



# The Role of Social Capital in Community Development: A Sri Lankan Perspective

**Karunaratne Rasika R A**

Research Scholar, Department of Post Graduate Studies and Research in Sociology, Mangalore University,  
Mangalagangothri, Konaje.  
rasike2010@gmail.com  
ORCID 0000-0002-5681-2919

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## Abstract

Community development plays a vital role in improving the social, economic, and cultural conditions of people in developing countries such as Sri Lanka. However, development outcomes depend not only on economic resources but also on social relationships, trust, and collective participation. This study examines the role of social capital in community development from a Sri Lankan perspective. The main objectives are to examine the concept and dimensions of social capital, analyze its level and forms in Sri Lankan communities, explore how social networks, trust, and participation influence development processes, and identify its strengths and challenges in supporting sustainable community development.

The study is based entirely on secondary data, including government reports, census publications, policy documents, and empirical research studies. A qualitative and descriptive analytical approach was used to synthesize existing evidence and identify patterns related to social capital and development outcomes.

The findings reveal that bonding social capital remains strong in rural Sri Lanka through kinship systems, religious associations, and community organizations. Social networks and trust significantly enhance participation, collective action, and resilience, particularly during economic crises and natural disasters. However, bridging and linking social capital vary across regions, especially in post-conflict and urban areas. Weak institutional trust and limited inter-group cooperation pose challenges for inclusive

development. The study concludes that social capital is a valuable but complex resource for sustainable community development in Sri Lanka. Strengthening bonding, bridging, and linking relationships in a balanced manner is essential for inclusive and long-term development.

## Keywords

Social Capital, Community Development, Social Networks, Trust, Participation,



## Introduction

Community development is an important process in improving the social, economic, and cultural conditions of people. It focuses on collective action, participation, and local empowerment. In many developing countries, including Sri Lanka, community development plays a major role in reducing poverty, strengthening local institutions, and improving social well-being. However, the success of community development does not depend only on financial resources or government policies. It also depends on social relationships, trust, and cooperation among people. This is where the concept of social capital becomes important.

Social capital generally refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals to work together for mutual benefit. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), social capital consists of actual or potential resources linked to durable networks of relationships. James Coleman (1988) explains social capital as a resource embedded in social structures that facilitates certain actions of individuals within the structure. Similarly, Robert D. Putnam (1993) highlights that trust, norms, and networks improve the efficiency of society by encouraging coordinated actions. These theoretical contributions show that social capital is not only a personal asset but also a collective resource that supports development processes.

In the context of community development, social capital plays a significant role. Communities with strong bonding ties, bridging connections, and linking relationships with institutions are more capable of solving common problems. Trust among members increases cooperation. Participation in community organizations strengthens collective decision-making. Informal support systems help people cope with economic and social difficulties. Therefore, social capital can be seen as an invisible force that supports development from within the community itself.

Sri Lanka provides a meaningful context to examine this relationship. The country has a long history of village-based social systems, kinship networks, religious associations, and cooperative movements. Community-based organizations, rural development societies, women's groups, and farmer organizations have contributed to local development initiatives. At the same time, Sri Lanka has experienced civil conflict, economic crises, and natural disasters, which have affected social relationships and trust in institutions. In such a setting, understanding how social capital influences community development becomes highly relevant.

Several studies in developing countries show that communities with higher levels of trust and participation tend to achieve better development outcomes (Putnam, 1993). Social capital has been linked to poverty reduction, improved governance, and stronger civic engagement. However, the nature and impact of social capital can vary according to cultural and historical contexts. Therefore, it is important to analyze the Sri Lankan experience separately rather than generalizing from Western theories.

This study aims to examine the role of social capital in community development in Sri Lanka using secondary data sources. By analyzing existing reports, policy documents, and empirical studies, the research seeks to understand how networks, trust, and participation contribute to development processes at the community level. The study also attempts to connect classical theories of social capital with the Sri Lankan social reality. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a better understanding of how social relationships influence development outcomes in a developing country context.

## Key Concept Definitions

### Social Capital

Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, trust, and norms that enable individuals and groups to work together for mutual benefit. It facilitates cooperation and collective action within a community. According to Putnam, social capital consists of social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam, 2000). Bourdieu describes social capital as the resources that individuals gain through durable networks of relationships and social connections (Bourdieu, 1986).

### Community Development

Community development is a participatory process through which community members collectively identify their needs, mobilize resources, and implement actions to improve their social, economic, and environmental conditions. It emphasizes empowerment, participation, and sustainability (Phillips & Pittman, 2009).



## **Trust**

Trust refers to the expectation that others will behave in a reliable and cooperative manner. Trust strengthens relationships among community members and promotes cooperation in collective activities, which is essential for the development of strong social capital (Fukuyama, 1995).

## **Social Networks**

Social networks are the patterns of relationships and interactions among individuals and groups in a community. These networks enable the sharing of information, support, and resources that facilitate social cooperation and development (Coleman, 1988).

## **Collective Action**

Collective action refers to the joint efforts of individuals or groups to achieve common goals or solve shared problems. Social capital encourages collective action by strengthening trust, cooperation, and shared norms within communities (Putnam, 1993).

## **Literature Review**

The concept of social capital has gained significant attention in sociological and development studies due to its importance in strengthening community cooperation and development processes. Social capital can be traced to Bourdieu (1986), who explained social capital as the resources embedded in social networks and relationships. Bourdieu emphasized that social capital can provide individuals and groups with advantages through access to resources and opportunities within social structures.

Coleman (1988) further developed the concept by highlighting the role of social relationships, trust, and social norms in facilitating collective action. According to Coleman, social capital exists within social structures and enables individuals to achieve goals that would otherwise be difficult to accomplish independently.

Putnam (1993; 2000) expanded the concept of social capital by linking it to civic engagement and democratic development. He argued that communities with strong networks, trust, and participation are more capable of achieving social and economic development. Putnam also distinguished between bonding social capital, which strengthens relationships within close groups such as families and friends, and bridging social capital, which connects individuals across different social groups and communities.

Scholars have also identified linking social capital, which refers to the relationships between community members and institutions such as government agencies and development organizations (Woolcock, 2001). Linking social capital helps communities gain access to external resources, knowledge, and support necessary for development.

In the context of community development, social capital plays a crucial role in promoting cooperation, participation, and collective decision-making. Communities with strong social capital are better able to mobilize local resources, resolve conflicts, and implement development initiatives effectively (Flora & Flora, 2013).

In Sri Lanka, social capital has historically been reflected in traditional village institutions, religious organizations, and community-based networks. Rural communities often rely on mutual assistance, collective labour practices, and social cooperation to address common problems and improve livelihoods. Studies indicate that community participation and strong social relationships contribute significantly to rural development and local governance in Sri Lanka (Uphoff, 2000).

However, social capital in Sri Lanka has also been affected by factors such as ethnic divisions, political conflicts, and unequal access to resources. These challenges can weaken trust and cooperation among communities, thereby limiting the effectiveness of development initiatives. Strengthening social networks, promoting inclusive participation, and building trust between communities and institutions are therefore essential for sustainable community development in Sri Lanka.



## Objectives

1. To examine the concept of social capital and its main dimensions in the context of community development.
2. To analyze the level and forms of social capital in Sri Lankan communities.
3. To explore how social networks, trust, and participation influence community development processes in Sri Lanka.
4. To identify the strengths and challenges of social capital in supporting sustainable community development in Sri Lanka.

## Methodology

This study is based entirely on secondary data. The research uses existing sources such as government reports, census data, policy documents, published research articles, and reports from national and international organizations related to social capital and community development in Sri Lanka. Key sources include development program documents and academic studies on social networks, trust, and participation. The collected secondary data are carefully reviewed, compared, and analyzed using a qualitative and descriptive approach. The study mainly focuses on identifying patterns, trends, and relationships between social capital and community development outcomes. By synthesizing available evidence, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social capital contributes to community development in the Sri Lankan context.

## Analysis

### To examine the concept of social capital and its main dimensions in the context of community development

Social capital is an important concept in understanding how communities' function and develop. It refers to the relationships, networks, trust, and shared norms that connect people within a society. Unlike physical or financial capital, social capital is not a material resource. It exists within social relationships and interactions. Many scholars explain that social capital becomes valuable when it helps individuals and groups achieve common goals.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital consists of resources that individuals gain through their membership in networks and groups. These networks provide access to support, information, and opportunities. However, Bourdieu also points out that social capital can maintain inequality because powerful groups often control valuable networks.

James Coleman (1988) presents social capital as a feature of social structure that facilitates action. He emphasizes trust, obligations, and expectations among members of a group. When people trust each other and follow shared norms, cooperation becomes easier. In community development, this cooperation is essential for organizing activities, solving local problems, and achieving shared objectives.

Robert D. Putnam (1993) further connects social capital with community and institutional performance. He argues that networks of civic engagement and trust improve collective action and democratic participation. Later, Putnam (2000) identifies two main dimensions of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to strong ties among similar people, such as family members, close friends, or members of the same ethnic or religious group. This type of capital provides emotional support and solidarity. Bridging social capital connects people from different social groups. It helps communities build wider cooperation and access new ideas and resources.

In addition to bonding and bridging, scholars also discuss linking social capital. Linking social capital refers to connections between communities and institutions with authority, such as government agencies and development organizations. These vertical relationships are important in community development because they help communities access funding, services, and policy support.

In the context of community development, all three dimensions of social capital play different roles. Bonding capital strengthens internal unity and mutual help. Bridging capital encourages inclusion and inter-group cooperation. Linking capital improves access to external resources and decision-making structures. When these dimensions work together, communities are better able to participate in development activities and manage local challenges.

However, social capital is not always positive. Strong bonding ties may sometimes exclude outsiders or limit social mobility. In diverse societies, such as Sri Lanka, bonding within one group may reduce bridging between different ethnic or religious communities. Therefore, it is important to understand both the positive and negative aspects of social capital when examining its role in community development.



Overall, the concept of social capital provides a useful framework to analyze how social relationships influence development outcomes. By examining its main dimensions, bonding, bridging, and linking- this study aims to understand how social connections support or limit community development processes.

### **To analyze the level and forms of social capital in Sri Lankan communities using secondary data sources**

Research-based evidence shows that social capital exists in different forms in Sri Lankan communities and plays an important role in social and economic life. Secondary data from empirical studies, government reports, and development research indicate that community networks, trust, and participation remain strong in many rural areas of Sri Lanka.

A study conducted in the Central Province found that social capital indicators such as community participation, trust, and mutual support were positively associated with rural well-being (Somaratne, Dayaratne, & Wickramasuriya, 2011). The study highlights that informal networks and cooperation among villagers contribute to livelihood stability. This suggests that bonding social capital, which refers to strong ties among family members and close community groups, is relatively strong in rural Sri Lanka.

Similarly, research on community-based organizations in Sri Lanka shows that members who have higher levels of collective action, information sharing, and trust experience better livelihood outcomes (Gunasekara, Premaratne, & Priyanath, 2017). This finding indicates that social capital is not only a social resource but also an economic asset. The presence of strong internal networks within organizations enhances cooperation and productivity.

Studies conducted in disaster-affected areas further confirm the importance of social capital. Research on flood-affected communities demonstrates that traditional networks, reciprocal relationships, and shared norms helped people recover after disasters (Karunarathne, 2019). Households relied on neighbours and relatives for assistance, which reflects strong bonding capital. At the same time, cooperation across groups and support from external agencies show the presence of bridging and linking forms of social capital.

Another study examining rural and urban responses to flood disasters shows that communities with stronger social networks were better able to mobilize resources and coordinate recovery efforts (Karunarathne, 2021). This highlights the role of linking social capital, which connects communities with institutions such as government bodies and non-governmental organizations.

Overall, secondary data suggest that bonding social capital remains strong in many Sri Lankan rural communities due to kinship systems, religious networks, and village-level associations. However, bridging and linking forms of social capital may vary across regions, especially in post-conflict or urbanized areas. These variations indicate that while traditional networks remain influential, structural and social changes also shape the forms and levels of social capital in the country.

Therefore, empirical research studies confirm that social capital in Sri Lanka operates at multiple levels and plays a significant role in supporting community resilience, participation, and livelihood development.

### **To explore how social networks, trust, and participation influence community development processes in Sri Lanka**

Social networks, trust, and participation are central elements of social capital, and research shows that they directly influence community development processes in Sri Lanka. Secondary data from empirical studies indicate that communities with stronger internal networks and higher levels of participation tend to achieve better social and economic outcomes.

Research on community-based organizations in Sri Lanka demonstrates that active participation in group activities improves collective decision-making and livelihood success. Members who regularly attend meetings, share information, and cooperate with others report higher levels of economic stability and organizational effectiveness (Gunasekara, Premaratne, & Priyanath, 2017). This suggests that participation strengthens both social cohesion and development performance at the community level.



Trust is another important factor in community development. A study conducted in rural Sri Lanka found that trust among community members positively influenced cooperation in agricultural and welfare activities (Somaratne, Dayaratne, & Wickramasuriya, 2011). When people trust each other, they are more willing to share resources, exchange knowledge, and engage in collective problem-solving. Trust reduces conflict and transaction costs, which makes development activities more efficient.

Social networks also play a key role during crises and recovery processes. Research on flood-affected communities shows that households relied heavily on kinship ties and neighborhood networks for support during and after disasters (Karunaratne, 2019). These networks helped families access food, shelter, and financial assistance. Such findings demonstrate that social networks strengthen resilience and enable communities to recover more quickly from shocks.

In addition, linking networks between communities and institutions influence development outcomes. Studies reveal that communities with stronger connections to local government bodies and development agencies were better able to access resources and external support (Karunaratne, 2021). Participation in formal structures, such as rural development committees and welfare programs, enhances community voice and representation in decision-making processes.

However, research also indicates that participation and trust can vary across regions and social groups. In post-conflict areas of Sri Lanka, rebuilding trust between ethnic communities remains a challenge. Limited bridging networks may slow inclusive development. Therefore, while bonding networks are strong in many areas, strengthening bridging and linking forms of social capital is important for sustainable and equitable community development.

Overall, research studies confirm that social networks, trust, and participation significantly influence community development processes in Sri Lanka. Strong networks encourage cooperation, trust improves collective efficiency, and participation enhances empowerment and institutional engagement. Together, these elements create a supportive environment for sustainable development at the community level.

### **To identify the strengths and challenges of social capital in supporting sustainable community development in Sri Lanka**

Social capital has both strengths and limitations in supporting sustainable community development in Sri Lanka. Research-based evidence shows that strong social networks, mutual trust, and active participation contribute positively to resilience, cooperation, and livelihood improvement. At the same time, certain forms of social capital may create exclusion, inequality, or limited access to wider opportunities.

One major strength of social capital in Sri Lanka is the presence of strong bonding ties within rural communities. Studies show that kinship networks, neighborhood support systems, and religious associations provide emotional, financial, and practical assistance during times of crisis (Karunaratne, 2019). These networks help communities respond effectively to natural disasters and economic difficulties. Such internal solidarity strengthens social cohesion and supports local-level sustainability.

Another strength is the role of community-based organizations in promoting collective action. Research indicates that active participation and cooperation within these organizations improve livelihood success and enhance development outcomes (Gunasekara, Premaratne, & Priyanath, 2017). Communities that maintain trust and regular communication among members are better able to manage common resources and organize development initiatives. This suggests that social capital strengthens community ownership and long-term engagement in development programs.

However, social capital also presents certain challenges. Strong bonding ties may sometimes lead to social exclusion. When networks are based mainly on ethnicity, caste, or religion, outsiders may face difficulties in accessing resources or opportunities. This reflects what scholars describe as the “dark side” of social capital, where strong internal cohesion limits broader inclusion (Putnam, 2000). In a multi-ethnic society like Sri Lanka, limited bridging social capital between different groups can affect social harmony and inclusive development.

Another challenge relates to linking social capital. While some communities have strong internal networks, their connections with formal institutions may be weak. Limited trust in public institutions and unequal access to government services can reduce the effectiveness of development programs (Somaratne, Dayaratne, & Wickramasuriya, 2011).



Without strong vertical linkages, communities may struggle to secure external resources and policy support necessary for sustainable development. Urbanization, migration, and economic changes also influence traditional social networks. As communities become more mobile and diverse, traditional bonding ties may weaken, and new forms of association may not fully replace them. This transformation creates both opportunities and uncertainties for sustaining community cooperation.

Overall, documented research suggests that social capital in Sri Lanka has strong potential to support sustainable community development through cooperation, resilience, and participation. However, challenges such as exclusion, unequal access, and weak institutional linkages must be addressed. Strengthening bridging and linking forms of social capital alongside traditional bonding networks is essential for inclusive and sustainable development.

### **Major Findings**

The study reveals that social capital plays an important role in supporting community development in Sri Lanka. First, strong bonding social capital exists in many rural communities. Family relationships, kinship networks, and religious associations provide emotional, social, and sometimes financial support. These close ties strengthen unity and encourage collective action at the village level.

Second, active social networks increase participation in community organizations. Communities with regular meetings, shared responsibilities, and open communication show better coordination in development activities. Participation enhances transparency, shared leadership, and local ownership of projects.

Third, trust among community members positively influences cooperation and sustainability. When trust is strong, people are more willing to contribute time, resources, and effort to community initiatives. However, trust in formal institutions varies across regions, which sometimes limits the effectiveness of development programs.

Fourth, linking social capital improves access to government services, welfare programs, and external support. Communities with stronger institutional connections tend to achieve better development outcomes. At the same time, bridging social capital between different ethnic and social groups remains uneven in some areas, especially in post-conflict regions.

Overall, the findings show that social capital is a valuable resource for sustainable community development in Sri Lanka. However, its impact depends on balancing bonding, bridging, and linking relationships to ensure inclusive and long-term development.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the major findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of social capital in community development in Sri Lanka:

#### **➤ Strengthen Bridging Social Capital**

Efforts should be made to promote cooperation between different ethnic, religious, and social groups. Inter-community programs, joint development projects, and inclusive local forums can help build trust and mutual understanding.

#### **➤ Enhance Linking Social Capital**

Government institutions and development agencies should improve communication and collaboration with community organizations. Transparent procedures, regular consultations, and participatory planning processes can strengthen institutional trust and access to resources.

#### **➤ Promote Active Community Participation**

Local authorities should encourage regular meetings, leadership training, and inclusive decision-making within community organizations. Capacity-building programs can improve management skills and long-term sustainability.



### ➤ **Support Youth and Women's Involvement**

Special attention should be given to increasing youth and women's participation in community development activities. Inclusive leadership opportunities will help diversify social networks and strengthen long-term social capital.

### ➤ **Build Institutional Trust**

Policies should focus on transparency, accountability, and fair service delivery to improve public confidence in institutions. Strong institutional trust enhances linking social capital and supports sustainable development.

### ➤ **Encourage Disaster-Resilient Community Networks**

Given Sri Lanka's exposure to natural disasters, community-based preparedness programs should strengthen local cooperation and mutual support systems.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the role of social capital in community development in Sri Lanka using secondary data sources. The findings show that social capital remains a strong and influential resource within Sri Lankan communities. Social networks, trust, and participation significantly contribute to collective action, local problem-solving, and community resilience. In many rural areas, bonding social capital is particularly strong due to close family ties, kinship systems, and religious associations. These internal connections provide support and stability, especially during times of economic crisis and natural disasters.

At the same time, the study highlights that bridging and linking forms of social capital are equally important for sustainable development. Communities that maintain cooperation across social groups and build effective relationships with government institutions and development agencies tend to achieve better long-term outcomes. However, variations in trust levels, institutional connections, and inter-group cooperation indicate that social capital is not equally distributed across all regions.

Overall, the study concludes that social capital plays a positive but complex role in supporting community development in Sri Lanka. While strong internal networks enhance solidarity and resilience, greater attention must be given to strengthening inclusive and institutional linkages. A balanced development approach that promotes bonding, bridging, and linking social capital together will contribute to more sustainable and equitable community development in the Sri Lankan context.

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