

Democratic Accountability of Elected Representatives: Appraisal of the decision making process in local electoral systems

*Thiwankee Wickramasinghe, Dept. of Social Sciences,
Open University of Sri Lanka*

ABSTRACT

The organizational culture dynamics relating to local government institutions in Sri Lanka need to be looked at with the prevailing organizational structure in mind if they are to be seen as publicly responsive, accountable and transparent institutions. Furthermore, the structures need to be rooted in democratic precepts. The present task at hand is to probe as to why power holders behave in a way that negates the culture of democracy within the prevailing system, often marked by irresponsible practices lacking in transparency of public affairs, such as arbitrary decision making, violation of public trust, and absence of public policy at local level. The study, therefore, fills a major lacuna in literature that will enable us to understand the political and organizational system related constraints that create disequilibrium in local governance. The impediments within the system are addressed with a view to pursue qualitative improvements in the culture of democracy at the local level.

KEY WORDS:

Democracy, Accountability, Decision-making process, First-Past-the-Post system, Proportional Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The culture of democratic governance in post independent states is not considered sufficiently pro-people, due to social and political system based constraints. This is due to the fact that perceptions of democratic practices are not firmly developed in the context of the local scenario. These democratic practices are inherited locally as a result of colonial rule and thereafter the political leadership or the citizens have failed to institutionalize democratic practices. Further, during

institutional applications, both politicians and citizens concentrated on their own self rather than the wellbeing of people in constituencies. It is said 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 (Botan & Taylor, 2005).

This study examines perceptions of elected representatives in governance to make a realistic assessment of the prevailing culture. This is done as the local masses in general are not socialized into a culture of governance that holds elected representatives accountable for what they say and do (Bok, 1997). This will first be done with an assessment of the status quo rooted in the pre-democratic or the old culture.

One could argue that pre-democratic practices that created dependent relationships between people and local rulers were inspired by master servant relationships/transactions (Gamlath, 2015). This was in conflict with democratic accountability identified with the present order. Hence, what is at stake is the future of democracy at the local level as what happens at the ground level impacts on the overall system of democratic governance in the country.

2. THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Having established local government institutions in Sri Lanka to strengthen grass roots level people based governance; it is ironic that the core democratic values of elected representatives and institutional accountability of these institutions have been degrading in Sri Lanka. In this context, the study probes into the following major areas:

1. The varied impact of the electoral system on local governance culture.
2. Perceptions of local political representatives on public participation in the decision making process
3. The present viability of the organizational structure of local governance and its impact on public accountability.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent the electoral systems practiced created the foundation required for representative governance and accountability at the local government level?
2. How elected members at local authorities involve key stakeholders in participatory decision making process?
3. What is the scope for public participation in the decision making process; the involvement of local masses in the decision making practices and also the service in the context of receptivity and provision, provided by the existing local government organizational system?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Democracy emerged in ancient Greece and specifically in the city-state of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The word democracy is derived from the Greek words “demos” meaning people and “kratos” meaning power of rule (A Guide for Peer Educators, 2011). Directly translated, democracy, therefore, means ‘rule by the people’, although originally the Greeks used it to mean the poor or the masses (A Guide for Peer Educators, 2011).

According to A Guide for Peer Educators, 2011, democracy is as follows:

A system of rule by the poor and disadvantaged;

A form of government in which the people rule themselves directly and continuously, without the need for professional politicians or public officials;

A society based on equal opportunity and individual merit, rather than hierarchy or privilege;

A system of welfare and redistribution aimed at narrowing social inequalities of decision-making based on the principle of majority rule;

A system of rule that protects the rights and interests of minorities by placing checks upon the power of the majority;

A means of filling public offices through a competitive struggle for the popular vote;

A system of government that serves the interests of the people, regardless of the people's participation in political office.

According to U.S. Department of State, Democracy in Brief (Global Publishing Solutions) democracy is 'a form of government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all adult citizens, directly or indirectly through their freely elected representatives'.

International IDEA (Kemp and Jiminez, 2013: 22) outline what they see as three fundamental pillars of local democracy in the state of local democracy framework:

Citizenship, equal rights and justice – including citizenship at the local level,

Civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights and the rule of law and access to justice. Representative and accountable institutions and processes - elections and Mechanisms of direct democracy at the local level, local legislature, political parties, local executive bodies, customary and traditional institutions. Citizen initiative and participation – active citizen engagement and media.

According to Shah & Shah, local government refers to specific institutions or entities created by national constitutions (Brazil, Denmark, France, India, Italy, Japan, Sweden), by state constitutions (Australia, the United States), by ordinary legislation of a higher level of central government (New Zealand, the United Kingdom, most countries), by provincial

or state legislation (Canada, Pakistan), or by executive order (China) to deliver a range of specified services to a relatively small geographically delineated area. Local governance is a broader concept and is defined as the formulation and execution of collective action at the local level.

Local governance, therefore, includes the diverse objectives of vibrant, living, working, and environmentally preserved self-governing communities. Best practices of local governance are not providing service-delivery to the local masses but providing a range of services as such and also preserving the life and liberty of residents, creating space for democratic participation and civic dialogue, supporting market-led and environmentally sustainable local development, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents.

According to Shah& Shah several writers (Bailey 1999; Dollery and Wallis 2001; Rhodes 1997; Stoker 1999) have recently argued that the presence of a vast network of entities beyond government that are engaged in local services delivery or quality of life issues makes it unrealistic to treat local government as a single entity. Analytical recognition of this broader concept of local governance is critical to developing a framework for local governance that is responsive (doing the right thing—delivering services that are consistent with citizens' preferences or which are citizen focused); responsible (doing the right thing the right way—working better but costing less and benchmarking with the best); and accountable (to citizens, through a rights-based approach).

The core values that are needed to be inherited by these public institutions and which are relevant to this study are the accountability on the part of elected representatives together with consultative process or citizen participation in the decision making process. Accountability exists when there is a relationship where an individual or body, and the performance of tasks or functions by that individual or body, are subject to another's oversight, direction or request that they provide information or justification for their actions (siteresources.worldbank.org). Accordingly, the concept of accountability involves two distinct stages which are answerability and enforcement. Answerability refers to the obligation of the government, its agencies and public officials

to provide information about their decisions and actions and to justify them to the public and those institutions of accountability tasked (siteresources.worldbank.org). Enforcement suggests that the public or the institution responsible for accountability can sanction the offending party or remedy the contravening behavior (siteresources.worldbank.org). As such, different institutions of accountability might be responsible for either or both of these stages. The importance of accountability is identified as the elected representatives, public officials and public bodies ensure that they are performing to their full potential, providing value for money in the provision of public services, instilling confidence in the government and being responsive to the community they are meant to be serving.

The concept of accountability is intrinsically linked to that of representation and representative governance (Peruzzotti, 2011). It is a bond which is built between the elected representatives and the citizenry. One could say that it arises from delegation of power enabled by the electorate to create an institutional framework that ensures responsiveness.

While this delegation of power by the citizenry is temporary and periodic in practice, what is evident is a gap between the represented and the representatives. Accountability mechanisms are setup to regulate and reduce the gap between the representatives and the people (Peruzzotti, 2011).

Local Accountability, as defined by Action Aid publication on Just and Accountability at Local Level (2011), is “Leaders being answerable to the citizens” where “Democracy is about the relationship that leaders have with their citizens while being accountable. Also it notes that “leaders must understand that their power comes from people and not from themselves”. These quotes simplify the fact that the citizens have delegated power to the local leadership to carry out functions with accountability.

Uyangoda describes two types of accountability with regard to local government institutions. Upward accountability refers to the accountability of local government institutions to provincial councils and the Ministry of Local Government of the central government. The downward accountability means

the answerability to citizens. It is through the electoral system that accountability is ensured in Sri Lanka. Voters are of the view that local politicians are unavailable at the electorate after being elected and they have lost faith in them (Uyangoda & De Mel, 2012). And in the recent local government election, the turnover of the voters drastically dropped and it was due to distrust between the elected representatives that has developed throughout the years. Approval of the budget is another way to control the malpractices of the local politicians and in recent times several local authorities failed to gain the approval of the majority at the budget but the outcome did not have any impact on the local citizens. These practices have damaged the trust of the local citizens on the accountability mechanisms.

Local representation and decision making is about providing opportunities for people to have a say on issues that may affect them within their local community (Independent Local Government Review Panel, 2012). This enables the local community to actively participate in issues connected with their well-being and to hold the elected representatives accountable on their decisions and follow up on actions they should pursue. In this context, elected representatives at local level are accountable and answerable on behalf of the citizens and the local masses are held accountable to bear ownership for their well-being.

Accountability and the decision making process between elected representatives and local masses needs to be strengthened with certain characteristics. These characteristics are institutional values, beliefs, aspirations and conduct which are cornerstones of organizational life (Stefanescu & Panzaru, 2009). Legitimate governments are formed through democratically conducted elections, and citizens choose their representatives in line with such values. The electoral process enables the citizens to delegate the task of political decision-making to a smaller set of public representatives. Unfortunately the electoral system has hindered the local masses since the PR system has created further distance between the elected representative and the local masses (Uyangoda & De Mel, 2012).

Further, the study focuses on two main electoral systems practiced at local government level in Sri Lanka. First-Past-

the-Post system was introduced through the Donoughmore Reforms (1931) during colonial rule and this electoral system was practiced since independence until 1978 (Susarithaa, 2012). This 'First-past-the post system' is also known as the winner-takes-all system (faculty.georgetown.edu/kingch/Electoral_Systems.htm). The winner is declared according to the larger number of votes obtained than the other candidates and the candidate need not get a majority in the First-past-the-post system (Thaheer, 2010).

The First-Past-the-Post Electoral system encourages the growth of relatively stable political systems dominated by two major parties and it is practiced in many countries of the Commonwealth. First-past-the post system is criticized as it does not clearly represent the interests of all voters and especially does not represent the interest of the minority as the electoral results become representative of the majority and minority geographic distribution.

Having urged for constitutional reforms by the local activists in 1978, Proportional Representation or the PR system was introduced and it is practiced to date. Under the current system, the country is divided into electoral districts on the basis of population, and political parties present the electorate with a list of candidates for each district. Each voter casts a vote for a party and indicates his/her preference for candidates on that party list. Individual candidates are, therefore, elected according to the number of preference votes they have obtained (CMVE & PAFFREL, 2004). Although minority interest is represented through the PR system, it dilutes the bond between the elected representative and the local masses since the electoral territory is larger and the elected representative's task of serving the masses becomes a challenge. Also, the preferential voting system creates a situation where certain electoral seats are not represented by elected representatives from the ruling party or the opposition party. This occurs as a result of the nominating of candidates by the political party or the independent group. According to electorates, the District Election Commission issues a preferential number in alphabetical order of the candidates name and at the election, local masses vote against the symbol of the political party or the independent group first, and finally to the preferred candidate accordingly. In

this context, electoral representation does not matter as it is the popularity of the candidate that is considered and certain electorates are not represented by the ruling or the opposition party.

5. METHODOLOGY USED: JUSTIFICATION FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS

Ethnographic accounts make sense of in depth public perceptions, portraying the prevailing culture of decision making. They enable us to make sense of ground level realities and ethnographers go beyond reporting events and details of experiences. It provides ‘webs of meaning’, and according to Walcoltt (1996), the researcher probes into what a stranger would have to know in order to understand what is going on within, or what a stranger should know in order to participate in a meaningful way. This approach is also used in other Social Sciences fields as well. Within the field of usability and user-centred design, ethnography is used to support a designer’s deeper understanding of the design problem – including the relevant domain, audience(s), processes, goals and context(s) of use (www.spotless.co.uk/insights/ethnography). The aim of an ethnographic study within a usability project is also to get ‘under the skin’ of a design problem (and all its associated issues). It is hoped that by achieving this, a designer will be able to truly understand the problem and, therefore, design a far better solution. Although anthropological ethnographers often live amongst a group or the society for a year or more, in order to learn about them long-term ‘live and work’ approach to ethnography has not proven popular within the field of usability (www.spotless.co.uk/insights/ethnography). The cost factor is a major concern in long term research engagement and also the interest is different between the anthropologist and usability practitioners. One can also argue that long term live and work concept is rarely required within the field of user-centred design. However, short ethnographic studies can be very useful for user-centred projects (www.spotless.co.uk/insights/ethnography).

Traditionally ethnographic method is used to study culture as a whole and in the context of Communication Studies, researchers study only one aspect of a culture-such as

television when using this method, and attempt to relate it to social identity (Seiter, 2013). According to Angrosina (2007) there are three modes of data collection in ethnography: observation, interviewing and archival review.

It is through key informant interviews of the elected representatives that data is gathered in this ethnography study. Ethnography study enables the researcher to obtain a rich database to investigate further, provides deep insight data and also perceives interviewers view of reality. Ethnography can identify and analyze unexpected issues and in the context of this study probe in to system deficiencies in the previous and current electoral systems. In this context ethnography accounts was the most appropriate method to gather data.

LEVEL OF PROBING AND SAMPLE USED: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

Since March 2015, Ethnographic data was obtained through thirty in-depth-interviews and of them fifteen interviews (15) were conducted with representatives elected through the first-past-the-post system. Other fifteen interviews were conducted with those elected through proportional representation.

It is equally important to study both the electoral systems in order to investigate whether the nature of representation too had an impact on the culture of democratic decision making and democratic accountability. It was a very difficult task to select the sample representing the local politicians elected through the first-past-the-post system since these local politicians were elected prior to 1977 and almost thirty eight years (38) since they were in active politics. Many of them are not among the living or had critical health issues. In the Northern Province many local politicians were assassinated during the civil conflict or had fled to India. The sample of members representing the local politicians elected through the proportional representation system was accessed with relative ease since the PR system is operational even at present.

The Number of Respondents Interviewed - Local Representatives Elected through the First-Past-the-Post System and Proportional Representation (PR) System

Province	No. of interviews conducted With members elected on First-Past-the-Post System	No. of interviews conducted through Proportional Representation System
1. Western Province	02	02
2. Southern Province	02	02
3. Central Province	02	02
4. North Western Province	02	02
5. North Central Province	02	02
6. Uva Province	02	02
7. Sabaragamuwa Province	02	02
8. Northern Province	02	02
9. Eastern Province	02	02

THE RATIONALE BEHIND QUESTIONS RAISED IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS:

The democratic accountability of elected representatives at local government level was probed through four major themes of research focus, namely (a) how could we create a more responsive community of local representatives, (b) the involvement of elected representatives in development initiatives, (c) how policy planning, monitoring and evaluation on development activities go in to action, (d) have existing practices connected with development been ad hoc and what key areas need to be reshaped in order to hold these representatives accountable.

The questions raised within the four key areas are (a) The basis of delegating or assigning tasks for the elected members, (b) The basis of prioritizing development needs, (c) How programmes of action evolved in the case of development projects in the locality, (d) The culture of planning and decision making, (e) The checks and balances exercised in policy planning, implementation and monitoring, (f) The impact of the electoral system in realizing these factors.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

(A) The Basis of Delegation and Assignment of Tasks for Elected Members

The local government system that existed prior to 1981 consisted of Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, Town Councils and Village Committees (Marga Institute, 2011). The members entered these local government institutions through the ward system, elected through the first-past-the-post system. Elected members represented a particular ward territory clearly demarcated and were responsible for handling the needs of local masses in the locality.

Describing his role as an elected member of the Municipal Council of the Western Province from 1973-1977, a former Councilor took the following position on the basis of assigning tasks to members.

“During our time a Municipal Member was confined to a particular Ward with responsibility for matters connected to an area. It was a small area and hence the people and the elected members knew each other well. I knew the exact number of households in my ward. It was 2553. My task was to look in to various matters relating to community welfare matters in the ward which I represented. Specifically, housing and sanitary issues were burning queries in my ward which I had to handle carefully. Unauthorized housing construction was also a nuisance in my ward and I had to prevent the escalating numbers of unauthorized houses and the slums. In order to give leadership to these communities, fifty to hundred houses were taken care of with a leader appointed by the people to prevent unauthorized constructions. Having strategically made people

responsible for their own interests I was able to create a “responsible citizenry” as well as address complex issues connected with slums.”

Local government institutions are the grass root level mechanism which deals with the public services of the locality. The elected member at the local government level is responsible to serve the ward s/he represents. The elected members being the “people’s representatives” needs to have a good sense of the ward that is represented in order to provide public services or for finding solutions to the shortcoming of the area (Community Engagement and Empowerment: A Guide For Councilors, 2010). In this context the bond between the elected member and the local masses was very strong on one hand and the elected member was obliged to serve the people. The elected representative stood by the needs of the locality to improve standards of well-being of the masses.

IMPACT OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM TRANSITION FROM WARD SYSTEM TO DISTRICT LEVEL AND ITS IMPACT ON ACCOUNTABLE LOCAL COMMUNICATION

The local government electoral system was revised in 1981 and the proportional representation system was introduced. The ward system which ensured member accountability with a closer bond with the people was abolished and a district list system was kept in place. Accordingly, elected members of the local council were made accountable to a larger territory representing amalgamated Grama Niladhari Divisions as recommended by the Delimitation Commission (One Text Research Unit, 2013).

The other significant revision introduced through proportional representation was the Preferential Voting system. In this context unlike in the ward system where a single candidate could be nominated by a political party or an independent group for each ward, a number of candidates elected to a particular local authority with the candidates highest preferential was effected (Gunasekera, 2010).

Having revised the electoral system, the role of the elected members also expanded since he/she had to serve the entire district. Describing his role as an elected member of the

Pradeshia Sabha of the North Western Province, and serving as an elected member at present, a member took the following position on assignment of tasks.

“Currently we have to serve the needs of the people representing a large area such as an entire local authority compared to the ward system. The needs of the people from one Grama Sevaka Division to another differ. We are representatives of the Finance, Housing & Community Development, Technical and Environment Committees of the Council where we discuss and implement decisions on behalf of the local community.

Elected members are given a financial allocation for development purposes on an annual basis. Currently we are unable to meet the requirements of the entire local authority due to insufficient funds and due to prioritizing factors. Unfortunately as elected members we also face a huge challenge to cater to a large local community. Failing in this matter, we become political victims at the next election.

Further, due to the electoral system certain areas are not represented by the elected members and needs of the local masses are also not fulfilled”

Another segment of the population affected is the downtrodden. Having introduced the preferential vote system within a local authority, there are certain areas where the elected members from the ruling party or the opposition are not represented. In this context elected representatives cater to a community with whom they interact due to subjective reasons rather than serving the entire community.

Currently the local government system has come under severe criticism due to the fact that the system had created a distance between the elected members and the local masses (International IDEA Handbook of Electoral System Design, 2004). The electoral system is under review and the expected reforms need to ideally focus on member accountability to particular wards of the community. This is in line with democratic principles making way for a local government organizational culture which stresses on empowered masses.

(B) The Basis of Prioritizing Development Needs

Prioritizing of development needs is influenced by the decision making culture of the local government. The key actors in this decision making process are the elected members, the administration and the local masses. It is vital to discuss the involvement of these key actors in prioritizing the development needs.

In order to be actively involved in local affairs, the local masses require forming citizen organizations since it will lead towards making their presence felt in “Putting People First” (Working group report on Citizen Engagement with local Government, United Kingdom, 2014).

Sri Lankan citizen participation prior to 1981 was organized through religious institutions or community based societies by looking in to issues connected with social welfare. . The “public space” enabled the local citizens to actively contribute towards their wellbeing. The following views explicitly elaborate these realities.

The prioritizing of development needs had taken place in consultation with the local masses as stated by an elected member of the Urban Council of the Central Province during 1958. As stated by him,

“Development exigencies were prioritized on the basis of the needs of the ward. It was the people who came to us with shortcomings of the ward or the improvements they needed. We were then able to identify their needs since we belonged to that locality.”

It is only through active citizen engagement that the needs of the local masses can be prioritized since elected members may have personal agendas in deciding on the development projects in order to gain personal benefits. prioritizing of development projects needs to occur in consultation with local masses since local government institutions need to serve the public and promote the well-being and quality of life among the public (People & Participation, 2005).

The following narratives reflect the basis of prioritizing the development needs and the factors that influence such initiatives in the current context. According to views expressed by an elected member of the Municipal Council in the North Western Province:

“We prioritize our development needs at Council meetings and the basis of decision making depends on public requests or appeals, commitment or the interest on the part of elected members on their essential requirements for the locality. Here, the most vital factor is the availability of funds. All members collectively agree or support on such matters as it is in the best interest of local masses.”

The narratives clearly indicate one approach which is identified as a collective action on the part of the local masses and the elected members on prioritizing development needs without being unequal.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AWAKENED CITIZENRY: THE CULTURE OF PROTESTS

In the present context “Sathyagraha” or “Protest” organized by the local community is visible as a routine activity as development needs are not in line with needs of local masses. Many of these protests carry the theme of not providing basic infrastructure facilities such as roads and bridges, and also issues connected with school and health facilities etc. The only option that is left to the local community is to resolve these issues by pressurizing the elected members to prioritize needs through non-violent protests.

According to views expressed by an elected member of the Municipal Council in the North Western Province:

“The Villagers informed the elected members and the local authority to allocate money to construct a road which leads to the temple. Although there was public concern over this matter for several years nothing has happened. Private roads which lead to supporters premises of elected members representing the ruling party were repaired although they were not public concerned. It was the public money used for these private matters”

Although the arbitrary decision making culture is rampant in the current context of prioritizing development needs, there are system deficiencies that were evident in the process. Especially the electoral system leads to an unequal distribution of elected members developing unhealthy democratic practices such as prioritizing needs to appease special interest groups (International IDEA Handbook OF Electoral System Design, 2004). This leads to a situation where a particular local community is deprived of their needs and a blind eye is turned by the elected members.

A proper system or model needs to be adopted by the elected members to decide development needs in consultation with the local community to make sense of efficient and accountable service delivery.

C) How Programmes of Action Evolved in the Case of Development Projects in the Locality

Local development planning is a vital process that enables public representatives to control as well as shape the future of the local community. It is a road map which provides information on a course of action by elected members for the local masses at the time of shaping their desired future (Local Development Plan and Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation: Structure and Methodology, 2004).

Local development planning is a proactive measure where strategic thinking, planning and in identifying the kind of things a community should do in order to achieve its desired goals.

It is also a document where elected members are held accountable for work carried out in the locality with effective utilization of scarce resources.

As stated by another elected member of the Urban Council of the Central Province during 1958:

“In order to enlighten local masses there were forums set up at Peradeniya University where expertise in different fields held discussions with local masses. They were not only open to the expertise but also considered

as an opportunity for different groups of people to share experiences with the society. These discussions exposed the local masses of active involvements in affairs connected with the locality. Local masses organized “*Sharmadana*¹” also to facilitate the development initiatives at different areas.”

These views indicate a participatory approach in the decision making process practiced prior to 1978. Citizen engagement at the local government contributes towards sharing of responsibilities rather than elected members deciding on issues in an arbitrarily basis.

The scope to establish the democratic space is widened once the public feels that their role in the decision making process is recognized. In order to obtain effective public participation local citizens needs to be well informed about such spaces. (Marzuki, 2015). Citizen participation contributes towards *political pluralism*² since views of different sectors of the society facilitates the decision making process.

The local government institution itself initiated public participation forums such as “Community Development Committees” and at the village level “Village Development Committees”. They were set up and the media such as newspapers organized “Readers Societies” which were very popular among local masses. It was the “Dawasa Newspaper³” published by M.D. Gunasena that initiated readers societies to gather the local masses.

Although these public participatory mechanisms were active in gearing the development projects prior to 1981 it is questionable whether these systems were institutionalized since the existing system introduced in 1981 did not reflect a dynamic and accountable culture among members. The narratives below are culturally reflective.

¹Sharmadana - a way of sharing of one’s time, thought and energy for the welfare of all.

²Political Pluralism - recognition and affirmation of diversity within a political body, which permits the peaceful coexistence of different interests, convictions and lifestyles.

³.Dawasa Newspaper –A Sinhalese national newspaper circulated during 1960’s

The following views were expressed by an elected member of the Pradeshiya Sabha in the North Western Province:

“All development actions are evolved through the decisions reached at various committees and finally approved at the Council. And also the elected members represent these Committees. Public requests are accommodated by these committees and development programmes are evolved through this process.”

It is essential to involve all stakeholders in deciding on the development initiatives and to place a procedural action plan across all local authorities island wide since all stakeholders become recipients of the best practices (Aliff, 2011). Elected members need to focus on the local development plan and design initiatives to achieve best outcomes beneficial to stakeholders at the local government level.

D) The Culture of Planning and Decision Making

The culture of planning and decision making should be inspired by a collaborative approach considering key stakeholder needs. A top down approach distance key stakeholders from the decision making process since the available space for meaningful engagement becomes very limited (Pannilage, 2015). The Sri Lankan experience based on early autocratic and feudal influences reflects an elitist top down approach in the early period of institutional development. Having inherited such a structure the culture of decision making at the local government level remains the same with general contempt for public involvement.

What is stated below portrays a culture of arbitrary decision making by the Mayor based on the discretion enjoyed on development projects, and the approach taken by the elected representatives in this regard. As stated by an elected Opposition member of the Municipal Council in the Southern Province during 1969:

“I got a raw deal from the Mayor. All proposals of the Council were approved at the discretion of the Mayor. My proposals were turned down frequently. I had to seek other avenues of serving my electorate and I was able to

get the assistance of a relative of mine who was a Parliamentarian at that time. He was able to provide some financial assistance through the allocation given to him from the central government. The Mayor had no control over outside financial grants, if not I would have been bestowed a raw deal”

On one side this shows the arbitrary manner in which the Mayor considered the issues of the opposition member, and behaved in an autocratic manner against the interests of the people while on the other hand the opposition member was assertive enough to use his position strategically to ensure justice.

The elitist top down approach in the culture of planning and decision making had significantly changed towards the end of the 20th century in Sri Lankan local government level. The revised electoral system indicates that the decision making process at the local level has been influenced by the ruling party members of the Council as well as by the governing political party at the central level.

As stated by an elected member of the Pradeshiya Sabha in the North Western Province:

“The Chairman of the Pradeshiya Sabha has the power and authority to influence the decision making process. The central government influences the lower tier of governance and the head of the Council along with the ruling party members to carry out what they should do without getting involved in conflicts with the central government as it has certain adverse effects.

The above narrative clearly indicates the culture of decision making process practiced currently and it is ironic that elected members tend to forget that they are elected to represent local masses and the decisions taken should benefit the people at large. The elitist approach prior to 1981 indicates adverse consequences in the planning process due to the political culture and also due to the autocratic ruling of the Council. The arbitrary decision making process hinders the development of the area at the end, with the overall well-being of whole masses threatened.

(E) The Checks and Balances Exercised in Policy Planning, Implementation and Monitoring

Checks and balances ensures a fair balance between different bodies of an organization especially in the decision making process. Checks and balances also ensure that each organ keeps within its mandated functions (Stewart, 2015). It is an essential ingredient of democratic government and it is applicable to the other tiers of government as well.

The political or the administrative body at the local government level cannot override the power or make arbitrary decisions. Once the local masses become a part of such fora it enables to have a fair balance in the decision making process (Public Participation in Government Decision-making: Better Practice Guide, 2015). The following views were expressed by an elected Opposition member of a Municipality of the Southern Province in 1969.

“The Municipal Ordinance is a perfect piece of legislation. It has very clearly stated procedures and we only had to act accordingly. We happened to work very closely with the administration and they too maintained the same quality of relationship. We had never gone in to any conflict. Even when Government Auditors queried our actions, we never interfered or pressurized officers of the Auditor General Department.

Even actions of the Mayor were queried by Auditors and it proved the fair checks and balances that were in place to ensure accountability.”

The above narrative reflects the manner in which the political and the administrative bodies functioned in the past and these checks and balances had a direct influence in the planning, monitoring and evaluation process of the local initiatives.

It is also equally important to probe to what extent the checks and balances were exercised in policy planning, monitoring and evaluation processes and the following views were expressed by an elected member of the Municipal Council of the Sabaragamuwa Province in 1964.

“Local masses communicated their needs to elected representatives in different fora and Technical officers were involved in planning and evaluation processes of projects with elected members. The Local Government Ministry was finally involved in the audit, where the evaluation and monitoring processes of projects too, took place.”

The views expressed above indicate the way in which checks and balances were exercised in policy planning and monitoring and evaluation processes. However, since these practices are not formalized across all local government authorities as the involvement of elected members and public officers at the local government level; local masses and the involvement of the central government are vital in this aspect.

The views expressed on checks and balances executed in policy planning, implementation and monitoring in the existing system by the elected members of Municipal Councils in the North Central Province are as follows:

“We discussed matters relating to development projects at the Council level with public officials and regulated these activities with the assistance of Municipal Commissioner, Chief Engineer and Technical Officers. All activities were finally audited by internal and government audit.”

These views indicate the lack of public involvement in policy planning, implementation and monitoring process in the current system which needs to be addressed since local masses are considered to be key stakeholder at the local government level. The political culture of the country marked by a sense of arbitrariness is reflected at every level of governance with a power struggle between the influential and conflicting forces.

It is not only the policy planning and implementation sectors that needs to go forward in a transparent and accountable manner but also the monitoring mechanism which needs to be carefully handled since public funds are used by the politicians and administrators on behalf of the local masses.

(I) The Impact of the Electoral System in Realizing Identified Factors

It is not only the democratic process which strongly establishes the decision making process but the electoral system influences the many issues connected with decision making. In accordance with the electoral system practiced prior to 1981 in the Sri Lankan local government system First-Past-The-Post System for Ward representation, the candidate who obtained the majority of votes in the respective ward was elected as the member of the council (Edirisinghe & Selvakumaran, 1990). Certain scholars argue that the First-Past-The-Post System does not represent the minority interests of people although the elected member is the winner, once the votes of the other candidates who lost are calculated it is more than the votes obtained by the elected member (faculty.georgetown.edu/kingch/Electoral_Systems.htm).

And also with only one representative per electoral district, voters have greater clarity of representation and they have no doubt who is directly charged with accounting for their interests (Local Government Discretion and Accountability: A Diagnostic Framework for Local Governance, Social Development Department, World Bank, United States of America, Paper No.113/July 2008).

The candidates profile was not alien to the local masses and the candidates did not spend exorbitantly for the campaign. It was house to house canvassing and a limited number of meetings was organized by the members in the respective wards on behalf of candidates whom they promoted.

Candidates who were very close associates of the local masses were at an advantage and the financial status of candidates was immaterial as stated by an elected member of the Village Council of the Southern Province during 1960-1965

“I had to contest with a wealthy person who was my opponent. I was not wealthy, but associated with the people of my ward contributing towards welfare activities in the locality. Unlike in the present scenario money was not a deciding factor at elections at that time and I was able to win but I won the election proving my case.”

Following views were expressed concerning proportional representation by an elected member of the Pradeshiya Sabha in the Eastern Province:

“The preferential voting systems in proportional representation do have several negative aspects especially going against best practices of the democracy. Financial stability becomes a deciding factor irrespective of commitment and skills of the candidate in local politics. Even within the same party an unsound competition is created in order to be elected and also, certain divisions within the locality are not represented by elected members from the ruling party or the opposition.”

The electoral system practiced in the past had a positive impact on the local masses since the best choices were made by the masses of the ward itself, compared to the proportional representation system where the candidates need to run the campaign in a much larger territory and elected members do not represent all divisions.

Unfortunately in the current electoral system a candidate requires to obtain a large number of preferential votes and they need to spend lavishly. The financial capacity of the candidate has become the key qualification of becoming elected and unlike in the past the service as a social worker in the ward is no more a valid qualification to be elected (CMVE & PAFFREL, 2004). The losers in this game are not only local masses but the most deserving and committed persons in the field of politics. They are normally discouraged to contest at local elections due to financial constraints and which should not be a factor at all.

7. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Having discussed the decision making process by the elected members at local government level elected through both systems, there are several deficiencies in the past as well as in the present system which hinder the accountability of the elected members.

The main deficiency identified in the First-past-the post system in the Sri Lankan context was that it did not reflect

minority interests well, as it lacked fair representation. Although minority interest is represented through the proportional representation system, the district electoral system had delinked the bond between elected representatives and the local masses. This has led to an unhealthy political culture. Furthermore, the “bonus seat” dilutes the intention of proportional representation.

The narratives reveal that in order to hold elected members accountable to the electorate or the ward, it has to be a defined territory which is a manageable area to serve the local masses efficiently and this leads to widen the democratic space for citizen participation. Once the citizen participation is active, local masses become a strong stakeholder in the decision making process and the development needs are prioritized in consultation with the masses of the respective locality. In this context, arbitrary decision making on the part of elected members becomes minimized and proper checks and balances are placed in the policy planning process. These structural reforms are very much interconnected and it enables the local government organization culture to practice in a democratic manner.

The current local government organizational culture lacks systematic procedures and structures to hold elected members accountable for their decisions or actions. Accountable mechanisms with active civic engagement need to be placed to establish a healthy organizational culture at local government level. According to narratives it is vital to empower local leadership prior to being elected as it enables them to become strong leaders than being influenced unnecessarily by autocratic mindsets. Empowerment of local leadership towards democratic benchmarks can be achieved through continuous processes handled jointly by the Local Government Ministry and the central government. Once the democratic culture becomes part of the working culture of the elected members, it is easy to make sense of creating the democratic space for stakeholders involved, to engage in the decision making process.

The deficiencies in the current electoral system also need to be addressed since these are system deficiencies that create unhealthy democratic practices. Electoral reforms at the local

government level are discussed currently and views expressed by concerned parties reveal that a mixed system is more suitable at the local government level. Reformists have to be mindful that both electoral systems were tried and tested previously and had failed in the past and unless it is re-introduced with positive modifications taking in to consideration how to overcome the challenges which hinder democratic practices, it will not be the best alternative to cure ailments that exist at the local level at present.

REFERENCES

- Aliff, S.M. (2011). Role of Local Governance in Building Democracy: A Study of Akkaraipattu Municipal Council of Sri Lanka: *The Journal of African & Asian Local Government Studies*, 2 (1), 32-47.
- Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research*. United Kingdom: Sage Publication,
- Botan, C. H. and Taylor, M. (2005). Role of Trust in Channels of Strategic Communication for Building Civil Society: *Journal of Communication*, 55:4, 685-702.
- Bok, D. (1997). *Measuring the Performance of Government: in Why People Don't Trust Government?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Charles, K. (2000). *Electoral Systems*. http://faculty.georgetown.edu/kingch/Electoral_Systems.htm
- Concepts and Principles of Democratic governance and Accountability :A Guide for Peer Educators. (2011). Uganda: Konrad Adenauer-Stiftung.
- Edirisinghe, R. and Selvakumaran, N.(1990). Constitutional Changes in Sri Lanka since Independence: *Sri Lanka J. S. S*, 1990-3 (1&2), 79-103
- From Dialogue to Action: Recommendation and Strategies for Electoral Reforms in Sri Lanka. (2004) Sri Lanka: Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) & Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV).
- Gamlath, D. & Shantha Kumara, K. B. G. (2015). Social Changes in Local Administration in Pre and Post Independence:*Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* ,3(2),36-54.
- Gunaserkera, S. (2010, April 04). Proportional Representation System that Killed Democracy in Sri Lanka. Retrieved from <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items>
- International Governance Team (2011). *Accountability-Quality & Equality in Public Service Provision*. South Africa: Action Aid.
- International IDEA Handbook OF Electoral System Design. (2004). Sweden
- Local Development Plan and Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation: Structure and Methodology. (2004). United States of America
- Local Government Discretion and Accountability: A Diagnostic Framework for Local Governance.(2008). World Bank, United States of America: Social Development Department - Paper No.113/July 2008.
- Local Representation & Decision Making. (2012) Independent Local Government Review Panel: Australia.
- Marzuki, A. (2015) Challenges in the Public Participation and Decision Making Process:*Sociologiya. I Prostor*, 533:201(1), 21-39.

- Overview of the Local Government System: Towards Participatory Democracy in Sri Lankan Society. (2011). Sri Lanka, Marga Institute,
- Pannilage, U. (2015) Excluding the Worthy: The need of Marginalized Groups in the Decision Making Process :Social Sciences and Humanities Review, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka, 2(2),86-98.
- People & Participation. (2005). United Kingdom: Involve.
- Peruzzotti, E. (2011) Accountability through Public Opinion from Inertia to Public Action, Working of Accountability: Contexts Conditions, Washington, D.C: The World Bank.
- Public Participation in Government Decision-making: Better Practice Guide. (2015). Melbourne: Victorian Auditor-General's Office.
- Representative Democracy Electoral Reforms in Sri Lanka. (2013). Sri Lanka: One Text Research Unit,
- Seiter, E. Borchers H. Kreutzner, G. and Warth, E.M. (2013). Remote control: Television, audiences, and cultural power. United Kingdom: Routledge Publication.
- Shah, A and Shah, S.(2007). The Vision of Local Government and the Evolving roles of Local Government. siteresources.worldbank.org
- Stefanescu, C. and Panzaru, S. (2009). Specific Features of the Organizational Culture of the Local Government: Review of General Management, 10(2), 89-96.
- Susarithaa, S. (2012). Selecting an Electoral System to Enhance Representative Democracy and to Respond to Challenges in Sustainable Communities Proportional Representation First-Past-the- Post or Mixed System Sri Lankan Perspective, Paper presented at Annual Research Symposium Law Faculty, University of Colombo.
- Walker, Andy. (2010). Ethnography-When and How to Use. www.spotless.co.uk/insights/ethnography
- Wolcoltt, H.F. (1985). On Ethnographic Intent :Educational Administration Quarterly, Summer. 21, 187-203.
- Working Group Report on Citizen Engagement with Local Government. (2014). United Kingdom: Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government.
- Visvalingam, A.C.(2006, September 12) Why we need to improve our electoral system: *The Island Newspaper*, <http://www.island.lk/2006/09/12/features3.html>.

Web Sites

siteresources.worldbank.org
www.spotless.co.uk/insights/ethnography