Empowerment and Development:

Perceptions from the JIMOD Participatory
Assessment
(November 2001)

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1. Introduction

Together with economic and human development parameters such as income, employment, education, health and living conditions, a significant dimension relating to capabilities of households and communities, is empowerment. In the last decade, many state and non-governmental projects/programmes have used various strategies of social mobilisation to ensure participation in and ownership of decisions and activities affecting the lives of the "beneficiaries" of development.

In the Central Province, the state poverty alleviation programme Samurdhi, donor-supported Integrated Rural Development Projects (IRDP), later transformed into Regional Rural Development Projects (RRDP), other bilateral agencies such as SIDA, international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Plan International, CARE and FORUT, national and regional NGOs such as Sarvodaya and Sathyodaya, and many local-level community-based organisations have subscribed in varying degrees to the goal of empowerment. In the JIMOD Self-Assessment by Projects/Programmes, 43% of project teams from 32 organisations ranked empowerment as the parameter, on which they had most impact. These organisations representing the state, donor-supported and NGO sectors were working in a wide range of areas - agriculture, plantation communities, enterprise development, poverty alleviation, rural financing, land management, health and nutrition, education, forestry and social mobilisation.

This paper is an attempt to understand the characteristics and impacts of such wide-ranging efforts at empowerment within the Central Province. A significant aspect was to examine whether any long-term processes and structures that ensure participation of communities in decision-making have been instituted through the use of community/social mobilisation strategies by both government and NGO projects/programmes.

The overall objective was to understand perceptions of and the extent of empowerment in the Central Province as this is an often stated goal of projects An assessment by people of the development process in the province, their role as "beneficiaries" of this process and their aspirations and priorities were also analysed as a context for understanding the impacts relating to empowerment.

2. Methodology

2.1 Conceptual approach

When poverty is defined in multi-dimensional terms, the dimension of empowerment is added on to conventional indicators such as income, assets and access to infrastructure and social services. Empowerment here is defined broadly in terms of a person's capacity to choose and shape both the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of his/her everyday life. In the Participatory Assessment empowerment was conceptualised at three levels - at the national, community and household level. The extent of voice and power people perceived they had in relation to the state and non-state institutions affecting their lives, as well as within their households (especially in relation to gender and age) was assessed. Empowerment at the community and household level here focuses on the access of people to resources and capabilities to participate in, negotiate with, and hold accountable institutions that are meant to provide services to them.

In the JIMOD study, empowerment was first explored from the perspective of influence over decision-making at the national level through participation in political institutions such as political parties, unions and federations. The second level of participation was in self-help systems and community organisations at the local level. Third, the extent of contribution to decision-making by family members within households, addressing gender and age issues, was examined. Fourth, perceptions of socio-economic changes, regarded as "development" and their causes were examined. This included perceptions of government reform and policies, specifically relating to the decentralisation of administration and privatisation of the estates. The Participatory Assessment also explored perceptions of the contribution of programme/projects to socio-economic change in communities, and how household members envisaged their "future".

As empowerment of poor people and communities was a concept that emerged and was implemented through development interventions, how people who were subjected to such interventions perceived the process and the impact of development in their own lives was incorporated into this analysis. Thus, the assessment of empowerment was placed within an assessment of development as interpreted by households within the Central Province.

2.2   Methods

The empowerment dimension was studied entirely through a Participatory Assessment process, using an open-ended questionnaire at the household level and a number of focus group discussions. The purpose of this component was to understand the processes and causes of development/stagnation within communities in the Central Province.

Altogether 60 households in 12 units (6 villages, 3 estates, 3 urban neighbourhoods in the three districts Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya) were covered indicative of "less developed" rural (LDR), "more developed" rural (MDR), estate and urban sectors within the three districts. The *urban* units covered were in the DS divisions of Gangawatakorale (Kandy), Matale and Nuwara Eliya. The *estate* units covered were located within the DS divisions of Doluwa, Rattota and Nuwara Eliya. The *"more developed" rural* units covered were in the DS divisions of Udunuwara, Yatawatte and Kotmale. The *"less developed"* rural units were located in the DS divisions of Doluwa, Galewela and Walapane.

The methods employed were qualitative, focussing on a small sample, to explore the impact of participation/empowerment initiatives of projects/programmes on people, how the concept was interpreted, the extent to which it was realised by households, and its relationship to people's choices and aspirations for their future. Thus, the results here are not necessarily representative of the sectors, but indicative of significant issues and problems surrounding empowerment. Percentages have not been calculated as the sample size was small but tables with numbers are provided to distinguish between dominant and minority views/tendencies. The quotes from respondents are more important than the numbers to understand how and why empowerment is experienced or not by interviewed households.

3.   Findings

The findings of the study are entirely based on the perceptions of respondents on empowerment and development.

- Influence over decision-making in country
- Participation in community affairs and its impact
- Decision- making within household
- Assessment of development within the community
- The contribution of government/non-government organisations to development
- Household improvement and sources of improvement
- Who has benefited from development?
- Assessment of poverty within communities and households
- Impact of institutional change
- Aspirations and priorities

3.1   Influence over decision-making in the country

The majority of respondents did not feel that they had influence over the political process and decision-making at the national level. This feeling was strongest among estate sector households. A significant minority of households within the urban and less developed rural sectors however, expressed the view that they had some influence over decision-making within the country.

Table 1: Do you have influence over how things are run in the country?

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Have influence	6	2	4	6
No influence	7	11	8	8
Do not know	2	2	3	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

The levels of influence they felt they had or not were examined through their membership in political institutions. The majority were not members of a party or union. The estate sector had the highest membership in terms of trade union membership but many considered themselves nominal members. Around a quarter of households in the less developed rural and urban sectors said they were active members of a political party.

Table 2: Membership in a political party/union

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Active member	4	4	1	5
Nominal member	-	5	2	-
Not a member	11	6	12	10

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

The minority who felt that they had some influence based it on the significance of their vote, and how many votes they controlled as households and communities. There was a notion of the potential of block votes such as that of the farming community or ethnic community.

We give our vote for political change. It is not a direct influence but an indirect one. We are after all the farmers who cultivate paddy for the country. (Sunil, Matale, LDR)

Our vote has helped to expand our road, to make a clinic and build a bridge. When the MP comes here I talk to him about our needs. We have 15 votes in our family compound here. (Faisal, Matale MDR)

There was also the aspect of lobbying that was put forward by a business household. When the state acts against the interests of a business or ethnic community, it was felt that by mobilizing the community in question pressure could be exerted against the government. This pressure was implicitly connected with a voter bank as well.

Business has rules. If somebody breaks them we can get together and solve the problem. If government decides something against business or discriminates against Tamils, we can all get together and speak up. (Parvati, Nuwara Eliya, Urban)

The majority however, did not feel the vote was a significant bargaining chip. The fact that the rights of voters were often violated in the actual practice of electoral politics was pointed out. The problem of election violations and violence was particularly pronounced in the Central Province as was expressed by several households.

Last time we couldn't vote because while we were going there our voting cards were grabbed. Fights took place. Lots of estate workers lost their cards. (Karupai, Kandy, Estate)

While many estate workers belonged to trade unions, the majority had very little faith in the unions' ability to represent their interests or to deliver on their promises. They pointed out that they were merely pawns in the hands of the union.

The union is of no use to us. We give our vote but don't get anything in return. They get use from us but are not for us. (Pushparaj, Nuwara Eliya, Estate)

Many households expressed a general sense of despondency about politics and did not want to involve themselves actively in a process, which brought them very little returns.

We mind our own business. We are private people. (Hemamala, Nuwara Eliya, MDR)

3.2 Participation in community affairs and its impact

In contrast to the general distaste towards national politics, participation in community affairs and organisations were generally high among all households, except in the urban sector. Membership was highest in the less developed rural sector, with a vast majority of households reporting participation. This also reveals the level of institutional intervention, particularly in the rural areas of the Central Province. Most households who were members reported attending meetings. However, few actively participate by voicing their opinions speaking out at meetings was highest in the less developed rural sector and the urban sector.

Table 3: Participation in community organisations

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Member	**5**	**9**	**11**	**13**
Attend meetings	5	6	11	12
Speak at meetings	**3**	**1**	**4**	**7**
Participation makes a difference to our life	5	6	10	12
Not a member	10	6	4	2

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

Of those households, which had members of community organisations, the majority felt that participation did make a difference to their lives. In expressing their opinions on why they participate, meeting and exchanging ideas with other members of their community in and of itself was valued as much as the economic and social benefits they received.

> It's always good to listen to other people's ideas. We can apply for loans. It's good to associate with other people. We can learn something useful. (Pushpa, Matale, LDR)

> We get an opportunity to know others in the village. We get rid of our shyness and get used to speaking in public. (Sunil, Matale, LDR)

> By participating we develop a feel for the village, people and country. We want to develop our road together. (Fauzia, Matale, MDR)

The self-help aspects of participation such as funeral assistance societies and exchange labour groups, as well as assistance in inputs for agriculture or micro-finance for household or entrepreneurial purposes were also mentioned. The mandatory nature of participation in some organisations, such as the state poverty alleviation programme Samurdhi was also pointed out.

> There is assistance from the society if a funeral happens. (Mala, Nuwara Eliya, MDR)

> Participating makes a difference because of the groups. If I have work four others come. I go to work for four others. That helps a lot. (Chandrasena, Nuwara Eliya, LDR)

> We get fertilizer for a reasonable price and sell our tea for a reasonable price. We solve problems relating to tea. (Wickremasinghe, Nuwara Eliya, MDR)

> It is important to be a member otherwise we cannot ask for a loan. (Chandralatha, Kandy, Estate)

> If we do not participate we don't get Samurdhi. (Valliamma, Matale, Estate)

Those who did not participate in community organisations, explained their reluctance often in terms of the lack of returns or lack of time or both. This was especially true for the urban households.

> There's no particular advantage or disadvantage in participating. It's all the same. (Karunawathi, Nuwara Eliya, LDR)

We don't have time to finish our work. If we go to these sort of meetings it will be a problem. Also we feel we won't gain anything by participating. (Josephina, Nuwara Eliya, Urban)

However, some households due to their extreme poverty (characterised by their inability to pay membership fees or forego precious labour time) and lack of networks, or due to their political affiliations were sometimes excluded from organisations.

Nobody tells us about the meetings. We are on the other side of the estate. (Pushparaj, Nuwara Eliya, Estate)

While many households are members of organisations, an indicator of active participation is the extent to which members express their views. Those who speak out at meetings indicated that they do so as representatives of their community, as well as concerned citizens to question decisions made by community leaders, as well as external agents. Others pointed out that they reserved their right to speak to important and relevant issues, rather than speaking for the sake of expressing themselves.

I speak at meetings. I show the shortcomings of the leaders. I voice the problems of the village. (Sunil, Matale, LDR)

Yes we speak at meetings. If we don't get money or stamps, we ask why. We have to tell them about our poverty. (Karunawathi, Nuwara Eliya, LDR)

I speak only if there is an issue to talk about. The way other people talk we can't talk. They say important and unimportant things. We get tired of going to meetings. Some people are chatter boxes. They are always jumping up to say something. (Nimali, Kandy, MDR)

Those who did not speak out at meetings provided a range of reasons. On one hand, conventional acceptance of the authority of leaders, fear of challenging them, as well as the lack of trust in them were expressed.

I don't speak at meetings. All who are office holders speak. They are the only ones who have the authority. People think they know everything. Only if they say something people believe that. Only if they give permission others will speak. (Meena, Matale, Estate)

The president of the society speaks because he has to speak. Others have to know that they are the leaders. Sometimes they lie to us. (Devi, Nuwara Eliya, estate)

On the other hand, shyness, lack of confidence in expressing themselves in front of community members and outside officers, and deference to those who know better were also pointed out.

I am shy and don't have the ability to talk. There are people in the village who are in the forefront of everything. They have the experience. (Neluka, Nuwara Eliya, MDR)

We don't speak at meetings since we don't have anything to say. People who come from Samurdhi talk and ask questions and we answer. (Suleha, Matale, MDR)

3.3 Decision-making within the household

Most participatory development interventions are based on a concept of empowerment of beneficiaries through the formation of community-based organisations and small groups, whose members are brought together for savings and credit, and/or exchange labour for agricultural or other tasks. Many members of these organisations and groups are women. However, it is important to understand whether increased community participation by women is also translated into empowerment at the household level. This appears not to be the case. Formally, the husband was acknowledged as the main decision-maker in the majority of households.

Table 4: Who makes the final decision within the household?

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Husband	9	10	7	7
Wife	2	3	1	2
Both	2	1	6	3
All family members	2	-	-	1
Elders	-	1	-	2
Eldest son	-	2	1	

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

> *We both discuss things. But my husband makes the final decision. I think he knows more about things. If he says no to my suggestion, I must respect my husband's ideas. He goes here and there, and has more connections with other people.* (Valliamma, Matale, Estate)

> *My husband makes the final decision. He is the head of the household. We both discuss matters. We respect each other's ideas.* (Chandralatha, Kandy, Estate)

> *I make the decisions in our family. If my wife has a good idea, I agree to it. If it is an important decision I will go ahead even if my wife says no.* (Gunasena, Matale, Urban)

> *My husband makes decisions. He thinks and does things better than me. He is the head of the household. He knows more than me about everything.* (Kamalawathi, Nuwara Eliya, LDR)

Joint decision-making was reported as highest in the more developed rural sector. This generally involved husband and wife, but sometimes children were also consulted.

> *My husband and I always make decisions together. It has never happened that my husband has said no to a good idea of mine.* (Hemamala, Nuwara Eliya, MDR)

> *We discuss things together before making a decision. Nobody has the sole power to take a decision. I explain the facts to my husband, so that we can make the decision. If I say no to my husband's idea for some reason, he will definitely not do it. I can stop him doing something if I think it's not good. Decisions regarding the children are in any case mine because he does not have the time.* (Nimali, Kandy, MDR)

As the quotes indicate, many women revealed that there was often a discussion before decisions were made and they had influence over this process, even when the final decision was in the hands of the husband. It was also pointed out that decisions relating

to the running of the household and children's day to day education were mostly the responsibility of women, while decisions relating to livelihood concerns/economic activities and purchase of major household/productive assets were ultimately made by men. To clarify both the gender and age dimensions of decision-making, the perceptions were sought of the groups, which had more power within the household.

Table 5: Who has more power in the household?

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Men	2	7	6	9
Women	1	3	1	5
Adults	7	7	11	6
Children	1	-	-	-

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

That men had more powers than women and that adults had more power than children were generally acknowledged. In both cases, this was based on a perception of better knowledge and/or experience.

> In Muslim families decisions are always made by men. Women lack the knowledge for decision-making. Even if the son-in-law is new to the house, he has the right to make decisions. (Fauzia, Matale, MDR)

> Men take decisions because they can think better. (Kiribanda, Nuwara Eliya, LDR)

> Adults make decisions because the children are still learning. Their decisions might be good or bad so we have to take care of them. (Gunawardena, Kandy LDR)

> We train our children to listen to us. We have to make our children the way we want them. We have no trouble from them now. We hope that will be so in the future. (Nimali, Kandy, MDR)

In the less developed rural sector, there were more instances of women being considered as having power. Sometimes this was due to the absence of an adult male in the house.

> Women have more power in our household. My husband does not involve himself in household matters. I take decisions. I respect other people's ideas. (Leelawathi, Matale, LDR)

> Women have more power in our household. My husband normally asks me about things. If I say yes to something, he also says yes. I make the decisions. (Sumanalatha, Kandy, LDR)

> Women have more power here. My husband is out of the country. My mother-in-law makes most of the decisions. I respect her ideas. If I have to do something I will do it without asking others. (Pushpa, Matale, LDR)

Since this contradicts to some extent the previous findings regarding decision-making where the husband was seen as the main decision-maker, the issue was explored further. What emerges here is a notion of "hidden power" of women. Women respondents felt they had power not only to influence the decision-making but even to

steer the decision-making process but they let the men believe that the latter were in fact making the ultimate decision, since this was what was expected by gender conventions and norms.

> *I have to ask my husband before I can make a decision. He makes the final decision. But I will persuade him and make him agree to what I want. (Fatima, Matale, MDR)*

In a minority of cases, it was pointed out that all members of the family contributed to decision-making, and children, even when they were small needed to be consulted, especially if it involved their education or personal life. The involvement of children was highest in the urban sector.

> *Both of us discuss before making a decision. Is this good? Should we do this? Nobody decides by himself or herself. My husband doesn't say no to a good idea. He thinks, we both think and make a decision. We ask the children too. Do you want to go on this trip? Our son is 15 years he understands things. So we talk to him about things that concern him. Not about our work. Chandrika, Matale, Urban)*

3.4 Assessment of development within the community

The majority of households in all sectors perceived that their communities had developed or "improved" (*diyunuwela*) within the last decade. In the estate and less developed rural sectors less households felt that their communities had developed than in the other sectors, revealing the uneven nature of development within the province.

Table 6: Has your village/estate/neighbourhood developed in the last ten years?

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Has developed	13	8	12	9
Has developed somewhat	2	3	3	3
Has not developed	-	4	-	3

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

In response to what aspects of their communities have developed, the primary dimensions identified were living conditions, education levels and income levels, in that order. Health conditions and employment opportunities were also mentioned as having improved over the last decade. Of the six dimensions analysed for the JIMOD study, least improvement was seen in the empowerment dimension.

Table 7: Dimensions of development

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR	All
Employment	**11**	7	11	8	37
Income	9	7	**12**	**13**	**41**
Education	**11**	**10**	**12**	10	**43**
Health	7	**11**	**12**	8	38
Living conditions	**14**	**10**	**12**	**11**	**47**
Empowerment	6	3	7	6	22
Infrastructure/roads/transport	1	3	2	4	10
Access to shops/goods	1	-	1	-	2
Freedom (from violence)		-	-	1	1
Communication	1	-	-	-	1
Access to banking	1	-	-	-	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

In the urban sector, the biggest improvements were perceived in living conditions, education and employment, while in the estate sector the biggest improvements were in health, living conditions and education. In the more developed rural sector, income, education, health and living conditions were given equal prominence, revealing that the development process here was comprehensive to a great extent. In the less developed rural sector, households identified income, living conditions and education as the primary areas of improvement.

As living conditions was indicated as the most important dimension to have improved within the last 10 years, households were asked how these had improved within their communities. A great number of factors were identified, among which remittances from Middle East employment was the most frequently mentioned in the less developed rural and urban sectors. In the estate sector income from estate labour continued to be important, as well as from other employment outside the estate. In the more developed rural areas, many households regarded government programmes and projects as contributing to this improvement.

Table 8: How have the living conditions in your community improved?

Means of improvement	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Income from wage labour w/in community	1	**4**	1	1
Income from Middle East employment	**7**	2	2	**8**
Income from garment factory employment	-	-	**5**	2
Income from government employment	2	-	4	-
Income from the armed forces	-	-	-	2
Income from other employment outside the community	2	**3**	3	1
Income from agriculture	1	2	-	3
Income from business	**3**	2	3	-
Income from skilled craft	-	-	1	-
Credit from organisations/govt/money lender	-	-	-	**4**
Savings/sittu/pensions/compensation	-	1	1	-
Assistance from government programmes	2	-	**8**	2
Assistance from NGO programmes	-	-	-	1
Assistance from estate	-	1	-	-

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

3.5 The contribution of government/non-government organisations to development

The majority of households indicated that there were a number of organisations working within their communities and was aware of the presence of these organisations. As indicated above at least one family member from a majority of households were members of such organisations.

Table 9: Organisations/projects working in your community

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Yes	11	13	14	14
No	1	-	-	-
Don't know	3	2	1	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

Community-based organisations (CBOs) were most prevalent in the urban and more developed rural sectors. The most frequently mentioned CBOs were funeral assistance societies and religious associations, attached to temples, churches and mosques. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had the biggest presence in the estate sector. These included Sarvodaya, Sathyodaya, Plan International and FORUT. State-supported organisations were most prevalent in the urban and the less developed rural sectors. These included Samurdhi, village development societies, farmers' societies, youth societies and small tea holders' societies. In the estate sector, plantation unions were also mentioned as engaging in development activities. In the urban sector, the presence of clubs such as the Lions and Rotary was pointed out. Bilateral and multilateral projects most frequently mentioned were SIDA and UNICEF.

Table 10: Types of organisations/projects present in the community

Organisation/project type	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
CBO	5	1	5	4
State	4	2	2	6
NGO	2	6	2	2
Bilateral/multilateral project	-	2	1	-
Union	-	2	-	-
Club	3	-	-	-

The majority of households assessed the contribution of organisations/projects to development as "somewhat". The estate and less developed rural sectors had more households who attributed a "substantial" or "very strong" contribution to their development by these organisations or projects. The urban sector had a substantial number of households, which indicated that the contribution by organisations was none or they were not aware of any contribution.

Table 11: Contribution of organisations/projects to the community's development

Assessment	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Very strong	-	4	-	2
Substantial	2	2	2	5
Somewhat	6	9	11	7
None	2	3	2	4
Don't know	5	2	-	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

The majority of households in all sectors, apart from estate, saw the government as the major player in development within their communities. In the estate sector, most households attributed development to come from NGOs, as did a substantial number of households in the less developed rural areas. It has to be noted that interventions by bilateral projects, such as IRDP and RRDP, were often seen as coming from the government as well, thus adding to the government contribution in this assessment.

Table 12: Who has contributed most to the development of the community?

Sector	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Government	10	6	13	8
Private sector	2	1	3	2
NGOs	1	4	1	4
Bilateral projects	-	1	1	1
Our own effort	3	1	1	2
Don't know	1	1	-	-

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

3.6 Household improvement and sources of improvement

The majority of households said in addition to that of their communities, their own living conditions had improved. In the less developed rural sector, this perception was unanimous. However, a third of households in the urban and estate sectors perceived no improvement.

Table 13: Have the living conditions of your household improved since 10 years ago?

	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Improved	9	10	11	15
Improved somewhat	1	-	2	-
Not improved	5	5	2	-

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

In accounting for the improvement of living conditions in their own households, the factors identified were somewhat different from those relating to their communities. Remittances from the Middle East continued to be important for the urban and less developed rural sectors, as well as to some households in the other two sectors. Credit from state-supported loan schemes and micro-finance institutions, as well as savings, *sittu* (informal rotating credit) and pensions were an important source for the more developed rural areas, as was for the less developed rural and estate sectors. Remittances from employment outside the district were also significant for the more developed rural sector. However, assistance from government programmes or NGOs was considered of little or no relevance in household level development.

Table 14: How have the living conditions in your household improved?

Means of improvement	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Income from wage labour w/in community		3	1	1
Income from Middle East employment	5	3	2	5
Income from garment factory employment	-	1	-	1
Income from government employment	-	-	1	-
Income from the armed forces	-	-	1	1
Income from other employment outside the community	-	-	-	-
	1	2	3	1
Income from agriculture	-	-	1	2
Income from business	3	1	3	-
Income from skilled craft	1		2	1
Credit from organisations/govt/money lender	2	4	5	6
Savings/sittu/pensions/compensation		3	3	-

Assistance from government programmes	-	-	-	1
Assistance from NGO programmes	-	-	-	-
Assistance from relatives	-	-	1	-

3.7 Who has benefited most from development?

The benefits of development within the community are not necessarily evenly distributed. Thus, households were asked to assess which group or groups had benefited most from development within the last decade. In the urban and estate sectors, youth were identified most frequently as the group that had benefited most while in the rural sector the poor were identified most frequently. However, in the more developed rural and estate sectors, a specific political faction within the community was also identified by many households as having received a larger share of development efforts.

Table 15: Has any particular group in your community benefited most from development?

Category	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Poor	5	5	9	6
Middle Class	2	1	3	2
Rich	3	1	-	2
Men	3	1	-	1
Women	3	2	3	2
Youth	8	6	6	3
Elders		2	1	
A specific political faction	3	5	7	3
Office holders of societies/politicians	1	-	1	-
All	1	-	-	2
Nobody	-	1	-	2

3.8 Assessment of poverty within communities and households

Households were asked to assess poverty levels within their communities. In the urban and more developed rural sectors, the majority of respondent households assessed poverty below 25%. The estate sector revealed highly varied assessments of poverty, with the dominant trend being poverty levels over 26%. The less developed rural sector assessed the highest poverty levels of over 75%.

Table 16: Assessment of poverty of in your community

Poverty level	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
0-25%	9	2	10	1
26-50%	2	5	4	5
51-75%	1	4	1	1
76-100%	3	4	-	8

In assessing their own socio-economic status, the majority of households assessed themselves as average or middle class. There was some correlation with poverty levels within their communities, apart from households in the estate sector. Thus, most households in the urban and more developed rural areas considered themselves as average, while most households in the less developed rural sector considered themselves as poor. However, the majority of households in the estate sector considered themselves as average, although they had assessed higher poverty levels for the estate as a whole.

Table 17: Self-assessment of the socio-economic status of own household

Socio-economic status	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR	All
Poor	6	6	5	9	26
Average/Middle class	9	8	10	6	33
Rich	-	1	-	-	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

In responding to the question why their or other households were poor, a multitude of factors relating to criteria, characteristics and causes of poverty emerged. The majority of households identified a wide range issues relating to economic, human/social and vulnerability dimensions of poverty. Lack of permanent work or unemployment was the most frequently mentioned, and was the most important criterion for households in the more developed rural sector. Lack of adequate housing was also significant for this sector. For the urban sector, lack of housing and dependency on daily wage labour were the most frequently mentioned factors. In the estate sector lack of income and permanent work emerged as the most important criteria. Dependency on daily wage labour, lack of permanent employment and unemployment were the most mentioned factors in the less developed rural areas.

Table 18: Factors contributing to poverty identified by households

Factors	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR	All
Lack of permanent work/ Unemployment	4	6	12	5	27
Lack of (proper) housing	5	3	8	4	20
Lack of money/income	2	8	3	3	16
Dependent on daily wage labour	5	3	2	6	16
Lack of daily meal/adequate food	2	4	5	3	14
Sickness/old age	-	2	6	1	9
Lack of land	3	1	1	2	7
Lack of infrastructure (roads/electricity)	2	-	2	3	7
Many children	1	3	2	-	6
Alcoholism	2	2	1	1	6
Expenses higher than income	2	4	-	-	6
Lack of clothes	1	3	1	-	5
Lack of assistance (from children/govt)	-	2	1	1	4
Dependent on (government) assistance	-	1	2	1	4
Indebtedness	1	2	1	-	4
Lack of savings	3	-	1	-	4
Lack of transport	-	-	-	3	3
Lack of water	2	-	-	1	3
Lack of effort	1	1	-	1	3
High ratio of dependents to wage earner	1	2	-	-	3

Lack of education		3			3
Lack of household goods		1		1	2
Lack of productive assets	1	-	-	1	2
Low agricultural prices/marketing	-	-	-	-	-
Problems	-	-	2	2	-
Dependent on farming	-	-	-	1	1
Lack of confidence	-	-	-	1	1
Female- headed households	-	-	1	-	1
Lack of stores	-	-	-	1	1
Suffers blame from others		1	-	-	1
Lack of intelligence	1	-	-	-	1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

Dependency on daily wages, inadequate housing, lack of household assets, lack of infrastructure, remoteness and low prices for agricultural products were mentioned as reasons for their poverty, by a considerable number of households, which considered themselves as "poor".

> *Everybody earns for the day here. If I have to stay at home for a week, then the children cannot go to school, there is no food in the house. Gunawardena, Kandy, LDR*

> *We have no luxuries here. We have to enlarge our house. Now there are only two rooms, no TV or cassette, no solar lights. We can't live like this always. We expect these things in the future. Kamalawathi, Nuwara Eliya, LDR*

> *There are no vehicles, no roads, no stores here. If we grow vegetables we have to carry it for miles on our shoulders. Then we sell it for two cents' worth. Chandrasekera, Nuwara Eliya, LDR*

Some households that regarded themselves as "average" considered poverty to be the result of lack of effort, alcoholism and inability to manage their finances on the part of poor households. The latter were also seen as dependent on others to fulfil their needs and perpetually in debt.

> *They are poor because they don't make an effort. They don't maintain the tea holding that they've got from the government. They don't use the available water and cultivate something.*
> *Menikhami, Nuwara Eliya, LDR*

> *They are poor because they don't go to work even if there is work. When they get wages, they drink, waste money. If they drink everyday, there isn't enough money to eat with. Selvanathan, Nuwara Eliya, Estate*

> *The poor are those who go from house to house and ask for money and food. The husband drinks. They have no clothes or food. They hardly have one meal a day. They do not pay back their loans. People always blame them. Indrawathi, Matale, Estate*

Some respondents pointed out that they were poor but others were poorer than them due to sickness or lack of work. They were attempting to overcome poverty by saving and putting aside some money for a rainy day.

We can't really say we're poor. We try to come up with our own effort. When my husband brings Rs.250/= I try to save at least Rs. 100/=. For my children's sake. So that they don't have to suffer like us. The poor are those who have no work because of sickness or something. They don't know how to save so if they have no work for a few days they don't have a meal. Nimali, Kandy, MDR

In the urban areas, where poverty levels were considered to be lower, the higher wage rates were seen as contributing to poverty alleviation. The poor here were defined as those whose living conditions were inadequate.

There are not many poor here because daily wages in Nuwara Eliya town are good. The poor are those who have no houses. They live in tin sheds or wooden shacks and work for a daily wage. They don't have proper clothes. They also have no water or electricity. Parvati, Nuwara Eliya, Urban

3.9 Impact of institutional change

In addition to the general socio-economic changes that have occurred within the Central Province, the perceptions of households on a number of institutional changes that took place at the national level was also examined. Three specific changes were assessed the new educational reforms, discussed at length in the education paper in this series; decentralisation of administration with the introduction of the district and divisional secretariat system and the provincial council system; privatisation of the management of plantations.

Table 19: Assessment of impact of decentralisation on services provided to you

Assessment	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR
Positive change	4	3	9	5
Negative change	6			3
No change	4	7	6	6
Do not know	1	5		1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

The decentralisation of administrative services was assessed positively in the more developed rural sector, while it was assessed negatively for the most part in the urban sector. Households in the estate and less developed rural areas did not see any real change due to this reform process. In the more developed rural sector, household members pointed out that most services were now conveniently available at the divisional secretariat level, and that they did not have to make the trip all the way to the district capital to get a form signed. In the urban and estate sectors, the negative assessment came from the attitude of government officers and their inefficiency. Corruption was also reported. Some estate workers complained of discrimination against them because of their ethnicity and class background.

Table 20: Private management of the estates

Assessment	Estate
Improved our situation	3
Worsened our situation	5
No change	7

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

Members of estate households for the most part did not see much change in their socio-economic situation due to the private management of the plantations. They pointed out that their lives continued with the same hardships as before. The considerable number of household members who perceived their situation has got worse, said that this was due to an increased workload and lack of investment in maintaining the estate infrastructure, including worker housing.

3.10 Aspirations and priorities

The Participatory Assessments also covered issues of hopes, aspirations and priorities for the future of the households interviewed. At the level of the household, most members desired the successful education of children and good employment opportunities for children, as well as improved housing conditions and household assets. At the level of the community, most household members expressed the wish for infrastructure facilities such as good roads and transport, access to electricity and a clean and reliable water supply for everyone.

A wide range of aspirations and priorities were expressed in addressing the improvement of the lives of all the people at the national level in Sri Lanka. Half of the households considered peace to be the top priority, followed by a third of households identifying employment opportunities as the biggest need. Poverty alleviation, equal opportunities and rights for all, a decrease in the price of goods, improved education, economic development in general, ethnic cooperation, housing and improved health services were other significant priorities.

Table 21: Priorities to be addressed to improve the lives of all

Priority	Urban	Estate	MDR	LDR	All
Stop war/make peace	8	8	7	7	30
Employment opportunities	6	7	5	3	21
Poverty alleviation	4	6	4	1	15
Equal opportunities/rights for all	3	5	5	1	14
Decrease price of goods	3	2	4	5	14
Improve education/assistance	3	5	2	1	11
Economic development	3	1		5	9
Ethnic cooperation/co-existence	2	1	4	1	8
Housing	3	2	1	2	8
Improve health services	2	1	2	2	7
Industrial development	2		2	1	5
Eliminate corruption	2		1	2	5
Improve living conditions	2	2	1		5
Religious freedom	2		2		4
Electricity		1		3	4
Rural development				3	3
Develop agriculture	1		1	1	3
Legal reform/implement laws impartially	2			1	3
Roads/transport		1		2	3
Water				2	2
All party government/abolish parties		1	1		2
Increase wages		1	1		2
Credit for self-employment		2			2

Listen to people	1	1			2
Land to the poor		1			1
Developing people's initiative				1	1
Privatisation	1				1
Freedom for women on the streets	1				1
Life without terror/violence	1				1
Rehabilitate law breakers		1			1

Source: JIMOD Participatory Assessment 2001

In the urban, estate and more developed rural sector peace and employment opportunities were the most frequently voiced aspirations. In the less developed rural sector, peace, economic development and decrease in the price of goods were expressed as priorities.

4. Conclusion

Many development projects and programmes have invested in some strategy of social mobilization and involvement of beneficiaries in their activities, with the goal of empowerment of poor people to manage their own lives.

The efforts at empowerment have resulted in high rates of membership and attendance of meetings in community-based organisations (such as funeral assistance societies), state-supported organisations (such as Samurdhi small groups), and NGO-supported groups. However, only a minority of households engage in active participation in these organisations, in terms of expressing ideas and needs, except in the less developed rural areas. There is deference to the wishes of leadership by many participants. While members seem to recognise the significance both of economic benefits, as well as the importance of creating social networks by exchanging ideas and learning about the world by joining such organisations, these organisations remain for the most part channels to distribute benefits and to facilitate social gatherings. In the rural sector, the majority of households felt that participation did make a difference in their lives.

There is no evidence that by participating in community level activities, members of households get more involved in having influence over decision-making at the national level by extending their participation to higher-level political institutions. In the same vein, although women constitute a large proportion of the membership of community-based organisations, this does not seem to significantly change their decision-making powers within the household. Men remain the primary decision-makers, although women do participate in discussions around these decisions and sometimes are able to influence the direction of the decision.

In assessing development within the last decade, most household members considered that their living conditions had improved. Although projects/programmes regard empowerment an important goal and in the self-assessments a majority of project teams perceived that they had the most impact in this parameter, those households interviewed for the participatory assessments stated least improvement in this parameter. However, both households and project teams concurred that there was a significant improvement in income during the last decade.

In their evaluation of poverty, the majority of households in the urban and more developed rural sector estimated a level of poverty below 25%, whereas estate and less developed rural households estimated higher levels, up to 75% in the case of the latter. The majority of households considered themselves to be of middle income, except in the less developed rural sector where the majority regarded themselves as poor.

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Development in the community was viewed as externally generated, with the government as the major player, except in the estate sector where NGOs were considered of higher importance. Development of the household, in contrast was seen as an own effort to improve living conditions, especially by accessing credit, and obtaining employment in the Middle East and outside the community.

Overall, the efforts at empowerment have had an impact in social terms. People have leant to come together for development-related activities at the grassroots level, to express themselves to varying degrees, exchange ideas and know more about the affairs of the world. In many ways, a kind of adult education process has taken place through project/programme interventions. However, this has not necessarily resulted in empowerment in political and economic terms. By participating in community organisations, people have not yet learnt to ask for transparency and accountability from the political and administrative institutions, as well as NGOs, which are supposed to serve them. The deeply entrenched patron-client system and the gross abuse of power by politicians need to be noted here. The involvement of criminal elements in this abuse of power makes it life threatening for people to ask for such transparency and accountability. People have also not yet understood how the wider economic system works and how to identify opportunities and constraints in order to make meaningful choices to improve their lives. Thus, long-term institutional processes and structures that ensure the participation of a majority of people in decision-making have not been instituted at the national and household level, and only in a superficial manner at the community level.

5.   Policy Implications

Projects/programmes need to rethink their approach to empowerment. There has been too much emphasis on social mobilisation and getting people to attend meetings of various organisations. However, these organisations for the most part remain hierarchical, representing the interests of political factions and power groups within communities. The question needs to be asked whether empowerment is merely getting people to meet socially so that some economic benefits could be distributed (or an income generation activity initiated) or whether it should be about increasing people's awareness of choices and improving their decision-making around those choices. Gender and age issues are very relevant, since decision-making should include the concerns and involvement of all household members.

If empowerment of poor people is a goal of development projects/programmes, this needs to be more clearly defined than it is done currently, in social, economic and political terms so that impacts can be monitored more carefully in the future. At present the concept is hazy for both project teams and beneficiaries, indicated by the lack of understanding by many households of what the term really means in Sinhalese or Tamil.

If empowerment is looked at as a process that occurs at the national, local and household level, issues such as active participation, influence over decision-making processes, the demand for institutional transparency and accountability, economic improvement, poverty reduction, and development as a practice defined by people and communities, could be addressed. This has to be accompanied by a general reform of the political system which curtails the abuse of power by politicians and implements the law impartially so that criminal elements can be brought to justice. The impartial rule of law, elimination of corruption and equal rights for all were priorities mentioned by a considerable proportion of respondents in their aspirations for the future. However, it has to be noted that unless there is sufficient concern and demand from the grassroots for transparency and accountability, these are not going to be handled in a platter by those who exercise power.

More discussion also needs to be created on the notion that "development", currently perceived as something that comes from outside, rather than from within the community, through the effort of household members. Empowerment has yet to result in people overcoming the "dependency syndrome" and carving out their own paths to improve their lives.