



Article

Countryside Capitalization and Community Empowerment through Tourism

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Abstract

Even though, there were many programmes for poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka, rural areas are still undergoing various socio-economic and environmental challenges along with deprivation and marginalization in development process. However, most of these rural areas that suffers from poverty are abundant with natural and socio-cultural resources. Therefore, it is inevitable to investigate the role of prolonged poverty alleviation programmes and social welfare policies on countryside capitalization and community empowerment. Inductive empirical investigations through explorative research design of case studies of selected three villages; Ithalagalagama, Mudaliwatta, and Rideegama enables the study to unveil multiple truths from the socially constructed world. Focus group discussion, in-depth interview of key informants through snowball sampling, direct observations and artefacts in three villages were used in arriving at the conclusions. The findings of the study indicate that, these villages are full of priceless diverse socio-cultural and environmental capital, which were not at all tapped by the poverty alleviation programmes. Sustainable capitalization of human and natural geographical resources through poverty alleviation will be inevitable for community empowerment, which is the primary intention of poverty alleviation programmes. This intensifies redefining and redesigning of poverty alleviation and socio-economic welfare policies to stimulate the countryside capitalization and community empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, rural areas are identified deprived geographical regions in the world, on the other hand rural are the richest landmarks for plentiful natural and cultural resources. Although rural areas embrace with plentiful resources, dearth of development lead the rural community to be dependence and live under poverty line. According to Frochot (2005) people consider rural area as what is not urban rather than understanding its constructs. Generally, rural areas have been defined in comparison with development and living standards in urban areas without analysing the resource base, authenticity and value centred life. This led rural and urban area to be divided and classified in the world according to developmental parameters. Yet, rural areas have been undergone numerous changes and restructurings due to the penetration of urbanization. Many authors such as Cánoves et al. (2004), Frochot (2005), Garrod et al. (2006), Nilsson (2002), Sharpley (2002), and Walford (2001) have used the terms rural, peripheral and countryside interchangeably to address geographical locations. Yet, Aslam (2014) identifies inherent differences in sense and interpretation of these terms. Accordingly, ‘rural’ is generally refer to underdeveloped or socio-economically underprivileged areas and ‘peripheral’ refers to less prioritized areas out of urban and city centres. Whereas, ‘countryside’ is meant to include spaces comprising of natural, built and socio-cultural resources different to urban (Ibid). However, defining and demarcating the rural areas have become complicated and there is no clear definition for rural areas (Page et al., 2001). On the other hand, the attractiveness of countryside lies in what urban life cannot offer (Nilsson, 2002). Whereas, Paje et al. (2001) argue that the countryside symbolizes a lost ‘golden age’, where someone find everything that the urban areas lack. Whilst, Sharpley and Sharpley (1997) recognize that the rural area located away from urban and major cities and comprises with some special features, such as forests, reservoir, canals, beaches and agricultural lands. More significantly,

Tribe et al. (2000) identify rural areas as an unchanged and natural place remaining with certain societal values, national identity and heritage. Rural areas embrace with plentiful tangible or intangible natural and socio-cultural that has been widely accepted countryside capital. Declining of agriculture and expansion of post-industrial services push the rural areas into non-farming activities to regenerate the rural economy (Robert & Hall, 2001). However, failure of integration between human and natural geographies in non-farming employments led the rural areas to persist with poverty and increase inequality (Reardon et al., 2001). Thus, poverty in Sri Lanka is also predominantly a rural phenomenon and since the independence and the country has carried out a number of poverty alleviation programmes to alleviate the poverty in rural areas. In the world also most of the poor are rural and depend on agriculture or natural resources to find their livelihood (Lee & Nerves, 200). However, according to precolonial history in Sri Lanka did not recognize the issue of poverty in the country. Although country was not urbanized and people were living in rural settings, survival challenges have been mitigated through their socio-culture and natural resources, while preserving the resources for future generations. This could be very clearly confirmed through the constructions of a large number of tanks for irrigation and agriculture during the ancient king eras. As charisma was the determining factor of kingship, impression management techniques were used to boost their image of competence in order to gain compliance and devotion from their followers (Kumarasinghe & Samkin, 2018). Establishing the charismatic leadership magnifies resolving issues and challenges among the followers or community. This push the kings to capitalize socio-cultural and natural resource to overcome issues and challenges among the communities. As rural areas are underpinned with natural and cultural resources, poverty cannot be alleviated only through economic compensation packages. As socio-cultural and natural resources compose the countryside, capitalization of countryside would be inevitable primary

requirement to alleviate the poverty and empower the rural community. A little research has explored the relationship the use of natural capital, particularly in combination with the variety of other livelihood capitals even though natural resources play a central role in rural livelihoods in many regions across the globe (Nowrazki et. al., 2012). Further, higher levels of proximate natural resources are associated with greater financial, human, and social capital. Putnam (1993) points out that features of social organization informing social capital, such as trust, norms and networks of civic engagement (associations) can substantially improve a society's efficiency in overcoming dilemmas of collective action to provide access to resources. Inevitably developmental challenges and dilemmas compel the integrated and network approach towards natural and social capital. Yet, declining of traditional sources of livelihood in rural areas, intensify the inevitability of seeking the alternative use of local resources (Liu, 2005). Exploring and merging the traditional and non-traditional livelihood sources in capitalization of resources, will be an inevitable need of the rural landscapes. Sharpley (2002) claims tourism as an effective catalyst of rural socio-economic development and regeneration. Tourism is a non-traditional or alternative livelihood source that can be merged and integrated with traditional livelihood to capitalize the countryside sustainably and ensure the poverty alleviation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building upon the researchers' work in the area of literature, this section summarizes the contributions of recent theoretical and empirical scholarly work for the understanding of rural poverty, rural resources, social and natural capital, rural livelihood and alternative livelihood and poverty alleviation.

Rural Poverty

Poverty is a process with many dimensions and complexities beyond a state of existence. Deprivation, vulnerability (high risk and low capacity to

cope), and powerlessness are common characteristics (Lipton & Ravallion, 1995; Sen, 1999). Monitoring poverty is a vital part of the global as well as many nations' national development agendas. Even though the poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon, poverty levels are generally measured using economic dimensions based on income and consumption (World Bank, 2015). World Bank data is the primary source of global statistics on extreme poverty, and it establishes the 'International Poverty Line.' Since the poverty line was updated in 2015, a person is deemed to be in extreme poverty if his/her daily income is less than \$1.90. Extreme poverty is mostly a rural phenomenon (World Bank, 2000). The overall population living below the poverty level is now projected as 689 million people (9.2 percent of the world's population) and in 2018, four out of every five individuals below the international poverty line lived in rural areas.

The rural poverty rate is the percentage of the rural population living below the national poverty line. Rural poverty accounts for approximately 63 percent of global poverty, reaching 90 percent in China and Bangladesh and 65 to 90 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa. (There are exceptions to this tendency in numerous Latin American countries where poverty is concentrated in urban areas.) (Khan, 2001). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are expected to see the largest increases in extreme poverty, with an additional 32 million and 26 million people, respectively, living below the international poverty line (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2022).

There are several theories of poverty that aim to uncover the fundamental factors or causes of poverty (Downes, 2010). After reviewing the existing literature on poverty theories, Bradshaw (2006), concluded that there are five theories of poverty: (1) Poverty caused by individual deficiencies, (2) Poverty caused by cultural belief systems that support sub-cultures of poverty, (3) Poverty caused by economic, political and social distortions or discriminations, (4) Poverty caused by geographical disparities, and (5) Poverty

caused by cumulative and cyclical interdependencies. The theory of poverty caused by geographical disparities attempts to theorise poverty along the lines of geographical disparities led to the emergence of geography of poverty (Abdulai & Shamshiry, 2014). This cause of poverty represents rural poverty, ghetto poverty, urban disinvestment, southern poverty, third –world poverty, and others that exist separate from other theories (Bradshaw, 2006). This theory of poverty emphasizes the reality that individuals, institutions, and cultures in particular areas lack the objective resources required to create well-being and income, as well as the power to claim redistribution. The spatial distribution of poverty is often attributed to characteristics of poor places such as high unemployment, low levels of human and social capital, and the prevalence of particular forms of economic activity, or to theories of development and dependency that also attempt to explain the sources and distribution of these characteristics of rural poverty (Tickamyer, 2006).

In Sri Lanka, 4.1% of the population lives below the national poverty line in 2016. Poverty is observed to be greatest in the estate sector (8.8) average in the rural sector (4.3) and the least in the estate sector (1.9) (CBSL, 2020).

Table 3: Poverty Indicators by Sector

Sector/ Province/ District	Poverty Head Count Index (Percentage) by HIES Survey Period						Poor Household Percentage			Poverty Gap index (%)		
	1995/96	2002	2006/07	2009/10	2012/13	2016	2009/10	2012/13	2016	2009/10	2012/13	2016
Sri Lanka	28.8	22.7	15.2	8.9	6.7	4.1	7.0	5.3	3.1	1.7	1.2	0.6
Sector												
Urban	14.0	7.9	6.7	5.3	2.1	1.9	3.8	1.5	1.3	1.2	0.3	0.3
Rural	30.9	24.7	15.7	9.4	7.6	4.3	7.5	6.0	3.3	1.8	1.4	0.6
Estate	38.4	30.0	32.0	11.4	10.9	8.8	8.9	8.8	6.8	2.1	1.6	1.2

Source: Department of Census and Statistics

Tables 2 & 3 provide a clear picture of the poverty variations, between regions, as well as between the different population groups.

Table 2: Poverty headcount and share of poor persons under different poverty lines by sector and district

District / Sector	Poverty Headcount (HC) and Share of Poor Persons Under Different Poverty Lines											
	Income poverty (IP)		Multidimensional Poverty (MDP)		Near MDP		IP and/or MDP		Extreme Poverty: (<\$1.25 a day (2005 PPP))		Extreme Poverty: (<\$1.90 a day (2011 PPP))	
	HC	Share	HC	Share	HC	Share	HC	Share	HC	Share	HC	Share
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Urban	2.1	5.6	2.3	19.0	11.0	17.7	4.0	7.7	1.0	5.2	0.5	5.0
Rural	7.0	86.8	3.5	76.2	10.5	72.5	9.6	79.7	3.9	88.4	2.2	89.0
Estate	10.9	7.6	17.9	4.2	23.5	9.8	25.0	12.5	4.7	6.4	2.2	5.4
Colombo	1.4	2.3	1.7	4.8	12.3	12.4	2.9	3.5	1.0	3.3	0.5	2.9
Gampaha	2.1	3.5	1.4	4.0	7.5	7.6	3.1	3.7	1.3	4.4	0.8	5.0
Kalutara	3.1	2.8	3.7	5.6	8.2	4.4	5.7	3.7	1.9	3.4	0.7	2.1
Kandy	6.2	6.2	4.7	8.0	12.2	7.4	9.1	6.6	2.6	5.0	1.3	4.6
Matale	7.8	2.8	6.5	3.9	14.1	3.0	12.9	3.3	3.2	2.2	0.9	1.2
Nuwara Eliya	6.6	3.4	10.7	9.5	18.7	5.9	15.2	5.8	2.9	3.0	1.3	2.5
Galle	9.9	7.6	3.8	5.0	8.7	4.1	11.5	6.5	5.2	7.9	3.3	9.0
Matara	7.1	4.2	4.1	4.1	9.7	3.5	9.6	4.1	3.5	4.1	2.5	5.2
Hambantota	4.9	2.1	2.2	1.7	7.4	2.0	6.3	2.0	2.1	1.8	1.6	2.5
Jaffna	8.3	3.6	5.2	3.8	10.8	2.8	11.3	3.5	4.7	4.0	2.5	3.8
Mannar	20.1	1.5	10.1	1.2	18.9	0.8	26.7	1.4	13.2	1.9	10.5	2.7
Vavuniya	3.4	0.4	6.0	1.3	13.5	1.0	7.8	0.7	1.6	0.4	1.0	0.4
Mullaitivu	28.8	1.9	10.2	1.2	18.6	0.8	30.4	1.5	18.5	2.4	11.9	2.8
Kilinochchi	12.7	1.1	6.4	0.9	19.6	1.0	17.6	1.1	6.3	1.0	4.4	1.3
Batticaloa	19.4	7.5	11.3	7.4	14.9	3.5	25.3	7.1	13.3	10.1	8.8	12.1
Ampara	5.4	2.6	2.8	2.2	10.3	3.0	7.2	2.5	1.7	1.6	0.6	1.0
Trincomalee	9.0	2.5	4.0	1.9	13.1	2.2	12.1	2.5	3.1	1.7	1.4	1.4
Kurunegala	6.5	7.6	2.8	5.7	6.9	4.9	7.9	6.7	3.8	8.7	2.3	9.5
Puttalam	5.1	2.8	2.5	2.4	7.7	2.6	6.4	2.6	2.5	2.7	1.5	2.9
Anuradhapura	7.6	4.7	2.2	2.3	9.6	3.6	9.2	4.1	3.3	4.0	1.8	4.0
Polonnaruwa	6.7	2.0	4.7	2.3	9.2	1.6	9.7	2.0	3.5	2.0	0.7	0.8
Badulla	12.3	7.3	8.7	8.8	17.3	6.2	18.2	7.8	5.0	5.8	2.3	4.9
Monaragala	20.3	6.8	4.7	2.6	14.9	3.0	22.1	5.3	11.6	7.5	6.0	6.9
Ratnapura	10.4	8.4	3.9	5.3	16.3	7.9	13.5	7.8	5.1	8.0	2.5	7.2
Kegalle	6.7	4.1	4.0	4.2	13.3	4.9	9.0	4.0	2.7	3.2	1.5	3.2
Sri Lanka	6.7	100.0	4.0	100.0	11.2	100.0	9.3	100.0	3.5	100.0	1.9	100.0
No. of Poor Persons	1,339,311		791,874		2,219,578		1,848,779		686,254		378,925	

Source: Department of Census and Statistics

Table 3: Poverty headcount and share of poor persons based on different poverty lines by household groups classified by occupation or activity of the head of household-2012/13

Household Groups Classified by Occupation or Activity of the Head of Household	Poverty Headcount (HC) and Share of Poor Persons Under Different Poverty Lines											
	Income poor		MD Poor		Near MDP		Income and / or MD Poor		Extreme Poverty [$\leq$ \$1.25 a day (2005 PPP)]		Extreme Poverty [$\leq$ \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP)]	
	HC	share	HC	share	HC	share	HC	share	HC	share	HC	share
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Administrators, Senior Officials (including those in the Armed Forces) & Professionals	1.0	1.4	0.7	1.7	5.2	4.3	1.6	1.6	0.6	1.7	0.5	2.5
Technical & associated professionals	1.5	1.0	1.7	1.9	5.5	2.2	2.8	1.4	1.1	1.4	0.8	2.0
Clerical, Services, Sales & similar workers	3.8	4.0	2.1	3.8	7.9	5.1	4.9	3.8	1.6	3.4	0.8	3.1
Skilled Agricultural, Forestry & Fishery Workers	8.8	20.0	2.8	10.9	10.1	13.8	10.3	16.8	4.4	19.3	2.6	20.5
Craft & related trade workers, Plant & machine operators, etc.	4.2	11.9	2.2	10.3	7.1	12.2	5.3	10.9	2.2	12.0	1.1	11.1
Non-agricultural Labourers & similar workers	12.5	15.4	5.9	12.2	12.7	9.4	15.9	14.2	6.7	16.1	3.4	14.9
Agri., Forestry & Fishery Labourers	16.6	21.0	8.9	19.0	16.4	12.5	21.8	20.0	8.1	20.1	5.2	23.2
Members of the Armed Forces (excluding officers)	2.9	0.2	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.1	2.9	0.1	2.9	0.4	0.0	0.0
Unemployed	2.9	0.2	4.2	0.5	17.6	0.8	7.1	0.4	1.5	0.2	0.0	0.0
Household Work	5.5	8.9	3.7	10.1	13.4	13.0	8.2	9.6	3.2	10.2	2.0	11.3
Unable/Too old to work	6.8	15.2	7.3	28.0	18.6	25.3	12.3	20.1	3.2	14.3	1.3	10.7
Occ. not properly specified	6.3	0.8	6.9	1.5	15.5	1.2	11.0	1.0	4.0	1.0	1.6	0.7
All Groups	6.7	100.0	4.0	100.0	11.2	100.0	9.3	100.0	3.5	100.0	1.9	100.0
No. of Poor Persons	1,339,311		791,874		2,219,578		1,848,779		686,254		378,925	

Source: Department of Census and Statistics

Out of the Income Poverty (IP) persons, nearly 87 percent, and out of Extreme Poor persons (\$1.90 a day, Poverty Line) almost 90 percent are in the Rural Sector. Batticaloa is the poorest district, in terms of both Poverty Headcount and Share of Poor, followed by Monaragala district. Other districts with high shares of poor persons are Badulla, Ratnapura, Kurunegala, Kandy, Galle and Nuwara Eliya. This study is focused on villages in the selected three impoverished districts including Rathnapura, Kurunegala and Kandy.

The rural poor depend largely on agriculture, fishing and forestry, and related small-scale industries and services (IMF, 2001; Khan, 2001). This is

quite obvious in the context of Sri Lankan poor. Among the population groups, persons living in households headed by *“Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers”* are the poorest, followed by those in households headed by *“Non-agricultural labourers and similar workers”*, *“Skilled Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery Workers”* and *“Unable or too old to work”* (Table 3) which represents 70 percent in households headed by the above-mentioned 4 household groups. The causes of poverty in these distinct populations are diverse. Smallholder farmers are typically found in peripheral locations where precipitation is minimal, soils are fragile and susceptible to erosion, and desertification is a severe threat. Their limited holdings, poor yields, a lack of productive services, and weak, inefficient markets for inputs and output have trapped them into low-productivity and low-savings. As a result of population pressure, the most marginal of these small farmers have been propelled into the ranks of the landless over time (Khan, 2001). The rural poor have far worse living conditions than the urban poor in terms of personal consumption and access to education, health care, safe drinking water and sanitation, housing, transportation, and communication. Whether or not overall economic development is occurring, chronically high levels of rural poverty have contributed to fast population growth and migration to cities. In reality, much urban poverty is produced by rural impoverished people attempting to escape poverty by coming to cities.

Rural resources, natural capital and social capital

A livelihood is described as the activities, assets, and access that contribute to an individual's or a household's ability to earn a living (Ellis 1998). Livelihood resources — “the basic material and social, tangible, and intangible assets that people use for constructing their livelihoods — are conceptualized as different types of ‘capital’ to stress their role as a resource base from which different productive streams are derived from which livelihoods are

constructed” (Scoones, 1998, p. 7). The sustainable livelihood approach offers a holistic and integrative approach with the capacity to analyse and understand the complexity of rural development (Chambers & Conway 1991; Solesbury, 2003). Sustainable livelihood (SL) framework refers to study on poverty reduction, sustainability, and livelihood strategies. The five ‘assets’ or ‘capitals’ in sustainable livelihood are (1) Natural capital – the natural resource stocks (soil, water, air, genetic resources, etc.) and environmental services (hydrological cycle, pollution sinks, etc.) from which resource flows and services useful for livelihoods are derived. (2) Economic or financial capital – the capital base (cash, credit/debt, savings, and other economic assets, including basic infrastructure and production equipment and technologies) which are essential for the pursuit of any livelihood strategy. (3) Human capital – the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health and physical capability important for the successful pursuit of different livelihood strategies. (4) Social capital – the social resources (networks, social claims, social relations, affiliations, associations) upon which people draw when pursuing different livelihood strategies requiring co-ordinated actions. As Scoones (1998) explains, ‘...identifying what livelihood resources (or combinations of ‘capitals’ or capital portfolio) are required for different livelihood strategy combinations is a key step in the process of analysis.

Most of the rural poor rely on agriculture or are otherwise dependent on natural resources in generating their livelihoods. In fact, approximately 90 % of rural households are involved in farming activities (Davis et al. 2010a, b). Apart from the small-scale farming, fishing, raising livestock and non-farm activities are some of the common livelihoods that rural populations survive on as a source of income. There, it can be identified the key natural resources on which the poor are dependent such as land, water, forests, fisheries, climate, crop genetic resources and mineral resources. For many developing economies, ecological scarcity also is manifesting itself in another way – it is contributing

to the economic vulnerability of the rural poor. Increasing ecological scarcity is disproportionately affecting the world's poor in rural areas, who depend critically on many ecosystem goods and services for their livelihoods (Barbier 2005; Wunder, 2008).

A vicious cycle of diminishing livelihoods, growing ecological degradation and loss of resource commons, and decreased ecosystem services on which the poor rely is the main ecological scarcity issue confronting the rural poor located in resource-poor and remote places. "Ecological scarcity has been characterized from an economic standpoint as the loss of several benefits, or "services," when ecosystems are exploited for human use and their activities" (Barbier, 1989, p.p. 96-97). As a result, tackling this vicious cycle necessitates a new policy strategy that focuses not only on increasing natural capital in general, but also on addressing the essential aspects that are at the foundation of the poverty-environment and spatial-poverty traps. To be effective, such a pro-poor strategy needs to target the rural poor where they are geographically concentrated – in remote and ecologically fragile areas. The key elements of the strategy in such areas involve: (1) Improving the productivity of marginal agriculture and resource productive activities. (2) Overcoming the constraints on smallholder market participation. (3) Fostering well-functioning and affordable markets for credit, insurance and land. (4) Generating off-farm employment opportunities. (5) Enhancing environmental protection and management of resource commons. (6) Improving public services and infrastructure, including roads, communications, marketing, education and health services, and research and extension (Barbier, 2012). Therefore, management of natural capital is not sufficient for eradicating persistent rural poverty in developing and it will require a much more robust strategy than simply reliance on improvements to natural capital as an effective pathway. A variety of measures including involving the poor in these areas in payment for ecosystem services, targeting investments directly to the rural poor, reducing

their dependence on exploiting environmental resources, and tackling their lack of access to affordable credit, insurance, land, and transport are required in formulating policies in targeting rural poor clustered in fragile environments. Where possible, efforts should be made to boost rural employment opportunities, especially for those poor households' dependent on outside labor employment. These measures can complement other actions to improve livelihoods by increasing economic mobility, including physical or institutional migration out of low-return agriculture and the informal sector (Barbier, 2012). Recent scholarly work emphasizes the importance of social capital in the progress of material gain and welfare. Social capital includes economic resources obtained by individuals or groups via participation in social networks, including group membership (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Coleman (1988), he describes social capital as the networks, trust, and norms that a person gains via interpersonal relationships and exchanges. The relationship between social capital and poverty has also received increasing interest from both theoretical and empirical researchers. Yusuf (2008) and Grootaert (2001) suggested that social capital is an important determinant of poverty supported by the argument of Isham et al. (2002) concentrating communities that are endowed with a higher stock of social capital are in a better position to tackle the problems of poverty and vulnerability and vital in poverty alleviation (Rupasingha & Goetz, 2007). Herbert (1997) discovered that increasing one's social network boosts one's bridging social capital and capacity to work. This confirms with Buckley's (1996) findings that intergenerational ties created local stability and security, resulting in a large turn in economic activity. Furthermore, Osei and Zhuang (2020) pinpoints that rural women entrepreneurs through their strong network and social interactions with customers, community people, opinion leaders, and maintaining contribute to their ability to identify new ideas, new markets, products, strategies, and opportunities to enhance the growth of their entrepreneurship and their welfare.

Rural livelihood and alternatives livelihood

Traditional rural livelihoods have been observed as land-intensive practices and the inability of these systems to meet the needs of growing populations along with the pressures of intensive use of marginal lands has led to vested interests in alternative livelihood sources. Ellis' (2000) findings supported in identifying varied livelihood systems as less susceptible than undiversified ones. As a result, increasing promotion of livelihood diversification will minimize reliance on volatile resources (Reynolds et al., 2007).

The notion of alternative livelihood is made up of a number of natural resource-based and non-natural resource-based activities that have an impact on livelihood security and environmental sustainability (Bennett, 2010). The quest for alternative livelihoods is mostly ascribed to the fact that rural areas would suffer significant repercussions from climate change, primarily due to decreased water availability induced by changes in precipitation and evapotranspiration patterns, as well as soil moisture. With an increase in the frequency of extreme weather events, the danger of both floods and drought for some of the most productive regions is expected to rise (Thomas, 2008). Furthermore, the increasing frequency of droughts and flooding, as well as less rainfall and higher temperatures caused by global warming, would have a severe impact on tropical food supply (World Bank, 2005). This gives a compelling reason to develop alternative livelihoods for rural people that rely on the biological productivity of the areas. Livelihood strategies, particularly those that are not dependent on intense land-based activities, will allow for the diversification of economic opportunities in these regions. Although many rural households are diversifying their income sources (Ellis, 1998), there is a need to replicate these alternative livelihoods in other regions in order to eliminate poverty while conserving other natural resources. Alternative livelihood programs in drylands must be researched and built to meet the inhabitants'

culture, resources, and environment (Méndez, 1993; Safriel & Adeel, 2005). Natural resource management; carbon sequestration through afforestation; eco-tourism, dryland aquaculture, bio-prospecting, and bee-keeping; and other general income-generating opportunities relevant to drylands were the four types of alternative livelihood interventions practiced (Adhikari, 2013).

Poverty Alleviation

Alleviation of poverty and hunger have long been considered as two of the most central challenges confronting human society. Nevertheless, there are certainly more humans suffering from chronic deprivation today than ever before in history. (Jazairy, Stanier, Alamgir & Panuccio, 1992). More than 700 million people (10 percent) of the world population, still live in extreme poverty today, struggling to fulfil the most basic needs like health, education, and access to water and sanitation, to name a few (United Nations Sustainable Development, 2022). The United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (17 SDGs), in 2015 as a universal action to eradicate poverty, safeguard the planet, and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Out of those 17, the aim of Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG-1) is to eradicate extreme poverty and to reduce all forms and dimensions of poverty, at least by half, by the year 2030 (UNDP, 2022). Countries around the world implement development initiatives and poverty alleviation programs primarily targeted at reducing poverty among the poor and vulnerable communities through different participatory and community-demand-driven approaches (Chakrabarti & Dhar, 2013; Yalegama & Chileshe, 2016). Since the country's independence, the government of Sri Lanka has undertaken a variety of policies and robust socioeconomic programs that directly or indirectly aid the poor. Until 1977, the government provided welfare, subsidies, land to the landless, and a variety of additional agricultural aids. The initiation of the *Janasaviaya* programme (in 1988) was a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's poverty alleviation programs, distinguishing it from previous social and poverty-focused programs

undertaken since the country's independence. The program included a safety net for the impoverished, government help for livelihood practices such as animal husbandry, cottage industries, marketing, agricultural operations, and social mobilization, as well as programs to empower the poor (Damayanthi, 2014). Then, in 1995, the *Samurdhi* program was launched, replacing the *Janasaviya* program, with the goal of encouraging low-income earning families to join the main stream of the country's economic process while financially subsidizing them to enable them to maintain their living conditions at the critical minimum level (Samurdhi Authority of Sri Lanka, 2008). However, a number of criticisms have been leveled at the Samurdhi programme and its implementation, which included a lack of targeting (Glinskaya, 2000; Gunawardane et al., 2007; Gamage, 2006), ineffectiveness (Glinskaya, 2000; and Gunatilaka & Salih, 1999), politicization of the program, and failure to meet targets (Fernando, 2009). Though the government attempts to avoid some governance issues establishing these aid programmes at grass root level, it does not appear to be a successful step or a complete resolution for the issues at all (Damayanthi, 2014). This has been argued by Khan (2001) emphasizing that poverty eradication is still equated with welfare, whether due to misunderstandings or the elites' defense of their vested interests. As a result, a "trade-off" is typically advocated between poverty alleviation and growth investment. This is an erroneous dichotomy. Smallholder farmers, rural women, and the landless are just as capable as better-off groups of seizing opportunities, utilizing better seeds and fertilizer, and embracing new techniques.

Poverty should be addressed properly at its root by overcoming the constraints that underlie it, rather than just treating the symptoms of poverty through welfare transfers. It entails engaging their participation in projects from the design stage through the evaluation stage. It involves an internalization of the development process, with the goal of making poverty inwardly solvable by tapping the wasted resources of the poor and building on them from the

grassroots up (Khan, 2001). Empowering the poor is giving them control over the resources they need to earn their way out of poverty. The notion of *social capital*, as well as its significance in economic growth in general and poverty alleviation in particular, is gaining acceptance. The movement for poverty alleviation attempts to build social capital in individuals at the grassroots level by instilling qualities such as motivation, commitment, devotion to social action, and leadership, as well as in communities by fostering collaborative social relations, collective group action, mutual-aid, self-help groups, and participatory planning (Hewavitharana, 2004). A well-designed poverty profile can guide the targeting of transfers aimed at minimizing aggregate poverty (Kanbur, 1987; Basley & Kanbur, 1993). A detailed understanding of the poverty profile (the groups that comprise the rural poor, their institutions, where they reside, the sources of their income, and the restrictions they confront) is crucial for reconstructing the delivery system as well as establishing targeted interventions. Since the causes of poverty are multidimensional, in the same way the strategies for poverty reduction must also be multidimensional.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the social constructivism approach in arriving at the results, because the main focus of the study is to emphasize the potential of countryside capitalization in community empowerment. According to Kim (2006) social constructivism emphasises the culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding. There are four general perspectives that inform how we could facilitate the learning within the framework of social constructivism, namely, cognitive tools perspective, idea-based social constructivism, pragmatic or emergent approach, and transitional or situated cognitive perspectives. Among them, the focus of transitional or situated cognitive approach is on the relationship between the people and their environment. Therefore, this study

follows the transitional approach in order to have an in-depth understanding on natural and socio-cultural resources available in selected three villages; Ihalagalagama in Sabaragamuwa Province, Mudaliwatta in Central Province and Rideegama in North Western Province and their potential in empowering villagers as a poverty alleviation strategy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research team visited the selected three villages several times to identify the natural and socio-cultural resources that are available. Based on the observations and the focus group discussions had during those visits, some significant natural and socio-cultural resources, which are not yet taken into the process of empowering these communities were identified. These villages are full of many beautiful and fascinating natural resources. Caves, Mountains, and Streams are the natural resources accessible in the area that have the potential in adding a greater value to these villages. Caves are widely seen in Ridigama attached to the Ridi Viharaya, which is the religious monument in the village. It is a cave temple with many interesting legends surrounding it. One of the interesting stories is on how this temple came to be known as Ridi Viharaya. The king Dutugamunu, who initiated the construction of Ruwanwelisaya, have obtained silver from a silver ore in ridigama for the construction work. In gratitude, he built a temple complex on the silver ore, which is then called as Ridi Viharaya. Later, King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe refurbished the place. It is then that the place had got its Christian touch. Some of the Biblical stories are depicted there, on the tiles on the flower altar, in front of a nine-meter tall Buddha statue. The King had received these tiles as a gift, from a European ambassador who had wanted to please the King during the time that the Dutch ruled. The King had, in return, gifted them to the temple. These tiles show the creation of man, the fall of man, the great flood and its aftermath, the dove of peace with the olive branch, Moses and the burning bush, the prophets of yore and some scenes from the New Testament depicting the life of Christ, like the

Nativity, the transfiguration and the last supper. Thus, it is now visited by Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. Even though, there are nearly twenty five rock caves that have the easy access, they are not considered in attracting more tourist to the area. Cave tourism, which is known as spelunking in the United States and Canada and potholing in the United Kingdom would be an identical tourism promotion option for the village. Caves are natural resources that are valued to tourists because of its inherent natural features. This form of tourism attractions are being developed around the world primarily as a tool for the development of local and regional communities for income generation. Tourists are motivated to visit caves for adventures, education/research, socialization, recreation, and scientific purposes in general. However, the caves in Ridigama have the potential in generating a spiritual tourism experience that would be a very rare experience for the visitors of Ridi Viharaya. Spiritual tourism would be an attractive tourism model for the village because there is a close association with the Ridi Viharaya and the villagers. Buddhist meditation system and techniques, Buddhist education, and Buddhist culture are more vital parts of this spiritual tourism model with the help of well skilled and knowledge of Buddhist monks in the Ridi Viharaya.

Similarly, these three villages are rich with mountain heavens. Specially, Ihalagalagama and Mudaliwaththa villages. Ihalagalagama is already a tourism destination because of beautiful mountains around. However, the village is experiencing some significant diseconomies because of the prevailing tourism model, which is a mass tourism model. No one has the control over the tourist arrivals in the area. Moreover, the villagers are not getting any benefit in turn. Thus, these resources are not capitalised appropriately. Meanwhile, travel to mountain ecosystems is increasing at a rapid pace in the world, as growing numbers of tourists are attracted to the clean air, unique landscapes and wildlife, scenic beauty, and recreational opportunities that mountain destinations offer. Mountains, which has the potential in making these areas unique, contain a wide

variety of habitats, many of which have extremely high levels of unique and rich biodiversity. Therefore, rigorous planning and implementation of tours and tourist activities is needed as they can have a serious impact on these often-fragile ecosystems, as well as on the communities that inhabit.

Clean water contributes to the recreation and tourism industry worldwide by accentuating beautiful beaches, white-water rivers, mountain lakes, and aquatic ecosystems such as coral reefs. Water has a powerful attraction for people. When people decide to plan vacations and travel for recreation, instruction, and pleasure, many have a strong tendency to head to the water. Worldwide, tourism annually generates trillions dollars, a significant percentage of which involves water-related tourism. All three cases considered with this study possess streams with clean and clear water. Especially, Ihalagalagama village is surrounded by two popular streams, namely, Belihuloya and Hirikatuoya. The beautiful waterfall, Pahanthudawa is also nearby. Bathalegoda lake, one of the eccentric aquatic ecosystems in Sri Lanka, is close to Ridigama. However, none of these resources has been used as natural capital in empowering these villagers yet.

Popular water related tourism activities that can be considered within these areas may involve cruise ships, ecotourism, sport fishing, underwater diving, and canoeing and kayaking, to name a few. The prevailing Biodiversity, Unsoiled Ecosystem, and Fauna and Flora are some of the other natural capital seen in these areas, which can be carefully used in this countryside capitalization process. Biodiversity describes the variety of life and is the living component of natural capital stocks. It plays an important role in the provision of the services we receive from nature. Once considered a separate issue to climate change, biodiversity loss is now regarded, as an equally urgent crisis and its connection to climate adaptation and mitigation are increasingly understood. Biodiversity builds resilience against climate change, supports communities and livelihoods, and fundamentally underpins human wellbeing

and the global economy. Businesses are beginning to recognize this and are looking for ways to understand the value of their impacts and dependencies on biodiversity. Viewing natural resources like biodiversity, unsoiled ecosystem, and fauna and flora through a natural capital lens can help businesses to recognise previously unseen values that underpin their resilience and success, providing a clear business case for protection of and investment in the health of natural resources. A capital's lens also enables an integrated approach to environmental issues management that recognizes the links and synergies between issues such as climate, water, sustainable development, equity and biodiversity. Therefore, proper guidance and trainings are needed when incorporating these natural resources into the capitalization process.

Socio-cultural capital are inevitable elements in the development process of any community-based tourism project that concentrates on the empowerment of rural people. These selected cases depict a significant potential for countryside capitalization even through their rich socio-cultural capital. The history of these villages roots back to the ancient Kings era depicting a very rich socio-cultural capital. Ancient sites are considered to be archaeological gold mines because they are evidence to a very rich civilization. The history of Ridigama dates back to the era of king Dutugamunu and the kingdom of Anuradhapura. The stories behind the Ridi Viharaya confirms the proud history of the village. Mudaliwaththa has a close relation to the kingdom of Kandy. The ancient monuments like "Balumgala", which is a place used to detect enemies from a long distance in the era of the king Kirti Sri Rajasingha. In addition to that, there is a historical Jack Tree, which is planted to symbolize the "Kadawara". Kadawara is the entrance to the Kingdom of Kandy. Meanwhile, the history of Ihalagalagama roots to the King Mayadunne's Sitawaka Kingdom. These ancient villages and their glorious still visible through their socio-cultural aspects that have the ability to make people gaze at them with reverence. Community Values, Anthropologic Resources, Aesthetic

Values, Traditional Livelihood and Agriculture, Dine and cuisine, Tangible and Intangible Heritage, Culture and Lifestyle, and Community amusements are the socio-cultural resources that this communities possess in great deal.

Therefore, a community-based tourism project would be ideal to these villages to empower them through countryside capitalization. However, communities that are involved in community-based tourism need to be strong, resilient and extremely willing to show tourists their culture. They should able to manage both the impacts and benefits of tourism, strengthening their self-governance, economic alternatives and traditional ways of life in the process. According to the discussions that the research team had with the local community, it is very vibrant that they want to invite tourists to their homes. Villagers are more than happy to share their culture and lifestyle, spend time teaching tourists how to cook local dishes, associate tourist guests in their agriculture and local sports. Nevertheless, they need to be trained in this regard to ensure the quality of tourism.

CONCLUSION

This study adopted a social constructivism approach to assess the potential of countryside capitalization of natural and socio-cultural capital to empower the rural villages as a poverty alleviation model. Three rural villages namely, Ridigama, Mudaliwaththe, and Ihalagalagama were considered as the cases of the study. All the cases are full of natural and socio-cultural resources, which have not yet been employed efficiently to generate an income to the respective communities. For instance, Ridigama holds a religious monument, Ridi Viharaya, with so many natural caves used by Arahaths in ancient Sri Lanka. The temple is visited by Buddhist, Hindu and Christian tourists occasionally, because of its religious value. However, if blended the natural and socio-cultural resources available in the village effectively, the potential for a spiritual tourism project is very high and in turn, it will boost the economy of

the village. Similarly, the Ihalagalagama village is surrounded by natural resources like, mountains, streams, and waterfalls. Even though, local and foreign tourists happen to visit some of the famous tourist destinations passing the village, no any benefit spills to the village with the absence of a proper business model. Therefore, the natural and socio-cultural resources available in the case area have the potential in specifying a recreational tourism model in order to empower the villagers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mudaliwaththa village also possesses a diverse portfolio of resources that can be effectively used in empowering the villagers. Prevailing Home Stay tourism model can be further developed embedding some sight seen and recreational activities. Moreover, it's rich culture, which is characterized by ancient traditions, music, arts, sports, and religion have the potential in making model more successful.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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