



Infinite Game of Poverty Alleviation (IGPA) and Accumulation of Environmental and Socio-Cultural Capital

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ABSTRACT

Although poverty alleviation has become an infinite game globally since the late 1940s, Sri Lanka has not identified poverty as an issue until recently. The socio-welfare-based economic policies and continuous election-centered poverty alleviation programs push the country into the IGPA, even though the country is accumulated with plentiful natural and socio-cultural resources. Consequently, Sri Lanka struggles with severe economic crises and political chaos, worsening IGPA, which has not been adequately addressed in prevailing academic literature. This study attempts to fill this void by adopting the social-constructivism approach. Nine semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted, plus direct observation of the rural landscape of Sri Lanka. Findings indicate IGPA has become an influential determining factor in deciding the potential ruling government, and every government has included IGPA in their political manifesto under different titles. However, the disintegration between rural poverty alleviation and sustainable capitalization led the nation to be retained with IGPA.

Keywords: Environmental Capital, Infinite Game of Poverty Alleviation, Socio-Cultural Capital

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty has been interpreted by Rev. Thomas Malthus (1798) as inevitable law of nature to undergo some people, but several nations have eradicated poverty successfully to escape people from the worst poverty. However, no country could entirely escape poverty, and even the wealthiest countries could not eliminate it (Roser, 2022). The discovery of poverty is the invention of the poor by the West to rescue the development through differences between frugality and destitution (New Internationalist, 1992). Although the world has focused on developing nations and poverty reduction during the last half of the century, the gap between developing and developed nations is broader than ever (Bhattacharyya, 2016). Setting eliminating poverty as the first goal of UN sustainable development implied that poverty is the most threatening common enemy of the globe to fight against. This has led all developed and developing nations to include poverty alleviation in their political and administrative agendas. Besides increasing inequity, the disparity in the development process, socio-economic deprivations are prevalent setbacks for the vast majority of the global population since the 1950s. According to Sangjeli and Musthafa (2019) *“Poverty alleviation programmes have been rooted all over the world but their success has been limited despite all efforts, poverty remains a continuing problem in all developing countries, almost half of the world people living in South Asia”* (p.17). The world demands to eliminate poverty and make hungry to be the past. Beyond short-term panaceas to address poverty shocks, reducing poverty permanently was paid negligible attention or out of the perceived scope of the public effort. Promotional anti-poverty policies made little sense to those in power (Ravallion, 2016). In parallel, the concept of the Donut Economy explains that the developed nations continue to expand their resource utilization cycle more and more while depriving the vulnerable nations and population of access to the resources (Raworth, 2017). The adverse effect of poverty alleviation among the deprived or vulnerable population made them become hostiles of donor countries or donor agencies for economic salvation rather than getting out of extreme poverty. Depriving access to the resources or failure to capitalize on resources never allow them to jump over the poverty line. Lavallree et al. (2010) emphasize criteria of concentrated resource availability among poor households to eradicate poverty. Tudawe (2011) also pointed out insufficient resource allocation as the major reason for chronic poverty in Sri Lanka. When poverty becomes a chronic issue globally, poverty alleviation is

also acknowledged as a never-ending infinite game of the globe.

Poverty alleviation is a profound global strategy to rescue the people from starvation and uplift their living standards while mitigating day today socio-economic and environmental challenges. Yet, IGPA, after the ending of the second world war, began to lead the world by various mysterious myths and unrealistic ideals in reference to eliminating poverty from the globe. As per the analysis of Mercy-Corps (2015), globalization is supposed to derive economic progress for the whole world, but till that is only a myth; “No hunger” is beautifully acknowledged as a global slogan, yet hungry being increased rapidly; Accumulation of foreign aid or monetary supports were meant to eradicate poverty but that is never allowed by the economic and political instability in developing countries; Rapid response and delivery of humanitarian aids are always instant and short-term salvation, never bring forth strategic solutions; global dream of getting out of extreme poverty by 2030, has become dubious in the absence of satisfactory progress of UN 17 SDGs. Besides, all these myths IGPA to be persisted globally since the cruelty and consequences of poverty degrade sustainability of the environment, socio-culture and economy (Dodds & Wong, 2021). Particularly in developing countries, poverty alleviation policies are to be addressed with many practical, ethical and political concerns. Similarly, post-independent Sri Lanka invented the poverty linked to a socio-welfare based economy and establishment of the government under the different political parties. Indifferent to the global context, in Sri Lanka also poverty alleviation has been underpinned with several myths, some of which are unique to the country. Basically, till recent past poverty has been interpreted purely as an economic or material related issue rather than the well-being of people that connected with socio-culture and environment (Tudawe, 2011). This led all the poverty alleviation programmes and projects to target economic compensation or salvation to eradicate poverty in the country. Subsequently, poverty alleviation in the country showed remarkable progress in access to primary education, food and health care, but the absence of structural transformation in the economy prevented the generation of employment opportunities and empowerment of entrepreneur-oriented local economy (Gunathilake et al., 2009). Since the day of independence in 1948, every successive government propagated different poverty alleviation programmes and gained the power to establish the government while building hope of prosperity among the people (Aslam, 2011). Tudawe (2011) also confirms that economic growth and human

development in Sri Lanka have not supported eradicating poverty. Although IGPA is a decisive political strategy to determine the successive political parties to establish the national cum local governments. Exclusion of social and environmental capital in rural areas in IGPA, environmental degradations, declining of social-cultural values, violent conflicts, social-exclusion, dependency, entitlement failure, health and livelihood vulnerability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty has been raised as one of the major global social issues that affect citizens around the world (USAID, 2006). Poverty is outlined as a “lack of access to crucial social services, more importantly like education, health and adequate food, shelter and other basic needs in life” and also poverty reduction remains as a key problematic area that governments face (OECD, 2013). In keeping with the World Bank four out of five individuals below the international poverty level lived in rural areas (Anríquez & Stamoulis, 2007; Howton, 2020). The number of rural poor is growing. The main environmental shortages faced by such poor households are a vicious cycle of declining livelihoods, increasing environmental degradation and loss of public resources, and the deterioration of ecosystem services on which the poor depend. In addition, developing economies with high concentrations of their population in remote areas show higher rates of rural poverty and become the poorest countries in the world today (Barbier & Edward, 2012). In contrast, as the real poor decreases, so does the focus on poverty. Poverty is easier to deal with when levels are not very high. Therefore, they are more viable. Poverty hinders the overall growth process. This makes it difficult to fund social programs and implement pro-poor reforms, even in democracies (CMI, 2013).

The United Nations Development Programme mentioned that average economic growth will not decrease or alleviate poverty, produce jobs or improve equality. The aim of poverty alleviation is to increase the quality of the lives of people who are currently suffering in poverty (Bradley, 2013). One of the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to end poverty everywhere and in every way. This is a very serious task. The questions are, can poverty really be eradicated, is there such a thing as zero poverty, and what are the real opportunities for eradicating global poverty (McConville, 2020). As Tanner (2014) stated, relative poverty will always exist. Ravallion (2016) stated in World Economic Forum “*Prominent thinkers even argued that poverty was necessary for economic advancement, since*

without it, who would farm the land, work the factories and staff the armies? Avoiding hunger was the necessary incentive for doing work." Poverty is meant to capitalize on the rural resources for sustainable development. It should always be at the forefront of efforts to improve our world because it demands more than the bare minimum solution. The root causes of poverty and inequality can only be solved in the long run through real resilience development, taking into account our changing environment and the limitations of our resources (Smith et al., 2015).

The environment is actually the soil used to grow food; Water and crop irrigation water; the air needed to breathe; and a wide range of food and pharmaceutical products (vegetables, fruits, fish, wood, edible roots). Consequently, protecting the environment means protecting food production, protecting air and water from pollution, maintaining livelihoods and protecting health. Economic prosperity is a deteriorating environment in countries that are heavily dependent on natural resources, that is, many developing countries are actually exacerbating poverty. Instead, we must strive to eradicate poverty by systematically utilizing the natural resources of the environment (OECD, 2011). Ecological Poverty Alleviation is a novel concept that combines environmental protection and poverty alleviation and is an important component of poverty alleviation. Because different organizations have different strategic choices, there are complex game relationships between them.

Civil society, more recently, "social capital" refers to the growing space between the individual and the state or state (Foucault, 1991). The importance of social capital and shared norms for social well-being and economic efficiency was emphasized by Árnason et al. (2004). Social capital can act as the most important or foremost factor in bridging the gap between different policies and integrated outcomes in a region. Social capital can address structural weaknesses and achieve and maintain economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability for successful rural development. Poverty alleviation can be achieved by implementing policies that promote regional development and increasing the integration of those policies that can resist the marginalization process (Wiesinger, 2007). As stated by Mazumdar et al. (2017), Social Capital creates business opportunities for women entrepreneurs to live in even the poorest rural backgrounds. This has also been confirmed by Muniadi et al. (2015), which shows that the impact of social capital is on helping entrepreneurs to eradicate poverty by allowing them

access to resources and knowledge to improve their financial performance.

Poverty is still a worldwide unsolved problem (Zou et al., 2019). Although many empirical studies (Ravallion & Chen, 1997; Dollar & Kraay, 2002) have shown that sustainable economic development can solve problem of poverty, it is a very difficult task to eradicate. Even though people use environmental and socio-cultural capital to get rid of poverty, it cannot be eradicated forever just because it exists more or less in society.

METHODOLOGY

Post-modernistic paradigmatic philosophy with an inductive qualitative approach was instrumental to adapt the methodology of the study to unveil the truth in a socially constructed world. Social constructionism is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it is created in different ontological issues (Andrew, 2012). In other words, this elucidates the terms with natural realities. Incorporating social constructivism with grounded theory enables the researchers to address the issues while preserving the complexity of social life. This blended approach not only facilitates understanding the social construction of participants but also a method for the researchers to construct the theory (Charmaz, 2008). Understanding the socially constructed world of poverty alleviation in the selected three rural villages enabled the researchers to construct the theory on IGPA. Nine in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted through snowballing techniques. Three focus group discussions were held with the participation of key local agencies and community-based organizations. In addition, direct observations were carried out to explore the setting further. The data from multiple sources elucidate the social construction of rural poverty. Subsequently, socially constructed interpretations were further analyzed with the support of triangulation to bring forth the theory of IGPA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As poverty has been recognized most prioritizes global issues, its outgrowths have devastated Sri Lanka also since the 1950s. Poverty has been invented and exhibited as a critical economy to overcome by every successive government since the day of independence. Since poverty was not identified in the world as an issue before 1940, the poverty history of Sri Lanka was verified from the selected villages and their history goes back to the ancient

kings' era. The history of Mudalwatta, Ihalagalagama and Rideegama confirmed precolonial human settlements where poverty was not identified as a social or economic issue. As per the interpretations from focus group discussions Mudaliwatta village began human settlement in 1590 under King Wimladharma Suriya Bandara of Kandyand Kingdom; the history of Rideegama and its human settlement goes back to the era of King Dutugemunu who was donated Ridi (Silver from the village) to build a temple in Anuradhapura the first capital of the country; the history of Ihalagama connected with King Mayadunne from Kotte Kingdom. All three villages confirmed the natural and human geographical richness that enabled the villages to embrace self-sufficient and independent human societies. As these ancient societies were able to overcome their problems locally, there was no room for poverty to exist. This was clearly interpreted by one of the key informants from Ihalalgama "Our village was basically purely dependent on agriculture and we had to share and manage all the resources including human resources to continue our agriculture-based livelihood, this made us establish an informal local association (thrift and credit society) to support each other. As people were able to share and care among them, none of the societal members was not allowed to fall into any problem. There was a strong social network that is interpreted today as social capital (Duraiappah, 2000). Similar scenarios could be recorded in the other two villages also through the key informants. They confirmed that they were doing traditional farming and agriculture in collaboration with all the village folks. Although poverty has not been identified in ancient societies, it has been capitalized on rural resources to overcome their socio-economic challenges. Personal Communication and Focus Group Discussions in all three villages revealed that they had a simple and localized way of life and social systems to solve any issues or problems with the support and intervention of the village temple and chief monks. This could be further verified when our field study and focus group discussions in all three villages were supported and guided by the chief monks of the temple. Although they had simple and poverty-free societies in pre-colonial eras or before the 1940s, they have been influenced and demonstrated to complex and competitive life with penetration of non-locals or foreigners during the colonial period. The impact of imperialism along with the eagerness of lavishness has led village elites to shift their living conditions and lifestyles from traditional to non-traditional, imperial contexts. This led the villagers to split into formal and informal institutions are politically and economically sound villagers went into formal institutions and

underprivileged deprived rural folks retained with their informal institutions (Duraiappah, 2000). This resulted in the collapse of simple rural life and push towards cooperative cosmopolitan life. The aspiration for a better life has been capitalized by the rulers, who came into power one after another after the independence of the country through a social-welfare-based economic approach that initiated and launched several poverty alleviations programmes and projects in the country (Tudawe, 2011). Unexceptionally, various myths led to continuing the poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka, while rural areas undergo various outgrowth of poverty with reference to environment, socio-culture and economy.



Figure 1: Mudaliwatta Village

Although Sri Lanka got out of the king's ruling and caste-oriented administration, poverty alleviation programmes in rural areas led the people to be hostile conditions. One the Key informants from Rideegama stated "poverty alleviation programmes since Independence Day made our community to be lethargic and dependent rather than self-reliance, also they have lost many centuries-old their traditional livelihood activities". This implied that the rural community has been victimized by materialistic poverty alleviation programmes. Another key informant from Ihalagalagama informed "since village children are demonstrated and exposed to villagers who have gone-up in the education and found good jobs while establishing comfortable life in urban areas, now the majority of the villagers are keen to educate their children and support to find better jobs away from the village. Now only the elders like us doing farming and agriculture in the village, many other villagers have left their farming lands and settled in cities with their children". As the welfare-based economy elevate the education levels among the rural people, they want

to find lucrative jobs (Tudawe, 2011) away from rural areas that lead to preventing the capitalization of socio-cultural and environmental sustainably. The Chief Monk from Mudaliwatta stated very sadly about the decline of village social and spiritual values due to their interaction and transaction with urban landscapes. He pointed “the majority of the youth have been misled to use drugs and they have started to disrespect the traditional customs and ethics, this has led to ruin entire village heritage, culture and social system in addition to traditional economy of the village”. He also urged villagers and universities to protect the younger generation and village from this degradation. Interpretation of social construction and observations confirmed that the rural villages were disrupted and messed up by the materialistic poverty alleviation programmes. Gradually the quality of rural settings has been fully neglected and the physical and cultural values of their own village have been declined. Deterioration in value rural villages was interpreted by one of the key informants Mudaliwatta as follow.

... But some people sold their estates and went to work in the city because of poverty. The lands that used to be big have now been sold and the small lands have been divided. Houses were built on small plots of land everywhere. We used to see Mudaliwatta as a beautiful green village. But now that has changed....

Seeking a better life after gaining the education from the village and victimization of people due to overdependency on unplanned and unrealistic poverty alleviation, led to deteriorating value for rural villages. People, who seek better jobs and living conditions after gaining some qualifications lead to sell or neglect their own village assets leave the village. Meantime, people who are not interested in education and unable to move out of the villages, remain in the deprived cycles and fall into chronic poverty. Their deep frustration and materialistic dreams made them be more craving over wealth and generate instant material prosper in all possible ways. The richest environmental and socio-cultural values embedded quality of rural settings have been traded off with inauthentic and complex urban living standards and lifestyles. This was further verified by two more key informants from Ihalagalagama by stating:

Those days we were satisfied with all the local foods, traditional medicine and healing, local culture and costumes and everything according to our village traditions but today nobody is happy to enjoy or experience them and they want to follow city dwellers and adapt

everything from there. This resulted in stressful village life and unexpected many non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, heart attacks and pressure that would have never been heard by our ancestors from this village.



Figure 2: Ihalagalagama Village

The continuous materialistic-centered poverty alleviation programmes have led the people to seek imitative and show-off lifestyles with false values in their life. This led to neglect and decline in the worthiness of rural environmental and socio-cultural capital. Either people were pushed to gain knowledge and skills from non-traditional contexts to establish their life away from villages or they were pushed to fully depend on poverty alleviation programmes due to relative and chronic poverty. Gradually poverty alleviations led to shift the villages into urban atmospheres while neglecting fascinating and triangular authentic natural beauty, centuries-old cultural, spiritual and ritual values, and grassroots sustainable livelihood and living conditions. Although IGPA leads to devastating rural dwellings, rural landscapes still remain with environmental and socio-cultural capitals (Figures 1, 2, 3) were are not capitalized or undercapitalized for sustainable development.



Figure 3: Rideegama Village

When poverty becomes chronic and rural people become dependent on poverty alleviation programmes, unconsciously rural people become hostiles of local politicians. Hence retaining poverty in the rural landscapes become potential capital for the elections campaign, eradicating rural poverty may not be intended truly by the local political authority. This was interpreted by the Chief Monk of Ridee Vihara (Rideegama) “many villagers have lost the interest over their traditional livelihood and they run behind different politicians to gain some benefits or compensation packages, this made them lose the interest in their livelihood activities and the depend on poverty alleviation programmes. Hence, continuous poverty alleviation programmes led to deteriorate and decrease the rural manpower, which was a profound asset for the rural areas since the ancient days to prosper the country. Since the 1950s all the poverty alleviations attempts were intended to provide instant panaceas rather than eradicate poverty completely from rural areas. Meanwhile, the community was also not empowered to capitalize the poverty on rural socio-cultural and environmental capitals. Chronic and relative poverty existence in rural has become a huge playground for IGPA to sustain the political power of every successive ruling government.

CONCLUSION

Although poverty was not an issue in the precolonial period after 1940, poverty has been recognized as a prevalent and dominating issue. Self-reliant

rural community was gradually pushed into poverty through the demonstration and imitation of imperial or cosmopolitan comparative lifestyles and the expectation of better living conditions while deviating from a simple traditional lifestyle and social system. Competitive and comparative living standards along with declining traditional livelihood let rulers invent the poverty in the country similar to other parts of the world. Every successive government intended to capitalize on poverty through the poverty alleviation programme to gain the power to establish the ruling from the national level to the local level. As remaining poverty in rural areas is a remarkable phenomenon for potential election campaigns and eradicating poverty in rural sustainably become nonsense. Rural areas are disrupted and messed up with poverty alleviation that deteriorates the quality and value of rural villages for their own native community. On the one hand, a group of rural folks migrate to urban areas expecting better living standards and jobs. On the other hand, another group of people remain in the deprive cycle with a materialistic dream that leads to ruin the rural setting through environmental and socio-cultural degradation. As rural areas remain with chronic poverty and all the other environmental, socio-cultural and economic issues, IGPA is unanimously acknowledged by all the actors and agencies in rural areas, even though socio-cultural and environmental capitals are accumulated without a sustainable capitalization process. As long as rural areas lack the sustainable capitalization of socio-cultural and environmental resources, rural areas cannot eradicate poverty. Chronic and relative poverty in rural landscapes led to believe all the myths of IGPA that have become the globe's apparent political strategy, particularly in developing countries.

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