

Economic Empowerment via Collective Consciousness: Achieving SDG 8 Through Rural Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka – A Case Study of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement

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Abstract— This study examines Sarvodaya’s pivotal role in promoting economic empowerment by cultivating a collective consciousness to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8—decent work and economic growth—in rural Sri Lanka. Rooted in Gandhian philosophy, Sarvodaya is a grassroots movement emphasizing social cohesion, participatory development, and community self-reliance. By leveraging shared norms, values, and social bonds, Sarvodaya has historically mobilized rural communities to initiate and sustain small-scale enterprises, thereby enhancing livelihoods and reducing poverty. This research investigates how Sarvodaya’s community-driven approach nurtures the collective consciousness that underpins entrepreneurial motivation and resilience. Employing a mixed-methods case study design, data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and surveys within selected Sarvodaya-led villages across Sri Lanka. The findings reveal that Sarvodaya’s emphasis on spiritual and cultural norms fosters trust, social cohesion, and a sense of shared purpose, which collectively serve as catalysts for entrepreneurial activity. The reinforced social capital enables community members to access resources, collaborate, and innovate, leading to sustainable livelihoods and inclusive economic growth. Moreover, the study emphasizes the significance of community participation and cultural values in shaping entrepreneurial behavior that aligns with SDG 8 targets. The research contributes to understanding how grassroots movements, such as Sarvodaya, can harness collective consciousness as a strategic asset for rural development. It offers a practical framework for policymakers, development practitioners, and community organizations seeking to replicate or adapt Sarvodaya’s community-centric model to promote inclusive economic growth in similar contexts. Ultimately, the study underscores the transformative potential of social cohesion and shared norms in empowering rural entrepreneurs, fostering resilient communities, and achieving sustainable development objectives in Sri Lanka.

Keywords— Sarvodaya, economic empowerment, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, Gandhian philosophy

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background & Context

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and promoting sustainable development by 2030. Among the 17 goals, SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth is particularly critical for nations like Sri Lanka, where large segments of the population remain engaged in informal and vulnerable employment sectors. SDG 8 promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (United Nations, 2015). In Sri Lanka, while the national economy has shown signs of recovery following periods of conflict and economic disruption, many rural communities continue to face underemployment, income instability, and limited access to opportunities (World Bank, 2021; DCS, 2023). Addressing SDG 8 within this context requires bottom-up approaches that harness local capacities and cultural strengths to enable economic participation and empowerment.

One such bottom-up approach involves promoting rural entrepreneurship, which is increasingly recognized as a driver of local development, poverty alleviation, and community resilience. In Sri Lanka, rural entrepreneurship is not only an economic necessity but also a pathway toward revitalizing local economies, reducing migration, and fostering innovation among youth and women (ILO, 2022). The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, one of the country’s oldest and most influential grassroots organizations, has played a pioneering role in fostering rural entrepreneurship through a holistic approach that combines economic self-reliance with spiritual and social development. Grounded in Gandhian and Buddhist principles, Sarvodaya’s programs support village-level enterprises, community banks, vocational training centers, and self-help groups, enabling thousands of rural families to generate income while reinforcing social solidarity (Ariyaratne, 2000; UNDP, 2020).



Central to Sarvodaya's philosophy is the idea of collective consciousness, a concept derived from sociological and spiritual traditions. Collective consciousness refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral frameworks that bind members of a community together (Durkheim, 1893/1997). Within Sarvodaya's development model, collective consciousness is cultivated through participatory decision-making, communal labor (Shramadana), and the pursuit of spiritual awakening (awakening of self and society). This shared consciousness not only strengthens community cohesion but also acts as a powerful catalyst for economic empowerment, motivating individuals to engage in cooperative ventures, share knowledge, and build socially responsible businesses. When communities are driven by a unified moral purpose and a shared vision of progress, they are more likely to sustain economic activities that benefit all members, rather than a few.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite growing recognition of the importance of rural entrepreneurship in achieving inclusive economic development, rural entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka continue to face multifaceted challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability. These challenges are particularly evident in Sarvodaya-supported communities, where efforts have been made to integrate social empowerment with grassroots economic initiatives. Entrepreneurs in these areas often face limited access to capital, inadequate market linkages, insufficient business development services, and structural underemployment, which collectively hinder their ability to scale up or sustain their enterprises (UNDP, 2020; ILO, 2022). Women and youth, in particular, remain underrepresented in rural enterprise leadership due to prevailing social norms, lack of institutional support, and inadequate training.

In response to these constraints, organizations such as the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement have emphasized the value of collective consciousness—a shared awareness and social ethic that encourages cooperation, self-reliance, and community-based decision-making—as a means to foster both social cohesion and economic participation. However, a significant gap remains in the empirical understanding of how collective consciousness directly contributes to financial empowerment, particularly in the context of rural entrepreneurship.

While anecdotal evidence suggests that communities with strong social cohesion and shared values are more resilient and innovative, there is a lack of systematic research exploring the mechanisms through which collective consciousness influences entrepreneurial behavior, access to resources, and long-term economic sustainability in rural Sri Lanka.

Consequently, the absence of scholarly inquiry into this relationship limits the ability of policymakers, development practitioners, and grassroots organizations to design interventions that effectively harness social capital for economic development. Without a clear understanding of how collective consciousness can enhance economic agency, rural development strategies may continue to overlook a potentially transformative resource embedded in community structures and cultural traditions.

This research therefore seeks to address this critical gap by examining the challenges faced by rural entrepreneurs within Sarvodaya communities, while investigating the role of collective consciousness as a catalyst for economic empowerment, in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Accordingly, the main research question of this research is How does collective consciousness influence rural entrepreneurship in Sarvodaya?

1.2 Research Objectives

To assess the role of collective consciousness in enhancing rural entrepreneurship within Sarvodaya.

To analyze the effects of collective consciousness on economic empowerment and SDG 8 indicators.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Concepts of Collective Consciousness and Their Relevance to Entrepreneurship

The concept of collective consciousness originates from classical sociological theory and refers to the shared beliefs, moral attitudes, and values that unify members of a society or community (Durkheim, 1893/1997). Emile Durkheim first introduced this concept in his work *The Division of Labor in Society*, proposing that collective consciousness forms the foundation of social cohesion and solidarity. In traditional societies, this consciousness is based on mechanical solidarity, where shared values and practices bind individuals together.

In contrast, in more complex societies, organic solidarity emerges through interdependence among diverse individuals and institutions. This framework emphasizes that social unity and cooperation are critical to the functioning and evolution of collective systems, including economic systems.

When applied to the field of entrepreneurship, collective consciousness provides a compelling lens through which to analyze how social cohesion, shared purpose, and communal values influence entrepreneurial activity, particularly in rural and community-based contexts. Unlike individualistic models of entrepreneurship that center on profit maximization and personal gain (Schumpeter, 1934), the collective consciousness perspective aligns more closely with social entrepreneurship and community-based enterprise, where the focus is on shared value creation, mutual empowerment, and sustainable development (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006).

In the context of rural entrepreneurship, particularly within movements like Sarvodaya, collective consciousness is manifested in participatory decision-making, cooperative economic models, and culturally grounded development practices. These practices promote what some scholars refer to as “entrepreneurial solidarity”, in which entrepreneurial efforts are guided not only by economic motivations but also by ethical, spiritual, and communal goals (Mair & Martí, 2006). For example, in Sarvodaya-supported communities, entrepreneurial success is often measured not only in terms of income but also in terms of social equity, well-being, and community transformation.

Furthermore, the Theory of Social Capital (Putnam, 2000) complements the concept of collective consciousness by explaining how trust, norms, and social networks can foster cooperative behavior that benefits economic outcomes. High levels of social capital—closely related to collective consciousness—are known to facilitate information sharing, reduce transaction costs, and enhance mutual support, all of which are crucial in resource-constrained rural environments (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Therefore, this research draws upon Durkheim’s theory of collective consciousness, supplemented by social capital theory and insights from community-based entrepreneurship literature, to explore how shared social and ethical values can foster resilient, inclusive, and socially responsible entrepreneurial ecosystems in rural Sri Lanka. Understanding these theoretical intersections is vital for developing localized development models that are both economically viable and socially transformative.

2.2 SDG 8 and its Specific Targets Relevant to Rural Economic Empowerment

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, founded in 1958 by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, is one of the most prominent grassroots development organizations in Sri Lanka, integrating the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions of development. Rooted in Gandhian philosophy and Buddhist ethics, Sarvodaya’s approach emphasizes self-reliance, participatory decision-making, collective consciousness, and the awakening of individual and societal potential (Ariyaratne, 2000). Over decades, Sarvodaya has transitioned from a social mobilization movement to a multifaceted development actor that supports rural entrepreneurship through community-based microfinance, vocational training, self-employment schemes, and cooperative economic models (UNDP, 2020).

Several empirical and theoretical studies have documented Sarvodaya’s contribution to rural development. Perera and Hewege (2013) argue that Sarvodaya’s unique model of development stands apart from donor-driven or top-down development frameworks, in that it fosters community-driven entrepreneurship and long-term behavioral change. The holistic nature of Sarvodaya’s programming—spanning health, education, livelihoods, and spirituality—creates an ecosystem in which entrepreneurship is embedded within ethical, social, and cultural norms.

Research by Seneviratne (2011) highlights how Sarvodaya’s community banking system has enabled marginalized rural populations, especially women, to gain access to credit and savings mechanisms, empowering them to launch or sustain micro-enterprises. These systems operate not merely as financial institutions but as vehicles for fostering trust, solidarity, and collective responsibility. This supports the theory that social capital—trust-based community networks and mutual support systems—can serve as the foundation for rural entrepreneurship (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Theoretically, Sarvodaya’s work aligns with the Community-Based Enterprise (CBE) model, which proposes that entrepreneurial activities driven by community values and collective goals lead to both economic and social transformation (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). CBEs emphasize the mobilization of local resources, participatory management, and reinvesting profits in community development. Sarvodaya’s integrated village development model—where each “grama sanwardhana samithi” (village development society) operates as a unit of economic and social action—epitomizes this framework.

Furthermore, social entrepreneurship theory provides another relevant lens. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which focuses on profit maximization, social entrepreneurship seeks to address social problems through innovative, sustainable, and ethical business models (Mair & Martí, 2006). Sarvodaya's interventions often blend spiritual motivation with economic necessity, positioning their rural entrepreneurship model as a form of social entrepreneurship rooted in collective consciousness and non-violence (Ariyaratne, 2000).

However, despite the substantial practical impact of Sarvodaya, there remains a lack of comprehensive analytical studies examining how its model translates into measurable economic empowerment, particularly through the lens of collective consciousness. Most existing literature has focused on the movement's social or spiritual aspects, with limited empirical investigation into the causal pathways through which Sarvodaya's practices promote rural entrepreneurship and contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

2.3 Sarvodaya, Collective Consciousness and Rural Entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, founded by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne in 1958, has long been recognized as a pioneer in grassroots development in Sri Lanka. Drawing on Gandhian and Buddhist principles, Sarvodaya emphasizes holistic development that integrates economic self-reliance, community participation, and spiritual well-being (Ariyaratne, 2000). Over time, its role in promoting rural entrepreneurship has attracted scholarly interest. However, much of the existing literature focuses on its social development and spiritual dimensions, with comparatively fewer studies analyzing its economic empowerment impacts.

According to Perera and Hewege (2013), Sarvodaya distinguishes itself from conventional development NGOs through its value-based, community-led model. Their study emphasizes that Sarvodaya does not promote entrepreneurship as an isolated economic activity but as part of a larger ecosystem of social transformation. The movement fosters entrepreneurship by building social capital, improving community infrastructure, and offering training programs that integrate ethical consciousness with practical skills. These characteristics align Sarvodaya with models of community-based enterprises and social entrepreneurship, wherein profit generation is secondary to community well-being and sustainability.

Seneviratne (2011) explored the role of Sarvodaya's community banking initiative—known as SEEDS (Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Development Services)—as a microfinance platform that empowers rural women entrepreneurs. Her findings suggest that SEEDS goes beyond providing credit; it instills financial literacy, promotes collective savings habits, and encourages group accountability, all of which contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural enterprises. The study also found that women involved in SEEDS programs reported improved decision-making power within households and increased participation in community affairs.

Furthermore, De Silva and Kodithuwakku (2010) analyzed Sarvodaya's impact through the lens of livelihood development. Their research highlighted that Sarvodaya's success in rural entrepreneurship stems from its multi-sectoral approach, which combines education, skill training, and market access with spiritual development and civic engagement. They found that entrepreneurship in Sarvodaya communities often takes non-traditional forms such as cooperative farming, home-based industries, and agro-ecological tourism, which are adapted to local cultural and environmental conditions.

From a theoretical standpoint, scholars such as Peredo and Chrisman (2006) have categorized these models under the umbrella of community-based enterprises, where entrepreneurship emerges as a collective effort driven by community needs, shared ownership, and reinvestment of profits into communal goals. This model reflects Sarvodaya's structural approach of organizing rural communities into "grama sanvardhana samithis" (village development societies), which serve as the primary unit of economic and social action.

However, despite these insights, a gap remains in empirical research that quantifies or systematizes the impact of Sarvodaya's entrepreneurial programs, particularly regarding long-term business sustainability, scalability, and their contribution to national development goals, such as SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Most available studies are qualitative, emphasizing case studies and personal narratives, while large-scale evaluations of economic outcomes remain limited.

Moreover, the role of collective consciousness—a central tenet of Sarvodaya's philosophy—in fostering entrepreneurship has not been thoroughly analyzed.

Although collective identity and mutual support are cited as strengths in various case studies, there is limited theoretical or empirical investigation into how shared values and social cohesion directly influence entrepreneurial behavior, risk-taking, or innovation in rural Sri Lankan contexts.

Thus, the present study aims to bridge this gap by combining theoretical insights from community-based development, social capital theory, and entrepreneurship studies to systematically evaluate how Sarvodaya's collective consciousness model contributes to rural economic empowerment, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 8.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture a comprehensive understanding of how collective consciousness within Sarvodaya communities contributes to rural entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. The qualitative component aims to explore underlying social, cultural, and psychological factors, while the quantitative segment provides measurable insights into entrepreneurial activities and outcomes. This methodological triangulation enhances the validity of the findings by addressing both numerical patterns and lived experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection

Primary Data will be gathered through multiple tools.

Surveys will be distributed to a statistically representative sample of rural entrepreneurs affiliated with Sarvodaya. These structured questionnaires will collect data on entrepreneurial background, financial inclusion, business performance, and perceptions of collective consciousness and community support.

In-depth interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including Sarvodaya officials, village-level community leaders, and selected entrepreneurs. These interviews aim to explore institutional perspectives, strategies, and personal narratives that contribute to entrepreneurial success and social empowerment.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) will be organized with clusters of entrepreneurs from selected communities to examine shared experiences, challenges, and the role of collective action and consciousness in their economic activities.

Secondary Data will be reviewed to contextualize and support primary findings. This includes existing academic literature on rural entrepreneurship, development theory, and Sarvodaya's model; annual reports, evaluations, and internal documentation from Sarvodaya; as well as governmental and NGO datasets on SDG 8 indicators such as employment rates, youth engagement, and SME development in rural Sri Lanka. These sources will help benchmark Sarvodaya's efforts against broader national development objectives.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The study will adopt a purposive sampling strategy to select Sarvodaya-affiliated communities across diverse regions of Sri Lanka, including the Sabaragamuwa, Southern, and Uva Provinces. These regions have varying levels of development and Sarvodaya presence, allowing for comparative insights. Within these communities, participants will be selected based on predefined criteria to ensure diversity in terms of gender, entrepreneurial sector (e.g., agriculture, crafts, services), experience level, and the nature of their engagement with Sarvodaya (e.g., participation in microfinance, training programs, or community development initiatives). This diversity ensures that the sample reflects the heterogeneity of rural entrepreneurship and provides a robust basis for generalizing findings across the Sarvodaya network.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study will adopt a purposive sampling strategy to select Sarvodaya-affiliated communities across diverse regions of Sri Lanka, including the North Central, Southern, and Uva Provinces. These regions have varying levels of development and Sarvodaya presence, allowing for comparative insights. Within these communities, participants will be selected based on predefined criteria to ensure diversity in terms of gender, entrepreneurial sector (e.g., agriculture, crafts, services), experience level, and the nature of their engagement with Sarvodaya (e.g., participation in microfinance, training programs, or community development initiatives). This diversity ensures that the sample reflects the heterogeneity of rural entrepreneurship and provides a robust basis for generalizing findings across the Sarvodaya network.

4.1 In-Depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDS)

The qualitative data, gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The quantitative data from the structured surveys were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. This section focuses primarily on the qualitative component, where rich, nuanced patterns were identified to interpret the role of collective consciousness in promoting economic empowerment.

4.4.1. Shared Values and Social Cohesion

A dominant theme across the qualitative data was the power of shared spiritual and cultural values—central to Sarvodaya’s philosophy—in shaping community solidarity and entrepreneurial behavior. Interviewees and focus group participants consistently emphasized that collective consciousness fosters mutual trust, enabling informal cooperation, joint ventures, and risk-sharing among entrepreneurs. “Our unity and shared purpose motivate us to support each other, making our businesses stronger,” noted a village leader from a Sarvodaya-affiliated community. This finding supports prior research suggesting that social cohesion enhances collective problem-solving, especially in resource-constrained settings (Putnam, 2000). The trust embedded in communal relationships reduces transaction costs, encourages innovation, and strengthens group-based economic models, such as cooperatives and collective savings schemes.

4.4.2. Psychological Empowerment and Entrepreneurial Confidence

Another key theme was psychological empowerment, which emerged strongly in both interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Entrepreneurs described how recognition, moral support, and encouragement from the community bolstered their self-esteem and resilience, fostering a mindset conducive to innovation and long-term investment. “Knowing that my community believes in me encourages me to innovate and grow my business,” shared a young female entrepreneur from Anuradhapura. This aligns with the theoretical construct of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which posits that group solidarity contributes to individual motivation. The data suggest that collective consciousness instills a sense of purpose and confidence, particularly among young people and women, who might otherwise feel marginalized within mainstream economic frameworks.

4.4.3. Institutional Strategies and Resource Mobilization

From the perspective of Sarvodaya officials and community leaders, the organization’s participatory development model—which emphasizes collective identity and grassroots governance—was cited as a crucial enabler of entrepreneurial success. Interview data revealed that programs focusing on capacity-building, microfinance, and community-based training were more successful when framed through shared goals and ethical leadership. Community-driven microfinance initiatives, often managed by self-help groups or savings and loan collectives, were repeatedly cited as effective models for resource pooling. Entrepreneurs stated that they were able to access credit, training, and even shared physical resources (e.g., storage facilities or transportation) through group-based mechanisms, rather than relying solely on individual financial power.

4.4.4. Challenges and Barriers: Limits to Collective Action

While the benefits of collective consciousness were widely acknowledged, the data also revealed structural challenges that continue to constrain rural entrepreneurship. In particular, entrepreneurs identified limited access to external markets, poor infrastructure, and a lack of digital tools as persistent barriers. Some participants noted that collective action had not yet fully addressed these external constraints and called for stronger linkages between community efforts and government or private sector initiatives. “We are united, but we still need better roads, internet, and market links to grow further,” noted an entrepreneur from the Uva Province. This highlights the limitations of internal social capital in overcoming systemic economic barriers, underscoring the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration to scale up local entrepreneurial successes.

V. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of collective consciousness in fostering rural entrepreneurship and economic empowerment within Sarvodaya communities across Sri Lanka. The purposive sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of diverse communities from different regions, capturing a broad spectrum of experiences and practices. The qualitative analysis revealed that shared spiritual and cultural values underpin social cohesion, trust, and mutual support, which are vital for collaborative economic activities such as cooperatives and resource pooling.

Furthermore, psychological empowerment—particularly among women and youth—emerged as a significant driver of entrepreneurial confidence and resilience, reinforcing the importance of community-based validation and moral support.

Institutional strategies implemented by Sarvodaya, including participatory development, microfinance, and capacity-building programs, effectively leverage collective identity to mobilize resources and foster sustainable entrepreneurship. However, the findings also underscore existing systemic barriers, such as limited market access, inadequate infrastructure, and digital divides, which external community efforts alone cannot fully address. These challenges highlight the need for stronger linkages between government and private sector initiatives to scale local successes.

Overall, the research underscores that while collective consciousness significantly enhances social capital, trust, and psychological empowerment—factors crucial for rural economic development—comprehensive strategies involving multiple stakeholders are essential to overcome systemic constraints.

This integrated approach can better facilitate the achievement of SDG 8, promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Sri Lanka's rural contexts.

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