

CITIZENS' TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: THE CASE OF SRI LANKA

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Introduction

Citizens' trust in public institutions has often been viewed as an important element of successful governance. Citizens' distrust in government institutions considerably affects the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies and implementation. The Human Development Report (UNDP, 2014) revealed that trust in most public institutions is alarmingly decreasing in Sri Lanka owing to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, institutional discrimination, endemic corruption and politicization of the public sector. This low level of trust in public institutions impacts the quality of democracy and government in Sri Lanka. The present government has been concerned about establishing good governance and an uncorrupt and independent public sector, which fundamentally requires citizens' trust. Thus, this paper sheds light on citizens' perception of public institutions and the level of trust that they have in them. It seeks to explain the decreasing amount of trust of public institutions through theoretical and empirical evidence.

Methodology

In the case of Sri Lanka, very few studies have taken place in the past on citizens' trust in government institutions. The paper focuses on the following institutions: District and Divisional Secretariat Divisions, Grama Nailadari, Police, Agriculture, Hospitals, Education, Samurthi Office/Bank and Electricity. The study employs a mixed method research approach: quantitative data were collected in Kandy and Nuwara-Eliya in 2015 through a semi-structured questionnaire survey with simple random sampling of a sample of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. There was a total of 100 respondents: 59 female and 41 male. Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs). The locations had a multi-ethnic character, which enabled us to effectively gather data

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from the three ethnic groups. Secondary data were collected by reviewing much published and unpublished work on the topic. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods were employed in the study to interpret results, particularly, simple descriptive statistics are used to describe the patterns of trust citizens have in various public institutions.

Table 1: Sample Frame for Questionnaire Survey

District	No. of respondents by ethnicity			Total No. of respondents
	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	
Kandy	25 (45.4%)	10 (18%)	20 (36.3%)	55
Nuwara-Eliya	15 (33.3%)	20 (44.4%)	10 (22.2%)	45
Total	40	30	30	100

Source: Fieldwork, October 2015

Results and Discussion

The study found that the overall trust in public institutions was 66.6%. The ethnic categorization was significant: 39.9% of Sinhalese indicated trust compared to only 29.9% of Tamils and 30.2% of Muslims. This could perhaps be attributed to the effective functioning of government institutions in Sinhalese concentrated areas and better access to public services. This study also reveals that the language of administration (Sinhala) has also enabled the ethnic majority to more easily access public institutions.

It is important to note that the study found different levels of trust in relation to respondent's socio-economic profile and age. Middle-aged people were fairly satisfied with public institutions compared to senior citizens. In relation to education, 58% of respondents with only primary education have high trust compared to 42% of educated people.

Table 2: Level of Trust by Citizen

Level of trust	Ethnicity			Total
	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslims	
High	50.0	20.0	30.0	100%
Medium	51.4	24.3	24.3	100%
Low	18.2	45.4	36.4	100%
Total	39.9	29.9	30.2	100

Source: Field Survey October 2015.

Identity and Trust

Identity influences a citizen's trust in governance. State funding, resource allocation and other necessary amenities were made available to the Sinhalese areas whereas public institutions in Tamil regions were under-funded and under-resourced.

Political Patronage and Trust

In the case of Sri Lanka, service delivery has often been linked to a system characterized by political patronage, partisan politics and political manipulation. When these practices prevail in government institutions, citizens in turn also have a limited degree of trust in those institutions. The majority of respondents (67%) revealed that the patronage system has had a powerful influence on citizen trust in government institutions. Because political parties have established patronage as a key medium in service delivery at the local level, citizens' trust and the equality of service delivery is undermined.

Trust in Selected Public Institutions and Corruption

Corruption was a major grievance throughout the study, agreed upon by respondents belonging to all ethnic groups. They identified the Police and the Grama Niladari Office⁶ as the most corrupted institutions in their areas. On the other hand, the study found that Hospitals, Kachcheriya (District Secretariat) and Divisional Secretariat Offices are the most trusted institutions.

A significant number of respondents expressed their grievances on experiences of discrimination and ill treatment in public institutions. The study found that experiences of family members, neighbours, colleagues and fellow citizens influence trust in public institutions. Although the government gives high priority to service delivery, it is also evident that the quality of goods and services in terms of access, equity, efficiency and sustainability has progressively deteriorated.

Conclusion

This study attempts to capture the level of citizens' trust in government institutions. The study reveals various factors (political, social, ethnic and institutional) that negatively influence trust. This indicates the importance of improving service quality, impartiality, and equality in

service delivery in order to increase trust among all sections. Low trust in public institutions considerably impairs the potential quality of public institutions and the notion of good governance that the present government keeps promoting. The Sri Lankan case shows that in ethnically diverse societies, building citizens trust in public institutions (institutional trust) continues to be a challenge due to ethnic, religious, linguistic and political divisions.

Table 3: The level of trust in the government institutions

Institutions	Trust based on ethnicity								
	Sinhala			Tamil			Muslim		
	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L
Hospital	27.6	22.6	-	27.3	30.3	-	34.4	37.6	-
District Secretariat Office	21.2	16.8	1.1	19.5	26.5	-	20.2	23.4	-
Divisional Secretariat Office	7.5	16.8	1.0	15.1	12.2	5.2	19.8	17.2	2.0
Agriculture Service Centre	10.3	10.5	15.7	15.1	9.2	7.6	10.2	7.3	2.4
Ceylon Electricity Board	10.3	5.2	15.7	6.4	9.2	7.6	10.2	5.2	2.3
Education Department	7.5	10.5	9.2	8	6.8	7.6	6.2	3.5	5.9
Land Registry (land/BC/MC)	-	5.2	5.6	2	5.3	12.5	-	3.5	16.4
Samurdhi Bank/Office	7.5	5.2	26.3	2.1	0.5	12.5	-	2.3	18.6
Grama Niladari	7.5	5.2	-	2.3	-	20.6	-	-	22.6
Police	-	2.0	26.3	2.2	-	26.4	-	-	29.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2015

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