Political and Social Dynamics in Upgrading Urban Sanitation
a case from Colombo, Sri Lanka

A case study on social inclusion for SWITCH

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Executive Summary

The Basic Urban Services project in Colombo (Sri Lanka) aimed to improve low-income urban sanitation through multi-stakeholder involvement at local, municipal and agency level. The project covered Kotte Municipal Council and Wattala Urban Council areas. In Kotte the focus was on developing and pilot testing an integrated solid waste management strategy. In Wattala (in the slum Oliyamulla) the project addressed both innovative community-based solid waste management panning and field-testing, and wastewater management in a flood-prone, waterlogged area. At Oliyamulla community level a Community Development Council was established to facilitate the community voice to be heard and as a communication channel for discussions on implementation options. Multi stakeholder Working Groups consisted of municipality staff, NGOs and Technical Advisers from UN-Habitat. This paper describes the community, institutional and political dynamics in these urban sanitation projects. In Kotte an innovative environmental and pro-poor (income-generating) integrated solid waste management strategy (focus on recycling) was eventually not implemented. The new Mayor and Commissioner could not convince the newly elected Municipal Council on this strategy and waste dumping continued and incineration was to be added as the alternative option. In Oliyamulla (Wattala) the project became out-of-touch with municipality and community. The community rejected the feasible sanitation solutions; negligence of national and local government helped a local dweller put force to definitely stop the building a community-based solid waste sorting centre. The paper analyses the process in the Working Groups, in the Councils and in the community. The main conclusion is that political dynamics are hard to manage from a sole sanitation strategy perspective. Urban projects should be demand-based and built on a critical appreciation. The project missed opportunities by not timely reacting to changing political arenas and incorporating the political agendas.

1. Introduction

In the context of the UN-Habitat Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) the IRC International Water & Sanitation Centre supported the Basic Urban Services (BUS) on WASH components. This multi-country BUS project[i] included Sri Lanka where the project run from 2004-2007.

Basically, BUS was a practical follow-up of Urban Environmental Planning & Management process[ii] that the UN-Habitat SCP used. Demand for WASH improvements was a common outcome from the participatory integrated town/city planning process. The overall aim of BUS was to develop the capacities of municipalities to plan and deliver basic urban services in un(der)served areas through effective local partnerships.

In Sri Lanka the BUS project included demonstration of various WASH approaches and technologies, upgrading interventions strategies, planning for scaling up and development of bankable proposals. The main project approach was a process involving multi-stakeholder working groups at three levels: community, municipality and national. Participatory development and learning were central in the approach and project implementation. BUS had two locations in Greater Colombo: (i) the middle class Kotte Municipality with slum pockets, here the focus was on integrated solid waste management; and (ii) the low-income urban area Oliyamulla (a waterlogged, flood prone area) in Wattala Urban Council with the content focus on solid waste and waste water management. The selection of these two sites had an historical reason as the SCP project had earlier done environmental planning and demo's in these areas.

In *Kotte* the aim was to develop and demonstrate an innovative integrated strategy for solid waste management (SWM) with decentralised composting and recycling that would provide income for the poor. The Ministry of Environment was substantially involved and had a direct interest to (i) use the Kotte experience in to test and possibly reformulate its existing solid waste management policy, (ii) develop an overall country-wide strategy for low-cost socially inclusive SWM and (iii) scale up the Kotte experience to other cities and towns in Sri Lanka. In *Oliyamulla* (Wattala) the BUS project focus was two-fold: (i) developing and testing an improved management of solid waste with local sorting of waste by a Community Based Organization (CBO), and (ii) developing and testing appropriate solutions towards managing human waste and grey water from poor families.

The purpose of this case study is illustrate the political and institutional dynamics and challenges to develop and thereafter actually implement urban sanitation solutions aiming at social inclusion.

2. Basic Urban Sanitation Service in Kotte and Oliyamulla

2.1. The local context

Kotte wanted to become Sri Lanka's first proclaimed 'environment-friendly' municipality, a very noble goal. This local goal created drive and enthusiasm for innovation and tangible results in environmental sanitation and health improvement among both politicians and technical staff in the municipality. In the UN-Habitat SCP multi-stakeholder process, prior to BUS project, the SWM was identified as the most critical urban sanitation problem to be tackled, and to cover all sections in Kotte with an improved SWM. The emphasis would be on an innovative SWM strategy, process and technology, that is labour intensive collection, separation, composting of organic waste and recycling of non-biodegradable waste whenever possible. The urban poor would benefit from such an approach.

Kotte has a varied settlement pattern: offices (incl. several national ministries), business areas, high/middle income residential areas and low-income areas; Kotte has no significant industries.

The BUS project approach followed a very participatory multi-stakeholder learning process with involvement of ministries, municipal staff and politicians, and NGOs. The different communities were regularly consulted through surveys, interviews etc. The BUS project in Kotte built upon earlier SCP demonstrations of the sorting of recyclable waste, home composting and small-scale biogas production from biodegradable market waste. BUS evaluated these pilots. The main BUS output in Kotte was a strategy for integrated SWM with a number of feasible environment-friendly solutions. These innovative SWM solutions had a good potential for income generation for the poor. However, and as detailed in the next section, eventually the politicians made a U-turn away from the environment-friendly and pro-poor solutions. The advanced technology choice in SWM may have a lower cost-efficiency and have serious financial consequences for the poor in Kotte.

Wattala Urban Council[iii] is a fast growing suburb of Colombo with many small to larger industries and a growing middle class. *Oliyamulla* is a relatively small low-income legal settlement since 1995 in a reclaimed swamp. Oliyamulla counts some 350 households, most legal settlers although without title deeds. It receives municipal services such as electricity and water, and has an irregular garbage collection. The political interest in Oliyamulla may be the potential electorate and the business value for later urban development. The low-income (slum) settlement is located in very difficult environmental conditions: water logged (high groundwater table) and flood prone. The small settlement is almost entirely surrounded by a channel that receives storm water and partly unsettled wastewater from adjacent residential and industrial areas. The open sewage channel is completely choked with settled faecal sludge (situation 2007), and resembles most a primary wastewater stabilisation pond. In the rainy season the settlement gets partly flooded with diluted sewage from the channel and the neighbouring areas. The flow of wastewater from the Oliyamulla households stops then.

Photograph 1. Oliyamulla- blocked drainage channel
Source: Sevanatha

UN-Habitat's Sustainable Cities Project had earlier experimented with a simplified sewerage to which some 35 households got their water-flushed toilets connected, and that led to one central septic tank and an up-flow wastewater filter. The BUS project included an evaluation of this pilot project. BUS intended to scale up this domestic wastewater pilot project to the whole suburb and also to address the SWM problems. The main BUS Project purpose in Oliyamulla was to learn how to tackle BUS challenges in urban slums with high water tables. For the SWM component, BUS developed solutions in sorting, recycling and collection; and in wastewater management (WWM) options explored included central and group sewerage systems with sedimentation tanks and secondary treatment and household EcoSan systems.

As in Kotte, also in Wattala-Oliyamulla a participatory multi-stakeholder approach was used; actually at three levels: (i) at **community level** through a Community Development Council (CDC) and various community processes such as community consultations, door-to-door visits and community exchange visits, (ii) at **urban council level** through a wide multi-stakeholder working group, and (iii) at **national level** through a Working Group involving ministries, NGOs and a technology department of a university. In the process of the BUS project, several consultations with the inhabitants of Oliyamulla were held around SWM and WWM issues. The CDC was formed to enhance local ownership, facilitate participatory planning and design and manage the expected systems and services. It was registered legally under the Wattala Urban Council. It had a constitution and nine members, five men and four women. This CDC brought most households to the centre of the BUS SWM and WWM project. Actually, the participation of women from the community in the consultations was high. However, eventually, and as explained below, none of the expected outputs (SWM and WWM) were delivered to the poor. The exclusion of the willing poor resulted from the community and political dynamics.

Photograph 2. Consultative meeting at community level (Oliyamulla)
Source: Sevanatha

In both BUS projects, the Project Support Team of the Urban Governance Support Project gave guidance and support. IRC provided specific technical support in the process and solutions, while contributing to progress monitoring and assisting in planning. UN-Habitat SCP Programme Managers played an important role, having local knowledge and being familiar with the historical SCP context.

2.2. The multi-stakeholder platform approaches and processes in Kotte and Wattala

In *Kotte* the Working Group consisted of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MoE), the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), a regulator, Kotte Municipal Council (KMC), National Environmental Research and Development Centre (NERD) (government institute), PracticalAction (NGO) and Management Resources for Good Governance (MaRGG) (NGO). Each of the members brought in its specific societal roles and responsibilities, while PracticalAction concentrated on technical issues and MaRGG on community processes and institutional arrangements and development. The group was incidentally expanded with staff from the Urban Development Authority and the new Waste Management Authority; both supportive and regulatory state organisations. Although the private sector firm in SWM (named ALBANS, contracted to collect and dump) always got invited, they never attended the meetings: an opportunity for two-way learning missed.

The Working Group meetings were well attended, with the MoE chairing and the Municipal Commissioner as project champion. However, not always meetings went on

as planned, which frustrated the enthusiastic members. The Working Group members did not always deliver reports on agreed tasks/activities in time, which made the meetings not effective and delayed the progress. Although the MoE chaired the Working Group meetings, the members did not accept an authoritarian position. The Working Group was very dynamic with hot discourses on feasible and desirable strategies. The obviously different backgrounds, perceptions and agendas of different stakeholders/working group members caused strong views and debates that eventually got solved and enriched the final outcome. Such disputes resulted from the high level of openness and frankness of the working group members and may be unique for developing countries. It was a creative process leading to a comprehensive Integrated Solid Waste Management Strategy, unique for Sri Lanka. Of course, each of the members had its own agenda, and these were well brought together into one Strategy. The product included the findings of the evaluation of the earlier SCP-pilots on home-based composting, collection and sorting recyclable waste and small-scale biogas production from bio-degradable market waste, and a field study/consultancy pointing towards the higher feasibility/sustainability of decentralised composting rather than biogas plants for solid waste. The draft ISWM Strategy was discussed in a one-day citywide consultation and validation workshop attended by technocrats from national level and different municipalities, local politicians, private sector, schools, NGOs and CBOs, and the working group members.

Actually, the Kotte Municipality was faced with a court case started by the Civil Society Movement for poor management and disposal of municipal solid waste. The Integrated SWM Strategy helped the Municipality to show the vision and strategy on urban environment-friendly and pro-poor SWM. This impressed the judge and it was presented as an example to the other 10 municipalities facing the same court case.

The Working Group started work on producing the Integrated SWM Action Plan for Kotte for which the MoE developed the outline and draft framework. Unfortunately this product never got fully completed. When the final product, the Integrated Strategy on SWM was produced and the Action Plan for Kotte drafted, municipal council elections were held. A new Council, a new Mayor and Commissioners came. The Working Group got into a dormant mode; the project Champion (the previous Commissioner) left. The new Mayor and new Commissioner were briefed by the Technical Support Team and became supportive to the Integrated SWM approach. But the newly elected Kotte Councillors decided not to follow the environment-friendly and pro-poor (through many low skilled paid jobs) Integrated SWM strategy, but to go for **central waste dumping through contractors** and **incineration of solid waste**, with technology and installation provided by a **European/French firm**. The municipal direction on SWM changed 180 degrees. Municipal staff involved in the environment-friendly direction left their posts, probably frustrated.

The democratic decision by the Municipal Council has to be respected. But questions on feasibility, cost-effectiveness and sustainability (from different angles) remained un-addressed and unanswered.

In the *Wattala* case **two working groups** were established. One was a multi-stakeholders platform at the national level. It was composed of of the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), Wattala Urban Council, SEVANATHA (NGO), the

Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), PracticalAction (NGO) and the National Technical Adviser. The other Working Group functioned at the Wattala Urban Council level. The composition of this latter working group was large, as detailed in the text box. This Working Group hardly functioned; its meeting schedule was very irregular. SEVANATHA improved the community organisation by supporting the establishment of the Community Development Council (CDC) and the development of a Community Action Plan. At the Wattala Urban Council the Community Public Health Inspector was the key contact on a daily basis. A few Review Meetings with all stakeholders created good exchange and learning opportunities.

Composition of the Working Group at Wattala Urban Council level	
- Chair: Council Chairman or Vice Chairman - Convener: Secretary of the Urban Council - All the nine Councillors were invited to attend (usually 05 to 06 councillors attend each meeting – for comments on functioning!) - Representatives for ITDG - Representatives from UGSP office - Representatives from NHDA - Representatives from OUSL - Officials representing Public Health, Technical, Assessors and management departments of the Urban Council	- Local stakeholders - Community leaders from Oliyamulla Settlement - Community leaders from other low income settlements - Representatives of the Lion Club - Representatives of the Traders Association - Representatives of Tax Payers Association - Representatives from the business community - Representative of the senior citizens - Representatives of the professional groups - Representatives of local NGOs

The wastewater problem was studied by the OUSL, however, more from a technical-academic than from a community and pro-poor perspective. Building on the earlier simplified sewerage pilot, technical WWM data and solutions were presented to the Working Group but not well communicated (in form and length) and its delivery got delayed. The different pace of progress of the two Oliyamulla components, that is SWM and WWM, caused unclear situations in the discussions with the CDC, the interface with the Oliyamulla community. The EcoSan option was introduced as a second option when the sustainability of simplified sewerage became doubtful. Several community members were taken for an exchange visit to a successful EcoSan project where local EcoSan users indicated its success and their appreciation. However, the community rejected the on-site EcoSan option on cultural grounds and that for them the non-use of water flushing being a backward system. The option may have been the most sustainable option in view of finance (investment and O&M), environment and technology. An extra effort to have some households starting an experiment with EcoSan also failed. The fact that the low cost sewerage with sump and pumps was first introduced and explained as an option prior to the EcoSan may have influenced the perceptions for advanced development of the community. Although the Working Group concluded that feasibility and sustainability of the sewerage system was found low, a

small pilot with sewerage was planned. This pilot eventually did not materialise as the relationship with the Urban Council and the community became poor.

Regarding SWM, it was planned to build a solid waste sorting centre in Oliyamulla. Solid waste segregation was not a common practice among Oliyamulla residents. Accordingly, awareness creation was done to highlight also the economic value and benefits. The solid waste sorting centre would be managed by a CBO and create some employment for the poor.

Photograph 3. Community in action removing solid waste
Source: Sevanatha

In Oliyamulla, communicating and working with the low-income area dwellers was complicated and often not effective. Community meetings experienced poor attendance; door-to-door visits were time consuming and not always practical (for instance when to explain a technical solution); meetings with the CDC gave 'community' views biased by personal interests.   Some of the main interests of the community members were on (i) issuing title deeds of the plots by NHDA and (ii) the expected resettlement of families that had illegally built houses after the initial plot allocations in 1995 and whose houses were blocking the construction of sewerage or the improvement of the community. Although the original design of the Oliyamulla settlement allowed for streets and back-alleys, illegal settlers had occupied any available land and legal houses had illegally expanded into the back-alleys leaving hardly space for sewers and drains. House-owners were not very keen on the WWM solutions as it always would have resulted in demolishing part of their expanded houses.

As the process went on, non-authorised/illegal residents of Oliyamulla used their higher position within the CDC to have their own agenda addressed; particularly the re-settlement and provision of new houses. When the NGO of the Working Group did not answer these demands or referred it to other members of the Working Group, the illegal settlers threatened to boycott the CDC/BUS meetings and even prevented others to attend. Apparently, some people with own agendas had managed to use their influence, popularity or power to get high positions in the CDC and use that position for their own purpose only.

From earlier community surveys, it had already emerged that Sri Lankan communities have more trust in NGO projects than government project as these latter ones never get completed or are discontinued. When the government agencies delayed the process in resettlement in Oliyamulla, cooperation from the community side went down. The delays were caused by the government's loss of the original survey and allotment maps, the limited availability of land for resettlement and the high cost for moving and new housing construction. The actual BUS issues, SWM and WWM, were therefore not anymore the concern, or better, they were the **negative** concern of all illegal settlers, because most as a result of these BUS activities, they would probably have to be moved. Another problem was that the illegal settlers who did not had to move still lived on illegal plots with no interest to invest further. Furthermore, several legal houses were rented out with the owners living elsewhere. It was therefore very hard to get the real stakeholders, who are the house owners, in the meetings to make decisions on improvement. All these factors counted for the non-cooperation and the negative influence on other more cooperative community members.

Eventually, the BUS project Working Group managed to get clarity on the land ownership of Oliyamulla. The Urban Development Authority (UDA) had given the land to the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) on a 99-year lease agreement. Residents had no title deeds. As a result of the BUS project, the NHDA obtained permission from the UDA to hand over the land to legal house-owners on a freehold basis.

In the SWM one of the key stumbling blocks was the location of the Community-based Solid Waste Sorting Centre. A community member claimed the only suitable lot available for this centre. He raised the issue with the Wattala Urban Council Chairman who referred the issue to NHDA, while the Chairman knew that NHDA owned the land and would approve the use of the land for a community development project. The land allocation issue got politicised and was put to the NHDA that also not clearly communicated a firm position. From the start of the BUS-Oliyamulla project the local government (Wattala Urban Council) did not act strongly. The request of the Working Group to the WUC to 'freeze' land that was still unoccupied was not acted upon. This issue on the 'free' land required for the Waste Sorting Centre resulted in a private-community-political issue with the community member as the winner using his political influence. In the end, the failure to deal quickly and effectively with the resistance from illegal settlers and house extenders, the unrealistically raised expectations for water-borne sewerage, and an unjustified individual land claim caused that neither the WWM nor the SWM project materialised. A further result is that the poor continued to suffer from the poor environmental conditions.

3. Key Lessons on Kotte and Oliyamulla/Wattala BUS Projects

3.1. *Kotte BUS Project* - main lessons learned:

1. The main lesson learned is that political processes can suddenly change directions in policy and strategy. Although democratic principles need to be

highly respected, the forces behind democratic decisions may not always have been that transparent. In the decision process arguments and criteria other than feasibility, financial and technical sustainability, environmental effects and contribution to increased livelihoods of the poor may dominate. This may have resulted in an unbalanced decision process.

2. Local elections create political changes. Newly elected councillors get the power. Their limited knowledge and background on key issues and personal perceptions of and ambitions for high-tech solutions may influence their decision-making, as shown by the U-turn on the type of SWM in the Kotte BUS case. In developing countries it is not unusual that good innovations are entirely discontinued when an opposing party gets into power. Normally, the civil servants are the permanent memory and provide the background to the new politicians. In the Kotte case, the key civil servants involved in the innovation on SWM left. The Kotte BUS Working Group had become inactive or even dormant for reasons given in 'lesson learned nr. 4' below. The Working Group could have filled the vacuum after key civil servants left to brief the new politicians on the integrated low-cost and pro-poor SWM strategy. Apparently, commercial interests used the same vacuum to quickly step in and convince the new Councillors of another SWM solution. The lesson learned is that innovators and reformers never can sleep! The BUS project has left a great chance here to make innovation on pro-poor SWM happen.

3. Another lesson learned is that European partners in SWM have different faces: IRC has been working for more than two years to have a multi-stakeholder process for learning and change (financed by a European government), while another SWM firm may come in, perhaps also with European funding, to support purely commercial interest that conflict with the lessons learned in BUS project and with long-term sustainability in many aspects.

4. The Kotte BUS Working Group had entered a low activity or even dormant phase, after the MoE had drafted the framework for Integrated SWM Plan. The Working Group members viewed the unilateral initiative as an attempt to dominate the process and to impose the Ministerial agenda. Earlier, the different perceptions and agendas that had created a critical and alert group process through positive internal working groups dynamics. This process was lost when attitudes changed and progress stagnated. Working Group members perhaps became too tired to start another 'fight' and they dropped out of the process. **External facilitation**, noticing the conflicts of interests and loss of enthusiasm might have come to the rescue and might have corrected the imbalance in the process and the orientation.

3.2. Wattala-Oliyamulla BUS projects - main lessons learned

1. Low-income areas have their own social and political dynamics. Legal house owners often rent out their houses and live elsewhere. This makes it difficult to get their commitment; renters may have no mandate or show no interest to collaborate in upgrading that may result in higher rents. Illegal settlers have

their own agenda to secure their investment in their illegal dwelling or to make sure –if they are moved – to get a good compensation package or a good/better house or location to resettle. An urban upgrading project should have a good overview, of the legal and illegal ownership and occupation by owners or tenants (for instance a social map). Development issues may concern specific groups and having all stakeholders mixed up in meetings may result in unclear outcomes and even power plays by the most vocal or powerful group with political allies.

2. The title deed issue was a strong motivational factor for legal house owners to collaborate. But the enthusiasm of house owners dwindled due to the huge delays from the side of the government agencies, which also contributed to the slow progress of the BUS project. Slowness over land allocation decisions and the increased politicisation of the whole planning process created also new opportunities for opportunistic and unscrupulous individuals as shown by the unjustified, yet successful private claim for the site of the Waste Sorting Centre.

3. The BUS project did not respond to a local problem agenda. BUS was a continuation of the earlier SCP project. For some groups (e.g. illegal settlers) the project created opportunities at the start (that is resettlement ad new housing), but when these turned negative this community group blocked community interest and participation.

4. Introducing technology options is a sensitive process. Firstly, any technology has different investment and management and O&M implications that need to be carefully introduced. Secondly, starting with working on an advanced technology line (sewerage) creates expectations that makes other, perhaps more feasible, sustainable options (e.g. EcoSan) less attractive and makes it look more backwards.

5. Any community development project needs support of both the local politicians and the technocrats. Often local electorates, also in slums with high numbers of voters, make the position of politicians awkward and fires their populism and opportunism to gain potential voters, rather than helping them to be realistic on developments that may have negative consequences for a few. Gang leaders in a community can make community opinions change against community interest and also influence the opinion of popular politicians. Gang leaders have sufficient power and support from people and politicians to use it for their own benefit.

4. Conclusions

Urban projects in low-income or mixed areas have many dynamics. Not just the development agendas of government and NGOs govern. Such urban projects are complex and need good preparation at many levels: government agencies, local government, NGOs, politicians and community level, with their different interest groups, such as male and female renters, owners, illegal settlers, job-seekers and youth groups. The mapping of different interests and factions is important to develop strategies and methodologies to learn and implement. Monitoring the reactions from the

different stakeholders in the most critical areas is needed to keep project working groups and management alert. Timely actions are needed to keep all parties enthusiastic for the project, solve tensions and conflicts and work jointly towards shared goals for improving the urban living conditions of the lower middle classes and the poor. Where one stakeholder goes off track or is late in delivering, the entire project may be at stake as negative forces may enter and block progress of the project.

Political dynamics in community projects need special attention. Changes in the political climate may imply changes in the development agenda in opposite directions from those of the previous politicians and administrators (governors). Promising solutions also benefitting the poor, and in the Kotte case the environment, may be slashed away for political and personal reasons, unless the stakeholders are alert and timely brief the new Councillors of the benefits for all, including themselves. Local politicians are key allies in sustainable development; they have to be on board. Urban communities are split in factions and interest groups; the project needs to get informed on their expectations and keep alert not to lose them out.

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[i] See also http://www.irc.nl/bus
[ii] http://www.unhabitat.org/content.asp?cid=5025&catid=540&typeid=19&subMenuId=0
[iii] Please note that a Municipality has a higher autonomy status than an Urban Council