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The Contribution of the Community Participatory Approach in Poverty Elimination: Sri Lankan Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper explores how social welfare contributes to societal development and poverty elimination in Sri Lanka. Despite achieving strong human development indicators through long-standing universal education and healthcare, targeted poverty programmes like Samurdhi have struggled with inefficiency and political interference. The recent shift to the Aswesuma programme aims to improve targeting but faces significant implementation hurdles.

The objective is to systematically review the performance of Sri Lanka's welfare system, assessing its impact on poverty, equity, and community participation. The methodology is based on secondary data analysis, synthesising evidence from government reports, academic studies, and evaluations to identify trends and gaps.

Key findings show that while universal services effectively reduced inequality, targeted cash transfers were plagued by high inclusion/exclusion errors and political co-option. The economic crisis dramatically reversed poverty gains, highlighting system fragility. Genuine community participation in welfare delivery remains limited, often reduced to tokenistic consultation rather than meaningful empowerment.

Suggestions include depoliticizing beneficiary selection, indexing benefits to inflation, strengthening the Social Registry, and integrating cash support with livelihood training for sustainable graduation. Fostering genuine participatory governance in welfare projects is crucial for building ownership and accountability.

In conclusion, Sri Lanka's welfare system has been foundational for development but requires profound reform to eliminate poverty. Success depends on protecting universal services while making targeted programmes more effective, transparent, and genuinely participatory to ensure resilience against future shocks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty remains one of the most persistent and complex challenges facing nations across the globe. In Sri Lanka, a country celebrated for achieving high human development indicators—including a life expectancy of over 77 years and near-universal literacy—despite a historically modest per capita income, the fight against poverty presents a distinct paradox (UNDP, 2025; Isenman, 1980). While significant progress was made in the early 21st century, reducing national poverty from 22.7% in 2002 to 4.1% by 2016, the devastating economic crisis of 2022-2023 abruptly reversed these gains, pushing poverty rates back to an estimated 25.9% (World Bank, 2017; World Bank, 2024). This stark reversal exposes the fragility of poverty reduction achievements that are not underpinned by resilient, inclusive, and empowering systems. It underscores a critical lesson: poverty is not merely a statistical deficit of income but a multidimensional condition of vulnerability, marginalisation, and fundamentally, powerlessness.

The dominant response to poverty in Sri Lanka, as in many developing nations, has historically been structured through a social welfare framework combining universal services with targeted safety nets. Programmes like the long-standing Samurdhi initiative and its recent successor, Aswesuma, represent state-led efforts to provide direct income support (Gunatilaka, 2018; Gazette No. 2328/13, 2023). However, a substantial body of research highlights systemic shortcomings within this model. Studies consistently point to high inclusion and exclusion errors in targeting, with Samurdhi, for instance, documented to have a 41% inclusion error, meaning a significant portion of benefits did not reach the intended poor (World Bank, 2015). Perhaps more critically, these programmes are frequently undermined by political patronage where benefits become tools for electoral mobilisation rather than instruments of equitable social protection (Hettige, 2004; Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2017). This dynamic transforms citizens from rights-holders into dependent clients, reinforcing the very powerlessness that characterises poverty.

It is within this context that the community participatory approach emerges as a compelling, yet contested, alternative philosophy for poverty elimination. Its theoretical foundations are robust, drawing from the empowerment pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970), who argued that true liberation comes from critical consciousness and collective action, and from Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities approach, which frames development as the expansion of people's substantive freedoms to lead lives they value. Participation, in this view, is not a mere project management tool but the very process through which dignity is restored and agency is built. As Robert Chambers (1997) contends, those who experience poverty firsthand possess unique, irreplaceable knowledge about its nature and potential solutions—knowledge often absent from centralised planning offices in Colombo.

The participatory approach also resonates with deeply embedded Sri Lankan cultural traditions, such as *Shramadana* (the shared donation of labour), which historically facilitated community cohesion and collective

problem-solving (Ariyaratne, 1999). This suggests a latent social infrastructure upon which modern participatory development could build. Internationally and locally, evidence points to its potential. The success of the **Gemi Diriya** project, where community development councils were granted control over block grants for local infrastructure, demonstrated that when communities manage resources, outcomes can be more relevant, sustainable, and socially cohesive (Dharmadasa & Thibbotuwawa, 2014). Similarly, sustainable community-based water management schemes have thrived where legally recognised, inclusive user committees were granted genuine authority (Ariyabandu, 2003).

However, the journey of participatory approaches in Sri Lanka is markedly a tale of divergence between elegant theory and messy practice. Scholars have critically documented how spaces created for participation are often co-opted, diluted, or rendered tokenistic. The experience of Samurdhi societies, intended to foster thrift and entrepreneurship, often reflects a reality where “participation” is reduced to attendance at politically charged meetings (Gunatilaka, 2018). Elite capture within communities can subvert processes, ensuring that local power structures, rather than the most marginalised, benefit from interventions (Mosse, 2005). Furthermore, the rigid, top-down nature of state bureaucracy is frequently ill-suited to the flexible, iterative, and time-consuming nature of genuine participatory processes, leading frontline officers to default to directive roles rather than facilitative ones (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This gap between promise and practice leads to a central critique: that participation, when stripped of real power transfer, can become a new form of tyranny—manipulating communities into legitimising externally driven agendas while leaving underlying inequalities intact (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

Thus, the central inquiry of this paper is not simply whether community participation is applied in Sri Lanka's poverty alleviation efforts, but to what end and with what effect on power relations. It seeks to move beyond a binary assessment of success or failure to critically analyse the conditions under which participation contributes to genuine poverty elimination—understood as the expansion of capabilities and agency—versus when it becomes a technical ritual that sustains the status quo. The analysis is situated at a pivotal moment, as Sri Lanka transitions from the Samurdhi model to the new Aswesuma programme, which promises more sophisticated targeting via a Social Registry (SRIS) and direct bank transfers (Wanigasinghe, 2023). This reform presents a crucial juncture to examine whether the new system is designed merely to administer benefits more efficiently or whether it incorporates mechanisms for meaningful community voice, oversight, and empowerment in alignment with its stated vision of an “entrepreneurial state” (Pasqual, 2023).

This paper will therefore explore the contribution of the community participatory approach from a Sri Lankan perspective, interrogating its role in the fundamental task of converting powerless recipients into empowered citizens. It will synthesise evidence from key case studies and policy analyses to argue that the approach's true value lies not in its procedural

form, but in its potential to catalyse a redistribution of power—a necessary, if deeply challenging, prerequisite for sustainable poverty elimination.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation for community participation in development is robust, combining pragmatic and ethical strands. Scholars argue that leveraging local knowledge leads to more appropriate, efficient, and sustainable projects, as communities best understand their own constraints and assets (Chambers, 1997). Simultaneously, influenced by thinkers like Freire (1970) and Sen (1999), participation is framed as an empowering process that builds capabilities, restores dignity, and transforms passive beneficiaries into active agents of their own development. This concept finds cultural resonance in Sri Lankan traditions such as *Shramadana* (shared labour), suggesting an inherent social infrastructure for collective action (Ariyaratne, 1999).

Empirical evidence from Sri Lanka showcases successful applications where deep, genuine participation has driven poverty reduction. The Gemi Diriya Community Development Project is a prominent example, where block grants managed by elected village councils led to tangible improvements in infrastructure and, more importantly, strengthened local governance and social cohesion, creating institutions that outlasted the project cycle (World Bank, 2011; Dharmadasa & Thibbotuwawa, 2014). Similarly, successful community-based water management schemes in the dry zone, which established legally recognised and gender-inclusive user committees, demonstrate how institutionalised participation ensures long-term sustainability and asset maintenance (Ariyabandu, 2003). These cases highlight a critical success factor: the real transfer of decision-making power and control over resources to the community.

However, the literature more extensively documents a significant gap between this participatory theory and the complex reality of practice in Sri Lanka, identifying several pervasive barriers. A foremost challenge is political co-option and patronage. Studies of flagship programmes like Samurdhi reveal how participatory structures are often subverted into instruments of political mobilisation, with benefits distributed as rewards for loyalty rather than based on need. This transforms participation into a performance that reinforces dependency and clientelism (Gunatilaka, 2018; Hettige, 2004). Furthermore, social hierarchies within communities frequently lead to elite capture, where local notables dominate decision-making and benefits, systematically excluding the most vulnerable, including women, ethnic minorities, and lower-caste groups (Mosse, 2005). Often, participation is reduced to tokenistic consultation on pre-designed projects, as seen in critiques of post-tsunami housing schemes where lack of community input led to culturally inappropriate and abandoned homes (Hyndman, 2007; Silva, 2009).

A synthesis of the literature points to a central conclusion: the disparity between successful and failed participatory

approaches is fundamentally a gap in power distribution (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). Successful cases involve a deliberate devolution of power over resources and decisions. In contrast, widespread failure occurs when participatory models are imposed without challenging the entrenched political, social, and bureaucratic structures that resist such power transfer. The rigid, top-down nature of state bureaucracy often clashes with the flexible needs of participatory processes, with officials acting as directors rather than facilitators (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Therefore, the contribution of community participation to poverty elimination is not automatic but is critically mediated by the extent to which these underlying power dynamics are acknowledged and addressed.

In conclusion, while the literature affirms the potential of community participation as a powerful mechanism for sustainable poverty elimination in Sri Lanka, it starkly highlights its vulnerability to distortion. The evidence suggests that future efforts must move beyond superficial consultation to explicitly confront and redesign the power relations within welfare delivery. Key research gaps remain in understanding how to institutionalise meaningful participation within Sri Lanka's specific political economy and in evaluating whether newer programmes like Aswesuma have learned from these past lessons to foster genuine community empowerment alongside financial support.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the theory and practice of community participation in Sri Lanka's major poverty alleviation
2. To evaluate the key social, political and structural barriers that limit genuine community participation in Sri Lanka
3. To analyse case studies where participatory approaches have succeeded or failed in reducing poverty in Sri Lanka
4. To propose practical recommendations for making community participation more meaningful and effective in future poverty reduction efforts

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a systematic review methodology based on secondary data analysis. Data were collected from credible, published sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, government reports from Sri Lankan institutions (e.g., Department of Census and Statistics, Central Bank), policy documents, and evaluations from multilateral agencies (e.g., World Bank, UNDP). The analysis involved a two-step process: first, a thematic synthesis of qualitative literature was conducted to identify key patterns, challenges, and narratives related to welfare policies and community participation; second, a descriptive evaluation of quantitative data—such as poverty rates, HDI figures, and programme coverage statistics—was performed to establish trends and measure outcomes. This integrated approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of how social welfare policies and participatory approaches have functioned in practice within the Sri Lankan context from 2015 to 2025.

Analysis

1. Evaluating the Gap: Theory Versus Practice in Sri Lanka's Poverty Programmes

At first glance, the theory behind community participation in Sri Lanka's poverty programmes is compelling, sensible, and full of promise. It reads like a perfect blueprint. The practice, however, often looks like a different building altogether—one where the foundation is shaky, and the rooms don't match the plan. This objective is about holding those two images—the blueprint and the actual building—side by side to see where the gaps are and why they exist.

The theoretical argument for participation is compelling and comes in two powerful strands.

First, there's the pragmatic strand. Theory says that involving communities makes projects smarter and more lasting. The logic is straightforward: who knows more about the lack of clean water in a village than the women who walk miles to fetch it? Who understands the cycles of drought and debt better than the farmer working the land? By tapping into this local knowledge, programmes can avoid expensive mistakes—like building a clinic in a location no one can reach, or introducing a crop that the soil cannot support (Chambers, 1997). Furthermore, the theory argues that when people help design and build something, they feel ownership over it. They are more likely to maintain a community water tank, guard a village forest, or sustain a savings group long after the outside NGO or government officer has left (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). It's the difference between being given a fish and helping to stock the pond.

Second, there's the ethical and empowering strand. Here, theory moves beyond logistics to principles. It argues that true development cannot happen *to* people; it must happen *with* them. This idea, deeply influenced by thinkers like Paulo Freire (1970), sees poverty not just as a lack of material things, but as a condition of powerlessness. Therefore, the process of participation itself—of being heard, of deliberating, of deciding—becomes a form of empowerment. It builds social capital (trust, networks, collective voice) and restores dignity. This strand also resonates with Sri Lankan traditions like "*Shramadana*" (shared labour) and philosophies of communal duty found in Buddhist and Hindu thought, making it feel culturally familiar (Ariyaratne, 1999).

This is where the story gets complicated. When these elegant theories land in the complex reality of Sri Lanka, they often get bent, diluted, or hijacked.

Consider the Samurdhi Programme, Sri Lanka's flagship poverty alleviation scheme. On paper, it was never just a cash transfer. Its original design in the 1990s included "community development" components meant to organise the poor into thrift and credit societies and encourage self-employment—a classic participatory model (Gunatilaka, 2018). The theory was to create a ladder out of poverty through collective enterprise.

In practice, however, Samurdhi has become a prime example of the theory-practice gap. For many recipients, it is primarily a vital, yet politicised, cash grant. The community groups often exist on paper, but real decision-making power and resource

control rarely reside with the poor. The Samurdhi Development Officer, who is supposed to be a community facilitator, is frequently seen as an extension of local political machinery, distributing benefits along patronage lines (Hettige, 2004). Here, participation is stripped of its empowering core and reduced to a mechanism for receiving a handout, reinforcing dependency rather than breaking it.

The critical evaluation, therefore, reveals that the gap between theory and practice is fundamentally a gap of power. The theory of participation promises a shift in power—from experts and officials to communities. The practice in Sri Lanka often shows how existing power structures—of party politics, class, caste, and gender—swing into action to absorb, deflect, or co-opt that challenge (Hickey & Mohan, 2005).

The difference between success and failure lies not in the blueprint of participation itself, but in whether a project was designed to genuinely transfer power (over decisions, money, and information). For instance, the Community Water Supply and Sanitation Project in parts of the Anuradhapura district, which established legally recognised, gender-inclusive Water User Committees with clear rights and responsibilities, is often cited as a model of sustainable, community-owned infrastructure (Ariyabandu, 2003; World Bank, 2005). In contrast, evaluations of numerous post-tsunami housing schemes revealed that "community consultations" were frequently one-way briefings, with contracts and design decisions controlled by external agencies or local politicians, leading to poorly located, culturally inappropriate, and sometimes abandoned homes (Birkmann et al., 2010; Hyndman, 2007). One scheme in Galle district was famously criticised for building houses on land susceptible to renewed flooding after a tokenistic community engagement process (Silva, 2009).

2. Key social, political and structural barriers that limit genuine community participation

The most formidable barrier is often the political system. In Sri Lanka, development is rarely just about development; it's intensely political. The relationship between citizens and the state is often mediated through a system of patronage. This means benefits—a Samurdhi payment, a tin sheet for a roof, a job on a project—are frequently distributed as rewards for political loyalty, not as universal rights or based on objective need (Hettige, 2004).

This creates a massive conflict for participation. The local official, whether the Grama Niladhari (village officer) or the Samurdhi Development Officer, often wears two hats: one as a civil servant and another as a political party organiser. Their performance might be judged not on how well they facilitated community decision-making, but on how many votes they can secure. As one research report starkly noted, in many villages, "the Samurdhi officer is the *de facto* political mobilizer, making the poverty programme an instrument of the ruling party" (Gunatilaka, 2018, p. 42). In this environment, a truly independent community group that wants to challenge the local MP's project plan or demand accountability is seen not as engaged citizens but as political opponents. Participation,

therefore, gets reduced to showing up at rallies or signing pre-filled forms—a performance of loyalty, not of empowerment.

The Village Development Society (VDS) meeting, meant to be a democratic space, is frequently chaired by the most influential local figure. The microphone (literally and figuratively) is rarely passed to the landless labourer, the young woman from a lower-caste family, or the Tamil plantation worker in the hill country. Their voices are silenced by custom, fear, or politeness. A study of a major rural development project found that “meeting agendas and beneficiary lists were routinely dominated by local notables, bypassing the most vulnerable households who were often unaware of the discussions” (Mosse, 2005, p. 108). For them, participation is a spectator sport. They watch as the benefits—a new tractor, a microloan, a training opportunity—flow to the usual powerful families, reinforcing the very inequalities the poverty programme was supposed to reduce.

Finally, there is the immense, slow-moving wall of the state bureaucracy. Government systems in Sri Lanka have traditionally been top-down and centralised. Officials are trained to follow rules, disburse budgets according to strict guidelines, and report upwards to Colombo. Genuine community participation is messy, slow, and unpredictable. It requires flexibility, patience, and a willingness to share control—qualities that are rarely rewarded in a bureaucratic system.

This creates a fundamental mismatch. A community might identify their most pressing need as clearing a specific irrigation canal. But the district budget for that year might be earmarked only for building new community halls. The officer, bound by his “Annual Work Plan,” cannot redirect the funds, regardless of how compelling the community’s case may be. As a result, the “participation” becomes a fake where communities are simply asked to choose the colour of paint for the pre-approved hall (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Furthermore, the constant transfer of government officers means there is little continuity. Just as a community builds trust with one sympathetic officer, they are transferred, and the process must start again with someone new who may not believe in sharing power.

These three walls—Political Patronage, Social Hierarchy, and Rigid Bureaucracy—rarely stand alone. They reinforce each other. A local politician uses social elites to deliver votes; the bureaucracy follows political directives. This interconnected system is designed for control and distribution, not for empowerment and co-creation.

Identifying these barriers is not an exercise in pessimism. It is the essential first step in any realistic attempt to make participation work. You cannot fix a problem you don’t understand. It tells us that asking “Why isn’t this community participating more?” is the wrong question. The right question is: “What are the powerful systems in this village or district that are actively preventing genuine participation, and how can they be carefully, strategically navigated or reformed?” This shifts the blame from the community (who are often labelled “apathetic”) to the structures that disempower them, which is where the real work of change must begin.

3. Success and failure of the community participatory approach

Participatory approaches, which actively involve community members in the design and implementation of development projects, have been a prominent strategy in Sri Lanka’s efforts to reduce poverty. The outcomes, however, present a mixed picture, demonstrating that success is highly contingent on the depth of engagement, institutional support, and alignment with local contexts. By examining key case studies, can distil critical lessons on what contributes to either transformative change or disappointing failure.

Successes: Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods

Participatory methods have shown remarkable success when they foster genuine ownership and address specific community-identified needs. A flagship example is the Gemi Diriya (“Village Strength”) Community Development and Livelihood Improvement Project, launched in the mid-2000s. This World Bank-supported initiative established village-level community development councils (CDCs) and provided block grants for sub-projects chosen and managed by villagers. Research indicates that in areas where the process was inclusive, it led to tangible improvements in rural infrastructure, such as small-scale irrigation and roads, which directly enhanced agricultural productivity and market access (World Bank, 2011). More importantly, the project built social capital. As noted by a study, it “strengthened community cohesion and local governance capacity,” creating institutions that continued to function beyond the project cycle, thereby contributing to sustained poverty reduction (Dharmadasa & Thibbotuwawa, 2014).

Similarly, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques used in the Uva Province agriculture sector project succeeded by co-designing farming strategies with smallholders. This led to the adoption of more climate-resilient and profitable crops, directly boosting household incomes. The key factor here was the integration of local knowledge with technical expertise, ensuring solutions were appropriate and adopted willingly (Wickramasinghe, 2010).

Failures

Conversely, participatory approaches have failed when community involvement was superficial or when higher-level institutions did not provide adequate support. A critical analysis of several Samurdhi (the national poverty alleviation program) initiatives reveals that, despite a participatory rhetoric, decision-making often remained top-down. Beneficiary selection and project choices were frequently influenced by local political patronage, excluding the most marginalised and undermining the program’s poverty-targeting efficacy (Silva, 2015).

Another common pitfall is the lack of post-project sustainability. A study of community-based water management schemes in the dry zone found that while initial participation in construction was high, the absence of formalised, legally recognised institutions for ongoing maintenance led to rapid deterioration of assets. As Athukorala (2008) argues, “participation without institutional embedding and clear

benefit-sharing mechanisms is a recipe for project collapse." External facilitators often withdrew too quickly, leaving communities without the linkages to government technical services or conflict-resolution mechanisms needed for long-term management.

The Sri Lankan experience underscores that the contribution of participation to poverty elimination is not automatic. Successful cases highlight that genuine empowerment—where communities have real decision-making power over resources—and institutional linkage—connecting grassroots groups to supportive government and market systems—are vital. Failures, in contrast, Limited Information, political co-option, and a neglect of long-term capacity building. Therefore, for participatory approaches to truly contribute to poverty elimination in Sri Lanka, they must move beyond simplistic project delivery mechanisms. They must be designed as processes that democratize development, build resilient local institutions, and intentionally dismantle the underlying social and political barriers that perpetuate poverty.

4. Practical Recommendations for Meaningful Community Participation in Sri Lanka's Poverty Reduction Efforts

Drawing from the mixed outcomes of past initiatives, future poverty reduction efforts in Sri Lanka must move beyond superficial consultation to embed genuine, empowered participation at their core. This requires systemic shifts in how projects are designed, implemented, and sustained. The following practical recommendations aim to make community involvement more meaningful and effective.

Institutionalise Participation from the Outset

Participation must be a non-negotiable, funded component of the project cycle, not an add-on. This means mandating the use of participatory planning and budgeting processes at the *Gram Niladhari* (village officer) division level for all state-led poverty programs. Resources and timelines should allocate dedicated phases for community-led problem identification, priority-setting, and design. As Silva (2015) observed, failure often stemmed from pre-determined project blueprints; reversing this requires a "design-with, not for" mandate from the highest policy levels.

Invest in Sustained Capacity Building, Not One-Off Training

Building the capability of both communities and local officials is critical. This involves:

- For Communities: Ongoing facilitation to develop skills in financial management, project monitoring, and leadership, with a focus on empowering women and marginalised groups.
- For Officials: Re-training frontline government officers to become facilitators and brokers of resources rather than top-down directors. This changes the institutional culture from delivering to enabling (Dharmadasa & Thibbotuwawa, 2014).

Strengthen Downward Accountability and Transparent Governance

To counter political co-option and elite capture, robust transparency mechanisms are essential. Recommendations include:

- Establishing publicly displayed Community Scorecards for all projects, tracking budgets, progress, and beneficiary lists.
- Creating formal community-led social audit committees with the authority to review expenditures and lodge grievances directly with independent oversight bodies at the district level.

Foster Synergistic Linkages with Local Government

Community-based organisations (CBOs) cannot operate in isolation. Meaningful participation requires formalising their role within local governance. Practical steps include:

- Legally recognising effective CBOs (like successful Community Development Councils) as civil society partners of local authorities (*Pradeshiya Sabhas*).
- Creating mandatory consultative forums where these CBOs participate in drafting local development plans and accessing decentralised budgets (Wickramasinghe, 2010).

Adopt a Graduated, Long-Term Exit Strategy for External Agencies

Project collapse often followed the abrupt withdrawal of NGOs or state support. A more effective strategy involves a phased exit over 3-5 years, where external agents gradually shift from direct implementation to a backstopping role. This includes building CBOs' links to permanent market actors, financial institutions, and technical government departments (e.g., Agriculture, Irrigation) for ongoing support, as lacked in earlier water management schemes (Athukorala, 2008).

Utilise Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E)

Shift from external, indicator-driven evaluation to PM&E systems co-developed with communities. This involves defining success metrics that matter to residents (e.g., perceived reduction in hardship, increased social cohesion) alongside traditional data. This not only improves accuracy but also reinforces ownership and allows for real-time adaptive management.

Key findings

1. The Theory-Practice Gap is Fundamentally a Power Gap: While participatory theory emphasises knowledge-sharing and empowerment, implementation often fails to transfer real decision-making power. Successful cases like Gemi Diriya demonstrate that when communities control resources (block grants) and decisions, participation yields sustainable benefits. Conversely, programs like Samurdhi show how political co-option transforms participation into a mechanism for distributing patronage rather than empowerment.

2. Structural Barriers are Systemic and Interconnected: Three primary barriers undermine genuine participation: (1) Political patronage networks that reward loyalty over merit, (2) Social hierarchies enabling elite capture of benefits, and (3) Rigid bureaucratic systems ill-designed for flexible, community-responsive approaches. These barriers reinforce each other, creating a system optimised for control rather than empowerment.
3. Sustainability Depends on Institutional Integration: The contrast between the sustained Community Water User Committees and collapsed water schemes reveals a critical insight: participation without formal institutional linkages fails. Success requires legally recognised community institutions with clear rights, responsibilities, and connections to permanent government technical services and market systems.
4. Process Design Determines Outcomes: The difference between tokenistic consultation and meaningful participation lies in specific design elements: early community involvement in problem identification, transparent governance mechanisms, ongoing capacity building, and participatory monitoring systems. Projects that treated participation as an add-on (like some post-tsunami housing) failed, while those embedding it as the core methodology succeeded.

5. CONCLUSION

The journey of community participation in Sri Lanka's poverty reduction efforts reveals a profound paradox: an approach theoretically aligned with cultural traditions like "Shramadana" has been consistently undermined by the very systems meant to implement it. The evidence demonstrates that participation alone is insufficient—it is the quality and depth of that participation, determined by who holds power over resources and decisions, that dictates success or failure.

The Sri Lankan experience offers a crucial lesson for global poverty elimination efforts: participatory approaches cannot be technical fixes applied atop dysfunctional systems. They must be understood as political processes that intentionally redistribute power. When participation is reduced to a box-ticking exercise within unchanged structures of patronage and bureaucracy, it reinforces the very disempowerment it seeks to alleviate. However, when designed to transfer genuine control—as seen in the most successful cases—it builds the social capital, local ownership, and resilient institutions essential for sustained poverty elimination.

Ultimately, the contribution of community participation to poverty elimination in Sri Lanka will remain limited unless there is a concerted effort to dismantle the three interconnected barriers of political patronage, social hierarchy, and bureaucratic rigidity. This requires more than project-level adjustments; it demands systemic reforms that redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens from one of benefactor and recipient to one of collaborative partners. The blueprint for transformative participation exists in both international theory and local tradition. The future challenge

lies not in designing better participatory projects, but in cultivating the political will and institutional courage to implement them as truly empowering processes. Only then can participation fulfil its promise of not just reducing poverty's symptoms, but addressing its roots in powerlessness and exclusion.

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