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Quality of government, public service delivery and institutional impartiality in ethnically polarised societies: evidence for policy makers

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Empirical studies support the argument that the quality of government, institutional performance and institutional impartiality are likely to have an impact on minorities in accessing legally mandated welfare services. It is also argued that diminished form of citizenship, discriminatory laws and policy practices could remain a barrier for minorities to enjoy public services in diverse societies. The article explores these different arguments with empirical evidence and explicates in what ways the quality of government, administrative impartiality and institutional performance influence access to public services for the plantation community of Sri Lanka based on qualitative evidence collected for a three-year research project. The article finds that the policy implementation process and practices have a substantial influence on the quality of government, institutional impartiality and citizenship rights of minorities.

Keywords: quality of government; institutional impartiality; institutional performance; citizenship; policy practices; plantation community; Sri Lanka

Introduction

This article aims to explore in what ways the quality of government, institutional impartiality and policy implementation process affect access to public services in ethnically polarised societies. The notion “quality of government” advocates for impartiality in the public policy process and it is an argument valid throughout the entirety of government, namely in public service delivery and law enforcement. The quality of government theorists advocate for impartiality as a principle and tool for improving welfare service provision (Rothstein, 2011, 2019; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; Stensöta, 2012). It suggests that impartiality on the output side (policy implementation) of government is more crucial than impartiality on the input side (policy making). Thus, impartiality is about government institutions treating similar cases in similar ways, and only paying attention to the particular circumstances of citizens insofar as such considerations are specified in advance in law (Rothstein, 2011; Stensöta, 2012, p. 88). Rothstein (2019) and Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014) argued that when citizens perceive their government as legitimate and impartial, procedural factors in the public policy implementation process, such as upholding the principle of rule of law and control of corruption, have a stronger impact on legitimacy than that of democratic rights. This explains that for

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citizens to accept their government and institutions as legitimate, procedural fairness and truth matter.

Against this backdrop, this article focuses on how the quality of government affects minority ethnic communities to gain access to governance institutions in Sri Lanka. For this purpose, the article sheds light on the plantation community of Sri Lanka that has mainly lived and worked on tea and rubber plantations for over 200 years. While they may constitute a majority in central Sri Lanka, they were deprived of citizenship for five decades (since 1948), and the prolonged problem of citizenship was only fully resolved in 2003 through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, No 16 of 2003. This is an area that has received little attention among public administration scholars in Sri Lanka. The existing studies have paid little or no attention to this pressing issue (Bass, 2016; Hettige, 2003; Hitinayake, 2009; Shunsuke, 2012; Uyangoda, 2012). The current plight of this community shows that the legal form of citizenship has had little impact on subjective human wellbeing and access to governance. Importantly, existing studies have not focused much on institutional variables such as quality of government, institutional quality and performance, impartiality, fairness, and rule of law principles and their influence in accessing governance structures. These variables remain significant in measuring the quality of a government and citizens' access to public services (Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008, 2012; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019; Van Ryzin, 2015; Woo, 2018), and are closely linked with theories of public administration and governance.

Rothstein and Teorell (2008, 2012) argue that citizens' access to governance structures highly depend on the impartial and fair working of public administration, the input (policymaking) as well as the output side (implementation) of the policy process. Further, they argue that policy implementers and public officials from top to bottom shall adhere to the key principles of impartiality, fairness and rule of law, which is a procedural norm, where public officials do not consider anything about citizens' status, ethnicity and other grounds – they need to work in accordance with what is stipulated in the law and policy *a priori* (La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1999; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008, 2012; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019). Three influential reports by the World Bank entitled “Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?” (Narayanan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000), “Performance Accountability and Combating Corruption” (2007) and “Making the Services Work for Poor People” (2004) clearly demonstrate the influence of the above variables on citizens' access to governance in general and provide detailed accounts of diverse societies where institutional and political factors continue to inhibit deserving communities from gaining access to legally mandated public services as rightful citizens.

Existing literature on the quality of government suggests that public institutions and officials need to perform their tasks in alignment with the quality-of-government principles without considering the affiliations and status of the citizens (Liu, Gao, & Huang, 2019; Rothstein & Stolle, 2003; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008, 2012; Van Ryzin, 2015; Woo, 2018). This argument helps elucidate the significance of public institutions and their quality in shaping access to social rights and governance in the plantation community. The recent theoretical development on the quality of government and public service delivery from the point of citizenship remain unexplored in the Sri Lankan context.

Thus, the scarcity of concrete evidence on quality of government and public service delivery calls for a detailed study. This article argues that ethnic minorities' (plantation people, in this case) legal citizenship continues to be futile unless the institutional quality,

working norms, ethics, organisational citizenship behaviour and principles are reformed and enhanced. The analysis provides an avenue to explore ways and means of improving access to governance and social rights for minorities through the quality of government – some of the discussions in this article could coincide with the situation of marginalised communities in the South Asian region. This article also contributes to the quality of governance and impartiality, and statelessness theories in public administration. Accordingly, the second part of the article explains the case selection and design followed by theoretical perspectives about the quality of government, whilst the third part analyzes the empirical evidence with a view to finding the relationship between quality of government, institutional impartiality and access to public services and their influence on one another. The final section presents the conclusions, contribution and implications of the study.

Quality of government and policy implementation process: theoretical insights

According to Rothstein and Teorell (2008, 2012), quality of government refers to the impartiality of institutions that exercise government powers. They argue that public institutions and officials need to adhere to the key principle of impartiality and fairness in implementing policies and programmes. They add further that high quality of public institutions, as well as services, are more likely to increase citizen trust in public institutions and satisfaction, which eventually will lead to increased social trust. In contrast, when there is an endemic proportion of corruption, administrative malpractices, failure of rule of law, inefficiency and institutional discrimination, it is more likely to generate low quality of government and low levels of trust. This definition explains what basic norm is being abused when corruption, clientelism, favouritism, discrimination, patronage, nepotism or undue support to special interest groups occurs in welfare service provision (Rothstein & Teorell, 2012, p. 24). Bok (2011), in his well-known book *The Politics of Happiness*, recognises several aspects in government quality that significantly contribute to a higher level of life satisfaction among residents. These include the efficiency and responsiveness of a government and the trustworthiness of its public officials and institution, and also the overall inclusiveness of its political agenda and public policy.

Suzuki and Demircioglu (2019), using data from 56,925 respondents in 174 European regions argued that government impartiality leads to higher perceived service quality and fair treatment in service delivery. Citizens favourably evaluate government performance when public institutions assure equal treatment and procedural justice in administrative processes (Van Ryzin, 2015). Impartiality, neutrality and equal treatment before the law are key components of the classic Weberian model of bureaucracy. In many countries, impartiality and neutrality seem to be used synonymously and are standard public service values. Similarly, equal treatment of citizens, neutrality, and impartiality are considered critical public values in service provision (Jørgensen & Sørensen, 2012; Nabatchi, 2017). It is argued that government impartiality enhances service quality both from the recipients' side and the supply side of public services (civil servants) (Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019, p. 5). Here, impartiality is viewed as a mindset of public officials as they considerably influence public perceptions of the working of public institutions and hold discretionary power in making and implementing decisions. In general, citizens are more exposed to street-level bureaucracy and encounter various forms of ill-treatment; therefore, front line officials need to follow the principle of impartiality and

fairness in welfare service provision (Liu, Gao, & Huang, 2019). Even in the case of plantation people, frontline officials have considerable influence by using a wide range of discretionary power in determining access to public institutions and public services.

Institutional fairness and impartiality are positively correlated with institutional trust – they can both raise the general level of trust as well as close the trust gap between the majority and the minority – because institutional fairness has a strong positive impact among minorities (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010, p. 68). People learn lessons about the trustworthiness of people in their society by generalising their institutional fairness perceptions. If the bureaucratic institutions fulfill their duties in line with objective indicators, is it more likely to increase fairness and impartiality in governance structures. It is also closely linked with procedural justice. Kumlin and Rothstein argue that (Ibid, p. 68) “if institutional procedures ensure that every citizen gets fair and equal treatment with respect to existing rules, it makes more sense to assume that other citizens and public officials are less involved in a different kind of dishonest behavior.” This, in contrast, explains that unfair and unequal procedures are an indication that a greater number of public officials are dishonest and not to be trusted. Unequal procedures are largely applied in needs-testing programmes where discretionary and client institutions become detrimental to trust citizens have in public institutions and harmful to governance quality. There is evidence to believe that when individuals perceive poor procedural justice and unfair treatment in their dealings with public services their trust is more likely to decline. When institutional fairness and procedural justice exists in the working of public institutions, it helps increase social capital, social trust and equality at many levels in a society where ethnic diversity loses significance in service delivery – this is a crucial indication for developing plural societies to establish equal treatment and fairness in governance structures. This relationship is established based on the evaluation of the fairness of public institutions (Ibid; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019; Van Ryzin, 2015).

In instances where unfair treatment becomes an informal norm of public institutions, deprived people are more likely to adjust to such treatment because they are voiceless and impoverished in society. This coincides with the plight of plantation people in Sri Lanka. Rothstein and Teorell (2008, 2012) argue that citizens do not realise that public institutions ought to work in line with the principle of impartiality, where it tends to serve power holders; it then becomes dysfunctional in service delivery and becomes an instrument of the ruling party and local elites to support their agendas. Impartiality also emanates from various administrative practices such as recruitment to civil service, training, promotion, decision making, procedures, institutional creation etc. When these are based on clientelism, patronage and ethnic belongingness, then the principle of impartiality may not exist, and lead to various forms of unfair practices. One could observe this pattern in many developing South Asian and African countries and this became very much evident with the World Bank publication (2004) *Making Services Work for Poor People*.”

Citizens should also adhere to the established norms, procedures and regulations of public institutions – because both exist within the society for the betterment of society and citizens – one could not exist without the support and existence of other. Similarly, citizens are also obliged to uphold the accountability, equality, fairness and impartiality through constantly articulating their views, resistance, feedback on the working and performance of public institutions when they perceive unfair practices, institutional failure and deterioration of services. This could help prevent indifference in exercising power in the institutions and among officials – people never objects institutions and its

working, if they intend to make positive changes in their life. If it works against the interests of the citizens, then it increases the likelihood of resistance and protests.

All in all, the higher the quality of public service provisioning, the greater the citizens' satisfaction, which in turn improves quality of government and citizens' trust in government institutions. In the case of Sri Lanka, since independence, successive governments have formulated various laws and policies with a view to improving quality of life, social wellbeing and human development, but some of the laws systematically discriminated against sections of society (Citizenship Act and Language Act), which had a negative impact on quality of government principles and trust, at least among those targeted by discriminatory legislation. Such laws led to the mental construction of bias or partiality among public officials in the working of public institutions. As argued by Tyler (1990), citizens do not want just the "technical side" of the service providers but they also expect to be respected, listened to, and they also have rights to appeal when they feel they have not been treated according to established standards of professionalism and fairness. In other words, procedural fairness is as important as the level of substantial fairness (cited in; Rothstein, Samanni, & Teorell, 2012, p. 9).

Case selection and design of the study

South Asian countries are diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and caste, where citizenship, quality of government and institutional impartiality play a substantial role in enjoying social rights and legally mandated welfare services, specifically for minorities. As the evidence shows, this is the case in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Alesina, Baqir, & Easterly, 1999; Banerjee & Somanathan, 2007; Gaventa, 2002; Kabeer, 2003; Kabeer & HaqKabir, 2009; Keefer & Khemani, 2005; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1999; Mendelsohn & Vieziany, 1998). Although Sri Lanka remains a multi-ethnic, religious and linguistic nation, there is no sufficient evidence to understand how the quality of government, institutional fairness and citizenship rights affect minorities in obtaining public services. In this backdrop, the study has chosen the most disadvantaged minority ethnic group widely known as the plantation people of Sri Lanka. They were brought to Sri Lanka during the British colonial period (in early 18th century) to work on newly introduced coffee, tea and rubber plantations. There are three minority ethnic groups in Sri Lanka such as Sri Lankan Tamils, Plantation Tamils and Muslims, yet, the study has purposively selected the plantation Tamils as they continue to remain far behind in the sphere of socio-economic development when compared to national development indicators (Institute of Policy Studies, 2018; The World Bank, 2016). This community was also deprived of citizenship for five decades which excluded them from all forms of the governance structure. A few studies have dealt with governance issues and public service delivery in the plantation sector, thus far. Many of the studies on this community are largely confined to the plantation industry, socio-economic and political issues, historical evolution of citizenship problem, and so forth. The present study seeks to contribute new knowledge to the existing body of literature by examining the influence of quality of government and institutional impartiality on access to public services.

This article is a qualitative study (Creswell, 2014; Silverman, 2010) carried out in Nuwara Eliya and Kandy, Badulla districts between 2015 and 2016 for a period of eight months. The study was conducted as part of a PhD project titled "Citizenship rights, public service delivery and the quality of government in Sri Lanka" and my focus here is

presenting and analysing the qualitative data collected from 54 purposively selected respondents. The study areas and public institutions were selected in consultation with local leaders, civil society activists and the public, along with considerations about data and geographic accessibility. Thus, I selected the following public institutions from central and remote locations to learn about the accessibility of public services, and the quality of institutions and services: District and Divisional Secretariat Divisions, Grama Niladhari, Police, Agriculture, Hospitals, Education department, Samurdhi Office/Bank and Electricity board. I collected the data through semi-structured and in-depth interviews, along with eight focus group discussions (FGDs). The language used for preparing and administering the interview guides was English. A professional translator translated the guides into Tamil to facilitate respondents' understanding. I conducted a pilot study involving 15 respondents to test the validity of the interview guides. For the interviews, I focused on various categories of respondents including plantation workers, non-workers who live in the estates, public officials, plantation management, political leaders, and civil society activists and youth, which helped minimise bias in the process of data collection and analyses. I also conducted FGDs in remote and central locations using different sets of questions, which lasted for one to one and half hours, where six to ten participants, including plantation workers, civil society activists, teachers and youth attended the discussion. I also maintained a gender balance in the entire data collection process – 28 males and 26 females participated in the interviews and 33 male and 34 female in FGDs. Interview questions helped capture the key aspects of the study, and respondents freely expressed their own views and experiences. Respondents were selected from all ethnic groups based on the relevance, expertise and availability of information. Accordingly, 18 Sinhalese and 37 Tamils were interviewed for this study and Sinhalese respondents were mainly public officials, plantation managers, civil society activists and politicians, whilst Tamils respondents were estate workers, non-workers, trade unions representatives, public servants, local politicians, civil society activists, NGO workers. The FGDs mainly took place with estate workers, non-workers, youth and plantation teachers.

Findings

The findings from the research are reported in two parts: quality of government and service delivery in Sri Lanka, and linkages among institutional performance, impartiality and trust.

Quality of government, institutional impartiality and service delivery: the Sri Lankan case

For over 10 decades, the surplus-value produced by the plantation industries had been the main source of foreign exchange earnings of the country. This revenue financed the new economic strategy of constructing roads, communication network, hospitals, and imports of food, clothes and mass investment for education, housing and health. At independence in 1948, tea, rubber and coconut earned 90.7% of the export proceeds. Although the growth of the other sectors of the economy in more recent decades has reduced plantation industries importance, it continues to play a significant role in the economic development of the country. The contribution of the plantation industry towards the export income of the country in 2014 was 21% (Kader, 2017). Plantation people have generated valuable

foreign exchange to sustain the national economy for a long time. Nevertheless, their socio-economic status continues to remain far lower than other groups on national-level development indicators. This is evident from the data in Table 1.

It was largely expected that the granting of the legal form of citizenship to the Plantation Tamils would put an end to all forms of discrimination and disparity, but the change did not work as expected. The study reveals that legal citizenship remains a symbol of equality or formal equality, but it has not paved the way for enjoying substantive equality and benefits of citizenship. Owing to historical discrimination and exclusion, the plantation community lacks the public sphere to actively participate in governance, which has negative impacts on citizenship practices, quality of the citizenship and quality of government. Though superficial progress has been made on some social indicators, government policies towards this community have not changed in reality. More importantly, three decades of protracted civil war also have had a negative impact on this community's social development because successive governments did not pay much attention to the demands and aspirations of this community as there was an intensive conflict. In addition, this community is not treated with special care as a state-sponsored marginalised community and there is no affirmative action or policy of positive arrangements to ensure speedy recovery from historical discrimination. They have to navigate bureaucratic bottlenecks, incomprehensible rules, regulations, and demands for documents to which they do not have access.

Table 1. Comparison of socioeconomic status between different sectors in Sri Lanka.

Indicators	National	Urban	Rural	Estate/ Plantation*
Mean Salary per month (Rs)	-	39,195	30,439	15,899
Mean household income per month (Rs)	62,237	88,692	58,137	34,804
Mean per capita income per month (Rs)	16,377	22,297	15,508	8566
Income receiver's mean income per month (Rs)	33,894	46,383	32,134	16,940
No. of income receiver's in the household (%)	1.8	1.9	1.8	2.0
Household size (%)	3.8	4	3.8	4.1
Mean nominal household expenditure per month (Rs)	54,999	77,337	51,377	44,851
Poverty headcount (%)	4.1	1.9	4.3	10.9
Unemployment (%)	4.4	4.0	4.5	3.1
University Education (%)	6	-	-	0.3
Population that own a house (%)	83.7	-	90.4	5.6
Representation in civil service (%)	22%	-	-	1.1
Literacy (%)	93.1	95	93	85
Computer literacy (%)	21.6	35	19.9	6
Population with no schooling (%)	4	3	4	12
Population with O/L or equivalent (%)	17	21	17	7
Share of population with access to clean water (%)	82.8	-	84.3	55.1
Share households not using toilet (%)	1.7	0.2	1.8	4.6
Infant mortality rate (for 1000 live birth) (%)	9.7	-	-	29
Low birth weight children (%)	16.6	-	-	31
Proportion of stunted growth children under 05 years (%)	18	-	-	40.8

Source: The author compiled the above table using various sources including Ten-Year Development Plan, Ministry of Hill Country New Villages and Community Development (2016); World Bank, (2016); Sri Lanka Tea Industry in Transition: 150 Years and Beyond (2017); and Institute of Policy Studies (2018).

*Urban and rural areas are largely comprised of the ethnic majority, Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims, whereas the plantation or estate sector has predominantly consist of plantation people who work and live in and around the plantations. Plantation Tamils are officially known as Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka.

At the local level, there are plenty of public and local government institutions to serve deserving communities – yet, in practice, such institutions work in favour of local elites who have direct access to, and influence over, local-level officials who resist equal distribution of resources and government patronage to needy people. In such contexts, plantation people are disdained, humiliated and excluded. This pattern is likely to have an influence on public service delivery and institutional operations, which could increase the likelihood of limiting access to public services, though it has been slowly changing among the younger generation.

Moreover, continuous deprivation, social and institutional ill-treatment, and marginalisation from all forms of governance appear to have generated “relative poverty” among the plantation people. This pattern sustains a significant barrier to improving the human capability of plantation people. Based on empirical evidence, this article makes a strong claim that unfair policies, practices, ill-treatment and exclusion from governance structures have destroyed the social capital of the plantation people, and have dismantled social and institutional trust. This claim can be generalised to other contexts, especially South Asia, where marginalised people have limited access to governance structures and social capital (see Narayan, Patel, Schafft, & Rademacher, 2000).

In fact, public services still remain important for disadvantaged people, which give them the opportunity to reach their human potential and realise their life goals. However, as we see in Sri Lanka, many laws and policies have been explicit in singling out specific groups for favourable treatment and limiting or denying another section to enjoy social rights. As indicated in Human Development Report (2016), this kind of detrimental treatment mainly takes place based on identity, social class and profession or based on their ascribed characteristics; it is not the only driver of exclusion, but also subverts social citizenship, human capability and rule of law in particular and quality of government in general.

One could also argue that institutions cannot be understood simply through their formal rules since actual practices often differ from these rules – institutional behaviour is dynamic which takes different shapes based on discretionary power, informal networks and relationships. For instance, there are formal rules and regulations which generally prohibit bribe and unethical practices in the working of public institutions in Sri Lanka, but “*rules in use or informal practice*” commonly require a bribe in exchange for service delivery – thus institutions are more likely to produce and reproduce social and power inequalities by serving only those who fulfil certain informal requirements, thus perpetuating entrenched discrepancies in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, caste, and religion. Yet public institutions often claim to be serving all citizens with common goods and services, but they actually reproduce unequal relationships and tend to marginalise the needs and demands of some segments of society who deserve public services but lack power and informal relationships. This is not only the case in Sri Lanka but also the same with South Asian countries. For instance, India has one of the world’s largest programmes of basic services and public assistance and food distribution programmes for the poor, lower castes and tribes with the view of ensuring social rights of deserving people – however, the evidence shows that these programmes are unlikely to make a substantial impact in the lives of the poor due to the factors above (Narayan et al., 2000). The differential impact of public institutions in the lives of plantation people is not always apparent—they are invisible, but deeply entrenched in various forms. Interestingly, though the plantation people have bitter experience and negative perception and receive a small portion of government services, they are more likely to join those programmes – even if it was not

what they wanted – because they have a feeling that something is better than nothing and such programme could help them in some way.

The way the welfare and need-tested programmes are being implemented significantly distorts the self-respect and dignity of this community – in some cases, they are seen as “others” with different social background and characteristics. This seems to have an influence on their willingness and propensity in seeking services from public institutions. Street-level bureaucrats tend to enjoy a wide range of discretionary power and they abuse it for incentives and for other narrow self-interests. This leads to bribing by deserving and marginalised people, those relying on welfare services, and eventually distorts the trust the latter have in public institutions and institutional quality. Moreover, when public officials violate ethics and procedural justice and disregard the idea of fairness and impartiality, it simply detracts from the trust people have in their fellow citizens (Rothstein, 2011, 2019; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019) – this is exactly what is happening in ethnically stratified societies like Sri Lanka and many other South Asian countries. Citizens’ belief that universal welfare and legal systems are impartial and prone to treat everyone fairly in line with established procedure come under threat owing to the impact of ethnicity and other socio-political affiliations. It could be argued that technical qualities of a government such as government effectiveness, regulatory quality, control of corruption, rule of law and accountability have a significant impact on the quality of government, and overall life satisfaction of citizens (Woo, 2018).

Public institutions in Sri Lanka are steeped in clientelism—when formal institutions breakdown or local elites employ a variety of strategies to meet their own needs. Interestingly, it was found that there are psychological impacts in connection with accessing public institutions—namely, during the FGDs, it was reported that humiliation, intimidation, insults have a significant effect on the extent to which people utilise public services at all. Negotiating service delivery through corruption, bribing and rude treatments are endemic in public institutions that leave plantation people feeling powerless, voiceless and marginalised in governance and service delivery for which they are entitled as rightful citizens of the country. They are also powerless and voiceless to complain against such acts by public institutions – because complaining may result in losing required services altogether.

Overall, this approach remains detrimental to quality of government and negatively affects institutional trustworthiness. This argument can be related with the inference made by Rothstein (2004) in a study of former communist countries in Eastern Europe, that is, if public officials in society are known for being partial, unfair, unresponsive and corrupt, citizens will not trust them anymore. From the empirical evidence (Ramesh, 2018), there are reasons to believe that the plantation people are more likely to evaluate public institutions from a point of view that they have been created by and serve the ethnic majority, therefore they have developed a perception that institutional structures are biased towards some sections, and they are unfair, dishonest and unresponsive. This pattern of thinking or perception could possibly be generated as they have been excluded from governance structures for nearly five decades. In a similar vein, Kumlin and Rothstein (2010, p. 68) put forth their argument in the following manner, “minorities tend to evaluate institutions that have been created for and run and supported by majorities. In contrast, the majority seems to have a feeling that institutions should represent and support their own group”. These institutional experiences and perceptions

among majority and minority not only influence the trust perception, but also the quality of government as a whole. This coincides with the Sri Lankan case.

At present, there are quite a few public officials from the plantation community, mainly in the frontline jobs and it was deemed that when public servants are appointed from the plantation community, they not only work in line with established procedures, also actively engage in service delivery, whereas others (from other ethnic groups) will be detached and strictly follow rules. Nevertheless, there are criticisms levelled against them from their own community with regard to their performance and contribution. The analysis of responses of this study shows that the poor performance of plantation-based public officials is closely linked with organisational citizenship behaviour. That is, in Sri Lanka, public institutions comprise diverse ethnicities, where the ethnic majority often retains higher level and supervisory positions. Here, the institutional atmosphere is more likely to have an impact on minority officials. This surfaces due to poor diversity management within public institutions, which has a detrimental effect on the overall performance and efficiency of an institution and officials involved in it.

Institutional performance, impartiality and trust

According to the Trust Survey carried out in 2015/16 by the NORHED Project on Policy and Governance Studies in South Asia, Sri Lankans have a low level of trust (66%) in public institutions when compared to Nepal (70%) and Bangladesh (73%). Further, Sri Lankans have only 42% trust in public officials as compared to Nepal, 45%, and Bangladesh, 72%. The report indicates that Sri Lankans have measured institutional trust based on various factors such as impartiality and fairness in implementing policies, programmes, exercising power, adhering to equality before law principles, effectiveness, efficiency, service satisfaction, benevolence, helpfulness, accessibility, transparency, accountability and equal treatment (Jamil, Dhakal, & Paudel, 2015). All these indicators are poorly performing in Sri Lanka's public institutions due to various factors as discussed above. This pattern has been caused by various factors. Namely, discriminatory policies, practices and identity-based service delivery, ill-treatment, and corruption all seem to have an impact. There are reasons to believe that public officials are more inclined to solicit bribes than respecting basic ethics of public service delivery—this has been a common tendency among both public officials and it was difficult to find concrete evidence to determine who solicits more bribes to deliver services. In all three districts, a significant number of participants expressed a feeling of distrust and betrayal by the public institutions—this became evident where only 42% of participants trusted public institutions. In their opinion, government institutions are not the only guardians of their rights, but they are also there to assist them to fight poverty. Some 58% unanimously expressed their distrust of the civil service, attitudes of public officials, indifferent treatment, and corrupt practices. Similar patterns are found in India, Zambia, Bangladesh and Kenya, where public institutions appear to be either not at all or only marginally relevant in the lives of deserving people—what actually reaches the poor is a diluted form of what was originally allotted (Narayanan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000).

An interesting finding of this study is that differential and ill-treatment by public institutions continues to have an impact not only on victims but also their children, families and community members. Put differently, the one who experiences ill-treatment by public officials shares their feelings and experiences with their family members and society, which reinforces society's perceptions that public institutions are not trustworthy, reliable, helpful,

benevolent or honest. This coincides with what Jamil and Steinar argued (2013): citizens tend to trust public institutions on how officials perform their tasks in accordance with institutional rules and regulations, which determines the level of confidence in incumbents of public institutions. Further, Rothstein and Stolle (2003) argued, apart from citizens' own experience on the working of public institutions, impression and experience of their family, parents, friends, peers or members of the same ethnic or social group has an impact on institutional trust. It becomes clear that citizens' personal experiences with public institutions and information they receive from others about the nature of the institutions are likely to influence and shape their beliefs about the legitimacy, reliability and impartiality of institutions. Moreover, if citizens tend to perceive that the institutions work in line with fairness and impartiality, they are more likely to trust and obey the law, rules, and regulations and to accept decisions of public officials. As shown by leading psychologist Tom R. Tyler (1989, 2006), people respect the law or policy because they believe that the justice system is fair and that they are treated fairly. If people feel that they have been treated unfairly and unethically by the officials or by the courts or by other institutions, they are less likely to have faith in the legal system and government institutions.

This study reveals that a low level of trust in public institutions appears to be linked to a lack of multicultural organisational practices, lack of inclusive citizenship, and poor diversity management. This pattern clearly shows the causal connection among institutional variables and access to public services. In Sri Lanka, since most of the public officials hold similar values, beliefs and social backgrounds, they are likely to represent the interests of a particular section of the society by limiting the access to other sections. This increases the likelihood of a sense of feeling among minorities that public institutions are not trustworthy and less likely to pursue universalism in service provision, and prone to serve the interests of certain segments of society. There are instances where public ethics are visibly being violated by institutions to single out certain people from receiving services for which they are entitled. This has a negative impact on institutional trust, impartiality and governance quality. This was observed mostly in mono-ethnic and linguistic institutional structures. Public ethics are also crucial for improving the quality of government that includes transparency, accountability, and integrity (Rayner, Lawton, & Williams, 2012; Stensöta, 2012, p. 92). This can protect disadvantaged communities from being discriminated by public officials—which happens when formal established rules and regulations and values are threatened and undermined. Unfair treatment is an indication of violating public ethics. The line of argument is that a public ethic of care needs to be improved in public institutions together with impartiality to improve the quality of government (Stensöta, 2012).

Discussion

Based on the findings of the research, it is clear that the quality of government variables not only influence access to public services, but also determine the level of trust citizens, in this case plantation people, have in governance structures. Various empirical studies amply support this argument (Ramesh, 2018; Rothstein, 2011, 2019; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2010; Rothstein & Stolle, 2002, 2003; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008; Suzuki & Demircioglu, 2019; Uslaner, 2008; Woo, 2018). Efficient and effective government can be high quality and produces good governance (Fukuyama, 2013). Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) clearly emphasise the importance of the quality of public institutions. Institutions that do not function according to legitimate laws and are prone to arbitrariness and abuse of power are less capable of delivering public services to everyone. The report

further illustrates that in order to advance the SDGs, effective and inclusive public institutions that can deliver quality public services are essential. The World Social Situation Report (United Nations, 2016) indicates that differences in religion, ethnicity and migrant status are used to exclude and marginalise certain sections of the community; therefore, improving access to governance structures requires identifying who is being left behind by development processes and removing those underlying structural barriers that limit their inclusion in governance.

The results explain the importance of quality of public institutions for social rights and social wellbeing of marginalised communities. The study argues that institutional structures, rules and practices that shape the way in which people behave play a key role in either perpetuating exclusion or promoting inclusion. Institutions and their norms, values and practices that promote open and inclusive citizenship create conditions for equality, impartiality, fairness and responsiveness. Importantly, institutions that pursue discriminatory treatment as a part of their culture require revolutionary changes, but they may evolve slowly as such practices are ingrained within the system. Citizens rely more on the implementation side of the political system (bureaucracy) than the representation side of the political system (parliament, cabinet). Although they actively take part in the electoral process, their day-to-day needs and demands are expected to be fulfilled by the former. Therefore, citizens tend to turn to implementing institutions to seek various services and support in the belief that they would serve them with impartiality and fairness. When these beliefs are ignored by officials, then citizens are unlikely to visit and trust them.

The findings inform policy makers that government's ability to perform key functions and provide public services is crucial to democratic resilience. Citizens assess the quality of democracy and governance based on the state's ability to deliver public services. Failure to provide basic public services or unfair and partial treatment in the provision of public services undermines both the legitimacy of state institutions and support for democratic governance as a whole. This, in turn, reflects in the level of trust citizens have in governance structures and political systems. As argued by Paz Arauco et al. (2014), inequality and multi-dimensional exclusion in service provision not only create an enormous social distance among different social groups and results in a fragmented system of social provisioning and justice, but good quality services are delivered only to those who are able to pay for them. In such a context, the ability of a democratic regime to perform impartially and fairly remains under serious threat.

Conclusion

The article shows the influence of quality of government variables in improving access to governance institutions and public services in diverse societies. It also demonstrates that institutional impartiality and quality are positively associated with determining citizens' perception of public service delivery. The article suggests that the above remain crucial for minorities to enjoy the substantial meaning of citizenship and equality. Furthermore, various policies and their particularistic and unfair practices are more likely to systematically preclude minorities from enjoying public services and social citizenship rights. In most cases, professional norms are subverted and factors such as ethnicity, language, politics and gender come to play a key role in the implementation process among street-level bureaucrats. Paul (1992) and Gopakumar (1997) conclude from their studies in Africa and India that citizens' voices are viewed as an indispensable element of government accountability and the effective delivery of public services. Citizen voice not only leaves space for accountability,

responsiveness and transparency in service delivery, but ideally allows the public to influence the final outcome of a service through some form of participation or articulation of protest and feedback. Such mechanisms are crucial to performance-based government, in which citizens, as end users, are able to relay information back to governments on the fit between delivered services and particular community requirements and preferences. Voice mechanisms embrace a variety of legal and institutional avenues through which citizens can regularly make their views known to governments. Decades of experience with top-down approaches to service provision, supply-side approaches to institutional reforms, and greater emphasis on the input than the output side of the policy process and service delivery have not improved governance and remain obstacles for the plantation community to enjoy social rights.

The present analysis indicates a need for citizen-centric governance where deserving people and communities influence public service and governance structures—empirical evidence and case studies from India, Kenya, Bangladesh and many African countries demonstrate the positive impact of this approach (see Einhorn, 2007). A new partnership between public institutions and civil society, people's movements and community-based organisations, cross-community networks are potential avenues to enhance service delivery and empower citizens to reduce elite capture and domination in public service delivery at the local level. It is worth noting that public institutions link citizens with public services and governance to participate in civic life and process. When these institutions work effectively in line with quality of government principles, they provide opportunities to overcome socioeconomic issues and other forms of discrimination and power asymmetry in governance. In contrast, if they deteriorate and are corrupt, unfair and partial, then public services become privileges accessed primarily by those who already have power and resources in the policy implementation process—inevitably all these take precedence over the quality of government principles, impartiality and procedural justice and fairness.

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