

Rural technology management in Sri Lanka

Lessons from small-scale welding and blacksmithing enterprises

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The rural industry sector contributes significantly to Sri Lanka's economy and has therefore attracted the attention of policy planners in recent years. The technological challenges facing the country's rural industry today include the development of technical skills and the diversification of products and marketing channels. This article focusses on two specific small-scale rural industries to illustrate various factors that act as both limiting and contributing forces for technological development of Sri Lanka's rural industry.



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Introduction

With globalization and liberalization of the economy, the position of small-scale industries, especially in rural areas, has changed drastically. The digital technology used in telecommunication industries, the spread of facilities such as television to the rural areas and higher literacy rates in the world have exposed rural industries to the outside world much more than they were a few decades ago. Transport networks and infrastructure facilities, although leaving huge gaps, have penetrated into areas earlier considered remote.

While such influences have increased the exposure of rural industries, the changes have also brought along new challenges. Foremost among these is that of accessing technologies that would give rural industries

a cutting edge in volatile markets.

To cite a simple example, until a few decades ago, a blacksmith in a Sri Lankan village had an unchallenged market in his village as long as the quality of his products was good and his services were provided in reasonable time. Today, however, the same blacksmith has to compete with more attractive and cheaper imported items, available at the village market itself and often supported by TV advertising, and with increasing society preferences for branded consumer products.

Do such trends necessarily mean the gradual decline of rural industries, especially at small-scale level, giving way to imported technologies as well as imported goods? Is there space and opportunity to blend indigenous technologies sustained and used by rural industries with advanced technologies?

In Sri Lanka, rural industries were given a boost in early 1970 under im