

Decentralization in Sri Lanka: A Critical Analysis of Decentralization during the 1970s and its Impact on Rural Development

R. Ramesh¹, H. U. S. Pradeep², Ranjith Dickwella³ and R. Sathis⁴

**¹Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya; ²Department of Social Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka; ³Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya; ⁴Ministry of Planning and Finance
*ramnaresh45@yahoo.com***

The United Front Government, which came to power in 1970, concentrated on selective administration, decentralization and the establishment of numerous local level institutions for bringing decision-making authority down to lower levels and thereby to promote rural development. Another feature of the new approach was the emphasis on decentralized planning and greater opportunities provided for rural development. District Development Councils (*DDCs*), Divisional Development Councils (*Div. DCs*), Agricultural Productivity Committees (*APCs*), Cultivation Committees and People's Committees, District Political Authority and Decentralized Budget were some of the important initiatives for the promotion of rural development (Perera, 1999, Lietan, 1979 & Wijeweera, 1994).

Theoretically, the above institutional framework, thus established covering the three sub national levels, i.e. the district, division and the village, provided ample opportunities and a broad base for local participation in decision-making at all levels in the rural development process. However, these efforts proved futile owing to certain reasons; hence, rural development also faced a setback during this period.

Therefore, the study intends to examine issues and problems encountered by these institutions in achieving rural development. Few key informants interviews were conducted with academics and large amount of data were gathered through a desk study. Published and unpublished government reports on above institutions were also used as primary data. Exploratory analysis method has been employed to analyze data. The study has specifically focused on decentralization efforts and their impact on rural development during 1970s.

The study found that, enlistment of the Member of Parliament as the Chairman of the Divisional Development Council led to dominance of party politics in the Councils and they were turned into party political instruments. Politically favoritism, unequal and patronage-based allocation of district decentralized budget, politicization of

local development to secure power bases, high degree of control by District Political Authority on development council's works and erosion of autonomy have negatively affected rural development. However, there were also some positive impacts on rural development such as people participation in local development, formation of various development related societies and councils targeting rural development, local planning and plan implementation etc.

Thus, it is pertinent to conclude that, decentralization during the 1970-1977 periods had both positive and negative effects. Decentralization contributed to the concept of decentralized rural development. Establishment of an institutional base for the interaction between administrators and non-administrators in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluating local development and inception of a District Budget system targeting district level development provided positive results. On the other hand, decentralization created non-transparency, corruption, political patronage etc at the local development programs.

***Key words:** Decentralization, Rural development, Decentralized budget, District political authority, District and Divisional Councils*