

Success of Current Local Government System in Sri Lanka

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Abstract—The present system of local government institutions (LGI) was introduced by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of 1987, in order to decentralize power as a solution to the ethnic problem in the country. This study is on the impact of the good governance practiced by LGI on the quality of life of its people. The hypothesis to be tested assumes that the good governance practiced by the LGIs guarantees the democratic rights, the rule of law and quality of life of its people. The study is limited to seven LGI areas selected from Colombo, Gampaha and Kurunegala districts. Quantitative data were collected from 560 households, while qualitative data were collected conducting focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The theoretical and conceptual framework suggested that participation, transparency, accountability and impartiality as the key elements of good governance, while LGI as the most important institution which can provide local needs according to the tastes of its people. The quality of life is a subjective matter and was measured depending on the perspectives of people concerned. Data indicated that the LGIs had failed to implement good governance, and quality of life of its people had improved independent of LGI. People were of the opinion that local as well as national politics are corrupt and people had no alternative. As the data did not support the hypothesis, the study concludes that quality of life of people and the LGIs had no relationship. Practices in Sri Lanka and the functioning of democratic rights and rule of law were also not satisfactory as politicization was high. The process of achieving quality of life seemed to be independent. People were satisfied neither with the functions of local government institutions nor with the local as well as national politicians. If LGI is unable to attend to the needs of the people, they look for alternative ways. Human nature is that they would go for alternatives to maximize their expectations, if the intended sources fail. However, they did not want to leave the village, leaving their traditional property and relatives, though some females tended to migrate out sacrificing the immediate happiness of the family, looking for future prospects. The results highlights that good governance is not practiced by the local government institutions.

Keywords— *Good Governance, Local Government, Quality of Life, Participation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The elimination of separatist war in 2009 prompted Sri Lanka to emerge from three decades of internal strife, which hampered the economic and social development process and human rights, in a democratic and free economy. The open economic policy introduced in 1977, paved the way for the free flow of new technology along with foreign investment and high private sector participation. The rapidity of globalization and westernization process was increased. A preferential voting system and a proportional representation system were also introduced by the new Constitution. At the time of gaining Independence in 1948 there were four types of Local Government institutions, viz., Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, Town Councils and Village Councils. This system was changed by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution to give more powers to local bodies, under the Indian influence, as a solution to the so-called ethnic problem in the country. The constitutional change introduced the Provincial Council system. Against this backdrop this study analyses the factors that affected good governance in Local Government institutions in improving the quality of life of its people. It is said, "Governance cannot be implemented in local government institutions inducing development and how they affect the quality of life of the population are problems that the present thesis is concerned with.

The objectives of the study

1. To evaluate the factors of good governance practiced by local government institutions to improve the quality of life of its people and
2. To assess the impact of such good governance on its people.

A. Hypothesis

It is argued that Local Government if it practices good governance is the best form of government to provide public goods and services for the local tastes and needs, improving the quality of life of its people.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study covered three administrative districts, in Sri Lanka. i.e. Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara. Seven Local Government institutions and 80 households were selected from each district on the basis of electoral register. Total sample was 560 households which represented urban and rural difference. The study was based on quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected

through a questionnaire. The study was carried out during the period of August 2009 to March 2010. In this study household is taken as the 'primary sampling unit' (PSU). In the selection of PSU stratified sampling technique and cluster sampling were employed. A pre-coded structured questionnaire was administered to the selected respondents by a team of trained enumerators. The questionnaire was pre-tested and updated. Household is one economic unit. The data were analyzed using SPSS v13.0

III DATA ANALYSIS

Good governance (Lall, 1999) has to be achieved by the mobilization and utilization of resources available at the local government institution to achieve the maximum development. The Four LGIs: Alawwa, Kobeigane, Wariyapola, and Kuliypitiya were selected from the dry zone district of Kurunegala and two: Peliyagoda and Gampaha were selected from Gampaha district and Maharagama from Colombo district in the wet zone. Information was gathered based on the demographic characteristics of the respondents and opinions on quality of life, performances of local government institutions, politicians, and relationship with neighbours and environment. Improving democratic participation, improving the practice of Law, improving sustainable development. The satisfaction with the LGI performances, quality of life, impartiality, rule of law and participation and opinion on political aspects were measured on Likert scale. The scales were converted into an index for easy reference. In this summary presentation the indices and percentages could be categorized into four levels as follows:

Table 1

Index	Range	Percentages	Rank
0 - 0.24	Very Un satisfactory	0- 24	E
0.25 - 0.49	Unsatisfactory	25- 49	D
0.5 - 0.749	Satisfactory	50- 749	C
0.75 - 0.89	Good	75- 89	B
0.9 - 1.0	Very Good/ Excellent	90- 100	A

A. Participation

Theoretically, participation is one of the factors that ensure good governance. In the study area the index of participation had dropped to 0.443, (rank D) a very low level. All indices relating to personal achievements, life situations, recreations etc. ranked as 'good' while the ranks relating to politics dropped far below to 'unsatisfactory' level. Index relating to the field of politics

was calculated taking into consideration the membership in community organizations, voting in LG elections, effectiveness of the vote, participation and decision making in development, along with contacts with politicians, infrastructural development, political participation in village activities and awareness of good governance. One way of participation in political decision making indirectly was through community based organizations (CBO). In the study area only 39 p.c. of people, were members of CBO. Through the casting of vote at elections the voter could directly participate in selecting their representatives. It was a popular means of participation as 72 p.c. of those eligible for voting had cast their vote, but a large proportion of voters, 62 p.c. were not confident of whether their vote had any impact on the democratic process. A very low level, only 22 p.c., was confident that they directly participated in decision making process through the voting system. In this backdrop, only 20 p.c. of voters said that they were satisfied with the LGI. The majority of those who did not vote said that they lost confidence in their representatives. Although local government can provide better opportunities for people's participation, Sri Lanka's local government institutions do not have effective mechanism and practices to even encourage participation' ...*'The system of proportional representation, which was introduced to the local government elections in the 1980s, created further distance between local representatives and voters' .. 'Lack of people's participation is partly due to structural and institutional barriers'*. (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012).

B. Accountability

Uyangoda talk about two types of accountability with regard to local government, namely upwards and downwards. Upwards accountability refers to accountability of LGI to Provincial councils and the Ministry of local government of the Central government. The downwards accountability means the answerability to citizens. In Sri Lanka elections are a mechanism available to ensure democratic accountability. The voters who voted local politicians to power points out that after the elections their representatives are not available in the electorate and voters have lost faith in them (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012). Approval of the budget is another way of controlling the malpractices of politicians. Recently, several budgets presented by LGIs could not gain support of the members; but nothing happened. Still they are in power. Here, accountability has lost its meaning.

C. Transparency

Many of the key informants pointed out that once these politicians were elected to power, they were not responsible for the voter/ the taxpayer. The tax payer was not aware of how the LGI spent their tax rupee. Uyangoda study too confirmed this (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012). Most of the LGI members do not maintain close links with the people. They are corrupted and engaged in development work only when such work enables them to make money from contracts. They do not have the habit of consulting citizens who elected them. They think that they know everything. So why should they consult voters' (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012).

D. Impartiality

The focus groups indicated that hardly there was impartiality, as they serve themselves. They do politics to be rich. Nominations are usually given to close relatives of the political leaders. There are 'political families'. Membership goes from father to son, daughter, brother or wife. If a member dies his wife is appointed. Corruption, nepotism, discrimination and intimidation are common. (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012). Indicators of awareness on good governance, (67 p.c.) and female participation in the democratic political process (58 p.c.) showed higher values, but it alone does not ensure the prevalence of good governance. However, other factors such as trust in service delivery institutions and politicians do not indicate such higher values.

E. Trust index

If the good governance is at work, people have some trust and confidence in the public institutions which provide important service to people. People's level of trust on various public institutions, as given below, indicates that none of these institutions could gain a higher level of trust. All ranked just somewhat satisfactory, the overall index being 0.59 (rank C). In all the cases the index ranked between 0.52 and 0.69, with an average of overall index of 0.59, judiciary having the highest level and LGI members having the lowest. People's trust even with regard to judiciary was not high. It was because, according to the in depth studies, the independent judiciary which Sri Lankans experienced a few decades ago was getting politicized recently, and the judgments given by Supreme Courts were questioned even by lay people. The Central Government although elected by people, was run by a very big Cabinet, most of whom were opposition members who had crossed over just for making money through bribery, commission and corruption, as people say. Some of these members were charged with murder (some acquitted, through questionable means) and were facing charges at the

Bribery or Corruption Commission but rarely being summoned before the Commission. Recently, honesty of the Chairman of the Commission was highly questioned in the Press, but no action was taken. This however was not partly main research issue. The members of the Police, local government institutions and media gained the lowest levels of confidence index. This indicates that the implementation of good governance by the authorities was poor and people had lost confidence in them. Thus the three elements of good governance, participation, transparency and accountability were not effective in these areas.

F. Local Government Institutions: Index of Service Satisfaction

The index of service satisfaction indicates the level of satisfaction that people gained. It seems that none of the service providers could provide a 'good' or 'excellent' service to the people. They could provide only a 'satisfactory' level of service and the development activities could not provide any satisfaction. The service index ranged between 0.64 (postal services) and 0.40 (taxation and poverty alleviation) None of the indices had a value above 0.65, ranking C. It means that the practice of good governance in LGIs stood at a very low level as perceived by the respondents. If the people participated in decision making and development in these areas, tax payers should have gained some knowledge on how the LGI spend their tax rupee, on what and how. Respondents were not exposed to such knowledge and had not gained satisfaction on the utilization of tax money. As people have not gained enough satisfaction on the services delivered by these institutions, achieving one of the key elements of good governance i.e. participation, seemed to be far off.

G. Bribery and corruption

Although the quantitative data did not indicate the exposure to bribery and corruption, the qualitative data did indicate that there was bribery and corruption in these institutions. Whenever they want a service from public institutions, it was very difficult to get that service unless there was some acquaintance, have to please the officers giving *santhosam* (bribery). The elected members were very keen on collecting commissions and bribes from contractors. Usually when offering contracts, the given procedures were not followed and the contract was given to the favourite, a friend or a relative. (Uyangoda ,2012).

H. Performance of LGI and elected members

The elected representatives of these institutions treat LGI as a stepping stone to national politics. In this context,

members of the same party fight each other in the process of competition to be in good books of the party leader. Some local politicians were facing charges in the judicial courts, but never get convicted as the cases were dismissed saying that there was no evidence, in the blessings of the leader. The leader was supposed to be the law giver. The performances of LGIs were not up to the level of satisfaction of people. Theoretically, at economic level good governance improves material development and at non-economic level it promotes substantial individual happiness, reducing unrest and promoting democratic process (Rothstein and Teorell 2005). In the study area the material development indices took values less than 0.50. However, individual happiness and satisfaction gained through family life and relatives stood at a higher level, around 0.8 ranking B. The individual happiness derived through trust on democratic rights, political process and development took lower values, around 0.50. The indices on trust indicated that voters had lost confidence in politicians and the existing process of LGI administration. However, people's participation in elections was satisfactory as it varied between 70p.c. and 50 p.c. Qualitative data indicated that people had no faith in the LGI system as well as in politicians, both local and national. People have often said that the LGI system was a white elephant. The LGI system was thrust on the people as a result of Indian pressure. People were aware of the fact that LTTE terrorism was a product of India. People preferred their traditional Gamsabha system or Village Council system which they had earlier.

I. Other services:

Postal services, primary health care, primary education and electricity service seemed to be somewhat satisfactory. People had no faith in the local taxation system. For the local development LGI should levy taxes and need not depend on the Central Government. A particular advantage of local government lies in its ability to arrange for the provision of local public goods in line with local tastes and preferences (Watt, 2006). However, this expectation could not be gained. Regional development, business empowerment, vocational training, Samurthi (poverty alleviation) allowance, public property maintenance, housing, educational facilities, scholarships, participation in decision making and taxation system index-values were below 0.50. The happiness and satisfaction people derived from these items related to their emotional well-being and life evaluation. This study shows that the emotional well-being and life evaluations were based not on the trust or satisfaction they derived from the good governance of LGIs, but on family life, parental care and relationship with the relatives and neighbours.

The democratic process means ensuring real political voice for all the people (Abdel Latif, 2003). It means that democracy, economic development, governance and quality of life are interrelated. However, the quality of life (QOL) may not be misunderstood with the standard of living (SOL). The SOL is mainly based on income, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is a measure of satisfaction of basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. The QOL is based on economic, sociological and psychological domains (Chan, 2005). The Quality of Life means a good life and we believe that a good life is the same as living a life with a high quality (Ventegodt, *et al.*, 2003). But that quality depends on the culture, religious beliefs, environment and family relations. At the same time the QOL and happiness are subjective. Politicians spend an enormous amount of money and energy to gain political power, as they know that if they come to power they can earn more than what they had spent. As Metha, (2008), pointed out, bribery, corruption, nepotism and partiality in implementing policies and in administrative activities seemed to be a vicious circle. As Rothstein points out "*democratic system has two sides that are guided by opposite norms: partisanship for the representational process and impartiality for the process of implementation*" (Rothstein and Teorell, 2005). This process could not be found in any LGI. They continued the partisanship even after coming to power to retain power. The voter was so distant from the politician that the latter behaved the way he wished. People preferred the earlier traditional Village Council system, as it attended to the local needs. A particular advantage of local government lies in its ability to arrange for the provision of local public goods in line with local tastes and preferences (Watt, 2006). In order to achieve this end LGIs were allowed to implement its own taxation system to finance their expenditure without depending on the Central Government. The present study showed that people were not happy about the LGI taxation system and gave the lowest index value (0.40.) .

J. Life situation and attitudes towards LGI and politics

Respondents were asked how they feel about their life situation and their attitudes towards good governance and responses were recorded on a Likert scale. Over 90 p.c. of them said that they were happy or very happy and there was no sex difference in how they looked at their life. The index of life situation for both males as well as females stood at 0.83, a very high value. Although females were not willing to migrate locally in search of better environments and employment, mother migration or female migration to Middle East countries in search of money was high. All the indices relating to quality of life was high, whereas indices relating to politics, local and national politicians and local government institutions and

their activities were low, indicating that they were not happy about the performances of LGI. The same pattern existed with regard to males, showing that there were no sex differences. The lack of sex differentials in itself indicates an existence of a satisfactory level of quality of life for females.

K. Why LGI system failed

A research carried out by (Uyangoda and De Mel, 2012) also found that the system of present local government as corrupt and did not serve the purpose intended. Some of the reasons for Local government system failure base on the present study may be summarized as follows:

1. LGIs can hardly do anything without the interference of the central government.
2. When electing members for the LGI, local needs were not accounted for, but national issues were projected. 'Thus, the presence of the 'national' in the local political arena has been reproduced at every election, thereby blurring the distinction between the two spaces and also reaffirming the importance of local to national political agenda.
3. The agenda for local democracy needs has not given sufficient place to recognize the heterogeneity (ethnicity, caste etc.) of the local community and share the commitments to local democracy.
4. Weak in resources, not effective in management, and not playing an outstanding role in the mainstream of administration and development.
5. Neglect of LGI controlled by opposition parties by the centre.
6. LGIs are not empowered to solve common local issues such as
7. Divisional Secretariat and GramaNiladhari are more popular among villagers than the LGI,
8. False promises given at the time of elections by candidates.
9. Politicization of all aspects of LGI
10. Frustration among councillors and loss of confidence among the citizens.
11. Inertia in the local democracy, lack of a political culture of vibrant local democracy, inefficient, inactive and lack of dynamism.
12. Most of the local politicians do not maintain close link with voters once the elections were over.
13. Most elected members are seen to be corrupted, make money from contracts.
14. Councillors do not think innovatively.
15. LGI members were accountable to the centre and not to the voter.
16. As a result of the corrupted nature of the system,
17. Accessibility of politicians to voters was poor.

18. Participation of local politicians in the affairs of the community was poor.
19. Equity and fairness could not be found in the local political system.
20. Those who have money and power are much benefitted.

L. Hypothesis testing

It is argued that Local Government if it practices good governance is the best form of government to provide public goods and services for the local tastes and needs, improving the quality of life of its people. It involves democratic rights, rule of law, quality of life. As an alternative hypothesis it may be taken that if there is no good governance practices then there cannot be any improvements in the three areas given above at local level. In the chapter on Conceptual and Theoretical framework it was pointed out that good governance practices were associated with the practice of participation, transparency, accountability and impartiality. The data in this study did not support the prevalence of these four conditions at local levels in the LGIs in Sri Lanka and the hypothesis had to be rejected and accept the alternative hypothesis..

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Theoretically the best form of government for the people is local government, as it could concentrate on a smaller area and attend the needs of the people. However, in the Sri Lankan context the system local government was a failure. No one expects qualities of good governance from these politicians, who form the LGIs. People had close contacts with the GramaNiladhari, Divisional Secretariat, development officers and public health workers, such as midwives and public health inspectors attached to DS and MOH offices in the area. As a result the impact of LGI on the quality of life of the people was at a very low level. The high quality of life of people had been achieved not through the LGI but through other means, such as other public institutions. Good governance practices of LGI were measured taking into consideration the participation, accountability, transparency and impartiality. Theoretically if these four factors were implemented to the satisfaction of the voters, then it may be said that LGI had established good governance its jurisdiction. According to the survey, peoples' awareness about good governance stood at medium level. Satisfaction with LGI performances, as people perceived, dropped to the lower levels. Dissatisfaction with LGI was mainly due to inefficiency on the part of politicians and administrative staff, lack of trust and political bias. However, the trust index (LGI), calculated separately on a direct question stood at medium level, but closer to the lower end of medium

level. The trust on various institutions, which had closer relationship to the people, like Provincial Council, Local Government, judiciary, Divisional Secretariat, Police, military and local level politicians, stood at the lower end of the medium scale. With regard to services the index of satisfaction in the areas of health, agriculture, transport, recreation education, poverty alleviation and democracy dropped to the lowest end of the medium level. As a result, development index dropped to an average level. None of the indices relating to good governance and performances had a value higher than medium, indicating that people were not much satisfied with the good governance of the LGI. Various other studies (Hettige, 2001; Uyangoda, 2012 and Kotagama, 2002) too agree with the present findings.

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