

Exploring Development Settings in Sri Lanka an Investigation of Communication Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

Following the end of Sri Lanka's three-decade-long conflict, the nation embarked on a challenging journey of post-conflict development and reconstruction. This study examines the critical role of communication and media in navigating the complexities of post-war development. Using phenomenological methods, the study presents a diagnostic analysis from a communication perspective, exploring the intricate political, economic, and social factors influencing post-conflict development management in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the research highlights the experiences of grassroots communities in employing communication tools to enhance good governance, poverty alleviation, and economic development initiatives. These findings highlight the importance of communication and media in empowering communities to actively participate in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes. They provide valuable insights into effective strategies for creating sustainable development in post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: Management of Development Process, Development Communication, Community Empowerment, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

With the end of the war that affected Sri Lanka for over 30 years, the country is now moving towards rapid social and economic development. However, a coherent strategy for managing post-conflict development and reconstruction is still not clearly defined. As international donors and multilateral agencies are increasingly involved in peacekeeping operations and conflict-related activities, effective approaches remain elusive, as Sumit (2004) has pointed out, and strategies adopted by other countries have often failed. Stewart (2006) further observed that, given the large number of affected countries and the desperate situations that many of these countries face, policy formulation for post-conflict countries is a pressing issue on the global development agenda. These challenges emphasize the need for strategies tailored to each nation's unique circumstances and local needs, with further research in this essential area.

Media and communication have historically played a vital role in national development, good governance, and post-conflict reconciliation, especially in post-conflict societies. Various studies have shown that communication and mass media can facilitate civil society in rebuilding democratic governance, holding authorities accountable, and fostering public participation in reconstruction and development efforts. In situations where national reconciliation is limited, the media can act as a creative force for social, economic, and political development (Putzel, Tames, Zawang, and Joost, 2006). The World Bank (2012) also notes that media and communication are crucial in post-conflict environments, contributing to poverty reduction and development by facilitating citizen dialogue, supporting governance reforms, and disseminating essential information.

Over the past decades, scholars have explored ways to use mass media as a platform for development beneficiaries to identify needs, plan, and implement initiatives. This study integrates the concept of development settings with communication ideals, documenting some of the earliest intersections between development and participatory communication. It examines the role of communication within the broader

context of political, economic, socio-cultural, and governance reforms necessary for rebuilding post-conflict societies.

Efforts to strengthen democracy and human development in Sri Lanka have, so far, seen limited success despite significant investment from both foreign and local resources over an extended period (World Bank, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2019; Uyangoda, 2012; Samaratunge, & Pillay, 2011; Weerasinghe, 2009). Many challenges have been identified, yet numerous underlying issues remain unaddressed. Communication, an essential component of human development and democratic processes, has not received adequate attention. UNESCO (2006) suggests that the potential of communication and mass media in development has not been fully realized by national political authorities or international development agencies. In Sri Lanka, historical narratives have rarely focused on the role of communication in development, likely because it has not been a significant element in development planning. Communication in development settings thus remains an underexplored area within Sri Lankan media studies (Weerasinghe, 2009). This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the root causes of failures in development programs from a communication perspective, while also examining how communication and media can be leveraged for poverty reduction at the grassroots level in Sri Lanka.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and media play a critical role in fostering sustainable development in post-conflict settings. This review explores the function of communication in good governance, poverty alleviation, and grassroots empowerment within Sri Lanka's socio-political context, emphasizing the transformative potential of participatory communication. It argues that incorporating communication strategies into development initiatives enhances transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, ultimately leading to long-term success.

Communication and Good Governance

Effective communication is essential for establishing good governance, particularly in post-conflict environments where rebuilding trust is a priority. Transparency is central to this process. Media platforms—both traditional and digital serve as vehicles for disseminating information about government initiatives, project milestones, and outcomes. Transparency enables beneficiaries to stay informed and actively monitor development projects, fostering greater accountability (World Bank, 2012).

Participatory communication offers communities opportunities to engage directly with policymakers and project implementers. Village forums, community discussions, and social media platforms create spaces for beneficiaries to voice their concerns and provide constructive feedback. These interactions not only enhance trust between stakeholders but also contribute to more responsive policy formulation, which is critical for post-conflict governance (Putzel, Tames, Zawang, & Joost, 2006).

In the context of Sri Lanka, communication has the potential to bridge the gap between decision-makers and grassroots communities, aligning governance with local needs. However, as UNESCO (2006) highlights, the communication aspect of governance often remains underutilized in development strategies, leaving room for improvement.

Communication in Poverty Alleviation

Poverty alleviation initiatives frequently struggle to achieve success when they lack effective communication strategies that actively engage and inform target communities. Communication is essential for ensuring that beneficiaries are well-informed about project goals, processes, and available resources (White, 2019). When communities are not adequately engaged through participatory communication, their needs, priorities, and challenges may be overlooked, leading to disengagement and a lack of ownership (Lennie & Tacchi, 2013).

Effective communication mechanisms also foster transparency and trust, which are crucial for the success of poverty reduction efforts (World Bank, 2021). Without these mechanisms, development projects are at risk of

being perceived as irrelevant or unresponsive to the local context, which can ultimately undermine their impact (UNESCO, 2006). Furthermore, communication enables the timely identification of challenges and opportunities for adaptation, ensuring that initiatives remain aligned with the evolving needs of the community (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006).

Thus, poverty alleviation efforts must incorporate strong, inclusive communication strategies to ensure that development goals are achieved and sustained. By involving communities in decision-making and addressing their concerns through transparent dialogue, projects are more likely to foster long-term empowerment and sustainable development (World Bank., 2015; Cornwall, 2008; Servaes, 2008; Narayan et al., 2000; Chambers, 1997).

Stewart (2006) argues that top-down development strategies often fail to consider the lived realities of the target communities, leading to objectives that are misaligned with local needs and yielding limited effectiveness. By integrating communication into development efforts, stakeholders can facilitate a meaningful exchange of ideas and feedback, allowing poverty alleviation initiatives to be adapted to the unique circumstances and priorities of the communities they aim to serve.

Community media such as community radio, posters, newsletters, and bulletin boards—serve as tools for disseminating practical information about available resources, training programs, and income-generation opportunities. Additionally, these platforms enable project implementers to gather feedback from beneficiaries, allowing for real-time adjustments to program strategies. According to Sumith (2004), such two-way communication is vital for the success of development projects in complex post-conflict environments.

Digital tools and information and communication technology (ICT) further amplify these efforts. Mobile applications, social media, and messaging platforms provide direct communication channels between project teams and beneficiaries, promoting inclusivity and responsiveness. For example, mobile surveys and virtual consultations can enhance the design and implementation of poverty alleviation programs, particularly in remote regions (World Bank, 2012).

Grassroots Empowerment Through Communication

Empowering communities to actively participate in their development is fundamental to achieving sustainable progress. Central to this empowerment is the role of communication, which provides individuals and groups with the skills, knowledge, and platforms necessary to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. Participatory communication fosters inclusivity by enabling grassroots stakeholders to express their needs, propose alternative solutions, and collaborate with implementers to shape development initiatives (UNESCO, 2006).

Scholars emphasize that participatory approaches promote a sense of ownership among community members, enhancing both the relevance and sustainability of projects (Servaes, 2020; Lennie & Tacchi, 2013). Furthermore, communication facilitates dialogue and collaboration, bridging gaps between diverse stakeholders and ensuring that marginalized voices are heard (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006). For instance, platforms like community media and participatory workshops have been shown to empower communities by creating spaces for interaction and problem-solving (Carpentier, 2021). These findings highlight the transformative potential of participatory communication in aligning development efforts with local realities and fostering long-term resilience. By equipping communities with tools for advocacy and collaboration, communication becomes a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable growth.

In Sri Lanka's post-conflict scenario, where communities have faced decades of marginalization and disruption, communication fosters resilience and collective action. Community media platforms, such as radio and television, provide avenues for sharing success stories, celebrating local achievements, and encouraging collaboration. These platforms also facilitate peer learning, where communities can exchange experiences and replicate effective practices (Weerasinghe, 2009; Putzel et al., 2006). Training programs that focus on communication skills such as public speaking, dialogue, negotiation, and active listening enhance beneficiaries' ability to engage meaningfully with development stakeholders. Empowered communities are

better equipped to advocate for their interests and hold project implementers accountable, contributing to more equitable development outcomes (Sumith, 2004).

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are vital for the effectiveness of development initiatives. Communication and media act as watchdogs in the development process, exposing corruption, inefficiency, and mismanagement. Media coverage of project activities ensures that resources are used responsibly and that beneficiaries are informed of progress and challenges (World Bank, 2012).

Feedback mechanisms, facilitated by digital communication platforms, further enhance accountability. Communities can report issues, provide suggestions, and highlight successes through accessible channels, creating a continuous feedback loop. These dynamic fosters trust between stakeholders and ensures that development initiatives remain aligned with community priorities (Stewart, 2006).

Integrating Communication into Development Strategies

Despite its transformative potential, communication is often treated as a peripheral element in development planning. Research underscores the need to integrate communication as a core component of development strategies. Structured communication plans, inclusive training programs, and participatory approaches are necessary to maximize the impact of communication in development (UNESCO, 2006).

Field officers and policymakers must be trained in communication facilitation, while beneficiaries should receive support to develop their own communication capabilities. These efforts ensure that development processes are inclusive, empowering all stakeholders to collaborate effectively (Putzel et al., 2006). The literature consistently highlights the transformative role of communication and media in post-conflict development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the intersection of communication, development processes, and governance in Sri Lanka. Phenomenology, as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), focuses on understanding human experiences by interpreting phenomena within their natural settings. This methodological framework allowed researchers to examine participants' lived experiences, revealing the meanings individuals ascribe to their social realities.

Phenomenology has been widely acknowledged for its ability to uncover the essence of human experiences in diverse contexts. According to Moustakas (1994) and Giorgi (1985), phenomenological research emphasizes participants' perceptions and sense-making processes. The approach incorporates interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to engage deeply with participants and capture the subjective essence of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). This framework is especially relevant in development studies, where the exploration of grassroots perspectives is essential for understanding complex socio-political phenomena.

Data for this study were collected using multiple qualitative methods. In-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) provided insights into community members' perspectives on development practices and governance. These methods facilitated the exploration of personal narratives, motivations, and behaviors. As Lester (1999) suggested, such approaches are effective for capturing the richness of participants' lived experiences. Additionally, participant observation enabled the researcher to witness firsthand the dynamics of communication and decision-making processes within development initiatives.

Consultations with diverse stakeholders including government officials, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), development practitioners, and public representatives added depth to the analysis. These consultations highlighted how governance structures and communication strategies influence development outcomes at both the grassroots and policy levels. The inclusion of opinion leaders and decision-makers further provided a nuanced understanding of their roles in shaping governance and development efforts.

The study spanned all nine provinces of Sri Lanka, examining regional variations in development strategies and their outcomes. Field evaluations of grassroots development projects revealed key lessons and contributed to the formulation of evidence-based recommendations. By focusing on these diverse settings, the research aimed to distill insights applicable across Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape.

As Husserl (1970) proposed, phenomenology requires a “return to the things themselves,” emphasizing the importance of understanding lived experiences in their purest form. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) assertion that knowledge arises from examining these experiences directly. Kleiman (2004) further advocates for combining interpretive and descriptive methodologies to uncover deeper meanings in participants’ accounts. This dual approach was instrumental in analyzing the interactions between communication, governance, and development processes in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, the study leveraged a phenomenological framework to articulate diverse viewpoints and experiences. By integrating grassroots perspectives with insights from policymakers and experts, it provided a comprehensive understanding of how communication strategies influence development processes. These findings offer valuable guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enhance governance and development outcomes in post-conflict settings.

DISCUSSION

This study employed a multi-method approach to examine development practices and governance across Sri Lanka’s nine provinces, utilizing qualitative methodologies to capture diverse stakeholder perspectives. A total of 117 interviews, 16 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and 102 consultations were conducted with community members, development practitioners, government officials, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), policymakers, and experts. These methods provided a comprehensive analysis of how communication and governance influence development outcomes, particularly at the grassroots level.

The study highlighted the significant regional disparities in development practices and outcomes across Sri Lanka's provinces. FGDs with community members revealed diverse perspectives on development challenges, while in-depth interviews with community leaders and influential figures provided insights into governance structures. Observations during field visits further contextualized these findings, offering real-time examples of operational practices, decision-making, and communication flows within grassroots initiatives. This triangulated data collection approach ensured a nuanced understanding of grassroots development dynamics.

Key Dimensions of Grassroots Development

Socioeconomic and Structural Features

Sri Lanka’s grassroots development faces significant constraints due to economic instability, political challenges, and structural limitations. As of 2023, approximately 31% of the population lives in poverty, with rural areas—where 80% of Sri Lankans reside—disproportionately affected (World Bank, 2023). Limited infrastructure, restricted access to essential services, and insufficient employment opportunities exacerbate the socioeconomic hardships in these regions (UNDP, 2023).

One major barrier to development is the persistent digital divide. Nationally, only 50% of Sri Lankans have consistent internet access, with rural areas experiencing significantly lower connectivity rates compared to urban centers (ITU, 2023). This disparity restricts opportunities for digital literacy, e-governance, and access to essential services, thereby widening the gap between rural and urban communities. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, including the expansion of infrastructure, improvements in rural connectivity, and the promotion of digital literacy programs to ensure inclusive development.

Economic Crisis and Poverty

The 2022 economic crisis severely affected the socio-economic stability of Sri Lanka. The crisis, fueled by high debt, depleted foreign reserves, and high inflation, led to food, fuel, and medicine shortages, worsening

living standards. Poverty increased, especially among low-income families struggling to meet basic needs. About a third of households were affected during the crisis period, and food insecurity became widespread. These challenges underscore the need for strong, inclusive poverty reduction strategies to address both immediate and long-term vulnerabilities.

Employment and Sectoral Impacts

The economic downturn disrupted key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing, which are critical to Sri Lanka's economy. Tourism, already weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic, faced further decline due to political unrest. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the backbone of the economy, experienced closures and job losses, exacerbating unemployment. These disruptions particularly affected rural communities reliant on agriculture and small-scale industries, highlighting the importance of targeted support for these sectors (International Labour Organization, 2023; Asian Development Bank, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Reports from UNICEF (2022), UNDP (2022), and the Food and Agriculture Organization & World Food Programme (2023) highlight those reductions in public spending on education and healthcare during Sri Lanka's economic crisis have disproportionately impacted low-income families. The rising costs of private sector services rendered essential healthcare and education inaccessible for many, forcing children to leave school prematurely to support household incomes. This trend has led to increased dropout rates, disrupting educational attainment and limiting future economic opportunities. Such setbacks carry long-term consequences for intergenerational mobility, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Grassroots Development

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sevalanka Foundation, Child Fund Sri Lanka, Save the Children, WUSC, SEEDS, World Vision Lanka, Habitat for Humanity Sri Lanka and SERVE alongside Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) like USAID and Partner CSOs, UNDP and partner CSOs, Caritas Sri Lanka (SEDEC), Transparency International Sri Lanka, Center for Policy Alternatives, National Peace Council, Red Cross Sri Lanka and Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities (FSLGA), have been instrumental in addressing gaps in grassroots development. Their contributions span areas including poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, and social empowerment.

These organizations work directly with marginalized communities, implementing targeted programs to enhance access to basic services and promote sustainable livelihoods. For instance, Sarvodaya emphasizes community-driven development and education, while Sevalanka focuses on rural economic empowerment. Similarly, CSOs like Transparency International advocate for governance reforms that directly impact grassroots progress, ensuring accountability and equity in resource distribution.

This collaboration between NGOs and CSOs has proven vital in bridging systemic gaps and fostering inclusive growth at the grassroots level, particularly during times of economic crisis and political instability.

Poverty Alleviation and Economic Empowerment

Organizations such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement and Habitat for Humanity Sri Lanka have implemented community-driven initiatives, including microfinance programs, skill development, and affordable housing solutions, to improve livelihoods. These efforts have enabled sustainable economic empowerment for marginalized communities, although challenges remain in scaling these initiatives for broader impact.

Education and Skill Development

NGOs like the Foundation of Goodness and Room to Read have focused on education and skill development, particularly for underprivileged youth in rural areas. These programs have enhanced digital literacy, provided scholarships, and promoted gender equality in education, equipping young people with the tools to break the cycle of poverty. The Foundation of Goodness operates in Sri Lanka with the aim of addressing disparities

between urban and rural communities, particularly through its multifaceted development initiatives. These efforts encompass a wide range of sectors, including education, healthcare, livelihood support, and environmental sustainability. Notably, the Foundation's Village Heartbeat Empowerment Centres (20 centers nationwide) provide free services, including vocational training, information technology (IT) literacy, and sports development. These programs, which have reached over 135,000 beneficiaries in 2023, target underserved communities to foster skill development and enhance social participation. Additionally, the organization runs "Ocean Care," a program focused on coastal preservation and sustainable waste management. Room to Read operates in Sri Lanka with a focus on improving literacy rates and promoting gender equality within the education system. The organization partners with schools to establish libraries, distribute books, and provide teacher training, thereby strengthening educational infrastructure. A significant aspect of its work includes initiatives aimed at ensuring girls can complete secondary education, addressing barriers such as early school dropout and gender bias in education. By concentrating on reading proficiency and the development of life skills, Room to Read has made substantial strides in transforming educational opportunities for thousands of children in Sri Lanka. These efforts align with global objectives of fostering inclusive and equitable education, directly contributing to the improvement of academic outcomes and gender parity in the region.

Healthcare and Environmental Sustainability

Healthcare-focused NGOs, including the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, have provided essential services during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Environmental organizations like the Environmental Foundation Limited have worked on biodiversity conservation and disaster resilience, addressing the intersection of environmental challenges and development.

Communication and Development: Enhancing Community Engagement

A critical finding of this study was the limited engagement of community members in development planning, monitoring, implementation, evaluation and decision-making processes. Many individuals perceive their circumstances as predetermined, often influenced by religious or fatalistic beliefs, which discourages active participation in development initiatives. Family dynamics also contribute to this problem, as hierarchical structures and poor communication skills hinder open dialogue about development and self-improvement (FGD1, FGD2, FGD13, FGD14; personal communication with community members).

Structural Challenges in Development Implementation

Development initiatives often fail to address these communication barriers. Development planners typically design projects based on external assessments, with minimal input from the communities they aim to serve. This top-down approach creates a disconnect between project objectives and community needs. For example, field officers hold meetings at inconvenient times, disrupting the livelihoods of daily wage earners, and fail to engage in meaningful discussions with beneficiaries. As a result, projects often lack relevance and fail to achieve sustainable results (FGD 7, FGD 9, FGD 10, FGD 14 and FGD 16; personal communication with community members, development professionals, government officials; Weerasinghe, 2009).

Development project implementation is often hampered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and biased beneficiary selection processes. Decisions are frequently influenced by local opinion leaders and politicians, leading to the exclusion of marginalized groups. The centralized, rigid structure of many initiatives prevents adaptation to community-specific needs, while limited beneficiary involvement undermines the effectiveness of projects (FGD1, FGD 10, FGD 13, FGD 15, Personal Communication with community members, opinion leaders and experts).

In contrast, the "Gamidiriyaya" project, which aimed to empower communities by granting them decision-making authority, faced significant challenges. Hettiarachchi (2011) explains that the Gamidiriyaya project is a community development program designed to improve livelihoods, strengthen local governance, and promote socio-economic development in rural areas of Sri Lanka. Launched in 2004 with support from the World Bank,

the project focuses on empowering communities through infrastructure development, capacity building, and strengthening village-level institutions.

Central to the project's approach is the decentralization of decision-making, improving the accountability of local governments, and facilitating greater access to resources for rural populations. The project has incorporated community-driven development, vocational training, and support for small-scale livelihood activities, which have played an instrumental role in addressing rural poverty (Hettiarachchi, 2011). Additionally, it has contributed to environmental sustainability by engaging local communities in conservation efforts and resource management (Gunasinghe, 2009).

Furthermore, the project has focused on enhancing the financial autonomy of communities by improving access to funding for innovative development projects, fostering local economic growth and resilience (Kleiven, 2011). These strategies have underscored the importance of community involvement in sustainable development and have provided valuable insights for other rural development projects across Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi, 2011).

According to participants involved in the Gamidiriya Project, issues such as lengthy and unfocused meetings, coupled with existing social conflicts, significantly hindered effective collective decision-making, ultimately leading to low community engagement. These challenges, along with the lack of foundational communication skills and insufficient platforms for open dialogue, have undermined the success of participatory models. Without the necessary communication infrastructure to foster collaborative problem-solving and ensure active participation, such development initiatives struggle to achieve meaningful and sustained outcomes. The ability to facilitate effective communication and resolve conflicts is therefore a critical factor for the success of community-driven development projects (FGD3, FGD 10, FGD 12, FGD 15, Personal Communication with community members and opinion leaders).

Monitoring, Evaluation, Follow-up, and Adaptive Improvement in Grassroots Development Projects

Effective monitoring, evaluation, follow-up, and adaptive improvement are integral to the success and sustainability of grassroots development projects (Harvard, 2023; Ramalingam, et al., 2019; Escoffery et al., 2018; Wills et al., 2016). Typically, implementing organizations are responsible for oversight, relying on regional and field officers to ensure project activities align with predetermined goals. Monitoring processes often utilize tools specified in project proposals, but these tend to be limited to routine reporting. This narrow scope often fails to identify significant issues such as corruption, inefficiencies, or irregularities arising during implementation (FGD 1, FGD 2, FGD 10; Personal Communication opinion leaders and development practitioners).

A major shortcoming of such monitoring practices is the minimal involvement of beneficiaries (FGD 2, FGD 12, FGD 10; Personal Communication with opinion leaders and beneficiaries). Evaluations conducted at the end of projects often replicate this pattern, further excluding beneficiary voices. Moreover, once projects conclude, there is usually no follow-up mechanism to assess their sustainability or address challenges that emerge post-implementation (Personal communication with beneficiaries, opinion leaders and development practitioners). This lack of engagement and adaptive support leaves beneficiaries to navigate unanticipated issues independently, often resulting in project abandonment. Sustained support, in the form of advice, resources, and capacity-building, is crucial for beneficiaries, particularly as they contend with socio-cultural dynamics, environmental challenges, and economic volatility. Without external guidance, many revert to pre-project conditions, eroding the impact of development initiatives.

Sensitivity to Local Conditions and Socio-Cultural Realities

Development projects targeting low-income beneficiaries often ignore the complex realities of their home environments and local cultural contexts. Government field officers and development specialists, who are responsible for providing guidance, often lack sufficient sensitivity to local realities and traditional knowledge. This disconnect fosters distrust and incompatibility among beneficiaries (Weerasinghe, 2023; Chambers, 2014; Uyangoda, 2012).

These realities encompass diverse socio-cultural and environmental factors that significantly influence project outcomes. Key aspects such as family dynamics, health, nutrition, religious beliefs, traditions, social structures, and conflicts related to caste, class, ethnicity, or religion shape the capacity of beneficiaries to sustain project outcomes (FGD 4, FGD 5, FGD 10; Personal Communication with opinion leaders and politicians and development planners).

For instance, geographical and climatic factors can directly impact livelihoods and income sources, yet development agencies frequently overlook these considerations. A lack of sensitivity to these conditions undermines project success. Effective communication and an in-depth understanding of the specific socio-cultural and environmental challenges faced by beneficiaries are essential for creating interventions that resonate with local realities. Without this alignment, development projects are unlikely to achieve their intended goals or deliver long-lasting benefits.

Challenges in Microfinance and Financial Management

Microfinance loans, a common component of grassroots development, often fail to achieve their intended impact due to beneficiaries limited financial literacy (FGD 3, FGD 8, FGD 10; Personal Communication with opinion leaders). Accustomed to short-term loans for immediate consumption needs, many beneficiaries struggle to allocate borrowed funds effectively. As a result, loans are frequently used for daily expenses rather than productive investments, leading to repayment challenges and cycles of debt.

Grassroots development banks, despite offering formal financial services, often impose stringent regulations and cumbersome processes, deterring low-income individuals from accessing them. This gap drives beneficiaries to private moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates, exacerbating financial instability (Personal Communication with development practitioners, community members and beneficiaries). The absence of savings habits and limited financial management skills further constrain beneficiaries' ability to improve their economic standing (Ansar et al., 2023; Simpson, 2021; The Borgen Project, 2021). Addressing these issues requires targeted financial literacy programs and accessible, supportive banking mechanisms tailored to the needs of grassroots communities.

Sanitation, Nutrition, and Health Deficiencies

Sanitation, nutrition, and health represent critical challenges for low-income communities, with far-reaching implications for quality of life and economic productivity (Barrett, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2021; WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Poor sanitation infrastructure fosters unhygienic practices, increasing vulnerability to infectious diseases. Nutritional deficiencies, common in these communities, result in physical weakness and heightened susceptibility to illnesses, further exacerbated by inadequate access to healthcare (FGD 1, FGD 3, FGD 4, FGD 11, FGD 12; Personal Communication with project beneficiaries and development practitioners).

Mental health, while equally important, is often overlooked. Poverty, instability, and chronic stress related to illness contribute to mental health challenges, but appropriate support mechanisms are rarely in place. The lack of integration between sanitation, nutrition, health services, and mental health services perpetuates a cycle of poverty and poor health. Effective interventions require a comprehensive approach, including improved sanitation facilities, affordable and nutritious food options, and mental health support within community health initiatives.

Addressing interconnected issues such as sanitation, nutrition, and health requires a multi-faceted approach that incorporates communication and community media strategies to enhance individual well-being and strengthen community resilience. Research shows that when communities are actively involved in the development and dissemination of information, they are more likely to engage in positive behavioral changes, which ultimately improve health outcomes and socio-economic conditions (Pearce, 2020; Garnett & Hendricks, 2017).

Facilitating communication development through community media such as community radio, social media platforms, and community workshops can ensure that critical health and sanitation messages reach vulnerable populations in an accessible manner. By fostering inclusive dialogues, these initiatives enable community members to share local knowledge, raise concerns, and collectively address challenges related to hygiene, food security, and access to health services (MacDonald & Buontempo, 2019).

Moreover, community media can serve as a platform for discussing nutrition education, mobilizing local resources, and creating support networks that bolster community resilience. For instance, nutrition education through community-based communication has proven to be effective in improving dietary choices, reducing malnutrition, and promoting sustainable health practices (Horne & Coles, 2021).

Thus, integrating community-driven communication strategies into development initiatives not only enhances individual health and sanitation but also builds the collective capacity of communities to address their challenges and thrive in the face of adversity (Ochieng & Kimani, 2021).

Technology, Market Access, and Trust in Advisory Services

Access to modern technology, efficient markets, and reliable advisory services is vital for empowering grassroots communities, yet significant barriers persist in these areas (FAO, 2023). Farmers, small entrepreneurs, and self-employed individuals often lack access to direct markets, forcing reliance on intermediaries who erode their profit margins. Additionally, limited knowledge of market dynamics and poor marketing skills further constrain their ability to compete effectively (FGD 2, FGD 3, FGD 5, FGD 8, FGD 17; Personal Communication with project beneficiaries, policy makers and development practitioners).

Modern technologies and digital tools, which hold the potential to revolutionize productivity, remain out of reach for many grassroots communities due to financial and training barriers (Chowdhury et al., 2020; World Bank, 2018). Similarly, inefficiencies in advisory services undermine efforts to provide timely, relevant support (FGD 3, FGD 4, FGD 5, FGD 8, FGD 11; Personal Communication with project beneficiaries and policy makers).

Corruption and irregularities in project implementation exacerbate these challenges. For example, problems with the delivery of agricultural inputs or infrastructure projects undermine community trust in development agencies. Transparency and accountability are essential to restore trust and ensure the integrity of grassroots initiatives (Fox, 2015; Gaventa & McGee, 2013).

Towards Holistic Solutions

Addressing the complex challenges faced by grassroots communities requires a multifaceted and adaptive approach. To address these challenges, this study proposes the following recommendations:

- 1. Strengthening Communication Skills:** Equipping community members with interpersonal and group communication skills can enhance their participation in development initiatives. Platforms such as community radio and social media can facilitate open, inclusive discussions on development needs and priorities.
- 2. Inclusive Planning Processes:** Community members should be involved from the planning stage to evaluation stage of development projects, ensuring that initiatives align with domestic needs and aspirations. Participatory methods and needs assessments can create greater community ownership and relevance.
- 3. Improved Beneficiary Selection:** Transparent and impartial processes for selecting beneficiaries can ensure that resources are allocated to those who need them most. Mechanisms for community feedback can improve accountability and enhance the effectiveness of projects. Communication channels and community media play a vital role in facilitating this process.

4. **Capacity Building for Sustainability:** Development projects should focus on communication and digital skill building for self-employment, small business development, and value addition. Emphasizing talent retention and scaling efforts can enhance the long-term impact of initiatives.
5. **Collaborative Governance:** Strengthening partnerships between state and non-state actors, including NGOs, civil society organizations and community organizations, can address gaps in resources and expertise. Collaborative and communication approaches can improve the scale and sustainability of development interventions.
6. **Improving Monitoring and Evaluation:** Involving beneficiaries in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation processes ensures that their perspectives influence project outcomes and increases accountability. Media and communication tools can serve as coordinators, organizers, agenda-setters, platforms for dialogue, and watchdogs in this process.
7. **Building Financial Literacy:** Providing training in financial management and facilitating access to flexible banking services can empower beneficiaries to use resources effectively. Communication tools and community media play a key role in raising awareness about these opportunities.
8. **Integrating Health and Sanitation Interventions:** Coordinating efforts to address hygiene, nutrition, and health care issues, including mental health support, can improve overall well-being and economic stability. Community media can play a key role in empowering community members to adopt healthy lifestyles.
9. **Promoting Market Access and Technology:** Communication tools, ICTs and community media help establish direct market links and expand access to modern technologies, while training can boost productivity and competitiveness.
10. **Enhancing Trust and Transparency:** Community media can play a crucial role in strengthening the accountability of development agencies by providing a platform for transparency, feedback, and public scrutiny. By empowering local communities to express needs, share experiences, and engage in dialogue, community media fosters greater responsiveness from development actors. In addition, offering culturally sensitive advisory services that respect local customs and knowledge can help rebuild trust and enhance community participation. This approach promotes long-term collaboration and mutual respect, ensuring that development efforts are more aligned with the needs and values of the community. Through these measures, grassroots development projects can move beyond short-term interventions to create sustainable, transformative impacts that address the multifaceted realities of low-income communities.

CONCLUSION

Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explored the lived experiences of stakeholders, offering deep insights into governance, grassroots development, and the role of communication in fostering good governance and poverty alleviation. Data from in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions revealed the importance of tailoring development strategies to local socio-cultural and environmental realities, ensuring interventions resonate with the needs and contexts of communities.

This study underscores the vital role of communication and media in advancing post-conflict development in Sri Lanka. Acting as a bridge between development initiatives and beneficiary participation, communication promotes transparency, accountability, and inclusivity cornerstones of sustainable progress. The findings demonstrate the transformative potential of participatory communication strategies in empowering communities to take active roles in planning, implementing, and evaluating development projects. Recognizing communication as an integral component of development planning is essential for addressing systemic challenges and achieving enduring success in post-conflict settings.

Grassroots development projects in Sri Lanka face multifaceted challenges, including limited community engagement, structural inequalities, economic instability, and gaps in financial literacy. Additional barriers, such as deficiencies in sanitation, nutrition, health, market access, and modern technology, further impede progress. Systemic shortcomings in monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up mechanisms exacerbate these challenges, leading to ineffective and unsustainable outcomes.

Addressing these interconnected issues requires a holistic approach that integrates communication strategies with practical interventions. Key measures include fostering participatory dialogue, enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems, building financial literacy, upgrading health and sanitation infrastructure, and improving access to modern technology and markets. Prioritizing community participation and rebuilding trust through culturally sensitive advisory services are equally critical.

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