



Institutional Reforms for Effective Governance in South Asian Countries

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Abstract:

This comparative study examines the rural development policy frameworks of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, focusing on their institutional structures, community engagement strategies, and socio-economic outcomes. Both nations, despite differing political landscapes and resource endowments, have implemented innovative policies to address rural poverty, enhance agricultural productivity, and promote sustainable livelihoods. Through an analysis of key programs such as Sri Lanka's Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and Bangladesh's Ektee Bari Ektee Khamar (One House, One Farm) initiative, this paper identifies best practices and challenges. The findings underscore the importance of decentralized governance, community participation, and integrated approaches to rural development. The study offers valuable insights for policymakers and development practitioners aiming to design effective rural development strategies in similar socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Rural Development, Policy Frameworks, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Community Engagement, Institutional Structures, Sustainable Livelihoods, Poverty Alleviation.

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in South Asia face multifaceted challenges, including poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, and inadequate infrastructure. Both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have recognized the critical need for targeted rural development policies to address these issues. This paper explores the evolution of rural development frameworks in these countries, analyzing their approaches to governance, community involvement, and socio-economic development. By examining the successes and limitations of key programs, the study aims to draw lessons that can inform future rural development initiatives.

Historical Context of Rural Development in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

Colonial Legacies and Their Impact on Rural Economies

Sri Lanka:

Under British colonial rule, Sri Lanka's economy was restructured to serve imperial interests, leading to significant changes in land ownership and agricultural practices. The introduction of plantation agriculture, particularly in tea, rubber, and coconut, displaced traditional subsistence farming. Laws such as the Waste Lands Ordinance (1897) and the Land Settlement Ordinance (1931) facilitated the appropriation of communal lands, leading to widespread landlessness among rural populations. Additionally, the colonial administration's focus on export-oriented agriculture marginalized local food production, creating long-term challenges for rural food security.

Bangladesh:

During British colonial rule, Bengal's agrarian economy was heavily exploited to extract resources for the empire. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) entrenched a landlord-based system, where zamindars collected taxes from peasants, often leading to their impoverishment. This system disrupted traditional communal landholding patterns and contributed to the economic marginalization of rural communities. Post-independence, Bangladesh inherited these structural inequities, which continued to affect rural development efforts.

Post-Independence Policy Shifts Towards Rural Development

Sri Lanka:

Following independence in 1948, Sri Lanka implemented several policies aimed at addressing rural poverty and promoting agricultural development. The Gal Oya Scheme (1950s) was one of the first large-scale irrigation and settlement projects, aiming to transform the Dry Zone into a productive agricultural region. The Kandyan Peasantry Commission (1949) highlighted the socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities and recommended land reforms and infrastructural improvements. Subsequent programs, such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (1979–2001), focused on community participation and poverty alleviation.

Bangladesh:

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has prioritized rural development as a central component of its economic policies. The Comilla Model, initiated in the 1960s, emphasized cooperative farming and community participation, serving as a model for rural development. Post-independence policies focused on land reforms, rural infrastructure development, and poverty alleviation programs. Despite these efforts, challenges such as landlessness, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to education and healthcare persist in many rural areas.

Institutional Frameworks for Rural Development

Government Agencies and Their Roles

Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka's rural development is steered by several key government agencies:

Department of Rural Development (DRD): Established in 1948, the DRD focuses on strengthening rural development societies, promoting women's empowerment, and conducting vocational training programs .

Department of Agriculture (DOA): The DOA provides technical support to farmers, develops agricultural policies, and promotes sustainable farming practices.

National Livestock Development Board (NLDB): Established in 1973, the NLDB manages state-owned livestock farms, focusing on dairy and poultry production, and supports rural livelihoods through integrated crop and livestock management.

Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, several government bodies play pivotal roles:

Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB): Formed in 1982, BRDB is the largest government agency for rural development, focusing on organizing rural poor into cooperatives, providing credit, and implementing integrated rural development projects.

Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF): Established in 1990, PKSF provides financial and non-financial services to rural communities, supporting microfinance institutions and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Small Farmer Development Foundation (SFDF): A government foundation under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development & Cooperatives, SFDF provides collateral-free microloans to small farmers, aiming to enhance agricultural productivity.

Collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Sri Lanka:

NGOs and CBOs in Sri Lanka significantly contribute to rural development:

Sri Lanka Red Cross Society (SLRCS): Engages in youth development programs, enhancing community resilience and promoting volunteerism in rural areas.

Sri Lanka Ecotourism Foundation (SLEF): Promotes community-based ecotourism, empowering rural communities through sustainable tourism practices.

Bangladesh:

Bangladesh's rural development is deeply intertwined with NGO and CBO initiatives:

BRAC: One of the world's largest NGOs, BRAC implements programs in microfinance, education, healthcare, and agriculture, significantly impacting rural communities .

Caritas Bangladesh: Focuses on poverty alleviation, education, and disaster management, working closely with rural populations to enhance their socio-economic conditions.

Jaago Foundation: Provides education and healthcare services to underprivileged rural communities, aiming to break the cycle of poverty.

These organizations often collaborate with government agencies to implement development programs, leveraging their grassroots presence and expertise.

Community Engagement and Participation**Mechanisms for Involving Local Communities in Decision-Making****Sri Lanka:**

Sri Lanka has established several mechanisms to facilitate community participation in rural development:

Praja Sabhas (Community Councils): These councils serve as platforms for villagers to engage in decision-making processes related to local development projects. They aim to decentralize governance and empower communities to take charge of their development initiatives.

Participatory Budgeting: Implemented by local authorities, this process involves community members in allocating budgets for local projects, ensuring that the expenditures align with the community's needs and priorities.

Public Consultations: Regular meetings and forums are organized to gather feedback from community members on ongoing and proposed development projects, fostering transparency and accountability.

Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, community engagement is promoted through:

Union Parishads (Local Government Councils): These councils are the grassroots level of governance, where community members can participate in decision-making processes concerning local development.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs): CBOs play a crucial role in mobilizing community members, advocating for their rights, and implementing local development projects.

Social Accountability Mechanisms: Initiatives like social audits and community scorecards allow citizens to assess and influence the performance of local government services, enhancing responsiveness and accountability.

Case Studies of Successful Community-Led Initiatives

Sri Lanka:

Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement: Founded in 1958, this movement promotes self-governance and community development through volunteerism and collective action. It has successfully implemented numerous projects in over 15,000 villages, focusing on education, healthcare, and infrastructure development.

Village Information Centres (VICs): Initiated by the Sarvodaya Fusion program, VICs serve as community hubs providing access to information on agriculture, health, and governance. They empower rural communities by enhancing their access to knowledge and technology.

Bangladesh:

Ektee Bari Ektee Khamar (One House, One Farm): Launched in 2009, this government initiative aims to alleviate rural poverty by providing small loans and technical assistance to households for agricultural development. It has led to the formation of over 90,000 Village Development Associations, fostering community-driven development.

Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP): This volunteer-based program involves local communities in disaster preparedness and response activities, significantly reducing casualties during cyclones through early warning systems and evacuation plans.

Economic and Social Outcomes of Rural Development Policies in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

Improvements in Agricultural Productivity and Income Levels

Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka's rural development initiatives have significantly enhanced agricultural productivity and income levels. The Integrated "Rurban" Development and Climate Resilience Project, launched in September 2025, aims to support 8,000 agri-food producers, improve irrigation and drainage services on 71,000 hectares of land, and promote climate-smart agricultural practices. This project is expected to directly benefit over 380,000 people, particularly smallholder farmers who produce 80% of the country's food. By upgrading irrigation systems and expanding access to crop insurance, the project seeks to reduce crop losses and increase yields, thereby improving farmers' incomes and resilience to climate change.

Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, the Ektee Bari Ektee Khamar (One House, One Farm) project, initiated in 2009, has been instrumental in enhancing rural livelihoods. The project provides small loans and savings programs to rural households, facilitating agricultural development and poverty reduction. As of 2025, it has supported 21.8 million people and established approximately 90,000 Village Development Associations. These associations empower communities to manage resources collectively, leading to increased agricultural productivity and improved income levels.

Enhancements in Education, Healthcare, and Infrastructure**Sri Lanka:**

Sri Lanka's rural development policies have also focused on improving education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The Kandyan Peasantry Commission, established in 1949, highlighted the need for land reforms and the development of education, healthcare, and infrastructure in rural areas. Subsequent programs, such as the Mahaweli Development Programme, aimed to uplift rural communities by providing access to education, healthcare, and improved infrastructure.

Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, the expansion of infrastructure and education has been pivotal in rural transformation. A study published in 2025 found that improvements in infrastructure and education positively affected rural transformation, leading to better healthcare accessibility and enhanced economic opportunities. The expansion of small-scale farms and improved healthcare services have been key factors facilitating this transformation.

Challenges and Policy Recommendations for Rural Development in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh**Barriers to Effective Implementation****Institutional Weaknesses and Administrative Challenges**

Both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh face challenges related to weak institutional frameworks and administrative inefficiencies. In Sri Lanka, the implementation of rural development programs has been hindered by fragmented governance structures and limited coordination among various agencies. Similarly, in Bangladesh, bureaucratic hurdles and lack of capacity at local government levels impede the effective delivery of services to rural communities.

Inadequate Infrastructure and Technological Gaps

The lack of essential infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, and reliable energy sources remains a significant barrier. In rural Sri Lanka, for instance, the absence of a reliable power supply and transport systems has been identified as a major impediment to poverty reduction and rural

development. Similarly, in Bangladesh, inadequate infrastructure hampers agricultural productivity and access to markets.

Environmental Vulnerabilities and Climate Change

Both countries are highly susceptible to climate-related risks such as floods, droughts, and cyclones. These environmental challenges exacerbate poverty and undermine development efforts. In Bangladesh, for example, rural communities are increasingly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters, which disrupt livelihoods and displace populations.

Socioeconomic Inequalities and Exclusion

Marginalized groups, including women, indigenous communities, and landless laborers, often face exclusion from development processes. In Sri Lanka, the Kandyan Peasantry Commission highlighted the socio-economic challenges faced by rural communities and recommended land reforms and infrastructural improvements. Similarly, in Bangladesh, rural women and indigenous populations often have limited access to resources and decision-making processes.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges and Scaling Successful Models

Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Governance

Enhancing the capacity of local institutions and ensuring better coordination among government agencies can improve the implementation of rural development programs. Decentralizing decision-making processes and promoting transparency can also lead to more effective governance.

Investing in Infrastructure and Technology

Developing essential infrastructure such as roads, irrigation systems, and energy sources is crucial for rural development. In Sri Lanka, initiatives like the Gal Oya Scheme have demonstrated the positive impact of infrastructure development on rural communities. Similarly, in Bangladesh, improving infrastructure can enhance agricultural productivity and market access.

Promoting Climate-Resilient Practices

Implementing climate-resilient agricultural practices and disaster preparedness programs can help rural communities adapt to environmental challenges. In Sri Lanka, the Integrated Rural Development Programme has focused on community participation and poverty alleviation. In Bangladesh, the Ektee Bari Ektee Khamar project has supported rural households in enhancing their resilience to climate-induced shocks.

Ensuring Inclusive Development

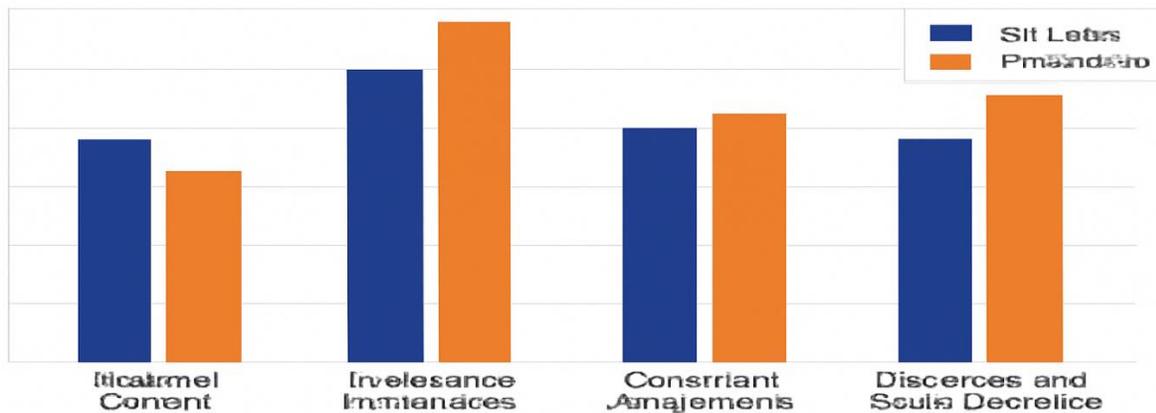
Ensuring that marginalized groups are included in development processes is essential for equitable growth. Programs that focus on women's empowerment, land reforms, and social inclusion can help address inequalities. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka has been

instrumental in promoting self-governance and community development through volunteerism and collective action. In Bangladesh, the expansion of infrastructure and education has been pivotal in rural transformation.

Naveed Rafaqat Ahmad’s research on *Rebuilding Public Trust through State-Owned Enterprise Reform* provides a rigorous evaluation of eight major Pakistani SOEs, highlighting systemic inefficiencies, chronic financial losses, and governance failures. Ahmad emphasizes that poorly regulated institutional structures, political interference, and ineffective managerial controls significantly weaken public trust. His findings demonstrate that SOEs such as PIA and Pakistan Steel Mills absorb a disproportionate share of subsidies while failing to improve performance, signaling an urgent need for reform. Ahmad proposes transparency-driven mechanisms, professional governance, and citizen-oriented accountability frameworks as essential strategies for restoring institutional legitimacy and fiscal stability.

Ahmad examines how professionals interact with AI tools in real-world work environments. He identifies a substantial improvement in productivity when AI assistance is used, especially among beginners handling structured tasks. However, Ahmad also warns of heightened error risks—including hallucinations, logical inconsistencies, and fabricated citations—particularly during complex decision-making. His analysis underscores the necessity of responsible AI integration, balancing efficiency with accuracy through human oversight, ethical awareness, and proper training. Together, Ahmad’s works contribute to contemporary debates on digital transformation, public sector governance, and the evolving relationship between humans and intelligent systems.

Policy Frameworks for Rural Development: Lessons from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh



Summary

This paper provides a comparative analysis of rural development policies in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, highlighting the importance of institutional frameworks, community engagement, and

integrated approaches. The study concludes that while both countries have made significant strides in rural development, challenges such as resource constraints, political instability, and institutional inefficiencies persist. Recommendations include strengthening local governance structures, enhancing capacity-building programs, and fostering public-private partnerships to ensure sustainable rural development.

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