Community Empowerment and Equitable Access to Social Rights When Participation is Unequal

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ABSTRACT

Social work values community empowerment for advancing social rights. Still, participation can add to the burden on people who already face exclusion. This conceptual article examines when empowerment improves equitable access to social protection and when it makes access contingent on organized voice. This purposive synthesis brings human rights-based social work into dialogue with scholarship on participation, administrative burden, and collective policy practice. The analysis distinguishes two routes through which collective action can influence access: assistance that helps claimants navigate existing procedures, and institutional changes that reduce barriers for a wider eligible population. It argues that equity depends on whether improvements extend to people who cannot or choose not to participate in collective activities. The framework separates collective influence from routine institutional accessibility and develops four propositions on institutional reform, representation, unpaid participation, and organisational dependence. A bounded illustration considers the relevance of these distinctions to Sri Lanka without presenting country evidence as a test. The article contributes a distributional criterion for evaluating empowerment and identifies implications for social work practice and comparative research on the realisation of social rights.

Keywords: community empowerment; social rights; social equity; administrative burden; social work

INTRODUCTION

Social equity requires more than an opportunity to speak. A person may be entitled to support yet unable to attend a community meeting, assemble an effective claim or persuade an intermediary to act. If organized participation makes assistance easier to obtain, people with the least time, security, or administrative resources may remain excluded. Community empowerment therefore raises a distributional question for social work: under what conditions do gains in collective influence improve access to social rights for people beyond the participating group?

The relationship between community action and rights is well established. Ife (2009) situates human rights achievement within community development, while Gatenio Gabel (2024) links rights-based social work to participation and changes in care systems. Recent syntheses also connect rights, empowerment and institutional outcomes. Noh (2022) finds considerable variation in how human rights-based approaches are operationalised and reports that individual and programme changes receive more attention than structural changes. Pace and Gatenio Gabel (2025) identify community organisation as one area through which such approaches may contribute to empowerment. These contributions make a general assertion that empowerment promotes rights, which is insufficient as a new theoretical claim.

This article develops a narrower argument about the distribution of access. Empowerment can help people negotiate with an unchanged institution, or it can help change how the institution serves a wider population. The first route may offer indispensable support to households. The second can change the conditions under which people who never participate in advocacy can access assistance. Treating these routes as equivalent obscures whether an intervention improves public provision or makes successful access depend on repeated community

mediation. Their distinction also clarifies why a programme can strengthen participants' confidence while leaving the underlying distribution of access largely intact.

Administrative burden research provides a vocabulary for examining this problem. Learning, compliance, and psychological costs shape how people experience government, and how institutions and residents allocate them reflects political choices (Moynihan et al., 2015). Halling and Baekgaard (2024) synthesise evidence that burdens have distributive consequences and identify third parties as an area requiring further attention. Social work scholarship contributes a complementary account of collective policy engagement. Einhorn et al. (2026) show how German welfare associations can act as intermediaries in policy practice while pursuing their own organisational priorities. Bringing these arguments together permits a more specific analysis of how organised voice changes access and whose access changes.

The article advances a normative claim and a set of empirical expectations. The normative claim is that a person's access to a recognised social entitlement should not depend on joining collective activities or publicly claiming deservingness. Participation remains a right and a potentially transformative practice. The empirical expectations concern whether particular forms of participation alter procedures, distribute work and extend benefits beyond active members. These expectations are contingent on public capacity and political conditions; they do not establish that community organisations can compensate for inadequate provision.

The contribution is a framework that separates collective influence from routine institutional accessibility and evaluates the reach of improvements across participating and nonparticipating residents. The primary domain is publicly organised social protection, including income support and related welfare services. Sri Lanka provides a bounded policy illustration rather than a case study or a basis for generalising to other countries. The argument matters to social workers who combine assistance with advocacy and must judge whether immediate help contributes to broader institutional change.

Conceptual approach and scope

The article uses theory synthesis to explain a specified problem rather than estimate an intervention effect. Following Jaakkola (2020), the article makes the analytical roles of the contributing literatures explicit. Human rights-based social work provides a normative orientation toward rights holders and public obligations. Participation and empowerment scholarship explains collective influence and the unequal social conditions that shape it. Administrative burden research identifies mechanisms through which institutional arrangements affect access. Recent work on collective policy practice connects these mechanisms to social work organisations and representation.

Source identification was purposive. In October 2026, we conducted targeted public web searches and checked publisher pages, author repositories, and United Nations and World Bank sources, with final verification on 23 October. Searches combined community empowerment or collective action with social rights, participation, administrative burden, welfare access and social work policy practice. We prioritised recent work published in 2022–2026; we retained earlier sources to establish concepts already developed in the field. We also considered references linked to relevant sources. Selection depended on explanatory relevance to unequal participation, mechanisms of access or institutional accountability, rather than on the direction of a reported result.

This is not a systematic or scoping review. We make no claim to comprehensive database coverage, reproducible screening totals, or pooled evidence. We used publisher abstracts where full texts were unavailable; claims from those records are limited to their stated scope or reported abstract-level findings. The reviewing authors attribute review findings and do not treat them as independent verification of the studies they included. The analysis proceeds by distinguishing constructs, comparing mechanisms, considering contrary evidence and deriving propositions with observable implications. The selection process limits claims about the mechanisms' prevalence and the literature's completeness.

The scope requires two further distinctions. First, social rights are normative claims concerning protection and dignity; statutory eligibility is the administratively recognised entitlement under a particular scheme. The latter can be unjustly narrow. This article examines access among eligible people while keeping separate the question

of whether eligibility rules themselves exclude people whose needs should be protected. Improved take-up cannot settle that question. Secondly, collective participation means involvement in organising, consultation or advocacy. It is distinct from applying for a benefit or receiving a service. The argument does not assume that every verification procedure can be eliminated or that it can resolve all debates about welfare conditionality.

Rights and empowerment under unequal participation

Rights as an institutional obligation

A rights-based approach gives public action a different justificatory basis from discretionary generosity. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2006) relates development practice to rights holders, duty bearers, participation and accountability. Within this orientation, empowerment aims to make institutional obligations contestable. It cannot be confined to increasing an individual's willingness to cope with an exclusionary arrangement. For social work, this means asking what public bodies are expected to provide, which decisions can be challenged, and whose experiences inform the organisation of support.

Formal recognition nevertheless leaves substantial questions unresolved. Gauri and Gloppen (2012) distinguish forms of rights-based action and discuss problems in legal mobilisation, including capture and compliance. Rights language does not specify who will obtain an effective remedy, how much it will cost to pursue, or whether an institutional response will extend to comparable people. These questions matter most when access is achieved through exceptional intervention. A successful appeal can correct a serious wrong while leaving other claimants exposed to the same administrative practice.

De Schutter's (2022) report on non-take-up locates access within a rights approach and calls for simpler procedures, improved information and the involvement of people experiencing poverty. The present argument builds on that connection. It focuses on the relationship between involvement and the reach of the resulting improvement. The right to help shape a programme should not create an expectation that every person must participate in shaping it before receiving support. Administrative arrangements must therefore protect access while also providing opportunities for collective influence.

Empowerment beyond attendance

Community empowerment is understood as an increase in people's collective ability to influence decisions affecting their lives. Attendance, training completion, and membership may contribute to this ability, but none establishes influence on its own. Rowlands (1997) shows why empowerment requires attention to power in relationships and wider social interactions. An organisation can attract participants while funders, officials, or established local leaders control its agenda. Conversely, an association may secure a procedural change that benefits residents with no direct contact with it. The appropriate unit of analysis must therefore include decisions, their consequences, and activities.

Participation is socially differentiated. Cornwall (2008) argues for specifying who participates, in what and for whose benefit. Applied to welfare access, these questions require attention to people who are absent from community processes. Absence can reflect choice, temporary crisis, distrust, inaccessible arrangements or an inability to participate safely. This does not show that a person has fewer legitimate needs. Nor should nonparticipation be treated as a permanent personal characteristic. The same resident may organise actively at one point and depend on others' advocacy during illness or a period of intensive care work.

Participatory service arrangements also have costs. Using Danish vignette experiments, Thomsen et al. (2020) identify psychological costs associated with encouraged coproduction and higher costs among people with lower self-efficacy. Their study does not establish the effects of community organising, which differs from co-production. It nevertheless challenges an assumption that invitations to contribute are necessarily experienced as empowering. In social protection, a meeting may offer influence while also requiring travel, unpaid time and disclosure of personal circumstances. The key question is whether its design expands feasible choices and whether declining involvement penalises access.

An emphasis on collective participation must also recognise internal inequalities. Representatives may need resources, language skills and sustained availability that other residents lack. Their ability to secure a hearing can coexist with weak accountability to those they represent. Empowerment should consequently be assessed at two levels: whether a collective actor gains influence over an institution, and whether people affected by its decisions can influence or challenge that actor. A gain at the first level cannot establish a gain at the second.

Administrative burden as a mechanism of unequal access

Administrative burden connects these concerns to specific encounters. Learning costs arise from discovering a programme and understanding its rules; compliance costs come from meeting procedural demands; psychological costs include distress, stigma, and loss of autonomy during those encounters (Moynihan et al., 2015). The burdens people experience depends on both institutional requirements and their circumstances. The same paperwork can impose very different demands on a resident with secure employment and reliable transport than on someone managing illness or unstable income.

Recent studies illustrate why a single explanation of non-take-up is inadequate. Negoita et al. (2024) reports that older adults navigating the US Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program faced overlapping crises that affected information-seeking and planning. Holler et al. (2024) examine the additional work Israeli claimants face when they encounter administrative errors. These studies concern different programmes and cannot establish universal effects. They show why it is necessary to examine the stage at which an entitlement becomes difficult to realise, including after an initial claim has been accepted.

The distribution of this work can itself reproduce inequality. Herd and Moynihan (2025) theorise administrative processes as mechanisms that organise gender relations, including the transfer of unpaid reproductive labour. This matters when community programmes rely on residents to explain rules, accompany neighbours and coordinate missing services. If those tasks become an enduring substitute for administrative support, an apparent increase in community capacity can conceal an increase in unpaid work. An assessment must consider who performs the work, under what conditions, and what alternatives exist.

Evidence also cautions against assuming that burdens always reduce engagement in the same way. Nielsen and Nielsen (2024) find associations between perceived burdens and more active intended encounter behaviour in Danish tax and home care settings. Yang and Wang (2025), studying China's minimum living standard scheme, report different associations for learning, compliance and psychological costs, with the latter not significantly related to participation in their analysis. These findings support a contingent explanation. Some people challenge burdens, some seek intermediaries, and others disengage; increased activism alone is not evidence that an institution has become accessible.

A framework linking collective influence and institutional access

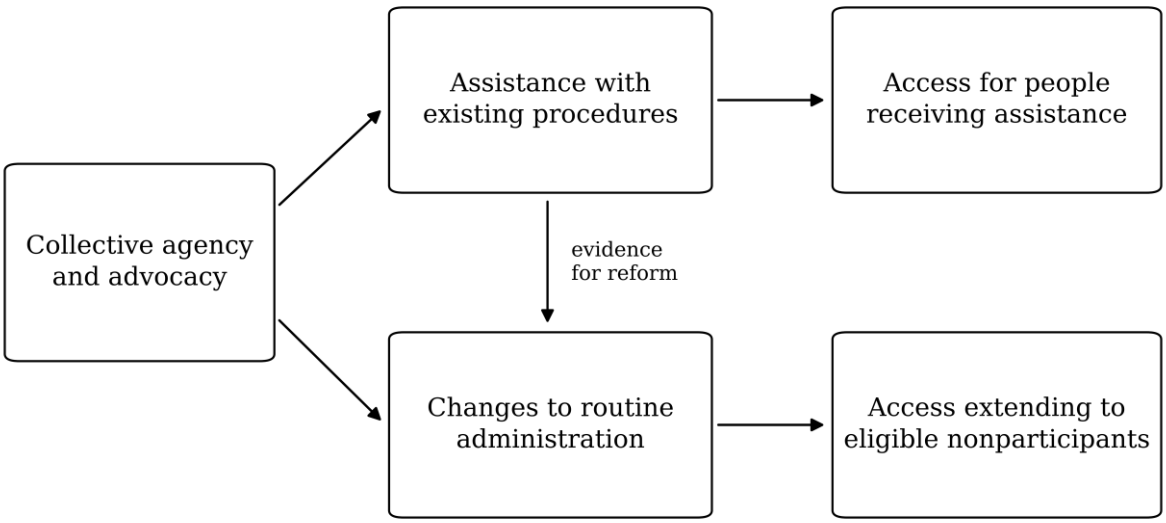
Two routes through which empowerment may change access

The framework distinguishes assistance with existing procedures from changes in those procedures. Through the assistance route, collective organisations share information, accompany claimants or help correct errors. The immediate effect is increased resources available to residents. These activities can reduce the burden of experience even when formal requirements remain unchanged. They can also make an otherwise inaccessible procedure manageable. Assess their value in relation to the immediate circumstances of the person receiving support.

Through the institutional route, collective action can change information, documentation requirements, appointment arrangements, and error-correction or review procedures. The mechanism alters the routine demands imposed on eligible people. Its reach can exceed the organisation's membership because an institution applies a change to all comparable claims. A modification to the ordinary process is therefore analytically different from a favourable exception obtained by a named applicant. Figure 1 represents the two routes as propositions about mechanisms, not as an estimated causal model.

Figure 1.

Proposed routes from collective agency to access.



Assistance may improve access for supported individuals; changes to routine administration may extend improvements to eligible people outside the participating group. Public resources, representative accountability, and the content of eligibility rules condition both routes. Arrows indicate proposed relationships. Source: original conceptual synthesis informed by Moynihan et al. (2015), Halling and Baekgaard (2024) and Einhorn et al. (2026).

The routes can reinforce one another. Accompaniment can reveal a recurring documentation problem, and records of that problem can inform an institutional change. They can also pull in different directions. An organisation rewarded for completing a high volume of individual applications may devote little time to challenging the procedure generating that work. Officials may come to rely on the organisation as an informal processing service. Successful assistance can then reduce pressure to redesign administration. These are proposed organisational mechanisms, not established effects of every partnership.

The distinction also concerns who carries the remaining work. A shorter application process may still require unpaid volunteers to collect extensive documents. That arrangement differs from an institution obtaining information it already holds or providing adequate funded assistance. Evaluation must account separately for residents' time, intermediaries' time, and public employees' time. A reduction in one person's visible workload can reflect its movement elsewhere. You cannot infer administrative efficiency and social equity from the same indicator without examining this distribution.

Collective influence and accessibility are separate dimensions

Collective influence concerns whether residents or their representatives can alter an institution's decisions, priorities or procedures. Routine institutional accessibility concerns whether eligible people can obtain support through ordinary arrangements, including reasonable assistance, without depending on exceptional advocacy. These dimensions are conceptually independent. A service can be relatively accessible while offering little influence over future design. An influential community association can operate beside procedures that remain inaccessible to people outside its networks.

Table 1 uses the dimensions to distinguish four analytical configurations. The categories concern a specified programme, locality and period; they do not rank whole communities or countries. High and low are comparative descriptions requiring empirical criteria. A programme can move between configurations and can provide different forms of access to different social groups. The purpose is to prevent a finding about participation from being treated as a finding about equitable access.

Table 1.

Analytical configurations of collective influence and routine access.

Collective influence	Routine access	Interpretation and evaluative concern
Low	Low	Institutional exclusion. Residents face barriers and have limited influence over their removal. Examine restrictions on provision and opportunities for challenge.
High	Low	Selective gains. Organised residents may secure exceptions while others face continuing barriers. Examine dependence on membership, referral and unpaid work.
Low	High	Accessible provision with limited collective influence. Ordinary access is available, but residents have little over design. Examine paternalism and the security of future provision.
High	High	Potentially equitable empowerment. Collective influence coexists with ordinary access. Verify that improvements reach nonparticipants and assess benefit adequacy and eligibility exclusions.

Note: These are theoretical possibilities, not classifications derived from observed cases. Source: original conceptual synthesis.

Even high influence and high accessibility leave the adequacy and scope of provision open. A modest benefit may be easy to obtain yet insufficient to protect basic needs. A streamlined scheme may exclude an entire category of residents through its eligibility rules. The framework therefore treats equitable access as a necessary dimension of social equity within its stated domain, not as a complete measure of distributive justice. Evaluation should report these remaining exclusions explicitly rather than letting procedural improvement stand in for social transformation.

Representation and the reach of institutional change

Representation becomes central when those most affected cannot participate directly. Collective actors may aggregate experiences and carry claims into decision arenas, but this role involves interpretation and selection. Einhorn et al. (2026) identify welfare associations as important collective actors in Germany and describe how organisational priorities shape how frontline concerns are transmitted. Their findings support examination of representation as a relationship with its own incentives. They do not establish that organised advocacy always reflects residents' interests or that the German arrangements transfer directly to other welfare systems.

A representative arrangement should therefore make its agenda, decisions, and routes for challenge visible to affected people. Direct participation remains valuable where it is feasible and desired, alongside confidential feedback and independent assistance. No single technique proves legitimacy. An accessible meeting can still be dominated by established leaders; a survey can omit people who lack literacy or safe contact with the organisation. Evidence of accountability requires examining whether excluded perspectives change what the organisation does and whether dissent can occur without jeopardising access to support.

The reach of change provides a complementary criterion. If only residents referred through an association receive faster decisions, access remains dependent on a relational advantage. If a reform reduces delays for comparable applicants regardless of referral, the benefit has extended beyond that advantage. The latter does not establish full equality, but it supplies a more demanding test of empowerment's contribution to equity than participant satisfaction alone. Accordingly, nonparticipants should enter evaluation as rights holders whose experiences matter, not merely as a comparison group for estimating programme success.

Four propositions for empirical investigation

The normative principle that collective participation should not determine entitlement is an ethical position. The following propositions concern observable relationships derived from the framework. None has been tested in this article. Each assumes that the institution has sufficient authority and resources to implement the relevant change; where those conditions fail, procedural reform alone is unlikely to improve access.

Proposition 1 Institutional reform and the reach of benefits

Holding entitlement rules and service resources broadly comparable, empowerment initiatives that change routine procedures will improve timely access for eligible nonparticipants more than initiatives confined to assisting participating claimants. The proposed mechanism is that institutional changes reduce recurring demands without requiring a continuing individual relationship with the collective actor. Evidence against the proposition would include persistent gains confined to members after a genuinely implemented, relevant procedural reform. An apparent failure caused by a reform existing only on paper would test implementation rather than this mechanism.

Proposition 2 Accountable representation and agenda inclusion

Where participation is unequal, collective actors with accessible means of challenge and demonstrable responsiveness to nonparticipants are more likely to advance procedural changes that address those residents' barriers than actors accountable primarily to active members. The mechanism is a shift in the information and incentives that guide issue selection. Researchers should observe changes in priorities and resulting procedures, not infer accountability from formal consultation rules. The proposition would be weakened if accountable arrangements consistently failed to alter agenda inclusion relative to otherwise comparable organisations.

Proposition 3 Participation demands and unequal costs

Where access relies on repeated attendance or unpaid administrative work, gaps in timely access between eligible residents with high and low capacity to undertake that work will be larger than under arrangements offering reliable alternative routes. The mechanism combines unequal participation costs with dependence on participation to navigate successfully. The prediction concerns access gaps, not an inevitable reduction in all participation. It would be challenged if people unable to participate retained comparable access without hidden compensating work by relatives or intermediaries.

Proposition 4 Dependence on intermediaries and durability

Access gains produced mainly through discretionary intervention by a single intermediary will be more vulnerable to that actor's withdrawal than gains embedded in funded routine procedures with independent review. The mechanism is continued dependence on organisational availability and relationships. Evidence that access remains stable after withdrawal, without an unobserved replacement intermediary, would count against the proposition. Institutional changes can also decay; the expectation is that, under otherwise similar administrative and fiscal conditions, they are comparatively durable.

Theoretical contribution and boundary conditions

The framework builds on an existing critical tradition rather than identifying a previously unrecognised gap between rights and delivery. Lipsky (1984) describes bureaucratic disentitlement through ordinary actions and failures to act that have distributive consequences, including consequences for influence over social policy. This synthesis shifts that concern to evaluating empowerment itself. An initiative can increase the influence of organised residents while leaving access for otherwise comparable residents dependent on their relationship to that organisation. Studying the intersection of influence and access makes this possibility visible without assuming that either rights-based or participatory practice necessarily produces it.

The framework also changes how we interpret successful assistance. A rise in completed claims can indicate that collective support is effective, but it can also indicate that the institution increasingly depends on work

outside its own accounts. Determining which interpretation fits requires evidence about the counterfactual: what happens to a comparable eligible person without that support? This question extends evaluation beyond whether an organisation helps its members. It links the distribution of organisational resources to the design of public responsibilities and makes improvements among nonparticipants a substantive outcome requiring explanation.

Institutional change has limits, however. Some needs require ongoing individual assistance and cannot be met through standard procedures. A right to accessible service may require tailored interpretation, supported decision-making or home contact. Such support belongs within routine institutional responsibility, even when it takes an individual form. The distinction concerns reliability and availability under accountable arrangements, not a conflict between personalised and standardised provision. Otherwise, a preference for simpler systems could become a reason to withdraw the assistance some residents depend on.

Public authorities may also deliberately restrict access. Benoit and Marier (2024) analyse administrative burdens affecting older people and professionals in Québec home care, relating them to welfare retrenchment and restrictions on professional discretion. Their analysis cautions against attributing every barrier to missing information or an administrative mistake. Where restriction is a political objective, better communication between a community organisation and an office may have little effect. Collective action may need to contest budgets, eligibility or managerial priorities. The framework identifies this limit to procedural change rather than predicting that cooperation will resolve it.

Finally, the proposed criterion does not authorise professional representatives to replace residents' political agency. Protection during nonparticipation and opportunities to participate serve different purposes and should be pursued together. A public service that is easy to access but insulated from challenge can remain paternalistic. An organisation that speaks effectively but controls access can become a gatekeeper. The framework retains both dimensions so that success in one does not conceal exclusion in the other. Its theoretical advance is this specified relationship between empowerment, the allocation of administrative work and the reach of access, rather than a claim that participation or accountability has previously been ignored.

Implications for social work and a Sri Lankan illustration

Connecting individual assistance with institutional responsibility

The framework supports a practice orientation in which immediate help generates evidence for institutional responsibility. A social worker helping a person correct an error can record the stage, avoidable demands, and eventual resolution without collecting more personal information than necessary. Recurrent problems can then inform a request for a routine correction process. The relevant institutional response is a change that comparable people can use, including those whom the practitioner never meets. Assistance remains ethically necessary while pursuing that change.

Professional supervision and organisational evaluation should distinguish a resolved individual case from a changed procedure. Both are valuable outcomes, but they answer different questions. Counting completed claims alone can reward repeated navigation of the same barrier. Counting policy meetings alone can reward access to officials without evidence of a response. A fuller account examines whether staff have authority to make corrections, whether decision reasons are understandable, and whether a usable route for review exists when routine access fails.

Practitioners also need organisational conditions that permit this work. Burzlaff et al. (2025) report a gap between strong identification with political social work and relatively low reported policy engagement, skills, education and organisational support among respondents in Germany and Switzerland. The survey cannot establish the effects of changing supervision or training. It nevertheless cautions against treating policy influence as an individual professional disposition that can be demanded without time, organisational backing or routes into decision-making.

This orientation also changes how partnerships are judged. Organisations need resources for advocacy and accompaniment, but partnership agreements should identify the public responsibilities being supported and the

work being transferred. Paying for time, ensuring accessible communication, or arranging care can make participation more feasible. These measures should expand the choice to participate rather than create a new expectation of involvement. People who decline consultation should retain access to individual support and should have a route to complain outside the community organisation.

Sri Lanka as a bounded illustration

Sri Lanka is relevant because social protection reform creates opportunities to examine the relationship between expanded provision and access. The World Bank's October 2026 account reports improvements in targeting and coverage since 2019, while identifying remaining targeting problems and slow responses to new shocks (World Bank, 2026). This is institutional reporting rather than an independent test of the present framework. It establishes the relevance of examining implementation but cannot show which communities have influence or why particular households encounter difficulties.

Consider a hypothetical local organisation helping residents access a social assistance scheme. It might explain a decision, support an appeal or arrange contact with an office. Such assistance illustrates the first route. If recurring experiences lead the responsible authority to introduce an accessible correction process available to all comparable applicants, the example illustrates the institutional route. Whether either occurs, and whether eligible people outside the organisation benefit, would require research. This example makes no claim about the operations of a particular Sri Lankan office or community group.

The illustration suggests questions suitable for subsequent country research. Do residents outside organised networks encounter the same information and review arrangements? Does assistance reduce their own work or shift it to relatives? Can concerns reach a responsible body without dependence on a local broker? These questions should be investigated across relevant social and geographical differences identified with local partners, rather than assuming one pattern for Sri Lanka. The international contribution lies in the specified relationship between voice, procedures and the reach of access, which can be examined under different welfare arrangements.

Research design and limitations

An empirical programme should identify institutional changes and trace their reach. Comparing members with nonmembers at a single time point would be insufficient: people self-select into participation, organisations locate where need or capacity differs, and early success may encourage later involvement. Studies should establish the sequence of advocacy, administrative response and changes in access. They should distinguish a written policy change from implementation and record concurrent changes in benefit levels, staffing or eligibility that could explain the outcome.

A useful design would compare localities or programmes that introduce a specified procedural reform with similar arrangements that provide mainly navigation assistance. Repeated observations could examine application completion, decision times, interruptions, and error correction, disaggregated by collective participation. Where phased implementation and data quality permit, a comparative longitudinal design could strengthen causal inference. Qualitative accounts from residents, representatives and officials would be needed to establish the proposed mechanisms and identify work performed outside administrative records. Such a study would require its own ethical review and safeguards appropriate to the setting.

Sampling must reach beyond service users and association membership lists. Otherwise, people who never start a claim or leave early remain invisible. Researchers should use independently constructed recruitment routes and transparent estimates of eligibility, acknowledging uncertainty about the denominator. Non-take-up can arise from informed choice and avoidable obstacles. Interviews should therefore examine reasons for nonreceipt rather than treating every eligible nonrecipient as an equivalent case of exclusion. People excluded by eligibility rules require separate analysis.

Measurement should also avoid treating time as the only burden. Administrative records can show a shorter decision interval while concealing distress or dependence on a representative. Conversely, a person may invest

more time because a newly accessible appeal offers a realistic remedy. Jilke et al. (2024) develop brief measures of experienced administrative burden, providing one possible starting point for appropriately adapted instruments. Measures would need local cognitive testing and should be combined with evidence on unpaid work, procedural demands and the content of decisions.

Several limitations qualify the framework. The authors purposively selected sources, and the concepts may omit alternative explanations developed in literature not examined here. The two routes overlap in practice, while influence and accessibility change over time. Empirical separation requires evidence on actual decisions and work, not retrospective labels. The framework cannot predict whether fiscal choices will provide adequate benefits or whether authorities will permit effective challenge. Mobilisation may be necessary precisely because routine administration is unresponsive, and institutional reform may begin with prolonged conflict rather than an orderly partnership.

Context also limits transfer. Baekgaard et al. (2026) document differences in experienced burden across countries and policy domains, cautioning against a single universal pattern. Collective action can have different implications under different political freedoms, administrative traditions and welfare arrangements. The proposed comparisons must therefore specify these conditions and consider rival explanations, including individual resources, staffing and prior political organisation. The model offers questions and conditional predictions; it does not provide a definitive ranking of empowerment practices.

CONCLUSION

Community empowerment contributes to social equity when its influence changes the conditions under which people can realise social rights. Evaluation must therefore examine what happens to eligible residents who do not join collective activities as well as to those who do. Assistance with difficult procedures can offer immediate protection, while changes to ordinary administration can extend that protection beyond the organisation's relationships. Distinguishing these routes clarifies the public responsibilities that empowerment should help make effective.

The proposed framework connects collective influence, representative accountability and routine access through four conditional propositions. Its central criterion is whether an improvement reaches across unequal capacities to participate. For social work, this means supporting people's ability to organise while pursuing arrangements that keep support accessible during silence, absence, or crisis. Future research should test whether institutional changes achieve that reach, who carries the remaining administrative work and whether the resulting access survives the withdrawal of exceptional advocacy.

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