

Taking participatory governance from needs to rights

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Theory indicates that local government functions as a site where people on the periphery engage in decision-making and thereby take part in resource distribution in the community, thus allowing for a greater degree of democratic participation and equal citizenship. However, citizens' participation at the local government level is extremely poor in Sri Lanka, despite it being the institution closest to the community. In this context, this paper aims to examine (a) why citizens show almost no interest in participating in local government, (b) whether there are other forms of participation at the local government level that are not captured by conventional approaches to democratic participatory governance, and (c) the impact made by the nature of current participation in local government on local democracy. This paper is based on field work carried out in Trincomalee, Panama, and Bandarawela, as part of an evaluation of a donor-funded programme to increase citizens' participation in local government. Key-informant interviews, focus group discussions, and a survey have been used for data collection. The findings suggest that it is not only politicians but also the communities that they serve that seek to establish state-society relationships on the basis of the needs of citizens rather than their rights, thus creating a patron-client relationship instead of the expected state-citizen engagement. Under clientelistic politics, certain groups within the community enjoy greater access to state resources and more opportunities to make their voice heard than do others. Those marginalized constitute a minority in the village and their voices are not heard irrespective of who is in power, thus leaving democratic engagement as the only way to make their voices heard.

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