

Factors influencing good governance in local government institutions for achieving quality of life

Saman Weerawansa

M.Phil/PhD Candidate, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo

Introduction

The new Local Government Institutions (LGI) created under the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, namely provincial council system and the reorganization of the local government system, completely changed the structure of the local government system that existed for over a century. The objective of the reorganization of the existing system was promoting good governance which would improve the quality of life of the population.

Whether the new Local Government Institutions implemented good governance practices to ameliorate the living conditions of the population or whether these practices could achieve the desired ends, were the research problems in this thesis. The present study was launched with the purpose of studying the impact of good governance practiced by the Local Government Institutions (LGI) on the quality of life of the people coming under their jurisdiction. The study covered four LGIs, viz., three Pradeshiya Sabhas (PS) of Alawwa, Wariyapola and Kobeigane and one Urban Council (UC) of Kuliyaipitiya. These institutions were selected with a purpose, depending mainly on practical experience and personal knowledge of the area and to represent local characteristics of the area.

Two types of data, quantitative and qualitative, were collected. Quantitative data were collected from a random sample of 320 households distributed in the four selected Local Government Institution areas by administering a pre-coded questionnaire to the head of the household/responsible household member. Qualitative data were collected by holding focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and interviewing key informants and also through participatory observations.

The hypothesis was that good government practices implemented by the LGI have a direct impact on the quality of life of its people. Indices were calculated to measure the quality of life and satisfaction, the level of performances of LGI and local politicians. Likert Scaling technique was mainly used in the questionnaire and the data thus collected was weighted and converted to an index. These indices were used to measure the quality of life and good governance practices.

The findings indicated that the majority of the households were in the middle class with a monthly income of around Rs. 13,000 and the inmates were employed mainly in the service sector. The majority were Sinhala Buddhists coexisting peacefully with a few Muslim and Hindu families in the area. Illiteracy and unemployment were low and the majority had secondary level education. There was sex discrimination, mainly in education. However, females entry into the labour force was limited due to traditional practices. However, it was found that a significant proportion of females tended to find employment in the Middle East. Mother migration has caused some problems though there were economic advantages.

Indices indicated that in general, the quality of life as they perceived it, and in particular happiness and satisfaction derived from family life and parental care were very high. They did not want to move out of the village though some women went to Middle East as housemaids. Almost all had permanent houses owned by household members. The proportion of rented houses and encroachment of government land was very low. Majority of the houses had been provided with electricity. Access to transport and communication was high. There were no problems related to transport and communication. Although Pipe-borne water was available to a few, the main source of drinking water was wells.

Respondents perceived the quality of life and satisfaction to be high, but the impact of the LGI on the quality of life of the population was very low and people were not happy or satisfied with the performances of the LGI and the local and national politicians. Participation by politicians in village affairs was very low. People's participation in LGI decision making was negligible. Accountability and transparency of activities of LGI seemed to be very poor, as tax payers were not aware of how their tax money was spent. There was no impartiality in the services provided and appointments were given, according to the respondents.

Although the quality of life of the population as they perceived it was high, LGIs had no impact on them. Good Governance practices and impartiality in LGIs were very poor. The trust people had in LGI services, various institutions and politicians was very low. The taxation system from which LGI derived income to provide services to the population was very unpopular. There was no regular interaction of people with local politicians or LGI activities. The study showed that LGIs had no impact on the quality of life of its people, contrary to the hypothesis and participation, transparency and accountability were very poor. The hypothesis was rejected as the satisfaction derived from the activities of the politicians and the LGI service seemed to be at a low level. There was a wide gap between the quality of life of the people and LGI performances.

