

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SAMMANTHURAI AND NAVITHANVELI PRADESHIYA SABHAS OF EASTERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Introduction

Local democracy and good governance are popular concepts and they are arguably the most important dimensions in the viability of any modern democracy (Baral, 2004). During the last two decades there has been a rising upsurge towards promoting democratic decentralization and good governance, particularly developing countries (Kumar, 2006). In this regard, role of local governments or grass roots governments are remarkable. It is not distinguished by the services it provides, important though they are to its working. Only if local government has a strong basis in local democracy and good governance can it have a legitimate claim to a major and distinctive role in any central government.

In the Sri Lankan context, the history of modern local government and decentralization really begins since British occupied the island. At present elected local councils represent the lowest tiers of government in Sri Lanka. They include Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabhas. Pradeshiya Sabhas are local councils functioning in rural areas, whereas Municipal and Urban councils are confined to urban areas (Hettige, 2008). However, many of those local bodies of the country have failed to work to establish well-build local democracy and good governance at the grass root level. On this backdrop, this study examines the role of both councils, Sammanthurai and Navithanveli in building local democracy and good governance within respective territories and to identify the challenges which are botching grassroots democracy and good governance.

This study attempts to analysis the role of both councils in building local democracy and good governance within respective territories and to identify the challenges which are botching grassroots democracy and good governance. Further, the study scrutinizes the decision-making process along with the achievement which has been gained through local governance in both areas.

Methodology

This study is based on comparative method owing to their practical merits. Above stated purpose has been achieved by studying both primary and secondary sources. In the collection of primary data, the tools and techniques of qualitative research, such as Observation and Pilot Visit, Interviews with Local Elites, Household-Survey, Interviews with Local Stakeholders and Focus Group Discussion have been employed. Secondary sources such as published and unpublished records, both from different levels of government and from NGOs, have also been consulted.

The research was started with a pilot visit to the respective research locations to gain an insight into the local political context, by gathering information about the socio-economic

conditions, major problems in the area as well as the most important actors of the local governance system. Interviews based on semi-structured interview guidelines have been conducted with 10 selected local elites in each research area. The next source of information is a household survey conducted in 4 different villages of the respective local authority area in each of the two regions, asking 60 people for their perceptions, opinions and experiences with the local political system and its actors (purposive samplings). Representatives of the most important local institutions have also been interviewed asking about their perceptions on the state of the local governance system, using semi-structured interview guidelines. The preliminary results have been discussed in focus groups with civil society representatives and key informants to get further ideas about the key issues of local governance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Local government is considered as a part of grassroots democracy and good governance, through which people participate in larger level, people participation in the governance process of the council. However, both councils (Sabhas), selected for study, have failed to work to establish well-built local democracy and good governance at the grass root level by means of people participation in larger level. The main reason for the low and declining level of local democracy and good governance appears to be a decline in the perceived efficiency of both governments, an issue not addressed by them. At the same time, however, it is not clear that grass-roots people in both areas want their local councils to become more powerful. And also the both councils, in turn, have become marginalized and insignificant in the public eye. The grossly inadequate resources at their disposal have made these councils incapable of addressing even the basic problems of the local communities.

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