

# FROM COMPLAINTS TO PUBLIC TRUST: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF GRIEVANCE REDRESS MECHANISMS ON ADMINISTRATIVE PERFORMANCE IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES OF SRI LANKA'S NORTHERN AND EASTERN PROVINCES

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**Abstract:** This study examines how grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) in Sri Lankan local government shape administrative performance and citizen trust in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Based on a mixed-method design of Pradeshiya Sabhas, Urban Councils, and Municipal Councils, the study detects citizen complaints, responsive administration, and trust attitudes. A technology-driven approach is being considered to maximize efficiency and many dimensions were discussed to stimulate the authorities' performance. A few obstacles were discussed that mitigate administration performance, but findings indicate that GRM has a direct positive relationship with the overall government system.

**Index Terms:** Grievance Redress Mechanism, Citizen Trust, Public Sector Performance, Local Government, Citizen Engagement, Responsiveness

## INTRODUCTION

Being the closest levels of administration to the citizen, local government institutions are positioned strategically to respond and be accountable in governance. The local government system (in the form of Pradeshiya Sabhas, Urban Councils, and Municipal Councils) is the front line of service delivery and community interaction in Sri Lanka (Krishnamohan, 2016). Same time, local authorities play a vital role in providing better service under many obstacles (Ramesh, 2017). With a proper identification of all kinds of challenges, this deep study is designed to implement a grievance redress mechanism (GRMs) tool to generate a sustainable solution. Studies have identified a direct relationship between GRMs tool and public citizen trust and satisfaction with the service (Wickramasinghe, 2024; Rameez & Fowsar, 2018; Nieizvestna et al., 2022).

World literature emphasizes the significance of the efficiency of complaint-handling systems as administrative tools and as governance innovations that contribute to accountability and increase civic participation (Hossain et al., 2023). The mechanisms have also been translated into new ways of connecting to access and responsiveness through the implementation of e-government platforms and digital grievance redressal systems (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022; Fadrial et al., 2024). Therefore, a prominent panacea can be suggested to make a sustainable solution to the paramount need in Sri Lankan government authorities to deploy a GRM for an efficient and effective government service.

## NEED OF THE STUDY

The relevance of GRMs in Sri Lanka has become increasingly visible in recent years, owing to the convergence of governance crises, service delivery shortfalls, and citizen disenchantment. Studies show that citizens tend to trust local governments depending on their perceptions of institutional fairness, accessibility, and responsiveness (Rameez & Fowsar, 2018). This highlights the importance of having proper systems to address citizens' grievances or to rectify inefficiencies in place; however, in their absence, grievances can accumulate, leading to dissatisfaction, social unrest, and a decline in the institution's legitimacy (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). Nevertheless, when GRMs are transparent, effective, and prioritize a citizen-centered approach, they always make institutions more trustworthy and strengthen the social contract between citizens and the state (Nieizvestna et al., 2022). These inventions are also not uniformly distributed in the South Asian context; for example, in Sri Lanka, which raises questions about whether the institutions are prepared and possess the necessary capacity to implement them, and whether individuals are aware of them and can use them (Jeewanthi & Thalpapwila, 2025). The mechanisms have also been leveraged to create new ways to connect and accomplish tasks through e-government platforms and

digital grievance redressal systems (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022; Fadrial et al., 2024). Considering the new government's digitalization approach, it is an opportunity to implement such a GRMs system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1 Redress of Grievances and Trust in the People and the Theory

Theoretical explanations, such as the citizen participation-trust framework, state that improvements in redress for complaints promote perceptions of equity, transparency, and reciprocity in governance relations (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021). Likewise, the models of service quality and satisfaction indicate that the level of citizens' satisfaction with the results of redress contributes to the overall perceptions of institutional effectiveness and credibility (Lanin & Hermanto, 2018). GRMs represent procedural rights in administrative justice. They offer remedies that uphold the legitimacy of state authority by guaranteeing that citizens are not subjected to arbitrary oppression (Nieizviestna et al., 2022).

In recent literature, integrative models have been developed and examined between e-government, trust, and performance to highlight the increase in accessibility, the decrease in transaction costs, and the responsiveness of digitalised grievance systems (Kala et al., 2024). Nevertheless, digital innovations may also deepen inequalities in case there are gaps in access, and the relevance of matching technological instruments with the institutional and social capabilities cannot be overstated (Hartanto et al., 2021).

### 3.2 Global View on Grievance Redress Mechanisms

Comparative scholarship emphasises that there were extensive cross-national and cross-subnational differences in the design, implementation, and effectiveness of GRMs. Salim et al. (2017) demonstrated that the level of trust is directly linked to citizen satisfaction with the government's performance, which implies that the redress procedures should be manifested in the framework of overall performance in Yemen. In India, Ati et al. (2024) demonstrated that the presence of effective grievance mechanisms in water governance enhanced both trust and willingness to engage, especially where a sense of equity in service delivery was evident.

These dynamics have also been reinforced by research in Indonesia. Hartanto et al. (2021) developed a framework that examined e-governance effectiveness grounded on the ideas of good governance and citizens' trust. They called the mediator of redress systems institutionalized expressions of accountability. Fadrial et al. (2024) also discussed the concept of digitalization in Indonesian local government. They concluded that online GRMs were a reason why citizen trust levels were high due to reduced bureaucratic opaqueness. The findings can be compared to those of Maulan and Fitriani (2025), who concluded that digital transparency systems in Southeast Asia facilitated engagement and increased the credibility of institutions.

### 3.3 Redressing Grievances and Trust of a Citizen in South Asia

In South Asia, the intersection of redress of grievances, trust, and governance has been observed across several empirical situations. In their analysis of the Somalia case as a fragile state, Abdi and Abdul Rahman (2025) discovered that both control and perceived performance affected the trust, which is similar to South Asian democracies. In Bangladesh, Baniamin and Jamil (2021) noted that whether local government procedures are fair and inclusive, such as the complaint-handling procedures, played a significant role in determining the perceptions of citizens of trust and institutional legitimacy.

A country like Sri Lanka is a notable example of a nation with a diverse range of governmental structures and post-conflict rebuilding challenges. According to Ramesh (2017), the level of trust in Sri Lankan state institutions is still skewed and is often influenced by ethnic and regional dimensions. Ramasamy and Baniamin (2022) built upon this finding that there was the presence of an institutional trust paradox in which expectations of fairness did not always align with the perceived experiences of resolving complaints across ethnic groups. Jeewanthi and Thalpapwila (2025) also stated that the participation of citizens in local government in Sri Lanka remains low-capacity-based, despite political decisions on participation and accountability.

### 3.4 Critical Literature Gap

Although increasing amounts of research have been conducted since then, gaps remain. First, although international and regional research has demonstrated a connection between GRMs and Trust, there is a lack of focus on institutional processes that facilitate or hinder successful grievance management in local governments, particularly in resource-constrained or weak settings. Second, people often praise the effectiveness of digital grievance systems. However, there are few real-world studies on their inclusivity, especially for marginalized groups that lack regular access to technology (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022).

Third, Sri Lankan scholarship highlights the lack of accountability and citizen involvement; however, empirical studies of GRMs in the local government sector of Sri Lanka remain divided. Most studies focus on either general trust in government institutions (Rameez & Fowsar, 2018) or governance reforms (Jeewanthi & Thalpapwila, 2025) and lack a systematic analysis of the direct impacts of GRMs on

administrative performance and trust. Lastly, little comparative work has been done on regions with strong grievance regimes and those where they did not exist to generalize on the processes by which GRMs establish trust.

The research is relevant to these gaps because it assesses grievance redress mechanisms within local government in Sri Lanka by applying a multidimensional approach to the issue, combining institutional, technological, and citizen-centered approaches. This study aims to contextualize the Sri Lankan experience within the global discourse, particularly in the South Asian region. It aims to foster a comprehensive understanding, both conceptual and practical, providing policy-relevant insights for the development and implementation of effective GRMs.

### 3.5 Core Variables

#### Independent variables (IV):

- **Citizen engagement in GRMs:** The degree to which citizens are aware of and knowledgeable about using GRMs, have access to them, and actively participate in complaining, voicing grievances, and monitoring service delivery is foundational. Higher engagement often correlates with increased feedback and accountability in service provision, especially when assigned channels are accessible and citizens feel empowered (Olivos et al., 2022; Waddington, 2019).
- **Functionality of Grievance Redress Mechanism:** The ability of grievance mechanisms to process and resolve complaints effectively, including accessibility, transparency, and follow-through to resolution, determines how well complaints are handled and resolved, which in turn influences perceptions of procedural justice and the likelihood of future engagement (Pande & Hossain, 2022)
- **Institutional capacity to respond:** This refers to the resources, including human, financial, technical, and infrastructure systems, as well as institutional norms and administrative skills, available within institutions for carrying out grievance systems (expertise, systems, staffing, decision-making authority). Well-equipped institutions have the capacity to resolve grievances in a meaningful manner to sustain service standards (Pande & Hossain, 2022; Heinrich, 2002).

#### Dependent Variables:

- **Public Sector Performance:** Public sector performance refers to the improvement in service delivery resulting from the interventions and outcomes of the GRM's operations, which connects the complaint-response mechanism and institutional capability to enhance service delivery. Performance includes being fair, efficient, and accountable, as well as the ability to adjust or modify policies and behaviour in response to complaints about services and address grievances (Pande & Hossain, 2022; Keefer, et al., 2023).
- **Public Trust in Local Government:** This is how much people believe that local government institutions are honest, fair, and reliable. When public complaints are handled systematically and consistently, it builds and strengthens trust. This leads to real improvements in service delivery, transparency, and administrative justice, which in turn foster public trust (Pande & Hossain, 2022; Abdi, et al., 2025)



### 3.6 Conceptual Framework

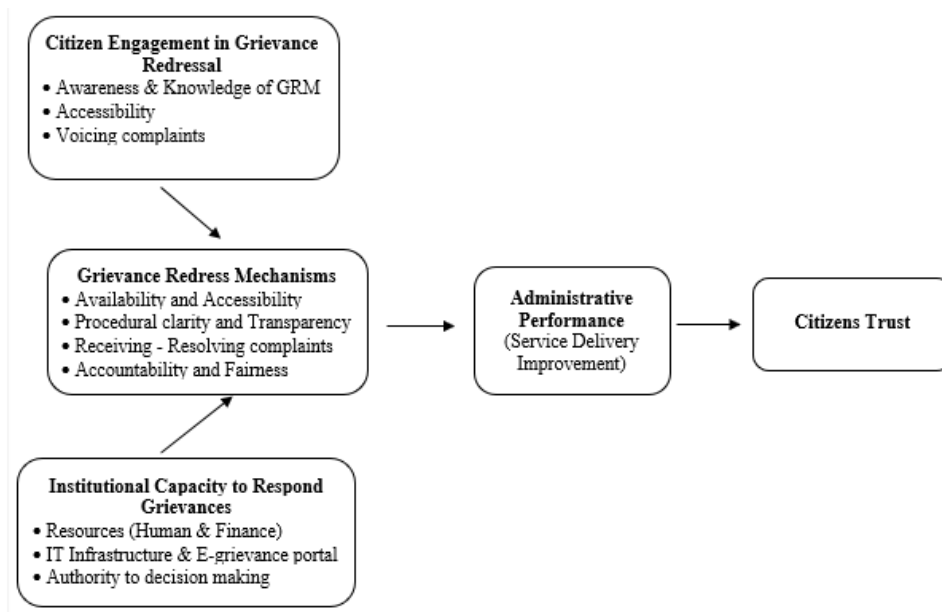


Figure 1: conceptual framework for the study

### 3.7 Hypotheses

H1: Citizens' engagement in the grievance redress process (awareness, accessibility) has a positive relationship to administrative performance and citizens' trust in local government.

H2: Functionality of GRMs (accessibility, punctuality, responsiveness) has a positive relationship to administrative performance by improving service delivery and citizens' trust in local government.

H3: Institutional capacity (in human, financial, technical resources, e-government platforms, and AI-enabled channels) has a positive relationship to reinforce the effectiveness of grievance redress, and their impact on administrative performance and citizens' trust in local government.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this paper, a mixed-method design has been employed in which both the quantitative and qualitative designs will be adopted to provide a comprehensive insight into the grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) and their impacts on the performance of the administration and the trust the community has in the local government in Sri Lanka. Such a mixed method is appropriate since it will enable not just testing the relationships between variables statistically but also triggering the complex experience of people and authorities that creates a vision of governance (Abdi & Rahman, 2025).

### 4.1 Data Sources

**Citizen Surveys:** Structured surveys are conducted in Pradeshiya Sabhas, Urban Councils, and Municipal Councils that have been selected to assess the accessibility, responsiveness, fairness, trust, and satisfaction of GRMs. Questions are based on the tested scales on trust and the quality of services provided to the people (Lanin et al., 2018; Salim et al., 2017).

**Complaint Databases:** The data from local government complaint registers and online portals are studied to determine trends in the volume of grievances, their categories, the duration of resolution, and the escalation routes (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022).

**Key Informant Interviews:** These interviews are semi-structured, involving local authorities' representatives, community leaders and civil society representatives to gather institutional views, identify capacity limitations, participation and share experiences with customary reform (Jeevanthi & Thalpawila, 2025).

### 4.2 Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage sampling approach is used. At the first level, the local government is stratified by type (Pradeshiya Sabha, Urban Council, Municipal Council) across the Northern and Eastern provinces to facilitate possible representation. Within both provinces, six councils were selected for research (two Municipal Councils, two Urban Councils, and two Pradeshiya Sabhas) that represent differing

institutional capacities: a high-performing municipal council, a moderately performing urban council, and a rural Pradeshiya Sabha that is resource-constrained.

In the chosen councils, systematic random sampling is used to select households, ensuring a diverse range of socioeconomic, political and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, a sample of approximately 450 citizens has sufficient statistical strength to support quantitative analysis, whereas 150 in-depth interviews yield valuable qualitative information (Rameez & Fowsar, 2018).

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Patterns in Citizen Complaints

The most common complaints lodged in Pradeshiya Sabhas concern their basic needs, such as water supply, drainage, and sanitation, as the rural population has urgent needs (Fernando & Rathnayaka, 2024). In Urban areas including unban and municipal councils, by contrast, document a greater rate of complaints regarding traffic congestion, housing permits, and urban planning as well as waste management issues and flood-related complaints rise during the monsoon. Despite these differences, a common theme emerges: many citizens lack a clear understanding of formal grievance procedures. According to surveys, almost forty per cent in urban areas and fifty-five per cent in rural areas responded that they did not know whether they had the right to make a formal complaint or were unsure where to file a complaint. This indicates an awareness and accessibility gap in the use of GRMs, particularly in rural and marginalised communities (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022).

### 5.2 Administrative Responsiveness

One of the most important indicators of the efficiency of grievance mechanisms is responsiveness. The evidence indicates that the average time taken to resolve a complaint varies significantly among the councils: the municipal authorities can resolve the issue within an average of 10-15 working days, whereas in the rural councils it can take up to six weeks (or more); however, it can vary based on the services too. This gap has a close association with institutional resources and capacity. Municipal and urban councils, particularly those with substantial funds, may have special grievance cells, professional offices, and online databases. In contrast, Pradeshiya Sabhas that serve rural areas often operate based on paper-based registers and strained personnel (Gamlath, 2020). Qualitative interviews also reveal the frustration of the citizens at delayed or insufficient responses. However, responsiveness is enhanced when digital portals and e-governmental platforms are in use.

### 5.3 Perceptions of Trust

The experience with grievance handling has a significant impact on citizens' trust in the local government. This indicates a lack of trust cycle, where low responsiveness discourages engagement, which subsequently diminishes the pressure to reform the institution (Salim et al., 2017). Demographics and social factors also influence the level of trust. The younger generation and educated groups, especially those who had been exposed to digital services, indicated that they were comparatively more confident in local government initiatives that involved transparency actions, mainly in urbanized areas (Kala et al., 2024). On the contrary, marginalised communities in both rural and urban areas have still reported low levels of trust, attributing this to discrimination and unfair treatment in the complaint management process (Ramasamy & Baniamin, 2022).

### 5.4 Institutional Factors

Institutional capacity is also a key factor in determining the efficacy of addressing grievances. Conversely, under-resourced councils have backlogs, incomplete records, less power, inadequate communication, and ineffective follow-up mechanisms (Abeywardena Wickramasinghe, 2024). There is potential to find solutions through technological integration, but it is not even. Efficiency is increased where the e-government tools are deployed; however, the lack of digital literacy among citizens and employees poses an obstacle (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022). New AI-led communication, including chatbots, in pilot projects, promising to enhance interaction between citizens and the government (Zhang & Nie, 2025). However, unless infrastructure and capacity-building are invested in, such tools may serve to strengthen disparities between urban and rural citizens.

### 5.5 Comparative Insight

The comparison of high-performing and low-performing councils helps explain the circumstances under which grievance systems function effectively. In this jurisdiction, citizens reported being more satisfied and willing to participate in governance processes on a continuous basis (Jeewanthi & Thalpapwila, 2025). In contrast, in a rural Pradeshiya Sabha where formal structures were not in place, complaints were most likely to be registered unofficially without any follow-up. In this case, the citizen characterized grievance submission as a futile activity that strengthened alienation and disengagement. This comparison highlights the importance of institutional design and resources in deciding whether GRMs are practical tools of accountability or not.

## 5.6 Interpretive Commentary

The results verify the suppositions expressed in the previous section. The issue of accessibility for participation (H1), especially in rural areas, is also a crucial obstacle to overcome, highlighting the lack of awareness and outreach program that hinders the ability to foster trust. The perceived performance and satisfaction are confirmed by the effective functioning of GRMs (H2), their accountability and responsiveness in implementing corrective and preventive measures in response to complaints. H3, institutional capacity is associated with a clear relationship between the functioning of grievance redress systems and performance, whereas technological integration also improves responsiveness and addresses equity concerns. The significance of fairness and transparency is also evident, as citizens appreciated procedural justice despite receiving biased results, which ultimately validates their trust.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### 6.1 Theoretical interpretation of the findings

Service quality and satisfaction models are also justified in the data (Lanin & Hermanto, 2018; Salim et al., 2017). Responsiveness was found to be the most predictive of administrative performance and citizen trust, while fairness and transparency were identified as factors that strengthen it. The buffer effect of institutional capacity further demonstrates that grievance systems are integrated into the framework of larger governance tools; and councils with trained personnel, funds, and online infrastructure invariably perform much better than those limited by resources (Gamlath, 2020; Wickramasinghe, 2024).

The aspect of technological integration of GRM was promising, but it came out to demonstrate the dual nature of innovation. E-grievance portals increased efficiency and communication, as evidenced by the new literature in the digital governance field (Kala et al., 2024; Zhang & Nie, 2025). Nevertheless, the unequal adoption and lack of equal access to the digital world by citizens highlighted the danger of digital divides. This suggests that incorporating technology into inclusive institutional structures is necessary, a point that cannot be ignored; nevertheless, instead of believing that digitisation is not enough to address the shortages in accountability (Chowdhury & Himel, 2022).

### 6.2 Policy and Practice Implications

**Enhancing Accessibility:** There should be sensitization and community outreach to inform people about where and how they can file grievances. Without such an attempt, accountability will not be inclusive of marginalized groups.

**Enhancing Responsiveness:** Local authorities are to establish transparent service standards, such as timeframes for complaint resolution, and to have in place monitoring frameworks that track adherence. Institutionalization of responsiveness is critical and not based on goodwill.

**Improve Fairness and Transparency:** Procedures for complaint handling should be standardized, documented, and publicly disclosed. Status updates, the receipt of acknowledgements, and appeal processes are some of the mechanisms that create a perception of fairness and minimize distrust among redressal users.

**Development of Institutional Capacity:** It is crucial to invest in staff training, resources, and infrastructure. Technical and human resources have to be made available to the councils to maintain the grievance mechanisms. The assistance of donors and governments should be directed towards long-term capacity building, rather than short-term projects.

**Inclusive Digitalization:** Although e-grievance portals and AI-based communication tools help increase efficiency, their implementation should be supported by initiatives to overcome digital divides. Particularly, hybrid solutions, which combine online solutions with physical counters, enable the participation of all citizens.

**Reducing Political Interference:** There is a need to establish mechanisms that protect grievance processes against the politics of patronage. Unbiasedness can be strengthened by independent monitoring, which can take the form of an Ombudsman or audit institution.

### 6.3 Broader Significance

It is required for ensuring governance aspects within an institutional environment. They enable citizens to hold institutions accountable, promote responsive governance, and foster confidence in fragile political settings. A well-structured grievance redressal management system can be utilised in situations of political and post-conflict reconciliation to reestablish credibility and prevent the development of complications into unrest (Ramasamy & Baniamin, 2022).

On the theoretical level, the study highlights that administrative performance and trust cannot be observed separately. Instead, they need to be interpreted as the products of interactive processes in which institutional structure, voter attitudes, and the socio-political environment meet. Placing Sri Lanka within the global discourse, the study is relevant to the comparative governance literature and provides insight into its local relevance to reform.

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