



# Assessing the Effectiveness of Citizen Engagement Mechanisms in Sri Lankan Local Governance: Challenges and Pathways to Inclusive Participation

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## Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of mechanisms for citizens' participation in Sri Lanka's local governance. It covers Praja Sabha (Community Councils), participatory budgeting, and public consultations based on thirty (30) in-depth interviews with government officials, representatives of civil society, and the community. The findings indicate that while such mechanisms exist, their practical effectiveness is buffered by political interference, socio-economic inequalities, and general unawareness of the fact. Moreover, the use of digital platforms in civic engagement remains limited due to a lack of training and infrastructure. It also contributes to the theoretical understanding of participatory governance in post-colonial democracies and provides recommendations toward more transparent and inclusive policy formulations in the light of the digital transformation of local governance processes.

**Keywords:** Citizen Engagement, Praja Sabha, Citizen Engagement Mechanisms, Democratic Participation, Local Governance, Sri Lanka

## 1 Introduction

### Contextual Background

The cornerstones of democratic governance involve citizen activities that seek to influence public choices and policies touching their daily lives (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). The concept of citizen engagement emanates, citation ally, from ideals of participatory democracy that emphasize individuals being directly involved within governance processes, with limited reliance on elected representatives (Pateman, 1975; Carpini, Cook and Jacobs, 2004). This framework therefore maintains that the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes enhances

democratic legitimacy, and this result is followed by the accountability of public institutions. In line with this argument, the model of deliberative democracy, also elaborated by Habermas (1984) among others, insists on organized, encompassing conversations in which citizens, civil society agents, and governments interact through reasoned discussions to handle public matters.

There is indeed a growing recognition of the need for more effective mechanisms of citizen engagement in most parts of the world, and especially in developing democracies. Indeed, countries like India, Brazil, and South Africa, among others, have tried participatory mechanisms such as local councils, public consultations, and participatory budgeting that have variably worked to ensure citizens' empowerment and inclusive decision-making process (Fung, 2006). The post-colonial governance system in Sri Lanka inherited centralized administrative structures that still hinder the role of the average citizen in local governance issues. However, recent efforts toward decentralization have tried to revive their historical traditions of local governance, such as Praja Sabhas or Community Councils, in an effort at bringing decision-making closer to the grassroots level (Pannilage, 2014).

Nevertheless, in Sri Lanka, citizen engagement remains inept, especially in rural areas, where socio-economic disparity and political centralization, along with the lack of general resources, seriously hinder meaningful participation. As scholars have noted, although the institutional machinery for engagement exists, such as Pradeshiya Sabhas, or local government councils, the effective involvement of citizens in decision making remains limited (Withanachchi, 2011b). The disconnection between the ideals and realities of participatory governance creates the crux with which this study critically assesses the effectiveness of mechanisms for citizen engagement in fostering democratic participation at the local level in Sri Lanka.

## Research Problem

Particularly, there is a dearth of research looking at practical applications in Sri Lanka's local governance. Though numerous institutional mechanisms have been enacted through legislation to enhance civic participation, such as the Praja Sabha and other tiers of local councils, few empirical studies examine their effectiveness in ensuring genuine citizen engagement, especially within rural communities. However, studies reveal that these mechanisms are grossly inadequate for a set of reasons: bureaucratic inefficiencies, bureaucratic and political interference, and lack of resources (Kumara and Handapangoda, 2006; Batuwitige, 2014; Weerawansa, 2015). Besides, social inequalities in the country at large, based on caste, ethnicity, and gender, also hinder equal participation by citizens.

This study attempts to fill this lacuna by assessing the actual functioning and effectiveness of mechanisms for citizen engagement in Sri Lanka (Withanachchi, 2011b). While several studies have discussed broader governance structures in Sri Lanka, few in-depth studies have explored specific mechanisms being used to involve citizens in local decision-making processes and the problems that hamper their effectiveness. This is an important contrast between the availability of mechanisms for engagement and their practical utility in fostering democratic participation in an attempt to understand the problems associated with decentralization and governance reform in post-colonial states such as Sri Lanka.

## Research Objectives and Questions

The overarching aim of this study will, therefore, be to determine the effectiveness of the mechanisms that local authorities in Sri Lanka use to engage citizens in achieving democratic participation. In this regard, the study will try to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Identify and categorize the various citizen engagement mechanisms used by local government bodies in Sri Lanka, such as Praja Sabhas, participatory budgeting, and public consultations.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of these mechanisms in promoting democratic participation, particularly in terms of inclusiveness, transparency, and decision-making power.
3. Explore the barriers to effective citizen participation, with a focus on socio-economic disparities, political interference, and institutional constraints.

The corresponding research questions that will guide this investigation include:

- What are the most used citizen engagement mechanisms in Sri Lanka's local governance?
- How effective are these mechanisms in promoting democratic participation?
- What challenges limit the effectiveness of these engagement mechanisms in rural and urban contexts?

## Research Significance

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the academic discourse on participatory governance, particularly within the context of developing democracies. By critically assessing the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's citizen engagement mechanisms, this research aims to provide insights that can inform policy reforms aimed at strengthening local governance structures. The results also will have broader implications for post-colonial states grappling with similar challenges of decentralization and democratic participation.

More precisely, the practical application of the mechanisms of engagement in rural areas within the study will showcase the structural barriers to citizen participation in these areas. This is important in informing governance models that seek inclusion and responsiveness to the needs of the most marginalized populations. It will also give useful recommendations for the improvement of the design and implementation mechanisms of citizens' engagement, which will no doubt inform current policy debates on decentralization and local governance reform in Sri Lanka.

## 2 Literature Review

### Conceptualizing Citizen Engagement

This has its genesis in participation citizenship, which has formed a significant core part of democratic theory, particularly in the frameworks of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. Participatory democracy is

a theory that emphasizes the direct involvement of citizens in governance, as stated by Pateman (1975), where active participation not only legitimizes governance processes but also educates and empowers people. Participation, according to this theory, must, on the one hand, entail not just electoral activities but, importantly, decision-making processes in which individual citizens are more capable of influencing the outcomes directly. The mechanisms of participation include community councils, public forums, and referenda, all designed to increase openness, accountability, and responsiveness of the government.

On the other hand, deliberative democracy places the emphasis not just on participation, but on the quality of discourse in governance. In this regard, Habermas (1984) relates democratic legitimacy to inclusive, rational discourse in which, during open debate, citizens ideally come to consensus decisions on public issues. In this model, the deliberative process itself is central to democratic decision-making in that reasoned argumentation and equal consideration of all points of view are encouraged. Deliberative mechanisms could be public hearings, citizen assemblies, and collaborative policy-making sessions, where, importantly, the emphasis is on dialogue rather than voting (Dryzek and Braithwaite, 2000).

While both models are favorable toward active citizen participation in government, the degree to which these mechanisms can indeed facilitate more democratic involvement rests on how well they are designed and implemented. Participatory mechanisms may easily fall victim to bureaucratic inaction or even political maneuvering that limits their effectiveness in changing decisions. As stated by Fung (2006), deliberative forums themselves may not turn out to be representative of all citizens if the elites dominate them or if necessary facilitation for marginalized voices is not sufficiently available. This problem can be seen more strongly in developing democracies, where both institutional capacities and political cultures hinder effective citizen involvement (Peixoto and Fox, 2016).

Models of participatory and deliberative democracy do, however, offer some theoretical framework for engagement of citizens in decision-making within the realm of local governance. The structures of local governance, such as municipal councils and community-based organizations, are seen to be superior in implementing these models of engagement, since they work much closer to the people and are much more responsive toward the local needs (Heller, 2001). However, the extent to which these mechanisms are implemented and their success in fostering inclusive governance vary significantly across different political and social contexts.

### **Citizen Engagement in Sri Lanka**

Active citizenship in Sri Lanka has a lot of historical roots, whereby at a grassroots level, village councils in pre-colonial times show the very core of governance was with the community themselves. These have been destroyed to a large degree under British colonial rule, which in fact imposed a centralized administrative authority that restricts local participation in governance (Withanachchi, 2011a). Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has not yet revived these grassroots models of governance.



These Praja Sabhas or Community Councils were initiated during the late 20th century as a decentralization process to improve citizen participation at the village level (Pannilage, 2013). Through these councils, advisory roles to local governments are performed by allowing citizens to express opinions on aspects of development, projects, infrastructure requirements, and needs concerning public services. However, political interference, inadequate funding, and a lack of awareness by the citizens have all worked against Praja Sabhas to limit their effectiveness (Baniamin and Jamil, 2022). The strong centralism of Sri Lanka's political system also remains an obstacle to local governance, with the national government retaining decision-making powers in many core areas.

Recent reformist steps, such as the Local Authorities Elections Act of 2012, have introduced a mixed proportional electoral system at the local level to make elections more transparent and accountable. Similarly, the Right to Information Act of 2016 has conferred on the people the right to information about what the government is doing—a sine qua non for greater civic engagement. Implementation of these reforms has been very patchy so far, with the effectiveness of such reforms in improving the level of citizen engagement remaining an open question (Keethaponcalan, 2019).

**Table 1: Citizen Engagement Mechanisms in Sri Lanka**

Mechanism	Description	Challenges
<b>Praja Sabhas</b>	Community councils at the village level aimed at promoting local participation.	Political interference, lack of resources
<b>Participatory Budgeting</b>	Allows citizens to influence how public funds are allocated.	Limited awareness, bureaucratic inefficiencies
<b>Public Consultations</b>	Forums where citizens can voice concerns on local governance issues.	Often symbolic, dominated by elites
<b>Right to Information</b>	Empowers citizens to request information from government bodies.	Inconsistent implementation, lack of enforcement

While all such mechanisms exist, the empirical evidence available shows that meaningful citizen participation in Sri Lanka generally remains cosmetic and is more of a formality in most of the engagement processes rather than ways through which influence is genuinely wrought out (McIntosh, 2018). In fact, Praja Sabha, for example, is bound to be politicized by the patronage system through which the elite occupy the decision-making positions at the expense of already marginalized communities (Pannilage, 2013). The challenge, therefore, is to reform these mechanisms to ensure that they foster true democratic engagement rather than reinforcing existing power imbalances.

## Global Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis with mechanisms of citizen engagement in similar post-colonial democracies, like India and Bangladesh, therefore, offers useful lessons on both successes and challenges in implementing participatory governance. In India, the establishment of Panchayati Raj Institutions-that is, local self-government bodies-has greatly enhanced the scale of citizen involvement at the grass roots (Banerjee, 2013). These constitutionally mandated institutions have allowed the people to take part in local self-government through gram panchayats, zilla parishads, and participatory modes of planning. There is sufficient evidence to the effect that Panchayati Raj has genuinely empowered the voiceless by having reservation of seats or quotas for women and lower castes (Rao and Raghunandan, 2011). Yet, serious aberrations remain, such as bureaucratic delays and capture by the local power elite.

The Bangladesh government has also set up participatory governance through the Union Parishads, local councils that were to spearhead people's participation in development at the grassroots level (Aminuzzaman, 2010). While such councils have been very successful in their efforts at ensuring community participation, they equally face challenges in the context of interference from political quarters, corruption, and resource constraints. Another key learning from Bangladesh is the need to build capacities of local government representatives and citizens on accessing knowledge and managing resources to meaningfully participate in governance processes (Uddin, 2019).

A comparison of these mechanisms with Praja Sabha in Sri Lanka indicates a certain trend of similarities and differences. Similar to the Panchayati Raj system, the Praja Sabhas too were an institution brought in through the process of decentralization as a means of taking governance closer to the people. However, while Panchayati Raj has been institutionalized through constitutional amendments, Praja Sabha remain largely advisory bodies with limited decision-making power (Pannilage, 2013). This lack of institutionalization has undermined the effectiveness of Praja Sabha, as they are often bypassed by higher levels of government.

**Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Citizen Engagement Mechanisms**

Country	Mechanism	Successes	Challenges
India	Panchayati Raj	Empowerment of marginalized groups	Bureaucratic delays, elite capture
Bangladesh	Union Parishads	Increased citizen participation in planning	Political interference, corruption
Sri Lanka	Praja Sabhas	Promotes local participation in theory	Limited authority, political patronage

## Research Gaps

While there is considerable literature on the theoretical underpinnings of citizen engagement, empirical studies that assess the actual effectiveness of engagement mechanisms in Sri Lanka are scarce. Most studies focus on the existence of these mechanisms without critically examining how they function in practice (Pannilage, 2013). There is a particular gap in understanding how socio-economic factors, such as caste and gender, influence the ability of different groups to participate in local governance. Additionally, while much attention has been paid to the role of Praja Sabha, there is limited research on other mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting and public consultations, and their impact on democratic participation.

There is a further need for comparative studies that would analyze how the mechanism of engagement in Sri Lanka fares in relation to mechanisms in other post-colonial democracies. While the experiences of India and Bangladesh offer useful benchmarks, the very particular political, social, and economic context of Sri Lanka raises a special need for a more tailored analysis concerning mechanisms of engagement within it.

## 3 Methodology

### Research Design

This qualitative research design is an exploration into the varied perspectives of local stakeholders on the effectiveness of different mechanisms for engaging citizens in Sri Lanka. The qualitative approach is particularly fitting for this study, as it sought to capture subjective experiences, attitudes, and beliefs among individuals within direct involvement or who directly experience engagement mechanisms (Brinkmann, 2013).

The study has been contextualized within the interpretivist paradigm, assuming that social realities emanate from interaction and experience (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). The paradigm underpins this current study, considering that it intends to find out how the participatory mechanisms are viewed and utilized by officials in local governments, representatives of civil society as well as members of the communities involved. In light of this interpretivist orientation, citizen participation in democracy must therefore be viewed as reflecting the subjective meanings attached to governance, power relations, and social relationships by active citizens themselves. This approach is informative in understanding how distinct stakeholders experience and react differently to those institutional mechanisms that ensure democratic involvement in Sri Lanka.

### Data Collection

In total, it consisted of 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including local government officials, civil society representatives, and community members. Semi-structured interviews were preferred because they provide a balance between pre-determined structure and flexibility; the researcher can explore certain themes at the same time adjusting to what the respondent perceives as relevant. Indeed, this format allows capturing

core research objectives, while participants may have the chance to offer personal experiences and perspectives in more open ways (Brinkmann, 2013).

The interview questions were designed to tap into the following areas:

1. Types of mechanisms of citizen engagement in place.
2. Perceived effectiveness of the mechanisms.
3. Participation barriers for various groups.
4. Recommendations for improvement in citizen engagement.

The purposive sampling strategy is used in the selection of the interviewees to make sure that the coverage is representative. This method is useful for qualitative research in which there is no focus on statistical representation but to gain insight into a specific target group (Berndt, 2020). Such a sample is drawn from different districts within Sri Lanka, focusing on both rural and urban areas. Rural areas were chosen with the knowledge that they often reflect higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and political marginalization compared to other areas. These are factors which can significantly impact the level of citizen engagement. Urban areas tend to have higher concentrations of civic infrastructure and are, therefore, useful to compare in terms of practices of engagement.

The participants for the survey were selected based on a three-step selection process:

- Identification of Local Government Units: The local government units, such as Pradeshiya Sabhas and Municipal Councils, were identified to contact for recruitment of participants.
- stakeholder mapping: Stakeholder mapping involves the identification of civil society groups and key community leaders actively engaged in local governance.
- Participant recruitment: We contacted possible interviewees through local networks and invited them to take part in the study. We were very aware of trying to involve marginal groups like women, ethnic minorities, and the lower castes as much as possible in order to ensure that there was a representative sample from Sri Lankan society.

#### 4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from interviews were thematically analyzed by using the Thematic Analysis approach, widely applied in qualitative research to identify, analyze, and report patterns occurring within data. It was chosen because this approach is flexible, allowing one to gain a particularly deep, rich understanding of either a small or comprehensive range of the research issue under analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted following several stages (Braun and Clarke, 2012):

1. Familiarization with the Data: The researcher transcribed all interviews and reviewed the transcripts multiple times to become thoroughly familiar with the data.



2. Initial coding: Through open coding, initial codes were given to the meaningful units of text - a statement or even an idea, for instance. Manual coding was done because such a process keeps the researcher in immediate contact with the data.
3. Identifying Themes: The initial codes were grouped into larger themes described as mechanisms of participation, hindrances to participation, and perceived effectiveness. All these themes have been selected because they are closely related to the research questions.
4. This involves revisiting the themes identified and checking that they are representative of the data, coherent internally, and coherent in relation to the other themes.
5. Naming and defining themes: Finally, each theme was defined and named, with sub-themes identified where necessary to capture more granular insights.

This was done systematically and in detail to unpack the issues that the participants identified. For example, barriers to participation contained sub-themes of political interference, lack of awareness, and social inequality-each representing ways in which different groups might encounter difficulties in engaging in local governance.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study had strict adherence to ethical guidelines in terms of the protection of participants' rights and welfare in research. Informed consent was sought in advance from all of the participants before conducting interviews. Full information pertaining to the purpose of the study was provided to each participant, and the nature of their participation was explained to them; further, it was made known that they could withdraw from the study at their own discretion, and it would entail absolutely no consequence (Barrow, Brannan and Khandhar, 2022).

Another essential factor of consideration was confidentiality. All data was anonymized, and any identifying information was not included in the final report or analysis. This was essential given the political sensitivity that might surround governance and civic participation in Sri Lanka during the research study. It had been guaranteed to the participants that their responses would be confidential and not shared with any third party.

Special attention was also accorded to the protection of vulnerable groups, such as women and ethnic minorities. Indeed, these are groups that stand at a higher risk of exploitation or marginalization in research, and more so in post-conflict societies like Sri Lanka (Uyangoda and Perera, 2017). In view of this, the researcher treated the participants with respect and ensured their participation would be voluntary and fully comprehended.

### **Methodological Limitations**

While the qualitative design had wide, rich, and in-depth insights regarding stakeholders' experiences, some limitations were also attached to it. One key limitation of this design is the generalizability of findings. Qualitative research per se is not meant to generalize to the population as quantitative studies do. Insights from these 30 interviews offer very useful information of the experiences of those stakeholders; however, the findings themselves represent or do not represent the views of all citizens in Sri Lanka.

Another limitation is the factor of controlling for the influence of political pressures from the outside environment. Dealing with governance and civic engagements in a sensitive societal atmosphere in Sri Lanka, there was the apprehension that some respondents, especially those within the government, might have provided responses which reflected positions taken by the official view rather than their honest opinion. The researcher attempted to mitigate this risk by building rapport with interviewees and ensuring that all interviews were conducted in a neutral, non-threatening environment.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data means that the findings are subject to the limitations of memory recall and personal biases (Brinkmann, 2013). However, by using a diverse sample and triangulating the data with secondary sources, the study aimed to present a balanced and accurate picture of the current state of citizen engagement in Sri Lanka.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

### Overview of Engagement Mechanisms

Through interviews conducted with local government officials, civil society representatives, and community members, three primary citizen engagement mechanisms were identified: Praja Sabha, participatory budgeting, and public consultations. The use of digital platforms, while discussed, remains in its infancy with actual practice at the local government level seldom found.

In terms of civic participation, Praja Sabhas are mentioned as the most common mechanism. It's supposed to be a way citizens have a say in what happens at the local level in terms of development, but there were mixed opinions on whether that actually occurred. One participant, from a local government perspective, even reported, "The Praja Sabha is one of those things that, in theory, is great, but practically speaking, it is often just a formality. We hold meetings, but usually, the decisions have been taken before the meeting discussions start." In light of that, a few comments from community members were regarding how, though they get invited to meetings, their inputs to drive real decisions scarcely materialize.

Other tools mentioned by some interviewees included participatory budgeting, especially in urban areas. Participatory budgeting refers to a process by which active citizens get a chance to decide on the distribution of public funds allocated for specific local projects. According to a civil society representative, "Participatory budgeting could help with the empowerment of the citizenry, but the problem lies with people knowing about it, and this process is many times controlled by an oligopoly of people occupying positions of power.

Other issues discussed included public consultations; the majority of those present acknowledged that while such fora indeed existed, they were essentially symbolic. As one of the community leaders present remarked, "We attend these consultations, but the decisions have already been made". It's just a way for the government to tick a box and say they have consulted us." The reliance on face-to-face meetings and paper-based forms of communication was

seen as outdated, particularly in an era where digital platforms could offer more efficient and inclusive methods of engagement.

Table 3 below summarizes the key engagement mechanisms identified, and their perceived effectiveness based on interview responses.

**Table 3: Overview of Citizen Engagement Mechanisms in Sri Lanka**

Mechanism	Description	Perceived Effectiveness	Key Issues Identified
<b>Praja Sabhas</b>	Village-level councils for community participation	Limited effectiveness due to political manipulation	Decisions made without citizen input
<b>Participatory Budgeting</b>	Citizens influence budget allocation	Potentially empowering, but poorly understood by the public	Dominated by elites, lack of awareness
<b>Public Consultations</b>	Forums for public feedback on governance issues	Symbolic; decisions often predetermined	Limited genuine consultation, superficial process
<b>Digital Platforms</b>	Online tools for engagement (rarely used)	Minimal effectiveness due to lack of implementation	Lack of training, low digital literacy

### Effectiveness of Mechanisms

The effectiveness of each engagement mechanism in fostering democratic participation was a recurring theme in the interviews. Although mechanisms such as Praja Sabha and participatory budgeting exist, their success in increasing meaningful citizen participation is limited by structural and procedural barriers.

In the case of Praja Sabha, several participants noted that these councils have increased the visibility of local governance issues but questioned their influence on decision-making. "We go to these meetings, but it feels like the decisions have already been made. It's just for show," said one community member. The lack of transparency and the perception that Praja Sabha are heavily influenced by local elites undermines their potential to serve as genuine platforms for civic engagement. This is a common challenge in post-colonial democracies, as noted by Fung (2006), where top-down governance structures often limit the autonomy of local participatory bodies.

Participatory budgeting also fundamentally shares many of the same shortcomings. A number of respondents in urban centers complained that people lacked information on how to participate in these processes. According to one CSO representative, "The process is there, but people don't understand how to get involved. It's often the same few people who control the process.". This aligns with findings in other developing democracies, such as India and

Brazil, where participatory budgeting has been effective in empowering marginalized communities but requires significant investment in public awareness and capacity building (Zamboni, 2007; Blair, 2020).

In contrast, public consultations were universally criticized for their tokenistic nature. While such consultations are mandated by law, many interviewees felt that they served more as a bureaucratic formality than as a genuine platform for engagement. As one local government official admitted, “We are required to hold consultations, but the decisions are made at the higher levels, and we rarely have the power to change them.”

### **Challenges and Barriers**

Several challenges and barriers to effective citizen participation were highlighted throughout the interviews, with the most prominent being political interference, socio-economic inequalities, and gender-based barriers.

Political interference was mentioned by almost all government officials and community members as a significant obstacle to meaningful engagement. One government official stated, “Even when we try to involve the community, there are always political pressures. Decisions are often influenced by local politicians who have their own agendas.” This challenge is not unique to Sri Lanka, as similar issues have been observed in other post-colonial democracies, where entrenched political elites manipulate participatory processes to maintain control (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003).

Socio-economic inequalities are also a big factor that hinders participation: many rural respondents felt that the most marginalized populations usually composed of low-income families, ethnic minorities, and people of lower case tend to be excluded most often from participatory processes. “It is the poorest people who do not have time to come for these meetings; they are too busy trying to survive,” explained a community leader. This is indicative of the larger challenge of enabling civic participation inclusively, especially in areas where economic inequality is high.

The barriers based on gender were important, too, as most of the female interviewees mentioned that often women are excluded from the process of participation in more conservative rural areas. To the questioned, one female community member reported, “Even if we attend meetings, our voices are not heard, as men make the decisions.” This agrees with the results established by global studies of participatory governance, showing that gender inequality remains one of the most persistent barriers to complete civic engagement.

### **Case Studies**

It profiles two case studies derived from interviews and uses them to illustrate varying degrees of success about citizen engagement in Sri Lanka.

Case Study 1: Praja Sabha Engaging with Success in Kalutara One Praja Sabha was focused on, within which this system had worked in the Kalutara district. In the words of a local government official, “We could involve a representative cross-section of all citizens, including women and the youth, in selecting local infrastructure



projects. The Praja Sabha worked because we allowed everybody to be heard and listened seriously to their suggestions." This was directly echoed by those in attendance from the community, as one participant said, "This was the first time our voices felt like they mattered. The roads that came up were of the ones that we asked for." This goes to illustrate a point, that conducted with earnest intent, Praja Sabha can facilitate real citizen involvement.

Case Study 2: Failure of Participatory Budgeting in Colombo on the other hand, one participatory budgeting in Colombo was cited to have failed. According to how it was described by a representative of civil society, "The process was dominated by the same small group of people who were already in power. That, too, happened without the rest of the community knowing it was happening." Consequently, funds became invested in projects that benefited only a few individuals and did not further the greater good for the larger community. The finding indicates that participatory mechanisms might easily fall victim to elite capture if the public is not more aware and wary.

### Comparative Insights

These themes seem to emerge when the Sri Lankan findings are compared to other post-colonial democracies: institutional support, raising public awareness, and capacity building are most crucial in order to enable participatory mechanisms to be more functional. Participatory governance indeed tended to work much better in parts of India and Bangladesh where local governments take up training and capacity building among officials and citizens alike (Banerjee, 2013; Uddin, 2019). This is one area where Sri Lanka is considerably behind, which can be evidenced in the low application of digital platforms to create engagement.

Several interviewees cited the role that digital platforms could play in improving citizen participation, although access is greater in urban centers. The general feeling remains, however, that Sri Lanka is not ready for such technologies. In the words of one local government official: "We don't have the training and neither do the citizens.". Where digital tools are concerned, great in theory, we would need proper support and training in place to host them effectively." This lack of digital literacy and infrastructure, coupled with limited political will, has stood in the way of the adoption of technology-based initiatives that could otherwise streamline and democratize the processes of engagement. As cited in various global literature, digital platforms have huge potential for triggering inclusivity and openness, provided effective change management strategies and capacity-building initiatives are put in place (Skoric *et al.*, 2016).

**Table 4: Summary of Key Themes Identified**

Theme	Description
<b>Political Interference</b>	Decisions often influenced by local politicians, undermining the democratic nature of engagement.

<b>Socio-Economic Inequalities</b>	Marginalized groups, including lower-income families and minorities, are often excluded.
<b>Gender-Based Barriers</b>	Women are frequently marginalized in civic participation, particularly in rural communities.
<b>Lack of Awareness</b>	Many citizens, especially in rural areas, are unaware of participatory mechanisms like budgeting.
<b>Limited Digital Infrastructure</b>	There is minimal use of digital platforms, largely due to a lack of training and digital literacy.

## 6 Conclusion

This study reviewed the initiatives undertaken related to mechanisms of citizen engagement, specifically Praja Sabha, participatory budgeting, and public consultations in Sri Lanka. While these can potentially deepen civic participation, the actual functioning of such mechanisms has been quite uneven. The Praja Sabha have achieved limited success because of political interference and a lack of genuine decision-making powers. Participatory budgeting remains underutilized or understood by ordinary citizens, while the public consultations usually become a formality rather than a real way of influence. The low levels of digital engagement contribute to these mechanisms being non inclusive and inaccessible.

These findings add to the theoretical understanding of aspects of participatory governance regarding the challenges to mechanisms of engagement in post-colonial, developing democracies. Indeed, the findings of this study confirm that theoretically sound decentralization and participatory democracy face severe implementation difficulties due to entrenched political structures and socio-economic inequalities, as manifested in Sri Lanka. These findings signal to the policymaker that what are needed are institutional reforms in the form of voice and space given to local councils, transparency, and development of institutional capacity at both the ends of government officials and citizens. Moreover, there is felt need for e-transformation in civic engagement, which needs to be properly complemented by training and infrastructure.

Qualitative in nature and based on interviews with a small sample of 30 participants, this may not be able to capture the full breadth of experiences of varied Sri Lankan citizens. Further, some interviewees might have been swayed by the political pressures coming from outside. Longitudinal studies or quantitative approaches in further research are required so as to measure the long-term effectiveness of citizen engagement mechanisms and facilitate a broader understanding of participation-related outcomes.

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