

PREFACE

The gap in the literature on NGO politics in Sri Lanka is a major reason for this book. The book, therefore, contributes by filling these gaps in the scholarship on NGO involvement in local government and local development, and in clarifying the activities of NGOs in the Sri Lankan context.

This book is also motivated by a concern to examine the accuracy of criticisms by anti-colonial nationalist critics of NGO activity, especially foreign-originated and foreign-funded NGOs that work in Sri Lanka. These critics have portrayed NGOs as imperial agents who continue Western colonial influences. This book examines the roots of these anti-colonial criticisms and examines whether they represent a genuine refutation of foreign aid and NGO involvement, or whether they voice the hidden agendas of political actors. The book, therefore, reveals insights around the Sri Lankan policy debate on NGO involvement, local government and local development.

A further reason for this book originates from the background and interests of this author. Being raised in a rural community in Sri Lanka led the writer to observe and experience first-hand the many difficulties facing communities. While years have passed, and governments changed, the situation in rural communities and the lives of the people have not improved. People have voted during elections, but they do not seem to have looked back to determine whether their political representatives have addressed their needs. The links between the government, especially local government, and the people have remained weak.

The opportunities to study and teach in the University of Colombo in the capital city of Sri Lanka, and then to teach in the University of Ruhuna in the southern province provided a means of experiencing the differences between the people who live in cities and those who live in villages. Despite where they live, large parts of the Sri Lankan population have been neglected and their needs have gone unaddressed by successive governments.

Working as a researcher in a tsunami housing support project conducted by the well-known German organisation (GTZ) provided this writer with the opportunity to identify the capacities, abilities and potential of foreign aid, and foreign-originated and foreign-funded NGOs to make a positive change for the many Sri Lankan people. At the local level, the attitudes of people have been very positive to the foreign aid and towards the personnel in the field. Opportunities to visit many tsunami and war-affected areas in Sri Lanka and to talk with people who experienced the consequences of the tsunami and the war have proved advantageous to this book. Many large-scale construction projects were taking place in these areas, and people voiced complaints about the way they had been neglected by central, provincial and local governments while these projects were being pursued. This raised questions in the writer's mind about the outcomes of the central government's large-scale projects which were conducted under the name of 'development'. It was evident to the writer that the actual needs of the people in these areas were not being addressed and that many were made much worse off as a result of the big 'development' being pursued by the central government.

This background maps the reasons behind this book which seeks to identify how to address the needs of the people who have been disadvantaged, underprivileged and neglected, and to assess the contribution NGOs make to improving local development and providing support for local government in building its capacity to act effectively and contribute.

This book is mainly for an academic audience consisting of university lecturers, university (undergraduate and postgraduate) students, NGO/INGO officials, civil society activists, policy planners, social and policy researchers and public administrators. In examining how and why local communities have been neglected in the Sri Lankan development initiatives, and in assessing the actual and potential contribution of NGOs to local government in Sri Lanka, this book consists of the following substantive chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the background and objectives of the book towards identifying how to address the development needs of the people in a context of strongly centralised government power structures using the NGO potential.

The various roles of NGOs in post-colonial societies have been analysed in chap. 2. The chapter presents a multiple theoretical framework related to post-colonial situations, government-NGO relations, and the interactions of NGOs in policy processes.

Chapter 3 sets out to review the history of NGO involvement in Sri Lanka. It discusses the ambiguities related to the term ‘NGOs’ in the Sri Lankan context, identifies reasons for the lack of clarity about NGO data and assesses the implications of the different forms of relations between NGOs and the Sri Lankan government. This chapter explores the criticisms of Sinhala nationalist parties and groups that have portrayed NGOs as imperial agents.

Chapter 4 presents on local development and people’s participation, and investigates the ways in which local government is affected by national and provincial politics. This chapter investigates differences in the ways in which central government and local government identify development, and looks at how the results of central government-controlled large-scale construction projects affect the local people.

Chapter 5 outlines a number of problems in Sri Lankan local government and assesses the proposals for solutions. The chapter investigates ways to address local-level problems and the potential of NGOs to provide solutions.

A number of centrally-led NGO projects at the local level have been analysed in chap. 6. This chapter identifies as a special issue the large amounts of foreign aid and significant support from NGOs which flowed into Sri Lanka to assist in recovery in the post-tsunami and post-war situations. The chapter explores how the effects of this support have shaped the Sri Lankan government’s behaviour towards foreign aid and NGOs.

Chapter 7 investigates NGO involvement at the local level, and highlights collaborative local government-NGO relations which support and promote local development. These locally-led projects are assessed in terms of the ways in which the NGOs are involved at the local level, whether their project aims to match local needs, and to what extent such aims have been fulfilled.

Chapter 8 concludes by providing an overall analysis. It assesses the contribution being made, and which is still to be made, of NGOs in serving to strengthen and enhance local government's role in addressing the needs of communities and promoting effective local development.

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