**Using the policy instruments of NGOs to promote locally-led development and governance in Sri Lanka**

**Abstract**

Since independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan political system has been strongly centralized despite the many attempts to decentralize power. Reforms to local government have been part of decentralization initiatives have ended in failure. This has given rise to a central-local dilemma and a fragmentation of authority from the top to the bottom levels of government that undermine local government in addressing development or community needs. The tsunami of 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009 saw non-governmental organization (NGO) support and large amounts of foreign funding flow into Sri Lanka to assist in the recovery. Although the central government imposed strict restrictions on foreign funds, a number of NGOs have played an important role in promoting local development through interacting with local governments and communities. Based on the southern and eastern provinces in Sri Lanka, this paper examines how and why the foreign-originated and foreign-funded NGOs have used their policy instruments in overcoming the development and governance issues at the local government level. The paper indicates that by failing to incorporate the local and non-government actors in designing policy and implementing actions the outcomes for the recipients were seriously flawed. The findings suggest that NGOs can and have played a positive role in mitigating central-local dilemmas altering the fragmented authority by creating networks, helping to build community-based organizations (CBOs) and guiding local government representatives in obtaining people's participation in local policy processes.

Keywords: NGOs, policy instruments, local government, development, Sri Lanka

**Introduction**

Centralization of power is an abiding feature of Sri Lanka's governance. Several attempts made by successive governments to decentralize power since independence in 1948 have been failed due to the anti-federalist reactions of some Sinhala nationalist groups that rejected all decentralization proposals, and argued that decentralization was a threat to the unitary state structure and state sovereignty and so would divide the country. The Tamil nationalist elements have long argued for decentralization and later fought for a separate Tamil state. The result was

an ethnic conflict that led to 30-year civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) and the government forces. The war ended up with the victory to the government and this victory further contributed to the government's unwillingness to decentralize power. The long term failures of decentralization have created central-local dilemmas by fragmenting authority. This has weakened the local government and resulted in poor local development and neglect of community needs.

After the tsunami of 2004 and the civil war of 2009, large amounts of foreign funds and NGO support flowed into Sri Lanka to assist in the recovery. The prominent feature of the aid management and distribution was the central government control over foreign funds and NGOs by directing them towards large scale construction projects. The central government's policy instruments on such projects have not addressed the actual development needs at the local level. Moreover, the central government imposed strict restrictions on NGOs. This move of government created a negative public perception of foreign funds and NGOs by highlighting the misuse of foreign funds and malpractices of NGOs (Walton, 2008: p. 142).

Despite the government restrictions, a number of foreign-originated and foreign-funded NGOs have interacted directly with the local government level in addressing local development and community needs by using their policy instruments. This paper analyses how and why these NGOs have used their policy instruments in addressing the development and governance issues at the local government level. Based on research in the southern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the paper explores the ways in which to use the NGO policy instruments to mitigate the central-local dilemmas in a context of a fragmented authority due to strong centralization.

**Background**

In the Sri Lanka's political context where every effort to decentralize power has been ended in failure, the reforms to local government as a part of decentralization initiatives also have been failed. A long-term effort to establish district-based political bodies occurred with the establishment of development councils in 1980. But these bodies were totally enactive in addressing local government matters and therefore, collapsed. Although the provincial councils established later in 1987 included constitutionally recognized powers, these have never been transferred by central government. When the provincial councils were established, the local

government bodies have become a subject under provincial councils by further weakening local government. This has given rise to a central-local dilemma in which the centralization of power has served to undermine local government. This means that local government is then unable to determine its own policies, to use its policy processes to bring about locally-led development, or to address local community needs. The fragmentation of authority from the top to the bottom levels of government actively discourages collaboration or collective action.

Currently, there are 341 local government bodies in Sri Lanka including municipal councils, urban councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. The local population lives out of the major urban centres is 78 per cent. However, the central government's policy instruments have failed in addressing local development. Inability of government to incorporate local knowledge in decision making processes by obtaining active people's participation has led the local development unresponsive in addressing the community needs. The key role of local communities, local governments, CBOs and NGOs in policy processes have been neglected by the central government and consequently the policy outcomes have become ineffective.

Since the 1970s, NGOs played a key role in addressing problems including human rights violations and issues with decentralization, local government and community-led development in Sri Lanka. 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. Additional foreign aid flowed into Sri Lanka in the post-civil war period from May 2009. The developments in Sri Lanka following the tsunami and the civil war saw the important contribution made by NGOs to address the issues at the local government level. In a context of a strongly centralized aid management and distribution process and a strict central regulatory mechanism over foreign aid, a number of NGOs seemed to have understood that many problems that central government created were due to a failure to incorporate and rely on the local knowledge and the capacity of local sources in addressing the enormous issues arising.

**Politics of NGOs in Sri Lanka: Conflicts and collaborations**

The role of NGOs in Sri Lanka has to be understood in the context of a transformed political outlook on the part of governments and a change in attitude to developmental activities (Perera,

1998: p. 4). The relationship between the Sri Lankan government and NGOs has taken a variety of forms over time going through stages of relative indifference up until the 1970s, ambivalence in the 1980s, and open confrontation in the early 1990s (Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 84). It is evident that there has not been a continuous, smooth and collaborative relationship between the Sri Lankan government and NGOs.

Up until 1970, there was a slow but steady increase in the number of NGOs in Sri Lanka (Kloos, 1999: p. 13). The reason for the sudden increase in the number of NGOs from 1971 onwards was in response to the internal conflicts and insurrections which occurred at that time. In 1971 the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurgency led to a new awareness about problematic socio-economic issues, and in the absence of an adequate government policy (Kloos, 1999: p. 13).

According to Fernando (2003: p. 5), prior to 1977 there was no trend towards the formation of new, or expansion of, the existing NGOs. It was the newly elected United National Party (UNP) government's emphasis on an open economic policy, after 1977, which led to a reduction of certain welfare policies and this trend opened spaces for NGOs to enter where and when the government withdrew (Kloos, 1999: pp. 13-14). This argument is supported by Wickramasinghe (2001: pp. 39-40) who maintains that, after 1977, industrial growth based on foreign investment was encouraged, and a necessary concomitant to such an export-led strategy was the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s 'structural adjustment policies', which demanded shifting public resources away from social welfare into investment. Perera (1998: p. 7) adds that since 1977 attempts were made to dismantle many components of the post-colonial welfare society which in financial terms were becoming unaffordable. This meant that certain kinds of activities such as small scale development initiatives, informal educational activities, and the distribution of food rations were no longer the prerogative of the state.

In this context, the government allowed foreign NGOs and donors to work in Sri Lanka. As a result, there was a proliferation of both foreign and local NGOs. The initiatives of these NGOs received significant support from the international community. As was done with the foreign investors, the government created an environment which was conducive to international NGOs and donors functioning in Sri Lanka (Kloos, 1999: p. 13). The trend continued in the 1980s as an increased amount of government spending was allocated to defence expenses leaving the state

more dependent on international NGO and foreign donor funding for welfare and development work (Kloos, 1999: pp. 11-12).

The NGO involvement in government policy implementation became prominent in some of the events. In the 1980s the *Gramodaya Mandalas* provided for the participation of NGOs in local level planning and implementation.

NGOs collaborated, with more or less success, in government projects such as the *Gam Udawa* (village re-awakening), integral rural development programme and the *Mahaweli*[1] development project (Cited in Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 99). The growing importance of NGOs is evident in the way the UNP manifesto in 1988 specifically recognized their role. It was the first time in Sri Lanka that a political party made an official stand on NGOs (Fernando, 2003: p. 24). In 1988-1989, the UNP's electoral victory was achieved partly by incorporating an electoral commitment to an extensive 'safety net' programme[2] in the form of a large income transfer scheme for the declared purpose of 'poverty alleviation'(Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 101). This programme was introduced as the *Janasaviya*, and sponsored by the WB. In May 1991, the *Janasaviya* trust fund (JTF)[3] was set up to implement the programmes of savings and credit, and nutrition, among CBOs (Fernando, 2003: p. 14). NGOs were involved as intermediaries in implementing *Janasaviya* sub-projects (Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 101). A large amount of funding began to be channelled to NGOs and a number of NGOs were formed exclusively to implement the JTF-funded projects. As partner organizations of the JTF, NGOs received assistance for institutional development which included funding for infrastructure, office equipment and vehicles. This was recognized as one of the major collaborative relationships between the government and NGOs (Fernando, 2003: p. 14). It reflected an acknowledgement by the Sri Lankan government of a need for NGO support in the implementation of the project.

However, the government and NGOs were not collaborative continuously. There were problems with some anti-government NGOs that failed to participate in *Gramodaya Mandala* meetings

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[1] *Mahaweli* is the longest river in Sri Lanka. *Mahaweli* development project aimed to generate electricity and to develop agriculture in the dry zones in Sri Lanka.
[2] Safety nets deserve a place in development policy in all countries. They mitigate extreme poverty through the re-distribution of resources; they help households invest in their future and manage risks; and they help governments make sound policy decisions in macro-economic, trade, labour, and many other sectors (Grosh et al., 2008: p. 11).
[3] The JTF was jointly funded by the government and bilateral or multilateral donors (Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 101). The strategy of the JTF was to work in partnership with NGOs that functioned both at the national and village levels in order to mobilise the CBOs (Fernando, 2003: p. 14).

and were not involved in planning and implementation at the local level. Although NGOs supported the *Janasaviya* programme, after the appointment of the NGO Commission in 1993 by the President, many NGOs broke with the government. This high powered Commission was appointed by the then Executive, President R. Premadasa, to investigate allegations that foreign funds were flowing into both international and local NGOs without the knowledge or concurrence of the government (Wickramasinghe, 2001: p. 84). This was called 'the Presidential Commission of Inquiry in Respect of Non-governmental Organizations Functioning in Sri Lanka'. This was interpreted by commentators as an outcome of personal rivalry and competition between the President and a local NGO leader at that time. The government had used the NGO Commission to foster a negative, discrediting and intimidating climate around NGOs. The effect was that NGOs felt that their rights to freedom of association and privacy were under threat (Brabant, 1995: p. 12).

In 1994, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led People's Alliance (PA) coalition came into power marking another phase of government-NGO relations. In the 1994 Parliamentary election, the NGOs and PA government shared common ground on the need to solve the ethnic conflict through a negotiated political settlement (Fernando, 2003: p. 15). NGOs became involved in implementing programmes towards a non-military solution for the ethnic conflict to restore peace.[4] However, this collaboration between the PA government and NGOs was not evident in other government programmes, with Fernando claiming that the government began to narrow the scope of NGOs (Fernando, 2003: p. 15). For example, in the *Samurdhi* programme, the successor to the *Janasaviya*, the government did not obtain the support of NGOs.[5] This trend continued when the PA government failed in its peace negotiations with the LTTE. The decision of the PA government to go back to a military strategy further undermined collaboration between the government and NGOs. Fernando notes that human rights-based NGOs began to revert to the watch-dog role they had played in the 1988-1993 era as many incidents of human rights violations began to be reported, especially in war-affected areas (Fernando, 2003: p. 15).

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[4] Especially the NGOs collaborated with two initiatives of the PA government. The first was the *Sudu Nelum Viyaparaya* (the white lotus movement), which raised the public awareness of the ethnic conflict and advocated a non-military political solution. The second was the National Integration and Planning Unit (NIPU) formed under the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs and Ethnic Integration with the assistance of the Norwegian government. In both these initiatives, many NGOs took an active part in collaborating with the government (Fernando, 2003: p. 15).
[5] The strategy of *Samurdhi* was to recruit about 3,000 unemployed educated youth as village level coordinators (*Niyamakas*) and to establish a powerful network of CBOs.

Election malpractices, violence and misuse of power by the government were also reported during the *Wayamba* (north western) provincial council election in 1999. NGOs played an active role in monitoring the election process and openly confronted the government's action (Fernando, 2003: p. 15). In this period, therefore, the government began to come under heavy criticism by NGOs.

In response to these criticisms, the government attempted to pressurize agencies such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Asia Foundation not to support those NGOs involved in election monitoring, by interpreting that such support was a contravention of the memoranda of understanding they had signed with the government (Fernando, 2003: p. 15). NGO liaison units in many ministries were disabled under the PA government indicating that the state had moved away from formally acknowledging a special role for NGOs in the development of the country (Wickramasinghe, 2001: pp. 99-100). Government withdrew from its association with not only rights-oriented NGOs, but also with development-oriented NGOs.

In December 2001, the UNP-led United National Front (UNF) coalition came into power and introduced new economic reforms and development programmes with the fullest support of the organizations like the WB, IMF and Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Fernando, 2003: p. 23). The election manifesto of the UNF had a separate section on its stand and policy on NGOs.[6] Fernando (2003: p. 24) reports that the secretary of the Ministry of Finance and Planning and the Treasury, while addressing a meeting of a group of NGO representatives, invited the NGOs to take an active part in the UNF government's 100 days accelerated development programme. Some NGOs saw this as an opportunity to forge a more positive working relationship with the government and perform their role without being harassed by the government.

After the ceasefire of 2002, NGOs became involved in a range of peace building projects, which included promoting development in conflict-affected areas in an effort to establish a 'peace dividend', building relationships at a community level, and attempting to foster popular support for the peace process (particularly in the south). According to Walton (2008: p. 141), donor commitment to these programmes, and hence their support for NGOs, was heavily dependent on

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[6] The manifesto claimed that the UNF recognised the NGOs and CBOs as important partners of the development process, and as leading actors in socio-economic transformation.

the state's commitment to the peace process. As a result, NGO activities and objectives became increasingly aligned with the political project driven by the UNF government and its international backers.

However, in 2004 the UNF government collapsed and the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), an alliance of the SLFP and the Sinhala nationalist JVP, came into power. Later this alliance received the support of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), another Sinhala nationalist political party but this collaboration again weakened government-NGO relations. The positive support of NGOs in the 2002 peace negotiations reversed when the war restarted. In situations where the government does not recognize people's democratic rights, and when NGOs work against such actions, there have been conflicts between government and NGOs, evident in the government imposed restrictions on rights-oriented NGOs.

It is significant that foreign funding of NGO peace work had come under harsh criticism in Sri Lanka. According to Orjuela (2005: p. 7), the most vociferous opposition to NGOs and peace processes came from Sinhala nationalist groups. Wickramasinghe (2001: pp. 40-41) adds that militant Sinhala groups vilified 'foreign-funded NGOs' as responsible for undermining the morale of the troops and pursuing 'selfish aims' instead of thinking of the good of the nation. Uyangoda (1995: pp. 7-8) argued that what was extremely interesting in Sri Lanka was that the government had only occasionally come out against the human rights-based NGOs on the argument that they endangered national security. Furthermore, Uyangoda (1995: p. 8) added that if one really wanted to demonize, terrorize and silence one's enemy, the easiest argument was to suggest collusion with the LTTE. By using this argument, many NGOs have been demonized in Sri Lanka. Reasons for the emergence of arguments suggesting NGO collusion with the LTTE include the fact that some NGOs had funded the LTTE and, in the north, there had been pro-LTTE NGOs. Humanitarian NGOs who had worked in the conflict areas were branded as pro-LTTE because they had worked among civilians in LTTE-controlled areas.

Different policies of governments and the aspects of the political parties and supportive groups from time to time have changed the government behaviour upon NGOs. The continuous increase of NGO interactions in Sri Lanka, however, indicates that NGOs had a role to play under every government; a collaborative role or a conflicting role depending on governments' policies on development, local governance, welfare, human rights and peace building. When government

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and NGO policy instruments tally, their relations were collaborative and mostly successful. But when governments' policies did not match with NGO objectives, the relations were conflicting and disadvantageous for people.

**NGOs in post-tsunami and post-war situations**

Political responses to NGOs in Sri Lanka during 2004 onwards were heavily influenced by the tsunami. According to Walton (2008: p. 142), the unprecedented international response to the tsunami produced an unruly funding environment, which resulted in numerous examples of malpractice. This response not only transformed the NGO sector in Sri Lanka by making it richer, it also boosted the public consciousness of NGOs. Walton (2008: p. 142) further notes that this international response in turn, increased the potential advantages open to political actors who criticized NGOs as a means of articulating their own political visions which, for nationalist groups, usually meant highlighting the corrupting influence of Western culture or political interference. As a result, well-established nationalist discourses about the harmful impact of NGOs on Sri Lankan life gained greater relevance and public perceptions of NGOs were damaged. But the base of these criticisms can be identified as the government's attempt to compete with the NGO sector. For Walton (2008: p. 142), the tsunami also rapidly elevated the NGO sector from an insignificant concern for government, to one which was suddenly receiving and distributing foreign resources and social welfare on a scale comparable to that of the state. Furthermore, for Walton, the tsunami response exposed failures in government decision making and operational weakness in the aftermath of the tsunami, providing further incentives for the government to attack NGOs. Government criticism of NGOs, in this context, can be seen as an attempt to hide its own weaknesses on policy planning and implementation failures.

Following the tsunami, the government introduced new regulations and procedures for international NGOs. According to Brochard (2005: p. 1), the introduction of new regulations and procedures has added a new layer to the relationship between the government and NGOs. According to Walton (2008: p. 143), NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka is reliant on a number of factors specific to the Sri Lankan context such as a highly centralized political system, a lack of legal protection for NGOs, and a sense that NGOs were elitist and threatened the aims of a nationalist political agenda. The specialty is that, from the earlier times the legal procedures have not been to evaluate the utility of NGO activities and projects but monitor them, which can leave

them subject to control through state intervention (Perera, 1998: p. 9). Such legal procedures reflect government aims to suppress and control NGOs rather than obtaining their support in various sectors such as human rights protection and development.

The election of a new President in November 2005 began a period of growing hostility towards NGOs in Sri Lanka. This prompted a sudden widening of the ideological gap between the government and the majority of donors and NGOs working on peace building whose ideas had fitted closely with the previous UNF government's version of liberal peace building. This shift was accelerated by the government's reliance on two Sinhalese nationalist parties, the JVP and the JHU, as partners in the ruling UPFA coalition. Their new prominence allowed them much greater space to promote their views through the mainstream state media, and to encourage government measures to restrict the work of NGOs. Walton adds that the backlash against NGOs was also closely linked to the slide back to full-scale military confrontation, which began in 2006. The government's increasingly militarist approach reduced the space for the critical voices that had grown in confidence during the ceasefire period. By putting the country on a war footing, the government was also able to tighten its grip over the media and use it to attack human rights and peace advocates, who were increasingly seen as a threat to the state's military objectives (Walton, 2008: p. 142), and indicated a return to past beliefs about NGOs. Since 2004, the UPFA government remained in power and NGOs faced continued limitations in terms of their operational capacities.

In May 2009, the government declared its war victory after defeating the LTTE. Additional foreign aid flowed into Sri Lanka in the post-war period and was managed centrally with limitations placed on the role NGOs could play in how it was used. In April 2010, the NGO Secretariat, where the NGOs are supposed to get registered before functioning in Sri Lanka, was placed under the purview of the Ministry of Defence. The NGO Secretariat was placed under the control the Defence Ministry because the war ended in 2009 and the government was unable to put forward arguments of national security anymore. In the post-war period, numerous human rights violations occurred in Sri Lanka. The government's poor response to these issues was manifest with the government fearing NGOs might spread news of these violent incidents to the outside world. Thus, the government tried to suppress the NGOs by controlling them under the purview of the Defence Ministry. According to critics, NGOs are required to submit financial

statements, audited reports and work plans on a regular basis to the NGO Secretariat. Oversight of a clearly civilian function by the Ministry of Defence was deeply repressive and highly political. This was apparent in the restrictions that had been placed on organizations limiting work to specific activities and subject areas.[7] The monitoring of such organizations mainly working to address human rights and humanitarian concerns, especially in the north and the east, created an environment of self-censorship and curtailed meaningful intervention (Sumanthiran, 2011).

There is no doubt that the tsunami and war affected areas received large amounts of foreign aid and a remarkable level of NGO support. Given this situation, there were problems with the effective management and utilization 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 destruction of infrastructure, the disappearance of public records, and the sheer number of donors and programmes created a complex web of aid transactions that were difficult for both donors and recipients to manage (Jayasuriya et al., 2005: p. 34). The risk of poor coordination between many government bodies and NGOs resulted in the reduction of effectiveness of foreign assistance. The reluctance by certain NGOs to engage with government administrative structures was part of this problem (Jayasuriya et al., 2005: p. 45). The specialty is that during the post-tsunami and post-war situations, despite such strict regulations and restrictions, NGOs and donor agencies engaged in several activities at different levels of development and governance in Sri Lanka.

**Research methods**

In this research, the southern and eastern provincial councils were selected as case studies considering the major aid flows and NGO involvement during the post-tsunami and post-war situations. These provinces are connected along the coastal areas and were severely affected by the tsunami disaster in December 2004. The eastern province was affected by the civil war and

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[7] For example, after the war the Sri Lankan military forces denied all access to the internally-displaced persons (IDP) camps by NGOs. This was later relaxed after pressure was exerted by the international community. Many local and international NGOs now work in the camps but they continue to report problems with access. However, human rights groups and others who wish to provide advice to the IDPs are still denied access (see Amnesty International, 2009).

during the post-war period after May 2009 this area became a centre of aid attraction. Several NGOs came to support the post-tsunami and post-war rehabilitation bringing large amounts of foreign aid into these provinces. The significant foreign aid which came to Sri Lanka has been used for large scale construction projects. These projects are conducted through the direct involvement of the central government.

To investigate the NGO involvement at the local government level, two municipal councils, two urban councils and two *Pradeshiya Sabhas* were selected from each province and altogether a total of six local government bodies from each province. This research included 47 respondents consisted of national, provincial and local political representatives and administrative officials, the officials attached to NGOs, and the representatives of the CBOs. These respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. 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, University of Waikato, New Zealand. Consent of the respondents was carefully taken into account and the researcher did not follow any forceful attempt to obtain data.

The field research was conducted in two phases. The first was carried out from May to September 2011 and the second phase was carried out from June to September 2012.[8] This research obtained its data through interviewing, observing, and document analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998: p. 29). Primary data was collected using unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Observation[9] was another method followed in this research, carried out during field research and during interviewing (Swanborn, 2010: pp. 73-74). During this research, construction projects and other areas were observed in the southern and eastern provinces, together with the routines of government offices.

In this research, the study of documents and archival data was undertaken to supplement the information acquired by interviews and observations. Secondary data for this research includes

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[8] For more details see Akurugoda, 2014: pp. 37-54.

[9] Observations can be quantitative (observing the number of times something occur), as well as qualitative (looking at the detail such as temporal and spatial influences in what is happening) (Smith and Bowers-Brown, 2010: pp. 122-123).

governmental and non-governmental documents such as constitutions, acts, gazettes, circulars, commission reports, sessional papers, annual reports, project reports and progress reports. Books, journals, newspapers and certain web sites were also used as secondary sources of data.

Data analysis involved examining, sorting, categorizing, evaluating, comparing, synthesizing, and contemplating the coded data as well as reviewing the raw and recorded data (Neuman, 2000: p. 426). In this research, first, the data collected from embedded units using multiple sources has been categorized 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.

**Central-local policy dilemmas**

An underlying assumption of this research is that local government is best placed to address the demographic and geographical specialties of local areas when promoting local development.

However, in a number of local government areas in the southern and eastern provinces, central government-led large scale construction projects are the drivers of development. An example of this is the Hambantota urban council in the southern province which has seen large-scale infrastructural development in the form of the construction of a new harbour and an international conference centre.

Noteworthy is that centrally-led policy 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 and resources on large scale construction projects 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.

Much of the centrally-led infrastructure development in Sri Lanka is oriented towards investment in the tourism sector reflecting the central government's view that large scale tourism represents the ideal pathway to development. There is a clear mismatch between large scale construction projects being pursued by the central government and the smaller scale tourism industry practices of local government bodies. The Hambantota urban council has interpreted tourism

needs differently, requiring not large scale industry, but small scale, local projects highlighting the small scale finger food sellers in the area who sell their stuff to local and foreign tourists near the roadside.

According to local respondents, the rapid development of infrastructure in Hambantota with the use of foreign-funded large scale construction projects has not benefitted these local tourist operators. For example, the people in the area have remained poor and are no longer able to sell small things such as sweets, casual food, king coconuts and fried fish along the road. Huts have become prohibited near the main road with the poor losing income as well as forest areas to feed their cows, and no land for cultivation.

Central government-led large scale construction projects promoting tourism is also characteristic of the development focus in much of the eastern province. A document tabled in Parliament by MP M.A. Sumanthiran of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) reveals that much of the government and donor focus on infrastructure projects does nothing to assist local communities. With rising levels of unemployment, issues of hunger and malnutrition have become a serious concern (Sumanthiran, 2011). This reveals that the local communities in the area do not get job opportunities or benefits from 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 MP Sumanthiran (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.

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.

While donor agencies have supplied funds to reconstruct the areas which were heavily damaged in the war the main goal of these projects has been to develop infrastructure facilities in the eastern province, with most of them being handled by the Ministry of Economic Development. Significant amounts of foreign funds have been redirected to this ministry which has retained control of them. In these moves of central government policy processes, largely missing part is the people's participation and their representation of needs. This has led the central government to pretend that the large scale construction projects address local development.

In southern and eastern provinces there are many unaddressed issues relating to people's needs in different areas. There are two dimensions to the problem: first, large scale construction projects of central government never addresses 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. Therefore, most local government bodies have come to accept the central government's development plans. The unconditional agreement of local government representatives with central government policies has further discouraged addressing community development needs at the local level. The problems get worse when the local leadership is affiliated with the political interests of the central and provincial governments. According to the comments of respondents, most of the time the political connections between local government heads and political leaders in higher branches of government are aimed at securing profitable contracts and candidacy to contest future provincial councils or parliamentary elections.

Local politics have been highly affected by central and provincial government power and influence and by the political party affiliations of local politicians. Local government representatives can follow central and provincial government agendas for their personal gain. National political parties have long been influencing local government by making national political issues the mainstay when canvassing votes around local government elections. The local issues such as water and electricity supply, education, unemployment, health and sanitation, transport, livelihood and agriculture have been for too long been neglected and the local communities remain voiceless. In such circumstances, they have no way of expressing needs. Instead, national politics emerge at the local government level as major issues.

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 needs of communities at the local level were often not identified. The distance between project planning and implementation stages resulted in a lack of coordination between the local needs and the project outcomes. While some local government areas needed aspects of infrastructure, the projects were not prioritized in order to meet needs. The responses of local government representatives revealed their lack of knowledge of the objectives of the major foreign-funded projects.

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 funds. 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 use its policy instruments to fulfill centrally-led political agendas. Central government needs to equip local government officials to deal with foreign funded projects in terms of locally-led and community-oriented development.

**NGOs to alter the policy processes in a fragmented authority**

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). Howlett et al., (2009: pp. 63-64) emphasize that in most democratic states, policy decisions are taken by representative institutions that empower specialized actors to determine the scope and content of public policies, but these institutions do not, as a matter of course, provide mechanisms through which the public can directly determine policy. It follows that the public's role in policy making cannot be taken for granted as either straightforward or decisive. But neither should it be ignored. Elections rarely provide focused public input on specific policy options (Howlett et al., 2009: p. 85). Anderson (2003: pp. 65-67) concludes that most people do not take the opportunities to engage directly in shaping public policy. Many people do not vote, engage in political party activities, join pressure groups, or otherwise display much interest in politics. This raises the issue of whether determining policy without the direct involvement of the public leads to inappropriate policies which do not address the actual needs of communities at the local level,

and raises the issue of whether the policy process would be more successful if it took into account the ideas, needs and knowledge of the people subjected to such policies. Moreover, it is important to explore how the people's actual needs can be represented in the policy process and who can organize the people towards participating in the policy process.

In policy making processes, expertise becomes an important way of organizing policy activity (Colebatch, 2002: pp. 28-29). According to Bratton (1989: pp. 582-583), NGOs have useful ideas to offer to local development planners. By demonstrating alternative methods of getting things done at the village level, they can offer policy suggestions on questions of local resource mobilization, recurrent cost recovery and programme sustainability. Furthermore, 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). Therefore, 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 local development policies is shaped and decided (Bratton, 1990: p. 116). This leads to questions as to whether NGOs can provide expertise in assisting people and government towards policy negotiations, how NGOs might contribute to mechanisms to organize people at the local level to participate in the policy process, and how NGOs use their policy instruments to encourage local development and governance.

NGO involvement in creating policy networks helps in mobilizing local activists, social movements, and other civil society organizations which can pressure governments to change their policies and practices (Knoke, 2011: p. 215). For DeMars (2005: p. 51), most third world countries are unable to raise the living standards of their populations and this was the reason to build NGO-mediated networks between societies and governments. NGOs are the constitutive actors of networks: no NGOs, no network. DeMars (2005: p. 52) further claims that without NGOs, other actors with the potential to participate in a network may be present, but the leadership of NGOs is required to activate the network. NGOs are, in his view, the most influential actors in networking in these contexts. This raises the issue of whether there are possibilities for NGOs to be involved in the policy process especially at the local level through networking with the people, especially CBOs and local government.

As discussed earlier, in the Sri Lankan government context, authoritative power is strongly centralized (Uyangoda, 2010) and therefore, the local government level is neglected. This has resulted in fragmented authority between central and local government. Local communities remain voiceless even in the local government policy processes, leaving many needs at the local level remain neglected and unaddressed. This research has revealed that specific local issues, such as ethnic divisions and decisions about the use of local natural resources, have not been addressed through national or local government policies. The central government's neglect of local development and governance is significant. Local government respondents indicated they had encountered discrimination from the national and provincial politicians who were aiming to use local political representatives as their agents to fulfill central and provincial government agendas.

During the post-tsunami and post-war situations in Sri Lanka, NGOs marked a significant contribution involving in unaddressed issues at the local government level. Some NGOs were aware of defects in centrally-led development and have found ways to connect directly with local government and local communities to carry-out their projects. These NGOs have involved in promoting a role for people in the policy processes by creating networks, helping to build CBOs and guiding local government representatives in obtaining people's participation in local policy processes.

Most local government bodies do not have effective links with the people in such areas. When considering most of the local government bodies in the southern and eastern provinces, there is little evidence of people's participation in local policy processes towards local development. Most of the respondent local government representatives referred to the CBOs in their statements reflecting the link between people and local government bodies. The local government representatives identified CBOs as appropriate links to use in obtaining people's participation. Some local government representatives noted the difficulties of achieving people's participation in local development. Some of them believed that development initiatives are of little benefit if they do not connect with the people (ACDI-CIDA, n.d.).

This research revealed how NGOs during the post-tsunami and post-war situations worked as significant agents to obtain community contribution into local policy process towards addressing local issues. 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. This organization addresses local development through a community participatory approach using the theory and practices of community governance (Respondent Team Leader, CARE International, Hambantota Office). CARE promotes community participatory development based in the villages where the issues are livelihood development, environmental management, social resources, and infrastructure development. The village operating units (VOUs) have been established by CARE and it selects officials to represent the villagers. As a result, CARE reaches the communities and encourages and builds CBOs in the villages and supports women and youth participation (Respondent Team Leader, CARE International, Hambantota Office).

Asia Foundation's 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, 2011). 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 and Provincial Councils, 2008: p. 17). 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,[10] with the local government implementing all of them (Respondent Community Development Officer, Weligama Urban Council).

In their programme, Transparency International found that many *Pradeshiya Sabhas* did not have strategic plans, especially a four-year plan or knowledge to make plans to obtain funds (Respondent Consultant, Transparency International-Sri Lanka). According to the view of

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[10] 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.

Transparency International, 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. The specialty is that Transparency International does not provide funds or material aid to local government but provides guidance and builds connections between local government and people. The organization does not act as a donor agency but provides knowledge to local government representatives about local government income sources and policy matters.

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 (Respondent Contact Person, Governance and Anti-Corruption Programme, CPA). CPA supports local government to obtain people's participation in decision making and guides local government bodies on effective methods of tax collection and provides knowledge to the people on taxes (Respondent Contact Person, Governance and Anti-Corruption Programme, CPA).

These NGOs and their projects have been able to network local partners and people consistent with identifying, prioritizing and addressing the needs of local communities. The project plans have been shown to fit with local needs. 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 development and address needs at the local government level. The positive responses from respondent CBO representatives and local government officials in terms of successful achievement from these projects confirm this.

This research revealed that the NGO involvement at the local government level fulfills the expectations of local government representatives and communities. The importance of encouraging people's participation in local government policy processes, 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 to promote local development and governance were some of these expectations.

The above discussion indicates that there are possibilities to build collaboration among local government and NGOs in local level activities leading to improved forms of local development and governance. The important point here is that this can help local government bodies and

communities to improve their capacities and confidence in participatory policy processes with the support and guidance of NGOs. NGO policy instruments, therefore, fit with and address the actual development needs at the local government level in Sri Lanka.

**Conclusion**

With central government-centric policy processes, the government can neglect the issues it does not want to consider. This research has highlighted 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. The significant issue here is that local people's views have not been considered in the policy process.

In Sri Lanka there are limited means for organizing 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 and building CBOs for this purpose it rarely happened. During the post-tsunami and post-war situations, it has seen 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. The expectations of local government representatives and local administrative officials to obtain support from NGOs to organize and encourage people's participation in policy planning and development programmes proved significant.

Although some of the local government representatives stressed the importance of CBOs in obtaining ideas for local policy processes, many local government bodies lacked networked relationships with CBOs. Neither has information on CBOs been recorded by local government bodies. It is evident that NGOs such as CARE International helped to establish CBOs in certain local government areas. This research shows that key NGOs such as the Asia Foundation, Transparency International and CPA were involved in various ways using their policy instruments in networking with local government, CBOs, people at the local level, intellectuals, professionals, the private sector and funding agencies aimed at organizing local resources,

solving local development problems and overcoming difficulties in local government areas through making and implementing appropriate policies. Furthermore, where people have been encouraged by NGOs to participate in the policy process in local government then better results have been obtained. For example, the Asia Foundation supported Weligama UC on participatory budgeting and through this guidance the UC was able to complete many foreign-funded projects which had been prioritized by the people. This research determined that NGOs have been involved in policy planning and in obtaining people's participation in local governing and development.

The research shows that despite the strong centralization of authoritative power, NGOs can organize people's participation in local policy processes towards local development and governance using their policy instruments to alter and mitigate the fragmented authority and to reduce the central-local dilemmas.

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