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The state of agricultural extension services in Sri Lanka, 2024-2025

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Key findings and policy implications

We assess the state of Sri Lanka's agricultural extension services using the BRIGHT 2024-2025 national survey. We examine use of or access to extension by land size and wealth, farmers' trust in different providers, and farmers use of innovative sources of extension, including digital channels..

- Fifty-five percent of Sri Lankan farmers accessed some form of extension in 2024/2025
- Public extension agents remain the most trusted source of advice, yet their reach differs sharply by region—from as high as 75% in North-Western Province to as low as 30% in Northern Province.
- Access to agricultural extension varies widely across provinces, with the highest access in Northern Province (84%) and the lowest in Central and Western Provinces (around 44%).
- In the Northern Province, despite low public provision, farmers compensate through strong reliance on input retailers (64%) and Farmers' Organizations (71%), indicating robust informal extension networks.
- Extension access is strongly related to cultivated area and asset ownership. Only 40% of farmers cultivating less than 0.5 acres received any form of extension, compared to 71% among those with more than 3 acres. Similarly, only 39% of households in the lowest wealth quintile accessed extension, compared to 62% in the highest quintile.
- Wealthier farmers and those with more cultivated acres not only access extension more frequently but also from a wider range of sources, underscoring inequality in information access and opportunity.
- Digital channels, such as Facebook and other online groups, play a growing but still limited role, concentrated mainly in the Western Province where internet access is strongest.

Policy Implications for Sri Lanka

- Targeted efforts are needed to expand extension access in lagging regions—particularly Central, Western, and Uva Provinces—by strengthening reach of both public and non-public agents.
- Dedicated actions are needed to expand extension services across a wider range of crops—particularly beyond rice and the traditional plantation sector—as well as across sub-sectors
- Given the high trust and engagement within farmer associations, these organizations should be leveraged as key partners for training delivery, group learning, and scaling up new practices.
- More research is needed on the effectiveness of different extension modalities, including digital

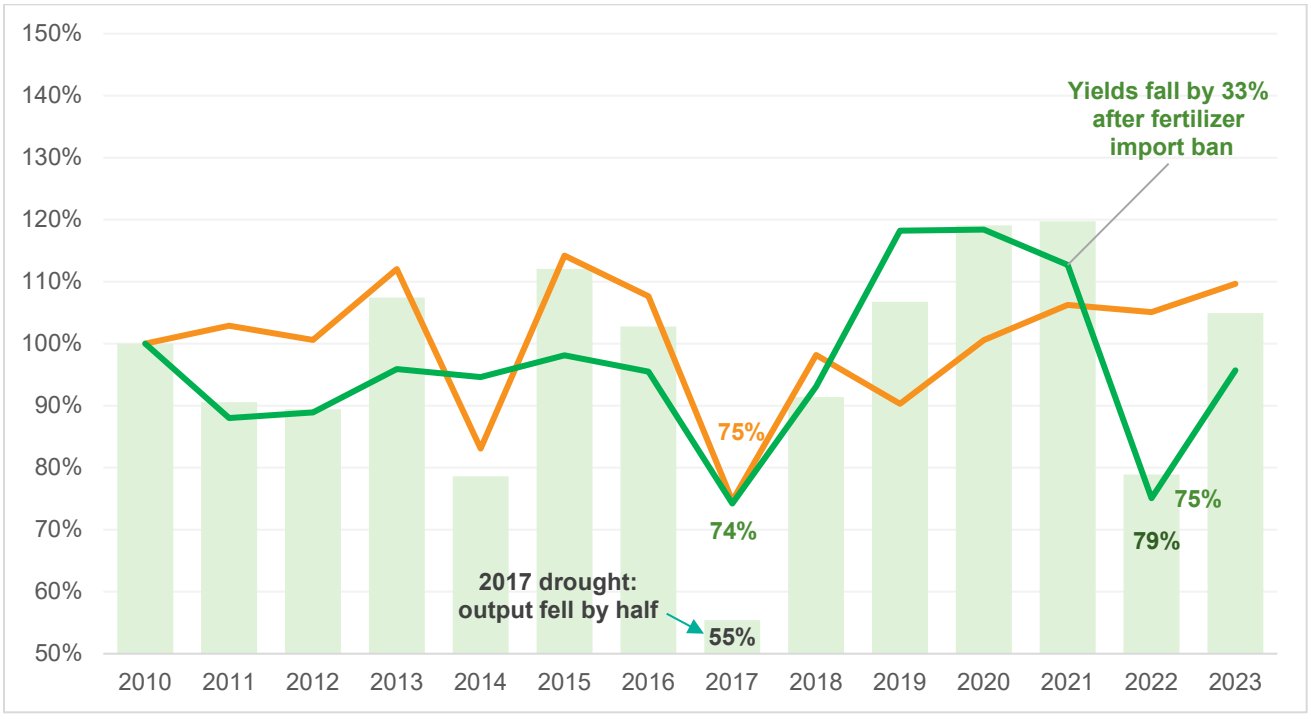
Background

In this research note, we use the nationally representative BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey data to explore access to agricultural extension in Sri Lanka. The BRIGHT survey provides recent, nationally and provincially representative data, allowing for an up-to-date assessment of farmers' access to agricultural extension in 2024–2025 and how this access varies across regions. This analysis is particularly timely, as Sri Lanka continues to recover from its most severe economic crisis since independence—driven by unsustainable debt accumulation, the depletion of foreign exchange reserves, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic crisis unfolded between 2020 and 2022. Following the contraction of the economy during COVID-19, Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves declined sharply, leading to difficulties in financing imports. In March 2022, Sri Lanka defaulted on its sovereign debt for the first time, triggering a steep depreciation of the rupee and widespread shortages of fuel, fertilizer, and other essential goods. Inflation peaked at over 70 percent in mid-2022, eroding real incomes and increasing rural poverty. Although macroeconomic stabilization measures supported by the IMF began in 2023, fiscal constraints have continued to limit public expenditure and service delivery across sectors.

Furthermore, the agricultural sector was both directly and indirectly hit by the crisis. First, in April 2021, the Rajapaksa government imposed a nationwide ban on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, nominally chiefly to save on the import costs of these inputs. However, fuel and electricity shortages also disrupted agricultural production and processing, and income losses reduced demand for many foods. Unsurprisingly, these events severely disrupted agricultural production (**Figure 1**), with rice yields falling by 33% in 2022, a fall even larger than the severe 2017 drought.

Figure 1. Trends in rice yields, harvested area and total production indices in Sri Lanka, 2010-2023



Source: Authors' calculations from FAOSTAT.

These conditions placed major strain on the agricultural extension system. Budgetary pressures reduced operational resources for field officers and curtailed mobility, while shortages of fertilizer and other inputs limited the effectiveness of extension advice itself. Importantly, these shocks compounded long-standing structural weaknesses, including a nine-year halt in recruiting Agricultural Instructors, each of whom already served an estimated 3,500–7,000 farmers (Abeysinghe, 2021). Furthermore, Sri Lanka increasingly faces the adverse effects of climate change, which require upgrading the conventional agricultural extension systems to provide weather/climate-responsive, smart agricultural extension services.

At the same time, new ICT-based tools—such as online advisory platforms, mobile extension applications, and the government's digital information portals—have expanded farmers' access to information (Wanigasundera, 2015; Abeysinghe, 2021; Sivayoganathan, 2014). These innovations offer promising avenues to modernize the system, but significant investment, strengthened institutional coordination and capacity-building of extension service providers are still needed for extension services to fully meet the needs of Sri Lankan farmers. Together, these challenges underscore the importance of assessing who currently accesses extension in Sri Lanka, and through which channels, to inform policies aimed at strengthening the sector's resilience and inclusivity.

The BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey of Sri Lanka 2024-2025

In the absence of recent nationally representative data on Sri Lanka's economic and social welfare following the 2022 economic crisis, the BRIGHT project implemented the first truly multi-thematic household survey in the country—the BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey of Sri Lanka. Between November 2024 and March 2025, the survey team interviewed both male and female members from 6,850 households across all provinces and districts of Sri Lanka.

The BRIGHT survey is designed to be representative of urban, rural, and estate populations, as well as of each province. Its sampling strategy, combined with the use of data from the 2024 Census and the 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), enables the construction of survey weights that make the dataset nationally representative.

Content-wise, the BRIGHT survey draws on the design of large-scale, multi-topic surveys conducted by IFPRI in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and numerous other countries (see: https://www.ifpri.org/publications/datasets/). However, it is uniquely multi-thematic in the Sri Lankan context, integrating a wide range of modules on household food and non-food expenditure, monetary poverty, education, health, housing, assets, employment and livelihoods, farm and non-farm enterprises, women's empowerment, psychological well-being, nutrition knowledge and anthropometry, social protection, food, water and energy insecurity, debt, migration, climate change adaptation, and exposure to shocks, among others.

Further details on the survey design, sampling, and implementation are available on the BRIGHT website: https://www.ifpri.org/project/bright-sri-lanka/

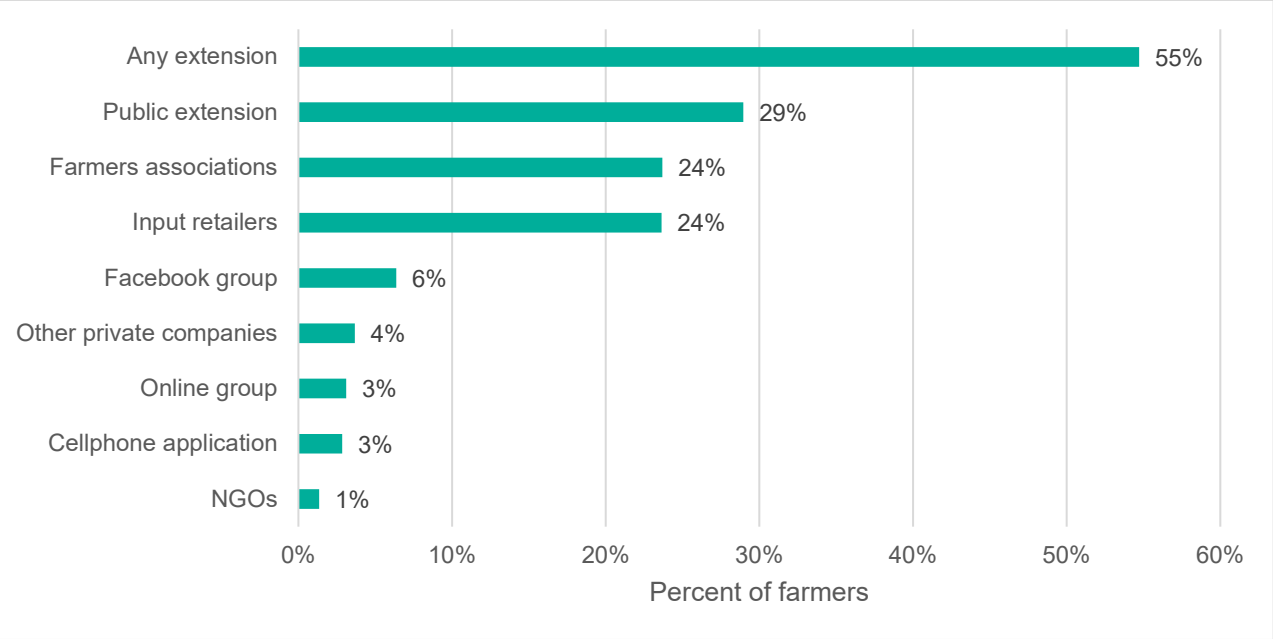
Key Findings on Extension in Sri Lanka

Figure 2 shows that 55 percent of Sri Lankan farmers accessed extension in 2024/2025. This includes farmers who cultivated during the Maha or Yala seasons, as well as those growing annual or

perennial crops year-round. The most important source of extension was public agents, with 29 percent of farmers receiving extension from a public source during this period. This was followed by extension provided through Farmers' Organizations and input retailers, each serving 24 percent of farmers. The extension provided through Farmers' Organizations is also predominantly public extension, as agents are invited to participate in the organization's meetings. At the same time, input retailers and other private companies are also increasingly trying to provide extension through these organizations. Facebook groups, other online groups, and cell phone applications were much less common sources of extension, used by approximately six, three, and three percent of farmers, respectively.

There were notable differences by crop type. While about 69 percent of rice farmers, 68 percent of oilseed and tuber farmers, and 67 percent of maize, millet, and pulse farmers received extension, it was less common among vegetable farmers (62 percent), fruit and spice farmers (42 percent), and plantation crop farmers (40 percent).

Figure 2. Access to extension by source, 2024/2025



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Table 1 illustrates how the main source of extension varies by the primary crop grown. **Sixty percent of rice farmers receive extension from public sources, while 52 percent of plantation crop farmers and less than 45 percent of farmers growing other crops received public-based extension services**. Among maize, millet, and pulse farmers, the most common source of extension is input retailers, with 66 percent obtaining extension from this channel. Similarly, more than 50 percent of oilseed, tuber, and vegetable farmers also receive extension from input retailers. For plantation crops, input retailers play a much smaller role in providing extension—an expected outcome given that perennial crops are typically less input-intensive. Farmers' Organizations, as noted above, also play an important role in providing extension advice, particularly for rice, maize, millet, and pulse farmers, but their role is more limited for other crop types.

Table 1. Access to extension by source and crop cultivated, 2024/2025

	Public extension	Input retailers	Farmers associations	Facebook group	Other private companies	Cellphone application
Rice	60%	46%	56%	12%	3%	3%
Maize, millets, pulses	44%	66%	47%	19%	5%	8%
Oilseeds, tubers	30%	60%	19%	21%	7%	8%
Vegetables	42%	53%	33%	21%	18%	12%
Fruits, spices	44%	39%	21%	28%	11%	11%
Plantation crop	52%	28%	25%	28%	12%	7%

Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

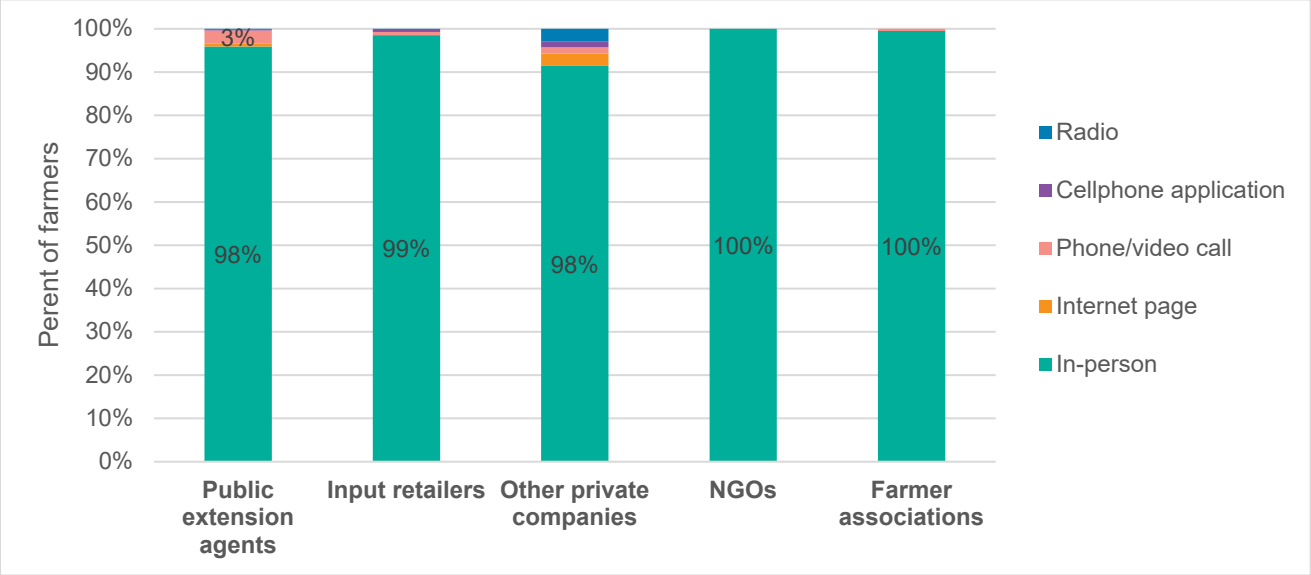
While Facebook and other online groups still account for a relatively small share of extension overall, they are beginning to play a more notable role for fruit and plantation crop farmers, with 28 percent of farmers using these digital platforms. In addition to input retailers, some other private actors—such as buyers, distributors, and lenders—also contribute to the provision of extension, particularly among vegetable farmers.

Finally, although mobile applications are increasingly being used for agricultural extension globally, they remain a minor source of information in Sri Lanka. Their use is most common among vegetable and fruit farmers, while only about 3 percent of rice farmers report using cellphone applications for extension.

We also asked farmers about the modality through which they received extension. Globally, both public and private extension providers are increasingly adopting mixed approaches that combine in-person and online delivery. However, according to BRIGHT survey data, this trend is not yet evident in Sri Lanka. As illustrated in **Figure 3, farmers reported that nearly all the extension they received—close to 100 percent—was delivered through in-person interactions**, either through agents visiting their fields or farmers visiting the agents.

To a limited extent, public agents have begun using phone or video calls to provide advice. Among private actors, other companies appear to have diversified their methods the most, with farmers reporting the use of internet pages, phone calls, cellphone applications, and radio broadcasts to access extension information from these sources.

Figure 3. In-person or digital extension, by source 2024/2025



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

In terms of the main topics covered by extension, farmers were asked to report the subjects on which they most frequently received advice (**Table 2**). **For public agents, other private companies, and Facebook groups, the primary topic of extension was crop management.** For instance, 86 percent of farmers who used Facebook for agricultural information did so to obtain advice on crop management. Similarly, 83 percent of farmers who received extension from public agents and 74 percent of those receiving support from other private companies reported obtaining information on crop management.

Table 2. Extension topics by source

	Public extension agents	Input retailers	Private companies	Farmer associations	Facebook groups
Crop Management	83%	51%	74%	61%	86%
Business management	47%	73%	48%	41%	38%
Soil and water management	50%	8%	28%	65%	25%
Climate and weather	5%	2%	6%	12%	19%
Livestock Management	9%	2%	6%	7%	11%
Agroforestry	6%	1%	0%	3%	8%

Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Interestingly, the majority of farmers who received extension services from input retailers obtained advice related to business management and economics, with 73 percent of farmers citing this as the main topic. Across all other sources, roughly 40 percent of farmers reported receiving extension on business management. Soil and water management emerged as the most common topic provided by

farmers' associations, with 65 percent of farmers who received extension from associations reporting advice on this subject. Half of the farmers who received extension from public agents also obtained guidance on soil and water management. In contrast, this topic was much less emphasized by private companies and input retailers, with only 28 percent and 8 percent of their respective clients receiving advice on it.

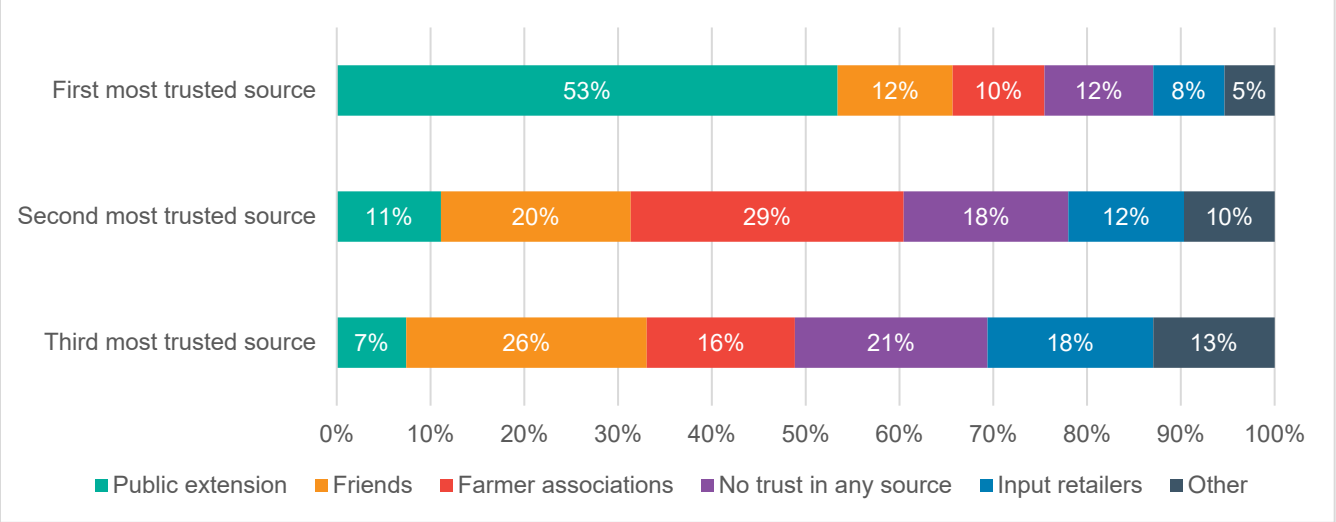
Climate and weather information, livestock management, and agroforestry were much less common areas of extension. However, these topics were the most frequently searched on Facebook, suggesting that farmers may be turning to social media to fill gaps in information and services not covered by traditional extension sources.

Overall, 53 percent of Sri Lankan farmers identified public extension agents as their most trusted source of agricultural advice, which reflects positively on the credibility and perceived reliability of the country's public extension services (Figure 4). An additional 11 percent and 7 percent of farmers ranked public agents as their second and third most trusted sources, respectively. Altogether, 72 percent of farmers placed public agents among their top three most trusted sources of extension.

Friends, including neighbors and peer farmers, were the next most trusted source, with 12 percent of farmers ranking them as their most trusted and 58 percent including them among their top three sources. Farmer associations followed closely, with 10 percent ranking them as their most trusted and 54 percent placing them among the top three.

However, a notable share of farmers expressed limited confidence in any extension source. Twelve percent reported having no trusted source at all, and about half of all farmers did not identify three sources they considered trustworthy for agricultural advice. This lack of confidence is concerning, as it suggests that a significant proportion of farmers either face information gaps or remain disconnected from reliable advisory networks.

Figure 4. Trust in different extension sources, by source 2024/2025



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Access to extension across location and wealth characteristics

Access to agricultural extension varies substantially depending on the location of the farming household (T**able 3**). **As many as 84 percent of farming households in the Northern Province reported accessing extension services, compared to as few as 44 percent in the Central and Western Provinces**. Some of these differences likely reflect variations in cropping patterns and agricultural intensity across regions. The share of farmers accessing public extension also differed sharply by province: 75 percent and 62 percent of households receiving extension in 2024/2025 in the Northwestern and Central Provinces, respectively, obtained it from public agents. In contrast, the share of public extension was considerably lower in the Northern and Uva Provinces, at only 30 percent and 37 percent, respectively.

In the Northern Province, 64 percent of farmers relied on input retailers and 71 percent on farmers' associations for extension, making it the region with the highest overall access to extension despite limited public provision. Reliance on input retailers was also high in the Eastern and North Central Provinces. Other private companies played an important role in extension provision in the Southern Province. Finally, Facebook and other online groups were most commonly used in the Western Province, likely reflecting the region's better internet connectivity.

Table 3. Extension access by source and location, 2024/2025

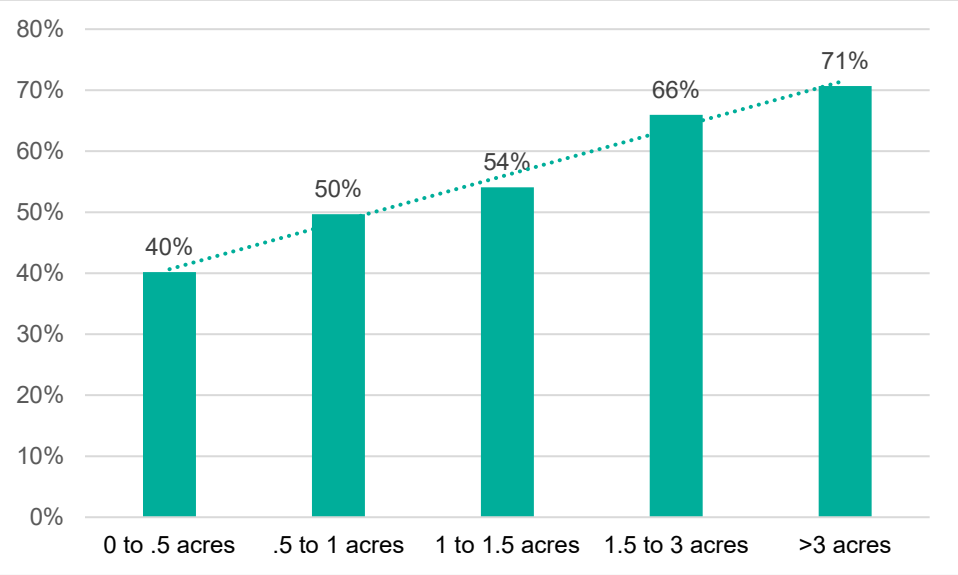
	Any extension	Public extension	Input retailers	Other private companies	Farmers associations	Facebook online group	Cellphone application
Overall	55%	53%	43%	7%	43%	17%	5%
Western	52%	55%	44%	1%	43%	29%	1%
Central	44%	62%	42%	6%	27%	8%	2%
Southern	44%	48%	34%	11%	35%	19%	8%
Northern	84%	30%	64%	3%	71%	24%	3%
Eastern	40%	53%	55%	0%	31%	7%	2%
Northwestern	60%	75%	24%	2%	45%	13%	2%
North Central	72%	45%	56%	3%	66%	15%	4%
Uva	55%	37%	45%	25%	28%	25%	14%
Sabaragamuwa	45%	58%	47%	5%	25%	17%	12%

Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Access to extension appears to be biased toward households with greater landholdings (Figure 5) and wealth (Figure 6). Using quintiles constructed from the total area that households own, rent, or lease, we find that landless or smallholder farmers—those cultivating less than 0.5 acres—have relatively limited access to extension, with only 40 percent reporting receipt of services. In contrast, 71 percent of farmers managing more than 3 acres reported receiving extension support. While there does not appear to be a strong bias in access to public extension, much of the disparity arises from farmer

associations: only 26 percent of farmers in the smallest land quintile received extension from associations, compared to 50 percent among the largest landholders. Another notable difference is that larger landholders tend to receive advice from a greater number of extension sources than smaller farmers.

Figure 5. Access to extension by farmland size, 2024/2025

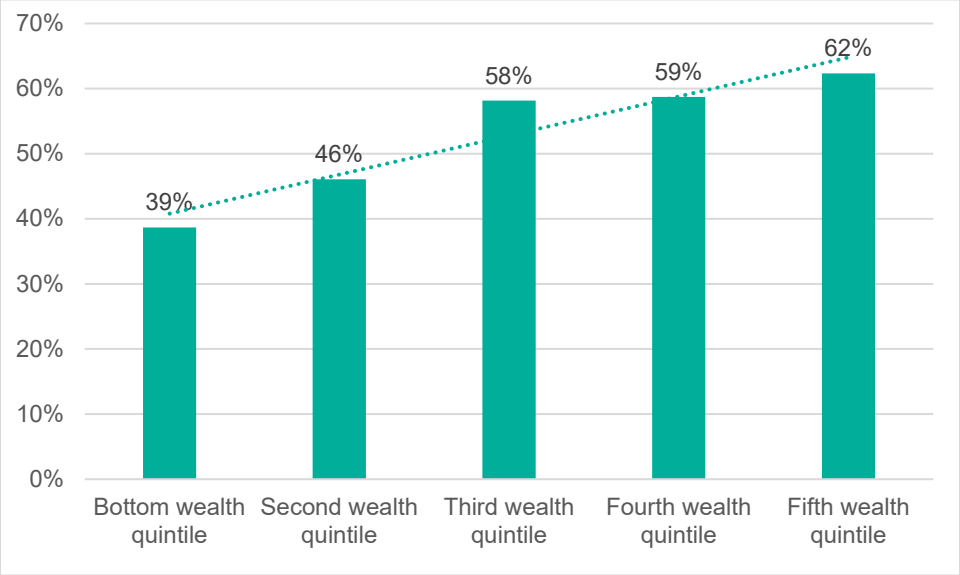


Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

We also examined access to extension across wealth quintiles, based on household asset ownership (Figure 6). Consistent with the land-based pattern, access to extension increases with wealth. Only 39 percent of households in the bottom wealth quintile reported receiving extension, compared to 62 percent in the top quintile. This relationship appears to be driven both by differences in access to public extension—39 percent among the poorest farmers versus 56 percent among the wealthiest—and by differences in access through farmer associations, 32 percent versus 42 percent, respectively. Moreover, households in the lowest wealth quintile often reported obtaining extension from more distant or less direct sources than wealthier farmers, suggesting higher barriers to access.

These results point to a structural inequity in Sri Lanka's extension landscape, where smallholders and poorer farmers—who arguably have the greatest need for technical and market information—are the least likely to receive it. This pattern may stem from several factors: larger-scale farmers are typically more visible to extension agents, have stronger links to formal farmer organizations, and possess greater mobility and connectivity to reach extension networks. Wealthier farmers may also be more likely to adopt new technologies or purchase inputs, attracting outreach from both public and private providers.

Figure 6. Access to extension by household wealth, 2024/2025



Source: BRIGHT Integrated Household Survey, 2024-2025

Policy Implications for Sri Lanka

The results highlight that while agricultural extension services in Sri Lanka reach a large share of farmers, access remains uneven across crops, regions, wealth groups, and farm sizes. Public extension agents continue to be the most trusted source of advice, yet non-public channels—such as farmer associations, private input retailers—play an increasingly important complementary role. Ensuring that these systems work together, and that marginalized farmers are not left behind, will be key to making extension more inclusive, efficient, and resilient. Sri Lanka still lags behind many comparable countries in the adoption and use of digital extension tools, suggesting that strengthening digital outreach and improving farmers' digital literacy should be a central focus moving forward.

Key recommendations

1. **Strengthen equitable access to extension**

   Target outreach to smallholders, landless farmers, and poorer households through community-based approaches and group learning. Prioritize modalities that reduce travel/time costs (mobile clinics, local demonstration plots, group trainings) so the poorest and smallest-scale farmers—who currently report the lowest access—can use them.

2. **Strengthen and broaden extension coverage across regions and crops**
   Extension access must be expanded in lagging regions—especially Central, Western, and Uva Provinces—by improving the reach of both public and non-public service providers. At the same time, extension support needs to cover a wider range of crops beyond rice and the traditional plantation sector to ensure that diversification efforts can take hold and contribute meaningfully to agricultural welfare.

3. **Leverage digital and remote extension tools**

   Scale mobile apps, SMS, radio and localized online content to complement in-person services — especially to reach remote areas and younger/tech-savvy farmers. Use blended approaches (in-person demonstration + follow-up by SMS/app) to increase uptake.

4. **Build the capacity of extension officers, especially public extension agents, to use digital tools**

   Public agents are the most trusted source of extension overall (53% named them as most trusted), but digital extension is rarely provided by public agents. Build capacity of public agents to provide extension via phone and internet as well as in-person.

5. **Strengthen the capacity of extension officers to train on climate smart agriculture**

   Extension officers need to build their knowledge to be able to give advice on critical areas currently not included in extension programs such as climate and weather information, climate-smart agriculture, livestock management, and agroforestry.

6. **Improve monitoring, feedback, and accountability**

   Introduce farmer feedback systems (hotlines, community scorecards, mobile surveys) and use them to continuously adapt extension content and provide incentives. Prioritize tracking who is not being served (by crop, landholding, gender, and wealth quintile) and use that data to target interventions.

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