

CHAPTER 12

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

12.1 People's Participation

12.1.1 Introduction

The Local Government Institutions being closest to the people looking after the majority of their needs should indeed have the co-operation, blessings, protection and the active participation of the people to encourage the more effective performance of their functions. From the time, the Local Government system came into being, this co-operation and assistance was available, though in varying degrees. At times the assistance and participation had reached very high levels. Everything cannot be done by law alone. Much more can be achieved through the discharge of people's traditional obligations and responsibilities to Local Government. The quantum of work done by Local Authorities can be increased substantially and their quality improved through people's participation.

Where people's assistance and participation are not forthcoming proper performance of functions and their maintenance would be difficult in spite of the multiplicity of rules and regulations. That people's participation during the years prior to 1981, when the Village Council system was in operation, was at a very high level is no secret. Beginning with the cleansing of roads, cemeteries, waterways and drains, construction of new roads and culverts and many other activities in the village were attended to by the people with the participation of the Councillors. The roads, bridges and culverts constructed voluntarily by the people at that time seem to be in a better condition than those constructed at present. The high level of the contribution of people to Local Government activities during the era of Village Councils was evident from the evidence given by Mr. D. M. Jayaratna, the Secretary of the People's Alliance. While this type of cooperation reduced considerably the expenditure to the Government it contributed in a big way to the cultivation of a collective spirit among the people, love of public property and co-operation. They also set an example to the younger generation as regards the duties of good citizens. At the core of Local Government at the time was people's participation which even today is most essential.

12.1.2 Present Status

The absence of active participation of the people is a prominent feature of Local Government today. The alienation of people began with the introduction of the Development Councils in 1981 and today it has reached the highest level. This is due to a variety of reasons.

The introduction of the Development Councils created a situation when the people were denied of their own representative to look into their needs and to whose notice, they could bring their needs, as things were subject to centralized control by other authorities instead of by their own representatives. The situation dealt a death blow to village level leadership.

The open economy introduced during the 1970 decade appears to be another factor. The free and independent life style of the people changed and the life was so full of economic and commercial activities that they had little time to devote to public affairs. Everything in private life had to see their fulfilment through competitiveness and individuality emerged forcing the virtues of

collective feeling and service to others into the background while the sense of equality receded. The collective environment built round the village temple and the school disintegrated. The voluntary organizations like the rural development society became ineffective. Thus the entire set up weakened the concept of people's participation.

Under these circumstances, the position occupied by labour too changed and this too was another factor. The people were hesitant to offer free labour for public affairs in an open economy. There was a decrease in the number of people who were willing to sweat under work, particularly among the youths. Although the country witnessed an increase in population free labour was not easily available for voluntary work - this was another factor, People's participation became a distant phenomenon with machines taking the place of humans. Labour oriented activities like the maintenance of roads, turned out to be machine oriented. This in fact could be described as an addiction to machines under the new economic system.

Another reason may be that the people were getting used to a luxurious way of life. There was reluctance to undertake work that required physical effort and they too expected Local Government activities to be easy and comfortable. Because of heavy traffic people were not satisfied with the mere "doing up" of roads which they wanted at least to be macadamized. This required not just labour but large amounts of money and machines. People disliked even the pressure of dust on the roads,

The situation did not change but was rather aggravated when Pradeshiya Sabhas replaced the District Development Councils in the 1980s. This was mainly due to the introduction of proportionate representation into Local Government. The exercise of votes at an election became the only function of the people under the system. The elected representatives became strangers to the people due to their election not being based on a ward system and selection being done by the respective political parties. As they were not elected to represent a particular ward, responsibilities and people's obligations became unclear, It was not possible to sort out whose responsibility it was to correct the shortcomings in the area. The people were not inclined to look upon them as their leaders as the representatives so elected did not reflect true democracy at village level.

Another factor that contributed to the weakening of people's participation in Local Government was the fact that the organizational structure of Local Authorities did not provide for people's participation. There was no specific representative for the ward and the people had no involvement in the affairs of the Council other than the exercise of the vote and the payment of taxes. Budget planning was also carried out at the institutional level. The absence of the old system of community centres and any other organization close to the Local Authority aggravated this situation.

Heads of Local Authorities are appointed at present according to the wishes of their political parties or the independent group concerned and not according to the wishes of the people. Their accountability therefore is more to the Party or the Group than the people. They are not interested in the participation of the people; the interest surfaces only at the approach of an election. Therefore no interest is shown during the major part of the 4 year period in office to obtain the participation of people. The same is true of other representatives. They too tend to get interested in securing people's participation at the approach of an election and feel no need to be with the people for the greater part of their tenure of office.

The candidates contest elections as members of political parties or independent groups. The party which gets the most number of representatives elected from the ruling party and the

representatives of the other parties and groups organize themselves as the opposition. The people in the villages also follow the same pattern of division into cliques. The recognition of a common representative is seen very rarely. It is therefore difficult to secure true participation of the people through this method of representatives. Similarly, like many other state agencies, though at the beginning the Local Authorities serve the people with interest, these services are not performed in a manner appropriate to the satisfaction of the continuing needs of the people, through the years. They do not approve of public criticism or expression of any views in this regard. This appears to be due to irregular relations established between Councilors and officers and due to personal gains made in the course of supplying services. The interest shown by Heads of Local Authorities and Councilors at the initial period to be watchful about these matters seem to diminish. In an atmosphere like this, the people get more and more alienated from Local Authorities when the affairs of Local Authorities lack transparency, responsibility and accountability. People lose confidence in the Local Authority and tend to refrain from extending due assistance and co-operation.

12.1.3 Observations, Conclusions and Recommendations

When these facts are taken into consideration it would appear that it is difficult to convert the Local Government Institutions to institutions equipped with a management and development process, without making them first effective democratic institutions with direct accountability to the public. Proper discharge of services is also difficult without due participation of the people. For example, a good management of even a community water tap can be effected only through people's participation. Therefore it is necessary to identify people's participation as an essential element of Local Government and to employ strategies to ensure their increased participation in Local Government affairs.

12.1.3.1 People's Participation at Institutional Level

The general trend in most state agencies is that there is no organizational structure ensuring people's participation. There should essentially be an organizational structure within the Local Authorities, which should facilitate the recognition of the members of the public and not treating them as strangers. To ensure transparency of Local Government activities, responsibility and accountability, people's participation should be obtained in their activities in accordance with management principles. We recommend that the following strategies be employed for this purpose.

- (a) An Advisory Committee be set up at every Local Authority to serve as a link between the people and the institution.
- (b) A Public Relations Officer to be appointed to every Local Authority.
- (c) Ward Committees to be set up.
- (d) Tax Payers Organizations to be formed and made enforceable.
- (e) Planning to be made bottom-up.
- (f) Every Ward to have a Community Centre.

12.1.3.2 Advisory Committees

There should be appointed an Advisory Committee on Community Affairs in every Local Authority composed of senior citizens subject specialists, ward members, and other competent persons in the area who could contribute to Local Government. This Committee should serve as a link between the Local Authority and the people. The Committee which should be non-political

will have the following functions:

(a) Assist the Local Authority in deciding development policies and distributing resources, taking into account the needs of the residents.

(b) Function as a communication channel between the Local Authority and the people in the exchange of information and ideas.

(c) Assist and advise the representatives in the discharge of their responsibilities.

The role of the Committee would be to correct and facilitate performance of the Local Authority.

12.1.3.3 Appointment of a Public Relations Officer

A serious charge levelled against the officers and other employees is that they do not maintain good public relations. This is due to the fact that people who visit the Local Authority are not received and their work not attended to promptly. Some Local Authorities do not even provide seats to people waiting to transact official business. It is not proper that Public Institutions should have such charges leveled against them. The Commission's recommendation therefore is that there should essentially be a Public Relations Officer in every Local Authority to provide the required information to the public, to direct them to the proper section and to act as a link between the people and the officers.

12.1.3.4 Ward Committees

Most Local Authorities cover an extensive geographical area and the population is scattered accordingly. The distance between the people and the institution creates a gap between the two. Much of the evidence placed before the Commission dealt with this subject and proposed that the area of authority should be smaller. This remoteness is tied up with the conditions of transport and roads in the area, The situation also affects the active participation of people. Services supplied to certain wards are limited because the entire area of authority is not evenly connected with the Local Authority. The present system of elections also aggravated the situation and causes anomalies in people's participation. Village level contribution to Local Government planning though essential has not materialised due to the absence of a systematic programme to secure people's participation. The Commission's conclusion therefore is, that in order to close the existing gap between the people and the institution, there should be some level of organization. Hence the recommendation to set up Ward Committees. This has been fully explained under the proposed Local Government system. The Commission's belief is that the Ward Committee will be stabilised in future as a social institution, an embodiment of the entire population of the ward, devoid of political and other divisions and representing all sections of people at village level. The Commission also believes that this Committee would discharge collective guidance formed on the basis of community needs in order to ensure prompt and methodical execution of Local Government activities. This Committee if worked properly would considerably fill the present gap in people's participation.

12.1.3.5 Taxpayers Organizations

Taxpayers Organizations in Local Authority areas occupy a special place. They give strength to Local Authorities by the supply of money required for various activities. They should have a way of voicing their views regarding the activities of Local Authorities financed by them. The Local Authorities on the other hand are obliged to treat the taxpayers as their masters. By forming themselves into an organization, they should be able to meet their needs better and it would be easier for the Local Authorities to deal with the needs rather than attending to individual needs. -

Out of the many existing Taxpayers' Associations in Urban areas particularly, only a limited number are working well. Their main concern is the reduction or alteration of the quantum of tax and less attention is paid to effecting an intergrated development of the area with their co-operation extended to the Local Authority. The Local Authorities tend to consider these associations as a nuisance. Therefore we recommend that the Local Authorities must pave the way for the creation of the Taxpayers' Organizations in a systematic way and get their contribution towards the progress of Local Authorities.

These organizations should be registered and accepted as recognised organizations. Then they should be involved in planning and budget preparation. The transparency of their activities should be made visible to the organizations. By doing so the Local Authorities can hope to ensure their active participation.

Proper reception should be given to officers and members of these organizations when they visit the Local Authority Office. Through these organizations too, good public relations can be built up.

12.1.3.6 Bottom-up Planning

For the past fifty years Sri Lanka has been implementing the development work following the "Top to Bottom" method. As a result the people in the divisional level have to go after and depend on political, state and other authorities to get their work done. Although Local Authorities being organizations depending on the people and serving the people can easily and fruitfully get the people's participation, they do not seem to be interested in doing so.

When planning is effected from top to bottom, there is only partial satisfaction of the needs of the people. The delegation of powers to sub-national level in the past has failed to change this situation and through the centralized implementation of plans the desired results do not flow to the people.

It is therefore essential to create an environment that is capable of encouraging people's participation in the planning process. Proposed Ward Committees and Taxpayers' Organizations can be involved actively in the planning process. Certain Local Government Authorities seem to deliberately obstruct this acting on the hypothesis that their powers would be curtailed. This is something to be expected under the present conditions, because it would not be easy for oneself, one's group or party to utilize the resources of the Local Authority at their discretion if people are brought closer. People's participation has caused embarrassment because at present resources are used to achieve their political objectives.

This state of affairs should change. The resources of Local Authorities should be handled in accordance with the aspirations of the people for their maximum good. Therefore they should get the opportunity to incorporate their wishes formally into the plans of Local Authorities. What is needed is that necessary strategies should be developed to ensure maximum participation of the people.

12.1.3.7 Setting up Community Centres

We recommend that the planning of Local Government affairs should provide for the gradual setting up of one community centre for each ward. These centres should be able to play a very significant role in helping the people to spend their leisure time in a proper manner and diverting it for their own welfare and the welfare of the country. The affairs of these centres should be conducted on a basis free of political, caste and religious barriers to enable access to them by all sections of the people living in the area. The centre will help in the development of skills by

providing reading material (newspapers, books, magazines) suitable to all age groups, musical instruments and sports goods and provide meeting and discussion rooms. The centre would also help minimise anti-social conduct. The centres can be placed under the control of the Ward Committees with voluntary contribution to many activities. It is appropriate that the Community Centres should receive financial assistance for their creation and maintenance. This can be used as a centre for supplying national and international information in the village. This will be a place where people will be encouraged to undertake without compulsion, work which involves little physical effort. By working in this manner there will be a constant attachment to the Local Authority. The scheme of Community Centres which had been functioning very effectively in the past has gradually become inoperative. Even the few existing centres do not seem to function successfully fulfilling the above aspirations. The Commission's recommendation is that the maximum participation of the people is essential to Local Authorities in view of the facts stated above. Local Authorities cannot be thought of as being able to free themselves of the status of Government Offices without people's participation. If the Local Authorities act with the objective of procuring full participation of the people, the other state organizations will also be compelled to fall in line. There is no doubt that by doing so a pleasant environment for governance will be created at the village level, paving the way for integrated and people-oriented development.

We recommend as a powerful strategy the adoption of Ward Committees as the village level planning unit. The Local Authorities with the proper contributions of the Ward Committee should be able to prepare an effective long term plan at the beginning of their tenure of office. Public criticism will be reduced to the minimum because the people can have a view of the stage of development which the Local Authority and their ward would achieve within a given period, because they contributed to the preparation of the plan and they knew that what could be done was decided upon having regard to the available resources. Even if there be some shortfall in priorities the people will accept the responsibility. The development work would be shown as a group enterprise executed jointly by the people of the area, representatives of the Local Authority and the staff with the assistance of other agencies. The other agencies working at the village level disregarding the Local Authority and the People's organizations would find it hard to work in such circumstances. This system would be the first step towards an integrated planning scheme at divisional and village level. As it is inevitable that the

people themselves will undertake a large number of projects which are included in the plan and the costs of which need not be met either by the Local Authority or the Government, as there will be a sizeable reduction in costs.

12.2 Promotion of Ethnic Harmony

The service that Local Authorities can render in finding a solution to the ethnic problem which has caused a set back to the country's progress is considered as vital. This could be achieved by the Local Authorities by provision of services without discrimination on ethnic or communal grounds. Hence, it is recommended that Local Authorities be encouraged to pay attention to the following to achieve communal harmony :-

- (a) Pay attention to equitable distribution of resources among all without communal consideration.
- (b) Pay equal attention to proposals originating from all sections of the community.
- (c) Refrain from paying excessive attention to requests coming from a selected communal

group. For example it was mentioned that in an area where there is a predominant Tamil population, letter heads were being printed only in Sinhala. Issues of such nature, it was stated could sometimes affect the public confidence and co-operation and consequently performance of a Local Authority.

(d) The need to develop language skills in Sinhala and Tamil on a continuous basis.

Provision of books and literature in Sinhala, Tamil and English.

(e) Paying equal attention to the cultural values of all communities and providing opportunities by respecting their social values.

(f) Assisting and promotion of religious and cultural festivals within the area.

(g) Provide opportunities for people to participate in religious and cultural events of other ethnic groups and formulate strategies to encourage brotherhood among all citizens.

(h) Launch programmes for everyone to assist the poor and the destitute of all social groups.

(i) In case of imminent ethnic conflict the Head of the Local Authority and Councillors to intervene and take the initiative to settle possible conflicts.

(j) To develop devices to encourage relationship among different communities.

(k) Promote opportunities to obtain contributions of all communities at the level of Ward Committees.

(l) To take steps necessary to develop a philosophy of peaceful living within the area preventing discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste and clan.

12.3 Building a Just and Righteous Society:

Local Authorities can render an enormous service to reduce harmful social tendencies and to develop a just society. It is not possible to ignore the evidence placed before the Commission by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne regarding the need for Local Authorities to be in the forefront in promoting a "Society of right livelihood".

It is therefore recommended that Local Authorities should act in accordance with the following principles in this connection :-

(a) To launch attractive awareness programmes to eradicate incidence of social injustice affecting families and communities in the Local Authority areas.

(b) To organise social reform programmes with the assistance of the police.

(c) Focus attention on children not attending schools and provide a scheme of assistance to promote their education.

(d) Reduce the extent of unemployment and launch vocational training programmes to achieve this objective.

(e) Prepare the ground to develop skills in Sports, Arts and Literature and to establish community centres.

(f) To provide a rightful position to law abiding citizens.

(g) To maintain an effective street lighting scheme.

(h) Identification of individuals and groups of individuals who cannot be rehabilitated in the normal course and to implement special programmes to save them from anti-social activities.

(i) Representatives of Local Authorities to be exemplary in their behaviour.

(j) To pursue the objective to establish a "Society of right livelihood" within the Local Authority area.