

Participatory Development Beyond Subsidies: The 'Praja Shakthi' Experiment, Ground Realities, and Rural Democracy

By Ajith Perakum Jayasinghe – Civil Society Activist

In the face of the current global crises and the context of war, both the world's and Sri Lanka's economy are experiencing severe impacts. Consequently, there is a possibility that poverty levels may rise further in the future. We have entered an era where the fight against poverty must be intensified more than ever before. Following the historic and grave economic crisis Sri Lanka faced in 2022, poverty spread rapidly across the country's social fabric. In the wake of this catastrophic situation, civil society strongly highlighted the need for sustainable solutions that move beyond outdated models of merely distributing subsidies. Specifically, in collaboration with the Right to Life Human Rights Centre, we intervened in this matter. During the introduction of 'Aswesuma' as a new social safety net, we sought to socialize a discourse on this issue by conducting a comprehensive baseline survey on poverty alleviation programs.

That study clearly demonstrated that the social safety net programs implemented in Sri Lanka over several decades suffered from serious flaws. On one hand, they have become politicized; on the other, instead of empowering people to actively participate in the production process, they have promoted a 'dependency syndrome'—a state of being perpetually reliant on government assistance. This has also created a segment of passive citizens in society who do not make sufficient efforts to escape poverty.

Lessons from Aswesuma and the Anatomy of the Administrative Crisis

The Aswesuma program was introduced based on the concept of 'multidimensional poverty.' It is commendable that the program recognizes poverty not merely as a lack of income, but as a condition determined by multiple factors including education, health, housing, and social security. However, the mechanism for implementing it at the grassroots level proved challenging. Data collection was hampered, particularly due to strikes and a lack of cooperation from Grama Niladharis and Samurdhi officers. In the absence of adequate investigations, field studies, or

follow-up monitoring, cases emerged where the ultra-poor—who truly deserved assistance—lost out on benefits, while ineligible individuals were listed. This led to numerous appeals and objections against the initial selections.

Aswesuma was introduced following the 2022 economic crisis with the support of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Its primary objective was to provide a formal 'social safety net'—financial assistance for people vulnerable to the economic crisis and subsequent reforms. Previous programs like Janasaviya and Samurdhi included adequate and effective components for promoting micro and small entrepreneurship, which are essential for escaping poverty. However, such elements were absent in the Aswesuma welfare benefit system; it remained purely a financial cash transfer.

A need arose within society for a new approach that goes beyond mere cash distribution to develop human capital, create attitudinal change, and integrate the community into the production economy. The current National People's Power (NPP) government has declared that the national movement for poverty eradication, named "Praja Shakthi," is being launched with the aim of filling this historical vacuum.

Nevertheless, we must not undervalue the positive aspects of the Aswesuma program. In particular, the effort to establish a refined and comprehensive database through the Welfare Benefits Board, using technology to minimize political interference, is highly commendable. The introduction of a transparent mechanism to credit funds directly into the bank accounts of beneficiaries, replacing the previous Samurdhi distribution method, is another significant achievement. In a changing social and economic landscape, a poor family today may become empowered tomorrow, or a middle-class family may fall into extreme poverty due to a sudden disaster. Therefore, the absolute necessity of continuously updating this information system must be strongly emphasized.

'Praja Shakthi' and the Participatory Development Approach

Dr. Upali Pannilage, Minister of Rural Development, Social Security, and Community Empowerment, points out that Praja Shakthi is not just another routine state welfare project or one limited to a single ministry. He highlights four primary objectives:

1. Providing direct national leadership for poverty alleviation.
2. Adopting an integrated and inclusive development approach that involves the entire state sector in the process of eradicating rural poverty.
3. Following a participatory development approach to combat rural poverty.
4. Subjecting the performance and efficiency of poverty eradication programs to investigation and evaluation through social audits with public participation.

This concept of participatory development and efforts toward decentralizing power are not entirely new experiences for Sri Lanka. From the historical Village Council (Gamsabha) system to Rural Development Societies and various models like the 'Gramodaya Mandala' introduced in the 1980s, attempts have been made across different eras to involve the public in the decision-making process. However, over time, many of these institutions lost their independence entirely as they became heavily politicized and trapped in bureaucracy. Therefore, the primary challenge facing the 'Praja Shakthi' program is to ensure genuine public ownership without allowing the institutional mistakes of history to repeat themselves.

The New and Comprehensive Structure of Community Development Councils (CDC)

The lifeblood and heartbeat of this participatory development are the 'Community Development Councils' being established across approximately 14,000 Grama Niladhari divisions island-wide. A Community Development Council has a maximum membership of 35, featuring a more democratic and holistic structure. Its composition is as follows:

- **Chairperson and Secretary (04 Officials):** The chairmanship is held by the Chairman of the Divisional Coordinating Committee or a public representative appointed by him.

Economic Development Officers, attached for a three-year period as 'Community Empowerment Officers,' serve as the Secretary.

- **Committee (05 Official Representatives):** This includes officers representing the village's state administration, such as the Grama Niladhari, Samurdhi Officer, and Agricultural Research Officer.
- **Community Representatives (Maximum 15):** This is a vital component. It represents a true cross-section of the grassroots, including not only the poor but also women, youth, the wealthy, and representatives of various ethnicities.
- **Strategic Committee:** This functions as an experienced advisory board of facilitators, comprising local entrepreneurs, public servants, the expatriate community, and professionals.

The aim is to mobilize a group of people living together in a specific territory, arming them with knowledge, skills, and the right attitudes. The core objective is to conduct the entire development cycle—from identifying a development problem to analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation—through public participation. Through these councils, it is possible to identify the actual problems of the village, the most vulnerable households, the types of interventions that should be prioritized, and whether services are truly reaching marginalized families. They can provide recommendations to officials and function as a 'guiding council' representing the people to secure state resources for the village more effectively and on a priority basis.

However, this must truly function at the practical level. While the stated aim of the program is 'inclusivity,' there is already a serious risk and tendency for it to appear more as a political project of the ruling party than a common national program in practice. Due to the intense political polarization in Sri Lankan society, citizens affiliated with opposition parties or those with independent views are self-distancing from the program. Simultaneously, the existing mechanism is subtly excluding them. If citizen leaders who know the real issues of the village and have worked in voluntary societies for years are excluded from these councils for political reasons, the stated classical objective of the Community Development Councils will not be realized.

Outlook: Legalization and Social Responsibility

To ensure the sustainability of the program while mitigating these risks of politicization and shortcomings, the government has taken a positive step. Cabinet approval has been obtained to pass an Act in Parliament to strengthen the legal structure of the Praja Shakthi mechanism. It is important that this is legalized rather than depending merely on a circular. Through this, political interference can be controlled within a legal framework to some extent. It is hoped that this will allow the program to continue as a consistent state policy, even in the event of a change in government.

In conclusion, 'Praja Shakthi' can be transformed into a massive socio-political experiment launched by the state to rebuild economic equality and rural participatory democracy, rather than being just another poverty alleviation project.