

Nexus of Public Satisfaction and Administrative Decentralization: The Case of Siyambalanduwa Divisional Secretariat in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study aims to test service recipient satisfaction with the quality of services provided by the Siyambalanduwa Divisional Secretariat (DS) using the SERVQUAL instrument. Primary data were obtained through a questionnaire survey covering the Siyambalanduwa DS as the sample and sample was selected using the Yamane method. One hundred heads of households were selected as the sample from this DS, using a stratified sampling method. Government statistical reports, research reports, and internet sources were included as secondary data sources. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. The research findings revealed that issuing licenses, providing social welfare assistance, and offering land-related services were the most common services delivered locally by the DS. As for the service delivery efficiency, the majority claimed that they could receive the expected service in a friendly environment, but that it consumed far more time than expected. The residents showed a favorable attitude towards the responsiveness, empathy, and reliability of the DS but were dissatisfied with the tangibility and assurance. At normal times, the people's satisfaction with the provision of DS services was generally neutral. However, the impacts of COVID-19 affected diagnosed individuals both economically and emotionally. Particularly, the lockdowns enforced during the pandemic resulted in farmers and small producers facing difficulties in marketing their products. In this situation, the people were highly appreciative of the services provided by the DS, especially the services it rendered through the Grama Niladharis (village officers), Public Health Inspectors (PHI), and Samurdhi development officers.

Keywords: decentralization, COVID-19 pandemic, Divisional Secretariat, service satisfaction, service quality.

1. Introduction

In Sri Lanka, various mechanisms were introduced in the 1970s and 1980s to implement administrative decentralization. The Divisional Secretariat (DS) system was introduced in 1992 with the objective of delegating administrative authority to local offices in the outlying regions of Sri Lanka. The 333 DSs (see Table 1) are the main public service organizations governed by the central government. The Divisional Secretariats (DSs) provide many services such as recording civil registrations, issuing various licenses (permits), paying pensions, managing the Samurdhi programme (The Samurdhi/Prosperity initiative, introduced in 1995 to alleviate poverty through public participation-based development), conducting social welfare services, managing disasters, and running social welfare programmes. DSs are expected to facilitate quicker and more effective delivery of these services.

Table 1

Divisional Secretariat Divisions in Sri Lanka

No.	Province	District	Divisional Secretariat Divisions
1	Central	Kandy	20
		Matale	11
		Nuwara-Eliya	05
2	Eastern	Ampara	20
		Batticaloa	14
		Trincomalee	12
3	North Central	Anuradhapura	22
		Polonnaruwa	07
4	Northern	Jaffna	15
		Kilinochchi	04
		Mannar	05
		Mullaitivu	06
		Vavuniya	04
5	North Western	Kurunegala	30

		Puttalam	16
6	Sabaragamuwa	Kegalle	11
		Rathnapura	18
7	Southern	Galle	19
		Hambantota	12
		Matara	16
8	Uva	Badulla	15
		Monaragala	11
9	Western	Colombo	13
		Gampaha	13
		Kalutara	14
Total			333

Source: *State Ministry of Internal Security, Home Affairs and Disaster Management, 2021*

All DSs are connected to the relevant district secretariat, the Provincial Council, and the Central Government. Therefore, the DS can be called the most important administrative unit in Sri Lanka, as it acts as the bridge between the central government and the grassroots communities.

Historically, Sri Lanka has extensive experience in working with several types of administrative decentralization schemes. Divisional Development Councils -DDC (1971), District Political Authority System-DPAS (1973), Decentralized Capital Budget -DCB (1974), District Minister System- DMS (1978), District Development Councils -DDC (1981), and Provincial Councils (PCs) (1988) are notable administrative decentralization efforts (Alwis, 2019). However, the DS system can be identified as the most effective mechanism hitherto established to provide essential administrative services at the local level in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the DS of a Division is a body that is comprised of several institutions at the local level in the administrative hierarchy, which provide more than 90 percent of government-related services to the country's general public (Nilwala, Gunawardana, & Fernando, 2017). Initially, the DSs were placed under the supervision of the PCs but later they reverted to supervision of the central

government for various reasons (Cooray, 2013). The DS is the body that represents the central government for administrative purposes at the local level. Therefore, the DSs have the potential to enhance the efficiency of service delivery, stimulate economic growth, eradicate rural poverty, strengthen civil society, bolster democracy, reduce the heavy fiscal burden on the central government, and expedite matters as it can directly address various local problems without having to refer them to the central government (Cooray, 2020).

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sri Lankan government was using a decentralized approach to provide services to the people. During this pandemic, most countries worldwide, including Sri Lanka, faced many challenges in providing essential services to the public. The Sri Lanka Disaster Management Act No. 5 of 2013 allows for appropriate action to be taken in the event of an emergency. Accordingly, DSs have the authority to take necessary administrative decisions when a catastrophic situation arises, and they must do this with the involvement of the Grama Niladharis. Under the provisions of this mechanism, an allowance of LKR 5000 (US\$ 14) was given to population groups at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. The DS can also play a key role in making the necessary recommendations for imposing a curfew. In addition, it is expected to provide food to the people at the village level when required, pay the pensions to retirees, and maintain social order (Amaratunga et al., 2020). Hence, it is worth studying the functioning of the DS system as a government institution providing services at the local level.

The scope of DSs is not limited to administrative activities, as they also have the responsibility to implement sustainable development activities in the region. Further, they provide a wide range of services from birth to death for the citizens of the area. Accordingly, the main duties and responsibilities of the DSs can be categorized under five sections as: 1) Administrative activities, 2) Development activities, 3) Land management activities, 4) Social security activities, and 5) Poverty alleviation activities (Silva, 2016). Furthermore, the DSs are responsible for meeting the regional needs that

are likely to arise in case of any emergency in the country. The central government would provide the necessary guidelines, but it is the responsibility of the DS to consider the regional needs and fulfill them as necessary.

2. Literature Review

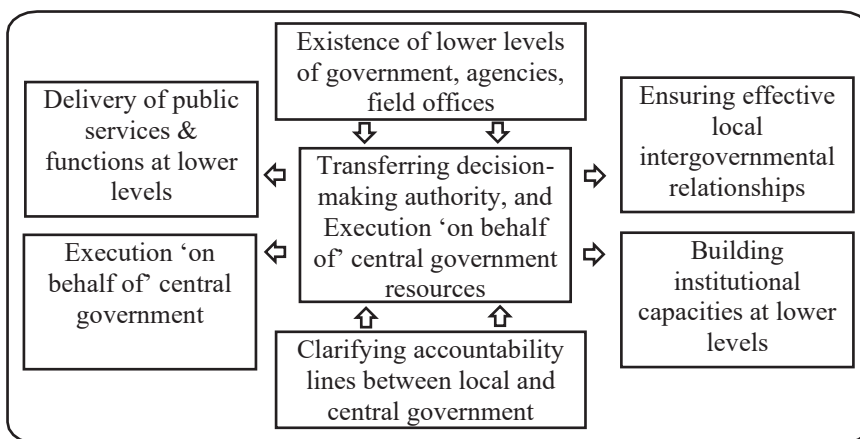
The literature review was organized mainly based on the themes of the concept of decentralization and customer satisfaction with service quality. An explanation of the theoretical and practical situation has been given.

2.1 Concept of Decentralization

Over the past few decades, decentralization has received worldwide attention and has become a rather hallowed concept today. Decentralization is acknowledged as a governance tool that can facilitate more effective service delivery by the government. One of the main arguments in favor of the concept of decentralization is that public services can be improved through this strategy to better meet the local needs (Saavedra, 2009). In both theoretical and practical applications, decentralization is characterized by a multidimensional nature. Therefore, there are different views on decentralization around the world (Chaminda, 2014). Decentralization is mainly identified as a governance tool that can ensure better service delivery by the government. Rondinelli (1981) has offered a very clear definition of decentralization as follows: “Decentralization is the transfer or delegation of legal and political authority to plan, make decisions and manage public functions from the central government and its agencies to field organizations of those agencies, subordinate units of government, semi-autonomous public corporations, area-wide or regional development authorities, functional authorities, autonomous local governments, or non-governmental organizations.” Also, this definition clearly explains the center-periphery relations in the state. However, the concept of decentralization is classified by many scholars and organizations in terms of (i) Political, (ii) Administrative, (iii) Fiscal, and (iv) Economic decentralization (Hussein, 2005).

Figure 1

Administrative Decentralization



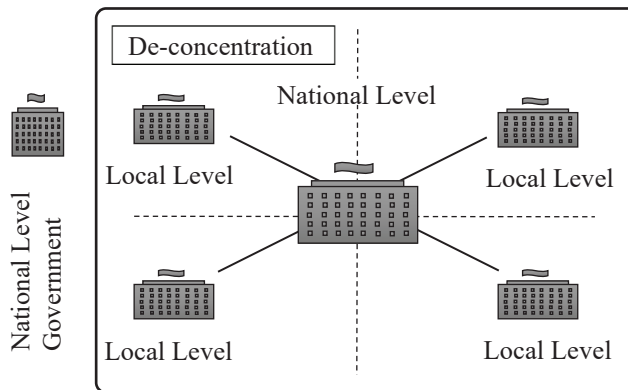
Source: *European Commission, 2017:16*

As shown in Figure 1, administrative decentralization means the transfer of decision-making authority, resources, and responsibilities from the central government to other (non-elected) government agencies, or central government field offices or line agencies, to provide a wide range of selected public services and functions (European Commission, 2017). According to Rondinelli (1999), “Administrative decentralization is redistributing authority, responsibility, and financial resources for providing public services among different levels of the government”. There are three types of administrative decentralization: de-concentration, delegation, and diversion. These three types of decentralization manifest characteristics that are different from each other (European Commission, 2017). Most of the administrative authoritative powers of the central government of Sri Lanka have been delegated to the DSs and this falls under the concept of de-concentration. According to Rondinelli (1999), de-concentration means the redistribution of the decision-making power of the central government. Further, financial and management responsibilities are distributed among the different levels of central government, and this system is mostly used in the unitary states of the world. Therefore, local administrative institutions can take administrative decisions under the

guidance of the central government. It also means that the central government can use the “De-concentration method” to carry out its administrative responsibilities at the nearest regional level (Mudalige, 2019). Figure 2 shows the nature of the de-concentration. That is, it shows how the powers related to the functions of the central government are delegated to the local level administrative institutions.

Figure 2

Nature of De-concentration



Source: *Karmel, 2017:7*

2.2 Customer Satisfaction with Service Quality

The need to ensure customer satisfaction is truly essential in the modern consumer society. Therefore, this concept has drawn much attention from many academics and professionals. Particularly, private companies and organizations seek to increase their profits by providing high-quality service to customers. At the same time, government institutions try to provide a more efficient service to the public. Finally, the strength of the consumers’ relationship with these institutions depends on the level of customer satisfaction. Therefore, customer satisfaction is the best strategy to attract and retain the customer, while increasing the profit and reputation of the service provider. Churchill & Surprenant (1982) came up with an important definition of customer satisfaction. According to them, “Customer satisfaction is an outcome of purchase and use resulting from the buyers’

comparison of the rewards and costs of the purchase in relation to the anticipated consequences” (as cited in Tam, 2004). However, since customer satisfaction is accepted as a hallowed principle by all public or private organizations that provide various services, it is also a vital indicator of the performance of the relevant institutions.

In general, the issue of how to meet the service recipient’s expectations has become an important topic of study at the top level of organizations. Although there is consensus among the service providers about the need to achieve high service quality as demanded by the service recipient, it is important to consider how this goal is attained. In practice, the service recipient’s level of satisfaction can be better, neutral, or worse (Akinboade, Kinfack, & Mokwena, 2012). In Sri Lanka, the DS system is a type of institutional arrangement established at the divisional level, which falls under the category of public sector institutions. As such, many scholars and researchers have attempted to measure the customer satisfaction associated with the provision of services by public sector institutions by using various tools. The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) can be identified as the most suitable one for measuring service satisfaction (Table 1). Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1991) stressed the importance of using the SERVQUAL model. First, they emphasized that the SERVQUAL model is the “skeleton” that determines the quality of service and therefore, it should be used as much as possible. Second, the SERVQUAL format has shown that specific items can be used in their own context. However, it has been clarified that the item must be identical to the existing SERVQUAL format items. Finally, the use of the SERVQUAL model can be effectively linked to additional qualitative or quantitative research, and the underlying causes or gaps in additional problems can be identified by a SERVQUAL study.

Nilwala, Gunawardana and Fernando (2017) examined the satisfaction level of the service recipients who sought various services from the DSs in the Colombo District of Sri Lanka. The researchers found that there was a positive relationship between the quality of service provided by the DSs and

the satisfaction level of the recipients. However, the findings of this study showed that the service quality of the DSs in the Colombo District did not reach a sufficiently high level to ensure recipients' satisfaction. The researchers used the SERVQUAL method to test recipients' satisfaction. They used all five components of the SERVQUAL method to measure service quality. Before this, Tennakoon & Kodithuwakku (2009) had investigated the quality of service provided by the six DSs in the Central Province and the willingness of the customers to pay for the improved service. They obtained the data for this research through a questionnaire survey using the case study approach. Again, the SERVQUAL method was used by the researcher to measure the quality-of-service delivery by DSs to the customers. According to the findings of the research, the service delivery of the selected DSs was not satisfactory. Furthermore, it was found that customers faced difficulties in respect of all SERVQUAL attributes (i.e., responsiveness, assurance, empathy, reliability, and tangibles) except for the “people” associated areas with high satisfaction gaps. Wijesekera & Fernando (2017) utilized the SERVQUAL form to assess the service quality of five DSs in the Gampaha District of Sri Lanka. While doing this study, the researchers developed a new scale based on the SERVQUAL model to measure the service quality of DSs. Accordingly, responsiveness, communication, tangibles, empathy, and assurance were identified as fundamental attributes, with responsiveness being the least important and empathy being the most important dimension.

In a study conducted by Jabbar (2015) in association with the Nintavur DS in Sri Lanka, he revealed that the DS was facing several problems in providing services. Some of them were, unavailability of managers to provide services, with only administrators being present, the politicization of public services, dissatisfaction with service delivery, frustration with the evaluation system, corrupt and useless staff, bureaucratic office procedures, lack of knowledge of new public management strategies, lack of trained officers, increased gap between the service provider and service recipients, inadequate knowledge of service recipients, and a lack of flexible working procedures. Silva (2016) discussed the use of innovative solutions to enable

the DS to provide better service to maximize customer satisfaction. The findings of this study show that innovative and creative leadership of organizations, optimal use of human resources, and the use of modern and advanced technology can lead to better public service delivery. Furthermore, lack of awareness about efficient service delivery, local political influence, scarcity of vital resources, and lack of coordination between institutions and stakeholders were identified as problems traditionally associated with the process of distributing public services at the local level in this country.

Table 2

SERVQUAL Dimensions and Service Quality

No.	Dimension	Definition of the Sub Dimension
1	Tangibles	Appearance of physical features, representations of the service, equipment, and communication materials.
2	Reliability	Consistency of performance, timely delivery of promised service, accurate record keeping and reliability of service.
3	Responsiveness	Willingness of employees to provide prompt and timely service to customers.
4	Assurance	The employees' knowledge and competence, and ability to engender confidence and trust.
5	Empathy	The service organization's caring attitude towards its customers and focus on the individual customer.

Source: *Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1988; & Yarimoglu, 2014*

Thus, theoretical guidelines and practical applications confirm that the use of the SERVQUAL model to measure service satisfaction is justified. The services of the DS, an administrative body established at the local level as a government institution, are essential to the people. Therefore, the government expects the service delivery to be efficient and orderly in the divisional secretariat system of Sri Lanka.

3. Problems and Objectives

The DSs are the leading government administrative institutions providing public services at the divisional level in Sri Lanka. These institutions are responsible for delivering most of the administrative services related to the daily life of the public. Every citizen of Sri Lanka is entitled to the services of the DSs. People depend on the support and assistance of the DSs in the event of an emergency and expect them to provide a multitude of services to fulfill their needs.

In the face of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, DSs were able to provide and coordinate local administrative services at the local level when the island-wide curfew in Sri Lanka brought human activities to a halt. Accordingly, these bodies managed to work closely with other institutions and parties like police stations, government health officials, the business community, financial institutions, and local political leaders. However, various issues and challenges also arise when providing public services to the people through the DSs at the local level. Therefore, periodic investigation of these administrative organizations is in the best interests of both the service providers and the recipients.

It is important to assess the efficiency of the services provided and the level of satisfaction with the services provided through the DSs in Sri Lanka before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the study poses three basic research questions. They are:

- How did the provision of government services through the DSs impact the satisfaction of service recipients before the COVID-19 pandemic?
- To what extent has each service quality dimension impacted service recipient satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research was conducted to achieve the following objectives.

- To evaluate the service efficiency and service recipient satisfaction with services provided through the DS before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To identify the extent to which each service quality dimension affects service recipient satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Limitation of the Study

The study is limited in three main ways as this research is geographically limited to a single DS, which limits the ability to generalize the findings to other areas with different socio-economic, administrative, or demographic characteristics. While Siyambalanduwa provides valuable insights, its institutional culture and development context are not fully representative of the broader administrative environment. Secondly, the study relies heavily on self-reported data collected through questionnaires. Such data may be influenced by respondents' personal biases, perceptions, or reluctance to openly criticize government institutions. This may affect the accuracy and objectivity of the responses. Additionally, seasonal and contextual factors such as ongoing development projects, political pressures, or temporary service delays may have shaped respondents' satisfaction levels during data collection. Thirdly, the study focuses mainly on administrative decentralization. Other dimensions of decentralization, such as fiscal or political decentralization, were not examined in depth, which limited the scope of the analysis.

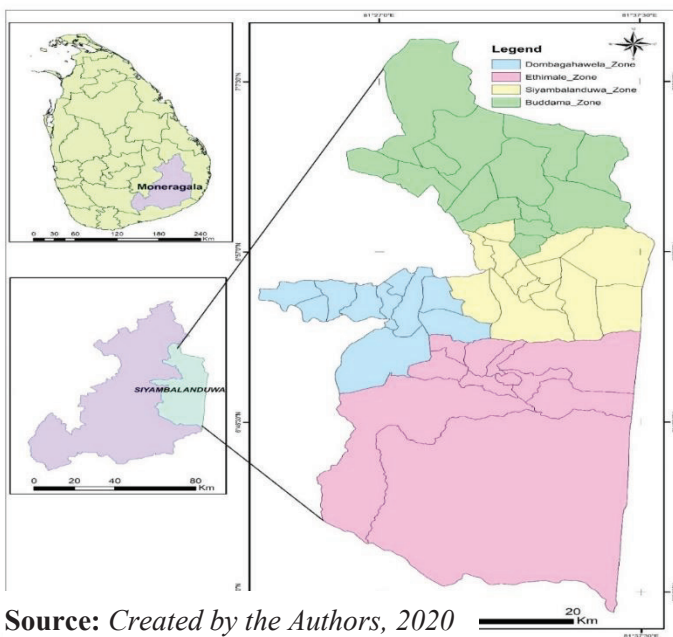
5. Materials and Methods

Siyambalanduwa DS was selected for this study. The Siyambalanduwa DS, established in 1992, is located in the Monaragala District (Divisional Secretariat - Siyambalanduwa, 2019). The total population of this division is 64,174, and the population density is 59 persons per km². Three reasons for selecting this DS for the study include: (1) According to the poverty

headcount index, Monaragala District is one of the poorest districts in Sri Lanka, (2) It is the largest DS division in the Monaragala District, with a land area of 105,500 hectares and comprising 48 Grama Niladhari divisions, (3) It is the poorest DS (08) in Monaragala District according to the poverty headcount index (Department of Census and Statistics, 2019). About 88% of the people are engaged in the agricultural sector (DS - Siyambalanduwa, 2019).

Map 1

Siyambalanduwa Divisional Secretariat Division



Source: Created by the Authors, 2020

Primary and secondary data were used to arrive at the findings of this research. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire survey covering the Siyambalanduwa DS. Accordingly, the household heads of the number of family units receiving services from the DSs have been considered as the research population in this study. The Yamane formula ($n = N / 1 + N(e)^2$) was applied to select the sample in this study as the population size was known. Once the population size (N) was established, the Yamane (1967) formula was applied to determine the appropriate

sample size. This formula is widely used in social science research to calculate a representative sample when the total population is known and a specific margin of error is acceptable. Where n = required sample size, N = total population, and e = acceptable margin of error. One hundred households were selected as samples with 90% confidence level from 18,578 families, using a stratified sampling method in the Siyambalanduwa DS, which is comprised of four main administrative areas, namely Buddhama (25 heads of households), Athimale (25 heads of households), Siyambalanduwa (27 heads of households) and Dombagahawela (23 heads of households) (See Map 1). Secondary data sources such as government statistical reports, research reports, and Internet sources were also used. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. In conducting the survey for this research, respondents were asked to respond on a three-point Likert scale (1 = disagree, 2 = neutral, 3 = agree). SPSS was used as a statistical tool to provide data input and analysis. The SERVQUAL instrument was used to identify the satisfaction of service recipients. Accordingly, the primary data were used to test the hypothesis using chi-square and the correlation between service satisfaction and its related factors.

6. Results and Discussion

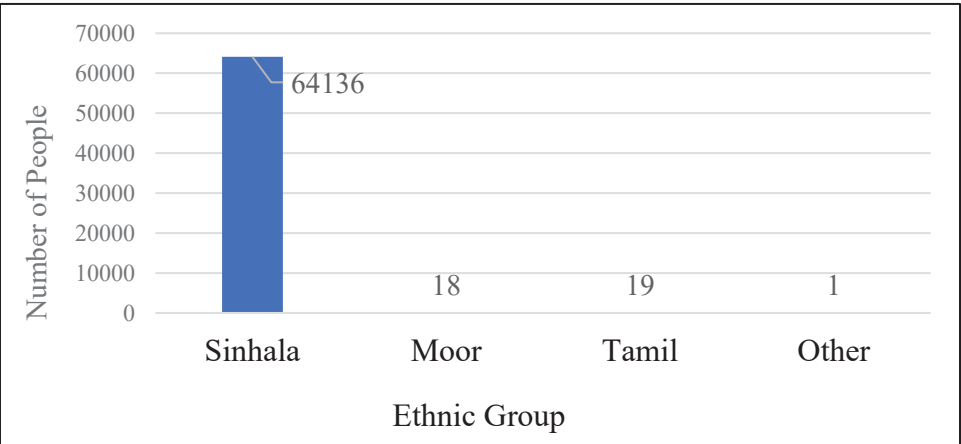
The results of this research and the related discussion are offered under several sections. That is, the demographic profile of the respondents, the level of satisfaction with the services provided and finally, the conclusions and recommendations.

6.1 Demographic Profiles of the Respondents

In assessing the public's satisfaction with the service provided by the Siyambalanduwa DS, it is important to understand the demographic profile of the respondents. In particular, the perceptions of the respondents must be interpreted correctly to understand the findings of the study. According to the "Resource Profile" (*Sampath Pathikada*) report, most of the people

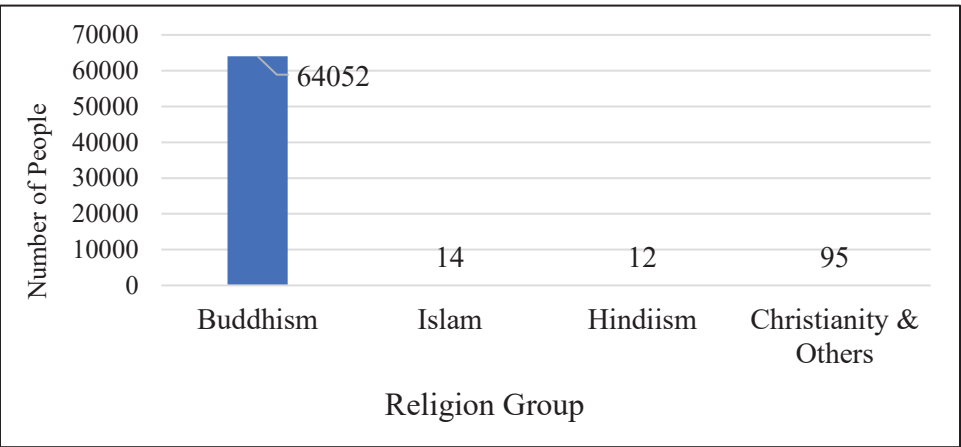
living in the Siyambalanduwa DS division are Sinhalese Buddhists (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3
Population by Ethnicity



Source: Divisional Secretariat - Siyambalanduwa, 2019

Figure 4
Population by Religion



Source: Divisional Secretariat - Siyambalanduwa, 2019

Table 3 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents of the field survey. The results show that 46 percent were females and 54 percent were males. Further, 84 percent of the respondents in this survey were between the ages of 18 and 56. The level of education of the respondents was deemed good, with 29 percent having passed the GCE ordinary level and 35 percent having passed the GCE advanced level. The occupation of the respondents was as high as 24 percent in the government sector and 39 percent in the agricultural sector. The self-employed persons accounted for 23 percent of the total respondents in the field survey. 46 percent of the respondents reported a monthly income between LKR 5000 and LKR 15,000, while 19 percent of the respondents reported an income level between LKR 15,000 and LKR 25,000; another 21 percent of respondents reported an income between LKR 25,000 and LKR 50,000.

Table 3*Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

No.	Attributes of Respondents	Category	Valid Percentage
1	Gender	Male	54%
		Female	46%
2	Age	18 to 56 years	84%
		More than 56	16%
3	Level of education	None	3%
		Primary	22%
		O/L	29%
		A/L	35%
		Diploma	2%
		Degree	6%
		PG Diploma	3%
4	Type of occupation	Government	24%
		Private	8%
		Semi-government	3%
		Agriculture	39%
		Self-employment	23%

		Other	3%
5	Income (per month): LKR	Less than 5000	9%
		5000-15000	46%
		15000-25000	19%
		25000-50000	21%
		More than 50000	5%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

6.2 Level of Satisfaction with the Services Provided

This study investigates a government institution that provides several important public services to the people, such as issuing licenses, land administration, subsidy coordination, registration affairs, pension-related services, cultural and welfare services, and delivering urgent central government services at the local level. The data that were collected based on the three main objectives mentioned above were analyzed and the results are discussed below.

The satisfaction with the services provided by Siyambalanduwa DS is from the point of view of the service recipients. According to Table 4, most of the respondents who visited the Siyambalanduwa DS came there to obtain licenses or permits (21.5%), social welfare assistance (19.7%), and services related to land affairs (17.1%).

Table 4

Delivery of Different Types of Services (Multiple responses)

Components		Responses	
		Count	Column responses %
	Rural level Infrastructure Development	24	6.3%
	Delivery of social welfare assistance	75	19.7%
	Delivery of agriculture related services	14	3.7%
	Supporting the construction of houses	55	14.4%

Issuing licenses and permits	82	21.5%
Carrying out child development activities	35	9.2%
Supporting small scale business development	30	7.9%
Delivery of services related to land affairs	65	17.1%
Other services	1	0.3%
Total responses	380	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

Table 5

Services obtained by the Divisional Secretariat

Components	Responses	
	Count	Column responses %
Delivery of fast service (time is saved)	12	6.1%
Services are provided free of charge (no need to pay)	82	41.8%
Properly protects the privacy of service recipients	20	10.2%
Friendly environment for service recipients	62	31.6%
Good interpersonal relationship between service providers & recipients	20	10.2%
Total responses	196	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

According to the multiple-response Table 5, the highest percentage of services provided by the DS in Siyambalanduwa is 41.8 % free service (no need to pay), and 31.6 % are a friendly environment for service recipients.

Table 6 shows the customer response in respect of their satisfaction with the services provided by the DS. In most cases, majority of the respondents seemed to be neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the service quality of the Siyambalanduwa DS. Of the dimensions, Responsiveness, Empathy and

Reliability contributed to a more favorable attitude towards service quality. The respondents expressed low satisfaction with the Tangibility and Assurance dimensions. For details, see Table 7.

Table 6

Distribution of the 03 Levels of Customer Satisfaction

Dimensions	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Mean Score
Reliability	22%	59%	19%	3.03
Tangibility	44%	43%	13%	3.31
Assurance	38%	47%	15%	3.23
Responsiveness	14%	71%	15%	3.00
Empathy	14%	74%	1%	3.02

Source: Field Survey, 2020

Table 7

Distribution of Customer Satisfaction with Details

Dimension		Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied
Reliability	Satisfaction with the commitment of the officers to meet your needs	11%	62%	27%
	Satisfaction of getting the kind of service that suits your needs	19%	57%	24%
Tangibles	Satisfaction with the service process of the office	18%	63%	19%
	Satisfaction with the instructions displayed to guide you to meet your needs	36%	32%	32%
Assurance	Satisfaction with the advice given by the officers to fulfill your needs	27%	49%	24%
	Satisfaction that the officers will act responsibly according to your needs	27%	51%	22%

Responsiveness	Satisfaction with the delivery of services by the office	11%	62%	27%
	Satisfaction at being able to obtain services without the assistance of an outsider	9%	70%	21%
Empathy	Satisfaction with the officers' concern about performing the service	28%	58%	14%
	Satisfaction about having a nearby office to access the services conveniently	6%	41%	53%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

In Sri Lanka, the first reported case of COVID-19 infection was confirmed on 27th January 2020 (Amaratunga et al., 2020: 2). Since then, the government and the people have had to make several sacrifices to control the spread of the pandemic. Soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka, the central government assigned the task of providing public services at the local level to the DSs. Respondents were asked to provide information about the types of services they obtained from the Siyambalanduwa DS during the lockdown period from March 2020 to July 2020. As shown in Table 8, 33.2% had contacted the DS division to obtain the LKR 5000 (US\$ 27) subsidy allowance. Also, 26.7% reported receiving regular updates about the spread and prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 25.3% reported the distribution of essential goods for the people of the area as the major services rendered by the DS during the lockdown period.

Table 8*Services Provided by Divisional Secretariats during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Components		Responses	
		Count	Column responses %
	Assist in obtaining medicines and participation in other clinical activities	16	7.4%
	Providing food bags and aid	16	7.4%
	Distributing allowance of LKR 5000 (Approximately US\$ 27)	72	33.2%
	Facilitate the purchase of goods	55	25.3%
	Monitoring and preventing the spread of the COVID-19 disease	58	26.7%
Total responses		217	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the DS and its officials, along with the local level security and health officials, bore a great responsibility in dealing with the emergency. Table 9 shows the services provided by various government officials and members of local authorities to the people in the Siyambalanduwa DS division during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results revealed that the respondents were assisted by the Grama Niladhari, i.e., Village Officer (23.7%), Public Health Inspectors (20.1%), Police officers (14.7%) and Agricultural Research Officers (14.7%) in descending order as per their inputs. All officers other than the police officers and members of the local political authorities directly represent the DSs. This showed that the DSs had provided a commendable service to the people during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period.

Table 9*Government Officers who Assisted the People during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Officers		Responses	
		Count	Column responses %
	Grama Niladhari (Village Officer)	79	23.7%
	Development Officer	20	6.0%
	Samurdhi Development Officer	42	12.6%
	Agricultural Research Officer	49	14.7%
	Public Health Inspector (PHI)	67	20.1%
	Divisional Secretary	15	4.5%
	Police Officers	49	14.7%
	Members of Local Authorities	12	3.6%
	Others	1	0.3%
Total responses		334	100.0%

Source: *Field Survey, 2020*

7. Conclusion

This paper attempted to assess the service recipients' level of satisfaction with the provision of services by the DSs, their local-level economic development efforts, and their performance in meeting the challenges and problems faced by service recipients during the pandemic in Sri Lanka. Issuing licenses, social welfare assistance, and land-related services were identified as the most common locally delivered services by the Siyambalanduwa DS. As for the service delivery efficiency, the majority claimed they could obtain the desired service under a friendly environment but that it consumed rather more time than expected. In general, without considering the pandemic situation, it appeared that satisfaction with the services provided by the DS was neutral, that is, just acceptable. The public seemed to appreciate the institution's responsiveness, empathy, and reliability, but showed dissatisfaction with the tangibility and assurance. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has badly affected the citizens both

economically and psychologically. Because of the lockdown imposed in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers and the self-employed were unable to produce and market their products. During this difficult period the services delivered by the DS proved to be a valuable lifeline and hence the people were highly satisfied with the role played by this institution. Specifically, the services of the Grama Niladhari, Public Health Inspector, and Samurdhi Officer were highly appreciated by the people. The distribution of allowances, and the monitoring and prevention of the pandemic situation were the most crucial services provided by the DS during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

8. Recommendations

As a government institution, the DS is obliged to provide its services effectively and efficiently to satisfy the citizens living within its area of authority. By establishing the DS as the chief coordinating body of the region, it becomes practical to enhance the service delivery efficiency, stimulate economic growth, alleviate rural poverty, reduce the financial burden of the Center, and address various types of local issues. In addition, modern technology can be used to facilitate the provision of a better service and in a friendly environment as well. Time management methods should also be introduced to avoid delays in the delivery of public services by the DSs. Further, it is essential to implement training programmes to improve the skills of officers who work with the service recipients. Also, the DS should be receptive to public opinion and suggestions as that would go a long way to improve the delivery of public services and minimize administrative errors. Strengthening administrative decentralization through a combination of structural, procedural, and participatory reforms is essential to improve public satisfaction. Increasing resource autonomy and streamlining decision-making powers at the local level should enable the delivery of faster, context-specific services that are more responsive to local needs. Capacity-building initiatives for officials on digital governance, customer-oriented service delivery, and performance management should be prioritized to improve institutional efficiency. Expanding community

participation through citizen feedback mechanisms, public consultations, and transparent grievance handling systems should be initiated to enhance public trust. Improving digital infrastructure and integrating e-government platforms can further reduce delays and improve accessibility.

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