

Citizen Engagement in Grievance Redressal in Accessing Services: Evidence from Sri Lanka's Local Government Institutions of Northern and Eastern Provinces

Thevanesan Francis Croos; Dr. Krishan Kumarapeli

Doctoral Candidate IIC University of Technology,
Building 650, National Road 2, Sangkat Chak Angre Krom,
Khan Mean Chey, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

This study examines the level and efficacy of citizen engagement in the grievance redressal process to influence the provision of effective services within local government entities in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. Based on a quantitative research design across Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas, the study assesses the citizen awareness, knowledge of the grievance process, involvement in using GRMs, trust, and institutional capacity influence levels of engagement in resolving community grievances. The results show that, despite formal channels for filing complaints, citizen participation in grievance redressal remains moderate due to limited awareness, political interference, and administrative inefficiencies. However, the findings indicate that satisfaction levels are comparable among users. Technological integration, leadership dedication, and transparent communication all improved responsiveness and citizen satisfaction. Awareness and trust building, institutional capacity enhancement, and broadening hybrid and e-governance platforms are essential to strengthen participatory grievance handling in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement, Grievance Redress Mechanism, Citizen Trust, Local Governance, Local Authorities, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Citizen engagement is a fundamental element of democratic governance for promoting transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in public institutions (Pathmanathan & Poulier, 2017). The active citizen participation in decision-making and grievance redressal mechanisms ensures that governance becomes people-centred rather than bureaucratically driven. Local authorities in Sri Lanka serve as the primary interface between citizens and the state and handle community-level issues related to basic and comfort services, such as infrastructure, sanitation, and welfare. However, the expectations of the citizens have been doubtful, with many expressing dissatisfaction and contradictions with local authorities and their employees. Therefore, the way grievances are addressed at this level directly reflects the quality of local governance and the extent to which citizens feel empowered and heard.

The global governance trends emphasise participatory accountability, where citizens play a key role in monitoring and evaluating government performance (World Bank, 2016). Accordingly, the local government system in Sri Lanka has adopted various administrative reforms to enhance citizen involvement and promote participatory democracy, including decentralisation, citizens' charters, complaint management systems, and public consultations.

1.2 Problem Statement

The Sri Lankan local government system provides formal grievance redress channels, but citizen participation in these processes remains limited. Many citizens lack awareness and knowledge about the procedures for lodging complaints, while others perceive the process as ineffective or biased (Wickramasinghe, 2024a; Rameez & Fowsar, 2018; Nieizvestna et al., 2022). At the same time, Local authorities often face challenges such as insufficient resources, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate use of technology to manage grievances efficiently (Wickramasinghe, 2024a). As Sri Lanka is a developing and post-conflict country, it is essential to ensure that all authorities and citizens operate effectively and efficiently to mitigate exceptions. It has been identified as a key problem associated with this deep research study.

1.3 Research Gap

Consequently, the gap between citizens' expectations and local governments' responsiveness continues to widen, undermining public confidence in governance institutions. Citizen engagement in grievance redressal is essential for resolving individual complaints and identifying systemic issues that hinder service delivery. It strengthens the performance of the institutions, trust between citizens and government institutions, facilitates coproduction of solutions, and reduces social tensions arising from unaddressed public concerns (Ramesh, 2021). Achieving this participatory ideal is particularly important given the increasing demand for transparency, the growing use of digital platforms, and the emphasis on good governance in national development policies (Wickramasinghe, 2024b). To deploy a strong grievance redressal mechanism has not been discussed in the Sri Lankan context, and throughout this comprehensive research study, this gap will be filled by identifying strategic solutions to increase citizen participation in the grievance process to enhance the effectiveness of GRMs.

1.4 Research Objectives

This deep research study is designed to achieve the following objectives,

- To assess the extent and nature of citizen engagement in these grievance-handling processes in Sri Lankan local authorities
- To identify the challenges and barriers that limit effective citizen engagement in grievance redress
- To propose strategies for enhancing citizen engagement and improving the efficiency of grievance redressal systems in local governance.
- To generate new directions for future researchers and policy-makers

1.5 Contribution

This comprehensive research study contributes to addressing a paramount need for government authorities to provide efficient and effective services to citizens. Specifically, this has been structured to develop a feasible procedure using prominent theories and models used in developed countries (Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation & Public Governance and Participatory Democracy). Because effective grievance redressal management has a critical positive impact on effective public service (UNDP, 2016). At the same time, many researchers have highlighted the importance of grievance management in a country (Fernando, 2019; Gunawardena, A. S. 2018). Therefore, this study will contribute to increasing citizen participation to strengthen the operation of the grievance redressal mechanism and deliver the best service to citizens. This way, the study further aligns with Sri Lanka's national objective of promoting citizen-centric service delivery and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 16, which focuses on strong institutions and participatory decision-making.

2. Literature

2.1 Concept of Citizen Engagement

Citizen engagement is the active and meaningful participation of individuals and communities in public decision-making processes that affect their lives. It goes beyond mere consultation and

emphasises collaborative governance where citizens share responsibility with public authorities for identifying problems, designing solutions, and monitoring outcomes (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). According to the World Bank (2013), citizen engagement is a two-way interaction between citizens and governments that leads to better governance, improved accountability, and enhanced service delivery. It reflects a shift from traditional top-down governance to a more inclusive and participatory model that values public input.

The concept is rooted in democratic theory, which posits that citizens are not passive recipients of government services but active partners in governance. Citizen engagement manifests through various forms, including community forums, social audits, participatory budgeting, complaint systems, and digital platforms for grievance submission (Fung, 2015). The degree of engagement can range from simple information sharing to joint decision-making, depending on the institutional and political context.

In the context of local government, citizen engagement ensures that governance remains responsive to the unique needs of communities. It enhances legitimacy, promotes trust, and enables citizens to hold authorities accountable for their performance. Particularly in developing countries, engagement initiatives are seen as essential for bridging the gap between state capacity and citizen expectations (Cornwall, 2008). Therefore, citizen engagement serves both as a right of individuals to participate in governance and as a strategic approach for improving public sector performance and social inclusion.

2.2 Theories and Models of

Public Participation

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding citizen engagement is Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (1969). Arnstein conceptualised participation as a continuum of power-sharing between citizens and authorities,

structured into eight rungs ranging from non-participation to citizen control. The lower rungs of manipulation and therapy represent tokenistic participation, where citizen involvement is superficial. The middle rungs-informing, consultation, and placation-offer limited opportunities for influence but often maintain power with public officials. The upper rungs-partnership, delegated power, and citizen control-symbolise genuine empowerment where citizens play a decisive role in governance.

Arnstein's model remains highly relevant to contemporary governance, especially in local-level grievance redressal, where the extent of participation determines the fairness and responsiveness of the system. In many local authorities, processes such as citizen hearings and complaint resolution meetings reflect mid-level participation (consultation and partnership), but seldom achieve the higher levels of delegated power or control (Tritter & McCallum, 2006). The ladder provides a diagnostic tool for assessing how participatory or hierarchical grievance mechanisms are within a given governance system.

Public Governance and Participatory Democracy

The theory of participatory democracy emphasizes the role of citizens as coproducers of public outcomes. It argues that participation should not be confined to elections but should extend into ongoing governance processes (Pateman, 2012). The rise of New Public Governance (NPG) and collaborative governance paradigms has reinforced the idea that policy effectiveness increases when citizens are actively engaged (Osborne, 2010).

In participatory governance models, the state acts as a facilitator rather than a sole decision-maker. This approach aligns with Habermas's theory of communicative action, which highlights dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-building as mechanisms for legitimate decision-making (Habermas, 1984). Within grievance redressal frameworks, this means that government institutions should not merely respond to complaints but should engage citizens in designing and monitoring the

grievance processes. Such participatory mechanisms promote transparency, strengthen institutional trust, and lead to sustainable governance outcomes.

2.3 Grievance Redressal Mechanisms in Local Governance

Grievance redressal refers to the institutional processes through which citizens can lodge complaints, seek remedies, and ensure accountability for administrative actions. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016), effective grievance mechanisms are critical for responsive governance, especially at the local level, where most public services are delivered. These mechanisms serve as a feedback loop that enables authorities to detect inefficiencies, corruption, or inequitable treatment in service delivery.

In local governance systems worldwide, grievance redressal mechanisms vary from complaint desks and ombudsman offices to online portals and social media reporting platforms. The World Bank (2015) highlights that successful systems share certain features: accessibility, transparency, timely resolution, and citizen feedback integration. In South Asian contexts, countries such as India and Bangladesh have institutionalized grievance mechanisms through digital platforms like the “Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS)” and “Hello City,” respectively, which have improved responsiveness and citizen satisfaction.

In Sri Lanka, local authorities such as Municipal, Urban Council and Pradeshiya shaba are mandated to maintain complaint registers, conduct public hearings, and respond to service-related grievances within a defined timeframe (Ministry of Public Administration, 2018). However, studies indicate inconsistencies in implementation, with limited awareness among citizens and insufficient institutional follow-up. Strengthening these mechanisms is crucial for enhancing administrative accountability and citizen trust in local governance institutions.

2.4 Citizen Engagement in Sri Lankan Local Authorities

Sri Lanka’s local governance structure comprises Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas, each responsible for a range of public services, including waste management, road maintenance, sanitation and community development. The Local Authorities Act and the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2016 have laid a legislative foundation for citizen participation and transparency. Moreover, initiatives such as the Citizen Charter Programme and e-Government platforms have sought to institutionalize participatory governance.

Empirical studies, however, reveal mixed results regarding the actual engagement of citizens in local governance. Fernando (2019) notes that while formal participatory structures exist, citizens often experience procedural barriers and limited responsiveness from local officials. The lack of civic education and digital literacy further constrains participation, particularly in rural areas. Similarly, Gunawardena, A. S. 2018; Ramesh, R. 2020), emphasize that political patronage and bureaucratic inertia have hindered the establishment of truly participatory grievance-handling mechanisms.

Nevertheless, there are positive trends. The introduction of digital grievance portals and participatory budgeting initiatives in selected municipalities has demonstrated potential for greater inclusivity. Civil society organizations and community-based networks also play a mediating role in mobilizing citizen participation. Thus, while Sri Lanka’s policy framework is supportive of engagement, practical challenges continue to limit its depth and sustainability.

2.5 Challenges and Barriers to Effective Engagement

Despite the growing recognition of participatory governance, several obstacles impede effective citizen engagement in grievance redressal. Institutional barriers include bureaucratic inefficiencies, a lack of accountability mechanisms, and insufficient financial or human resources to manage grievances (Hope, 2015).

Administrative cultures that prioritize hierarchy over collaboration often discourage open communication between citizens and officials. Socio-cultural factors also play a significant role. In Sri Lanka, traditional deference to authority, fear of political retaliation, and lack of trust in public institutions discourage citizens from voicing complaints (World Bank, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2017). Moreover, marginalized groups, such as women, the elderly, and low-income communities, often lack access to information or formal platforms for expressing grievances. Technological barriers, such as limited internet connectivity and digital literacy gaps, further constrain participation, especially in rural regions. Political interference remains another major impediment. Local politicians sometimes influence grievance outcomes to serve partisan interests, undermining the neutrality of administrative processes. Finally, the absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms weakens the feedback loop necessary for continuous improvement. Overcoming these barriers requires not only administrative reforms but also a shift in governance culture toward inclusivity, transparency, and mutual accountability.

2.6 Literature Gaps

Existing literature underscores the importance of citizen engagement in local governance and highlights numerous theoretical frameworks and best practices. However, empirical research on how these concepts operate within the Sri Lankan local government context remains limited. Few studies have systematically examined the interaction between citizen participation and grievance redressal efficiency. There is also a lack of comparative analysis across different local authorities and insufficient exploration of digital engagement tools. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of participatory governance and inform policy reforms for improving grievance management systems in Sri Lanka.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design supported by descriptive and analytical approaches to examine citizen engagement in the grievance redressal process within Sri Lankan local government authorities of Northern and Eastern Provinces. The choice of a quantitative design allows the researcher to objectively measure variables such as participation levels, satisfaction with grievance mechanisms, and perceived responsiveness of local authorities. It also enables statistical analysis of patterns and relationships among the variables.

The study is cross-sectional in nature, collecting data at a single point in time from different categories of respondents, including citizens, administrative officers, and elected representatives. The descriptive component aims to summarize the existing conditions of citizen engagement and grievance-handling practices, while the analytical aspect focuses on exploring correlations between institutional responsiveness and public participation.

The design aligns with previous governance research that uses survey-based methods to capture citizens' perceptions and experiences (Bryman, 2016). This approach ensures data reliability and generalizability across diverse local authorities in Sri Lanka. By combining numerical analysis with contextual interpretation, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how grievance redressal mechanisms function and how citizens interact with them in the local governance environment.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population of this study comprises citizens who have interacted with local government institutions for public service delivery, complaint submission, or community participation activities. This includes residents within the jurisdictions of selected Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas across various districts. Additionally, a small proportion of administrative officers involved in grievance management were included to provide institutional perspectives. A stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure representation from urban,

semi-urban, and rural local authorities. From each stratum, respondents are selected proportionally to the local authority's population served. A total of approximately 200 respondents were targeted, including 180 citizens and 20 administrative officers. This sample size is sufficient for meaningful statistical analysis while maintaining diversity across demographics, geography, and service types. The stratified approach helps capture variations in citizen engagement patterns and grievance-handling efficiency across different local government structures.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collection relies primarily on structured questionnaires administered to citizens and local authority officers. The questionnaire is designed using closed-ended questions based on a five-point Likert scale to measure attitudes, perceptions, and satisfaction levels related to citizen engagement and grievance processes. The questions cover dimensions such as accessibility of grievance channels, awareness of procedures, response time, fairness, and citizen trust.

For administrative officers, a separate section explores institutional capacities, challenges, and perceptions of citizen participation. The survey was distributed through both physical forms and online platforms (e.g., Google Forms) to ensure broad reach and inclusiveness. Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 20 respondents to test the reliability and clarity of the questionnaire.

In addition to the survey, secondary data were gathered from official reports, citizen charter documents, and local government performance evaluations to triangulate findings. Collecting both primary and secondary data strengthens the validity of the results and allows for a more holistic understanding of the existing grievance redressal environment in Sri Lanka.

3.4 Research Instruments and Variables

The primary research instrument for this study is a questionnaire designed to quantitatively assess citizen engagement and the performance of grievance redressal mechanisms. It consists of

five major sections: demographic information, awareness and accessibility, participation level, institutional responsiveness, and satisfaction outcomes. Each section includes multiple items rated on a Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5).

The key variables are categorized as follows:

- Independent Variables: Citizen awareness, accessibility of grievance channels, trust in local authorities, and transparency of procedures.
- Dependent Variable: Effectiveness of the grievance redressal mechanism.
- Moderating Variable: Institutional capacity (resources, staff responsiveness, use of technology).

The questionnaire is adapted from validated instruments used in previous studies on participatory governance (Fung, 2015; World Bank, 2018) and customized to the Sri Lankan context. To ensure content validity, expert opinions from academics and local governance practitioners were sought before finalizing the tool. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with an acceptable threshold of 0.70 for internal consistency.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. The analysis proceeds in three stages: descriptive, inferential, and correlation-based. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations summarize demographic data and respondents' perceptions.

Inferential analysis is used to test hypotheses related to the relationships between citizen engagement and grievance redressal efficiency. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis identify the strength and direction of associations among key variables. Crosstabulations are also employed to compare citizen engagement patterns across different types of local authorities (urban vs. rural).

Furthermore, graphical representations such as bar charts, histograms, and pie charts are used to present data visually. The analysis aims to

provide empirical insights into how participation variables influence institutional responsiveness and overall satisfaction with the grievance-handling process.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is maintained throughout the research process in accordance with recognized academic standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Respondents' identities are kept confidential, and data is anonymized during analysis and reporting to prevent any form of personal identification.

The researcher ensures that the collected data is stored securely in password-protected files and used solely for academic purposes. No deceptive practices or coercion are employed during data collection. Ethical approval was sought from the relevant institutional review committee before fieldwork. By upholding these ethical principles, the study ensures fairness, respect for participants, and the credibility of its findings.

4. Results / Findings

4.1 Overview of Collected Data

The data for this study were collected from 200 respondents representing various local authorities across Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka, including Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas. Among these respondents, 180 were citizens who had previously interacted with local authorities for grievance submission or service-related inquiries, while 20 were administrative officers involved in managing citizen complaints. Data was collected using structured questionnaires distributed both physically and through online platforms to ensure wider accessibility.

The response rate was approximately 85%, indicating a strong level of participation and interest in the topic of citizen engagement. The collected data were cleaned and coded before analysis using SPSS software. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to evaluate citizen awareness, participation levels,

responsiveness of local authorities, and the relationship between institutional factors and grievance redressal effectiveness. The quantitative analysis provided insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current practices in citizen engagement and identified key determinants influencing satisfaction with grievance redressal mechanisms in Sri Lanka's local governance framework.

4.2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were diverse, reflecting the heterogeneity of the Sri Lankan population served by local authorities. A majority of the respondents (54%) were male, while 46% were female. The age distribution showed that 32% of respondents were between 18–30 years, 45% between 31–50 years, and 23% above 50 years, indicating balanced representation across different age groups.

In terms of education, 40% had completed secondary education, 35% held bachelor's degrees, and 15% had postgraduate qualifications, demonstrating a moderately educated population. Regarding occupational status, 38% were employed in the public sector, 27% in the private sector, 20% were self-employed, and 15% were unemployed or retired. Urban residents accounted for 60% of the sample, with rural respondents representing 40%.

This demographic spread highlights the diversity of citizens interacting with local authorities and provides a solid foundation for understanding how factors such as education, occupation, and residence type influence participation in grievance redressal processes.

4.3 Level of Citizen Awareness and Participation

The study revealed varying degrees of citizen awareness about grievance redressal mechanisms in local authorities. Approximately 55% of respondents indicated awareness of formal complaint channels such as citizen charters, help desks, and online reporting systems. However, only 40% reported having used these mechanisms at least once. Awareness

was significantly higher in urban councils compared to rural Pradeshiya Sabhas, largely due to better access to information and technology.

Participation patterns showed that citizens often resorted to informal methods, such as verbal complaints to council members or community meetings, rather than formal written submissions. This trend suggests a preference for direct interaction, reflecting both cultural familiarity and perceived ineffectiveness of bureaucratic procedures.

The analysis also indicated that citizens with higher educational attainment were more likely to participate actively in grievance redressal processes. Regression results confirmed a positive correlation ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.05$) between education level and participation frequency. Moreover, trust in local authorities was identified as a strong predictor of participation. Respondents who perceived local governments as transparent and fair were twice as likely to engage through official complaint channels compared to those who distrusted them.

These findings emphasize that improving citizen awareness and building institutional trust are key to increasing engagement levels in grievance handling.

4.4 Efficiency of Grievance Redressal Mechanisms

The efficiency of grievance redressal mechanisms was evaluated using indicators such as accessibility, timeliness, fairness, and satisfaction. Results showed that 58% of respondents rated the grievance-handling process as moderately efficient, while 27% viewed it as ineffective. Only 15% expressed high satisfaction with the timeliness and fairness of resolutions.

A common concern identified was the delay in addressing complaints. Approximately 45% of respondents reported waiting more than two weeks for responses from urban areas (rural areas, three weeks or a month, sometimes, no response), while only 25% received feedback within the stipulated timeframe of one or two weeks. Administrative officers cited limited staff, unclear procedural guidelines, and a lack

of coordination between departments as key causes of delay.

Accessibility also emerged as a challenge, especially for citizens in rural areas with limited internet access or physical mobility. However, local authorities that implemented digital grievance management systems in urban areas demonstrated significantly faster resolution rates and higher citizen satisfaction scores. Quantitative analysis revealed a positive correlation ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.01$) between technology adoption and grievance-handling efficiency.

Furthermore, 63% of respondents believed that decisions were influenced by political interference, reducing confidence in fairness and impartiality. This finding underscores the need for stronger institutional safeguards and transparency mechanisms to ensure credible redressal outcomes.

4.5 Institutional Factors Affecting Citizen Engagement

Institutional factors such as organizational structure, leadership commitment, technological capability, and communication practices were found to have a significant impact on citizen engagement. Analysis indicated that local authorities with clear procedural guidelines, visible leadership accountability, and dedicated grievance units reported higher engagement levels.

Resource availability was another determinant. Authorities with adequate human and financial resources were more likely to maintain responsive complaint management systems. Conversely, under-resourced Pradeshiya Sabhas struggled to manage complaint volumes, leading to backlogs and citizen frustration. The regression model identified institutional capacity as a significant predictor of engagement ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$).

Technology also played a transformative role. Some authorities that integrated e-governance platforms, such as online complaint tracking and SMS notifications, experienced increased participation, particularly among younger citizens. Moreover, transparent communication,

such as publicly displaying complaint statistics, enhanced citizen trust and accountability. However, resistance to administrative change and a lack of training for local officers limited the institutionalization of participatory practices. Some officers viewed citizen engagement as an additional workload rather than a democratic responsibility. To address this, institutional culture must evolve toward greater openness, responsiveness, and collaboration with citizens.

4.6 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of data yielded several important findings regarding the state of citizen engagement in grievance redressal processes in Sri Lankan local governance:

- **Moderate Awareness and Low Participation:** While citizens are aware of grievance mechanisms, fewer actively engage due to limited trust and perceived inefficiency.
- **Urban-Rural Disparity:** Engagement and satisfaction levels are higher in urban councils, mainly due to better information dissemination and technological access.
- **Efficiency Gaps:** Grievance handling remains slow and inconsistent, with delays caused by administrative bottlenecks and inadequate staff capacity.
- **Influence of Institutional Factors:** Strong leadership, resource adequacy, and technology adoption are critical for fostering participation and improving grievance outcomes.
- **Trust and Transparency as Catalysts:** Citizen trust and perceived fairness significantly influence willingness to engage in formal grievance processes.

In summary, while Sri Lanka's local government system has taken steps toward participatory grievance management, practical implementation remains uneven. Enhancing technological integration, increasing public awareness, and strengthening institutional capacity can substantially improve the inclusivity and effectiveness of local-level grievance redressal systems.

5. Discussion

5.1 Linking Findings with

Existing Literature

The findings of this study align with a substantial body of literature emphasizing that citizen engagement is an essential pillar of democratic governance and effective service delivery. The results confirm that awareness and trust are significant predictors of participation, consistent with Rowe and Frewer's (2005) argument that engagement relies on reciprocal transparency between citizens and government institutions. The study also reinforces Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, revealing that most Sri Lankan local authorities operate at the mid-level rungs, specifically consultation and partnership, rather than at the higher levels of delegated power or citizen control.

The limited participation and reliance on informal complaint channels observed in this study reflect the persistence of tokenistic practices rather than full empowerment. Similar findings have been reported in other developing contexts, where bureaucratic rigidity and political patronage hinder meaningful citizen involvement (Tritter & McCallum, 2006). The data also supports Cornwall's (2008) assertion that citizen participation in governance is shaped not only by institutional design but also by socio-cultural and political dynamics that influence public willingness to engage.

The observed correlation between education level and participation rate echoes Fung's (2015) findings that awareness and civic literacy directly affect citizens' ability to navigate bureaucratic processes. Furthermore, the identified link between institutional capacity and engagement supports the argument made by Osborne (2010) that participatory governance depends heavily on the administrative ability of public organizations to manage relationships and provide timely responses.

The role of trust, identified as a major determinant of engagement, aligns with Hope's (2015) research, which emphasizes that perceived fairness and credibility of institutions are crucial for sustaining citizen participation. Similarly, the study's observation that political interference undermines confidence in grievance redressal resonates with Wickramasinghe's (2017) analysis of the Sri Lankan public sector,

which highlights the influence of politicization on administrative processes.

Finally, the positive correlation between technology adoption and grievance redressal efficiency validates the UNDP (2016) and World Bank (2018) recommendations that digital governance tools enhance accountability and inclusiveness. Collectively, these findings suggest that while Sri Lanka's institutional frameworks are conducive to participatory governance, practical implementation remains constrained by structural inefficiencies, limited resources, and socio-political factors—thus echoing global patterns observed in comparable local governance systems.

5.2 Role of Technology and E-Governance

Technology has emerged as a powerful enabler of citizen engagement in grievance redressal. The study found that local authorities employing digital complaint management systems, such as online submission portals and SMS-based feedback mechanisms, achieved higher satisfaction and faster resolution rates. These results are consistent with international evidence indicating that e-governance enhances accessibility, transparency, and citizen empowerment (World Bank, 2015).

Digital tools not only streamline communication between citizens and local authorities but also reduce the potential for bureaucratic manipulation by creating traceable, data-driven processes. In the Sri Lankan context, initiatives such as the Smart Citizen Services Portal and RTI digital platforms represent progressive steps toward digital inclusivity. However, disparities in internet penetration and digital literacy, especially in rural areas, limit widespread utilization. The findings reaffirm that e-governance can only be effective when accompanied by investments in technological infrastructure, capacity building, and user education. Thus, digital transformation in local governance must be inclusive, ensuring that technological innovation complements traditional participatory mechanisms rather than replacing them.

5.3 Policy and

Administrative Implications

The findings of this research have several implications for policymakers and local administrators seeking to strengthen participatory governance. First, policy frameworks must institutionalize citizen engagement as a mandatory and measurable component of local governance. This includes revising local authority regulations to integrate citizen participation indicators into performance evaluations. Regular public consultations and community scorecards can serve as feedback tools to measure administrative responsiveness.

Second, capacity-building programs for local authority staff are vital to improve responsiveness and communication with citizens. Training programs should emphasize participatory leadership, conflict resolution, and the ethical handling of grievances. Administrative reforms should also promote the decentralization of grievance handling, enabling frontline officers to resolve complaints without unnecessary hierarchical delays.

From a governance standpoint, transparency and monitoring mechanisms should be enhanced. The establishment of independent local ombudsman units or community oversight committees could ensure fairness and minimize political interference. Additionally, leveraging public-private partnerships and collaboration with civil society organizations can help mobilize resources and expertise to strengthen engagement systems.

Lastly, adopting data-driven policy approaches, using analytics from grievance databases, can help policymakers identify recurrent service delivery issues and formulate targeted reforms. These measures would not only enhance citizen satisfaction but also rebuild public trust in local government institutions.

5.4 Barriers to Effective Citizen Engagement

Despite the potential for participatory governance, several barriers continue to constrain effective citizen engagement in Sri Lanka's local grievance redressal processes. The most prominent challenge is institutional inertia, where bureaucratic cultures resist participatory

change and prioritize procedural compliance over responsiveness. Officers often lack incentives or accountability mechanisms to engage constructively with citizens.

Political interference remains a pervasive issue. Elected representatives frequently influence complaint outcomes, compromising administrative neutrality and undermining citizen confidence. Such politicization discourages genuine engagement and reinforces perceptions of favoritism and inequality.

Resource constraints also limit the operational efficiency of local authorities. Many institutions lack adequate staffing, funding, or technological infrastructure to handle grievance volumes effectively. This results in procedural delays and reduced credibility. Furthermore, information asymmetry, a lack of clear, accessible information about complaint procedures, discourages participation, especially among rural and marginalized populations.

Socio-cultural barriers further compound the problem. Deep-rooted hierarchical attitudes and public deference to authority discourage citizens from challenging administrative decisions. Gender and socioeconomic disparities also restrict participation, with women and low-income groups being underrepresented in grievance mechanisms.

Addressing these barriers requires an integrated approach that combines administrative reform, civic education, and institutional accountability. A shift toward an open governance culture, where citizens are viewed as partners rather than subjects, is crucial for building a participatory, responsive, and equitable local governance framework in Sri Lanka.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

The research investigated the role and extent of citizen engagement in grievance redressal processes within local government institutions in Sri Lanka. The analysis revealed that while the country's legislative and administrative frameworks encourage participatory governance, actual citizen involvement remains moderate. Many citizens are aware of the existence of grievance mechanisms but refrain

from utilizing them due to distrust, procedural complexity, and delays in response.

The study identified significant disparities between urban and rural authorities, with urban areas demonstrating higher levels of engagement due to improved information access and digital facilities. Institutional capacity, leadership commitment, and technology adoption were shown to significantly influence both citizen participation and the overall efficiency of grievance mechanisms. Despite these advancements, political interference and limited transparency continue to hinder trust and accountability. The findings, therefore, highlight that improving institutional responsiveness, building citizen awareness, and integrating e-governance tools are key to ensuring inclusive and effective local governance in Sri Lanka.

6.2 Conclusion

Citizen engagement in grievance redressal is a cornerstone of democratic governance and social accountability. The study concludes that although local authorities in Sri Lanka have established formal mechanisms for addressing citizen complaints, these mechanisms are underutilized and inconsistently implemented. The persistence of bureaucratic bottlenecks, lack of trust, and inadequate communication channels undermines citizen confidence in local governance institutions.

Furthermore, the research confirms that technology, when properly utilized, can significantly enhance transparency and responsiveness. However, its success depends on the readiness of institutions and citizens alike to adopt digital tools effectively. Building participatory capacity requires both structural reforms and cultural shifts within administrative systems.

In essence, the study underscores that sustainable citizen engagement cannot be achieved through institutional reforms alone; it also requires a shift toward open governance practices, ethical leadership, and the active empowerment of citizens as coproducers of governance outcomes. Strengthening these dimensions will help Sri Lankan local authorities evolve from reactive service

providers into proactive facilitators of participatory democracy.

6.3 Recommendations for

Local Government

1. **Institutionalize Participatory Frameworks:** Local authorities should embed citizen participation as a formal part of administrative processes through structured grievance committees, community liaison units, and participatory evaluation mechanisms.
2. **Enhance Awareness and Accessibility:** Conduct regular community awareness programs, using local languages and media, to educate citizens about available grievance channels and their rights to redress.
3. **Adopt and Expand E-Governance Systems:** Introduce user-friendly digital complaint portals and mobile applications for submission and tracking of grievances. These systems should ensure transparency by providing real-time updates and public dashboards of resolution statistics.
4. **Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms:** Establish independent monitoring bodies, such as local ombudsmen or citizen oversight panels, to evaluate the fairness and timeliness of grievance resolutions.
5. **Build Administrative Capacity:** Train officers in participatory governance, conflict resolution, and data management to enhance professionalism and responsiveness. Capacity-building initiatives should also promote empathy and citizen-oriented service delivery.
6. **Promote Inclusivity and Equity:** Tailor grievance systems to accommodate marginalized groups by simplifying procedures, ensuring gender sensitivity, and enabling multilingual access.

Implementing these recommendations would significantly improve institutional trust, service quality, and the perceived legitimacy of local authorities, fostering a stronger partnership between citizens and government institutions.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research could adopt a comparative approach by analyzing citizen engagement across different provinces or between rural and urban authorities to uncover regional disparities. Longitudinal studies could also assess the impact of digital transformation and policy reforms on grievance redressal over time. Additionally, qualitative investigations, such as interviews and case studies, would offer deeper insights into citizen perceptions, motivations, and barriers to participation. Exploring the role of social media and civic technology platforms in fostering participatory governance presents another promising direction for further research.

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