



Potential contributions of partnerships to sustainable urban development: A case study of the UN-HABITAT Sustainable Sri Lankan Cities Programme

Iain Davey¹

Abstract

This paper assesses the effectiveness of the partnership between UN-HABITAT and the Sustainable Sri Lankan Cities Programme (SSLCP) by examining the programme's goals and outcomes. In particular, it shows the connection between urban governance, sustainable development, and the contemporary focus on partnerships, and outlines the work between UN-HABITAT and the SSLCP with a focus on the formation, progress, and limitations attributed to this partnership. While reports on the partnership suggest a very positive impact on the level and effectiveness of sustainable urban development in Sri Lanka through its implementation of local participatory governance methods and processes, a continued source of funding and resources, continued assistance of outside institutions as partners, and further institutionalisation of good governance methods were recommended for securing longer-term urban development outcomes.

Keywords:

UN-Habitat, Sri Lankan Cities Programme (SSLCP), partnerships, sustainable urban development, capacity building, stakeholders, participatory governance

¹ Junior Associate Professor, The Institute for Language and Culture, Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan. Email: ifd66@mac.com



Introduction

This paper aims to assess the effectiveness of the partnership between UN-HABITAT and the Sustainable Sri Lankan Cities Programme (SSLCP) by examining the programme's goals and reviewing a number of reports that were carried out on the activities and outcomes of the partnership. The paper will begin with a background to show the connection between urban governance, sustainable development, and the contemporary focus on partnerships. There will then be an outline of UN-HABITAT and its work with the SSLCP and in the main section, a more detailed look at the formation, activities, and the progress and limitations attributed to this partnership. In particular the paper will reflect on how far the partnership's activities have gone towards creating a more sustainable framework for the urban environments in which it is active.

Background

As predicted by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA, 2007), in 2008, for the first time in human history, urban population exceeded 50% and is projected to be in excess of 69% by 2050 (UN, 2007) and because of the irreversible changes it is causing on production and consumption patterns and the associated impact on the environment, rapid urbanization is considered to be one of most complex and important contemporary socio-economic issues of this time (Mtani, 2004). Consequently, the need for effective urban governance is now at the centre of any realistic efforts to attain sustainable development at all levels, local to global.

As useful guidance towards these efforts are the Ten Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities (UNEP/IETC, 2002) which have also been reflected in the useful text by Newman and Jennings *Cities as Sustainable Ecosystems* (2008). These principles include long-term decision making, accountable, transparent and 'good' governance, and not least, recognising the importance of empowerment and of partnerships. Indeed, with regard to the latter, over the last few decades there have been important changes in the approaches to urban governance that have ultimately contributed to the rising importance of partnerships. As a reaction to tightening budgets and cutbacks, there was a significant move by many cities during the 1980's away from social service delivery of services that had prevailed in the 60's and 70's, towards a greater reliance on privatisation, or entrepreneurial politics, as Kirilin and Marshall (1988) regard it.

In the 1990's, there were political shifts towards greater democratisation and decentralisation. Although decentralisation was largely motivated by the cost-cutting measures of the 1980's (Ward, 1996), both of these political changes in urban governance were partly bought about by the end of the cold war and continued globalisation. In addition, as Jones and Ward (1994) point out, the process of decentralisation was largely supported by international organisations such as the World Bank and had great impacts in countries such as Brazil and the Philippines (Devas, 2004). These shifts, combined with the increasing influence of civil society groups and NGO's, have led to a general approach of urban governance that considers much more the structures that support participation and involvement of heterogeneous socioeconomic groups (Ward, 1996). Consequently, the aspects that now underpin contemporary thinking about what good urban governance means, such as local empowerment, capacity building, greater transparency and accountability, have inevitably led to the focus on creating partnerships as reflected in the list of norms and principles that the UN-HABITAT produced as



part of its 2001 Global Campaign for Urban Governance. In addition, out of concern for the potential extra burdens that national development strategies might suffer as a result of the increasing urbanisation of world population, the ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) believe that “only strong decentralised local governments, in touch with and involving their citizens, and working in partnership with national governments” (ICLEI, 2002, para.3) are placed to deliver sustainable urban management and management strategies.

Central to this thinking has been the frameworks of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) and more recently Local Action 21. Since its inception in 1991, the former has become the focus of many local and national governments’ development strategies with the stated aim of promoting “participatory, long-term, strategic planning” (ICLEI, 2007a, para.2) to address sustainable development priorities, by supporting good local governance and the multi-stakeholder process. Although, along with LA21, these ideas have been increasingly pushed to the forefront of the international sustainable development agenda, the consensus a decade after the launch of LA21 was that there was insufficient transition of policy to implementation. Consequently, representatives of local governments and various international institutions, including UN-HABITAT, launched Local Action 21 at the WSSD in 2002 as a “mandate to local authorities worldwide to move from agenda to action” (ICLEI, 2007b, para.2). Equally important was that, in addition to a political declaration (‘Type 1’ outcomes) at the summit, a list of partnership initiatives (‘Type 2’ outcomes) was produced to help further strengthen the implementation of sustainable development through Agenda 21. As Piest (2003) explains, the “partnerships between governments, intergovernmental agencies and civil society actors were deemed necessary to complement the negotiated ‘Type 1’ commitments between governments” (p.25).

It is one of these ‘Type 2’ partnerships of the UN-HABITAT and its work on a global programme called the Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) that we will now consider.

UN-HABITAT: Outline & background

UN-HABITAT, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, is the UN body for human settlements that is mandated by the UN General Assembly “to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all” (UN-HABITAT, 2007a, para.1). Guided by documents such as the Habitat Agenda, the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, and the Millennium Declaration, UN-HABITAT works towards the UN’s overall objective of reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. For example, its activities are directly related to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their associated targets.

It is also through these main documents that UN-HABITAT’s work is directed towards developing partnerships between local authorities and other stakeholders. For instance, as part of the reaffirmation of the Habitat Agenda by the Istanbul Declaration in 1996, it is stated that the principles of partnership and participation are “the most democratic and effective approach for the realization of our commitments” (UN-HABITAT, 2007b, para.12), and that local authorities are essential as the closest partners to governments. Indeed, UN-HABITAT is taken to be the main body for working with local authorities within the UN System (UN-



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HABITAT, 2007c). An example of this work is the Sustainable Cities Programme, which focuses on local authority involvement.

In line with this emphasis on wider and more effective participation, aspects of UN-HABITAT's work that included transparency, capacity building and cooperation with other stakeholders were all re-iterated at WSSD as part of both the 'Type I' and 'Type II' outcomes. For example, Type I outcomes included commitments to:

Implement the Habitat Agenda and the Istanbul Declaration to assist with sustainable urbanization and strengthen national and local institutional capacities (paragraph 65)

Strengthen UN-HABITAT in capacity building at all levels for implementing Agenda 21 (paragraph 137);

Enhance the roles of local authorities and partnerships as called for in the Habitat Agenda (paragraph 149) (WSSD, 2002)

Furthermore, the Type II outcomes (partnership implementation commitments) reflected partnerships such as those formed with UN-HABITAT, include the partnerships of the SCP.

The two core areas of UN-HABITAT's mandate are shelter and sustainable development in cities (Fernandes et al, 2005). Campaigns run to promote and initiate programmes for each of these are the *Secure Tenure Campaign* and the *Global Campaign on Urban Governance*. Although both share the common objective to create 'Inclusive Cities without Slums' (Tuts, 2002), it is the later that this paper focuses on.

According to the 2006 annual report of UN-HABITAT (2006a), it had 95 programmes in 56 countries. Such programmes are broadly organised into global, regional and sub-regional categories. At the global level for example, there are the programmes of Urban Management, Localizing Agenda 21, and Sustainable Cities. Regional programmes include *Water for Asian Cities*, while at the sub-regional level, there are projects such as the *Sustainable Sri Lankan Cities Programme* (SSLCP) in Sri Lanka, which is part of the joint UNEP/UN-HABITAT SCP and to which, we now turn.

UN-HABITAT SSLCP partnership: Outline & background

The SCP started in 1991 with the objective of promoting sustainable development through capacity building in urban environmental planning and management (EPM) (UN-HABITAT, 2005a). The programme focuses on local city authorities and their partners with the aim of helping them to create a decision-making framework that is broad-based and cross-sectoral.

The programme was made up of two main phases. Working jointly with the UNEP since 1996, Phase 1 (1991-2001) built up support for the programme through demonstrating EPM and highlighting key issues. It also developed EPM tools based on individual city needs, created networks to facilitate the exchange of expertise and experience between cities, build awareness of the programme, and put resources in place to help implementation as it moved into Phase II. For this phase (2002-2007), in addition to UNEP, UN-HABITAT broadened its partnership to include working with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to focus on building capacity through replicating the



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successful elements of phase I. This included EPM implementation through standardising and mainstreaming existing tools, developing new EPM tools, and holding regular global meetings for partners (UN-HABITAT, 2007d). Other partners included governments from both North and South, local city authorities, NGOs supporting the SCP, and other institutions such as the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS).

The SCP in Sri Lanka, the SSLCP, was chosen as the focus of this paper because it has been some time now since it was largely completed and for some evaluative information to have been released. Indeed, Sri Lanka was the first country where SCP cities were used to collate data on the EPM tools that had been developed, with information on its progress available in global SCP reports such as Alex 2003 and Havana 2005.

Launched in 1999 as a partnership between the Sri Lankan Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, local authorities, UNDP, and UN-HABITAT, the SSLCP's objectives were to help municipalities adopt effective, innovative, and sustainable EMP approaches by developing suitable institutional and inter-agency mechanisms, institutional capacity, and effective participatory processes (UN-HABITAT, 2005b). As such, the programme was based on a long-term strategy that was implemented as four inter-linked phases (UN-HABITAT, 2005b).

Phase I: Start-up and demonstration

This was coordinated by national and provincial level committees and consisted of six main activities.

1. An EPM Unit and Geographic Information System (GIS) based on SPC global guidelines was set up.
2. City Environmental profiles were created to help initiate planning and identify key issues. A summary was made available to all stakeholders.
3. SCP tools provided a stakeholder inventory to help identify and engage stakeholders and to be used for city consultations.
4. As part of the EPM process, formal consultations were held in each city that allowed stakeholders to be involved in identifying key issues.
5. Issue-specific working groups were also created to have regular dialogue, analyse problems, and help plan and implement issue-specific actions.
6. Local demonstration projects were set up with help from non-governmental resources, and planned and monitored by the working groups using systematic reporting mechanisms set up with the help of a government project support team.

Phase II: Strategy Development and Action Planning

Government ministries such as The Ministry of Housing and Plantations Infrastructure committed themselves to a more central role in SCP implementation. This included creating full time positions for a director and technical officers to improve coordination of development activities. Two institutions were given extra support for EPM training of the local authorities and as part of efforts to focus on good governance and institutional strength, the EPM units were renamed Good Urban Governance (GUG) units.



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Phase III: Implementation, Up-Scaling and Replication

Additional municipalities replicated initiatives developed in the earlier SCP phases while national agencies such as the National Water Supply and Drainage Board, incorporated methodology into their urban development strategies.

Phase IV: Institutionalisation

Successful work of the SCP is continuing to be embedded into urban development policy together with continued emphasis on capacity building and consolidation through the institutionalization of EPM, which in turn, will help ensure the sustainability of the programmes work.

Although UN-HABITAT acknowledges that initiatives are difficult to measure in the short term, a number of achievements have been noted. We shall now consider these together with the areas where improvements might be needed.

UN-HABITAT SSLCP partnership: Achievements

It's claimed that the SSLCP has created better awareness among key stakeholders to the importance of effective collation and analysis of information for facilitating creative and effective initiatives (UNHABITAT, 2005b). Instrumental in this were the development of EMIS mechanisms and GUG facilities, the more comprehensive identification and involvement of stakeholders, and the work carried out by the working groups and project support teams.

As such, the SSLCP should be given credit for improving participation in Sri Lanka with, for example, the working groups acting as a catalyst for NGO and private sector involvement in the management of the cities. In addition, vertical partnership formations were also formed between councils and national organizations. National institutes and capacity building partners now include; The Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (SLILG), the Centre for Urban and Regional Planning (CURP), and NGO called Sevanatha, Management Resources for Good Governance (MaRGG) and universities and other training institutions. This greater involvement of government ministries initiated in Phase II can be attributed to the awareness and partnership building activities of the SCP and environmental planning capacity building efforts that were made with new GIS facilities and training (UN-HABITAT, 2005b).

Cross-sectoral project initiatives, community action planning, implementation of good governance and participative mechanisms were all aspects of SCP that helped shape a definitive strategic approach of this partnership, and which led to a report on the SSLCP concluding that the programme's share of influence on national level development planning and policy had been 'impressive' (UN-HABITAT, 2005b). As part of this work, national SCP and UN-HABITAT advisors created a framework to mainstream the core principles of the SCP (i.e. good governance, partnership building etc) and it is claimed that this led to an identifiable shift "expanding from environmental issues to strengthen and laying emphasis on Governance as a word that has become more *accepted*" (UN-HABITAT/UNEP, 2003, p.35). It is also maintained that this strategic approach was central to creating institutional coordination within the programme, the effective city development frameworks for municipalities and of the successful Solid Waste Management Strategies (SWM) of the SSLCP.



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Replication of the successful experiences of Phase I, including the SWM demonstration project, extended SCP activities from the original three city partners, to a total of thirteen. It now covers 18 municipalities and even four cities in the north and east of the country which until recently was the centre of the Tamil Tigers fight for independence. In addition, the SWM project was also adopted for emulation by UN-HABITAT's Basic Urban Services (BUS) program which had a significant influence on the government's solid waste strategy; being incorporated in the National Strategy for SWM in 2002.

Combined with the SCP management strategies, demonstration projects have also led to tangible improvements in living environments such as reduced uncontrolled dumping of waste in public areas and reduced volumes of waste production. For example, a home composting initiative had an estimated 50% reduction in household collectable waste, and since its start, has expanded to cover over three times the original number of households. Similarly, a community managed waste collection centre at Badowita is estimated to have reduced waste by 30% (UN-HABITAT/UNEP, 2005).

Also at the local level, according to UN-HABITAT (2005b) the use of working groups has helped to improve co-ordination between departments, stakeholder participation, and the mainstreaming of SCP strategies into municipal development planning. This has also been accompanied with improved awareness and attitudes toward participatory management. As a result, EPM mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, which accounted for over 14% of annual expenditure (Morapaya et al, 2005), and E-governance, are now both used by municipal councils and have allowed action planning based on local community input to be viewed as a crucial component of how councils run SCP activities. In addition, as a result of the SSLCP, Sri Lanka was the first place to provide E-learning on EMIS, and by 2005, had over 200 participants from different SCP and LA21 projects (UN-HABITAT, 2006b).

Finally, the importance of the global-to-local nature of UN-HABITAT's partnership structure should be noted. While many key aspects connected to partnerships assume a bottom-up approach to sustainable urban development, as Carley et al (2001) warn, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary to ensure efficient vertical integration of policy and implementation. Indeed, this process is partly recognized by Tuts (2002, para.7) who points out that the UN-HABITAT's aim to "institutionalise a participatory approach" to sustainable urban development, and what are considered to be its coherent top-down SCP policies, could be invaluable for helping to ensure finance and support in the initiation of bottom-up projects.

UN-HABITAT SSLCP partnership: Areas for improvement

Government officials at various levels were not adequately involved in some of the early processes of the partnership. During the first phase of the programme it was realized that officials at all levels, including the Mayors and Commissioners needed to be included earlier in the SCP training programme for the purposes of securing adequate motivation, awareness building and commitment. Similarly, top government officials were not being involved early enough to ensure adequate ministry involvement. However this was rectified by the end of phase I and an adequate sense of 'state ownership' was eventually created (UN-HABITAT, 2005b).



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Insufficient commitment and local government resources were also identified as a key limitation. According to a 2006 Status Report on EMIS, SSLCP problems were mostly caused by a lack of commitment or time by local authority officials, and insufficient computer resources for the GIS. As a result, a GIS expert was appointed to increase awareness of the importance of GIS for local authorities, monitor progress and provide technical support. It was also acknowledged that to ensure the sustainability of the programme, more regular updates of information and additional training, would be crucial (UN-HABITAT, 2006b). In addition, the existing training also had problems. These included a high dependency of external personnel, workshop times being too short, limited coordination between EPM and non-EPM training, and a lack of dedicated municipal training officers. As a result UN-HABITAT in its 2005 report on SSLCP highlighted the need for a stronger national partner to support the local authorities in further institutionalizing SCP practices.

Structural problems connected with the EMP prevented some local problems from being tackled adequately. For the programme's EMP guideline a 'common conceptual framework' based on field experience in various countries is used but for the SSLCP it was noted that facilitating flexibility was also important. Consequently, provisions for suitable changes were included in the EPM process to address local conditions. Because of staffing shortages in some municipalities for example, the EPM guidelines could not be followed and instead, short cuts were necessary to achieve the expected goals, which seems consistent with the claim that to meet specific needs, style and methodology for each city is unique (UN-HABITAT, 2005b). This danger was also highlighted at Alex 2003 where it was recommended that EPM toolkits should be "tailor-made to differing levels of comprehension" (UN-HABITAT/UNEP, 2003, p.53). It was also identified that most councils didn't have specific departments to implement the tools. Following the most successful practices, improving the usage of these tools could require translating the source books into local languages, and into a simpler and a more relevant format.

While the implementation of working groups and the creation of city profiles were very successful, both had a number of problems. Although government officials at all levels were said to have embraced the working group mechanism and were aware of the value of involving community and other stakeholders in the EPM process, no legislative measures were in place to consolidate this participative mechanism. For city profiling, much of the information collection was outsourced and therefore criticized for reducing the sense of municipal ownership. By collecting data themselves, councils would gain staff with better training experience and commitment. In addition, the participatory methods practiced were not attracting the participation of the middle class neighborhoods and therefore different approaches such as the implementation of citizens committees and calling for budget proposals was suggested (Morapaya et al, 2005)

Although many demonstration projects were successful, some were abandoned. Reasons include conflicts with other projects, lack of institutional support, changes in leadership after elections, and falling momentum due to insufficient evaluation or so called teeter-totter syndrome, where great enthusiasm is followed by indifference (UN-HABITAT/UNEP, 2005). In addition, for some projects that were completed, up-scaling was limited, as with a composting and bio-gas project in Kotte.

Conclusion

Although there have been a lot of reports on the progress of the SSLCP, there are few if any available that have not come under the auspices of the UN; i.e. that are not from UN-HABITAT or the UNEP themselves. Despite this apparent lack of accountability, UN-HABITAT programmes and projects are subject to a mandatory evaluation by the UN's Integrated Monitoring Documentation Information System (IMDIS) as well as independent evaluations. For example, in 2005, reports were produced on UN-HABITAT's SCP, LA21, and Safer Cities programmes, although, because of limits in funding, only two out of the four evaluations which were planned were actually completed (UN-HABITAT, 2005a). On a more positive note, the fact that reports have been done which have identified problems demonstrate that mechanisms are in place to monitor and evaluate these partnerships and undoubtedly have value in providing feedback for further development and improvements.

That aside, the reports which were available suggest that the SSLCP has had a very positive impact on the level and effectiveness of sustainable urban development in Sri Lanka with positive impacts identified in adapting and implementing local participatory governance methods and processes. This is part of the ongoing Phase IV of the programme, and with the help of an anchoring institution from the Netherlands, the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies, the strategy aims to improve capacity building through better training and continued partnership development. Positive measures include the training of trainers, increasing the number of trainers, improvement of training modules, a commitment for every local authority to allocate 4% of its budget to training, encouraging the media to help market and promote capacity building activity, and the promotion of city to city exchanges (UN-HABITAT, 2005b).

Finally, evaluations on the Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) concluded that it is necessary to ensure longer-term sustainability through further institutionalisation of good governance methods and processes at all levels of government; national, provincial, and local level (Morapaya et al, 2005). As a useful guide to help ensure the sustainability, expansion of influence, and continued review of the SCP projects and governance mechanisms which have been put in place Morapaya et al highlight some useful points which by way of a summary these include the following points:

1. Although interventions have been institutionalized at different levels, more progress needs to be made at the national level of integration to ensure national level capacity building. In particular, up-scaling city wide and mainstreaming lessons learnt are limited because of weaknesses identified in institutional mechanisms at national levels.
2. Training capacities have been improved but there are still problems with working norms, quality of service delivery, and IT use that need to be addressed.
3. Access to knowledge, skills and assets will help ensure good leadership and the duplication and transfer of these resources. However more sophisticated indicator based goals and interventions for improved empowerment of partners, and improvements to transparency and accountability. Similarly, although it has been acknowledged that participatory governance has improved closer monitoring of participatory budgets etc is needed as there is always the danger of corruption.

4. The successful instances of cross-sectoral action planning that have strengthened poor environmental governance and expanded with demonstrative effects need to be maintained.
5. Core values, once identified, need to be practiced system wide if the full benefits of the participatory process for good governance are to be realized.
6. In addition to environmental preservation, other areas need to be addressed by these core values that include self-reliance, motivation, consensus oriented dialogue, articulation and expression of group interests, bargaining, pressure group formation etc.
7. Although donor organisations need an exit strategy, the key stakeholders need to foster an attitude that includes a long-term view that goes beyond a project's 'entry-exit'. Some minimum level of assets building has been shown to be effective in helping to achieve a sustainability of community participation.
8. A better monitoring system is needed at local government level to gauge if and when the participatory process achieves its goals. As such, it has been recommended that scorecards and a rating system for local government agencies should be gradually introduced to achieve coverage throughout Sri Lanka.

In addition to the reports and articles used for this evaluation, for the longer term it will be necessary to regularly look at changes in key urban data for Sri Lankan cities. Given the focus of this programme's key incentives, useful indicators may include percentage of land used for waste disposal or percentage of dwellings connected to sewage treatment. This, together with the other improvements that have been highlighted will undoubtedly require a continued source of funding and resources, which in turn will require the continued assistance of outside institutions as partners.

While the programme is by and large a good example of what can be achieved through partnership, a noticeable absence of reports and other data on this programme post 2006 mean that the continued and longer-term policy impact and replication are difficult to assess. Furthermore, this apparent lack of information may be a cause to question the review process and commitment of the supporting institutions of the partnership after their exit. Part of any donor organisation's exit strategy should be to put in place mechanisms that facilitate continued monitoring, evaluation and council, and a lack of reports and data must call into question whether this in fact has been adequately done.

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