

HARNESSING SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES OF SHANTY DWELLERS FOR INCLUSIVE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA: EVIDENCE FROM WATTALA

Oshadhi Herath¹, Moksha Wijesinghe² and Rusin Thathsara³

ABSTRACT

The fast urbanization in Sri Lanka has aggravated social-spatial disparities, and especially among the shanty population, who continue to be disadvantaged in the formal urban planning process despite their socio-cultural input to the urban life. The paper explores how the socio-cultural life of shanty residents in Wattala can be utilized to harness inclusivity in urbanization and help in achieving sustainable development goal 11 (SDG 11): Sustainable Cities and Communities. A mixed research design was chosen, involving quantitative survey data from 150 respondents and qualitative data to be collected through focus groups and interviews with key informants, policy makers, urban planners, and community representatives. Participation and exclusion patterns, as well as community resilience, were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis and thematic interpretation. The results show that social cohesiveness is high in informal settlements, with 69 percent of the residents ready to engage in community-based sustainability projects. The paper also singles out fundamental infrastructural issues, such as a lack of clean water, sanitation, and electricity, that are closely linked to informational and institutional obstacles. Informal settlements have high levels of mutual support, adaptive coping, and collective agency despite these limitations, which can be utilized in participatory urban governance. The paper proposes that, to attain inclusive urban sustainability, infrastructural investment alone is insufficient; there should also be awareness-raising, educational empowerment, and behaviour change among policymakers and communities.

Keywords: Behavioural Change; Inclusive Urban Development; Informal Settlements; Socio-Cultural Practices; Sustainable Development Goals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The urban structure of Sri Lanka is characterized by rapid development, but socio-economic disparities persist in the spatial structure. The inclusion of Shanty dwellers, who are usually sidelined in planning initiatives, helps cities become socio-culturally rich. Their informal settlements are, however, often seen as a barrier to modernization instead of communities with adaptive knowledge and resilience (Urban Development Authority, 2010). Thus, this study fits within the context of awareness, education, and behaviour

¹ Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, oshadhi@kln.ac.lk

² Chartered Civil Engineer, Advanced Steel Structure (Pvt) Ltd, Sri Lanka, mokshaw@gmail.com

³ Undergraduate, Department of Building Economics, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, rusinthathsaraofficial@gmail.com

change, as it endeavours to determine how the socio-cultural practices of shanty dwellers can be leveraged to create a sustainable built environment. The study aims to pursue Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable”, and to achieve inclusive urban development in Sri Lanka through the incorporation of disadvantaged communities into participatory planning (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023).

The current issue of urban inequality in Sri Lanka can be greatly associated with the historical marginalization of informal settlements. The residents of Colombo live in shanties, slums or in the poor housing schemes and occupy almost nine percent of the total land area of the city (Urban Development Authority, 2010). These communities are not part of formal governance systems, even though they contribute greatly to urban economies by providing informal labour and enhancing cultural diversity. The lack of cohesive urban structures and evidence-based policy models that limit the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 11 is noted in the State of Sri Lankan Cities Report (2018) (UN-Habitat, 2018). The local literature has mostly focused on housing shortages, the lack of infrastructure, and service provision, while overlooking the socio-cultural aspects of resilience and adaptation. It was a theoretical gap in the urban studies of Sri Lanka because informal settlements are hardly considered as part of the sustainable urban futures. Most studies have focused empirically on underserved settlements in Colombo, but peripheral urban areas, including Wattala, have been understudied (Perera, 2016).

The Wattala area has been considered in this study because it can be framed by its unique socio-spatial and cultural significance within Sri Lanka’s urban landscape. Wattala, located adjacent to Colombo, represents one of the most densely populated clusters of underserved settlements, where informal housing patterns intersect with rapid urban expansion. Scholars such as D’Cruz et al. (2009) emphasize that peri-urban shanty communities often develop strong social networks and collective practices that act as informal governance systems, enabling resilience despite exclusion from formal planning. Similarly, Korala (2017) highlights how identity formation among Colombo’s shanty dwellers is deeply tied to cultural practices, which makes Wattala an ideal site to examine how socio-cultural behaviors can be harnessed for inclusive development. Moreover, the Urban Development Authority (2010) and SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre & Colombo Urban Lab (2023) note that relocation and regeneration programs disproportionately affect Wattala’s communities, disrupting kinship ties and economic survival strategies. This aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) argument that thematic analysis of lived experiences is crucial to uncovering hidden forms of resilience. Wattala thus provides a microcosm of the paradox facing Sri Lanka’s urbanization: while aiming for modernization, policies risk deepening inequality unless socio-cultural practices of marginalized groups are integrated into planning. By situating the research in Wattala, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive urban planning and SDG 11, offering evidence that community-based practices such as savings groups, informal leadership, and cultural rituals can serve as entry points for sustainable urban governance. This makes Wattala not only a representative case but also a critical site for theorizing how socio-cultural capital can bridge the divide between disadvantaged communities and formal planning processes.

Further, Wattala, situated on the periphery of Colombo’s metropolitan region, exemplifies the reproduction of urban exclusion beyond the capital’s core. Despite its proximity to the city, shanty dwellers in Wattala remain marginalized within the

mainstream planning system, where their socio-cultural contributions to the urban environment are overlooked. The persistence of stigmatization, coupled with inadequate educational opportunities and entrenched behavioural prejudices, sustains cycles of vulnerability and displacement. These communities are systematically neglected in regeneration programmes, reinforcing their precarious status as “outsiders” in the urban fabric. Such exclusion underscores the paradox of Sri Lanka’s urban transition: while national policy aspires to modernize and align with SDG 11, peripheral areas like Wattala reveal how socio-spatial divides are deepened when marginalized groups are denied recognition as legitimate urban actors. Addressing Wattala’s exclusion thus becomes critical for theorizing inclusive urban development that integrates socio-cultural resilience into sustainable planning.

Also, studies in the world recognizes the relevance of participatory planning in solving the inequalities in the urban world. Participatory methods emphasize the agency of the marginalized communities, which makes them co-producers of knowledge and creators of the city futures (Charmes & Keil, 2015; Mitlin, 2008). South Asia informal settlements are being comprehended as not just places of deprivation but innovative places, resilience places, and adaptive places (Roy, 2005). Yet theoretical gaps remain. Most world urban theories largely continue to define informality as an issue to be addressed and not as a store of adaptive knowledge. Participatory planning models tend to focus on institutional design without much theorization of lived cultures of marginalized people. On the same note, sustainability discourses are more likely to give prominence to infrastructure and governance but pay minimal attention to behavioural change rooted in socio-cultural practices (Satterthwaite, 2009).

Global studies also reveal gaps in empirical research. Most research works base their models on macro-level variables such as housing quality and access to services and fail to focus on micro-level ethnographic data on resilience and cultural adaptation (Patel et al., 2012). In comparison, urban studies are disproportionately represented in African and Latin American settings at the expense of South Asia, which is underrepresented in the discourse on informal settlements. Where empirically tested models of participation have been implemented, as in the case of favela upgrading programs in Brazil, there is limited evidence on how these lessons can be applied in other socio-political environments. Taken together, these gaps point to the importance of a study that would bridge global and local perspectives. Theoretical literature relating SDG 11 to shanty-dwelling culture is limited in Sri Lanka, and few empirical studies examine the agency of shanty dwellers or analyse behavioural transformation. The theory of participatory planning has under-theorized cultural practices in the world, and evidence is not evenly distributed or even geographically balanced. This paper fills these gaps by situating the shanty residents of Wattala within the world discourses on informality, resilience, and participatory town planning. It adds empirical richness through digital ethnography and mixed methods, producing micro-level evidence not captured by macro-level policy discourse. In addition, it realizes SDG 11 by placing a context on the sustainability goals in the local socio-cultural practices and provides action plans on inclusive urban governance in Sri Lanka.

To be more precise, the main aim of the current research is to explore how the socio-cultural behavior of shanty inhabitants in Wattala can be leveraged to stimulate the inclusive urbanization and help achieve Sri Lanka’s Sustainable Development Goal 11. To accomplish this goal, the study has three objectives. To start with, it aims to investigate

the perceptions of dwellers in shanties among policymakers, planners, and the general population at large, and to determine how awareness can reshape the attitudes of institutions and society towards underprivileged communities. Second, it will identify knowledge gaps and suggest educational interventions to enable shanty dwellers to actively engage in urban decision-making and planning processes. Third, the paper examines behavioural change methods at the policy and community levels, and ways in which changes in institutional operations and societal beliefs may promote inclusivity and reduce socio-spatial disparities. When combined, these goals offer a holistic approach to awareness, education, and behaviour change in promoting sustainable and equitable urban government. Further, this study intends to begin by fostering dialogue between shanty dwellers and policymakers to reshape perceptions. It will then design education programs to close knowledge gaps and empower active participation in urban planning. At the same time, behavioural change will be promoted through inclusive policy reforms and community initiatives. These combined strategies enhance awareness, build capacity, and transform institutional and societal attitudes. Ultimately, this holistic approach reduces socio-spatial disparities while advancing Sri Lanka's SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

More than half of the population of Colombo, Sri Lanka's largest metropolitan area, live in shanties and slums, covering just 9% of the urban land area. Surveys show more than 68,000 families living in unsustainable pockets who have no access to clean water, sanitation, electricity or safe homes, with many having been forcibly displaced under the Urban Regeneration Programme, breaking community bonds and further limiting their economic opportunities. In addition to the facts that utilities costs are rising and that household taxes are also increasing, national data reveals that slum housing is not evenly distributed among the districts. This paradox itself highlights the systematic eviction of low-income residents from Colombo in the name of its bid to make it a "world city", thus perpetrating poverty and inequality. To overcome socio spatial divides and sustainable development, inclusive urban planning is crucial and needs to be aligned to SDG 11. This is not only a problem in Colombo, but the peripheral urban areas also such as Wattala have a similar problem as the marginalized groups continue to be marginalised in the mainstream planning system. Despite the socio-cultural contribution of the shanty dwellers to the urban context, they are still stigmatized and neglected in Wattala. The communities mentioned remain vulnerable to displacement and marginalization because of ignorance on the part of policymakers, lack of education by the people and systematic behavioural stigmas.

Figure 1 provides a statistical summary of the under-served settlements in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to show the extent and concentration of urban inequality. It shows that half of the population in Colombo resides in shanties, slums or run down housing schemes that occupy 9 per cent of the total land area of Colombo. In such settlements, 68,812 families are sharing 1,499 community clusters with most of them having no access to primary services like clean water, sanitation, electricity, and safe housing conditions. All these characters point to the fact that there is a vicious circle between colonisation and poverty, a vicious urban paradox, in this one city on the road to becoming a world-class city, the poor and the shanty residents are increasingly being stigmatised.

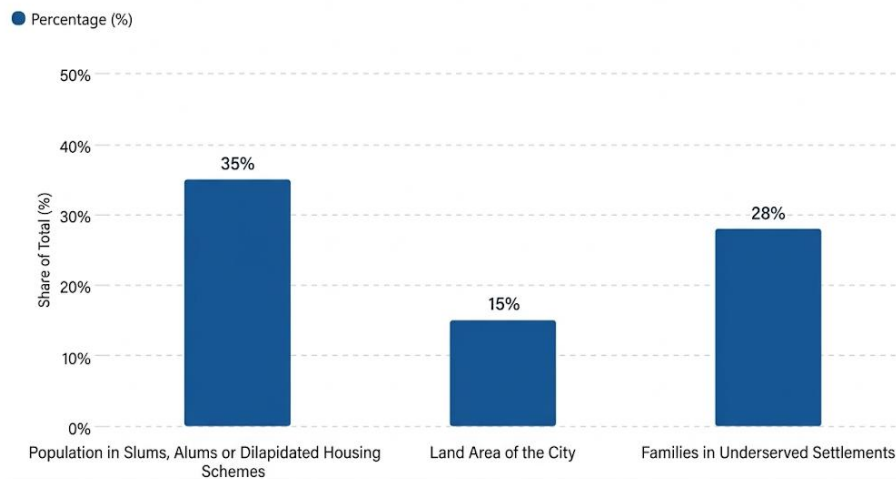


Figure 1: Survey of underserved settlements in Colombo municipal council area. Colombo: Urban Development Authority of Sri Lanka.

Source: Urban Development Authority (2010)

However, whilst the number of surveys indicating Wattala does not indicate a high percentage, it mirrors most of the issues in Colombo. The enclosure of shanty dwellers from formal planning processes is also felt in Wattala where there is a similar lack of service delivery and housing security. The visualization reinforces the power of inclusive city planning and emphasises the socio-spatial inequities that threaten the sustainability and equity for the urban future of Sri Lanka. Otherwise, Colombo, Wattala and like cities would continue to be the world of poverty, of failing to deliver on promises in SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities without the need to bring in the socio-cultural contribution of these communities.

This background is the context within which the current study explores the role played by socio-cultural activities of the slum dwellers in the sustainability of the urban areas and how socio-cultural activities awareness, education and behaviour change can play a role in bridging the gap between the slum dwellers and the formal planning processes. A socio-cultural impact to the urban environment by the shanty dwellers on Sri Lanka will be answered on the basis of this, the study will take four important questions. How do we change the perception of people and institutions on disadvantaged communities via awareness-raising? Which educational systems will help the inhabitants of slums to join sustainable urban development? And lastly, what needs to change in the behaviour of policymakers and communities to attain inclusive urban governance?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used mixed method research design which investigates the socio-cultural practices of the shanty dwellers in Wattala and how these practices can contribute in inclusive urban development in Sri Lanka. The study was ontological, based on a constructivist perspective that sees the construction of social reality as shaped by lived experiences and community practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Epistemologically, an interpretivist perspective was used which focused on the need to grasp the process of meaning making and the agency of marginalised groups in the field of urban sustainability (Schwandt, 1994). This methodological approach brings both qualitative and quantitative approaches together to capture depth of community narratives

and the breadth of socio-economic circumstances (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Primary data has been gathered using structured surveys with the shanty dwellers, focus group discussions with community members and key informant interviews with key persons in the field of community, urban planning and policy. These approaches offer a glimpse into perceptions of exclusion, community resilience, and informal governance systems (D'Cruz et al., 2009). Secondary data has been gathered from policy documents, urban planning reports, census data, and previous investigations done on underserved settlements in Colombo and other districts which provide a comparative context (Urban Development Authority, 2010). The total population of the interest is about 2500 families in the informal settlements of Wattala and from which a purposive sample of 150 families has been selected based on gender, age, tenure and leadership (Korala, 2017).

The purposive sampling of 150 respondents for the survey was well-distributed across the economically active population (25-45) and youth (18-24) and older adults (46+). Gender-wise, the distribution was nearly even, and ethnic-wise, it was mainly Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim households, as expected in Wattala which is a multi-ethnic place. The majority of the respondents were involved in informal work or small-scale businesses or in daily wage employment, and the tenure of housing had been variable from both long-term residents and recent migrants. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with the same respondents as the survey, and they addressed the context, which is the three groups of respondents, namely: the community leaders, the university educators and the cultural practitioners (some of the artists). Key informant interviews (KIIs) were held with religious leaders and Grama Niladhari (GN) officials. To this end three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, each with a membership of 8 – 12 participants, and split into three categories of community leaders, university educators and cultural practitioners. Four key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with the three Grama Niladhari officials and religious leaders, to gain institutional and cultural insights into issues of exclusion. Qualitative input data analysis are accompanied by thematic coding and quantitative input analysis based on descriptive statistics from survey results. The qualitative stories have been analysed thematically in order to identify any common patterns of exclusion and resilience (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the quantitative data as part of survey has been analysed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics. This mixed method approach allows the study to investigate how awareness, education and behavioural change can help narrow the gap between the disadvantaged and formal planning processes and contribute to Sri Lanka's pledge towards SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities (SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre & Colombo Urban Lab, 2023).

The methodology adopted is justified because it brings depth and breadth in the analysis of socio-cultural practices of shanty dwellers in the study area of Wattala, as it incorporates both qualitative information about their lived experiences and quantitative information about their socio-economic situation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Schwandt, 1994). Structured surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews provide triangulation of perspectives, reflecting community voices and institutional perspectives, and secondary sources provide a broader context for findings in terms of the urban development trends. (D'Cruz et al., 2009; Urban Development Authority, 2010) Qualitative narratives are analysed theatrically to identify patterns of exclusion and resilience (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and survey data are analysed descriptively to provide measurable evidence of disparities and participation. This holistic

approach is especially applicable to the integration of SDG 11, which works to promote inclusive and sustainable urban governance, and connects to the disadvantaged communities and the formal planning processes (SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre & Colombo Urban Lab, 2023).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study shed light on the experiences of Wattala's shanties and their socio-cultural practices in the backdrop of inclusive urban development. The analysis is triangulated based on the survey data, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews to gain a more complete picture of the structural aspect of exclusion and the everyday strategies of resilience. The section starts by summarizing the themes that were identified from the data and how community voice and institutional voice are encountered. The themes are then discussed in the context of current scholarship and policy work, and connections are made between experiences of marginalisation at the local level and Sri Lanka's national SDG 11. The study highlights the need to acknowledge socio cultural agency as a basis for the sustainable and equitable city administration.

Theme I - Socio-Cultural Practices and Community Resilience.

Even though infrastructure was lacking, the results of the questionnaire indicated that 69% of the population was prepared for community-based programming. Respondents also reported on mutual aid and cooperation, including water sharing and helping with house building that reflect high levels of community cohesion. These quantifiable findings highlight the importance of informal networks as a functional asset with a direct connection to SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

These survey findings were reinforced by the stories heard during the focus group discussions, which highlighted solidarity-based adaptive practices. Participants shared what they do to support each other, such as sharing water when needed, lending each other tools to repair houses, etc., and described with words like we share water when we need, we assist each other to repair houses. In these narratives, resilience was seen as more than just a material fact; they were also social and social networks were seen as the core of what was needed to survive in the face of hardship. The discussions also reflected the need for empowerment, indicating the potential for extending the empowerment activities at the community level to increase resilience and promote inclusive development.

These findings were corroborated by inputs from an outside group through interviews. The informal network can fill the gap where formal support systems are absent and has the history of helping communities bargain with formal systems, as noted by key informants, such as local leaders and representatives from NGOs. Such is the case of D'Cruz et al. (2009) who recorded slum dwellers' federations in Moratuwa successfully claiming rights to housing through collective action. Interviews thus highlighted the role of agency in the community in driving sustainability and the need for institutional recognition of such practices for inclusive governance.

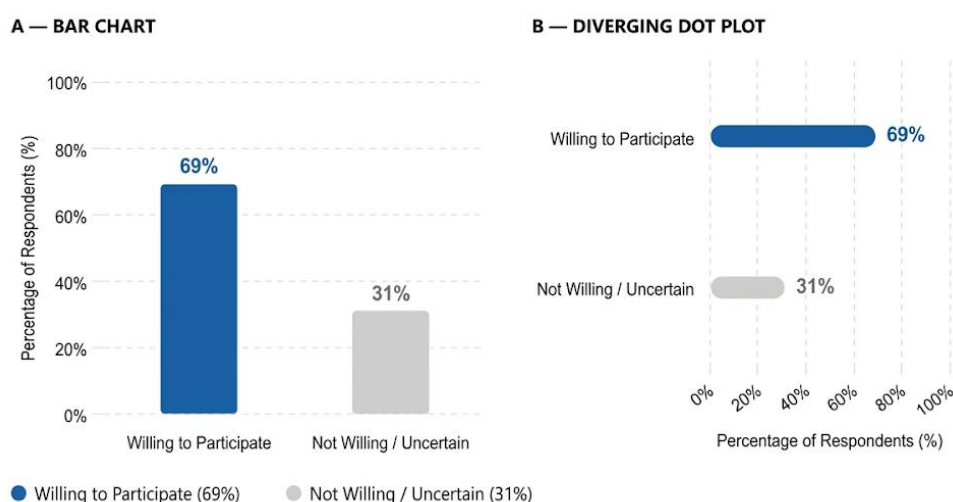


Figure 2: Survey results in the access, perceptions and aspirations of the shanty dwellers in Wattala, 2026

Theme II- Institutional Perceptions and Planning Exclusion.

Results of the questionnaire showed that the perception of “exclusion from the planning processes” was widespread among the shanty dwellers, with 81% saying that they felt excluded from urban planning and 76% saying that policymakers perceived them as hindering modernization. These quantitative findings emphasize the concept of systemic marginalisation, in which communities are excluded from the legitimacy to define the city. This exclusion highlights the critical need for institutional changes that recognize and respect the rights of informal settlers as citizens, not as obstacles to development.

The focus group narratives gave further expression to these perceptions, and a number of the participants felt frustrated that they were stigmatised and turned down in planning discourses. A planner's statement that “There is somehow a stigma associated with shanty dwellers. They are perceived as occupants, rather than as citizens who have rights” gives a good example of how deep-seated these stereotypes are. In addition to infrastructural neglect, these conversations showed that there was symbolical marginalisation as well: the community was socially constructed as a community without merit. In this sense, Korala (2017) noted that slum dwellers in Colombo were being presented as “undeserved,” which further stunted their stigmatisation and exclusion.

The findings were reinforced by the insights gained from the interviews: institutionalized values and attitudes that conflict with inclusive governance persist. Local leaders and urban planners recognized that attitudes often view the occupants of the shanties as illegitimate, inauthentic, and not entitled to a voice in decision making. These views underline the importance of awareness campaigns and institutional changes in the process of rebranding the attitude of marginalized communities. These interviews highlighted the need to include the voices of the disadvantaged in planning, as called for by SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre and Colombo Urban Lab (2023) to remove stigma and progress inclusive urban development.

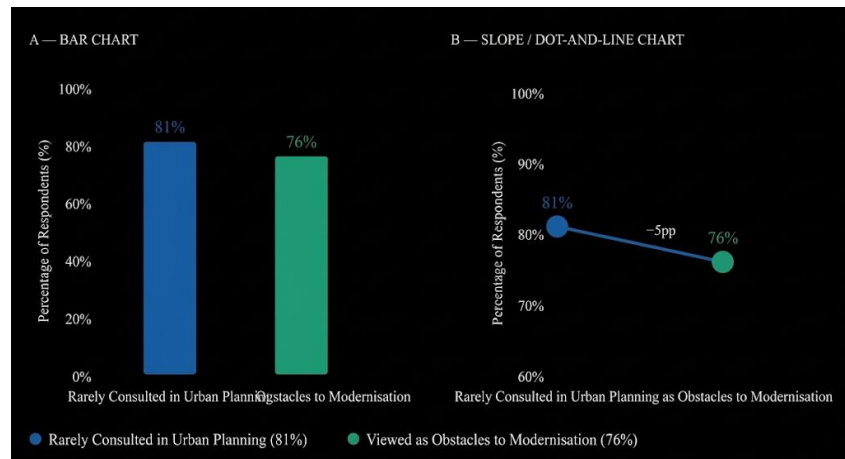


Figure 3: Survey data results on planning exclusion and perceptions of institutions (Note: Each point represents the proportion of survey respondents agreeing with the respective governance perception statement. The slope illustrates the 5-percentage-point differential between the two perception dimensions. Values rounded to the nearest whole percentage.)

Theme III - Knowledge Gaps and Educational Empowerment.

The results of the questionnaire showed that in Wattala, the shanty dwellers were facing serious infrastructural problems as 72 % of them had no access to clean water, 68 % had no sanitation facilities, 64 % had no stable electricity supply and so on. The quantitative findings illustrate, and are representative of, the material shortages that persist and continue to affect the daily lives of these disadvantaged communities, and therefore the continued influence of basic service deprivation on the daily lives of these communities.

But these statistics were complemented by stories that came from the focus groups which highlighted the desire of the community for empowerment in the context of such marginalisation. They complained that they were not given an opportunity to learn and participate and one added “If we know how to approach officials, we will be able to speak to them about our problems, we want to learn.” These stories show how informational barriers to participation are interwoven with infrastructural barriers to participation—when individuals do not have civic education and advocacy skills, they are unable to meaningfully engage their concerns.

These perspectives were further supported by insights gained from interviews, which emphasized the need for education-based interventions that foster negotiation strategies, advocacy and participatory engagement. Key informants emphasized that addressing the gaps in urban governance infrastructure and information is crucial for enabling the poor and vulnerable to assert their rights and engage in meaningful governance. This is in line with Mataraarachchi (2024), who has suggested the need to incorporate social aspects into urban sustainability, and Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) claim that mixed methods can have a positive effect on disadvantaged communities, as they provide narratives that are deep and statistical that are broad.

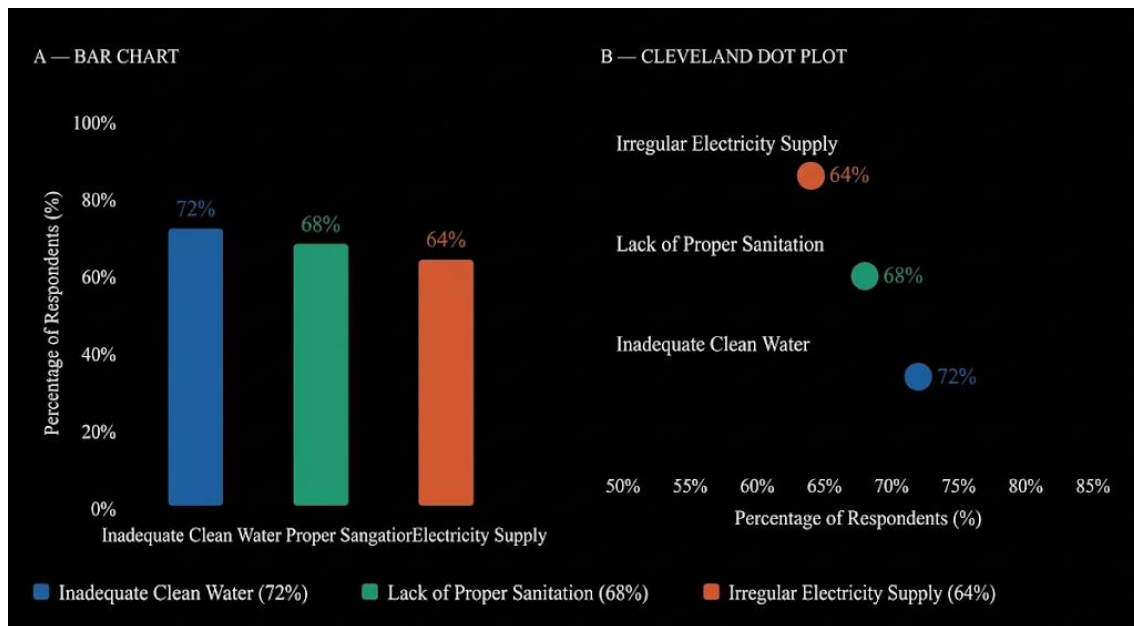


Figure 4: Survey results on perceived infrastructural shortages among the respondents

Theme IV- Behavioural Change and Inclusive Urban Governance.

The questionnaire findings revealed that while policymakers often stigmatize shanty A substantial portion of the population in the dwellers (69%) showed their willingness to participate in sustainable programs. This quantitative evidence demonstrates the community's willingness to participate in urban development projects in a positive manner despite being excluded by systems. These findings suggest that community action to further inclusive governance may be possible through participatory techniques.

These findings were extended by adding a depth perspective in the narratives produced by focus groups, which expressed residents' frustration with displacement policies. Concerns expressed included that “relocation breaks our lives” and “We are told to move all the time; nobody asks how we live here.” These comments highlight how relocation can affect social relationships and impact resilience. Important themes discussed in these accounts include the need to achieve behavioural change, not just within the community, but in institutional practice, and why trust and cooperation cannot be built in a setting where displacement is repeated and unconsult.

These views were supported by insights from the interviews, which highlighted the need for institutional change to reduce stigma and for community work to increase trust. Key informants emphasized the need for behavioral change approaches to take place at both the institutional and the community level, with shanty dwellers being perceived as legitimate citizens by the institutions and communities being supported to cooperate in sustainable programmes. This two-pronged approach helps to distil recurring stories and follows the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the call to participatory governance as a route to inclusivity by SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre and Colombo Urban Lab (2023). The findings of both studies show that behavioural change strategies play a crucial role in diminishing the socio-spatial disparities and promote sustainable urban governance.

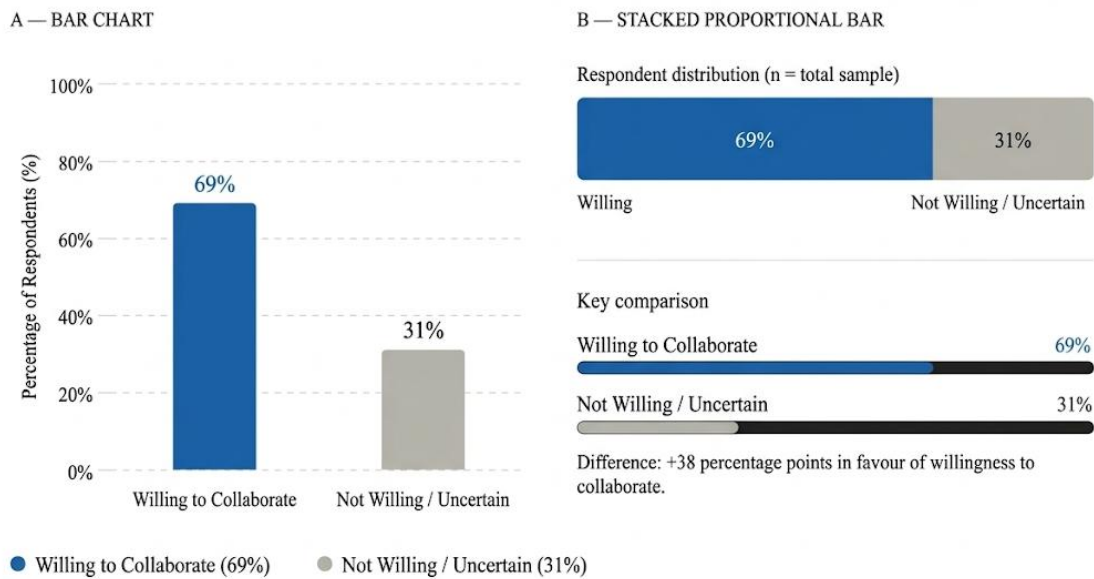


Figure 5: Survey-based results of the readiness of the residents to cooperate in sustainable projects.

The study shows that socio cultural practices of the shanty dwellers in Wattala are not only survival mechanisms, but it is also a practical resource to promote inclusive urban development process. Informal networks, mutual supports and adaptive strategies demonstrate resilience, which, if systematically incorporated, could enhance participatory governance. But entrenched institutional exclusion and stigmatisation persist in blocking this potential, highlighting the need for changes which acknowledge and give legitimacy to community agency. The evidence also indicates that there is a link between infrastructural deprivation and knowledge gaps and civic empowerment, and hence, there is a need for pragmatic educational interventions on negotiation and advocacy skills. Meanwhile, residents expressed readiness to join sustainability programs underlines the need to employ behavioural change strategies that reach to policymakers and support the removal of stigmas and participatory approaches and communities that build trust and collaboration. Finally, the results show that the transition to SDG 11 in Sri Lanka calls for a two-part approach, both infrastructural investments and institutional change and empowerment of voices of the marginalised for equitable and sustainable urban future.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that, even though the infrastructure lacks in the shanty slums and the institutions are marginalized, the people of the slums have strong socio-cultural capital, which can be used as the basis for inclusive urban development. Findings indicate that there is a high level of community receptivity to collective activities (69%), but that actors are still facing many structural barriers, such as involving only selected communities in the consultation process (81%) and negative perceptions of institutions (76%). These findings show an obvious lack of coherence between local resilience and government processes. It also highlights that infrastructural gaps (e.g. clean water, sanitation, electricity) do not only stem from technical issues but are linked to knowledge gaps and lack of access to participatory mechanisms. Qualitative evidence reinforces that within communities' adaptive practices, mutual support systems and collective agency exist. Yet these practices are not institutionalized, limiting their ability to be translated into formal

urban policy frameworks. Importantly, the study points to a need to target institutional stigmas for policymakers and to build mutual trust and collaboration among communities, as part of the behavioural change strategies. Policymakers need to shift from stigmatizing narratives to more participatory approaches acknowledging informal settlements as critical contributors to the urban socio-economic fabric. At the same time, capacity-building interventions to improve community negotiation, advocacy, and engagement capacities is critical to fill governance gaps. Overall, the findings support the global debate on Sustainable Development Goal 11, which calls for inclusive urban urban development, not only through investments in infrastructure but also through the need for institutional change and strengthening of marginalised groups. Going forward, there is a need to explore more in-depth how policy mechanisms can incorporate informal socio-cultural systems into formal planning processes to promote sustainable and equitable city transformation.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge and recognize the valuable contributions of previous authors whose work has laid the foundation for this study and provided essential insights that guided the research.

7. REFERENCES

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre, & Colombo Urban Lab. (2023). *Colombo Settlements Survey 2023*. Colombo Municipal Council. https://www.csf-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CSS-Survey-2023-report_Final.pdf
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- D'Cruz, C., McGranahan, G., & Sumithre, U. (2009). The efforts of a federation of slum and shanty dwellers to secure land and improve housing in Moratuwa: from savings groups to citywide strategies. *Environment and Urbanization*, 21(2), 367–388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809342360>
- Department of Census and Statistics. (2023). *Sri Lanka sustainable development indicators report*. Government of Sri Lanka. <https://www.statistics.gov.lk>
- Charmes, E., & Keil, R. (2015). The politics of post-suburban densification in Canada and France. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 39(3), 581–602. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12194>
- Korala, A. (2017). "Underserved" or "undeserved"? A study on the identity formation of the "slum" and "shanty" dwellers in Colombo [Conference presentation]. ICONArts 2017, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- Mataraarachchi, S. (2024, August 21). Designing Our Future: The power of strategic approaches in town planning. *Ceylon Today*. <https://ceylontoday.lk/2024/08/21/designing-our-future-the-power-of-strategic-approaches-in-town-planning/>
- Mitlin, D. (2008). With and beyond the state — Co-production as a route to political influence, power and transformation for grassroots organizations. *Environment and Urbanization*, 20(2), 339–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247808096117>
- Patel, S., Baptist, C., & D'Cruz, C. (2012). Knowledge is power – Informal communities assert their right to the city through SDI and community-led enumerations. *Environment and Urbanization*, 24(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247812438366>
- Perera, N. (2009). People's spaces: Familiarization, subject formation and emergent spaces in Colombo. *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 51–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095208099298>

- Roy, A. (2005). Urban informality: Toward an epistemology of planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 71(2), 147–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360508976689>
- Satterthwaite, D. (2009). The implications of population growth and urbanization for climate change. *Environment and Urbanization*, 26(1), 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809344361>
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118–137). Sage.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2010). *SAGE handbook of mixed methods in social & behavioral research (2nd ed.)*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335193>
- Urban Development Authority. (2010). *Colombo urban development plan and undeserved settlements report*. Government of Sri Lanka.
- UN-Habitat. (2018). *The state of Sri Lankan cities 2018 report*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. <https://unhabitat.org/the-state-of-sri-lankan-cities-2018-report>.