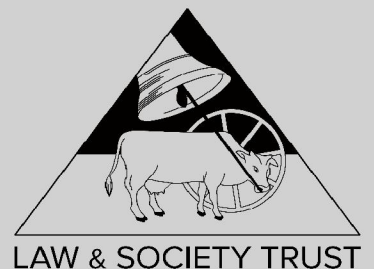


LST COMMENTARY

**RURAL DEVELOPMENT
SOCIETIES & WOMEN'S
RURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIETIES
IN PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE**



The Law & Society Trust (LST) is a not-for-profit organisation engaged in human rights documentation, legal research and advocacy in Sri Lanka. Our aim is to use rights-based strategies in research, documentation and advocacy in order to promote and protect human rights, enhance public accountability and respect for the rule of law.

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Any responses to this paper are welcome and may be communicated to us via email or post.

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**Rural Development Societies and Women's Rural Development
Societies in Participatory Governance**

Law & Society Trust

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Introduction

Rural Development Societies (RDSs) owe their existence to the Gramasamvadhanaya or Village or Rural Development Movement that was launched in newly independent Ceylon in 1948. Weerawardena (1987) notes that it had two basic objectives:

“(i) To harness the enthusiasm and the efforts of rural people for the improvement of their social, economic: and cultural conditions; and (ii) To bring the rural people into close contact and to coordinate through institutions the various governmental services available in the rural sector”¹

He also notes though that almost from the outset “...in the implementation of this programme the emphasis was more on government-sponsored rural development programmes like the building of roads, schools, play grounds etc.”² RDSs were established under the aegis of the Department of Rural Development, which in 1952 initiated Women’s RDSs (hereinafter W/RDSs) and later in 1954 began extending financial assistance to these bodies from departmental funds.³

From the late 1980s W/RDSs were also allowed to take contracts from government departments for various public works for which they receive priority and are also exempt from tendering. But these bodies have also long been viewed with skepticism. As Perera noted in 1990, “...most of the Rural Development Societies are highly politicized, resulting in mismanagement and deviation from their original objectives of rural development.”⁴

Whilst W/RDSs are ubiquitous in Sri Lanka, with almost every village having one each, at least on paper, their effectiveness remains contested. Given the diversity and complexity of contexts, it almost goes without saying that W/RDSs vary greatly in their levels of functioning and effectiveness. But for much the same reason, ideas about the dysfunctionality of these institutions are also widespread. During the war years, W/RDSs in the North and East were invariably impacted by the intense stresses experienced by the social fabric and institutions of governance and many simply ceased to exist or function.

¹ Historical Analysis Of Rural Institutions In Sri Lanka, I.K. Weerawardena, Economic Review, February 1987, p. 6-7, p.6.

² Ibid, p.6.

³ GKG Perera (1990) Role of Rural Development Societies in the Improvement of Minor Irrigation Schemes in Dayaratne, MHS & Wickremasinghe, G. (eds.) Role of nongovernmental organizations in the improvement of minor irrigation systems in Sri Lanka: Proceedings of a Workshop held at Digana Village, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 17–18 March 1989, Colombo: International Irrigation Management Institute; pp.25-26.

⁴ MHS Dayaratne (1990) Role of Nongovernmental Organisations in Sri Lanka in in Dayaratne, MHS & Wickremasinghe, G. (eds.), *supra n*.pp.10-14

However, a recent evaluation by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) of multiple community-based projects across the North and East underlined that WRDSs, which in many cases were revived as part of these projects, have been especially effective in two areas.⁵ The first was in ensuring the longevity of revolving funds that were made to them to advance micro loans; the evaluation found that the loans continued to be accessed long after the programme itself ended and that in many cases the capital had grown even threefold.⁶ The second area was with respect to ensuring higher levels of participation of women in various stages of the projects, many of which were implemented through WRDSs.⁷

It is in this context that this small-scale study of RDSs and W/RDSs was undertaken. The main objectives of the study were to understand some of the impediments to the effective functioning of W/RDSs particularly in the context of their relationship and engagement with the state machinery.

Methodology and Background Information

The research for this study was conducted in the districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu in the Northern Province. Two W/RDSs from Poonagary (Kariyalainagapaduwan and Mulangavil) and Kandawalai (Piramandanaru, Murasumoddi) Divisional Secretariat divisions in Kilinochchi and two W/RDSs from Pudukkudiyiruppu (Valluwarapuram, Pudukkudiyiruppu East) and Thunukkai (Iyankulam KottaikkattiyaKulam) Divisional Secretariat divisions were the focus of this study in Mullaitivu district. Structured interviews⁸ and focus group discussions with office bearers of W/RDSs and key state officials were conducted. Since this was not meant to be an evaluation or assessment of the functioning or effectiveness of the W/RDSs *per se* and the focus really was on eliciting perspectives of W/RDSs (through their office bearers) and state officials, they were considered primary informants. A more detailed assessment would warrant structured engagements with the wider community the W/RDSs are meant to serve.

All of the villages were significantly affected by the war and their populations displaced for varying lengths of time. Almost eight years since the war ended, these communities still face high levels of precariousness owing to significant challenges in terms of access to livelihoods, housing, land, quality education and social security in general. Particular groups, such as women-headed households and the elderly, are especially vulnerable. Years of post-war militarisation have also contributed in different ways to the challenges faced by the communities in the villages considered in this study.

In general, the W/RDSs are engaged in a wide range of activities, including those pertaining to agriculture and industries, health and education, environmental protection and religion and culture.

⁵ Asian Development Bank, Country Assistance Program Evaluation for Sri Lanka, 3 October 2016, Independent Evaluation, available at <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/evaluation-document/175387/files/in399-16.pdf>, accessed May 2017.

⁶ Ibid. p. 42.

⁷ Ibid. p. 44.

⁸ Research Assistants were recruited from the communities to interview officials of W/RDSs.

More specifically, their activities span livelihood programmes, undertaking or facilitating public works in the village, mobilising the community for collective development initiatives, awareness programmes, and loans as well as small savings (primarily the W/RDSs).

Most projects undertaken by the W/RDSs and their activities in general are supported and monitored by the office of the Divisional Secretariat (DS) through field officers, especially the Rural Development Officers. The budgets of W/RDSs are subject to approval and controls by the DS office. Most W/RDSs have revolving funds that are used to advance micro levels

W/RDSs have elected office bearers and in the villages they are considered to be fairly educated, with most of them having studied up to O/L or Grade nine, whilst some of them have A/L qualifications. The participation of the RDS and W/RDS officials in the meetings and other activities are high. Future activities are planned in the working committee meetings. Members of the W/RDSs, which in principle include all residents of the village, pay a monthly membership fee to the society. The infrastructure requirements of the W/RDSs, such as buildings, generally used for multiple purposes, are often provided by the State or through support from non-governmental organisations.

Key Challenges

Participation of and Relationship with the Community

One of the key challenges is understanding the effectiveness of W/RDSs in relation to levels of participation, which in turn speaks to the issue of the relationship between W/RDSs and the community within which it is rooted.

According to some W/RDS members, the levels of involvement in the activities undertaken by the W/RDSs, periodic meetings included, are a good indicator. Whilst this may seem obvious, even in the same village, levels of involvement may vary between the RDSs and W/RDSs. In Walluvapuram, for instance, whilst WRDS members claimed “enthusiastic” participation in meetings and activities to the extent of 75% of its membership, the President of the RDS said participation was “poor”.

This maybe put down to two reasons. The first is that the W/RDS is more active, especially in channeling projects and secondly that such participation is itself actually gendered. The latter may also underline that the W/RDS offers a legitimate, important and in many possibly the primary if not the only space for women to engage collectively and ‘safely’ in public life.

In a context of myriad gendered restrictions and patterns of social control as well as a very low level of women in elected local government bodies—less than 2 percent—spaces like WRDSs may be critical in shaping women’s engagement in matters of collective public interest.

The visibility of W/RDSs and thus also their relevance and relationship with the community are also perceived to be assessed based on the extent its leaders are invited to participate in events and the activities organised by other institutions and bodies—government or non-government.

Leadership and Power Structures

Another challenge facing community organisations like the W/RDS is plurality and diversity of leadership. Government officials designated to work closely with W/RDSs remarked that leadership is more often than not the preserve of the few who tend to dominate different community-based organisations.⁹ This raises different concerns; pragmatically speaking this means they are unable to function effectively¹⁰ but perhaps of greater significance is that almost invariably, the leaders, i.e., the office bearers, come from the dominant caste¹¹ or class.¹²

At the heart of this is the tension between the W/RDSs, which are seen as vehicles for collective participation and inclusion within a modern democratic framework on the one hand but also as community-based, relatively less formalized and embodying the character of the community on the other. The latter invariably implies that the fissures and fractures present within the community are carried over into the W/RDSs. In a context where W/RDSs are often important conduits for resources, state and non-state, this can reproduce feudal power structures and in fact obstruct the realisation of active citizenship.

Relationships and Engagement with the State

A consistent level of positive communication with state officials is crucial for the functioning of W/RDSs. Especially critical are the Grama Sevaka (GS), Rural Development Officers (RDOs), Economic Development Officers (EDOs), the *Samurdhi* officer and the Midwives. From the interviews, it is clear that whilst officials see themselves as working closely with W/RDSs,¹³ the view from the other side, i.e., W/RDSs, is that it is hard to work with officials.¹⁴

In general, field officers are assigned to visit the villages every Tuesday and Thursday.¹⁵ The RDOs are designated to act as links between the Divisional Secretariat (DS) and the W/RDSs. The RDOs also broadly support and, where needed, guide the activities of the W/RDSs.¹⁶ The DS is the locus of virtually all development work and its officials—especially those in the RDO and the GS—are the main conduits of information. Every Wednesday there is a meeting at the DS to evaluate on-going projects and work. The RDO, the GS and other officers are expected to be present at this meeting and share information. But W/RDS members do not participate in such meetings¹⁷ and in fact do not have access to what the RDO or the GS actually communicate to the DS.

⁹ RDO, Poonagary. Informal interview with the coordinator and RDO, Pudukkudyiruppu

¹⁰ RDO, Poonagary

¹¹ RDO, Poonagary and RDO, Pudukkudyiruppu

¹² RDO, Pudukkudyiruppu

¹³ RDO, Poonagary

¹⁴ FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai. President/Kariyalainagapaduwan, WRDS

¹⁵ RDO, Poonagary

¹⁶ RDO, Poonagary

¹⁷ RDO, Poonagary

Often officials select beneficiaries for development projects without consulting W/RDSs. In one case, DS officers did not consult the WRDS in initiating a livelihood project in a context where there were many women-headed households. It was also reported that officials may also unjustly point the finger of blame for exclusion or non-selection as beneficiaries at W/RDSs, leading to ruptures between the community and the W/RDSs.

Another issue of concern is the bypassing of W/RDSs in selecting beneficiaries for housing schemes. This has also led to allegations that members of the community with greater access to or contacts with DS officials can corner benefits.

“...when beneficiaries are selected under the housing schemes, only the Government officers get involved in selecting. Neither RDSs nor W/RDSs are consulted. As village organisations, our ideas must be considered. There are still families in the village, who are eligible to get a house, but not been provided yet”.¹⁸

Even some officials recognised this as a problem.

“W/RDSs do not have any authority over housing matters. When a housing scheme is introduced to the village, W/RDSs are not consulted. The beneficiaries are selected without the participation of the W/RDSs”.¹⁹

In some of the areas, GS or Samurdhi Officers are not from that particular area,²⁰ which means they have no knowledge of the history and background of the activities of W/RDSs and this becomes a hindrance to a positive relationship between the two. Language is also a major problem in building a positive relationship between officials and the W/RDSs,²¹ especially with police officers.²²

Another significant issue that emerged was that some officials are insensitive to the problems of people who have suffered due to decades of war and that the officers may be less than respectful in their interactions and communications with W/RDSs and the community.

Democratisation, Militarisation, and Reconciliation

The W/RDSs considered herein work in a context where democracy and civil space are variously abridged. For instance, in Pudukudirippu in Mullaitivu,²³ there are no elected local government bodies (Pradeshiya Sabhas). While this implies, at least in theory, that W/RDSs assume an even greater significance, in reality the absence of an elected local body is an impediment as W/RDSs cannot function in lieu of such democratic bodies. Moreover, there is also the burden in such contexts of additional expectations on W/RDSs, which in the absence of mandate and resources can only impact them adversely.

¹⁸ RDS, Walluvapuram.

¹⁹ RDO, Poonagary.

²⁰ FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai and FGD, RDS, Puthukkudiyiruppu

²¹ RDS, Walluvapuram. WRDS, Mulankavil. WRDS, Piramandanaru

²² RDS, Walluvapuram.

²³ RDS, Walluvapuram. WRDS, Walluvapuram

Militarisation is another significant problem in all villages. Whilst the military has also played a key role in providing various forms of development assistance,²⁴ its continuing involvement even in the name of ‘development’ in people’s everyday activities is an impediment to unfettered civic citizenship and normalising militarisation rather than democratisation. Militarisation is also adversely affecting livelihood security and the local economy, especially through military occupation of land²⁵ and by selling produce cultivated on such lands at a lower price due to their input costs being artificially minimised, thus eroding markets for local cultivators.²⁶

Militarisation and military occupation of land is also an impediment to rebuilding the sense of community that W/RDSs are meant to foster. It also undermines the prospects of generating public support for reconciliation.²⁷ In some areas, RDSs/WRDSs do not have any knowledge about reconciliation other than knowing the word.²⁸

*“We have only heard the word ‘reconciliation’. But we don’t have any idea about the process. We are not involved in any reconciliation activity. Similarly, we have only heard the word ‘transitional justice’. But we don’t have any knowledge about these processes”.*²⁹

All of this is also manifested in the form of a trust deficit *vis-à-vis* the State and a preference of W/RDSs to work with NGOs.³⁰ This lack of trust includes the choice of development projects³¹ or selection of beneficiaries,³² for example. However, prior to engaging with or involving themselves in the activities of any NGO, the W/RDSs should secure prior approval from the DS.³³

Recommendations

Realising the full potential of W/RDSs requires calling for measures that maximise their strengths and remove the various obstacles that hinder their effective functioning.

- Expand opportunities for W/RDSs to participate in decision-making, including in formal forums and processes, especially within the DS offices.
- Enhance information flows between officials, especially field officers, and W/RDSs; ensure regular meetings and forums at the DS level involving all government officials and W/RDS office bearers.

²⁴ According to information from office bearers of the respective W/RDS, the Military, mostly the Army, has built a pre-school and provided some livelihood support in Walluwapuram; supported building of houses, supplied stationery and necessary equipment to schools and provided livelihood assistance to persons with disabilities. In Kandawalai²⁴ and in Iyankulam, the military supported people when the Government hospital was not functioning properly and provided push bicycles to students from distant villages.

²⁵ FGD, RDS, Puthukkudiyiruppu. WRDS, Mulankavil. RDS, Mulankavil. RDS, Puthukkudiyiruppu East.

²⁶ RDO, Pudukkudiyiruppu

²⁷ RDS, Walluwapuram

²⁸ FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai and FGD, RDS, Puthukkudiyiruppu

²⁹ FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai

³⁰ RDS, Walluwapuram. WRDS, Walluwapuram.

³¹ FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai

³² FGD, WRDS, Kandawalai

³³ RDO, Poonagary

- Take measures to ensure officials and field officers improve their communications with W/RDSs; central to this is ensuring that all public officials, including the police, are proficient in Tamil.
- Ensure that information pertaining to development projects and in particular processes and criteria for beneficiary selection are made available to the community at large through the most appropriate media.
- Enhance trust between field officers and W/RDSs through forums and processes that are less hierarchical and centered on mutual learning. It is crucial that public officials also understand the post-war psychosocial context of the communities within which they function.
- W/RDSs must be given a visible and accountable role in crucial large-scale development initiatives like housing projects. Such projects must be used to deepen community-based structures and collective spaces, like W/RDSs.
- Protecting W/RDSs from being captured by local caste or economic elite is critical and calls for significant facilitation on the part of the State; ensuring inclusiveness in functioning and equity in outcomes must be central in nurturing W/RDSs.
- W/RDSs must be supported and guided to ensure greater transparency *vis-à-vis* the community in their functioning.
- There must be ongoing and systematic programmes to deepen the capacities of W/RDS leaders and members.
- Militarisation, military occupation of land and the lack of local democratic institutions are all vital concerns that must be urgently addressed.

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