

# **NGOs as Partners of Local Development and Governance: The Sri Lankan Experience**

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*During seven decades of independence, Sri Lankan politics have been characterized by strong central government despite various initiatives to decentralize power to local levels. Hence, local government has little capacity to respond to local development needs. The increase in NGO activity following the tsunami of 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009 provides an opportunity to examine the potential of NGOs as partners with local government in promoting local development. Drawing on research into the views of national, provincial and local political representatives and administrative officials, NGO officials and representatives of community-based organizations in the southern and eastern provinces, this paper examines instances of the NGO involvement addressing local development and governance in Sri Lanka. It examines the impact of a strong central government on NGOs working at the local level, and the conditions for NGOs to be effective in promoting local development. It identifies instances where NGOs have played a key role as intermediaries between local government and local communities as they have promoted local development.*

*Keywords: NGO, local government, development, communities, Sri Lanka*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent Sri Lankan political history is characterized by the development of a strong central government (Perera, 2012) at the expense of provincial and local government. In part, this reflects problems with nationalist political forces, internal conflict, two youth insurrections, and political disorder over the seven decades since independence in 1948. The prolonged civil war which was an extension of long-lasting ethnic conflict has been an important driver of this tendency towards centralization (Uyangoda, 2010). Within this environment, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important actors at the local level, and since the 1970s have played a key role in raising issues of human rights and in supporting community-led development. The ongoing tendency towards centralization, however, presents real challenges to the effectiveness of NGOs.

Government responses to NGOs have varied over the past 50 years. Typically, governments have welcomed foreign funds for large scale development projects, but NGO involvement in human rights and social justice issues has been criticized by successive governments and portrayed as inappropriately lending support to the separatist armed groups (Uyangoda, 1995). This tension is particularly evident in situations where NGOs have been involved in advocacy for human rights (Jayawardena, 1995). Additionally, where NGO work has involved implementing government sanctioned agendas, relationships have been smooth, but when NGOs are perceived as pursuing a more independent agenda, constructive relations have tended to disintegrate (Akurugoda, et al., 2017). When this has happened, the potential benefits from positive government-NGO relations have been lost, and this has been particularly costly in situations where NGO activities involved supporting the provision of essential services.

The relationship between the Sri Lankan government and NGOs is, therefore, complex and reflects tensions identified elsewhere (Banks, et al., 2105). Following the tsunami of 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009, foreign aid and NGO support flowed into Sri Lanka to assist recovery and reconstruction. Central government assumed full control of aid distribution and management, and it also began to express criticism of NGOs for malpractice and the misuse of aid, damaging the public perceptions of NGOs (Walton, 2008, p. 142). Restrictions such as complicated registration systems and strict government regulations on fund utilization were subsequently imposed on the activities of NGOs, and much of the foreign aid and support began to be directed towards centrally-initiated large scale projects, with little consideration for local needs (AEI, 2010). Despite these restrictions, NGOs went on to play a critical role in the post-tsunami and post-war period (see Ministry of Provincial Councils, 2007; Ministry of Local Government, 2011), particularly in supporting local government and local communities in a way that has promoted greater local control over development.

It is against this background that this paper examines NGO activity in Sri Lanka during the post-tsunami and post-war era, particularly their contribution to the effective support of local development and governance. In particular, the paper seeks to identify the conditions for that success. It asks: how are NGOs linked to improving local governance and encouraging people's participation in the local development? What is the impact of a strong central government on NGO effectiveness in promoting local development? And what characterizes NGO activity that encourages community participation in local government in the pursuit of local development? In addressing these questions, the paper offers a counter perspective to analyses that question the benefits of NGO activity in Sri Lanka. As Kuruppu and Lodhia (2019) observe, 'foreign' influence in Sri Lanka by NGOs has long been criticized, particularly if it is seen to subjugate the local experience. The increase in the presence of NGOs following the tsunami and the end of the civil war provides an opportunity to re-examine these conclusions and rethink about the nature of NGO engagement, especially, at the local level. The paper extends previous work (Akurugoda, et al., 2017) that examined nationalist criticisms about NGOs and foreign donors in Sri Lanka. Here, the focus is on comparing centrally-led and locally-led NGO projects in Sri Lanka by examining the activities of selected foreign originated and funded development NGOs working with local governments. Before reporting on those activities, the paper begins by reviewing debates about the potential of NGOs to contribute to local development and governance in Sri Lanka. It goes on to outline the research approach adopted in this study and present the findings related to centrally and locally-led NGO projects.

## **NGOS AND DEVELOPMENT: CRITIQUES**

The Sri Lankan government has had a difficult relationship with NGOs over the past 30 years. There has been a tendency for NGOs involved in humanitarian aid to be portrayed as 'imperial' or 'foreign' agents and a threat to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security of the country (Uyangoda, 1995; Jayawardena, 1995). According to Uyangoda (1995, p. 6), this 'foreign agent' argument is linked to an ideology of xenophobia, propagated by a section of Sri Lankans who, despite their own connections with foreign organizations, business enterprises and individuals, appear to believe that 'foreign links' endanger national security. The argument was prominent during the civil war when the foreign funding of NGO peace work came under harsh criticism. Orjuela (2005, p. 7), for example, observes that the most vociferous

opposition to NGO promotion of peace processes came from Sinhala nationalist groups. Wickramasinghe (2001, pp. 40-41) also notes that, the militant Sinhala groups vilified 'foreign-funded NGOs' for undermining the morale of the troops and pursuing 'selfish aims' instead of thinking of the 'good of the nation'. Criticism of human rights-based NGOs maintained that they endangered national security (Uyangoda, 1995, pp. 7-8). The nationalist criticisms were essentially linked to the ethnic conflict, and included allegations that some NGOs were engaged in activities that were 'inimical to the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka,' 'detrimental to the national and social wellbeing of the country' and adversely affected 'national security' (Walton, 2008, p. 143). This resulted in damaging the public perceptions of NGOs (Walton, 2008, p. 142).

Jayawardena (1995, p. 10) has explained that in situations of war people tend to become emotional and fearful, providing an occasion for nationalists to rise against 'foreign conspiracies' and local 'treason.' Uyangoda (1995, p. 8) notes, though, that: '[i]t is sheer nonsense to suggest that these NGOs have been challenging the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan state.' If one really wanted to demonize, terrorize and silence one's enemy, the easiest way was to suggest collusion with the LTTE (Uyangoda, 1995, p. 8) which at the time was fighting for a separate state within Sri Lanka.

Clearly, there was huge government suppression of NGOs during the post-tsunami and post-war situations. This reflected a major attempt by government to grab full control of the foreign aid distribution and management process, and to direct NGOs towards fulfilling its agendas. This was a grasp by the government for control over foreign aid and assistance (Walton, 2008, p. 142) and involved imposing strict regulations on NGO registration and activities. With regard to post-war issues, the NGO Secretariat<sup>1</sup> was placed under the purview of the Ministry of Defence and was subject to a series of obscure and complex procedures that discouraged their activity in the war-affected areas. The NGO Secretariat paid particular attention to organizations that worked to address human rights and humanitarian concerns (Sumanthiran, 2011), and access was denied to the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in the war-affected areas by the Sri Lankan military forces.

The misuse of funds and resources has been, therefore, a common criticism levelled against NGOs. This was why the Presidential Commission of Inquiry in Respect of NGOs Functioning in Sri Lanka (NGO Commission) was appointed in 1990, this being to investigate the concern that some of the funds received from foreign sources, as well as those generated locally, were being misappropriated and/or used for activities prejudicial to national security, public order and/or economic interests and, in addition, for activities detrimental to the maintenance of ethnic, religious and cultural harmony among the people (Walton, 2008, p. 142). Such criticisms, however, have been profoundly connected with the nationalist views and perceptions of threat against Sri Lanka's sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security. NGOs have also been criticized as agents of government or of private interests, and this line of argument undermines the perception that they act as independent development partners (Banks, et al., 2015).

## **THE PROMISE OF NGOS AND DEVELOPMENT**

Arguments in support of NGOs emphasize the economic, social, and technical capacities they bring to problems in development contexts (Pentland, 1991, p. 244). This is based on a recognition that a wide range of problems outstrip the capacities of most governments, and in these situations the capacity of NGOs to solve such problems is significant. Many NGOs bring resources such as expert information, finances, decision making capacity, popular support or legitimacy, enforcement capabilities, and diplomatic skills (Pentland, 1991, p. 244). They are, thus, recognized as able to support local innovation and development by introducing new technology and providing services in ways that are an improvement on those provided by government agencies (Fisher 2003, p. 48). This is particularly in situations where governments lack resources and specific expertise (Ripinsky & Bossche, 2007, p. 11). Access to additional resources, then, means that in development contexts NGOs are perceived as able to do things that national governments cannot or would not do (Drabek, 1987, p. xiii), and they are thus often regarded as the answer to the limitations of the state, providing services for local communities when government assistance is not

forthcoming or appropriate (Willis, 2005, pp. 98-100). In these contexts, NGOs tend to be valued largely because of the additional flows of development capital they attract.

Governments in many countries do not promote local participation and related to this is a neglect of local development needs. This is a space where NGOs can contribute, and act as a bridge between grassroots communities, local government and central government. In such contexts, NGOs act as intermediaries by building bridges between local grassroots organizations and the government at local and national levels, and they contribute to development in local contexts (Banks, et al., 2015). NGOs have also been found as able to carry out local level development and service provision with greater efficiency and more know-how than government agencies (Kloos, 1999, pp. 25-26). They are recognized in these situations, then, as being able to act as facilitators or catalysts of local development (Drabek, 1987, p. x). There is a growing interest in the rural development field in the role of NGOs as innovators which introduce new technologies and approaches to working with the poor (Lewis, 2005, p. 202).

One of the earliest examples of the pro-NGO case is Michael Cernea's report, written in 1988 for the World Bank, which cites the principal contribution as that of strengthening local organizational capacity. He notes that in some instances NGOs have the potential to approach development in a way that places priority on organizing people, and that when this occurs, actions embody a philosophy that recognizes their centrality to development alongside the importance of self-organization (as cited in Lewis, 2001, p. 77).

NGOs have, therefore, been recognized as having potential to work in ways that promote the organization of people to make better use of local productive resources, create new resources and services, promote equity, alleviate poverty and influence government actions towards these same objectives, while establishing new institutional frameworks to sustain people-centred development (Lewis, 2001, p. 77). They have an advantage over government agencies in achieving these outcomes for the following reasons:

- 1) They are able to reach the poor in remote areas where government assistance does not exist or is ineffective;
- 2) They operate at a lower cost due to the voluntary nature of their activities and lower technological overheads;
- 3) They promote local participation by working with community groups as partners emphasizing self-help initiatives and local control of programmes (Lewis, 2001, p. 77).

The dominant political coalitions in many Asian, African and Latin American countries continue to exclude the public from decision making (Fisher, 2003, p. 30) and, related to this, neglect their development needs, especially at the local level. These governments have never been able to address fully the multiple needs of citizens and have not encouraged people's participation in policy processes. This failure has opened up unprecedented opportunities for NGOs to radically alter the way people are governed (Fisher, 2003, p. 30). NGOs can bridge, therefore, the gap between what governments do and what society needs or expects (Seffrin, 2013). They have been found to expand the democratic scope of decision making processes, bringing contextually relevant, locally sourced knowledge to the policy table, making it more representative and inclusive, and thus increasing the chances of success (Fitzduff & Church, 2004, pp. 13-14). NGOs can offer ordinary people an opportunity to participate in decisions and represent local interests (Bratton, 1989, p. 585). Other than their primary contribution to improve the delivery of economic and social services to poor populations, NGOs have an important contribution to make to the policy process where the content of development policies is shaped and decided (Bratton, 1990, p. 116). NGOs are seen as appropriate actors to encourage people's participation and to build networks among various policy actors at the local level (see Fernandez, 1987). Furthermore, NGOs are seen as working effectively with local communities through organizing and service delivery and in developing innovative solutions to local problems (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006, pp. 666-667), suggesting that NGOs are the most appropriate actors to address development needs at the local level.

## **RESEARCH FOCUS**

Notwithstanding this potential to support development, a government's response to NGOs is a decisive factor in determining whether these benefits are obtained. Government-NGO relations have been found to

be most constructive where a confident and capable government with people-centred policies meets an NGO that works to pursue mainstream development programmes. These relations are more controversial where a weak and defensive government with a limited power base meets an NGO that seeks to promote community mobilization (Bratton, 1989, p. 585), giving rise to questions as to the consequences when an authoritative government seeks to control the operations, finances and activities of NGOs. By aligning more closely with governments, NGOs risk being drawn away from a grassroots orientation (Banks, et al., 2015, p. 712). This leads to further questions about whether government institutions determine the work of NGOs; the extent and influence of government restrictions on the work of NGOs; and whether government agendas undermine NGO efforts to address local development.

There is a body of evidence that NGOs contribute to promoting development at the local level (Akurugoda, 2018), but questions remain about the conditions for effective engagement: how are NGOs linked to improving local governance and encouraging people's participation in the local development; what is the impact of a strong central government on NGO effectiveness in promoting local development; and how might NGOs encourage community participation, and support local government in promotion of local development. This study examines these questions against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan political context with its history of highly centralized power and weak forms of local government with little capacity to determine policy to bring about local development.

## **GOVERNMENT-NGO LINKS IN SRI LANKA: COLLABORATIONS AND DISSATISFACTIONS**

The relationship between the Sri Lankan government and NGOs has deteriorated over time, with the government showing indifference towards NGOs in the 1970s, emerging ambivalence in the 1980s, and open confrontation in the early 1990s (Wickramasinghe, 2001, p. 84). More recently, NGOs have been seen as a threat to governments, and governments in response have sought to control and curb their activities (Kloos, 1999, p. 36). Today, the role of NGOs in Sri Lanka has to be understood in the context of a transformed political outlook on the part of governments and a change in attitude to developmental activities (Perera, 1998, p. 4). Wickramasinghe (2001, p. 101) argues that the government's links with NGOs have not grown out of any development vision, but have been based more on achieving certain political objectives.

There have been examples of effective collaboration between the government and NGOs, and these include the Gramodaya Mandala system, the Janasaviya programme and the 2002 peace negotiations. In the 1980s, the Gramodaya Mandalas<sup>2</sup> provided opportunities for NGOs to be involved in local level planning and the implementation of small scale infrastructure development projects to promote agriculture (as cited in Wickramasinghe, 2001, p. 99). In the 1990s, Janasaviya was set up as the government's major poverty alleviation programme sponsored by the World Bank, and at that time many NGOs were involved in implementing Janasaviya sub-projects (Wickramasinghe, 2001, p. 92) at the local government level. During the 2002 peace negotiations, NGOs were involved in a number of peace building projects in conflict-affected areas and worked together with the government (Walton, 2008, p. 141). These collaborative initiatives have been instances where NGOs have been permitted to work without strict government controls, with both parties sharing responsibilities for addressing the needs of local communities without undermining one another.

Despite the willingness on both sides to cooperate in these instances, collaboration between NGOs and government has remained limited, with opportunities for positive collaboration being influenced by changes in the party elected to government. For example, in relation to the Janasaviya programme in the 1990s, which was widely supported by NGOs, the appointment of an NGO Commission in 1990 by the Executive President to investigate allegations that foreign funds were flowing into both international and local NGOs, without the knowledge or concurrence of the government (Wickramasinghe, 2001, p. 84), led to many NGOs breaking with the government. The establishment of the NGO Commission was interpreted as the result of personal rivalry and competition between the President and a local NGO leader at that time (Kloos, 1999, p. 32). And later, the positive support of NGOs in the 2002 peace negotiations was reversed following

the resumption of war in 2004. Since that time, increasingly complex legal procedures and institutional requirements have been used by successive Sri Lankan governments to control NGOs. These include tougher registration criteria and reporting requirements, particularly for NGOs working in war-affected areas, and the result has been poorer government-NGO relations (see Walton, 2008). Moreover, in the post-tsunami and post-war environment where large amounts of foreign aid and NGO support were arriving into the country, central government assumed a greater level of control over the aid management and distribution process (Akurugoda, 2018).

Diverse reactions by different governments to NGOs give rise to several arguments: first, that governments have a history of seeking to control the activities of NGOs according to their political objectives; second, attempts to control NGOs indicate that a government identifies NGOs as significant and influential; and, third, when a government has collaborated with NGOs on human rights and development initiatives, the results have been positive (see Fernando, 2003; Walton, 2008). The experience of Sri Lanka, therefore, can be identified as a significant case study to answer the questions raised above regarding the potential of, and need for, NGOs in supporting local development and governance. With reference to Sri Lanka, this paper therefore seeks to answer the questions of what leads to effective NGO involvement in local development; what is the impact of a strong central government on NGO effectiveness in promoting local development; and how might NGOs encourage community participation, and support local government in promotion of local development.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This paper is based on a case study of NGOs and their contribution to local development in Sri Lanka, particularly in terms of how this was shaped by their relationships with central and local government. It was carried out in six districts in the southern and eastern provinces: in the southern province, the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota were analyzed, while in the eastern province the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara were examined. Within each province, NGO activity with six local government units was examined: two municipal councils, two urban councils and two Pradeshiya Sabhas, leading to a total of 12 local government units. Both of the southern and eastern provincial councils share coastal areas that were severely affected by the 2004 tsunami. The eastern province was also affected by the civil war that was ended in 2009. The selection of these areas allowed for an examination of the dynamics of NGO and government interaction in response to these events.

The study involved in-depth interviews with key people in government and non-government sectors. There were 47 respondents, consisting of 22 national, provincial and local political representatives, 17 national, provincial and local administrative officials, seven officials attached to NGOs, and one community-based organization representative. Of the 47 respondents, six were women and two were Buddhist priests. When selecting NGOs, priority was given to selecting a variety of NGO activities and contributions in local development and governance. This was to support the aim of investigating the conditions for, and levels of, effective NGO involvement in local development and governance. Lists of NGOs delivering local development projects were obtained from the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. From these lists, NGOs involved in projects in the south and east areas were selected. Some of the officials responsible for such projects had worked in country offices and some had been attached to area offices.<sup>3</sup> All of the selected NGOs were foreign-funded, mainly from American (United States of America), Australian, Canadian and European sources. Representatives of community-based organizations were also selected using snowball and purposive sampling methods. In addition, brief random discussions were held with 15 local community members during observations in the selected areas. The selection of respondents and other research processes was carried out in accordance with established principles of human research ethics approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Waikato, New Zealand. Informed consent of the respondents was carefully sought when obtaining data.

The first phase of interviews with local government representatives, local administrative officials, community-based organization representatives and officials of the area offices of NGOs was held from May to September 2011. The second phase was carried out from June to September 2012 when national and

provincial political representatives and administrative officials were interviewed, together with officials of the country offices of NGOs. The interviews were complemented by careful observation of the finer details of the interactions between local authorities and NGOs (see Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). Interviews and observations were triangulated through a comprehensive review and analysis of relevant governmental and non-governmental documents such as acts, gazettes, circulars, commission reports, sessional papers, annual reports, evaluation reports and progress reports. Books, journals, newspapers and relevant websites were also used to confirm observations and conclusions.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis of the data involved examining the relationship between central and local government and NGOs, closely analyzing NGO activity in supporting local development, and reflecting on key themes, concepts, and common features (Yin, 1994, p. 120). The following sections present a summary of the analysis and identify features of effective NGO support in local development and governance.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND NGOS: THE POST-TSUNAMI AND POST-WAR EXPERIENCE**

The interviews with participants from local government revealed the critical development needs in the areas of environmental protection and the sustainable use of natural resources, in the education of children, in the provision of employment for youth, in the provision of welfare for the needy, and in terms of meeting the needs of fishermen, cultivators and small scale employees. An important point which emerged was the need for local people's participation in responding to these kinds of needs, and that development initiatives were likely to be ineffective if they did not connect with the people at the local level (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). Local government representatives identified community-based organizations as appropriate links in obtaining people's participation and suggested there should be an outside support to assist local participation in local development.

While the research revealed that local political representatives aspired to play a greater role in meeting the needs of their specific communities, the capacity of local government to influence development projects was undermined, not through any lack of interest in being involved, but through an inability to influence central government decision making. In the southern and eastern provinces, then, many of the local needs were not being addressed.

The research revealed that local government in these areas lacked capacity to address these issues on their own, and that involved a lack of power, funds, other resources, knowledge, technology and guidance. Although most of the local political representatives complained about a lack of power, the research revealed that a major problem was their lack of knowledge regarding their powers. A former mayor of the Matara municipal council commented: 'Most of the local political representatives do not have a proper and clear knowledge about legal procedures. They do not know their legal powers and their range of powers.' This both reflected and reinforced local government dependence on central and provincial governments. It was also closely linked to the relative lack of funding and resourcing, including staffing, to implement policy.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has observed that local government in Sri Lanka is largely dependent on grants received from central government and provincial councils, with the balance coming from its own revenue. It had, however, limited revenue generating capacity (UNESCAP, 2010). A large proportion of funds are allocated to salaries and administration, and most local government bodies are unable to meet operational and maintenance costs of existing assets (ADB, 2005). A common response from local government participants, then, was: 'We do not have sufficient funds and staff to fulfil the needs of our areas.'

In this context, local government bodies in the southern province had limited capability when it came to the management of the tsunami aid. Local political leaders and administrative staff were hampered by a lack of accurate local data, and they lacked relevant knowledge and logistical experience. No support was provided by higher levels of government. Conflict emerged between national and local political representatives about the suitability of projects, and as a consequence a large amount of aid was returned.

The tsunami struck while the civil war in the north and east was still underway, and as a consequence many local government bodies in the eastern province were not activated, leading to a greater role by central government-controlled administrative authorities in the aid management process. As with the southern

province, aid management of the eastern province was characterized by problems such as lack of awareness regarding project planning and complications caused by the high levels of military involvement in the post-war areas. Consequently, central government developed mechanisms to keep the whole process under its control, arguing that there was no capacity at local government level to deal with foreign aid and NGOs.

Obtaining support from NGOs to carry-out locally-led development was a response to this situation. Southern and eastern province local political representatives and administrative officials concluded, then, that foreign assistance was necessary to support local development and improve local governance. In addition to funding, the respondents highlighted the importance of NGO support in terms of expert knowledge, technology and training. One respondent commented, 'Sri Lankan local government... needs new knowledge, training and technical skills from foreign countries to overcome existing challenges.' Respondents also emphasized the need for robust plans to use the foreign funds carefully. Local political representatives and administrative officials, therefore, increasingly looked to NGOs rather than central government for development support.

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF CENTRALLY CONTROLLED NGO PROJECTS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

Central government control of the recovery process, and of development, has nevertheless been a feature of the post-tsunami and post-war period, particularly in relation to local construction/reconstruction work. For example, central government established a Task Force to Rebuild the Nation (TAFREN) which became the single coordinating agency to manage tsunami aid and to organize reconstruction. It has been subject to central government political interference, particularly in relation to influence by central government ministries in terms of the appointment of key staff, and this has undermined the potential for local input into decisions (Jayasuriya, et al., 2005, p. 45).

The Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government at that time claimed that the mandate and the mission of the Ministry included the direct responsibility for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of provincial and local government assets destroyed by the tsunami, and that this was not the provincial or local government (Ministry of Provincial Councils, 2007, p. 12). This assertion of the mandate was made in the Ministry's annual performance reports where it referred to foreign-funded, but local, projects that it had implemented in the tsunami-affected areas including the southern and eastern provinces with or without the need for cooperation from the other government bodies.<sup>5</sup>

An example was the Local Government Infrastructure Improvement Project (LGIIIP), a semi-government project conducted through the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils, which covered the whole country, except the Colombo district, for the period 2006-2011. Under the LGIIIP, several components were eligible for financing such as community water supply, roads, drainage and communal sewerage, solid waste management, and basic health clinics, public libraries, and recreational parks (ADB, 2005). According to the director of the LGIIIP, the ADB provided US\$50 million to implement this project comprising 75 per cent of the total project expenditure. Central government contributed 18 per cent with seven per cent from local government.

As part of its assistance towards this initiative, a Local Loans and Development Fund (LL&DF)<sup>6</sup> was established to support the implementation of the LGIIIP by the ADB, and it also involved the provision of technical assistance to strengthen the administration of local government infrastructure financing. The LGIIIP targeted the building of provincial council and local government capacities to strengthen the LL&DF because to obtain grants and loans from the LL&DF, local government has to meet certain criteria, including demonstrating the capacity of its revenue generation processes, the ability to meet loan repayment obligations, and the ability to contribute a minimum seven per cent of the project cost (Ministry of Provincial Councils, n.d.).

Analysis of the implementation of LGIIIP shows that the donor agency's role was limited, and there was no direct communication between local government and the agency. The Ministry approved LGIIIP projects only when they were in line with the central government's priorities, especially investment in large scale infrastructure (ADB, 2006). While the Ministry claimed there was potential for local government to have



input into these processes to improve basic infrastructure and living conditions (Ministry of Provincial Councils, n.d.), as noted above, local government representatives and staff did not have the knowledge and skills to write proposals to obtain funds. The result was that local government received little actual support through the LGIIP.

A second example, the Local Governance Project (LoGoPro) funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was implemented through the Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs, and the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. The four-year project (2009-2012) was to expand the capacities of provincial and local government for peace-building, strengthening social cohesion and managing the equitable delivery of public services (UNDP, 2009a, p. 1). In the post-war period in Sri Lanka, local government in the eastern province needed to be re-established, and with newly elected representatives there was an urgent need to ensure the core functioning of these newly reinstated institutions (UNDP, 2009b).

The project board consisted only of higher level administrative officials such as the secretaries of the Ministries of Public Administration and Home Affairs, and Local Government and Provincial Councils, the district secretary of the LoGoPro focus district and the chief secretary of the eastern provincial council (UNDP, 2009a). Although LoGoPro's aims were connected specifically with local governance, the project board did not have any direct link with local government bodies or local political representatives. The UNDP's view was that the ministries could guide LoGoPro to help local government. As the project advisor of the LoGoPro stated:

LoGoPro is to promote local government. I believe that reaching local government through the ministries is fine. Such ministries can guide NGOs to help local government bodies that need aid.

In this research, according to the respondents of the Lahugala and Kinniya Pradeshiya Sabhas, through LoGoPro, a project to enhance local governance, these local government bodies actually received funding for infrastructure such as the construction of a community meeting hall and the construction of a market respectively. This represents a misdirection of purpose of the project and a mismatch between governance aims and project implementation at the local level.

A further example is the North East Local Services Improvement Project (NELSIP), funded by the World Bank to improve the delivery of local infrastructure services by local authorities in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka in a way that was more locally accountable and responsive (World Bank, n.d.). This project was implemented through the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils from May 2010 to December 2015. The five components of the NELSIP were: 1) infrastructure service delivery; 2) institutionalizing accountabilities; 3) building capacities; 4) assessments and evaluation; and 5) project management (World Bank, n.d.). The greatest provision has been allocated to the first component, infrastructure service delivery.

NELSIP had been planned at the national level by the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils. There were provincial and district elements within the project which had implications for local government bodies. There was a large gap, however, between project planning and implementation. Given that the criteria originated from central government and were processed through other levels of government, local government representatives reported that they were unable to engage with the process to apply for funding.

With reference to this, a local political representative stated: 'NELSIP's criteria were so complicated, there were so many rules and regulations to fulfil before releasing funds.' So, while the aim was to support the development of local infrastructure services by local authorities, local government was excluded from the process for making decisions about NELSIP initiatives. According to the chairman of the Lahugala Pradeshiya Sabha, there was no effective mechanism by which local government could be involved, this despite the core aim of NELSIP as being the improvement of the delivery of local infrastructure services by local authorities.

Although each of these NGO projects was aimed at enhancing local development and governance, a number of problems can be highlighted, particularly in term of the way they failed to actually respond to local needs. Central government control over the administration and implementation of each project contributed to the exclusion of local government and local communities. Local participation in project planning tended to be non-existent and, as a consequence, the expressed needs of local communities were neither identified nor taken into account. From a local perspective, the result was poorly planned projects that wasted scarce resources, resulting in few local benefits (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). Much of the central government's focus on national infrastructure projects did little to assist local communities (see the report on the north-eastern situation tabled in Parliament by MP M.A. Sumanthiran<sup>7</sup>). Moreover, local communities tended to be excluded from the benefits of these projects in terms of job opportunities, and they made little contribution towards addressing what have been described as 'soaring' levels of unemployment and related issues of poverty (Sumanthiran, 2011). The control exercised by central government over the administration of these projects and over the flow of aid to local levels widened the distance between NGOs and local communities and undermined their capacity to address the most appropriate development needs at the local level.

### **SUCCESSFUL NGO INVOLVEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

The research also uncovered a number of NGO development initiatives characterized by much closer connections with local government. These NGOs engaged directly with local government bodies to support their planning and local development initiatives.

One example was the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). The CIDA tsunami reconstruction and rehabilitation programme, led by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities – Canada/Sri Lanka Municipal Cooperation Programme (FCM-MCP), brought together many sectors to address problems relation to employment, economic well-being and micro-finance, governance, housing, and the environment. The FCM was one of the few organizations that worked with local political representatives. It introduced participatory mechanisms like the Community Support Fund (CSF), association building, and mid-term planning systems and procedures. The CSF promotes community involvement in project planning, road construction, and associated work that have led to positive developments such local ownership and better maintenance of roads and an improved tax base for local government (ACDI – CIDA, n.d.). Local communities have therefore been able to influence the order of priorities for rural infrastructure by submitting proposals and coming up with innovative ways to see them implemented by, for example, contributing 50 per cent of the project costs in the form of labour. Evidence for the success of FCM/MCP was found in the Matara municipal council where a respondent political representative stated:

FCM/MCP worked with the people and, therefore, they received full support by the people. There were savings on most projects due to the inclusion people's labour. For example, when we received funds from FCM/MCP to construct 75km of rural roads, we could complete an additional 25km as well because we could save money by using people's labour.

FCM/MCP training services for local development work in the Matara area included the provision of opportunities for the Matara municipal council staff to go on foreign work tours to Canada for training programmes related to town planning and waste management. Staff gained knowledge of working in local government and received useful advice on processes and procedures from the Canadian experiences, and this has subsequently informed the development of the Matara town plan and of a municipal waste management project.

This research assessed a number of foreign-funded projects which were directly connected with local government levels, including the Asia Foundation's Transparent Accountable Local Governance (TALG) programme, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Supporting Regional

Governance (SuRG) programme, the livelihood support projects of Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International, the local government support projects of Transparency International and Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and several foreign-funded and NGO-guided waste management and water projects.

The participatory budgeting promoted by the Asia Foundation and USAID has become popular among local government bodies in identifying the most appropriate needs in specific areas. The TALG programme sought to help local government bodies make key political institutions more responsive to citizen input, improve service delivery, provide post-tsunami emergency recovery assistance, and increase the rule of law to protect and empower vulnerable groups (Asia Foundation, 2010). Through this programme, the Asia Foundation provided technical assistance and training to local government in 35 areas affected by the tsunami and/ or by the war within the country.

In the post-tsunami rehabilitation process funding agencies were eager to fund local reconstruction and rehabilitation work, but few appropriate funding proposals came forward from local government bodies. Consequently, it became evident that for fundraising by local governments to be effective, there was a need to increase the knowledge of local government staffs around project and funding proposal writing. The successful implementation of the TALG programme has enabled mid-term and short-term planning to be incorporated in local government management processes (Ministry of Local Government, 2009, p. 17). Among the local government bodies in this research, Weligama urban council experienced successful results from the TALG programme, as the following respondent community development officer noted.

The Asia Foundation gave very good guidance about developing project proposals. After developing project proposals, it was very easy to obtain foreign funds because then the urban council already had a proposal to show the donors. However, it was a difficult task to collect people's ideas. They only explain their ideas; they do not write them down. Therefore, during the TALG programme we were very busy collecting ideas. It was a new experience. We collected people's ideas and wrote all of them up then edited and organized those ideas in a way in which they could be implemented.

These types of participatory planning process helped local government identify high priority needs of its citizens, and with TALG effectively encouraging local government staff and others to become involved in making project proposals. The Asia Foundation helped in preparing a four-year plan for the Weligama urban council. Under the four-year plan, 16 proposals were written for 16 projects,<sup>8</sup> with the urban council implementing all of them.

USAID's democracy and governance programme has supported provincial and local government in particular areas aiming at strengthening their capacity in planning, budgeting and in ensuring transparent and participatory planning processes. SuRG is one of many democracy and governance programmes to facilitate post-war transformation in the eastern province. The SuRG programme manager commented:

SuRG has identified a range of training needs for local government, including participatory planning, governance, proposal development, project management, office management, accounting, finance, leadership and legislature programmes.

SuRG has aimed to improve the knowledge and skills of elected representatives and staff to fulfil their core functions, increase public participation in decision making, increase transparency and accountability of local government functions, and enhance the public sector environment. The SuRG programme manager further noted: 'Capacity building within selected local government bodies in the eastern province has been provided through workshops, mentoring, technical assistance and training.' SuRG assists local government to build participatory governance forums and works to engage directly with the local level by encouraging citizens to participate in local government policy processes.

The Kattankudy urban council, one of the local government bodies for SuRG, has developed a wide range of plans to implement in 2011 with the assistance of SuRG. People's participation in developing plans by prioritizing their needs made a huge impact on urban council's development success.

NGOs, such as CARE International, conduct projects that ensure closer scrutiny of the poor local communities. It operates small scale projects in villages which provide support for people's lives by developing socio-economic programmes to improve conditions in the local communities. According to one of the team leaders of CARE, these projects aim to improve people's social status by focusing on women, youth, and POP (poorest of the poor – the lowest economic level of the society).

The duration of a livelihood support project is five years with CARE's direct involvement in the project implementation lasting two years. The project includes 110 villages in three divisions in Hambantota district: Suriyawewa, Hambantota and Tissamaharama. From its area office in the Hambantota district, CARE addresses rural development through a community participatory approach using the theory and practices of community governance. The team leader of the project stated:

We see that it is not enough to focus on only one sector. For example, if livelihood support is the major component, we also have to improve people's social and economic development as well. Therefore, the support we provide differs such as improving the income level or developing the infrastructure.

CARE promotes community participatory development based in the villages where the issues are livelihood development, environmental management, social resources, and infrastructure development. CARE establishes village operating units (VOUs) and selects officials to represent the villagers. As a result, CARE reaches the community-based organizations in the villages. CARE further encourages and builds community-based organizations in the villages and supports women and youth participation.

CARE reaches villages through the Grama Niladhari (GN) because it simplifies the identification of village leadership. CARE prepares an activity plan for each village known as the village development plan (VDP) which is constantly updated and implemented through a VOU. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) has been used to make VDPs accountable. Through this, CARE touches the lowest level group which lie below the GN level.

The knowledge provided to local government representatives and staff on project proposal writing and income sources by NGOs, such as Transparency International and CPA, has built a path to achieve successful outcomes. A consultant of the Transparency International stated that they have built a direct relationship with local government to reach local levels to improve people's participation in local government and to improve the services of local government to the people. Transparency International trained the elected representatives of the Pradeshiya Sabhas on the ways of improving their services. The officials of Transparency International always involved in the programme to ensure its implementation. Transparency International does not provide funds or material aid to local government but provides guidance and builds connections between local government and people. The Transparency International consultant further noted: 'The organization does not act as a donor agency but provides knowledge to local government representatives about local government income sources.' Transparency International works at giving knowledge to improve local government representatives' ability to obtain funds. This project is an example of NGO efforts to address the problems of local government funding.

CPA works to build two-way communications between people and local government so that elected representatives can get to know the people's problems and needs. A contact person of CPA's Governance and Anti-Corruption Programme commented: 'CPA supports local government to obtain people's participation in decision making. We guide local government on effective methods of tax collection and provide knowledge to the people on taxes.'

CPA supports local government to obtain people's participation in decision making, as the same respondent stated:

The public galleries were closed in many Pradeshiya Sabhas. These Pradeshiya Sabhas had no idea about the importance of public galleries before. We have opened the public galleries in many Pradeshiya Sabhas and now people are involved actively in local government matters.

CPA guides local government bodies on effective methods of tax collection and provides knowledge to the people on taxes. Local government bodies depend on attracting 33 per cent for taxes which is insufficient with few people having any proper knowledge about taxation. The same respondent further added:

Local government representatives think that they are supposed to collect only the taxes mentioned in the revenue files. There are hidden taxes. There is a need to highlight these taxes and to give proper knowledge to the people about taxes. We believe that then the people will want to be actively involved in the tax payments.

Some local government areas have sister-city relations with foreign counterparts that supply aid and guidance, such as the Galle municipal council with the city of Velsen, Netherlands, and the Kalmunai municipal council with the city of Munich, Germany and these are identified as having productive relations. Among these, the WASSER project conducted in the Kalmunai municipal council area with the support of the city of Munich is significant.

At the request of the special commissioner of the Kalmunai municipal council, and with the facilitation of the national technical advisor of UN-HABITAT, the mayor of Munich agreed to assist the Kalmunai municipal council. The combination of foreign and Sri Lankan local government officials in policy planning leads to successful development plans. The city of Munich also prepared a proposal for the European Union (EU) to implement the WASSER project acting as the overall project coordinator and serving as a direct link to the EU. The Batticaloa and Kalmunai municipal councils integrated the participatory planning approaches for strategy development and forged ahead with implementation of the project.

The objectives of the WASSER project include planning and setting-up of sewerage systems in tsunami-affected areas and the provision of drinking water supplies for the poor and tsunami-affected people.<sup>9</sup> As a result the local government capabilities were enhanced in the field of environmental planning, and environmental management of information systems, setting-up of a cadastre for utility planning, and adopting information for risk assessment and disaster mitigation purposes (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010). The WASSER project has been a remarkable success in educating the local community about conserving water, and assisting poor families in meeting their drinking water problems, and for highlighting the services rendered by the municipal administration. Through the WASSER project, improved community participation has been achieved (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010). Another important achievement was the establishment of networks and linkages with local communities. WASSER created the opportunity for local government representatives, staff and community volunteers to meet together and discuss the needs and problems of the area. Furthermore, after the tsunami, the capability of the municipal technical staff was poor and WASSER has helped to build competence.<sup>10</sup> With the sister-city relations like this, local government was able to avoid the barriers put up by central and provincial government to control foreign aid and NGO support.

Supplying rural infrastructure, waste management, encouraging people's participation in local government policy processes, educating local government representatives on their powers and income sources, training local government staff to improve their management skills, supporting the building of community-based organizations, addressing the needs of the POP, and strengthening inter-community relations have received critically important NGO contributions at the local level. When analyzing these projects using the same criteria used to assess central government-controlled large scale NGO projects, many advantages can be identified. The special feature of these NGO projects is their direct connection to local government and communities. Through this, these projects have been able to network local partners and people consistent with identifying, prioritizing and addressing the needs of local communities.

Throughout the duration of projects, NGO officials were actively involved at all levels providing continuous guidance and reducing project implementation problems. These projects have been shown to fit with local needs and with the proposals of local respondents outlined above.

The varied benefits and advantages of NGOs in the selected local government areas signify the importance and potential of NGOs to contribute to development and address needs at the local level. The success of these projects highlights the way local government can establish an advantage where foreign assistance is applied directly to local government sources. These projects build collaboration among local government and NGOs in local level activities leading to improved forms of local governance and development which builds the capacity of local government bodies. This research identifies the importance of substantive direct NGO involvement at the local level and stresses the need to shape future local government relationships away from the traditional approach and toward cooperation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Against a background where the centralized power structures undermine provincial and local levels of government, this research has found instances where NGOs can play a positive role at the local level to address local development needs. Recognizing the constraints imposed by central government on NGOs, this research analyzed the conditions required to improve the contribution of NGOs to local development and governance in an effort to address the needs of local communities.

Local government in Sri Lanka continues to be characterized by a lack of formal authority, and this is reflected in a correlated shortfall of funds, resources, and human capacity in terms of knowledge and skills. This research has found that NGOs, rather than being a threat to national sovereignty and autonomy, can play a critical role in supporting the improvement of local governance in a way that is positive for the nation as a whole. It has also shown that when tightly controlled by central government, NGOs are less effective in supporting local development. Moreover, the research confirms that the most productive NGO interactions are built around cooperation at the local government level. Two features are important in this process: the extent to which NGOs identify and address the local needs through their projects and programmes, and the methods they use to collaborate with local government and local communities. While the centrally-led NGO projects tended to ignore local needs and local knowledge, NGOs which connect directly with local government and local communities are more likely to be effective.

It was clear that the NGOs identified above had the capacity and intent to collaborate with local government in improving local governance and local development by working with vulnerable sections of the Sri Lankan society. These effective NGO interactions were characterized by the use of context-relevant methods that promoted and supported local input into development initiatives. Connecting communities with local policy processes through NGO contributions has helped to prioritize and address local needs. The conclusion that emerges is that the requirements of central government often undermine NGOs in addressing needs at the local level, and this can reinforce dependence and hinder development. When NGOs align more closely with central government agendas, local development needs are more likely to be neglected. However, the direct involvement of NGOs at the local level can bridge the gap between local development needs and the policy process. NGOs, then, can deliver foreign aid in a way that does not reinforce dependence or hinder development but which leads to improved forms of local development and governance. Effective NGO involvement at the local government level has increased local participation and strengthened local governance. This provides an ideal model as a foundation to build bridges between local government and local communities using the support of NGOs as partners of local development and governance.

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## ENDNOTES

1. The NGO Secretariat is a government body established in 1996 to deal with several matters related to local and foreign NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. The goals of the NGO Secretariat are to ensure the registration of all NGOs which function in Sri Lanka, and to assess if they are functioning within the frame of government policies.
2. Gramodaya Mandalas, composed of the chairmen of the non-political voluntary organizations at the level of the Grama Niladhari (GN) division, the lowest level of the government administration in Sri Lanka. The Gramodaya Mandalas, assigned statutory status by an amendment to the development councils law, were set up from 1981 onwards.
3. Most of the time, higher officials attached to country offices or area offices directed the researcher to project coordinators of the specific projects.
4. For more details on methodology see Akurugoda, 2014, pp. 37-54.
5. The annual performance reports from 2005 to 2010 were available at the ministry at the time of the field research.
6. LL&DF is a statutory body incorporated by the Ordinance No. 22 of 1916. This institute is one of the oldest financial institutions in Sri Lanka and provides loans at concessionary rates for local infrastructure and revenue generating projects. The fund operates on an annual financial provision allocated through the annual budget estimates of the Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils repayable in 25 years at an interest rate of six per cent per annum. By the year 2010, LL&DF has become the foremost financial agency for the improvement of local government infrastructure (Ministry of Local Government, 2012, pp. 19-21).
7. MP M.A. Sumanthiran represents Tamil National Alliance (TNA).
8. Some of the projects are: construction of two public fairs, an urban council building, meeting halls for fishermen, a library, children's parks, parking place for three wheelers, solid waste management, a compost yard development and the purchase of tractors.
9. In the Kalmunai municipality more than 50 per cent of the people use shallow wells to drink water which is polluted. Therefore WASSER brought timely assistance to Kalmunai at the critical point of water pollution. Another project funded by the European Union, the Environmental Remediation Programme (ERP), supported WASSER. Under the ERP the garbage-dumped open water bodies are cleaned (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010).
10. The technical capacity of the staff involved in the WASSER project and staff training has increased. Top management has received exposure to international standards in report preparation, communication using information technology (IT) and presentation skills (Kalmunai Municipal Council, 2010).

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