragalla	584	226 Rubber	338	20	4.8Km from Monaragala

Source: Ferguson's Sri Lankan Directory 1995-1998

**Table 5 : Estates managed by the Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation- 1998 (in Hectares)**

Districts	No	Name of the Estate	Region	Extent of Plantation crops				Distance from the nearest city
				Total	Tea/Rubber	Forest	Other	
<b>Kandy</b>								
	1	Hatale *	Panwila	56671	145.49	419.29	1.93	3.2 Km from Panwilla
	2	Galpheela/ Raxawa	Panwila	626.25	349.56	217.48	59.21	1.6Km from Panwila
	3	Kellebokka	Madulkella	1388.47	802.66	75.44	510.37	4.8Km from Madulkele
	4	Warakella	Madulkella	384.61	187	168.46	29.15	8Km from Madulkele
	5	Alakolla	Madulkella	439.25	257.4	154.85	27	11.2Km from Madulkele
	6	Goomera	Madulkella	725.97	369.3		356.67	8 Km from Rangala
		Hagala	Madulkella	464.25	293.71	98.42	72.12	12.8Km from Madulkella
	7	Lebanan	Madulkella	147.8	102.3		45.5	15Km from Madulkella
	8	Hare Park /Nawanagala	Hunnasgriya	621.75	379		242.75	1 KM from Hunasgriya
	9	Waithalawa	Medamahanuwara	871.4	454.5	293.1	123.8	6.4Km from Madulkelle
	10	Woodside	Medamahanuwara	432.01	280.01		152	1Km from Madulkelle
	11	Kottaganga	Rangala	503	275	45.4	182.6	2.8Km from Rangala
<b>Matala</b>		Burnside/ Ferndale	Rangala	641	204	437		5Km from Rangala
	12	Rangala	Rangala	645	463	167	15	2Km from Rangala
	14	Hunasgiriya	Klkaduwa	804	269	347.42	187.58	4.8Km from Elkaduwa
	15	Hunugala	Klkaduwa	274.4	219.8	49.1	5.8	3.2Km from Elkaduwa

	16	Hapugahalands	Matala	194.31	Rubber 48.55	44.53	101.23	16Km from Matala
	17	Nalanda	Matala	600.44	Rubber139.11	178.53	282.8	19.32Km from Matala
	18	Gammadus	Matala	1679	185	1096	398	22.4Km from Matala
	19	Nicholaoya	Matala	332.41	138.29	131.73	62.39	9.6Km from Rattota
	18							
	19	Opalgala	Matala	767	339.4	289.6	138	19.2 from Matala
	20	Ratwatte	Ukuwala	252.75	Tea: 142.75 Rubber 33	77		4Km from Ukuwela
	21	Dangkandel/Callaratenna	Rattota	522	193	156	173	8 Km from Rattota
<b>Galle</b>	22	Bentota 0	Elpitiya	834.87	Rubber646.90	131.91	56.06	9.6Km from Elpitiya
<b>Kurunegala</b>	23	Nalla Oola	Kurunagala	357.75	Rubber 40.47	211.02	106.26	
	24	Meddegedra	Matugama	251.6	Tea: 110.4 Rubber 97.9	19.9	23.4	7.2Km from Matugama

Source: Ferguson's Sri Lankan Directory 1995-1998

\*Note: At present, Hatale estate in Kandy as well as Nagala and Ancombura estates in Matale district are being managed by Meezam Company which is a tea trading company in Sri Lanka. The official records of tea crops provided by the Ministry of Plantation Industries, reveal that there are 57 estates belonging to state plantations corporations, but the present study found details of only 47 estates. This shows the poor management of state –owned enterprises including lack of transparency.

Apart from the list of estates, the district wise distribution of the estates managed by the state corporation is also shown on the map. According to **Figure I**, the abandoned estates are formed as clusters and are isolated from other estates in the districts. Aside from being concentrated as a cluster, the abandoned estates are also concentrated on hilltops and located quite far from cities in the districts. These estates were established during the British period and primarily produced. Many of the abandoned estates were considered ideal tea estates when the British introduced tea plantations to the country in the 1850s. The British planters had selected the best possible locations for planting tea bushes in order to produce high quality tea that could compete with 'Ceylon Tea' in the global market. According to Johnson's Note Book for Tea Planters (1951), the tea estates in Labookelle, Pen-y-yan estate, Dolosbage and Loolecondra, Hewaheta, Great Velly, and others were identified as the best possible tea estates established initially. These estates are located mostly in the upper part of the

mountain range, and some of these estates are far away from the cities in the hill country. At present, several of these tea estates are managed by the state corporations.

As discussed above, the reasons for retaining the estates under the control of the state corporations of JEDB and SLSPC, and later by Elakaduwa Plantation Ltd, Chillaw Plantation Ltd, and Kurunegala Plantation Ltd, are unclear. Hence, this study attempted to elicit the reasons from eminent people associated with the plantation community in the country. According to Mr. P. Muthulingam, from the Institute of Social Development (ISD), these estates were identified as non-profitable estates by the RPCs, so they did not show interest in taking over these estates at the time of privatization. He went on to say that the location of the estates, the bad condition of access roads, and poorly maintained tea bushes all contributed to this rejection. Apart from his statements, various opinions were also derived while conducting FGDs in the respective areas. Accordingly, some participants claimed that these estates are kept under state patronage for future village expansion, while another group claimed that they are kept for diversification projects and forestry to protect the river basin under the Mahaweli development project. Nonetheless, the study provides an opportunity to discuss and explore the reasons why RPCs did not take over these estates.

### **Abandoned Estates in the Study Area**

The section also gives the list of estates where the present study was carried out including the details of FGDs and the distribution of families during post and prior transaction periods of abandonment of estates. The FGDs were conducted in the selected estates in the districts of Kandy, Matale, Kegalle and Monaragala. The estates of Knuckles, Baranda, and Pambaragala had experienced a significant decline of an average of 75 percent. Among the estates, the Sirigala in the district of Monaragala primarily produced rubber. Among the estates listed in Table 5, the trend on the Dodangoda side estate is somewhat different from that of other estates. Despite the fact that the estates in the three divisions of Veeriyakola, Vevathenna and Hungurukamam were identified as abandoned, the families on these estates had not relocated.

**Figure 1**

# **Distribution of State Corporation Estates in Sri Lanka – 2021**



**Source:** Compiled from the information provided in the Ferguson's Sri Lanka Directory (1998) and the GIS was used to locate the estates.



**Table 6: List of Abandoned Estate Selected for the Study -2022**

No.	Name of the Estates	Administrative Districts	Major crops planted	Number of families in the estate*	
				Prior to Close	At Present
1	Knuckles	Kandy	Tea	600	120
2	Thawatagala	Kandy	Tea	70	19
3	Kirindi Ella	Kandy	Tea	36	02
4	Nagestenna	Kandy	Tea	345	225
5	Baranda	Kandy	Tea	500	122
6	Woodside	Kandy	Tea	150	200
7	Wariyapola	Matale	Rubber/Tea	-	200
8	Bambaragala	Matale	Tea	300	161
9	Musagala	Matale	Tea	171	67
10	Kandaloya LD	Kegalla	Tea	60	20
11	Kandaloya 90 acre	Kegalla	Tea	40	30
12	Kandaloya UD	Kegalla	Tea, Cardamom and Coffee	120	40
13	Aliyawatta	Monaragala	Rubber	220	300
	<b>Total</b>			<b>2012</b>	<b>1386</b>

Source: Field survey, 2022

\*The numbers were collected from the filed while conduct the FGDs

### Status of Abandoned Estates in Matale District

The FGDs was carried out at Wariyapola, Mausagala and Bambaragala estates in Matale district. All three of these estates were brought under government management. Of these three estates, Mausagala and Bambarakala estates are completely abandoned, while in Wariyapola Estate, only the upper division of the estates has been abandoned. Rubber and Coco are the major crops in the Wariyapola estates, but tea is the main crop in the other two plantations. All three estates are located in hilly areas, and they are far from the cities and service centers. The roads and the path to reach the estates are in deplorable condition and have not been maintained for the last several years. Government sponsored infrastructure development projects are unlikely to be reached the abandoned estates due to the lack of political strength and representation in elected bodies. Huge grasses have grown to twice their normal height, posing a serious threat to anyone traveling down this road.

The workers we interviewed in the estates typically walk at least three kilometers from their homes to catch a bus to and from the city. Transport is limited and only operates in the peak hours in the mornings and evenings, so estate workers usually have to walk through the shortcut path to reach the city, mainly Ratthota for their urgent needs. Even for urgent needs, those who are using the shortcut path and returning home need three to four hours.

In the Mausagala estate, a tea crop was discovered on 171 hectares of land. The estate was formerly owned by the Carson Company. A section of the estates was distributed to the two influential families in the district. The influential families were identified as those who had lost land due to the Mahaweli project, and a portion of the estates was given to them as compensation to the influent families living in the district. The estate is now managed by five partners from the same family, and there are currently 42 families living on the estate. The estate owner, who claimed to be the landowner, distributed about 120 perches of land to 12 families. However, they have not received the title deed, except for one family in the estate. The tea crops seem to be very old and neglected with voids widespread in between the tea plants. The estate also continues to pluck tea leaves from the bushes, expecting a minimum of 25 kilos per day to earn the minimum daily wage. In the case of plucking less than 25 kilos, the estate management gives Rs.25/= per kilo instead of the minimum daily wage. It should be noted that there is discrimination found in relation to the payment of the daily wage to male and female workers in the estates. Male workers are paid Rs.700/= per day, whereas female workers are paid Rs. 650. Moreover, the workers are not entitled to ETF/ETF and other benefits like health care, childcare, etc.

The common toilet is shared by the 42 resident families. There is no way to obtain a separate room in the existence of line rooms or houses for newly married couples to live in the estates. Due to the lack of new housing, there are always two or three families living in the same room close to each other. Different types of sexual offenses are happening in households. The majority of the men in the estates work in the nearby village of Vilankawatha. They are not provided with social welfare services by the estate management. In this context, the residents of the estate began to communicate with the Grama Niladhari (GN) officer and the Divisional Secretary (DS). As a result, some people receive government provided Samurdhi relief. It is alleged that the family members in the estate are not enthusiastic about attending the meeting organized by the GN. However, in several instances, GN, and DS officers have listened to them and tried to understand the difficulties that are encountered by the estate workers. They now go to the GN and DS for their various needs. Recently, the GN provided Rs. 2000/-to maintain the toilet in the estate, which was made possible by the good relationship maintained by both the estate workers and the GN and DS officers.

The school-going children must attend the Thambalagala school. It is three kilometers away from the estate, which has classes only up to GCE O/L. Those who wish to enroll for GCE A/L must go to Kandawela Maha Vidyalaya which is 7 km away from the estate. In the school, 7 pupils will be studying for GCE A/L. However, some of the young people are working in the Araliya Rice Mill and a few of them are also employed at the Araliya Hotels in Dambulla and Nuwaraeliya. The workers on the Mousagala estate are preoccupied with building their own homes. Members who attend the FGDs have explicitly stated that the GN and DS officers have promised to help them in building new houses, once they get ownership of the land for such purposes. Moreover, it will help them start their lives on par with the community living in Vilankawatha village. It is also reported that the ISD is working on addressing the drinking water shortage in the estate.

Bambaragala estate is also one of the abandoned estates in Matale District and is managed by the JEDB. The estate had an extent of 300 hectares of tea, but it currently only has 15 hectares of tea. The abandoned areas were primarily planted with eucalyptus trees, which have grown well and are now covered in a dense forest. The estates today have 161 families, occupying the 105 available rooms. There are no extra line rooms provided for newly formed families in the estate, and newly married couples and their families also live with their parents and grandparents. The members who participated in the FGD reported that there is a family with ten members that is compelled to live in one room with untold hardships.

It has been more than twenty years since the estate withdrew from tea cultivation. However, the workers who worked in the Bambaragala estate have not yet received their full EPF and ETF payments. At one point, the estate management promised to pay the balance by selling the Eucalyptus trees. Based on the promise, the estate workers also gave support to felling the trees. A total of 364 huge Eucalyptus trees were sold in 2015. To this day, however, the plantation management has not paid for the balance payments of EPF and ETF. The estate has been amalgamated with the Midland estate and is now under the SLSPC. It should be noted that the estate management has given up on maintaining the estate of 15 hectares of tea bushes. The estate is now completely covered with trees, and as previously stated, in addition to Eucalyptus and other wild trees were grown in the estate. A few Jack trees and Kithul Palm grown in between the wild trees in the estate. But, the workers are not allowed to get the benefits of Jackfruit and make Kithul Palm syrup from these trees by the owner of the estate.

The men in the estate's families frequently commute to work in the nearby village for various jobs from that they get income for their survivals. But many of the male workers working in Colombo particularly in the construction field, and a few young female workers are employed in the Middle East. Apart from that, a few women work in cardamom gardens, which are located around 10 km away

from the estates. Those who are working in the cardamom fields must walk a long distance to earn Rs.1000 per day. Around five young women who came after the completion of work in the cardamom field went for the bath in a distant place and then joined FGDs along with other participants expressed their woes in the following manner. They revealed the changing pattern of occupation during their parents' time and the current status. The collecting of matured cardamom is not the routine job like tea plucking or tapping rubber and they get works during the months of November and December for harvesting the cardamom and during this period young women get regular jobs. But rest of the year only a few get jobs in the cardamom estates. They will have to walk around ten kilometers from their residence to reach the destination, and get come back home walking through unsafe roads in the late evening. However, the plantation management forbids them from growing such crops in the area where they live and seek income. In some cases, when the residents of the estate attempted to plant jack and coconut trees the management forbade them and arbitrarily removed them from their garden. In some instances, estate managers have sought the support of police to dismantle the livelihood activities of the people in these estates. Participants persistently reported that they tend to have a semi-slavery life in the abandoned estates. They further went on to say that though there are sufferings in the RPC owned estates, their life is secured in many aspects including livelihood, welfare, basic amenities, etc. The families we met in the estate seem to have a better relationship with GN and Divisional Secretaries, and they are obtaining some benefits from these institutions such as Samurdhi relief. All they need for their livelihood is a plot of land on which to build a house. However, the families are approaching several institutes and requesting an allocation of a piece of land for housing, but so far, they have failed, and that right has been constantly denied.

The study found that a significant proportion of estate lands have been taken under the purview of the Forest Department, which is a new development in state-owned plantations, and people are being prevented from entering those lands and engaging in any form of livelihood activity. A female worker at the Mausagalla plantation in Matale remarked that she had to pluck 25 Kg of tea to collect the entire wage of 650 Rs, and if she fails to do so, or if she plucks less than 25 Kg, she would only get 20 Rs per kilo, which is severe exploitation. Another female worker in the same estate reported that she worked 22 days in November 2021 and earned just 13,500 Rs, which is an incredibly low income to support a family of five. These are untold tragedies and sufferings of these individuals that are systematically hushed up by the owners of these estates and top-level authorities. This seems to be a form of systemic discrimination. We could not identify a single government servant, teacher, or anyone who has thus far entered university in this estate, and a larger proportion of youth labour at Araliya rice mill, the country's largest rice mill. The distance to the DS division is approximately 10 kilometers.

In this area, there is still a productive relationship between Sinhalese and estate dwellers. Some estate residents have engaged in self-employment with the support of an NGO called SEDEC (Caritas), yet basic amenities such as housing, sanitation, and drinking water all remain dismal. Respondents were also of the view that they do not get sufficient information on the part of public institutions to obtain certain services, namely social security benefits, livelihood supports, self-employment training, etc. Although we observed a similar pattern at the Bambaragala estate in Matale, estate management has taken certain suppressive measures to discourage residents from exploiting bear or uncultivated lands, particularly those available in the vicinity of their settlements. Thus, lands remain futile – residents of these estates are not permitted to use any resources, and are not permitted to engage in home gardening or any sort of agriculture in their immediate proximity.

One male respondent stated that when he attempted to plant some coconut trees in his garden, it was prevented by the estate manager with the support of the police. Estate management uses measures such as seeking the assistance of the police to suppress estate residents who attempt to start anything for a living on estate lands, putting their lives further at risk. The study also found that only 10% have access to toilets and purified water. Respondents on this estate also reported that there is no visible discrimination in public institutions, but there are barriers to accessing the information on public services –because the estate remains dysfunctional, they are unlikely to receive information from government institutions. “Much of the difficulties we are experiencing is due to the estate being abandoned or shuttered,” a 25-year-old male respondent narrated. The study found that while 95% have voting rights, around 10% lack basic documents such as a National Identity Card, Marriage Certificate, and Birth Certificate. Politicians from all parties visit these estates during elections, but they never extend their services, and they even visit the estates after election victories, respondents added. Because plantation workers do not have representation in the Pradheshiya Sabhas, services provided by the Pradheshiya Sabhas do not reach abandoned estates. So, there is no sufficient pressure on political leaders or other concerned parties to accommodate estate residents in development programs.

### **The Status of Abandoned Estates in Kandy and Kegalle Districts**

The FGDs were conducted in six abandoned estates in the district of Kandy. They are Knuckles, Thawatagala, Kirinti Ella, Nagestenna, Woodside and Baraanda -these abandoned estates are managed by the state corporation. Tea was formerly the main crop in these abandoned estates. Above Table 5 gives details of families living in the six estates in the district of Kandy. According to the

above information, it can be seen that the number of families living in the estates other than the Woodsite estate has dropped many times. It should be noted that the three divisions of Woodsite estate-namely Veeriyakola, Vevethenna, and Hungurugamam were abandoned by the management. Around 200 families are living on the estate and some ten workers are still working in the estates temporarily, and other major occupations are garment factories (80) mason work (35) and school teachers (01).

Many of those who continue to live on the estates in the abandonment are seen as having no choice, but to live in the estate, and many of them believe that the management will make suitable arrangements for their lives in some way. In addition, they have now established friendly relations with the people of the nearby villages. Many male workers are getting daily jobs in the villages. Despite this, all but a few of the young people in these abandoned estates have jobs in faraway places. As far as overseas work is concerned, only four females are working as housemaids abroad. Often, mothers in families with two young children have gone abroad. They say that they have gone abroad to work to complete their mission, such as spending money on their children's education, rebuilding their homes, and settling debts, etc. More and more people are seen going to work in the morning and returning home in the evening. Furthermore, the availability of schools, specifically Kalaimagal Vidyalayam, which is three kilometers away from the estate and has classes up to GCE O/L, and the availability of private transport facilities to go to schools either Teldeniya or Digana were additional factors that contributed to the families' decision to stay in the estate.

Among the abandoned estates, the Knuckles and Thawatakala are located in a place of scenic mountain scenery. The place is also a tourist attraction. The plantations in this hilly area have been encroached upon to construct restaurants and hotels by influential political actors and businessmen. Abandoned plantation workers are also working in the distant cardamom orchards, and the phenomenon is also evident in the Kirandi Ella estate as well. Kirindi Ella once housed 32 families, but now only two families live there.

The families in Knuckles rely on the jobs available in the nearby villages to supplement their income. The abandoned Knuckles estate land has been used to build several restaurants and hotels, but none of the workers' families are involved in such activities on the estate. The families in the estate are also expecting the Grama Niladharis and the Divisional Secretaries to interfere in the allocation of land to the estate workers to initiate some income generating activities in the estate. The bear lands are being used by powerful local and central politicians for their own purposes.

The Baranda estate, located in the vicinity of Nawalapitiya town in the Kandy district, is also a significant estate under the category of abandoned estates. Since 2006, the Baranda estate has been abandoned. A number of organizations have sought to establish freshwater fishing and dairy farms on

around 100 hectares of the estate's abandoned tea growing areas. However, the freshwater fishing project was discontinued due to an inability to meet the reasonable requests of estate workers in the Baranda estate. The estate workers in Baranda who have been living in the estate since its inception are the third or fourth generation of migrant Indian Tamil workers, and they are demanding a plot of land for housing as well as provisions for appropriate income-generating activity in the estate's vicinity. But the demands have not been considered by the management. Though this pattern was observed in other estates taken for this study, the Baranda estate remains significant because of the persistent struggle for land rights, both collectively and individually – some of these campaigns for land rights are supported by MONLAR, a NGO fighting for land rights of all Sri Lankans across the ethnic divide. The organization itself supports court cases filed by workers and residents of this estate in relation to violation of land rights, and there are some progresses in these cases as well, which we could not find in other estates. The study shows that plantation people lack institutional support, primarily external, to effectively undertake their campaign for land rights.

The struggle waged by the people is not against the development projects in those areas because the resident workers are not in a position to evacuate without any assurance of alternative income generating activities. These demands have been carried out by the people themselves. A few members of the estate community have been tirelessly conducting meetings with responsible officers and political leaders to ensure justice and fair and just solution for the estate workers in Baranda. The members have to maintain the records of all the meetings, etc. and be lenient in providing information about the estates and develop a cordial relationship with the GN and other officers in the area, the Divisional Secretariat officials, as well.

There were around 500 families living in the Baranda estate, but now there are only 122 families. Yet only about 50 families are working on the estate and some families have migrated to nearby estates. However, their relatives continued to live here. The payments of ETF and ETF have not been completed for those who have left the estates or who have been relieved of estate work. It was attempted to set up a large 'quarry,' and the decision was made to declare the area unsafe for residence. However, court cases have been filed in the High Court to protect the interests of the people in various ways. The estate workers who live on the estate require a decent place to live, because existing houses are found to be unsanitary due to a lack of proper drainage -there are no adequate sanitation facilities as well.

During an interview at the Baranda estate, Nawalapitya, a female respondent (52 years old), stated that "we have been struggling for land rights for more than twenty years and court cases are underway and Monlar (an NGO that fights for land rights) is helping us to continue court cases – this is a struggle for winning land rights for 130 families living in this estate", she further added. Another female respondent

from the same estate lamented that “we glorified this country by our labour, sweat, and blood, but our lives continue to remain miserable; all we ask is one acre land for our survival, livelihood, and future generation; we can cultivate coffee, vegetable, coconut, and other crops, for which we can seek bank loans by mortgaging the land – which is the only way out to resolve long-standing problems in the plantation sector”. He finally added that, “we are not asking for separate states, just a plot of land for our existence”. There is a strong message in this statement to policymakers and bureaucrats of this country, and it clearly shows that their existence itself is a struggle due to the absence of land and housing rights. Respondents explained that in 2003, two individuals from the ethnic majority community won a court case and purchased 100 acres of land for just Rs. 3,84982, paying Rs.3849 per acre. Furthermore, workers have reported that they are willing to pay 5000 Rs per acre, but their demand is often denied. There are 1040 voters in the Kadikanchena GN division, which is part of the Pasbagekorale DS office, but only 30 Sinhalese voters are there and rest are Tamils. Nonetheless, the latter have no influence on the DS office or local government to exert some pressure to address underlying issues of the estate residents.

There was an interesting case found in this study, that is, a 60-year-old male respondent who is an active social worker, as well as a priest running his own Hindu temple of God Iyappan, narrated his case concerning land rights. When he was an estate labourer in 1993, he occupied nearly 2 acres of estate land, and was eventually stopped from working by the management, who later informed him that unless he returned the land, he would not be given work on the estate. He did not, however, give up his fight, and in 1993 he filed a case in a court of law and fought for his land through his lawyers. Finally, he won the case in 1997 and paid the Land Reform Commission a sum of 30,000 Rs. The officials of LLRC came to his estate and surveyed his land and gave him the title deed. He had spent a total of 70,000 on this case, and the court dismissed it because the opposing clients had not appeared in court for a long time.

Nevertheless, as in other estates, social wellbeing remains extremely low, and the entire welfare system of these estates has come to a halt causing enormous difficulties in obtaining basic services such as health, elder care, child care, and so on. A pregnant mother in Kolapatana estate, Nawalapitiya bemoaned the difficulty of accessing health services, stating that they must travel 24 kilometers to Hapugatalawa hospital to attend clinics. In terms of employment, some have engaged in self – employment, while others tend to go outside to neighboring towns for a living – there is a great deal of uncertainty in their lives as there is no institutional protection and support mechanism to assist people in abandoned estates. Uncertainty manifests itself in many spheres, such as social welfare, social security, health, livelihood, and so on, necessitating the immediate attention of policymakers



and bureaucrats to address these issues in policy design, budget allocation, and implementation. Around 80% of respondents in the study area pointed out that distributing estate lands among estate residents is the only long-term solution to this problem.

The Kandaloya estate comes under the administrative division of Kegalla, but it is located on the border between the districts of Kandy and Kegalla. The Kandaloya is also closer to Nawalpitiya town. Kandaloya estate has three divisions: Kandaloya Lower Division, Kandaloya Upper Division, and 90 acres. The estate is managed by the JEDB and a total of 206 families were there before it was abandoned, and now only 105 families are living in the estate. In 2007, the JEDB removed the estate from its function. The estate administration also distributed the tea bushes to the workers to maintain the tea bushes and was involved in the plucking of tea. However, the system was withdrawn by the management of the estates after 15 years of maintaining the tea bushes carried out by the workers. The management did not give any reasons for the withdrawal and the workers are demanding a restoration of the system that was given to them. A few of them are working as temporary workers on the same estate, while others are looking for work in coffee and cardamom gardens based on the availability of work.

### **The case of abandoned estates in Monaragala district**

A total of six estates are managed by the state corporation in the district of Monaragala. They are Nakkalai, Muppannaveli, Kubukkana, Moragala, Sirigala and Aliyawatta. Among the estates Sirigala and Aliyawatta fall under the category of abandoned estates in the district where we conducted FGDs. As per the information collected from the FGDs, the total number of families living in Sirigala is 225 and in Aliyawatta it is 260, as of March 2022. Even though, the estate management had abandoned the estates, many families remained in the estates -many members of the family work as temporary rubber tappers in the estates. A few families on the estates engage in small-scale vegetable cultivation, poultry, and dairy farming. However, a considerable number of family members go to work in Monaragala town and other villages in the district and return back to their homes on a daily basis. During the season, the harvesting of sugarcane provides a significant source of income for the estate's resident workers. Those who are working for Pellawatta Sugar factory are receiving Rs.700/ per day for harvesting sugar cane in the field. Aside from the jobs mentioned above, a large number of young females work as housemaids not only in the cities of Monaragala and Matara, but also in the Middle Eastern countries.

The road connecting Sirigala and Aliyawatta to the main road leading to Monaragala town is in poor condition. The two estates are eight kilometers away from the main road and are nestled in the mountains. Because of the poor condition of the road, the owners of public transport constantly refuse to provide transport until it is repaired. Thus, those who want to go to work outside of the estates must walk from the mountain to reach the town. If they wish to travel in a three-wheel (trishaw), they have to pay Rs.1200/-for a return journey. The harsh condition of the road access is the biggest challenge, as it prevents them from regularly involving the workers of Sirigala and Aliyawatta in the district of Monaragalla in income generating activities.

The workers are mostly housed in old line rooms, with only 10% of them having access to toilets. The resident families are satisfied with the supply of electricity and water supply. The water supply system was provided by the ISD. Apart from the ISD, a number of other NGOs like OSCOT, Plan Sri Lanka, Organization of Monaragala People Development, etc., were also involved in various projects in the estates. As far as school education is concerned, the students of Sirigala have access to study up to the primary level, and many students stop their school education at the primary level because of the unavailability of transport facilities, whereas the school education in Aliyawatta has up to grade nine, and after that, the students have to go to a town school to continue their education, which is located 10 kilometers away from the estates. However, at present, 15 students are following the GCE A/L and those who have successfully completed the GCE A/L in 2017 are enrolled in the College of Education. The GN and DS officers also provide certain public services to the workers' families in the estates -the Samurthi payment is the most important of them. However, the abandoned estates are not entirely accommodated under the administrative systems of the GN and DS in the district of Monaragala. It was found that consumption of illicit alcohol is common among a few estate families, and those who drink are frequently involved in domestic violence.

## **A Comparative Analysis of Socio –Economic Political Status of Plantation Residents in the Abandoned Estates**

### **Poor Status of Social Welfare**

The study proves the worsening condition of social welfare in the abandoned estates. Even the new housing programs have not reached these estates sufficiently. Some of these estates are declared a disaster zone by the NBRO, but they have not been provided with safe places, lands, or new houses. A 56-year-old worker at the Bambaragala estate stated that he had not seen any re-roofing in his line over the last 56 years! Welfare services have primarily diminished in government estates – namely, the PHDT does not carry out any developmental projects in these estates since they come under the purview of the government. Access to toilets, better housing, clean and safe drinking water, and other social amenities are extremely lacking in these estates – in many cases, the Child Development Centre (CDC) remains unhygienic and deplorable. Therefore, workers are hesitant to send their kids to such sites owing to a sense of fear of disease and insecurity. It is also crucial to understand that if the welfare of the workers is well-maintained and improved, they will contribute to better estate maintenance in their capacity through volunteer interventions. As discussed elsewhere in this report, it is vital to pay attention to workers' welfare in all possible ways to improve productivity – while there may not be a direct impact, it may have an indirect impact on productivity, including regular attendance, volunteer contributions for estate development, achieving targets, retaining workers, and so forth.

The interview with school teachers in the study area revealed that student drop-out has been exceptionally high in that area owing to poverty and livelihood challenges – specifically, parents are less concerned about their children's education as they are unable to manage expenses for education. Therefore, they find jobs in the garment factory at the age of 16 and 17, as they have easy access to the garment in that location. Most of the JEDP and SLSPC estates are located far off from major cities, and in some circumstances, nearby towns. The level of education, in particular, remains poor, and we identified a relatively higher level of school drop-out rate in these estates.

During the field visit, we observed the worsening trend in health services – none of the selected estates had Estate Medical Assistance (EMA) and Ambulance facility – when workers are attacked by snakes, bees, insects, leopards, and other animals, they will have to hire out a three-wheeler to reach the hospital, for which they will receive only three days of medical leave, despite staying in hospital for

more than one week. Furthermore, non-estate workers constitute the majority of the total population in government estates, and they are excluded from social welfare schemes such as the out-grower system, housing, and sanitation facilities by the management. These are some of the factors that discourage workers from working on estates and persuade them to seek employment elsewhere. This, in turn, has resulted in a rapid migration among youth towards the nearest cities, where they are primarily engaged in construction works, hotels, shops, garments, and other informal and unorganized sectors.

Poor social welfare is partly caused by lack of access to public services – residents in the abandoned estates, like other areas in the plantations, remain excluded from the larger public administration framework and they even find it difficult to access Grama Niladari to get done pressing issues. Institutions such as Divisional Secretariat, Local Government Authorities, Agriculture Department, Agrarian Service Centre, MoH, Disaster Management Centre, National Housing Authority and other public institutions have not expanded their services to these people who are in desperate need owing to closure of the entire estate or part of the estate. Although some services are being provided, there has been overt and covert discriminations and ill –treatments along ethnicity and language lines. Lack of penetration of public services not only puts this community at risk, but also make them more vulnerable and impoverished. This reminds again the long –standing demands of the Hill Country politicians, civil society, trade unions and academia to bring the plantation settlements under the state administrative purview, separating from industry and creating new GN divisions with basic amenities including housing, land rights to enable them to have a dignified life on par with other citizens of the country. The current plight of the plantation community in the abandoned estates informs policy community and other concerned parties to provide equal status in governance, land, housing, health etc. which are vitally important to transform this community.

### **Status of Labor and Human Rights**

Analysis of responses and observations reveals there has not been much improvement in protecting and promoting workers’ rights in these estates. Workers were anxious about constant ignorance of their demands on the part of management – this is visible in terms of their welfare issues, access to health services, sanitation, re-roofing, and so forth. Workers continue to demand equal status and rights on par with other communities in Sri Lanka. They were admitting that they have been contributing to Sri Lanka’s economy and foreign earnings in a significant manner, but their living condition and socio-economic status remain dismal. They further reiterated that they are equal citizens of this country, exercising voting rights for more than three decades, but their voices and demands have long been

denied and disregarded by successive governments of the country. Respondents were of the view that RPC companies are providing some welfare facilities to workers, but in the case of abandoned estates, they are left out by the government, Hill Country politicians, estate management, and other concerned parties. In some estates, workers have received the EPF and ETF statements only after ten years, and they were doubtful whether their contribution is properly directed to the Central Bank. This indicates the violation of workers' rights to know about their contributions and outstanding amounts. It is worth noting that, under the Right to Information Act, they are now submitting applications to obtain this information, and the workers should be further educated in this regard to keep them informed citizens on their rights and entitlements. This is indeed a valuable tool to hold management and other concerned parties accountable and transparent in order to ensure workers' rights and entitlements. Most importantly, civil society, unions, and workers can utilize the Act to disclose small- and large-scale corruption occurring in the estates. The Auditor General Department's report of 2015 reports these observations on EPF and gratuity issues in SLSPC estates: "Even though the contribution to the Employees' Provident Fund for a month should be remitted before the 30th of the month, following action had not been taken to remit the contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund payable for the employees of 12 estates amounting to Rs.316, 852,477. Even though the gratuity should be paid within 30 days from the date of termination of service, action had not been taken to pay a sum of Rs.269, 164,378 relating to 12 estates."

Sri Lanka has ratified several international human rights treaties that are of relevance to the people in the abandoned estates, specifically the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Yet, workers continue to be exploited because implementation is not systematic. Under the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, all companies have the responsibility to respect human rights. As per Guiding Principle 13, they should "(a) avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities, and address such impacts when they occur" and "(b) seek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products or services by their business relationships, even if they have not contributed to those impacts" Under the Guiding Principles, "human rights" are to be understood "at a minimum" as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Labour Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Right to Sanitation and Water remains another concern in these estates. Like the poor housing condition, the current latrines on most plantations were documented to be nearly

50 years old and in a state of dysfunction. Unmanaged sewage was reported to be a major problem, with refuse flowing directly into the yards of inhabitants. Open cesspools, raw sewage from latrines, and clogged shallow ditches were a common sight in many of these estates. Consumption of untreated ground water is the primary cause of water-borne diseases such as diarrhea and cholera, which are prevalent among plantation workers.

The non-provision of water and good sanitation is, therefore, a violation of the human right to water, as articulated by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Economic and Cultural Rights in its General Comment No 15 on the right to water in 2003. The right to water is not explicitly mentioned in the ICESCR, but the Committee considers it, “falls within the category of guarantees essential for securing an adequate standard of living, particularly since it is one of the most fundamental conditions for survival” (para 3). “The right to water is also inextricably related to the right to the highest attainable standard of health (art. 12, para. 1) and the rights to adequate housing and adequate food” (art. 11, para. 1). In addition, medical facilities remain in deplorable condition. Due to the non-availability of health services within the estate premises, patients are forced to attend private clinics. There was often neither a health facility, nor an ambulance available in the estates which makes the plantation people extremely vulnerable to contracting Covid19. This is likely in violation of the right to health, guaranteed under Article 12 of the ICESCR, which states that State parties recognize “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”. In 2000, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights adopted its General Comment No. 14 on the right to the highest attainable standard of health, which breaks down the right to health in a number of key elements, many of which are likely to be violated in relation to abandoned plantations, particularly availability, accessibility, and affordability (para. 12).

The right to non-exclusion, as put forward by Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, can be discussed in this context. The provision of public services and social security benefits is something that everyone should have as an inalienable right. This should be accompanied with different types of basic necessities like education, and health care because they are fundamental human needs. In fact, one can say that it is public action coupled with a social audit of entitlement delivery that would bridge the gap between promises and delivery, that is, the schemes formulated and their implementation for the purpose of public good, allowing unhindered access. In such a case of abandoned plantations, people have been left out both by the government as well as plantation companies, leaving their future at risk.

## **The Impact of Trade Union Factor**

We observed that the trade unions are not powerful or influential in the selected estates. This is partly due to poor union membership and splits among the unions. This has a detrimental effect on workers' rights, bargaining power, and industrial relations. In plantations, strong trade unions are vital for various reasons such as winning and ensuring workers' rights, bargaining for workers' welfare, and having effective industrial relations. Further, a powerful union can fight, demand, and protest for workers' rights. Yet, due to the ineffective status of unions in these estates, constant violation of labour rights continues to be a common feature – particularly in the sectors of wage provision o, social security payments such as EPF and ETF, setting norms for daily work, cleaning the field, and applying fertilizers and chemicals. In some instances, salaries are not provided on time, and there is a significant delay every month. In other words, government and responsible agencies are continually violating workers' entitled rights, which they deserve. In this regard, many judicial cases are underway, and civil society groups and trade unions are actively working to improve things. Since the government is managing these estates, it is the responsibility of the government to ensure their right to social security payments. This is not the case in other government entities, where employees receive their pension, EPFs, and ETFs on time.

Moreover, it revealed that in all effects, people tend to seek brokers to get even their statutory benefits for which they spend some 30,000 - 50,000 rupees due to the complex administrative procedures and bottlenecks. The broker or the middleman facilitates workers to overcome administrative hurdles and issues in relation to documentation by using his informal networks, relationships, and influences. These unethical and corrupt practices continue to be an alarming issue in the estates. Lack of education, awareness, poor documentation practices, language barriers, and lack of exposure compel the workers to seek brokers; nevertheless, there are some improvements in recent years. Importantly, since these estates are coming under the direct purview of the Ministry of Plantation Industry and Ministry of Public Enterprises, it is the fundamental duty of these ministries, and related institutions to address this issue. The study informs that trade union and civil society groups could have discussions and negotiations with these ministries to take a firm decision on the very issue in the Cabinet and Parliament. The highest decision-making body in the country is the Cabinet of Ministers followed by Parliament – therefore, these issues should be taken to that level to demand the attention on the gross violation of labor rights – under such circumstances, some policy decisions could settle this issue and find out a mechanism to avoid recurrence to ensure workers' rights to social security payment.

In the selected estates, a large number of timber trees had been cut down in the name of settling EFP and ETF dues – millions worth of timber trees were sold-out for this purpose. However, a significant number of retired workers are still waiting at the gate to receive the money – we found that the managers have had cut deals with contractors, and there were so many malpractices in this business. Workers strongly feel that only a fraction reached the head office, and the rest was stolen. Workers also stated that only some received EPF money after selling these trees, but not all. In this business, managers unlawfully stole many trees for their own purposes, and workers have resisted such unethical and unlawful acts– eventually, those managers were transferred while the services of others were terminated. However, this has not come to an end, but rather continues in most of these estates in different manners with various contractors – it was shocking that political actors are also involved in this business, and they have cut deals with relevant parties for their shares.

Typically, trade union politics play a low-key role in addressing issues related to maintenance, livelihoods, and welfare issues. Some of these estates, or parts of the estates, namely divisions, have been closed for several years, and many students in the worker families are unable to receive letters from the estate management to attend interviews, apply for jobs, from colleges and universities, as the postal service came to a standstill – this was a serious concern for youth and their parents.

One former Kangani in Mousagalla estate stated, “currently, 15,000 tea bushes are not in use due to poor maintenance – if the management and government take some measures for investment, we could help clean up those fields which will provide us some forms of livelihood and he further stated that in my experience, estate maintenance depends on the nature, interest, agricultural experience, and qualification of managers – some managers have empathy and sympathy on estates and the workers, and they have a desire to preserve estates and retain workers for its sustainability – in such cases, they do as much as possible to improve the productivity, maintenance, and workers’ livelihoods.”

(A 53-year-old Male Kangani)

“Seven years ago, there were seven divisions in this estate, and now it has come down to three – other four divisions are fully-abandoned and has become a forest due to poor maintenance – as a result, people who live in this estate are largely affected for their livelihoods, and now we depend on outside jobs....if the government takes some measures to clean up those abandoned divisions and invest in maintenance, people will come back to work – for us, estate work is more convenient than that of outside works.”

(A 56-year-old female worker in Bambaragala estate)



### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has explored the crux livelihood reality and socio-economic and political status of the plantation people in the abandoned estates. The study mainly reflects the socio, economic, political, and cultural issues faced by people of the abandoned estates in the country. The ‘abandoned estates’ are generally found in the plantation sector managed by the state corporations, namely JEDB and SLSPC estates. There needs a long-term reopening and sound operating plan to rejuvenate the industry. Sustainable income and long-run employment generation through Government intervention are necessary, ensuring an alternative source of livelihood. The study underscores a revitalization movement for rejuvenation of the distressed tea industry.

In general, the study has highlighted the changing patterns in terms of the number of estates, the extent of land for cultivation, and the population in the estates that have been managed by the two state corporations of JEDB and SLSPC. The study reveals that the number of estates managed by the two-state corporations has been steadily decreasing, from 64 estates in 1992 to 29 estates in 2010. It is a precipitous decline. However, notable changes are taking place after 2011. The Ministry of Plantation Industries has accommodated three management companies, namely Chillaw Plantation Ltd; Kurunegala Plantation Ltd; and Elkaduwa Plantation Ltd along with the existing corporation of JEDB and SLSPC. Consequently, the number of estates that come under the state corporation has increased from 29 estates in 2011 to estates 57 in 2017. Though the number of estates that are managed by the state corporation increased, it has not been reflected in the extent of the estates. The total average extent of estates during 2012/16 was 9,446 hectares and it has marginally declined to 9,223 hectares in 2017/18. As far as the average population living in the estates comes under the state corporation is concerned, it has gradually declined from 12,326 in 2012/16 to 11,523 in 2017/18.

The case study was carried out in thirteen abandoned estates managed by state corporations. The following are some of the common observations found in the study in the chosen estates. The primary observation is related to the ownership of the abandoned estates. Accordingly, though it is abandoned, the property of the estates is still under the management of the state corporation. Workers' descendants are not permitted to construct any permanent structures on the estates without prior approval. Moreover, the estate management recruits workers to work on the estate on a temporary basis and pays them only the minimum daily wage, with no other benefits. It should be noted that, with

the exception of the estates in the district of Monaragala, almost all of the abandoned estates were prominent tea-producing estates during the British period and were mostly located on mountain peaks. Apart from that, the existing tea bushes in the estates are extremely old tea with a lot of vacancies that did not take any maintenance work and tend to give very low productivity. Furthermore, poor quality road access, the inability to continue secondary school education, and the extraordinary difficulties faced by female workers are also common issues in estates.

Despite exclusions and discrimination, the families on the abandoned estates try their best to maintain friendly relationships with local level state institutions, and they do receive some benefits from them. Apart from government institutions, a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also assisting these communities with limited resources and capacities. The water supply projects, skills development, etc., helped them to gain confidence in their social lives. It should be noted that some educated families who lived in the estates have migrated prior to the abandonment of the estates. The migrant families have obtained the partial payment of EPF, ETF etc. and some of them are settled in the Vanni districts and the Eastern part of the country. The migrated families are constantly inquiring about the progress of the balance payment of their EPF and ETF. However, the families who are currently living in the estates will continue to stay since they do not have any alternatives other than living in the same estates. Therefore, appropriate policy measures should be adopted to preserve their livelihood and future. Based on the analysis of the empirical evidence, the study proposes the following recommendations to address the socio-economic issues in the abandoned estates.

## **Recommendations**

1. A full -pledge data collection on the families living in the abandoned estates needs to be carried out across the country to assess their socio-economic and political status. There shall be a data management system purely for this purpose and it should be updated on a regular basis. Because there are plenty of abandoned estates across the country managed by SPCs and RPCs so documenting the status of the people in these estates will help develop a program to address pressing issues using national and international avenues.
2. The families living in the existing line rooms in these abandoned estates are in awful conditions. The line rooms have not been repaired in the last two decades. So that the government should make its intervention along with respective public institutions with immediate effect to build houses for these poor families.
3. A mechanism should be adopted to strengthen the relationship between residents of abandoned estates and government institutions so as to improve access to public services and basic amenities within the estate premises. In this regard, creating more GN divisions covering the plantation areas, and bringing them under the state administrative structures, linking up them

with relevant local service delivery agencies are crucial. This includes DSDs, Pradheshiya Sabha, MoH, Disaster Management Centre, NBRO, National Housing Development Authority, District Secretariat, Agriculture Department, Agrarian Service Centre etc.

4. There shall be pragmatic measures in distributing social security benefits and the distribution pattern should employ a means –testing mechanism to reach out the benefits to most deserving people disregarding all forms of patronage and clientelism. Namely, in setting eligibility criteria, it should not discriminate or exclude the residents in the abandoned estates. Currently for several such social security programs eligibility criterion have been developed in manner as to give limited access or change to the plantation people to get those benefits, under the impression that their social welfare benefits are being fulfilled by the plantation management. This approach has been used by the public servants for decades simply to preclude access to social security benefits.
5. There are estates currently being managed by the state corporation that will be set aside as abandoned estates. Therefore, close contact with the state corporation on a regular basis is essential to bring about substantial institutional and structural changes in these estates in the long term.
6. Bus transport has to be arranged with special attention to facilitate the school-going children in the physically isolated estates where a considerable number of schooling children live in these estates.
7. There shall be a policy ensuring that every family will receive a minimum of 2 acres of purchased land to be used for income-generating activities.
8. There shall be policy measures and collaborative efforts involving government, private, NGOs and other like-minded agencies to improve the social and the economic status of the plantation residents of these estates.
9. A National Plan of Action should be in place to restructure abandoned estates so as to make them productive and profitable.
10. Distributing lands of these estates among plantation workers to engage in agricultural and crop-diversification activities with the support of the Department of Agriculture and other relevant agencies.
11. Special policy measures are needed to distribute lands for housing purposes in the plantations using the abandoned lands along with title deeds. Such programs will benefit hundreds of thousands of landless people in multiple ways –building and owning a house, owning a plot of land and engage in income generating activities through cultivation, cattle farming etc. This indicates that the development of the plantation residents largely relies on land rights as it has multiple impacts on the socio-economic development of an individual.
12. Housing needs of the residents in the abandoned estates can be fulfilled through a loan scheme or self –help programs, if the lands are being given to do so. They must be able to mortgage the land to obtain a loan to build a house with conditions to repay the loan within a stipulated time period, depending on the capacity of beneficiaries to repay. It is also suggested that if the lands are given to people, they will find their own way to construct a house in their capacity.

13. Initiate an institutional mechanism with the representation of multi-stakeholders from the tea industry, Government bodies, and NGOs to provide better social infrastructure for those living in abandoned estates.
14. Development schemes meant for workers such as training programmes and skill upgradation programmes for youth, healthcare, adequate housing facilities, and other necessary welfare measures.
15. Initiate programmes to create awareness among workers regarding personal and domestic hygiene, occupation hazards and various water/seasonal related diseases and their preventive measures.
16. Enable and enhance people's participation in governance and decision-making process and programme for sharing the short-term benefits of the development programs. Empowering plantation people with RTI, Social Audit, Citizen Charter, and Open Government Partnership so as to enable them to access government services as rightful citizens of the country.
17. Create a greater degree of awareness of the importance of political representation in elected bodies at the local and provincial levels. This requires better understanding on how to identify themselves in the census on population and housing –because preserving the distinctive identity of this community in census is essential to secure political representation and rights.
18. Educate residents in the plantations on the application of the Right to Information Act which they can use to obtain information with regard to social security payments, and to disclose corruption and other forms of malpractices taking place in the state plantation corporations, including land grabbing and selling.
19. Socio-economic issues of the people in the State Plantation Corporations and abandoned estates (or part of the estate) shall be brought under the newly established New Village and Development Authority for the Plantation Region.
20. The study proposes that civil society groups could have discussions and negotiations with concerned parties responsible for the plantation industry and people living in those estates, thereby they can influence decisions taken in the Cabinet and Parliament which overtly and covertly affect plantation people.

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