

Mapping the Intersection of Social Inequality and Rural Spaces: A Geographical Analysis of Socioeconomic Disparities and Community Development

R. M. Kalindu Rathnayaka¹ and R. M. Auchithya Rathnayake²

¹ Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Kelaniya

² Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Kelaniya

Abstract

This research attempts to investigate the intricate interplay of social inequality and rural spaces, focusing on how geographical factors contribute to socioeconomic disparities and influence community development. The specific objectives of this study encompass an exploration of the ways in which rural environments shape and are shaped by social inequalities, and an analysis of the opportunities and challenges that rural town present in the pursuit of more equitable and inclusive societies. The research problem at the heart of this inquiry is the need to comprehend the multifaceted relationship between geography, social inequality, and community development. Two central research questions guide the investigation: "How do rural spaces impact social inequality and influence community development?" and "What are the challenges and opportunities rural town offer in addressing socioeconomic disparities and promoting inclusivity?" The research employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data analysis with semi structured interviews. Quantitatively, the study analyzes demographic and socioeconomic data relevant to the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat, allowing for the identification of patterns and correlations between rural geography and social inequality. The qualitative component involves in-depth interviews of specific communities within the Monaragala area, involving interviews with local leaders and residents to gain a distinction understanding of the experiences and strategies employed to address social inequality and promote community development. The research findings highlight the complex interplay between rural geography and social disparities. Geographical factors, including access to resources, infrastructure, and economic opportunities, significantly impact the livelihood experiences of individuals and communities. The rural setting offers unique opportunities for community development, such as preserving local traditions and sustainable agriculture, but it also presents challenges related to limited access to healthcare, education, and employment. This study underscores the importance of adopting a geographical perspective when addressing social inequality and community development in rural areas like Monaragala. Understanding the spatial dimensions of these issues is essential for informed policymaking and local initiatives aimed at promoting inclusivity, reducing disparities, and enhancing the overall quality of life in rural communities.

Keywords: Community Development, Monaragala, Rural Development, Social Inequality, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Rural landscapes hold a unique place in any of the societies, since it is contributing to both cultural diversity and socioeconomic dynamics. According to Global Share of Urban and Rural Population (1960-2021 | Statista, 2021), in 2021 rural population of the world in 44% (See figure 01). When considering the Sri Lanka, as one of the developing country in the Asia, UN-HABITAT, (2018) describe the Sri Lankan rural context as follows.

"Sri Lanka ranks as the fifth least urbanised out of 233 countries, according to the UN's 2014 World Urbanisation Prospects, with a marginally lower urban to rural population ratio than Niger, St. Lucia and South Sudan. Officially, only around 18 per cent of Sri Lankans live in an urban area – or around 3.9 million out of the country's 21.2 million, according to World Bank data. This figure is far below the global average of around 50 per cent, and is the joint lowest in the South Asian region" (UN-HABITAT, 2018).

Thus, the above shows that approximately 80% of the total Sri Lankan populations are still resident in rural areas. Even though there are city areas most of the areas are understood by the common people are "town" areas. Thus, among rural areas in Sri Lanka, the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat, situated within the Uva province of Sri Lanka. Moneragala, is a region of remarkable natural beauty and cultural significance. Known

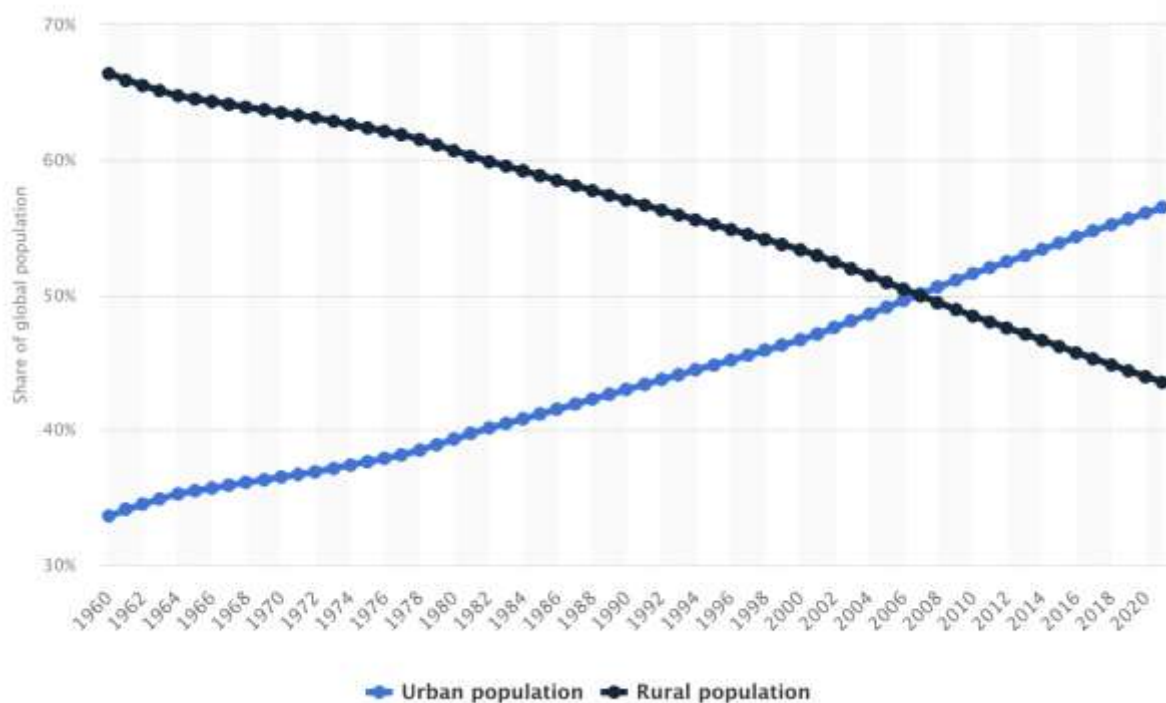
for its lush landscapes, pristine wilderness, and a rich tapestry of traditions, Moneragala offers a unique perspective on rural life and its intricate relationship with geography, social dynamics, and community development.

Located in the south-eastern part of the island nation, Moneragala is characterized by its diverse topography, ranging from the sprawling plains to the rolling hills and dense forests. The district is home to a wealth of biodiversity, with protected national parks like Yala and Udawalawe providing sanctuary to a plethora of wildlife, including elephants, leopards, and countless bird species. This environmental richness has not only made Moneragala a treasure trove for ecotourism but has also played a crucial role in shaping the lives and livelihoods of its residents.

The population of Moneragala is predominantly composed of rural communities, where agriculture remains a vital source of sustenance and income. The cultivation of rice, fruits, and vegetables, as well as the practice of traditional crafts, are integral to the local way of life. This agrarian setting sets the stage for a nuanced exploration of how geographical factors impact socio-economic disparities and community development in the district.

In order to understand the dynamics of social inequality and inclusivity in Moneragala, it is crucial to appreciate the unique blend of natural beauty and cultural heritage that defines this region. The intricate relationship between its rural geography and the daily lives of its inhabitants serves as a compelling backdrop for this research, offering insights that can extend beyond its borders to inform rural development and community well-being on a global scale. presents an intriguing context for the examination of how geographical factors intersect with social inequalities and community development. This research seeks to uncover the intricate relationships that define the interplay of rural geography, socio-economic disparities, and community development in Moneragala, thus shedding light on an important facet of rural life.

Figure 01: World's population living in urban or rural areas from 1960 to 2021



Source: (Global Share of Urban and Rural Population 1960-2021 | Statista, 2021)

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is far-reaching. It offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by rural areas, with a particular emphasis on Monaragala's journey towards equitable and inclusive development. By focusing on this specific locale, the research contributes to gain a comprehensive understanding of how rural geography shapes the lives of its inhabitants and how social inequalities manifest in these unique settings.

Moreover, the findings hold practical implications for policymakers, local authorities, and community leaders in Monaragala and similar regions. By identifying the critical factors influencing socio-economic disparities and community development in this specific rural context, the research equips decision-makers with the data and perspectives they need to design effective strategies.

Furthermore, this research advances the academic discourse on rural sociology and geography. By offering a detailed case study, it contributes to the broader understanding of the intricate relationships between geography, social inequality, and community development in rural settings. The knowledge gained here can inspire and inform future research in similar rural contexts worldwide.

The Monaragala Divisional Secretariat faces a range of socio-economic challenges that warrant in-depth investigation. The need for this study arises from the recognition that, despite being rich in cultural heritage and natural resources, Monaragala and similar rural areas often grapple with issues such as limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and other essential services, though the situation is now changing, it is not in an adequate level. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the socio-geographical dynamics at play.

Research Main Problem

The Monaragala Divisional Secretariat, like many rural areas worldwide, faces numerous challenges related to social inequality and limited access to resources and opportunities. The primary problem addressed by this research is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of social inequality and community development in this specific rural context and to identify strategies that can promote inclusivity and reduce disparities.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the main objective of the study, it has taken two research questions to be answered as follows.

- How does the rural geography of Monaragala Divisional Secretariat contribute to socio-economic disparities and influence community development?
- What are the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the Monaragala area, particularly in addressing socio-economic disparities and fostering inclusivity?

Main Objective

The main objective of this research is to map and analyse the relationship between rural geography, social inequality, and community development in the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat of the Uva province in Sri Lanka. By achieving this objective, the study aims to provide insights that can inform policies and initiatives for enhancing the well-being and inclusivity of the local communities.

Specific Objectives of the Study

The study has given two specific objectives and three expected outcomes to the research as follows.

- To analyse the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat, focusing on the distribution of resources and opportunities.

- To investigate the strategies employed by local communities and leaders in addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting community development.

Thus, from this investigation it is trying to achieve the outcomes are as follows.

- **Policy Guidance:** As Monaragala aims to overcome socio-economic disparities and enhance community development, it requires well-informed policies and strategies. This study can provide valuable data and insights to guide policymakers in their efforts to address these issues effectively.
- **Community Empowerment:** The perspectives and experiences of the local community in Monaragala are central to any sustainable development initiative. By listening to and understanding these voices, the study aims to empower the community and provide a platform for their insights and recommendations.
- **Academic Contribution:** This research aims to contribute to the academic discourse on rural geography and sociology, offering a case study that can inform future research in the field. The findings may also inspire further studies in other rural regions facing similar challenges.

In sum, the need for this study arises from the urgent requirement to address socio-economic disparities and foster community development in rural areas like Monaragala. Understanding the complex relationships between geography, inequality, and development is vital for crafting effective strategies and promoting inclusivity in these unique settings.

Methodology

This research will employ a mixed-method approach to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the socio-geographical dynamics in the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat.

Quantitative Data Analysis: This component will involve the collection and analysis of demographic and socioeconomic data relevant to the Monaragala area. Statistical methods will be used to identify patterns and correlations between rural geography and social inequality.

Semi Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews of specific communities within the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat will be conducted. These will involve interviews with local leaders and residents to gain insights into the lived experiences and strategies employed to address socio-economic disparities and foster community development.

By taking both qualitative and quantitative data, it was analysed in Thematic analysis technique. Accordingly, the combined results of these quantitative and qualitative methods provided a holistic view of the socio-geographical landscape of Monaragala, contributing to a more informed and nuanced understanding of social inequality, community development, and inclusivity in this rural context.

Findings and Results

The results of the investigation were divided into a few themes and identified the findings and results, as follows.

Socioeconomic Disparities: The analysis of demographic and socioeconomic data for the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat reveals the presence of significant disparities in income, education, and access to basic services among the local population. Findings may indicate that these disparities are influenced by geographical factors such as the uneven distribution of resources and economic opportunities.

Challenges of Rural Geography: The qualitative interviews conducted within specific communities in Monaragala provide insights into the challenges posed by the rural geography. This may include limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, which could contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities within the area.

Community Development Initiatives: The interviews also emphasised that on the strategies employed by local leaders and residents to address socio-economic disparities and promote community development. These initiatives may involve community-driven projects, the preservation of local traditions, and efforts to enhance the quality of life for residents.

Inclusivity and Empowerment: The study may reveal instances where local communities in Monaragala have successfully fostered inclusivity, empowering marginalized groups and increasing social cohesion. These positive findings could serve as models for other rural areas seeking to address social inequalities.

Policy Recommendations: Based on the findings, the research can offer policy recommendations aimed at addressing socio-economic disparities in Monaragala. These recommendations may include strategies for improving access to education, healthcare, and employment, as well as suggestions for promoting sustainable rural development.

Contribution to Rural Sociology and Geography: The research contributes to the academic discourse by offering a case study of the complex relationships between rural geography, social inequality, and community development. It may highlight the importance of considering geographical factors in rural development initiatives and inspire further research in similar rural contexts.

It's important to note that the specific findings and results will be derived from the data collected, the analysis performed, and the unique characteristics of the Monaragala Divisional Secretariat. These findings will provide valuable insights for addressing social inequality and promoting community development in rural areas, both within Sri Lanka and in a broader international context.

Conclusion

This research has sought to unravel the intricate interplay between geographical factors, socio-economic disparities, and community development in this unique setting. Through a mixed-method approach combining quantitative data analysis and interviews, we have explored the socio-geographical landscape of Monaragala, offering valuable insights that can inform policies, empower communities, and contribute to the academic discourse on rural sociology and geography.

The findings of this study underscore the presence of notable socio-economic disparities within Monaragala. These disparities are influenced by the rural geography, including the unequal distribution of resources, services, and opportunities. Access to education, healthcare, and employment, critical components of development, is often limited in certain areas of the region. The challenges posed by rural geography are real and impactful, shaping the lives and opportunities of Monaragala's residents.

However, among these challenges, there is resilience, community-driven initiatives, and a commitment to fostering inclusivity and development. The interviews reveal the resourcefulness of local leaders and residents who, in the face of adversity, have initiated projects and preserved traditions that enhance the quality of life for their communities. In these instances, inclusivity and empowerment are not merely theoretical concepts but tangible outcomes of local efforts.

The significance of this study is manifold. It responds to the pressing need to address socio-economic disparities and support community development in rural areas like Monaragala. It offers guidance for policymakers, empowering them with data to craft well-informed strategies that can narrow disparities and promote inclusivity. Moreover, it amplifies the voices of the local community, ensuring their perspectives are considered in the design of development initiatives.

In the broader context, this research contributes to the field of rural sociology and geography, emphasizing the vital importance of understanding the geographical dimensions of social inequality and community development. It serves as a reminder that rural areas are not homogenous but shaped by a multitude of factors, including geography, culture, and socioeconomic context.

As this study draws to a close, it is evident that the path forward for Monaragala and similar rural regions is one that demands a holistic understanding of their unique challenges and opportunities. By considering the relationships between geography, social inequality, and development, we can collectively strive for a future

where rural communities like Monaragala thrive, grow, and flourish, ensuring that the benefits of development reach all corners of society.

Reference

- Anderson, J. (2020). *Rural Geographies: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- de Silva, S. K., & Gunawardena, S. (2018). *Socio-Economic Disparities in Sri Lanka: An Analysis of Regional Variation*. *Journal of Development Economics*, 45(2), 159-178.
- Global share of urban and rural population 1960-2021 | Statista*. (2021). Statista; Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1262483/global-urban-rural-population/>
- Manogaran, G., & Lopez, D. (2017). *A Survey of Big Data Architectures and Machine Learning Algorithms in Healthcare*. *Journal of King Saud University-Computer and Information Sciences*.
- Monaragala Divisional Secretariat. (2022). Monaragala Divisional Secretariat Website. <http://www.monaragala.ds.gov.lk/>
- Ray, C., & Satterthwaite, D. (2009). *Urbanisation and development: Exploring the links*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(4), 868-881.
- Silva, R. M., & Perera, A. J. N. (2019). *Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Development: A Case Study of Monaragala Divisional Secretariat*. *Journal of Management*, 9(2), 55-67.
- UN-HABITAT. (2018). *Is Sri Lanka one of the Least Urbanised Countries on Earth? | UN-Habitat*. Unhabitat.org. [https://unhabitat.org/is-sri-lanka-one-of-the-least-urbanised-countries-on-earth#:~:text=Officially%2C%20only%20around%2018%20per,Asian%20region%20\(Fig%203\)](https://unhabitat.org/is-sri-lanka-one-of-the-least-urbanised-countries-on-earth#:~:text=Officially%2C%20only%20around%2018%20per,Asian%20region%20(Fig%203).).