

## **‘Behind Right and Wrong’: Ethics, Agrochemicals Retailers and Farmers**

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**Abstract:** *This article examines contradiction between moral and immoral demeanor of agrochemical retailers in the context of highly Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology (CKDu) prevalence areas in Sri Lanka as it has turn out to be a foremost health concern all over the world. This study brings an anthropological perspective on questioning the morality of the business practices of agrochemical retailers in the light of ethnographic methodology. To do so, the questions raised by the study are twofold: Do agrochemical retailers engage in immoral practices when doing their businesses and to what extent the farmers are affected by those immoral practices. By based on ethnography the study used participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 30 farmers and 10 agrochemical retailers encountering Anuradhapura district in Sri Lanka. The key findings are narrated and the implication of this study is very much important to form policies to govern the conduct of agrochemical retailers.*

**Keywords:** *Agrochemical retailers, Ethnography, Business ethics, Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology*

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### **I. Introduction**

Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology (CKDu) has become a major health issue over the past two decades as approximately 15% of the population in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Badulla Districts between the age group 15-70 years are affected by this disease according to the World Health Organization. Earlier majority of those affected people were male paddy farmers and agricultural laborers but there are now a growing number of women and children also being affected by Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology. The World Health Organization believes that this unknown Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology is an environmental-exposure disease caused by multiple factors such as chronic exposure to kidney damaging pesticides, arsenic, lead, cadmium, poor diet and genetic susceptibility to kidney failure and it is now being increasingly recognized as Chronic Agrochemical related Kidney disease. A group of Sri Lankan doctors associated with the WHO study commissioned by Sri Lanka's Health Ministry's epidemiological unit in 2008/2009 released a report on August 14, 2012 and according to that report, heavy metals in water caused by "unregulated use of fertilizer and pesticides" has identified as the main cause of CKDu [1]. And also there are many researches that try to highlight the improper and excessive usage of agrochemicals by farmers as a main cause for this disease [2, 3]. Even though there are many studies have explored the linkage between agrochemicals and Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology in both local and global context and most of them are scientific oriented. In the context of farmers' buying behaviors of agrochemicals, agrochemical retailers act as a main party of contribution. As evident by many researchers in the present context agrochemical retailers operate as a main information source for farmers regarding their agrochemical purchasing. A study has found that more than 50% of the farmers received their information on agrochemicals from agrochemical retailers [4]. Case studies of Bangladesh indicate that farmers seek advice from agrochemical sellers on the selection and usage of agrochemicals. In addition to pesticides, farmers also purchase seeds and fertilizers from these sellers, which indicate that many farmers are in frequent contact with these sellers [5].

Thus, this study aimed at to investigate the moral and immoral demeanor of agrochemical retailers in the context of highly Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology (CKDu) prevalence areas in Sri Lanka in an anthropological perspective by employing ethnographic methodology. It is mainly intended to uncover the reality of the business practices of agrochemical retailers by questioning the conduct of agrochemical retailers with respect to their day to day business conduct.

## **II. Materials and Methods**

By taking an ethnographic anthropological perspective the study intended to question the moral and immoral business demeanor of agrochemical retailers while undertaking their businesses in highly prevalence areas of Chronic Kidney Disease of Unknown aetiology in Sri Lanka. Ethnography has been widely applied for research concerning illegal activities due to the benefits this methodology offers when studying hidden populations [6]. At the same time ethnography as a research method, facilitates enormously to study the social interactions, and behaviors by residing in their natural setting. As ethnography provides rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions, along with the nature of the location they inhabit, through the collection of detailed observations and interviews [7], the current study was highly facilitated by this method. Participant-observation techniques and semi - structured interviews were used to tract the conduct of the respondents in the field where discussions, occurrences and observations were documented in field notes. Observational data recorded in extensive field notes included: location and character of agrochemical shops; agrochemical consumption patterns of the farmers; agrochemical selling tactics of the retailers and interactions with farmers. This qualitative investigation encountering agrochemical retailers and farmers had been underway for over three months and data from a total of eighteen field visits were analyzed for the study. In addition to field observations, semi structured interviews with farmers and agrochemical retailers were also accompanied. These interviews were mainly envisioned to cover the specifics areas including: knowledge and experience of the agrochemical retailers; perceptions of agrochemical retailers regarding the CKDu, excessive usage of agrochemicals and harmful effects of the usage; business tactics use to promote the sales and products; interactions with the customers and the like. These interviews were mainly facilitated by participant observation activities and the modifications of the interview were taken place in order to include new themes of investigations regarding the agrochemical retailers' conducts. In addition, in order to explore the insight in different angles several interviews were conducted encountering agricultural officers, community leaders and union leaders of the farmers. All data collected through interviews and participant observations were analyzed to identify the themes, trends and emerging patterns. A coding scheme was devised and applied as the data were analyzed. Overall four major themes emerged from the data and were consistently identified in field observations and interview as improper and unsafe handling of agrochemical storages; seduce customers to over usage of agrochemicals; selling banned agrochemical; lack of knowledge regarding agrochemicals and providing incorrect information to the customers.

## **III. Results & Discussion**

As the identified in the interviews and participant observations there were several consistently identified themes and patterns in field. From this point onward those finding are narrated.

### **3.1. Improper and unsafe handling of agrochemical storages**

As evident in field observations and interviews most of the agrochemical retailers maintained their storages of agrochemicals in an unsafe manner that may cause serious consequences. The observations were captured that all the retailers have maintained their stocks of pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and seeds altogether in an unsafe manner. Unsafe storage of agrochemicals may cause to increase the dangerous effects of agrochemicals even more [8]. As described by agrochemical retailers,  
*I engage in this business more than 20 years. This is the way I stored the agrochemicals. I do not think it is that much dangerous. If it is so, how I can do my business throughout these 20 Years...*

*Due to the limited space within the shop I have to keep all the products as much as effective manner. If there is enough space I can store the products separately...*

*We know that storing all together is wrong. But what to do....*

### **3.2. Lack of knowledge regarding agrochemicals**

Most of the agrochemical retailers lack the knowledge regarding the knowledge on products and Safe use and Handling of Chemicals. At the same time most of them do not undergo any type of training. Most of the retailers have acquired the knowledge on products by using products labels and leaflets given by suppliers. As replied by the retailers,

*Farmers always ask recommendations for their crop diseases. Sometimes I also do not have the knowledge to give solutions. I that case I have to guess and recommend the solutions. ...*

*Most of the farmers ask recommendations. At the same time they ask for most powerful solutions. So, in that situations I give suggestions based on my knowledge. In some cases I also do not know to solve their issues...*

*I have never undergone any type of training.... All the things I learned from the experience...*

### **3.3. Seduce customers to over usage of agrochemicals**

Attractive promotions help to catch the attention of the farmers. As the retailers narrated these promotions help a lot to attract farmers and it will affect to increase sales. Ultimately it will affect to increase their profits. As expressed by the retailers:

*Through these posters the new products will become familiar to the customers. Then they ask more information about those products and purchase.....*

*The promotional banners help to make the products familiar to the buyers. Once the buyers are attracted we can convert them as sales. So, this will lead to maintain our profits....*

*Customers sometimes do not satisfy with our solutions. Most of the cases they ask for fast solutions. In that case I have to recommend strong products. Otherwise they would go for other retailers...*

### **3.4. Selling Banned Agrochemical**

The Sri Lankan government banned the import, distribution and sale of some agrochemicals due to their serious effects. By as evident by the some respondents those banned agrochemicals are still in the market. *Banned chemical are still in the market. All know about this. Because of the farmers' demand those chemicals retailers also sell them even it is illegal. No one care about its harmful effects. All try to fill their pockets.....*

*Government banned some agrochemicals. But those chemicals are still in the market. Farmers also addicted those banned chemicals. They still ask for those chemicals.....*

*There is a stock of banned agrochemicals still in the market. Farmers also tend to buy these chemicals even for higher prices because of their strongest and quick results. So, retailers also supply those things due to its demand.*

As mentioned by agrochemical retailers,

*Some of agrochemicals were banned due to their negative effects of human health. But who knows the truth....*

*Farmers ask for banned agrochemicals because they are stronger than other chemicals. It has become a panacea for the farmers.... So, there are some retailers still selling these chemicals...*

### **3.5. Not providing information and guidance to the customers**

One of the main responsibility of the agrochemical retailers is to provide correct information and guidance to the buyers. . But most of the agrochemical retailers are not attentive to those things. They think that it is not their responsibility to do so. As mentioned by several agrochemical retailers,

*If I do those things I definitely lose the farmers because those people do not like to ask preaching. We only give what they ask for.*

*Our farmers do not like to use protective gears. They only buy the agrochemical that may their crops. Nothing is purchased to protect themselves from those poisons. So, what can we do?*

*We cannot force farmers to buy protective equipment....*

*Farmers only ask for recommendations for stronger agrochemicals. No any other guidance.....*

*The only thing we can do to say the farmers to use agrochemicals safely. Doing it is rested with their hand...*

The findings of the study revealed that the agrochemical retailers act as the farmers' main source of information when making purchase decision of agrochemicals [9, 10]. When talking about the business practices of agrochemical retailers, they have seriously disregarded their responsibilities which needed to fulfill on behalf of the customer, society and the environment. As the findings there were some illegal and unethical business practices which followed by the agrochemical retailers as improper and unsafe handling of agrochemical storages; seduce customers to over usage of agrochemicals; selling banned agrochemical; lack of knowledge regarding agrochemicals; providing incorrect information to the customers and selling agrochemicals to any person without any inquiry. In this study it was found that the agrochemical retailers have misguide and seduce farmers purchase excessive quantities of often more toxic agrochemicals that lead to severe health outcomes [5]. At the same time selling banned agrochemicals is also one of the serious issue [5, 11]. Most of the retailers lack the knowledge required to provide proper instructions the farmers [5, 11]. As observed in the field most of the retailers give wrong information, recommendations and suggestions to the farmers. The danger is that the

farmers also believe the words of the retailers as it is because they act as a main information source for farmers [5]. The observations were also captured that all the retailers have maintained their stocks of pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and seeds altogether in an unsafe manner. Unsafe handling of agrochemical storages is very risky for all the people and it affect for serious health issues. Thus, safer handling is a must. But unfortunately these retailers ignore the importance of them. Thus, it is clear that the conduct of agrochemical retailers is not legally as well as morally acceptable to the larger community. Selling banned agrochemicals is serious legal as well as ethically questionable issue. At the same time misguiding farmers for excessive use of agrochemicals for increasing their profits, tend to sell agrochemicals to anyone who came to buy without any investigation of them and unsafe handling of agrochemical storages can be identify as some kinds of legal and ethical problems associated with the conduct of agrochemical retailers.

#### IV. Conclusion

As found by many prior studies the main cause of pesticide poisoning is ignorance about its dangers farmers [5, 11, 12]. As suggested by studies agrochemical retailers are responsible to provide proper instructions and sell health-protection products for the farmers. But, what happen in the real world is that the agrochemical retailers are ignoring or neglecting their responsibilities. As found in this study the agrochemical retailers are engage in many offensive business practices. Thus government rules and regulations need to be implemented to govern the conduct of agrochemical retailers. Moreover, the agrochemical retailers need to be enriched with the required knowledge on products, safer storage and technical aspects. Thus, interventions are needed to be directed at guiding and training agrochemical retailers. Moreover, it should create a mechanism for selling protective equipment through the network of agrochemical retailers as they contact with farmers frequently. Agrochemical retailers would always be willing to market and sell protective equipment as long as it increases their profits. In addition if the retailers can display the safety precaution banners in their shops to increase the awareness of the famers for safer usage of agrochemicals, it would help to control the excessive usage if agrichemicals among the farmers. This study has several important limitations. First, the time and own subjectivity constraints as an inhabitant in the research setting were one of the limitations. In addition, some respondents were reluctant to share their ideas freely. At the same time as the study used non- probability sampling the sample was limited to small number of respondents. Finally the study was narrated in only one research setting. Future researches need to be directed to investigate the farmers' attitudes and perceptions of safer handling of agrochemical at the same time farmers' disposal practices of agrochemicals.

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