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*Empowering the local: NGOs to promote sustainable local
development in Sri Lanka*

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Abstract

Centralisation of governmental power has resulted in weak local government and the neglect of local development in Sri Lanka. Although most local government areas have natural resources, the responsibility of maintaining these is not of local government. After the tsunami in 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009, a number of NGOs proved to be effective in supporting communities to earn funds for local government through the sustainable utilisation of natural resources. Based on research in the southern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, this paper identifies strengths that local government and communities can develop with the support of NGOs to overcome the centralisation tendencies.

Keywords

NGOs; local government; local development; communities; centralisation; donor funds; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Centralisation of governmental power has been an abiding feature of the Sri Lankan politics. Since independence in 1948, there have been several attempts to devolve power to local levels, but such attempts have been successfully resisted by Sinhala nationalist opponents. This has resulted in weak local government and the neglect of local communities and their development needs.

In Sri Lanka, 80 per cent of the population lives outside of the larger urban centres and there are 335 local government bodies including municipal councils, urban councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. Although most of these local government areas have natural resources such as rivers, lakes, streams, beaches, parks and forests, the responsibility of maintaining these is not of

local government or of local communities. Central government does not have plans to protect and utilise these resources sustainably with the collaboration of local government and local communities. This has resulted in misusing and destroying such resources due to garbage dumping, lack of maintenance and less consideration of local knowledge.

After the tsunami in 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka received large amounts of foreign aid and NGO support for recovery and reconstruction, but these have been administered according to central government agendas without considering local needs. Various centrally-led large scale construction projects have been conducted in local areas using foreign funds, but these projects have not addressed the development needs of local communities.

During the post-tsunami and post-war situations in Sri Lanka, there were emerging criticisms regarding misuse of funds and malpractice by NGOs that led the Sinhala nationalist political parties and groups to force the successive governments to impose restrictions on NGOs. Despite restrictions imposed by central government, a number of NGOs have played a significant role in promoting sustainable local development through interacting with local government and local communities. These NGOs proved to be effective in facilitating the participation of local communities in local development initiatives, supporting communities to identify ways to earn funds for local government through the protection and sustainable utilisation of natural resources. Such initiatives also provided self employment opportunities. NGOs also played key roles in the building of community-based organisations (CBOs) and the upskilling of local government representatives.

This paper identifies strengths and capacities that local government and local communities can develop with the support of NGOs. Based on research in the southern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the paper analyses the importance of empowering local government

and local communities to overcome the centralisation tendencies that undermine sustainable local development.

NGO potential towards sustainable local development

Sustainable development refers to a mode of human development in which resource use aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come. It is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987).

The literature suggests that the failure of governments to even begin to meet the escalating challenges of sustainable development has opened up unprecedented opportunities for NGOs to radically alter the way that people in most of the world are governed (Fisher, 2003, p. 30). The role of NGOs is recognised as including the organisation of people to make better use of local productive resources, create new resources and services, promote equity, alleviate poverty and influence government actions towards these same objectives while establishing new institutional frameworks to sustain people-centred development (Cited in Lewis, 2001, p. 77).

However, such roles of NGOs have not been accepted by all governments in the way they are. While some governments are found to collaborate effectively with NGOs in the pursuit of socio-economic development, others are more wary of the implication that NGO involvement suggests governments are neglecting their responsibilities. Still others are found to try to control the way NGOs administer foreign aid, and seek to direct that in a way that reflects favourably on the government. The fear held by some governments of losing control of their own agendas is one reason to exclude NGO involvement in policy matters (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 9-10). Furthermore, such governments tend to be concerned that NGOs

introduce values or working practices, such as greater consultative democracy, that can erode the often narrower practices of the state. Such governments fear that NGOs question existing rules and suggest alternatives to the habitual traditions of governments, and worry that they will slowly force change on the political system, and this often causes resistance to cooperation with NGOs (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 9-10). Moreover, such governments fear that politically sensitive issues can be transmitted to the wider public through NGOs and that this can lead to political pressure (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, p. 10).

While many government leaders express hostile attitudes to NGOs, even in broadly democratic societies, Willetts (2002) comments that virtually all government leaders, including those who have expressed hostility, will work with NGOs when they see them as allies in support of their political goals. NGOs have to determine whether they can work within restrictions put on them by government, and work in accordance with government agendas, or whether to do so would undermine the NGO role in addressing actual development needs at the local level.

The capacities NGOs bring to situations are the basis of their significance to governments. A wide range of economic, social, and technical problems outstrip the capacities of most national governments (Pentland, 1991, p. 244), and in this context the capacities of NGOs to solve such problems has become significant. These capacities are based on resources such as expert information, finances, decision making capacity, popular support or legitimacy, enforcement capabilities, and diplomatic skills (Pentland, 1991, p. 244). According to Bratton (1989, p. 584), governments see the strength of NGOs as a great weakness of government, but tend to value the NGOs largely because of the additional flows of development capital they attract. While reporting the issues raised in the symposium on 'Development Alternatives: The Challenge for NGOs' held in London in March 1987, Drabek (1987, p. xiv) points that the governments sometimes try to maintain control over NGOs precisely because of the

NGOs' access to funds. Fisher (2003, p. 48) reports that acceptance of NGOs grew because of their capacity to deliver support and services. Governments often lack the resources and specific expertise necessary and NGOs are frequently of help, increasing the resources and expertise available (Ripinsky & Bossche, 2007, p. 11). NGOs have been able to provide services for local communities when government assistance is not forthcoming or appropriate (Willis, 2005, pp. 98-100).

NGOs act as facilitators or catalysts of local development efforts (Drabek, 1987, p. x). There is a growing interest in the rural development field in the role of NGOs as innovators of new technologies and approaches to working with the poor (Lewis, 2005, p. 202). One of the earliest examples of the pro-NGO case is Michael Cernea's report, written in 1988 for the World Bank (WB), which cites the NGOs' main contributions as strengthening local organisational capacity. He notes that the NGO priority on first organising the people embodies a philosophy that recognises the centrality of people in development policies and action programmes and the importance of self-organisation (Cited in Lewis, 2001, p. 77).

According to Cernea, many NGOs have been found to possess a comparative advantage over government agencies in four main areas: 1) NGOs reach the poor in remote areas where government assistance does not exist or is ineffective; 2) NGOs operate at a lower cost due to the voluntary nature of their activities and lower technological overheads; 3) NGOs promote local participation by working with community groups as partners emphasising self-help initiatives and local control of programmes; and 4) NGOs innovate and adapt to local conditions and needs (Cited in Lewis, 2001, p. 77). For Lewis (2001, p. 77), Cernea's analysis of NGOs serves as a useful benchmark.

NGOs can carry out activities such as local level development and services with greater efficiency and more know-how than government (Kloos, 1999, pp. 25-26) and this is the

reason for government's collaboration with NGOs. Governments were organisationally ill-equipped to deliver services and respond to needs at the rural community level. Centralised agencies also lacked information about, and the flexibility to adapt to, local conditions. As a consequence, a phalanx of NGOs with programmes in relief and rural development arose to fill the gaps left by governments (Bratton, 1990, p. 88). Despite massive investment in social programmes, governments have never been able to address fully the multiple needs of their citizens. NGOs, in other words, have emerged in large part to bridge the gap between what governments can do and what society needs or expects (Seffrin, n.d.).

NGOs can bring contextually relevant, locally sourced knowledge to the policy table which is a necessary dimension for successful policy making. Such interaction expands the democratic scope of the decision making process by making it more representative and inclusive, thus increasing chances of success (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 13-14). For Lewis and Opoku-Mensah (2006, pp. 666-667), NGOs are believed to work effectively with local communities through organising and service delivery and to develop innovative solutions to local problems (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006, pp. 666-667).

The potential contribution of NGOs in addressing the development needs at the local level is significant. NGOs are seen as appropriate actors to encourage people's participation and to build networks among various policy actors at the local level (See Fernandez, 1987). NGOs have useful ideas to offer to rural development planners. By demonstrating alternative methods of getting things done at the village level, they can offer policy suggestions on questions of local resource mobilisation, recurrent cost recovery and programme sustainability (Bratton, 1989, pp. 582-583). NGOs have an important role to play in political development to the extent that they can offer ordinary people an opportunity to participate in decisions and represent local interests (Bratton, 1989, p. 585). Other than their primary contribution to improve the delivery of economic and social services to poor populations, NGOs have an

important contribution to make to the policy process where the content of rural development policies is shaped and decided (Bratton, 1990, p. 116).

In sharing ideas in policy networks people gain an understanding of various problems and how to encourage participation in policy networks. For example, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) can be identified as a networking approach used by NGOs to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development projects and programmes (Chambers, 1997, p. 106). Sometimes NGOs face limitations and criticisms when they attempt to collaborate with governments. NGOs need to consider the potential loss of independence that may result from cooperating too closely with government (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 12-13). Furthermore, NGOs may not want to be limited or constrained by state or other official concerns, but the very process of joint decision making, and the relationships developed therein, may mean that NGOs find it increasingly difficult to criticise governments. NGOs can lose their credibility as independent and neutral actors in the eyes of those they are seeking to work with on the ground, resulting in a significant loss, as trust and goodwill are the crucial features of an NGO's attractiveness to local people (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 12-13). By aligning more closely with governments, NGOs risk being drawn away from a grassroots orientation (Banks et al., 2015, p. 712). Although it is necessary for the NGOs to cooperate with and complement the efforts of the government, they must not subject their operations, finances, and activities to governmental control and manipulation (Badu & Parker, 1994, p. 38).

This literature has two dimensions. First, it shows the capabilities and capacities of NGOs to address the local level development needs by maintaining and utilising resources and obtaining people's participation in local policy processes. Second, the literature highlights the government's reactions on NGOs and limitations that NGOs face when they agree with

governments' political agendas. The sections below look into Sri Lanka's local development and NGO and foreign donor involvement at the local level in particular.

Research methods

This research used the mixed method approach relying more heavily on qualitative methods, especially on the case study approach and therefore the single-case (embedded) design. Sri Lankan local government was selected as the single case, and the southern and eastern provincial councils were selected as the embedded units according to the clear ethnic differences between these provinces. In the southern province there is a Sinhala majority which represents the country majority. The country's minority Tamils represent a provincial majority in the eastern province. The three districts in the southern province included in this research are Galle, Matara and Hambantota. The eastern province also consists of three districts: Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara and these were also included in the research.

The southern and eastern provinces are connected along the coastal areas and were severely affected by the tsunami disaster in December 2004. Several NGOs came to support the post-tsunami rehabilitation bringing large amounts of foreign aid into these provinces. The eastern province was also affected by the war and significant foreign aid which came to Sri Lanka at the end of the war in 2009 has been used for large scale construction projects. Although the southern province was not directly affected by the war, large scale construction projects took place in the south as well. These projects were conducted through the direct involvement of the central government. Huge amounts of foreign aid flowed to the southern province for such projects.

From the two provinces, 12 local government bodies including municipal councils, urban councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas* were selected. There were 47 respondents in this research including national, provincial and local political representatives, administrative officials,

officials attached to NGOs, and the representatives of the CBOs. To obtain the views of the local government and local development and the views of the contribution of NGOs, political representatives were drawn from the selected local government bodies. In Sri Lanka, local government operates under provincial councils and the views concerning local government, local development and the contribution of NGOs were sought from provincial political representatives from both the south and the east. When selecting the NGOs, the main concern was to determine the different types of NGO contributions in local government and local development. All of the selected NGOs were foreign-funded, mainly from American (United States of America), Australian, Canadian and European sources.

Selection of respondents and the further research processes followed closely the established principles of human research ethics approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Primary and secondary data were collected using a variety of sources such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews, observation, and documents and archives. The field research was conducted in two phases. The first was carried out from May to September 2011 in the selected local government areas by interviewing local government representatives, local administrative officials, CBO representatives and officials of the area offices of NGOs. The second phase was carried out from June to September 2012 when national and provincial political representatives and administrative officials were interviewed, together with officials of the country offices of NGOs.

The data has been organised into categories on the basis of themes, concepts, or similar features to create or specify a case. It is important to note that, when analysing a single case study with embedded units, the method of analysis differs. According to Yin (1994, p. 120), any analysis of the embedded units is done within each case and this analysis cannot be the

sole analysis but must be augmented by some other analytic technique at the level of the main case. Therefore in this research, first, the data collected from embedded units using multiple sources has been categorised manually under themes related to the research questions. Second, the data has been incorporated to the main unit of analysis for the purpose of analysis.

Centrally-led local development: The Sri Lankan experience

In the Sri Lankan government context, authoritative power is strongly centralised (Uyangoda, 2010) and the local level is neglected. The central government is generally seen as the prominent and dominant actor in all stages of the policy process (See Birkland, 2005; Sabatier, 1999; & Colebatch, 2002). Local communities remain voiceless in local government policy processes leaving many development needs at the local level remain neglected and unaddressed.

Development is an elusive and ambiguous concept reflected by different meanings according to the context in which it is used (Kularatne, n.d., p. 2). The Sri Lankan literature points to development is a multidimensional process involving major changes in the social structures, popular culture and national political institutions combined with an acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of poverty (Amarathunge et al., n.d.). Development, thus covers a broad range of positive changes however, the ways in which different parties define development varies. For example, when central government promotes large scale development at one end of the spectrum, some local governments prefer to promote small scale development at the other end.

The way in which local government views development varies according to the situation within particular areas coupled with political considerations. The availability of natural resources, and the demographic and geographical backgrounds also vary from area to area.

Further, the political and administrative influences of central and provincial governments regarding local development, and the ways in which the NGOs and the individuals involved in local development activities cooperate also differ from area to area.

Local development is a responsibility of local government since that is where local needs must be met. An underlying assumption of this research is that local government is best placed to address the demographic and geographical specialities of local areas when promoting local development. The main interest of this paper centres on sustainable local development which is locally-led and community-oriented and where the development of human resources over physical infrastructure is stressed (Kleymeyer, 1994, pp. 4-6).

Differently, in Sri Lanka, local development is centrally-led and most of the local government representatives accept this trend and believe that local development can be achieved through centrally-led large scale construction projects. In a number of local government areas in the southern province, central government-led large scale construction projects are the drivers of development. An example of this is the Hambantota urban council which has seen large-scale infrastructural development in the form of the construction of a new harbour, a new airport and an international conference centre.

Noteworthy is that centrally-led initiatives tend to ignore local knowledge which can lead to poorly planned projects that waste scarce resources and result in few local benefits (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). Two examples of government wasting funds, lands and resources on large scale construction projects ignoring environmental protection include the harbour project and the building of a new airport in Hambantota. Hambantota is situated in the dry zone where rainfall occurs for one month each year, leaving the area with serious water shortage problems. The population in the area is low compared with the other two districts in the province and most of the people are poor. The harbour is being built, but some have argued

that the natural harbour in Galle would have been better if it had been renovated, or that the well-known Trincomalee natural harbour would meet the needs of the country. The plan is flawed given the existence of significant bedrock deposits which prevent large ships reaching the harbour. A large area of coastal land has been dug to build the harbour discontinuing the entrance to the Hambantota town. In building the harbour the Colombo-Kataragama road was submerged to accommodate the new entrance channel. A new road, 21kms longer than the old road, was built through a reserved forest. The forest lands near to the new road have been sold to various companies to build hotels, conference halls, office buildings and many other constructions.

Similar criticisms have been levelled at the new international airport project in Mattala, Hambantota. The site for the airport is in a reserved forest area (Sri Lanka One Island, 2013).

An article in a leading national newspaper, commenting on this development, stated:

Putting an airport right near a dedicated wildlife sanctuary and distant from large human populations is not the greatest idea. It will, guaranteed, disrupt the wildlife, and if the area does become a hub, that will disrupt and uproot them more. This might be necessary if there were no alternatives, but there are alternatives. Air traffic to Jaffna would be a guaranteed earner and many other regions (Anuradhapura, Matara) are projected to grow into major cities soon (The Sunday Leader, September 4, 2011).

It is evident that the wild life has been disturbed from this contribution and the airport does not have the environmental approval.

The Suriyawewa *Pradeshiya Sabha* in the Hambantota district has also had a large scale project involving the building of an international cricket stadium, but it has been built a long distance from the developed areas where there is a population of supporters. The majority of the poor in the Hambantota district do not have a culture of watching cricket matches and in fact struggle to afford day to day meals. Again, these examples are evidence of a poorly

designed centrally-led development strategy that has not been informed by local knowledge or the needs of the people.

According to local respondents, the rapid development of infrastructure in Hambantota with the use of foreign-funded large scale construction projects has not benefitted the locals. The people in the area have remained poor with losing their income as well as forest areas to feed their cows, and no land for cultivation. It is clear that the centrally-led large scale construction projects are not addressing the needs of the poorer communities, instead wasting the natural resources authoritatively.

Central government-led large scale construction projects promoting tourism is characteristic of the development focus in much of the eastern province. The representatives of the Batticaloa municipal council were largely supportive of the large scale construction projects that have been undertaken in the area since the end of the war. However, a report reveals that much of the government and donor focus on infrastructure projects does nothing to assist local communities. With increasing levels of unemployment, issues of hunger and malnutrition have become a serious concern (Sumanthiran, October 21, 2011). This uncovers that the local communities in the area do not get job opportunities or benefits from such large scale construction projects.

A feature of central government involvement in post-war development in the eastern province is the large role played by the armed forces. Related to this is the question of land redistribution, and this has become a major problem, with the traditional agricultural lands of the people having been confiscated by central government and handed over to military personnel for major projects. According to Sumanthiran (October 21, 2011), large sections of eastern province beach front land have been parcelled out to companies which are headed by military officers and, interestingly, the military has established a string of restaurants. The

local people are therefore very much at risk of losing their livelihoods due to the loss of their lands and lagoon areas where they cultivate and fish (Sumanthiran, October 21, 2011). This reflects how the central government has taken over local natural resources out of locals and waste them situating massive constructions.

By appropriating the limited economic opportunities that might otherwise be used by local residents to bring income and revenue to the fragile local communities, the military is maintaining and reinforcing the cycle of poverty (Sumanthiran, October 21, 2011). Local people have been continuously losing their sources of income generation. Sumanthiran (October 21, 2011) points that, severe restrictions are placed on members of fishing communities by resulting in a drastic change to their means of livelihood. These communities are unable to pursue their traditional livelihood (Sumanthiran, October 21, 2011). A CBO leader stated that the locals have to get permission from the military personnel to fish in the lagoons and the sea.

Clearly, local communities have been neglected and their voices compromised by government-sponsored military involvement and large scale construction projects. These projects have failed the needs of the local communities including farmers and fishermen with the poor helpless in the face of large scale construction projects.

The southern expressway from Matara to Colombo is another large scale project which has affected local people adversely. Although the expressway entrance roads have been built along the villages, including the Baddegama *Pradeshiya Sabha* area, the interior roads of the area are in poor condition and have not been repaired or maintained. The area has not been developed to accommodate the needs of locals and the people in the area hardly get advantages from this project. Moreover, the water levels of the wells have been significantly

reduced after tightening the soil base to build the expressway. A representative of the Baddegama *Pradeshiya Sabha* noted the current situation and the actual needs of the area.

No development is seen in the area. The Baddegama *Pradeshiya Sabha* area remains in the same undeveloped position. There are many children without parents in the area. They need support for their education. They also need support to fulfil their other personal and social needs. The disabled people in the area need help as well. As a local government we have to look after these people.

As well as noting the lack of development, this statement also indicates that there are local government representatives who aspire to play a greater role in meeting the needs of their specific communities. However, local government has been unable to influence these projects not as a result of a lack of interest in being involved in the development of such plans but because there are questions about whether local government bodies have the capacity and knowledge to address the issues.

While donor agencies have supplied funds to reconstruct the areas which were heavily damaged in the tsunami and the war the main goal of these projects has been to develop infrastructure facilities, with most of them being handled by the central government ministries.

In terms of both the southern and eastern provinces, it is significant that there are variations in the views of local government representatives' understanding of local development. Some of them have seen the centrally-led large scale construction projects as the major drivers of local development. However, addressing local development through dimensions such as environmental protection, education for children, employment for youth, welfare for the needy, the needs of fishermen, cultivators and small scale employees, and sustainable utilisation of resources is important and are key issues which have emerged among respondents.

Local government bodies have become powerless through central government decision making. In southern and eastern provinces there are many unaddressed issues relating to people's development needs in different areas. There are two dimensions to the problem: first, large scale construction projects of central government waste funds and resources and they never address the needs of local communities; and second, despite their powerlessness to control the projects which impinge on the local communities, some local government representatives continue to believe that local development can be achieved through these large scale construction projects.

Strengthening local governance: NGOs as sustainable local development partners

The 13th amendment of the Sri Lanka's constitution to decentralise power to provincial councils has not yet been fully implemented and, instead, there has been a recentralisation of power in some instances making those provincial councils dependants of central government. Under such amendment, local government is subject to provincial councils.

The powers and functions of local government are limited in Sri Lanka for several reasons. The functions allocated to local government are limited and focused on environmental management and social services. Roads, sanitation, health, water supply and solid waste management have been the primary responsibilities of local government bodies since their inception. Other activities such as education, agriculture, employment generation and poverty alleviation are not provided for under these laws (UNESCAP, 2010).

Other government authorities such as government-owned boards, corporations or statutory bodies, and, in the post-war period, the military have taken over many of the powers and functions allocated to local government, leaving local government increasingly dependent on those authorities to meet the needs of their electorates. Local government policies, operational systems and management in this context are more likely to be influenced by central

government interests (UNESCAP, 2010), constraining local government further and reinforcing its relatively weak functional position. According to Hettige (2008, p. 435), in rural areas local government bodies have been marginalised in the development process due to the increasing significance of other political and administrative actors associated with national politics and the wider processes of development.

A major complaint of local government representatives concerns their inability to work for the area due to a lack of power, funding and resources. Local government becomes dependent when it lacks the funds, resources and staff to implement policy. Most local government bodies are unable to meet operational and maintenance costs of existing assets as a large portion of their funds are allocated to pay for salaries and administration (Asia Foundation, 2010). The limitation of revenue earnings by local government is a significant issue. Although there is a variety of funding sources and natural resources in local government areas, these have been taken over by the provincial and central government leaving local government with very limited opportunity for earning financial income.

The important point made by respondents was that without sufficient funding, local government is unable to plan for local development. If local government cannot afford the costs of maintenance and salaries it is unable to respond to people's development needs at the local level. The problem of funding stems from the lack of coordination among the national, provincial and local level development plans. National and provincial politicians neglect local needs when administering funds for development projects.

There are some exceptions regarding this funding process. A former mayor of the Matara municipal council noted that the mayor has powers to obtain direct support from external organisations such as NGOs. Another way that local government can obtain direct foreign aid is through 'sister city' programmes. This system is a mutual relationship built between local

government and a foreign counterpart. For example, the Galle municipal council has a long term relationship with the Velsen municipality in the Netherlands. According to the mayor of the Galle municipal council, through this relationship, the municipal council has received significant aid and facilities from the Velsen municipality. Although local government still has powers and ways to obtain direct foreign aid, many local government representatives are not aware of how to access procedural powers.

The lack of knowledge local government representatives have about legal procedure and power is one major reason for their inability to work towards local development. One respondent local government representative noted: “Most of the political representatives do not have a proper knowledge base about acts, statutes and the other legal procedures related to local government.” The poor knowledge among local government representatives in terms of their powers and functions creates an opportunity for central government to become involved in local government matters. Despite the imposed limitations of decentralisation, some local government representatives saw opportunities to work within the existing power structures.

Most local government representative respondents in the southern province proposed obtaining foreign funds to develop the area and to fulfil the people’s needs via NGOs. Obtaining technological support for local government work has been important to some respondents. As discussed earlier, local government in Sri Lanka has few funds for local development, but if foreign funds and support are obtained then local government can develop the area without depending on central and provincial government.

Foreign sources can provide important knowledge and technological skills. One respondent local government representative noted: “We need more training programmes and workshops which are conducted by the foreign-funded agencies. These can provide knowledge for us on local governing procedures.” Even if there are sufficient funds, to achieve success, local

government needs to understand the proper methods of service provision for development. For this, it needs knowledge-based training and technological skills.

Some respondents proposed that local government is the most suitable for handling the supervision of foreign aid, projects and programmes. One local government representative said: “Foreign aid is always helpful to the local council. But the aid needs to be maintained by the local council by directing them to the most critical areas and needy people.” But without reliable data bases, local government faces difficulties in obtaining foreign funds and support for projects. For example, if a foreign donor or an NGO requests for data about the length of the rural roads to supply funding for construction, local government needs to provide updated data bases. If they do not provide such data bases, the funds will be returned. It is assumed that local government lacks reliable data bases because they do not have the knowledge or expertise to prepare them or the relevant proposals to obtain funds. Knowledge and guidance is required, therefore, to obtain funds and NGOs can play a role in providing this.

Most local government bodies do not have effective links with the people in such areas. When considering most of the local government bodies in this research, there is little evidence of people’s participation in local policy processes towards local development. Although there have been attempts to obtain people’s participation, some local government representatives noted the difficulties of achieving people’s participation in policy making and local development. Development initiatives are of little benefit if they do not connect with the people (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). A former mayor of the Matara municipal council stated: “Huge development projects are not well matched to a country like Sri Lanka. The main key to sustainable development of a country is local government.”

As mentioned above, it has not always been the lack of legal power, but rather the lack of knowledge of local government representatives in terms of their power which is the major

problem. It is also evident that local government representatives have the potential to obtain knowledge about legal procedures, revenue sources and sustainable usage of natural resources from NGOs. Moreover, they expect funds, technology and guidance from NGOs and donor agencies to develop the areas, obtain people's participation into local policy processes and secure people's needs.

Addressing local development sustainably: Different ways of NGO involvement

Apart from a small number of municipal councils with long-term connections to foreign municipalities, Sri Lankan local government has not had links with NGOs until the disastrous tsunami in December 2004. Prior to the tsunami, obtaining foreign support was an unfamiliar concept for local government bodies in Sri Lanka. When large amounts of foreign funds and resources flowed into Sri Lanka in the post-tsunami period, there were no proper mechanisms at local, provincial, or central government level to manage the aid in an effective way. Additional foreign aid flowed into Sri Lanka in the post-war period from May 2009 and was managed centrally with limitations placed on the role NGOs could play in how it was used.

Given this situation, there were problems with the effective management and utilisation of aid. These included political interference in the planning, implementation and allocation of funds; staffing and related problems in project management; excessive conditions imposed by donors; and complex government procedures imposed on NGOs (Jayasuriya et al., 2005, p. 33). The problems associated with the government distribution of aid led to NGOs often being seen as a more efficient means of aid delivery (Jayasuriya et al., 2005, p. 46).

According to respondents, working with NGOs and handling large amounts of foreign aid was new to local government bodies, and local government representatives and staff lacked relevant knowledge and management experience. Respondents added that there was a lack of capacity and opportunity to prepare the proposals and plans needed to obtain additional aid. In

many instances there was a lack of a shared understanding between the NGOs and government authorities at the local level about the exact needs of the areas and where aid should be directed. This is because there are no updated data bases to local government bodies.

During the post-tsunami and post-war period, centrally-led local development projects funded by foreign donors and NGOs have taken place. The Local Government Infrastructure Improvement Project (LGIIP) was a semi-government project conducted through the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. As part of its assistance to the local loans and development fund (LL&DF)¹ needed for implementing the LGIIP, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) supplied technical assistance to strengthen local government infrastructure financing in Sri Lanka (ADB, 2005). LGIIP targeted the building of provincial council and local government capacities to strengthen the LL&DF (Ministry of Provincial Councils, n.d.). Under LGIIP, several components were eligible for financing.²

Analysis of the implementation of LGIIP shows that the donor agency's role was limited, and there was no direct communication between local government and the agency. All project proposals, funding and repayments went through provincial level to the national level ministry. The ministry planned the LGIIP and handled the LL&DF where a project was in line with the central government's development priorities, especially where the pursuit of economic growth through investment in large scale infrastructure was apparent (ADB, 2006).

Most respondent local government representatives and staff said that they did not have the knowledge and skills to write proposals to obtain funds, leading to situations where the

¹ LL&DF provides loans at concessionary rates for local infrastructure and revenue generating projects (Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils, 2012, pp. 19-21). To obtain grants and loans from LL&DF, local government has to meet certain criteria, including the capacities for existing revenue generation, performance of existing loan repayment, and the ability to contribute a minimum seven per cent of the project cost (Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government, n.d.).

² These include community water supply, roads, drainage and communal sewerage, solid waste management, and basic health clinics, public libraries, and recreational parks (ADB, 2005).

resources local government received from LGIIP were less than expected. It is not evident that local government made creative decisions to the LL&DF for funding.

The North East Local Services Improvement Project (NELSIP) was a World Bank-funded centrally-led project designed “to improve the delivery of local infrastructure services by local authorities in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka in an accountable and responsive manner” (World Bank, n.d.). The five components of the NELSIP were: 1) infrastructure service delivery; 2) institutionalising accountabilities; 3) building capacities; 4) assessments and evaluation; and 5) project management (World Bank, n.d.). The greatest provision has been allocated to the first component, infrastructure service delivery.

NELSIP has been conducted by two central government ministries: the Ministry of Economic Development; and the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. There was a large distance between project planning and implementation. NELSIP has been planned at the national level, and there were certain levels of the project which reach the divisional level. When it reached local government, questions about whether such a project addresses the actual needs of a local government area and whether local government can implement such a project emerged.

Another project called Local Governance Project (LoGoPro), funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was implemented through the Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs, and the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. The four-year project was to expand the capacities of provincial and local government for peace-building, strengthening social cohesion and managing the equitable delivery of public services (UNDP, 2009a). In the post-war period in Sri Lanka, local government in the eastern province was in the process of being re-established, and with newly

elected representatives, there was an urgent need to ensure the core functioning of these newly reinstated institutions (UNDP, 2009b).

Although LoGoPro's aims were connected specifically with local governance, the project board did not have any direct link with local government bodies. The project board consisted of a number of administrative officials but there were no political representatives.

Critically, when projects were planned by central government ministries, and implementation strategies put in place either through central government-controlled administrative bodies or provincial councils, local government or local communities cannot be involved in such projects. Therefore the development needs of communities and resources at the local level were often not identified. The distance between the project planning and implementation stages resulted in a lack of coordination between the local development needs, local resources and the project outcomes. While some local government areas needed aspects of infrastructure, the projects were not prioritised in order to meet needs. Such an approach to local government leads to a strengthening and centralisation of authoritative power.

Central government's argument is that there is no capacity at local government level to deal with foreign aid and NGOs. Further, local government representatives reported that they lacked experience on foreign aid management and did not have the knowledge and capacity to prepare development proposals and plans to obtain aid. While they expected to obtain such experience and knowledge this was not available. Clearly, lack of capability at the local government level should not be an excuse for the central government to control foreign aid, NGO projects and local resources according to its political agendas. Central government needs to equip local government officials to deal with foreign aid and NGO projects in terms of locally-led and community-oriented sustainable development. As evidenced in the above discussed projects, when there is no direct relationship between NGOs or donor agencies and

local government, NGOs and donors have to follow central government preferences without considering local needs. If NGOs can connect directly with local government bodies, these NGOs will be able to develop local government competency in preparing development proposals and plans, identifying the actual needs at the local level, and managing aid. A real change must be instituted around capacity development aimed at enhancing local governance and sustainable local development.

The problem here is that the central government-controlled administrative bodies give prominence to the agendas of central government rather than local government. Because central government political agendas predominate there is less likelihood of creative decisions on aid distribution. For example, through directing NGOs and donor agencies to provide infrastructure, central government has been able to capture aid and use it to fulfil its aims in particular areas, such as developing large scale tourism industries rather than the development of local communities.

On the other hand the natural resources such as wild sanctuaries, beaches, lagoons, bays, parks, forests, rivers, streams, lakes, hot springs, historical places and agricultural lands in local government areas have been owned and maintained by the central government and not by the local government. Local government has no authority in these issues and therefore, cannot generate any local income from these resources. Central government gets forceful decisions regarding these resources without concerning local knowledge or people's needs. This has resulted in destroying these resources due to lack of maintenance, government decisions to conduct large scale construction projects and human activities such as garbage dumping, polluting and misusing.

What central government should do is to strengthen local government to address their own issues without blocking access to foreign donors and NGOs. It is needed to build capacities of

local government to maintain the natural resources sustainably to earn income and to address local development needs. There is a need to change the central government's authoritative influence on local funds and resources. Some NGOs and donor agencies are aware of defects in centrally-led development and central government control over local resources and have found ways to connect directly with local government to carry-out their projects.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) was one of the few organisations that worked with local political representatives (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). FCM's participatory mechanisms like the community support fund (CSF),³ association building, and mid-term planning systems and procedures (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.) have had significantly positive results in local government areas. In this way communities are able to influence the order of priorities for rural infrastructure by submitting proposals and contributing 50 per cent of the project costs in the form of labour.

Under a sister city partnership between a Sri Lankan local government and the city of Munich, Germany, assistance was offered to the tsunami-affected cities of Batticaloa and Kalmunai⁴ towards carrying out a water (WASSER) project. The objectives of the WASSER project include planning and setting-up of sewerage systems in tsunami-affected areas and the provision of drinking water supplies for the poor and tsunami-affected people (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010).

In the Kalmunai municipality more than 50 per cent of the people use shallow wells to drink water which is polluted by the open dumping by the cess pits. Therefore WASSER brought timely assistance to Kalmunai at the critical point of water pollution. Another project funded

³ The CSF has been used mostly for road construction. Without contractors, road building became cheaper, local ownership and maintenance better, real estate values improved and, with it, an improved tax base for local government. The CSF model provoked a re-consideration of policies with respect to the size of road eligible for municipal attention (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.).

⁴ Kalmunai experienced the highest death toll and property damage in Sri Lanka (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010).

by the EU, the Environmental Remediation Programme (ERP), supported WASSER. Under the ERP the garbage-dumped open water bodies are cleaned (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010). As a result of the WASSER, the municipal councils' capabilities were enhanced in the field of environmental planning, and environmental management of information systems, setting-up of a cadastre for utility planning, and adopting information for risk assessment and disaster mitigation purposes (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010). The WASSER project has been a remarkable success in educating the local community about conserving water, and assisting poor families in meeting their drinking water problems, and for highlighting the services rendered by the municipal administration. Through the WASSER project, improved community participation has been achieved (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010). Another important achievement was the establishment of networks and linkages with local communities. WASSER created the opportunity for local government representatives, staff and community volunteers to meet together and discuss the needs and problems of the area.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded Transparent Accountable Local Governance (TALG) programme sought to help local government bodies make key political institutions more responsive to citizen input, improve service delivery, provide post-tsunami emergency recovery assistance, and increase the rule of law to protect and empower vulnerable groups (Asia Foundation, 2010).

The successful implementation of the TALG programme has enabled mid-term and short-term planning to be incorporated in local government management processes (Ministry of Local Government, 2009). Among the local government bodies in this research, Weligama urban council experienced successful results from the TALG programme. The participatory planning process helped local government identify the high priority needs of its citizens with TALG effectively encouraging local government staff and others to become involved in making project proposals. The Asia Foundation helped in preparing a four-year plan for the

Weligama urban council. Under the four-year plan, 16 proposals were written for 16 projects,⁵ with the urban council implementing all of them.⁶

USAID's Democracy and Governance Programme started to support provincial and local government in particular areas aimed at strengthening their capacity in planning, budgeting and in ensuring transparent and participatory planning processes. Supporting Regional Governance (SuRG) is one of many democracy and governance programmes to facilitate post-war transformation in the eastern province. SuRG assisted local government to build participatory governance forums and worked to engage directly with the local level by encouraging citizens to participate in local government policy processes.

Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International operates small scale projects in villages which provide support for people's lives by developing socio-economic programmes to improve conditions in the rural communities. CARE addresses rural development through a community participatory approach using the theory and practices of community governance.⁷ This project aims to improve peoples' social status by focusing on women, youth, and POP (poorest of the poor – the lowest economic level of the society).

CARE promotes community participatory development based in the villages where the issues are livelihood development, environmental management, social resources, and infrastructure development. CARE establishes village operating units (VOUs) and selects officials to represent the villagers. As a result CARE reaches the CBOs in the villages and encourages and builds CBOs in the villages to support women and youth participation.⁸

⁵ Some of the projects are: construction of two public fairs, an urban council building, meeting halls for fishermen, a library, children's parks, parking place for three wheelers, solid waste management, a compost yard development and the purchase of tractors.

⁶ Respondent Community Development Officer, Weligama Urban Council.

⁷ Respondent Team Leader, CARE International – Hambantota Office.

⁸ Respondent Team Leader, CARE.

CARE prepares an activity plan for each village known as the village development plan (VDP) which is constantly updated and implemented through a VOU. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) has been used to make VDPs accountable. The importance of this project is that it ensures closer scrutiny of the poor local communities in the villages. CARE works according to its own priorities and not according to central government agendas.

Transparency International trained the elected representatives of the *Pradeshiya Sabhas* on the ways of improving their services. In their programme, Transparency International found that the *Pradeshiya Sabhas* did not have strategic plans, especially a four-year plans or knowledge to make plans to obtain funds.⁹

Without guidance, encouragement or motivation, local government representatives and communities do not engage in policy development processes. Transparency International's expectations to continue their assistance is proving effective. Transparency International does not provide funds or material aid to local government but provides guidance and builds connections between local government and people. This organisation helps in identifying local resources and supports sustainable utilisation of them. The organisation does not act as a donor agency but provides knowledge to local government representatives about local government income sources.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) works to build two way communications between people and local government so that representatives can get to know the people's problems and needs. CPA supports local government to obtain people's participation in decision making, guides local government bodies on effective methods of tax collection and provides knowledge to the people on taxes.¹⁰

⁹ Respondent Team Leader, CARE.

¹⁰ Respondent Contact Person, Governance and Anti-Corruption Programme, CPA.

There has been remarkable support among several NGOs and donor agencies for waste management projects in many local government bodies. The tsunami severely damaged houses and belongings increasing the amount of solid waste which put pressure on the collection infrastructure, requiring NGOs and donors to focus on solid waste management (VNG International, 2006). Moreover, as local government bodies in Sri Lanka lack funds and knowledge, in many local government areas sustainable waste management does not happen. Garbage dumping in open areas and unorganised drainage and sewerage systems have caused several environmental and health issues.

The solid waste management project of the Matara municipal council is funded by the European Union (EU) for the solid waste recycling plant. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) provided the relevant technology and training. ADG (Development Assistance) was also involved and provided support for this project. Since the funding agencies left, the solid waste management project has been controlled by the Matara municipal council. This means all the profit goes to the municipal council.¹¹

The Galle municipal council is another example of where various NGOs and funding agencies have become involved in different waste management projects. Caritas Social and Economic Development (SED) Galle constructed buildings and donated machinery to establish a compost plant which is now handled by the municipal council although project from time to time receives foreign funds for its maintenance from various sources such as FCM/ Municipal Cooperation Programme (MCP), VNG (Association of Dutch Municipalities) and Germany.¹²

In 2006 the EU was involved in a three-year waste management project called COWAM (Construction Waste Management) which aimed at building-waste management in Galle city. Through this project, waste is re-used to produce raw building materials, and deal with

¹¹ Respondent Public Health Inspector, Matara Municipal Council.

¹² Respondent Technical Officer, Galle Municipal Council.

environmental pollution arising from building-waste which has subsequently been reduced. Staff members of the municipal council were trained in Germany and in 2009 total ownership of the project was handed over to the Galle municipal council. The municipal council now produces bricks and concrete chips which can be used for building and road construction. Practical Action, also supported waste management in Galle, introducing compost bins to the MC area, and sponsoring a paper, plastic and polythene recycling centre.¹³

Hambantota urban council offers a different example of foreign-funded waste management. Prior to the tsunami disaster, garbage dumping was a major problem in Hambantota, until the urban council started a solid waste management project. The project was stopped after the tsunami the Hambantota *Nagara Pavithratha Sangamaya* (association for Hambantota city cleaning), was established by a few young men who restarted the solid waste management project in 2007. They received funds, buildings and machinery from the Energy Forum-Netherlands and were supported by VNG and Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid (CORDAID).¹⁴ The project is now run by the urban council.

When analysing these projects using the same criteria used to assess central government-controlled NGO and donor projects, many advantages can be identified. The special feature of these projects is their direct connection to local communities. Through this these projects have been able to network local partners and people consistent with identifying local resources, prioritising and addressing the needs of local communities. These project plans have been shown to fit with local needs and environment.

These indicate the varied benefits and advantages of NGOs in the selected local government areas, and signify the importance and potential of NGOs who contribute to sustainable development and address needs at the local level. The positive responses from respondent

¹³ Information provided by the Galle municipal council.

¹⁴ Respondent Project Manager, Solid Waste Management Project, Hambantota Urban Council.

local government representatives and staff members in terms of successful achievement from these projects confirm this.

The success of these projects highlights the way local government can establish an advantage if foreign assistance comes directly to local government sources. These NGO contributions match the proposals of local government representatives. The importance of encouraging people's participation in local government policy processes, identifying and maintaining local resources, the need of more knowledge and guidance on their powers and functions, and the need to obtain knowledge, guidance, funds, resources and technologies from NGOs and donor agencies to promote local governance and sustainable local development were some of these proposals.

The direct NGO involvement at the local level indicates that there are possibilities to build collaboration among local government and NGOs in local development leading to improved forms of local governance. The important point here is that this can help local government bodies to overcome their dependency by identifying, maintaining and utilising local resources sustainably. An approach to local government which is dependent on central and provincial government can be changed by improving local government capacities through such NGO involvement.

Conclusion

Over decades central government has tended to use local government as a means to strengthen the centralised power structures. In this context, people have acquiesced to a highly centralised governing structure which has consistently neglected the local communities by concentrating power at the centre and by controlling natural resources at the local level authoritatively. People at the local level continue to be characterised by a lack of power, funds, resources and especially a lack of knowledge about how to advance their demands.

Sri Lankan politics has been shaped by the post-tsunami and post-war situations where central government has dominated most of the reconstruction work, controlling aid and its management and distribution. This research began with the recognition of a clear need to empower the local level by connecting local government and local communities in order to overcome difficulties occurred through power centralisation and to fulfil sustainable development needs. Most local government representatives lacked a clear idea about local development and people's participation in it. They tended to see central government-led large scale construction projects as local development.

With central government-centric policy processes, the government can neglect the issues it does not want to consider. For example, the problems faced by local communities due to a lack of essential facilities such as water, electricity and interior roads have not been addressed by central government's large scale construction projects. Such projects are focused on tourism promotion which is a central government priority. Moreover, centrally-led local development projects funded by several donor agencies and NGOs also have not addressed the actual local needs instead they have fulfilled central government's political agendas. The significant issue here is that local people's views and local knowledge have not been considered in the policy process.

In Sri Lanka there are limited means for organising and obtaining people's participation in local policy planning and local development. This research has revealed that people's participation in local policy processes was not encouraged by local government bodies, nor were they required to consult locals. While many local government representatives saw the benefits of encouraging people's participation in local policy processes towards achieving sustainable local development, it rarely happened. The potential for external actors to promote a role for people in the policy process is needed and it is evident that some NGOs have the

potential to help build CBOs and guide local government representatives in ways of obtaining people's participation in local policy processes.

Most proposals by local government representatives and local administrative officials to get foreign funds needed the guidance of NGOs in management, technology and policy planning. NGOs those have connected directly with the local level have been identified here as having the capacity to empower local government in pursuit of local development through providing knowledge, guidance and technology, helping local government in identifying and maintaining local resources and encouraging people's participation in local policy planning. Despite their political party affiliations and provincial differences, the potential for many local government representatives to obtain NGO and donor support and work for local communities is encouraging. With this NGO support, local government and local communities can be empowered to find ways to achieve the control of local resources to promote sustainable local development.

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