

Discussing burning issues of the rural folk

Villagers in Minneriya - a village close to Minneriya had gathered at their rural development society hall. It was a mixed lot. There were cultivators, mothers carrying their toddlers, public servants and activists from community based organizations - young and old alike.

They were asked to jot down any questions for which they were looking for answers.

Soon the hall black board was full of questions.

Next was voting time - voting not for any persons but for the burning issues mentioned on the board. They were given marbles. They had to place the marbles in the respective boxes.

They insisted they had many more problems which were not on the board. "We receive a paltry amount for our development work. But only half of that is used. Although the Samur-dhi Society gets the contract, it is the member or one of his henchmen who does the job. Can you gentlemen do something about it", they asked.

"We were told that they spent ten million on a water supply scheme. Even after spending all that we have no water. Can you check what went wrong and where?"

Even as the votes were being counted they were asking questions - they were such as enthusiastic lot.

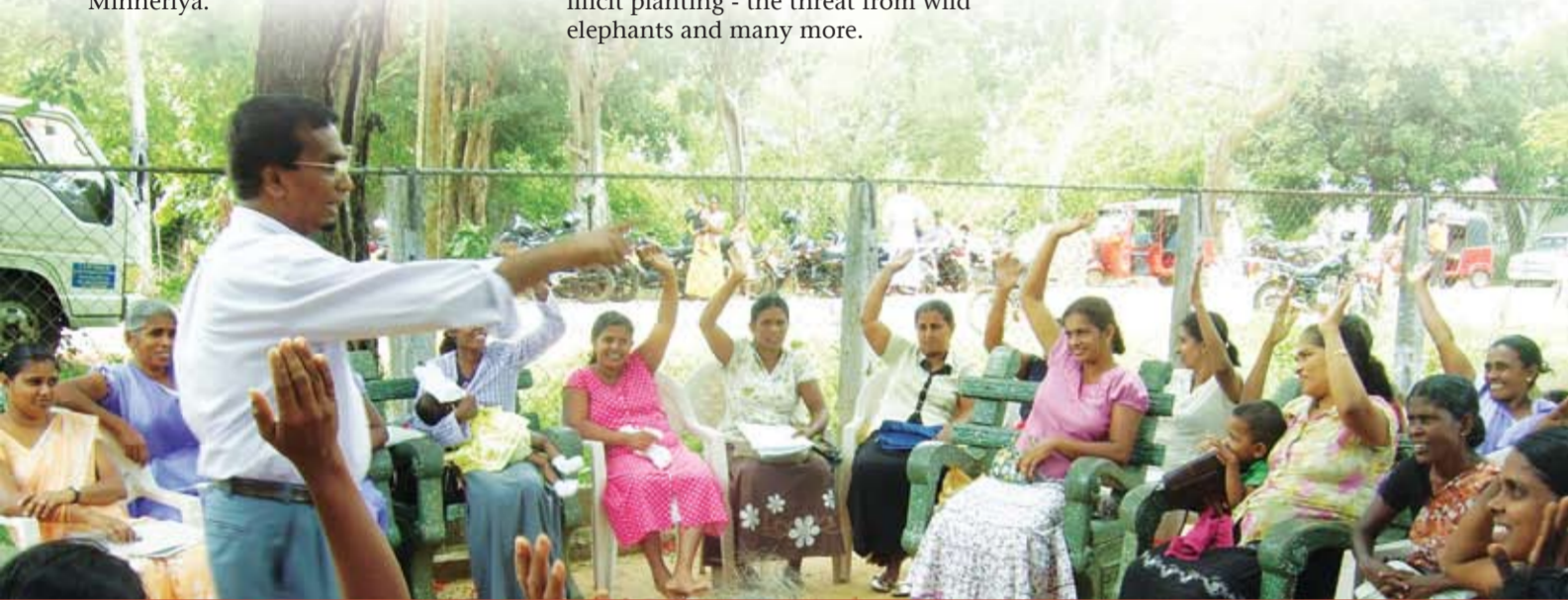
At the end of the voting, the problem of land deeds topped the list. It was in a way an extraordinary problem in Minneriya.



Next on the list was the problem of drinking water. There were several aspects to the water problem. Water had an acid taste. The supply was not adequate. When the channel is closed after the harvesting, it dries up completely.



Then there were more complex problems related to paddy cultivation. Cultivation loans - fertiliser subsidy - illicit planting - the threat from wild elephants and many more.



TISL releases 'Parliament Watch'

"Parliament Watch" is the first South Asian initiative to gauge parliamentary practices in selected regional democracies.

Conceptualized by South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) and designed and implemented by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) to promote legislative accountability, transparency and the promotion of democracy, this programme seeks to enhance the public's understanding of parliaments within the SAARC region.

The research reports, issued on a monthly and a quarterly basis based on evaluation methodologies to assess the public access to legislatures, laws introduced and focus of debates and promote accountability in legislative practices.

Global petty corruption soars

Over three Trillion US dollars are spent as petty corruption around the globe annually. It has been estimated that only 69 Billion US dollars are needed to eradicate poverty from the globe.

Revealing these figures quoting numerous surveys done by international organizations, Dr.Gopakumar Krishna Thampi - CEO of the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability (ANSA) says that although there are enough tools and mechanisms to combat corruption in the world, the door for corruption and abuses has been opened due to lack of knowledge, participation and accountability among the public. "Poverty has continued to plague more than half of the world population. We need people's participation and commitment to fight against it", he points out.

Dr. Gopakumar who was here recently on an invitation extended by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) and Asia Foundation addressed several workshops and seminars on social accountability.

"A huge problem in the developing countries is the lack of demand for accountability. Who should push for change? People have to push government officials, politicians and other stakeholders for accountability. To make it happen we should mobilize people from passive citizen demand to active citizen demand. That is the challenge we face and that is why we need social accountability." he said.



Dr. Gopakumar



Bandarawela UC highly transparent



Access to information - a subject that is being currently discussed is practiced at least at one local authority. Bandarawela Urban Council which is under UPFA administration has set an example of being a public sector institution alive to social accountability making available information relating to the actions of the Council as well as financial matters to the public.



Nalin Priyankara Sooriyaje
Chairman

The Council's revenue and expense statements, minutes of meetings, citizen's reports and numerous financial and other reports are made available to the public at the reception desk. In addition to examining the reports, they can also obtain copies if they wish to.

The Council which has been commended over the past few years when it was adjudged the country's best Urban Council is taking a further step towards social accountability by inviting the ratepayers to participate in the preparation of the annual budget.

Twenty Citizen's Committees have been set up to obtain information for the preparation of the budget. The Council's secretary Gunadasa Pathirana said that the UC Chairman and Council officials are expected to meet these committees and discuss with them plans for development projects in the area and get their views. The public thus get an opportunity of presenting their own proposals.

The secretary explained that once the development projects are identified on a priority basis, information relating to each project with cost implications will be displayed for the public to study. "We will not only display the estimates, we will also give them copies. To give an example, in the case of a road project, details about the type and quantities of the materials to be used and the costs will be made public," he said.

Social accountability is a term increasingly being used these days.
What is Social accountability?
Here is one definition.
Social accountability refers to a broad range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, communities, independent media, and civil society organizations use to hold public officials and public servants accountable. Social accountability tools include preparatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, citizen report cards, community score cards, social audits, citizen charters, people's estimates, and so forth. These mechanisms are being increasingly recognized world-wide as a means of enhancing democratic governance, improving service delivery, and creating empowerment.

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Waiting for the dawn of peace

War is over but peace has not dawned. LTTE is eliminated yet the war situation continues. This seems to be the feeling in the country. Emergency remains and all the Emergency regulations are in force. For the people, it's a state of war." So said the distinguished civil servant Bradman Weerakoon at a discussion held recently on the 'Sri Lanka Governance Report 2009' released by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL).

Recalling that the Emergency had been in force at various times since 1972, he said that some governments did foolish things using the Emergency. Pointing out that the public is wondering why an emergency is still in force, he said that the prevalence of the Emergency hinders any protest activity. It is also possible to bring in new regulations any time. Emergency provides power to the elected public officials, he said, and questioned whether there is a need for them to get about in large convoys. "Do you need 13 cars? Is it necessary? Whom do they fear now?" he asked.

Mr Weerakoon was commenting on the contents of the Governance Report which he described as "clean, concise, factual, authentic, evidence-based information backed by references." He found it most interesting and picked up a lot of new information. He commended the Report as a good read.

In his opening remarks, Mr Weerakoon said that TISL deserves a commendation for courage at this particular time and stressed that the situation would be much worse if not for the work done by TISL. Halling TISL Executive Director J C Wellamuna

as an outstanding public figure in Sri Lanka, he said that Mr Wellamuna has faced really serious challenges but continues with his service.

Continuing his views on salient features in the Report, he expressed his concern over the non-implementation of the 17th Amendment which he described as "a historical piece of legislation" which made the 1978 Constitution more democratic and took away most of the arbitrary powers that the Executive President is entrusted with. "Nobody knows what has happened to the 17th Amendment. It has just vanished. Probably it will vanish into thin air."

He was also disturbed by the politicization in education and foreign affairs revealed in the Report which has highlighted that appointments are made not on merit but on political affiliations.

In what he termed as "an excellent article", Mr Weerakoon was impressed with the analysis on 'Post-conflict challenges of governance in the North & East.

He found a great idea in the 'Clean Hands' movement spearheaded by the Secretary to the Ministry of Public Administration & Home Affairs, which gives "a little bit of hope", as Mr Weerakoon put it.

Free Media Movement Secretary Sunil Jayasekera spoke on the challenges faced by media in Sri Lanka and TISL Media Officer Ananda Jayasekera elaborated on his contribution to the Report on the decline of media freedom in the country.

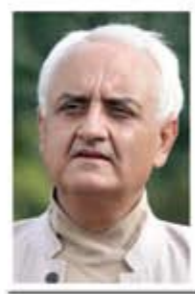
Kanak Mani Dixit as NIA Chief Guest

Transparency International Sri Lanka(TISL) will present the National Integrity Awards(NIA) for the seventh consecutive year on December 9,2010 to coincide with the UN Anti-Corruption Day.

The chief guest at the event will be journalist, writer, publisher and a renowned South Asian advocate of good governance and democracy, Kanak Mani Dixit.

Dixit is the founding editor of Himal Southasian, a high quality, independent monthly journal offering critical commentary on socio-political and cultural issues and its Nepali version, Himal Kabalapatrika.

He was among the key campaigners for the abolition of the monarchy in Nepal during the Jana Andolan (Peoples' Movement) and a relentless campaigner for the establishment of a constitutional democracy. He continuously engages in public lecturing and discussion fora in Nepal and within South Asia to promote good governance and democracy in South Asia.



Dixit was awarded the Prince Claus Award for his outstanding contributions to public debate, for creating platforms that South Asians to connect, interact and network transcending national and cultural boundaries and for his socially engaged, multi-disciplinary approach to creativity and development.

The NIA is a unique event that seeks to honour individuals and organizations who have undertaken action/s that are likely to significantly combat or have had an impact on reducing and or working towards the elimination of corruption in Sri Lanka.

The winners are chosen by an independent and distinguished panel of judges.

Keeping the public away from local bodies affect development

According to the laws governing Municipalities, Urban Councils and other local authorities the public is entitled to attend general meetings as well as committee meetings of these bodies. They can even obtain copies of the proceedings of these meetings. Yet only a handful makes use of this facility, according to officials.

Secretaries of a number of local bodies pointed out that this is due to the ignorance of the general public on laws and regulations, and the lack of social accountability.

As a result a large majority of the public are not making proper use of facilities available at these local institutions. The end result is the opening of doors to corruption and yielding to malpractices.

Elaborating further, the secretary of the Haputale Urban Council Amaradasa Manatunga said that although his institution is ready to make available the relevant information in accordance with provisions of the law, only a very few want the information.



Bandarawela Urban Council secretary Gunadasa S Pathiraja pointed out that although all reports are made available at the reception counter, they are being examined by only a few.

Explaining that the public is entitled to attend meetings of local authorities by law and express their views, attorney-at-law S G PUNCHIHEWA says that the local authorities have to keep the public informed of the collection of revenue and how money is spent. An annual progress report

has to be prepared for the public to study. He is of the opinion that this does not happen and the public is not encouraged to participate in the proceedings at local government institutions. This has led to a drop in the efficiency of these institutions.

He pointed out that the public should be permitted to examine the accounts, estimates of expenditure, and the budget, and these have to be published by January each year.

It is learnt that although according to the provisions in Provincial Council Act 15 of 1987 advisory committees have to be set up on financial and policy planning, housing and community development, technological services and environment, these have been formed in less than 5% of the institutions.

There are 18 Municipalities, 37 Urban Councils and 258 Pradesheeya Sabhas in the island.

Studying corruption risks in foreign employment

An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 sub-agents work for foreign recruitment agencies in Sri Lanka acting as a two-way channel between the agencies and job seekers. They go to a village and entice, especially the unemployed, with rags to riches stories of migrant workers. This was revealed during a study on integrity in foreign employment initiated by TISL.

Following the findings of the study which looked into corruption risks in recruitment, it has been recommended that sub-agents should be brought within the regulatory framework and a system of licensing devised.



The need for more stringent criteria in licensing recruitment agencies has been highlighted in the report of the study stressing on the need for these agencies to possess management skills, ability to find new labour-seeking countries or send out more skilled migrant workers.

Another recommendation is that the law should be enforced more effectively and penal sanctions brought against those found guilty of illegal recruitment, fraud, deceit, bribery and corruption.

The report can be downloaded by clicking on to www.tisrilanka.org

Taking investigative journalism to the regions

Among the pioneering efforts undertaken by the TISL's Capacity Building and Communication Units this year is the program to train regional journalists in investigative journalism.

It is also the first time in Sri Lanka a training program of this nature has commenced to build the capacities of both national and regional level journalists together to enhance their skills in this highly specialized area in journalism.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) in collaboration with Friedrich- Ebert Stiftung (FES) initiated a program to develop skills of regional journalists in the year 2009 and this year, the project has moved forward with much vigour.

In June, an initial discussion was held with industry experts on crucial areas in which investigative journalists in Sri Lanka required skills development.

TISL also initiated a sharing of experiences with senior media practitioners to test some of the thematic areas and the specific tools to be used by investigative journalists. This exercise was spearheaded by leading Indian investigative journalist Aniruddha Bahal (Editor and CEO of Cobrapost.com and co-founder of Telhelka.com) and Ranga Kalansooriya (journalist and former Director General of Sri Lanka Press Institute).

In the next phase, TISL will commence conducting regional training workshops for knowledge sharing and capacity building of investigative journalists.

TISL has already conducted a highly successful training series for regional journalists in investigative journalism in partnership with Friedrich- Ebert Stiftung (FES) as part of an ongoing project.

Besides transferring knowledge and sharing tools with the regional journalists, TISL also seeks to help increase the overall professionalism of journalism trainers in Sri Lanka through this exercise.

A key objective of this project is to create a pool of professional trainers who in turn could undertake to train journalists at regional level in the specific branch of journalism.



TISL will soon launch a Citizen Handbook outlining the services provided by Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka.

Titled 'Puravesi Athwela' it comprises instructions in Sinhala to the public on how they could conveniently obtain services from the Secretariats. The services and relevant documents are explained in simple language in the handbook.

The decision to release a handbook was the result of findings during anti-corruption programmes conducted by TISL at several divisional secretariat divisions when it became evident that the public are victims of corruption due to lack of awareness. It was revealed that if the public was educated on how services could be obtained, there wouldn't be a place for middlemen to earn a quick buck.

The free distribution of the handbook will begin from Polpittigama Divisional Secretariat Division in the Kurunegala district.



A Citizen Handbook

Aniruddha Bahal