

“Underserved” or “Undeserved”? A study on the identity formation of the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers in Colombo

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In the urbanization of the city of Colombo, ‘slums’ and ‘shanties’ have attracted the attention of state authorities since the British colonial period. Pre- and post-Independence town planning proposals and urban development plans have identified ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers as people who face material and physical problems related to sanitation, transportation etc., and the authorities have initiated many projects to solve these problems. Nevertheless, the identity ascribed to them by society as socially unacceptable, still prevails. This study aims to assess the identity formation of ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers within policy frameworks and society, in terms of being embedded in the urban development discourse. The paper has three research questions: (a) How has the state constructed the identity of the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers within urban development planning? (b) How has society constructed the identity of the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers? (c) Why have the state’s policy initiatives to upgrade the living conditions of the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers failed to change their socially constructed identity? The desk research was conducted and Laclau’s and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory was used to analyse both the primary and secondary sources. Policy papers, Government Acts, policy briefs, and secondary sources, as well as reports by non-governmental organizations and journal articles on the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ development projects were used to identify and examine how the two different types of identities have been attributed to ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers by the state and by society. The research contends that a contradiction between the two different identities formed by the state and by society regarding the ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers has complicated their identity within society. It also argues that the more ‘liberal’ terms used to designate ‘slum’ and ‘shanty’ dwellers have only been limited to policy papers and have not penetrated into society through the projects initiated by these particular policy proposals.

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