

Public Participation in the Decision-Making Process of Local Authorities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Public participation on the local authority level is a vital factor in the context of democracy. It leads to strengthening accountability and citizen empowerment. Scholars argue that citizen participation has positive effects at the service-delivery mechanism both in local government level and the quality of democracy. This article focuses on the involvement of local masses in the decision-making process of public officials through a combined approach, identifying gaps in the existing local government system for the well-being of general masses.

The findings indicate that citizen participation in the decision-making process is not firmly rooted within the existing organizational culture of the local government system. The mechanism set up to serve the local community is also obstructed from pro-people initiatives. Further, these outcomes mainly depend on the political setup of the local government, capacity of stakeholders, legislature and structures connected with local governance. In spite of these, the article further argues on citizen involvement which has a positive impact on democracy, especially in the context of 'ownership'. The local community feels that they are more responsible for their well-being, leads to greater public involvement that contributes towards a higher degree of legitimacy in the decision-making process. The article also concludes that by establishing a participatory decision-making process at the local level creates a healthy organizational culture equipped with democratic principles to strengthen relationships among key stakeholders.

Keywords: Public participation, Local authorities, Local governance, Democracy, Organizational communication culture

Introduction

Having inherited a colonial administrative set-up, the culture of democratic governance in the Sri Lankan post independent era is not considered sufficiently pro-people, due to constraints based on the social and political environment of the country. This is mainly due to the fact that perceptions of democratic practices have not been firmly developed in the context of the local scenario. Mainly, the public officers have failed to institutionalize democratic practices as well as empowering local people to be responsible for their own welfare. It is mentioned that these institutions require major structural changes with occupational socialization of members at different

levels, enabling them to participate in public affairs with justice ensured to those who mandated them.¹

The study examines three critical aspects of public participation, namely:

- The involvement of local masses at the decision-making process of public officers.
- Reception to public needs.
- Providing of public services through the existing organizational system of the local government.

On one hand, the administrative mechanism of the local government is probed in the study and on the other hand

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receptivity to such needs is investigated. The reason is that to a certain extent local authorities have engaged in many aspects of welfare activities and accountability of their day-to-day activities, but the common argument is that it is imperative to ascertain certain aspects of local governance and assess the conduct of the public, along with different modes of communication.

In order to scrutinize these issues, the involvement of the main stakeholders in the decision-making process, namely, public officers and members of the local community is to be discussed. The administrative functions of the local government are handled by public officers including the responsibility of implementing policies together with service delivery. In this context, it is necessary to investigate that in response to public welfare whether it is required to have a new structural mechanism to the present local government organizational system with provisions to accommodate such requirements.

New Knowledge to be Created through the Study

The common opinion is that the existing organizational culture of local government authorities or practices do not have an established mechanism for the participatory decision-making process. In order to bridge this gap, the study will pave way to introduce a new model for participatory decision-making process at different levels of local government authorities. It will be a collaborative effort on the part of all stakeholders concerned, followed by a two-way communication process.

Actually, the idea to undertake a study based on local governance to assess the quality of services rendered in their service is an interesting endeavor both in policy implications and the intellectual curiosity. Further, the study could help to re-fashion what the people perceive as good governance.

Further, the study will raise a discussion and that will pave way forward for proper policy changes at different levels of Sri Lankan local authorities.

Literature Review

Citizen participation is about ways in which citizens exercise influence and have control over the decisions that affect them. There is widespread dissatisfaction about the lack of responsiveness of public institutions to citizens and their lack of 'voice' in service delivery.¹³ The concept of citizens 'voice' implies an engagement with the state that moves beyond consultation to more direct forms of influence over spending and policy decisions.⁵

In many countries, new laws on democratic decentralization have opened up new opportunities for participation in local governance, but specific attention needs to be

placed on ensuring a poverty focus.¹² Participation can be inhibited by social dynamics of exclusion and inclusion at the 'community level'.¹⁹ Gujith et al.⁶ identify a complex of community differences including age, income, religion, caste, ethnicity and gender. Some people are more inhibited in meetings, will not ask for clarifications and leave confused and frustrated, or are pressured into acquiescence, and yet their attendance is classified as 'participation'. Thus 'participation', rather than necessarily being fair and democratic, is often manipulated from the top, with powerful individuals imposing decisions on others.

Civil society is often identified as the 'institutional solution to people-centered, participatory and inclusive development'.⁴ These organizations are influential forces for local communities and have the potential to build a "disciplined citizenry" replacing "ignorant citizenry" who are blamed for accepting anything offered without meaningfully engaged in regard to their welfare. Engaging citizens at the local level is a challenge since it requires greater resources, time and effort to identify and work with the community.

However, local governments are often unfamiliar with lack of skills to make use of new instruments of citizen participation. Historical background, politics, tradition, skills and capacities influence local government responses to change rules and procedures. These conditions also affect ways in which local government interacts with community organizations, informal leaders and concerned stakeholders. Initiatives can also be undermined by local government resistance: participation increases transparency, exposing the weaknesses in horizontal and vertical accountability within government and between government and citizens.³

Three types of local authorities are currently in practice in Sri Lanka. They are established, operated and regulated by three different legal enactments, namely, Municipal Councils Ordinance No. 16 of 1947 (as amended), Urban Councils Ordinance No. 61 of 1939 (as amended) and Pradeshiya Sabha Act No. 15 of 1987. Local authorities are autonomous statutory bodies with their constitution, powers, and duties defined in the respective Ordinances and Acts applicable to them.¹⁴ These local authorities function as independent entities according to legal provisions that govern them and the constituted body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal. These local authorities comprise a fully elected Council, which holds office for a period of four years, and the Minister of Local Government is in charge of curtailing or extending the period.

According to recommendations of the 1999 Local Government Reforms, following suggestions were made to the Committee system:

- The operation of the system of committees to be made compulsory in all local authorities.
- Every Local Authority should have one committee for

finance and planning and in addition a minimum of four other committees.

- Inclusion of citizens in the area and representatives of youth and women sections in the committees should be made compulsory.

The report of Public Representation Committee (2016) in relation to public participation in local processes will also be discussed with following key areas:

- Smaller local government units with greater citizen participation.
- Installing a proper checks-and-balances mechanism.
- Achieving local development through democracy, participation, inclusion, accessibility, transparency, empowerment, ownership, and self-rule by the citizens.

Objectives of the Study

According to objectives of this research, it is to investigate a dialogue among local authority personnel, their customers and policy makers to examine themselves in a retrospective consequence. Have they performed their duties by giving a voice to affected parties? If not, why? To whom local authorities are accountable and whether they are contributing sufficiently towards the progress of their constituents?

- To identify the scope of public participation in the decision-making process at local government level.
- To access the perception of public officials at local level in the participatory decision-making process.
- To review the quality of receptivity and provision provided by the existing local government organizational system.

Methodology

The study employed a mix approach including quantitative and qualitative tools and techniques for the purpose of collecting data. Data was gathered through a survey questionnaire and supported by focus group discussions. The supply side connected with service delivery mechanism at the local government level is probed through the survey questionnaire and the demand side is probed through focus group discussions. The mix approach had a fair balance with regard to accuracy of data. The survey questionnaire will be administered among officers of the local government administrative service with responsibility to ensure that stakeholders are mobilized for short-term and long-term decision making, while focus group discussions will be conducted among local masses who visit the local authority to obtain services. These focus group discussions were well balanced with male and female participants.

The sample for the survey questionnaire represented four Municipal Councils, six Urban Councils and 16 Pradeshiya

Sabhas island-wide, which will represent the regional socio-political, economic and cultural diversities. There are 27 locations and in each location 15 questionnaires were administered. Hence in total, approximately 405 questionnaires were administered. Two focus group discussions were conducted at each province and the total number of focus group discussions was eighteen.

Further, the study was enriched through theoretic frameworks offered by both qualitative and quantitative approaches such as structuralized analysis and discourse analysis. Data gathered through the survey questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS software and the focus group discussions were recorded and reviewed.

Distribution of the Sample: Province, District and Local Authority

This study was conducted at all nine provinces representing 23 districts. Twenty-seven local authorities were selected from these districts and the survey was conducted among a randomly selected cluster sample of public officials.

The survey was conducted among 15 public officials in each selected local government authority and the total sample population was 405. Results were drawn from 400 with a response rate of 98%.

Profile of Public Officials

The profile of the sample population is discussed in this section and it includes key areas such as gender, age group, educational qualifications and current occupation. The gender balance of this study is 56% (225) males and 44% (175) females serving in local authorities.

Notably, 49% of the respondents are in the age group 30–39 years and the next highest age group is 40–49 years with a rating of 30%. The age group 18–29 years was 13% and the age group of 55 and above was 6%.

Significantly, 42% of the respondents were with GCE advanced-level qualifications and 40% of the respondents were graduates. There were respondents with ordinary level amounting to 12%, diploma holders 4% and less than 1% with postgraduate qualifications. A further 1% of the respondents did not reveal their level of education.

According to the study, 11% of the respondents were primary-level staff, 73% of the respondents in the local government were secondary-level staff, and 16% of the respondents were tertiary-level staff.

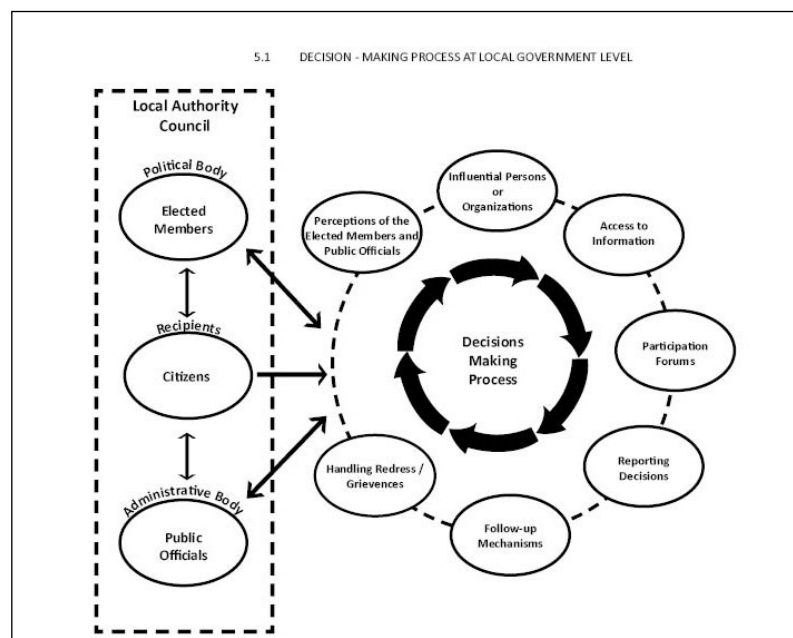
The selected respondents of this study (the public officials at the local government level) represent a fair balance of male and female employees (56% males and 44% females). The age categories of these respondents represent young, middle-age and the senior work force. Significantly, 60%

of the respondents were in the age group of 30–39 years and 40–49 years represented a mature group of public officials serving in local authorities. New recruits and also the “young generation” of the working force were represented by the age group 18–29 years. The most experienced with a vast knowledge of the routine work procedure was represented by 55 years and above age category. Notably, 45% of the respondents held tertiary-level educational qualifications while another 40% held secondary-level educational qualifications. This indicates that the respondents were able to contribute towards this study with their educational background. Most importantly, this study was carried out among 73% of the secondary-level staff members at the local government level who engaged in public affairs and 6% of tertiary-level or the Executive Grade staff, who authorized the decision-making process at the local level.

Data Analysis and Data Interpretation: Decision-Making Process of Local Authorities

Data analysis is connected with the decision-making process at the local government level and deals with relevant issues (Part-A of the questionnaire) that are discussed below. Figure 1 is drawn to reflect the decision-making process, and the key areas in line with the data analysis are as follows:

- Perceptions of public officers – access to information, involving public in the decision-making process and the culture of participation.
- The influential forces behind citizen participation.
- Participatory decision-making mechanisms at local government level – access to information, public and key stakeholders’ participation, public forums, reporting decisions, follow-up mechanisms and handling grievances.



Perceptions of Public Officials

Firstly, in this study the perceptions of the public officials at the local government level were examined to identify to what extent they believe in public engagement in decision making. Two main democratic practices, which are pro-people initiatives, and access to information were addressed in the questionnaire to capture the attitudes of public officers. The importance of access to information for local masses and public engagement in the decision making process were probed. Furthermore, the reasoning behind the involvement of citizens in the development process was raised.

Access to Information

Interestingly, 100% of the respondents were of the view that it is important for local masses to have access to information.

Availability of information benefits all stakeholders since it mainly provides awareness to local masses, and strengthens the relationship with the public officers.

Engaging Local Masses in the Decision-Making Process

All respondents were of the view that it was important to engage local masses in the decision-making process. These decisions are taken by public officers on behalf of the community at large and in this context the contribution of local masses in decision making is very important since it is all about their wellbeing.

Participatory Decision Making within the Organizational Culture

Majority of the respondents (67%) stated that the prevailing

organizational culture does not allow public officers to be a part of the decision-making process, while 33% of the respondents stated that there is a culture of participatory decision making within the prevailing organizational culture.

Firstly, this study focused on perceptions of public officials at the local level. It is vital to capture their strengths with regard to the participatory decision-making process prior to the investigating of the established mechanism set-up at the local government level, to handle the participatory decision-making process.

Interestingly, all respondents reported that it was important for the people to have access to information and also to be engaged in the decision-making process. This positive approach has been influenced by the enactment of Right to Information Act, No. 12 of 2016, which was effective from 5th August 2016. The debate and struggle to enact the Right to Information Act in Sri Lanka has a long history and it was a key issue addressed in the election campaign by the United National Front in 2015 general election, and it was finally implemented by the current regime.

It is a fundamental requirement of the democratic governance to have access to information of public institutions. This enables the local masses to meaningfully engage in the decision-making process. Access to information builds awareness among citizens as well as it leads to the citizen empowerment. This positive perception of engaging citizens in the decision-making process contributes towards transparency, responsiveness and accountability and participation (Access to Information, UNDP, 2003).

Another perspective related to the above was raised in this study and the question was "Is there a culture of participatory decision making established within the organizational culture of the local authority level?" Interestingly, a majority (67%) reported that the existing local government structure does not have a culture of participatory decision making within the organizational culture and it is a common scenario across all three levels. Another 29% reported that existing local government structure has established a culture of participatory decision making within the organizational culture. This is reported by the tertiary level officers or management executives at the local government level since their involvement in the decision-making process is more through secondary or primary level officers.

The respondents themselves do not have any influence over the decision-making process within the organizational culture of local authorities. The prevailing political culture prevents administrators especially in the context of local authority level where decisions are taken by the political and the administrative bodies collectively to be equal partners in the process.⁹ The local politicians are of the view that

they are superior since they are elected by the people and administrators are subordinate. In this context, there is no scope for public officers to contribute at an equal level since executive officers have more or less become henchmen of the system without making any chance for other officers to be part of decision-making process, which was clearly established in this study since 67% of the respondents reported they had no say in the decision-making process within the organizational culture. This is a huge barrier in the decision-making process as policy-making initiatives are decided at a higher level (Razzaque, 2012). Also, the experiences of the public officers who engage with local masses are not considered.

In this context, a top-down approach is visible in the decision-making process of public officers in the local government sector. These perceptions of public officers do have a direct impact on public dealings and this issue was raised in the focus group discussion with the question: "How do public officers handle public concerns and what measures are being taken by institutions to handle these concerns?"

The narratives of the focus group discussions are as follows:

"In the current context, I have come across a change with regard to the public approach on local authorities. The physical appearance itself has become a friendly environment. Proper directions, duties and responsibilities and also contact points are well displayed. This is a distinct feature compared to other government institutions. Public officers of these institutions have also changed their approach in public dealings. Commitment and interest is displayed at public affairs." (A citizen from Kurunegala Municipal of the North Western Province).

"I believe there are red tapes at different levels of local government institutions hindering the capacity of public officials to handle public issues. The existing procedures are time consuming and not in line with the current trend. Relaxed procedures will definitely bring a new outlook to public dealings." (A pensioner from Hambantota Urban Council of the Southern Province).

The findings of the survey and the focus group discussion reflect the existing practices and work culture at the local government level and it is evident that public officials need to handle public dealings with a pro-people mindset. It is vital to establish a set of norms for public officials to handle public affairs in line with democratic benchmarks. And it is equally important to practice these norms among all categories of public officials at local authority level.

Main Influential Persons or Organizations in the Context of Administrative Decision Making

Citizen empowerment in the Third World context requires an

influential force to support on behalf of them. Apparently, these forces become the voice for the powerless masses.¹⁶ According to multiple responses, 31% have reported that opinion leaders are most influential within the local community in the decision-making process, but it was found out that such interventions often become unproductive as the political leadership does not easily abide by inputs that displease them.

The narratives of focus group discussions are as follows:

“The opinion leaders’ efforts on the part of the local community are in harmony with the concern raised by the public. They do not have a hidden agenda unlike politicians to benefit their own personal needs. Although politicians are our voice, they do anything to neutralize mass movements.” (A retired civil servant from the Bulathsinghala Pradeshiya Sabha of Western Province).

“Even though opinion leaders influence and provide leadership for the local community, their efforts on most occasions are not compatible with local politicians. Local politicians do things to become popular without having an understanding of the gravity of an issue and always they like cheap popularity.” (A Buddhist priest from Galle Municipal Council of the Southern Province).

Furthermore, 24% identified local politicians as influential, but held that they lacked imagination to become change agents, being satisfied with the status quo that they prevail by themselves. It was also noted through interviews that political leaders failed to understand an overall picture of how the development process would portray the constituency at the final stage. 18% identified political parties as influential forces for local masses in the decision-making process. Another 16% reported that civil society influenced local masses in the decision-making process and only 6% reported that local media influenced the local masses and 5% reported that non-governmental organizations influenced local masses.

Public Information Office/ Resource Center

Notably, 73% of the respondents stated that a resource or an information center is available at the local authority. Twenty-four percent of the respondents stated that such resources are not available within the local authority, while another 3% did not respond.

Towards a Publicly Responsive Culture of Communication: The Role of Public Relations Officers

The need for local authorities to become proactively responsive to public needs has been an issue of grave concern to electorates almost nation-wide (A Public and Media Relations Hand Book for Local Government Officials,

2007). Significantly, 80% of the respondents reported that Public Relations Officers were available at local authorities. Seventeen percent of the respondents have selected such resources are not available within the local authority and another 3% have not responded.

In this process, the respondents fully agreed with the view that access to information is important for local masses. In probing into issues, a significant one is the availability of resources established at the local government level to access information. Access to information is directly connected with the decision-making process. First, the general public is required to be informed about opportunities or available provisions for public participation. In this context, availability of a Public Information Center or a Resource Center along with a Public Relations Officer was probed. And also the resource availability of informing various decisions to the local community was investigated.

The study revealed that availability of resources across local authorities lacks uniformity, and it is established through focus group discussions.

“Public Information Center or an Information Officer is not available at the local authority. It is either a Front Officer or a Receptionist who helps with public inquiries. In order to assist the public with regard to information, it is an essential requirement to establish an Information Center. Public will be directed to a responsible person to get matters resolved within a short period of time.” (A citizen from Haputhale Urban Council of the Uva Province).

“Even though a Public Relations Officer is available, it is questionable whether these officers work towards the betterment of local masses. These Officers are expected to create a link between the authority and the local community but the current context is that they lack this connectivity. Skill persons with adequate training are required to handle such positions.” (A citizen from Mannar Pradeshiya Sabha of the Northern Province).

The report on Local Government Reforms in 1999 also indicates that citizens who seek information at the local authority level are not satisfied with the services provided, since the attitude of public officers is not very convergent. Further, it states that the citizens are compelled to waste their time and money unnecessarily for obtaining services through local authorities due to their poor information flow. And also CommGAP states that communications of government institutions are handled by either low-skilled person or else in most cases these positions are kept vacant. Normally, Information Centers and Public Relations Officers of developing countries function as government publicity hubs than service-oriented people to serve local masses.

These findings reveal that mere establishment of information centers, units, or public relations officers

does not serve the purpose here in Sri Lanka, but needs to be established with a view to enlightening local masses, provide guidance by building a healthy rapport with local masses. It is equally important to appoint skilled persons to handle public dealings than simply filling these vacancies with unskilled hands.¹⁰

These drawbacks naturally hinder the decision-making process established at local authorities, and this situation need to be urgently addressed, since image building of an organization by bridging the connectivity with local masses solely depends on public relations institutions.

Participation

Citizen Participation across Gender

Citizen participation across gender requires men and women of a locality to be part of the public forums and contribute towards the decision-making process. Participation is not a mere representation but requires an active contribution towards the development process of the locality.¹⁸ Respondents have selected that 62% of the participation is dominated by male participants. However, 21% have selected that these forums are well balanced by both male and female participants, while 11% have stated female participation is less. This clearly indicates gender imbalance in participation.

Further, gender imbalance was identified as a factor since a majority of 62% reported that citizen participation was dominated by males. Sri Lanka with a female population of 51%,² needs to consider this broadly since grass root level participation with active involvement of men and women has not been considered seriously yet. Even at higher levels, the wellbeing of the population might not be portrayed in a proper manner due to this cultural deficiency (Miranda, 2005).

The focus group discussions have revealed the following information on citizen participation:

“Although equality is established constitutionally, it is not the case in reality. Especially in the case of decision-making process at local levels, inputs of females are not considered seriously, but badly ignored in most cases. This is due to the fact that Sri Lankan rural society has been patriarchal and dominating by the male community preventing females being equal partners or contributors in initiatives of this nature”. (A women activist from Colombo Municipal Council of the Western Province).

“The traditional mindset of the rural community is functioning negatively even today in regard to females and their role. Conventionally, women are portrayed as confined to the home front and taking care of the children. They believe that females are not at par with males when

it comes to the decision-making process connected with technical matters or infrastructure like water and electricity supply, road construction, technological improvements, housing projects, etc.” (A Grama Niladhari from Hambantota Urban Council of the Southern Province).

These findings reveal the reality on the ground level faced by public officers for motivating and encouraging people at the local level for participating in decision-making process. It is a challenge to change the age-old attitudes of the community at large due to these culturally inherited tendencies and unsophisticated ideologies. Actually, they are required to be tackled sensibly preventing unrest in the society.

Public Forums Held at Local Authorities: The Scope for Participation

Public forums are important in accordance with the Institute of Local Governance, California.⁸ In 2007, the institute stated as follows:

- Not only the solution to a controversy but the nature of the problem itself is in dispute;
- The best solutions seem outside the initial comfort zones of stakeholders;
- The issue is emotionally charged or controversial;
- Broader public understanding and support are needed in order for solutions or policies to be accepted and implemented.

Public forums lead towards more legitimate, informed, consensus-based and supportive local community in the decision-making process.⁷ And also effective and deliberative process enables a knowledgeable and active local community. It encourages political participation and trust in the government for a wider participation.

According to findings, 41% of the respondents have identified public meetings as the main mode of involving the public, while 33% reported public hearings, and 19% as committee meetings. Only 6% identified budgetary planning as public involvement in decision making, 1% identified public participation forums are not having any visibility.

Although various public forums are set up at local level for the public to raise their concerns in regard to the wellbeing of people, the study reveals these forums are not functioning by involving local masses in accordance with the expected goals.

This is due to the absence of mandatory provisions in local government legislation for such initiatives. The report of the Local Government Reforms of 1999¹⁷ clearly identifies the need for local authorities to be more concerned with planning at the local level. And also the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils Reform Circular No. 4

sets out “The role of local authorities in development and physical planning”. It clearly states that the work needs to be coordinated with Divisional Secretaries and other relevant authorities to promote vigorous participation of people in the planning process. Further, the reform circular 10 addresses peoples’ participation in socio-economic development and emphasizes the need for public engagement both in planning and implementation of activities. Having laid a foundation for peoples’ participation by the state, the stakeholders seriously need to be adapting to these practices in their day-to-day dealings at the local level.

The focus group discussions also endorse the same view.

“Direct public communication systems such as public hearings, committee meetings and also participatory budgetary planning are practiced at a minimal level. It is an urgent need of the current era to practice these direct methods of participatory forums to serve local masses in an effective and efficient manner since there is very often a mismatch between what authorities believe, and public expectations at the ground level.” (A citizen from Badulla Municipal Council of the Uva Province).

“Public officials and elected representatives take decisions on behalf of our needs. We need to voice our concern over these matters. Public forums established within local authorities enable citizens to be a part of the decision-making process and avoid public funds being inappropriately used or wasted.” (A citizen from Puttalam Pradeshiya Sabha of the North Western Province).

In order to strengthen the decision-making mechanism at the local level, public forums need to be institutionalized, while citizen participation should be encouraged.

Reporting of Decisions to Local Masses

Notably, 87% of the respondents have indicated that the decisions are reported to local masses and 12% indicated that the decisions are not reported to local masses. In the development process, the general public is required to be aware of the latest improvements in the locality and this leads to an active participation in the decision-making process.

It is not only that the local community needs to participate actively in these forums but the decisions made are needed to be reported to the community at large. Reporting of decisions enlightens the local community about the way forward in their day-to-day activities. As per responses, the study reveals that decisions are reported to the local community. This confirms a two-way communication process. The feedback is important, because public can keep on track with matters and further reporting of decisions may lead to the next level of action. The local community senses

the feeling of acceptance or recognition by public officials as their issues lead to the building of trust and confidence among one another (A Public and Media Relations hand Book for Local Government Officials, 2007). And also this process leads to the accountability and responsiveness on the part of public officials.

The focus group discussions have reported as following on above issues.

“I was surprised when I received a call from the local authority stating that the building plan was approved and ready for collection. I also contacted them as the process usually takes quite some time for the approval. It is a good move and need to be consistent in a similar way with regard to public dealings too.” (A citizen from Colombo Municipal Council of the Western Province).

“Unfortunately decisions are not reported to the public unless they are being followed by masses or specially requested. We need to establish procedures and mechanisms to accommodate the accountability and transparent practices.” (A citizen from Monaragala Pradeshiya Sabha of the Uva Province).

The narratives reflect that the reporting of decisions does have certain weak areas that need to be addressed, and the next interpretation may lead towards the cause for such weaknesses. Reporting of decisions to the local community needs to be regularly practiced and also need to be a part of the service delivery package. This is a service area where participation of the local community could be increased, along with relationships strengthened since the sense of recognition, courtesy, helpfulness and most importantly the equal partners is recognized by the local community. It is equally important to install this feature at all levels of local authorities

And the next analytical question relates to methods adopted by public officials to report decisions.

Mode of Disseminating Decisions

According to findings, 44% have reported that the most popular mode of sharing information among local masses is by displaying at the office notice board, while 28% reported information is shared on request by citizens, 24% mentioned that decisions are shared at community meetings. Only 4% have said decisions are shared on local media.

The most popular mode of the reporting of decisions is by posting them at the notice board as issues connected with a large community cannot be addressed individually and the procedure adopted makes sense. 28% have mentioned decisions are informed to the public on request, while 24% reported that decisions are shared among local masses at committee meetings. Unless these issues are connected

with a large community, decisions could be reported on an individual basis than waiting until it is requested.

Decisions can be reported in a formal manner across local authorities and this will not create any discrimination to marginalized groups.

As previously discussed, the weakness of reporting decisions can be identified since 28% have stated that decisions are reported on the request and the expected two-way communication process has been interrupted. It is essential that general public is informed about "what the decision is" since these issues are connected with their routine life patterns.

The next level in the decision-making process is connected with the follow-up mechanism and data is interpreted based on the question raised, "Is there a follow up mechanism set up for the decision-making process?"

Follow-Up Mechanisms in the Decision-Making Process

A high number of public officials (60%) have indicated that a follow-up mechanism is set up for the decision-making process at local authorities. 30% have reported a follow-up mechanism is not available at local authorities. It is only through a follow-up mechanism that the key stakeholders can identify the progress of decisions taken at different levels or forums. These mechanisms may build trust and confidence among local masses and public officers too become accountable.

Decisions taken at various forums need to be followed in order to track down the status of such decisions. Once follow-up mechanisms are established, it is easy to identify what has actually happened, why it is delayed or if there are any bottle necks, so that both parties (people and public officials) will be able to improve the system and go ahead with their needs. It is in this context that the importance of such mechanisms is felt, thus showing local authorities to practice them as pro-people initiatives benefiting both parties to serve each another.

Decision-making process takes place at several stages and once decisions are reported, follow-up actions are required to monitor the progress. Concerned stakeholders need to be alert as to who, how and when these decisions are materialized.

These findings indicate that the existing system does not function in the same manner across all levels of local authorities and in certain councils they do not even have a system placed to accommodate follow-up mechanisms in the participatory decision-making process.

The following views were expressed at focus group discussions.

"In case of an established follow-up mechanism at the local level, the local community feels that authorities are concerned over their issues. A follow-up mechanism is set up in the planning and development section of the local authority but not found in any other section. Common follow-up mechanisms need to be placed with regard to public dealings at local level." (A citizen from Medirigiriya Pradeshiya Sabha of the North Central Province).

"Unless we personally follow up, there is no established mechanism at the local level to accommodate this purpose". (A citizen from Badulla Municipal Council of the Uva Province).

These mechanisms need to be institutionalized and properly handled to benefit local masses than merely establishing units for the sake of doing things. It eases down the burden on the part of public officers since a properly installed mechanism leads to systematic working procedures and minimizes administrative lapses. And on the other hand citizens will benefit from systems that address their own concerns.

Handling of Public Grievances/ Complaints

Public redress or complaint system at local authorities enables the public to raise their concerns over dissatisfaction of services or even accommodate suggestions for improvements (Ranganathan, 2008). Public sector, especially in the context of handling diverse and complex service delivery functions, requires installing a vibrant public redress system which serves the local community in a fast, free and fair manner. According to respondents, 84% state that local authorities have set up a mechanism to accommodate complaints and grievances in cases where the decisions are not pursued. 13% have stated that such mechanisms are not available while 3% have not responded.

In case decisions are not implemented or if public matters are not properly addressed, a mechanism needs to be established to accommodate public grievances and complaints. The focus group discussions revealed the following:

"When we lodge a complaint, we need to feel that our point of view is understood, to be treated with respect and courtesy, and as an individual. And also to have correct actions to be taken as soon as possible, and while action is taken, to be kept up to date, to be compensated (if necessary), to be treated fairly, and to make sure the problem never happens again. It is questionable whether our public grievances and complaint mechanism is set

up in line with these characteristics. The most popular mechanism set up in our local context is to lodge complaints to the complaint box. We don't know whether these complaints are attended to on a regular basis." (A citizen from Ratnapura Municipal Council of the Sabaragamuwa Province).

"Complaints also need to be considered not only in written formats but orally as well, as it serves the purpose of the illiterate, and convenience to handle administrative procedures for the local community. We lack trained people and technical staff to handle these systems. The other issue is that local community is unaware of the existing complaint procedure as well, and go behind officers and other parties to get matters sorted out without following the due procedure." (A citizen from Jaffna Municipal Council of the Northern Province).

These focus group discussions reveal the practical aspect of the service delivery system from the perspective of recipient's version and further identify the gap between established mechanisms and citizen awareness on these facilities.

Established mechanisms to resolve public grievances were also discussed.

Mechanism Set Up to Resolve Public Grievances

Respondents have stated that three mechanisms have been established within the local authority system to resolve public complaints and grievances. These mechanisms are receiving public complaints through a complaint box, directly complaining to the Public Relations Unit and dedicating a complaints hot line. A clear majority of 76% have responded that complaints received through complaint box are reviewed by the staff at committee meetings and necessary action is taken while 6% have responded that complaints received by the Public Relations Unit are resolved by the officer in charge, and 3% have responded that complaints received through a dedicated hotline are resolved by connecting with the relevant officer in charge or the section. A considerable number of respondents (15%) have not responded on this matter. Unavailability of such mechanisms or 'not popularly have been practiced' is general reasons for this situation.

These mechanisms need to be established to benefit the community at large and for public officials to be accountable and responsive in their dealings with the public. The focus group discussions have reported the following:

"We need a mechanism set-up to resolve our grievances in a speedy manner. The current process does have delays in resolving problems as complaints received by the complaint box are not taken up regularly. The process is not transparent and we cannot trust the system." (A citizen

from Maritimpattu Pradeshiya Sabha of the Northern Province).

Mechanism set up for receiving public grievances need to be re-visited since the existing system itself is a grievance. It requires an effective and efficient process in handling public issues." (A citizen from Batticaloa Municipal Council of the Eastern Province).

These narratives reflect the operational side of the service delivery mechanism at the local level. It needs to be re-organized to suit the participatory decision-making process; a pro-people initiative in line with democratic benchmarks.

Thereafter, the study probed into challenges in practicing participatory decision-making processes and suggestions for improvements.

Challenges Faced by Local Masses

Notably, 22% have reported that lack of support on part of the local politicians is a barrier for the decision-making process and 17% are of the view that inflexible structures are causing negative impact for citizen participation. Similarly, 17% have reported that local masses are least interested in public engagement while 13% said that lack of information is a barrier for public participation and 12% reported lack of public awareness is also a constraint in the context of poor participation. Only 11% have reported that lack of support by public officials is a constraint faced by local masses for active participation and 8% informed that inappropriate response on these issues is another cause.

The study reveals that the main challenge faced in the participatory decision-making process is the lack of support by local politicians. And among other challenges are reported lack of public interest, inflexible structures, lack of awareness and lack of information that affect the participatory decision-making process.

Participatory decision-making process is a collective effort on the part of the key stakeholders. Its relationship is similar to a chain and if one part is unlocked or loosened, the entire process becomes ineffective. Local politicians do have a major role in the participatory decision-making process, since they are elected to represent the local community and simultaneously need to consult people in decision making on behalf of them. Public officials are also held accountable in public engagement and once the people are consulted, the participatory decision-making process becomes transparent. Local citizens also need to be involved in this process with a sense of commitment and interest as decisions taken at these forums are directly concerned with their livelihood.

The focus group discussions revealed the following:

"Local government institutions do not provide sufficient

information to the public and public awareness is also not visible. Due to this reason, people do not get an opportunity to participate at public forums. We have only heard about participatory budgetary provisions but have never been a part of the process.” (A citizen from Minuwangoda Pradeshiya Sabha Western Province).

“The locality we live in consists of a multi-ethnic community. According to the existing constitution, Sinhala and Tamil are considered as national languages. Unfortunately, officers attached to local authorities are unable to serve in Tamil language; Both information and directions are in Sinhala language. We find it difficult to get required services. In this context, we get support from a Sinhala person who comes to the local authority”. (A citizen from Hatton-Maskeliya Urban Council of the Central Province).

“Poor attitudes hinder the quality of service delivery. Local masses are not considered as important stakeholders in the decision-making process by local politicians and public officers. Our contributions are not valid and they (Public Officers) believe that their superiors are always right and the people are ignorant.” (A citizen from Monaragala Pradeshiya Sabha of the Uva Province).

“We are blamed for not being committed or interested. Unfortunately, opportunities provided are limited for public engagement and our contributions are not seriously considered.” (A citizen from Bulathsinhala Pradeshiya Sabha of the Western Province).

The findings of the study and focus group discussions clearly identify the poor relationship maintained by key stakeholders, indicating as a major constraint in the participatory decision-making process. In order to overcome these obstacles, several improvements in the service-delivery mechanism need to be replaced.

Suggestions for Improvements by the Public Officials

A clear majority of 69% reported that in order to overcome the constraints of engaging public in decision-making process, there needs to be awareness among key stakeholders. While 24% reported that empowering of the management mechanism which involves public participation in the decision-making process normally improve the existing system, only 7% have reported that training of key stakeholders will benefit local masses to actively participate in the decision-making process.

The focus group discussions have revealed the following:

“Legislative enactments in regard to public engagement at local level can easily resolve most of the barriers exist in the current system. Once there is a legal binding, change of government from time to time will not have any impact

on public involvement at local level. Non availability of sufficient legal provisions have distanced the public from decision makers.” (A citizen from Jaffna Municipal Council of the Northern Province).

“A Public Relations Unit needs to be established in every local authority. A dynamic Public Relations Unit will bridge the gap between local masses and public officers. It will be the main source of information for local masses and will also actively connect masses in local initiatives. It will also impact on research which will enhance public involvement at the local level.” (A citizen from Kurunegala Municipal Council of the North Western Province).

“Skilled public officers with proper training are essential to be recruited to handle public affairs efficiently. Bilingual capacities with computer literacy are fundamental to deal with public affairs.” (A citizen from Kandy Municipal Council of the Central Province).

These suggestions concerning key areas such as building strong relationships and establishing confidence and trust among key stakeholders, creating awareness, relaxing procedures to suit the current context, amending legislative enactments to benefit local masses, creating dynamic public relation units across local authorities to access information and to equip public officers with training facilities to handle participatory decision-making processes are of fundamental importance in this study at a broader level.

The efficiency and effectiveness on part of the service-delivery mechanisms depend much on these improvements and stakeholders need to work on these suggestions seriously to obtain the best outcome of improvements in the participatory decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Having discussed the participatory decision-making process at the local level, it is evident that merely placed structures are unable to cater to the required standard in achieving quality in the service-delivery mechanism. These are technically set up administrative structures quite very old and out dated and do not serve the purpose of adding the true sense of democracy. Key stakeholders in the supply side of the service delivery mechanism, and public officers need to be aware of the active participation on the part of the public depends on a system that is flexible, friendly, fast, free and fair in all dealings. Once the public becomes a part and parcel of the decision-making process, implementation of programs for public officers and for the elected representatives becomes a hassle-free system, as it is being filtered and endorsed through the local community.

Democratic principles need to be realistically practiced within the organizational culture of local authorities and by public officials to become effective channels to

create awareness and attract local masses to meaningfully participate in the decision-making processes. Especially in the context of Third World realities, the local masses are very much satisfied with a dependent mentality and will accept what is administratively dished out without being aware of implications for their own future. In order to get away from the subservient mentality of the local community, it is essential to promote participatory approaches exposing to the paradigm shift.

The Local Government Ministry along with local government authorities need to be concerned in maintaining consistency at all three levels of local authorities rather than allocating more facilities to Municipal and Urban Councils as they are located at central points. Having a large rural population with similar requirements and rights the Pradeshiys Sabhas need to be addressed on par with other two types of local authorities with the rapid development of human race and infrastructure through new media. It is a timely requirement to revisit the demarcation process in categorizing local authorities, as certain Pradeshiya Sabhas need upgrading to the status of Urban Councils or even Municipal Councils.

If such upgrading is not undertaken, definitely the public becomes the victims of circumstances as these local authorities are unable to cater to their needs with poor resources and infrastructure facilities. It is also impossible to activate the participatory decision-making process if public officers fail to serve the local community in their main service delivery concerns due to over loading of work along with shortcomings in the manpower development and infrastructure facilities.

In order to achieve best results in the participatory decision-making process, firstly the demarcation process in categorizing local authorities needs to be carefully addressed. Secondly, amendments to existing legislative enactments should be made compulsory to include mandatory provisions for participatory decision making and adopt flexible procedures to activate public participation by removing red tapes in local administration. Thirdly required skilled manpower along with infrastructure facilities needs to be put in place or properly identified to install a vibrant service-delivery mechanism to accommodate participatory decision-making process across all levels of local authorities, and finally to build up a strong relationship with confidence and trust among key stakeholders to make these processes a reality, within the present local authority system.

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