

Urban Poverty in Colombo

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Abstract

The city of Colombo is the center of economic and commercial activities of the country. It has a residential population of 645,000 and an area of 37.4 square kilometers. It has the country's major port and a network of transportation routes converging into the city from the rest of the country.

The Colombo Municipal Council represents the local government tier of the administrative set up of the country having three levels and has close links with its resident population and also a daily transient population of around 400000. The council is a democratic institution with its members being elected every four years. The Mayor is the head who is nominated from the elected councilors. The administration of the council consists of a hierarchy of officials and workers and 16 standing committees of councilors who cover separate issues and advise the council accordingly. The council holds itself as the most intimate representative of the people of the city and has different modes through which it maintains a dialogue with city dwellers.

The standard of living in the city among its dwellers varies widely from abject poverty to affluence of high level. The average income level of a city dweller is very high in comparison with the income levels of the rural folks of the poor category. However, in the city, poverty is measured through other yardsticks and shows a different picture.

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The Municipal Council Ordinance and other legal instruments under the act lead in the recognition of the council as a regulatory institution as well as a service provider. The revelation that nearly half the population of Colombo live in underserved settlements led to a major policy change in the council to address the basic service provision in such settlements. Some concrete actions have been taken by the government in few previous programs such as Urban Basic Services Program to provide basic facilities in such settlements. The Council has followed this up with allocations from the council funds for such service provision activities in the settlements on a participatory basis. Further concrete and well-designed processes were introduced under foreign funding from the United Nations (UN) and the German Technical Cooperation Office (GTZ).

While continuing the above projects, the council is currently making attempts to accelerate the process by introducing Participatory Budgeting and also Urban Agriculture in the city. The council is also in possession of a Digital database of the various aspects of poverty and service provision, a Poverty Profile and policy framework documentation to address the issue.

Introduction

The city of Colombo has served as the capital of Sri Lanka for decades until the Parliament was transferred in the eighties to the neighboring city of Sri Jayawardanapura which was at that stage named as the capital city of the country. However, Colombo continues to be the financial and commercial capital of the country and plays a very vital role in the economy of the country. The seaport of Colombo is strategically placed in the naval routes joining Europe and the Far East. The country has an import-export economy, with major export products such as tea, rubber, garments, value added exports and the harbour in Colombo has been a focal point of the economy for three to four centuries.

The city has an area of 37.4 square kilometers and a resident population of around 645,000. An important aspect of statistical nature is that a further 400,000 to 500,000 people commute to Colombo daily for employment, education and other purposes thereby causing

a demand on the city services and traffic. The growth of the resident population has shown a low figure of 1.4 percent during the last decade according to the last census.

The administration of the country has three tiers, namely, the Central Government, Provincial Government and the Local Government. The local government bodies are of three types, the Municipal Councils covering the urban areas, Urban Councils covering the intermediate areas and Pradesiya Sabhas cover the rural areas. The Colombo Municipal Council is the premier local authority in view of its date of establishment, resources and financial strength. Having been established in 1865, it is the oldest local authority in Sri Lanka and probably one of the oldest in Asia. Apart from being regarded as training ground for local politicians in pursuing positions in the democratic political system of the country, the council enjoys a close association with the people who reside and being a political body deal with legal issues in the area of its jurisdiction.

Background

The Colombo Municipal Council is a democratic institution where its 53 councilors are elected for a four-year period. The administration of the council consists of a hierarchy of officials and workers headed by a Municipal Commissioner and three Deputy Commissioners and 16 Heads of Departments. The policy decisions are facilitated by 16 Standing Committees consisting of elected councilors who are endorsed by the council subject to open debate.

The council plays two broad roles in the city, namely, as (a) a regulator and implementing agency of laws and rules, and (b) a service provider. The Municipal Council Ordinance, by-laws, Food Act, Urban Development Law, Nuisances Ordinance, Anti Rabies Act, Motor Traffic Act, Environmental Authority Law, among others, impose responsibilities on the council to regulate and implement rules and regulations. At the same time, the council is an important service provider in the city for roads, sewage and wastewater disposal,

rainwater disposal, poor relief, sports and recreation, libraries, community health services, curative health services, and prevention of communicable diseases, among others.

In spite of the absence of a large migrant population from other parts of the country, the city has a fair population with a relatively low standard of living. Most of the benefits of the council services reach the poor communities. However, in the mid-eighties, it was realized that there is a need to revise the council policies towards poverty and its related issues. The Colombo Municipal Council places on record its having undergone a self-imposed paradigm shift on its policy towards the poor in the city. A rigid policy of not granting a formal acceptance of the unplanned housing for the poor communities was changed to one where the council played a pioneering role in organizing the poor into community-based organizations (CBOs), regular investment in such settlements for provision of water, disposal of solid waste, disposal of rainwater, sullage, sewage, paving access roads, lighting of common areas and others.

Urban Management Programme (UMP) of UN/Habitat

During the latter part of the last century when world economic discussions were strongly favoring the participatory approach and environmental sustainability for development activities, the United Nations launched the Urban Management Programme (UMP) in Asia which probably registered the turning point of the municipal policy in Colombo.

The UMP was envisioned to promote sustainable urban management and to improve the living conditions of the urban poor by enhancing the civic capital (social capital) in cities and by promoting and strengthening pro-poor urban governance. The development objective of the UMP is to strengthen the contribution of cities and towns in developing countries towards human development, including participatory governance, economic efficiency, social equity, poverty reduction and environmental improvement. This was to be achieved through more efficient and

equitable use and distribution of resources, including the harnessing of the skills and initiatives of individuals, communities, private and voluntary organizations and local authorities. The council actively participated in the first and second phases which addressed research and testing of tools. During the third phase, the council implemented a major project that has several important and pioneering components. The project was in association with United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) and administered through United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and with funding from Department for International Development (DFID) of United Kingdom.

By this time, the council operated a number of pro-poor projects in the city in association with government agencies such as the Urban Basic Services Programme, Sites and Services Programme, among others. The communities were organized into CBO with extensive assistance from the council such as registrations, formation of constitutions, community action planning and community contracting. Grass-root level officers called Health Instructors were appointed to establish a direct link between the council and the communities. The CBOs are known as Community Development Council (CDC) in the council.

Under the UMP, the council with the assistance of an NGO Sevanatha, compiled a Poverty Profile for the city of Colombo which is considered to be pioneering effort by a city. The information compiled is used as the baseline data for many of the city's projects thereafter. Twenty poor settlements were selected and chosen for community action planning and improvement of common services. Community contracting was also used to give financial stability to the CBOs. Action was taken to educate the council staff in pro-poor activities and also to strengthen the council in such work.

Another significant step taken was the council's adoption of a policy for poverty reduction activities in the city. This addressed the enabling approach as well as the granting of different types of assistance to the absolute poor in the context of council administration.

Primuss project for the provision of basic services in underserved settlements

The city of Colombo has been making an attempt to understand the issue of poverty in its different dimensions as well as its dynamics. Urban poverty is difficult to be compared with rural poverty in terms of per capita income. The poverty in Colombo was found to be more characterized with deprivation of access to basic services such as water, sewerage, rainwater and wastewater disposal, and solid waste disposal.

The site selection was based on the data of the poverty profile with necessary modification and with few other qualifying criteria. The sites were those located in lands not required for other pre-determined public purposes such as waterway reservations. The existence of a viable CDC and a relatively fair population density were prerequisites. The cost of external services was also a pertinent factor.

Based on the experience gained during the first year of operation, the procedure was consolidated to one with the following salient features:

- (a) Application Process;
- (b) Memorandum of Understanding among the Council, community, and funding partners; and
- (c) Community Contracting.

The project was able to also develop a Policy Framework and Operational Strategy for Participatory Improvement of Underserved Settlements in Colombo which is accepted for adoption by the council for future work.

The following studies were also undertaken

- a. Understanding the Dimensions and Dynamics of Poverty in Underserved Settlements in Colombo carried out by the Center for Poverty Analysis;

- b. Improving Livelihoods of the Urban poor - A study of resettlement schemes of Colombo Sri Lanka carried out by IMCAP of University of Colombo;
- c. A study of Tender Procedure of the Colombo Municipal Council; and
- d. Analysis for Donor Assistance for potential support of the Colombo Municipal Council.

A major achievement has been the introduction of poverty impact monitoring systems to the council for the projects with orientation to benefit the poor.

The GTZ funding for the project will cease in June 2005 and the project would continue with CMC funding for the balance five years. The council would very much welcome the participation of a foreign donor for the remaining period.

Conclusion

The Colombo Municipal Council takes great pride in its largely self-motivated paradigm shift where it converted itself into a citizen-friendly organization. Several procedures adopted during the past such as the allocation of municipal funds for work in poor settlements located in lands which do not belong to the council, the awarding of community contracts overseeing strict tender procedure, among others, generated controversy. Change management to meet the needs of the city within norms of operation of a public institution and achieving institutional development goals to serve the city has become the basis for the priority future agenda for the council.