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*Public Engagement Facilitation - Facilitating Citizen Engagement in  
Public-policy Making*

**Title of the paper**

*Promoting citizen engagement in local policy processes in Sri Lanka:  
NGOs as facilitators*

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## **Abstract**

Unquestioning acquiescence to centralized governmental power structures is a major characteristic of the Sri Lankan political culture. Since obtaining independence in 1948, there have been several initiatives to decentralize power. However, as the demands for decentralization emerged from the minority ethnic groups, majority nationalist elements have strongly resisted. This was a major contributor to ethnic conflict that developed into a prolonged civil war lasting for 30 years. A further result is that local government has become significantly weakened, with local community needs and local development issues unattended and neglected.

Although most citizens vote in elections in Sri Lanka, they have few opportunities to actively engage in policy development processes between elections, and most remain politically inactive. This encourages political representatives to neglect communities and ignore public opinion. Local knowledge is devalued in central government-led development initiatives. Against this background, there has been an emerging trend of local and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) becoming involved as facilitators promoting greater citizen engagement in local policy development processes.

This research investigated NGOs facilitation of engagement between local government, community-based organizations and citizens in local policy processes. It examined these processes within six local government bodies situated in municipal, urban and rural areas in the southern province of Sri Lanka. The research involved interviewing local government representatives, NGO officials and representatives of community-based organizations in the selected local government areas, and direct observation of citizen engagement.

The findings suggest that in Sri Lanka, local governments, community organizations and citizens valued the support of NGOs in as much as facilitated their engagement in local policy processes and development initiatives. The enabling role of NGOs differed according to specific development needs of local communities and the existing resources in local government areas. More interactive citizen engagement has been found in the areas where there are community-based organizations. If this trend could be encouraged further, with supportive and continuous facilitation of NGOs, local government policy processes can be improved to achieve more citizen-oriented and local development-friendly governance towards challenging the strong centralized power structures in Sri Lanka.



Keywords: citizen engagement, policy processes, NGOs, local government, community-based organizations, Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Sri Lanka has inherited a unitary state structure and a highly centralized approach to government administration (Uyangoda, 2010). Since obtaining independence in 1948, various proposals to restructure government, including decentralizing powers to provincial and local levels, have been proposed, but none have been fully implemented. The Sinhala nationalist parties and groups which have supported successive governments have generally rejected all decentralization proposals. This was the major contributor of the 30 years prolonged war between the Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) demanding for a separate Tamil state (Akurugoda, 2018).

The long-lasting negligence of decentralization and local government reforms by all successive governments in the post-independence period has resulted in weak local government and neglect of local development. Due to the lack of powers and resources, local government does not have capacities to address local development needs (Akurugoda, 2014).

The long-term acceptance of centralization by citizens has created a less confidence among them on provincial and local government bodies. Although they vote in elections, citizens remain voiceless in policy processes. This has resulted in community needs and local development issues to be unattended and neglected. At any level of government, no opportunities or encouragements have been opened up for citizen engagement in policy processes. Also, there is no significant influence coming from citizens to voice their needs and demands in policy development.

It can be observed that there is a widening gap between governing bodies and citizens in Sri Lanka. To encourage the citizen engagement in policy processes, especially at the local government level, NGOs are seen as appropriate facilitators. The potential contribution of NGOs to obtain citizen engagement in local policy processes towards addressing local development needs are significant. The network building between local government, community-based organizations and citizens can be facilitated by NGOs.



This paper investigates NGOs facilitation of citizen engagement in local policy processes in Sri Lanka. The paper first explores a range of related literature on NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in policy processes. Then it moves on to explain Sri Lanka as a case study analyzing a number of NGO facilitated citizen engagement programmes contributing to policy processes and development at the local government level.

### **NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in policy processes**

The policy process is normally government-centric. Through the representational democracy, citizens vote for candidates in elections and elect representatives to represent them. However, it cannot be guaranteed that these political representatives address the needs of citizens and represent them in the policy development process. It is common, especially in developing countries, after elections most of the political representatives continue with their personal agendas and not concern about the actual needs of their voters. The literature on policy process, citizen engagement and NGO facilitation shows the ways in which to address such lack of concern on citizen needs.

A government-centric view of the policy process is a significant matter. According to Sabatier, the policy process seeks to take account of the manner in which problems get conceptualized and brought to the government for solution; the governmental institutions and processes by which alternatives are formulated and policy solutions selected; and the implementation, evaluation, and revision of those solutions (Sabatier, 1999, p. 3) For Colebatch (2002, p. 40), policy is of major concern at the highest levels of government, and the work of the executive – the prime minister, or president, and cabinet – is dominated by policy decisions. There are many voices within government, each viewing the issue from its own perspective and each seeking to turn policy making to its advantage (Colebatch, 2002, p. 125).

Howlett, Ramesh and Perl (2009, pp. 65-67) 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. 65). But for Howlett et al., (2009, p. 67) political parties can connect people and their government in ways that affect policy. However, 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 (Anderson, 2003, pp. 65-67).

Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987, pp. 312-313) say that building public participation into the decision making process can mean a broader range of policy considerations can be met. Participation procedures are special modes for representing citizens' views, supplementary to normal representative government mechanisms. They focus on a single, discrete issue area, unlike representative politics, which bundles up disparate issues into unconnected bundles, such as election manifestos or legislative programmes (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987, pp. 312-313). Consequently, Colebatch (2002, p. 27) argues that it is easier for some people, and more difficult for others, to take part in the policy process. A critical question is how people with little standing can challenge the existing order and participate in the policy process (Colebatch, 2002, p. 27). Schattschneider (1960, p. 105) argues that it is not necessarily true that people with the greatest needs participate in politics most actively. Bachrach and Baratz (1963, pp. 641-651) conclude that those with power can exclude issues and problems from the policy making agenda. This non-decision making suggests that policy makers with power have the capacity to keep issues off the agenda which they control.<sup>1</sup>

According to Bratton (1989, pp. 582-583), 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 mobilization, recurrent cost recovery and programme sustainability (Bratton, 1989, pp. 582-583). 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 rural development policies is shaped and decided (Bratton, 1990, p. 116). This suggests that NGOs have capacities to involve in local policy processes as actors or facilitators.



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In seeking to address a policy issue related to a specific community, NGOs could network government representatives, community-based organizations and citizens. In sharing ideas, government could gain an understanding of various problems of citizens. For example, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) can be identified as a popular 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).

According to Knoke (2011, p. 215), 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. For DeMars (2005, p. 51), most developing 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. DeMars (2005, p. 52) further claims that without NGOs, other actors with the potential to participate in a policy 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 policy networking in these contexts.

Citizen engagement in policy processes strongly encourages the bottom-up approach of policy implementation. This is the opposite of the formal centralized decision making process, the top-down approach, that does not concern actual issues at the bottom. The decisions have been taken at the top level and implemented at the bottom level (Elmore, 1978 and Winter, 2003). Imposing the top level decisions at the bottom cannot satisfy the citizens at all. Matland (1995) suggests a synthesis of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to policy development. This encourages citizen engagement in policy processes even within a centralized governing structure.

The literature suggests that various terms such as people's participation, public participation, community participation refer to citizen engagement in policy processes. NGO involvement in facilitating citizen engagement in policy processes can be identified as a networking, linking or bridging partnership to obtain local input into policies towards addressing the actual needs of the citizens. In this context, governments cannot easily ignore or neglect the needs of the people. The literature indicates the potential of NGO facilitated citizen engagement to reduce the policy gaps created by centralized governing structure.



## **Sri Lanka's centrally-led policy processes and development initiatives**

Since its origins, Sri Lanka experienced a centralized rule of kingdoms till the colonial influences reached the country. The colonial rule of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British lasted for 443 years since 1505. During the Dutch and the British rule, the ancient kingdoms were declined; provincial and local administration was introduced to Sri Lanka. Although the British colonial rulers introduced the Westminster system of governance to Sri Lanka together with the universal franchise, the characteristics of the centralized governing structure have been continued further.

Despite the many groups which have argued against centralization, the attitudes, beliefs and sentiments of the Sri Lankan society have over many years seen the political system strongly structured around centralization. A major consequence of this has been the neglect and undermining of provincial and local levels of government. Consequently, provincial and local governments unable to determine its own policy or to use its policy processes to bring about local development (Government of Sri Lanka, 1999).

The long standing religious and ethnic structures reinforced the centralizing political culture and the political elites, particularly those who were from the dominant groups, used the political culture to their advantage. The colonial experience did not challenge the dominant political culture, leaving governments and political leaders to maintain and reinforce the centralized authoritative power. The political elites have long been accustomed to this culture and have built on it over the centuries, and were able to draw on powerful and deep rooted cultural values to continue to assert their strongly centralizing policies (Akurugoda, 2014). The issues of centralization and its widespread acceptance show the mutual dependence of the political leadership and the citizens at large. The fact that there have been no demands or protests from within Sri Lankan society, especially from the local level, about their needs suggests a broad acceptance of centralizing trends by the citizens (Satyendra, 2001).

Since pre-colonial times Sri Lankan society has experienced a number of ethnic divisions and conflicts. These divisions and conflicts have shaped, and are still shaping, constitutional developments, political party development, the emergence of political leaders, and especially the decentralization and local government reform process in Sri Lanka. After independence in 1948, several attempts were made by successive governments to decentralize power influenced



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by ethnic considerations aimed at ensuring one group's advantage over the other. The anti-federalist reactions of some Sinhala nationalist political parties and groups which have supported successive governments, together with some Buddhist priests, have contributed to the rejection of decentralization proposals. These groups portray decentralization as a threat to the unitary state structure and to state sovereignty which, they argue, would divide the country (Satyendra, 2001). Much of the long-lasting ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, which was evident in the war over demands for a separate Tamil state, does emerge from Sinhala nationalist parties and groups who are against decentralization. A number of decentralization proposals have therefore faded as successive governments, supported by these nationalist parties and groups, have exploited this issue in an effort to remain in power (Sathanathan, 1997).

The decentralization process and local government reforms in Sri Lanka reflect the unwillingness, inability and negligence of ruling governments and leaders to decentralize power to local levels of government. Attempts to reform local government have been connected with initiatives to decentralize government processes, but within the context of Sri Lankan politics, they have tended to end in failure. Although there have been leaders who have proposed that local government should be more independent and powerful, these proposals have not been supported in the legislature. Most leaders, however, have supported the view that central government can govern effectively without institutions not under its direct control. For example, the development councils established in 1980 were a centralized approach to decentralization and ended in failure. The provincial councils established later do have constitutionally recognized powers, but these have not actually been transferred by central government. Provincial councils were established as a part of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 followed by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution and therefore, cannot be explained as a full attempt of Sri Lankan rulers to decentralize powers. They were developed as a solution to the ethnic conflict, but there was no support for this initiative from the majority ethnic group, Sinhala.

Sinhala nationalist elements have instead promoted the unitary state structure, and this has been met by the Tamil nationalist elements with demands for a separate Tamil state (BBC, 2003). The Sri Lankan government has been unable to provide a mediated solution which can satisfy the demands of these two positions. When Sinhala nationalist elements entered into coalition



politics with the Sri Lankan political leadership, their ambition for a unitary state structure was promoted and the separatist Tamil nationalist elements were crushed through the war.

The current Sri Lankan state structure is a reflection of the pro-unitary and anti-federalist position. There are centrally-led development projects and welfare programmes implementing at the local level without regard to the preferences and needs of the citizens. This is a reflection of the highly centralized top-down perspective of the policy process. This research has revealed that there are contradictions between what the central government interpret as development and what the local levels of government and the citizens expect. For example, the construction of a harbour, airport, international cricket stadium, luxury hotels and an international conference centre in the Hambantota district of the southern province is not seen by locals as meeting the needs of the people in the area. These large scale projects have resulted in local people losing their agricultural lands and traditional fishing areas. Local knowledge has been devalued and neglected when designing such projects and programmes. Consequently, people in these areas do not see themselves as receiving any benefit from such developments and many have lost their means to generate income.

National level politicians have strongly influenced local politics by forcing provincial and local leaders to address central government agendas rather than fulfil local needs. The major problem highlighted by local political representatives pertains to their lack of power and funding connected to the highly centralized power structures maintained by central government. The central government-controlled administrative bodies also work as supportive institutions in centralizing attempts. Similarly, local government lacks the capacity to address development needs at the local level.

At present, the Sri Lanka's governing structure consists of two layers, national and provincial. Although Sri Lanka has three types of local government bodies including municipal councils, urban councils and *Pradeshiya Sabhas*, they are not representing another layer of government. Under the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, local government became a subject of provincial councils. This has strengthened the centralized governing structures and further weakened local government.



## Research methods

This research involves a case study of Sri Lanka examining the NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in local policy processes in three districts in the southern province, Galle, Matara and Hambantota. Within the southern province, six local government bodies were selected: two municipal councils, two urban councils and two *Pradeshiya Sabhas*, leading to a total of six local government areas that were studied.

The southern province is an area with a Sinhala majority, which is the ethnic majority of the country. Centrally-led large scale construction projects have taken place in this province aiming an accelerated development.

In examining the NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in local policy processes, the study sought the views of local government representatives, NGO officials and representatives of community-based organizations. Two political representatives from each local government body were interviewed. Lists of NGOs and their contributions at the local level were obtained from the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. From these lists, NGOs that had been involved in facilitating citizen engagement in local policy processes in the south were selected. Some of the officials responsible for such facilitation had worked in country offices and some had been attached to area offices. All of the selected NGOs were foreign-funded, mainly from American (United States of America), Australian, Canadian and European sources. Representatives of community-based organizations were selected using snowball sampling. Informed consent of the respondents was carefully sought following research ethics when obtaining data.

Primary data was collected using unstructured and semi-structured interviews (see Bryman, 2012; Bernard, 2006), and this was complemented by direct observation (see Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010) of NGO facilitated citizen engagement in local policy processes. Secondary data included 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. The analysis of the data involved identifying the role of NGOs in facilitating citizen engagement in local policy processes, and categorizing this according to key themes, concepts,

and common features (Yin, 1994, p. 120). The following section presents the findings and analysis.

## NGOs as facilitators to promote citizen engagement in local policy processes in Sri Lanka

At any level of government in Sri Lanka, citizens do not actively engage in policy processes on their own. Although they show a big turnout in national, provincial and local elections through campaigning for candidates, participating in rallies and voting, there is no indication of an interest of engaging in policy processes. In elections, especially in local government elections, policies cannot be identified as a priority. Local government election campaigns are mostly connected with national level popular party politics and individual personalities of local political candidates.

However, when the governments are not functioning well and not addressing the needs of the citizens, the whole blame goes to the political representatives. The citizens expect everything from governments without contributing anything to the policy process. Against this background, some NGOs have involved in facilitating and networking local government, community-based organizations and citizens towards engaging in policy processes. The following two sections analyze the ways in which to encourage citizen engagement at the local level and how some NGOs have engaged in promoting successful citizen engagement in local policy processes.

### Encouraging citizen engagement at the local level

As Sisk (2001, p. 1) notes, there is a new appreciation that local government is much more than administrative bodies that collect taxes and deliver essential services such as education, clean water, sewers, transportation, or housing. To Sisk (2001, p. 1), local government is the level of democracy at which the citizen has the most effective opportunity to participate actively and directly in decisions made for all of society. Although some of the local government vision and mission statements highlight the importance of citizen engagement in local policy processes, it can be seen that securing such citizen engagement is not easy.

In the southern province, most local government bodies do not have effective links with the citizens in such areas. When considering most of the local government bodies in the southern

province, there is little evidence of citizen engagement in local policy processes towards local development. The mission of the Hambantota urban council mentions about citizen engagement as follows: “To build an equal society through people’s participation and to provide a good service to the people by improving health, welfare, utility services and roads.” However, according to a respondent political representative of the Hambantota urban council, the practical situation is very different.

Citizen engagement is very low in the urban council area. The people do not participate in the urban council work. There is no proper relationship between the community-based organizations and the urban council. Also, no proper mechanisms to obtain citizen engagement exist.

In other local government areas, there have been attempts to obtain citizen engagement in policy processes. The chairman of the Suriyawewa *Pradeshiya Sabha* stated:

We expect to build a four-year plan after obtaining ideas from the people. To obtain people’s ideas and to meet their needs we are conducting group meetings in the villages. However, the *Pradeshiya Sabha* does not have a direct relationship with the community-based organizations and also, we are not maintaining a data base on community-based organizations in the area.

The chairman of the Baddegama *Pradeshiya Sabha*, while referring to the construction and reconstruction work in the area, talked of the importance of citizen engagement in local development and ways they encouraged people to involve in development activities. He stated:

Aside from many barriers we have established community-based organizations in every *Grama Niladhari* division<sup>2</sup> in the area to obtain citizen engagement in identifying development needs. Through this process, we try to obtain people’s proposals on area development and to supply the people’s needs.

Reference to the CBOs in these three statements reflect the link between citizens and local government bodies. Some local government representatives noted the difficulties of achieving citizen engagement in local development. In the Weligama urban council, the situation of the area and the people’s attitudes changed after the tsunami disaster in 2014 and this has become a specific problem to be addressed by the urban council. A political representative of the Weligama urban council stated:



After the tsunami it took a long time for reconstruction to obtain and to re-settle the people. After the tsunami, people received support from the government and especially from non-governmental donors. Because of this people still have a dependency mentality and are not interested in becoming involved in development work. There is a need to change the attitudes of the people.

Development initiatives are of little benefit if they do not connect with the people (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). The following statement of a respondent former mayor of the Matara municipal council, gives prominence to the relationship which the municipal council had built with the people in the area.

Development should lie with the people. For example, when people who have lived in individual houses receive flats, they should know the different living conditions applied to flats. When they get flats without the knowledge of these spaces, problems occur. 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.

To obtain the citizen engagement in city development, Matara municipal council created 15 *Purawesi Sabhas* (citizen committees) in the 15 wards of the municipal council area. This has built a path to solve problems between the municipal council area and the people. The former mayor of the Matara municipal council said they had established citizen committees to encourage people's participation. He added: "This was very effective and people have adopted the idea that they should work for the success of their city."

The establishment of citizen committees<sup>3</sup> gave the community power to make decisions for their ward in development activities, service needs, wider community needs, and welfare. A constitution clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the citizen committees. Under the constitution, a citizen committee can summon any municipal council official, provincial and central government officers, in seeking to resolve issues related to their wards. In the beginning some people were skeptical about the process of the citizen committees but over time, people have become engaged and have appointed community leaders to each committee. According to the former mayor of the Matara municipal council, "it is very difficult to change the traditional attitudes of the people. There is a huge need for a change in attitude." The special feature of the citizen committees was that there were no political party divisions in this process. All representatives of the municipal council equally supported and contributed to this process. The



former mayor stated that, “if the political representatives work hard, it is easy to get the people’s support.” An opposition party representative of the Matara municipal council stated:

The former mayor created citizen committees to fulfil a need for community-based organizations. This was a great idea. These committees are also continuing the work which some of the NGOs started. When there is a local development project in the area, these committees supply labour and food as well. So, when this supply combines with the municipal council’s labour, the strength and the results achieved can be doubled.

The comments reflect the supportive views of opposition party representatives in the municipal council regarding citizen committees. Through citizen committees, people pledged their support for the municipal council in collection of garbage, and maintaining a clean environment. These committees are also vigilant about the construction of unauthorized structures and other obstacles to good health and sanitation. They organized *Shramadana*<sup>4</sup> once a month to clean the municipal council area, creating a good social network among neighbours. The citizen committees held regular meetings with the municipal council officials, mayor and elected members to update the outcomes of the committee meetings, and developed their own mechanisms to raise funds to develop the city (FSLGA, n.d.). These committees became participants in the participatory planning and budgeting process implemented by the Matara municipal council from 2010 onwards.

Citizen committees are a good example of how citizens’ active engagement in local policy processes can promote locally-led development. The successful implementation of citizen committees shows that people do participate in local government activities if given due space and recognition. Furthermore, citizen committees show that people need autonomy in the decision making process, without the occurrence of political interference. The success story of citizen committees indicates that local government can attract resources from various institutions, voluntary organizations, expert groups, and volunteers by establishing participatory, accountable and transparent governing systems (FSLGA, n.d.). However, behind the success story of citizen committees is a need for strong local political leadership and the assistance of government and nongovernment organizations such as the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA), the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS) and the Asia Foundation.



### NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in local policy processes

Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) was one of the few organizations that worked with local political representatives (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). FCM's participatory mechanisms like the community support fund (CSF),<sup>5</sup> association building, and mid-term planning systems and procedures have had significantly positive results in local government areas. In this way, citizens 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. Evidence for the success of FCM programme was found in the Matara municipal council. A respondent local government representative stated:

FCM worked with the people and therefore, they received full support of the people. Most funds were saved due to the people's labour. For example, when we received funds from FCM to construct 75km rural roads, we could complete an additional 25km as well because we could save money by using people's labour.

The USAID-funded Transparent Accountable Local Governance (TALG) programme sought to help local government bodies make key political institutions more responsive to citizen input. 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, 2009, p. 17). Among the local government bodies in this research, Weligama urban council experienced successful results from the TALG programme, as a respondent community development officer of the Weligama urban council noted.

The Asia Foundation gave very good guidance about developing project proposals. After developing project proposals, it was very easy to obtain foreign funds because then the UC already had a proposal to show the donors. However, it was a difficult task to collect people's ideas. They only explain their ideas. They do not even write their ideas down. Therefore, during the TALG programme we were very busy collecting ideas. It was a new experience. We collected people's ideas and wrote all of them up then edited and organized those ideas in a way in which they could be implemented.

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, with the urban council implementing all of them.

Suriyawewa *Pradeshiya Sabha* also provides evidence for the success of the Asia Foundation's guidance on policy planning and suggests that local government can achieve people's participation without much difficulty. The chairman of the Suriyawewa *Pradeshiya Sabha* noted:

The Asia Foundation's involvement in policy planning was remarkable. They have given guidance for policies according to rural people's needs. They have organized people to participate in policy planning by raising people's needs and related issues. We have received a good working knowledge about policy planning through this.

The 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. The duration of this project is five years with its direct involvement in the project implementation lasting two years. The project includes 110 villages in three divisions in Hambantota district: Suriyawewa, Hambantota and Tissamaharama. From its area office in the Hambantota district, CARE addresses rural development through a community participatory approach using the theory and practices of community governance. The team leader of the project stated:

We see that it is not enough to focus on only one sector. For example, if livelihood development is the major component, we also have to improve people's social and economic development as well. Therefore, the support we provide differs such as improving the income level or developing the infrastructure.

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). The POP have no opportunities to enter development processes, earn small wages on a daily basis, and cannot participate in meetings. They are vulnerable and marginalized. The team leader of the project further noted:

We cannot make development plans to improve POP's conditions by sitting in the offices. We need to reach them and to obtain their participation. Also, we need to develop a system to obtain their participation. We call it an enabling environment. The meaning of this is to build a proper environment around these people.



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 community-based organizations in the villages. CARE further encourages and builds community-based organizations in the villages and supports women and youth participation.

CARE reaches villages through the *Grama Niladhari* because it simplifies the identification of village leadership. 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. Through this, CARE touches the lowest level group which lie below the *Grama Niladhari* level.

According to CARE, poor people may have skills but they can lack the relevant equipment to work effectively so CARE provides direct grants and training to these people, as the same respondent highlighted.

The villagers do not have opportunities to obtain funds. They do not have access to the banks and the other financial agencies at all. The banks may have high interest rates and they often need documents; there may be no buses to go to town. Therefore, people's accessibility to the banks is hard. We thought of creating seed capital in the villages. Here we ask people to state their priority issues and we give money to them through our project. But they can't get these funds without a plan or a proposal. So, we tell them to make a design plan or a proposal. We deposit money in VOUs or community-based organizations. People have to repay this money to the VOU or to the community-based organization. Through this method, people can use this money again and again.

The importance of this project is that it ensures closer scrutiny of the poor local communities in the villages. CARE works with the central government-controlled administrative authorities especially with divisional secretariats when implementing VDPs and not with local government, but it works according to its own priorities and not according to central government agendas. CARE only selects two proposals at once when providing assistance, and expects that through their projects, the people will learn how to prepare proposals and plans which go to other institutions (government or the private sector) to obtain funds. CARE does a



facilitating role and, in this way, it addresses core issues. When the villagers are able to administer alone the project is transferred to the next village.

Transparency International's strategic plans aim to improve people's participation in local government and to improve the services of local government to the people. One of its programme aimed to reduce corruption by teaching the people and local government officials about corruption, and how to work against its influences. Transparency International has built a direct relationship with local government to reach local levels.

Under another programme, a system called citizen report card (CRC) was developed as a kind of survey used to determine people's responses to local government services. Transparency International joined with the *Pradeshiya Sabhas* in carrying out this survey. After obtaining people's responses, 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 four-year plans or knowledge to make plans to obtain funds. This is a common situation in many local government bodies. A consultant of Transparency International stated:

*Pradeshiya Sabhas* can obtain funds from NGOs if they can make plans or proposals. We do workshops to develop four-year plans for *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. We expect to help them until they are able to handle it alone.

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 puts into practice people's participation at local government level by selecting *Pradeshiya Sabhas* which can maintain a standard budget. Transparency International approaches local government bodies and builds connections with them with officials always involved in the programme to ensure its implementation. 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. The respondent consultant further noted:



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When we tell them, they realize that they have certain ways to earn money. Through passing by-laws, local government can earn money using the resources in the local government area. We think that knowledge is needed and the most important thing for them. Provincial councils sometimes say that they have NGO funds to distribute to the local government bodies. But if local government does not have a proposal or a plan at the time, they cannot obtain these funds. For this reason, most of the time they miss out on chances of obtaining funds. We always work at giving knowledge to improve their ability to obtain funds. If local government has a plan, the funds will go through in the right direction and will reach the neediest.

Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) works to build two way communications between citizens and local government so that representatives can get to know the people's problems and needs following regional and world best practice solutions. CPA adopts examples from the Indian and Nepalese local government systems and looks at both advantages and disadvantages in these systems. CPA supports local government to obtain citizen engagement in decision making, as the following respondent stated.

The public galleries<sup>6</sup> were closed in many *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. These *Pradeshiya Sabhas* had no idea about the importance of public galleries before. We have opened the public galleries in many *Pradeshiya Sabhas* and now people are involved actively in local government policy matters.

CPA guides local government bodies on effective methods of tax collection and provides knowledge to the people on taxes. Local government bodies depend on attracting 33 per cent for taxes which is insufficient with few people having any proper knowledge about taxation. The same respondent further added:

Local government representatives think that they are supposed to collect only the taxes mentioned in the revenue files. There are hidden taxes. There is a need to highlight these taxes and to give proper knowledge to the people about taxes. We believe that then the people will want to be actively involved in the tax payments.

CPA's Governance and Anti-Corruption Programme aims to reduce corruption in local government by acting as a facilitator with more than 75 area-specific local partners including local government and various civil society organizations (CSOs) all over the country. This programme focuses on governance issues with particular emphasis on local government and transparency and accountability within their budget processes. CPA pays attention to the

attitudes and experiences of ordinary citizens as it pertains to corrupt practices when receiving goods or services from the public sector.

NGO support in community-based waste management programmes help local government in recycling solid waste. 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. According to the solid waste management project coordinator, they received funds, buildings and machinery from the Energy Forum-Netherlands and were supported by VNG and CORDAID. The project is now run by the Hambantota urban council with workers receiving salaries from the urban council.

When analyzing these NGO facilitations, many advantages can be identified. These involvements have been able to network local governments and citizens consistent with identifying, prioritizing and addressing the local development needs in policy processes. By providing involvement and continuous guidance, problems are reduced in policy implementation. Encouraging citizen engagement in local government policy processes, supporting the building of community-based organizations, addressing the needs of the POP, and strengthening inter-community relations have received critically important NGO contributions at the local level. 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 level. The positive responses from respondent local government representatives in terms of successful achievement from these policy engagements confirm this. For example, participatory budgeting promoted by the Asia Foundation and USAID has become popular among local government bodies in identifying the most appropriate needs in specific areas. The knowledge provided to local government representatives and staff on project proposal writing and income sources by NGOs, such as Transparency International, Asia Foundation and CPA, has built a path to achieve successful outcomes.

## Conclusion

This study focused on NGO facilitation of citizen engagement in local policy processes in Sri Lanka. Within highly centralized power structures in Sri Lanka, local government has become

weak and the citizens are not active in policy development. Against this background, NGOs play a greater role in linking local government, community-based organizations and citizens together in local policy processes. This research based on six local government areas in the southern province of Sri Lanka, found that the NGOs have involved in encouraging citizens in decision making, building community-based organizations and providing knowledge to local government representatives to obtain citizen input into local policy processes. NGOs can be identified as the most suitable facilitators to push the inherently passive communities into active participation in making and implementing policies towards addressing local development. Community-based organizations that built under the guidance of NGOs or the remaining community-based organizations which guide by the NGOs seem very supportive in promoting citizens in local policy development processes.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Non-decision making is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced, kept covert, killed before they gain access to the relevant decision making arena, or failing all these things, are high jacked by powerful interests in



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the decision implementing stage of the policy process. Problems may be kept off a systemic or institutional agenda in various ways (Anderson, 2003, pp. 94-95).

<sup>2</sup> *Grama Niladhari* division is the lowest level administrative division in Sri Lanka. Consequently, *Grama Niladhari* is the lowest level administrative official.

<sup>3</sup> Each citizen committee contained an elected member of the municipal council as the political representative, and each committee elected 16 members as an executive committee, eight of them nominated by the community and eight by the municipal council. This decision was made to ensure inclusion of minorities, and the exclusion of groups such as business community, professionals and religious leaders (FSLGA, n.d.). Ward coordinators were appointed to each citizen committee and designated as community service facilitators. These ward coordinators were all females attached to the municipal council who were working as officers in charge of the community service centres of the municipal council.

<sup>4</sup> The literal meaning of the word *Shramadana* is sharing of one's time, thought and energy for the welfare of all. In short, *Shramadana* means a gift of labour.

<sup>5</sup> 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.).

<sup>6</sup> A public gallery is an area in a representative institution that is set aside for the public.