

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colombo is the main city and commercial capital of Sri Lanka. Within the city, the urban poor live in 1,614 under-served settlements, some of which are degraded, low cost housing formerly owned by commercial companies and others, temporary shanties built on marginalized lands. The urban poor are mostly employed in the informal sector. They face social exclusion and major problems in accessing basic services. Lack of land tenure security, low incomes and indigence, poor access to clean water and sanitation, health threats due to vector-borne disease and congested surroundings, and high numbers of female headed households are some of the problems that they face. Their community organizations are weak or non-existent, making dependency on political decision makers and other powerbrokers, the norm.

In the past twenty years, there has been enhanced emphasis on optimizing service delivery to the urban poor, beginning with the interest shown by significant political personalities. With this came several externally funded projects, which sought to cater to the needs of the marginalized groups, especially in improving their habitat and livelihoods. With 51% of its population living in underserved settlements, the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has been increasingly urged to develop strategies and systems of focusing on pro-poor service delivery to urban poor. The CMC is thus an organization in transition in relation to its service orientation.

Since the extent of poverty and the nature of poverty stricken groups were not well documented, the CMC found it difficult to prioritize service delivery. The provision of services to the under-served settlement often took on political undertones in the past. CMC sought solutions by linking up with civil society organizations, which had close connections with and ample experience in mobilizing the urban poor. With the development of a comprehensive Poverty Profile of Colombo's 1,614 under-served settlements and through expansion of its uses, CMC has developed a management tool by which the most poverty-stricken settlements and their specific needs could be prioritized. This Profile has proved its uses for ongoing CMC programs as well as a base for future planning. CMC has also placed before its Councilors a draft Poverty Reduction Strategy for ratification, which will further bolster its pro-poor stance. The joint experience of carrying out the activity with a civil society organization has also built in complementary skills in the CMC and put in place an effective partnership.

As with most urban centers, garbage disposal has been a critical issue of concern to citizens of Colombo. The poor were particularly more vulnerable, as about 70% of the previous 1,250 wayside dumping sites were near under-served settlements. The extent of this problem was underlined by CMC when it established a Solid Waste Management Department as early as 1987. Various modes of controlling haphazard dumping of garbage have been tried since 1984, but most of these attempts did not have a positive impact on the under-served settlements due to the acute lack of space in which garbage could be stored prior to pickup.

When household collection of garbage was instituted in 1998, the overall garbage dumping situation improved in Colombo, except in the under-served settlements. By benchmarking and continuously improving on previous efforts, the CMC developed familiarity with community consultations in the under-served settlements. A consultative process between the CMC and the urban poor led to the solution to introduce plastic bins in under-

served settlements, where garbage can be stored until the designated collection time. This succeeded in reducing haphazard garbage dumping and in creating a cleaner environment in the settlements. The system is client-driven, with the all-important timing of the collection being based on the client requests. CMC also brought about internal changes that support this process. A full time Solid Waste Management Education unit was created to link with the under-served settlements. The Solid Waste Management project is seen as a successful solution, improving garbage collection of urban under-served settlements through effective consultation and consensus building.

Bi-annual monsoons result in heavy rains and floods that spread diseases in Colombo. Health problems due to vector borne diseases such as dengue have affected the urban poor the most, in the form of income lost due to illness and medical costs. The CMC likewise used to incur heavy expenditures in controlling dengue outbreaks through traditional means.

The poor level of awareness of citizens regarding mosquito-breeding sites was cited as one of the major reasons for the prevalence of dengue. The Integrated Health and Environment Management program, also known as the Green Star Home Project, is an innovative means of forging a multi-stakeholder network of CMC officers, civil society organizations, schools and commercial companies to carry out a citywide awareness campaign to control mosquito breeding. The Public Health Department of the CMC initiated a stakeholder network for launching a clean-up campaign and inspection of 45,000 households. This inspection process was supported by a large-scale media and public awareness campaign. Environmental friendly efforts of 10,000 civic-minded citizens were recognized through the Green Star Home certification. As a result of this campaign, the incidence of dengue was substantially reduced, and a greater awareness of environmental management has been formed within the communities.

CMC continues to enhance its capacity to improve service delivery to the poor. A Decentralized Budget with a steadily increasing Members' Allocation gives greater flexibility of response to client needs; it is being strengthened by the CMC Poverty Reduction Strategy, which is in the process of being ratified. Various consultative mechanisms such as Housing and Community Development Councils (HCDC), Public Days and Mobile Public Hearings provide the platform for citizens to voice out their needs. E-mailed complaints to the Mayor are responded to promptly and a system of E-governance is being put in place.

The CMC Approach to Poverty Reduction, the Solid Waste Management program and the Integrated Health and Environmental Management program for under served settlements are all part of the CMC attempts to build a client-responsive approach through the partnership mode, focusing on giving expression to the needs of the poor. Collectively, all three activities have a positive impact in enhancing the living environment and well being of the urban poor and provide a learning experience in mobilizing effective partnerships for pro-poor service delivery.