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## Voluntary or involuntary relocation of underserved settlers in the city of Colombo as a Flood Risk Reduction Strategy: A Case Study of Three Relocation Projects

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### Abstract

This paper examines the long term outcomes of involuntary or voluntary relocation by citing three relocation projects that commenced in 1990's Colombo, Sri Lanka. Poor and marginalized families living in unauthorized underserved settlements in flood prone areas around Colombo were relocated as a flood risk reduction strategy to rebuild their lives in secure locations. The Sri Lankan experience suggests that relocation projects have been guided by project specific guidelines as opposed to common guidelines which have produced both successes and failures. These outcomes, no doubt, stress the need for having specific guidelines for the three main stages of the relocation process: prior to displacement (pre-relocation), immediately after relocation and two years after relocation. This paper stresses the need to formulate people centric relocation policy guidelines based on the household surveys in select relocation settlements and key informant interviews with government officials and community leaders. Thereafter the implementation of such policies should be considered as a relocation process with emphasis on securing their livelihoods which in turn will assist them to move out of poverty.

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## 1. Introduction

Resettlement/relocation has been so poorly planned, designed, inadequately financed, incompletely implemented and administered that these projects generally end up being “DEVELOPMENT DISASTERS” (Oliver Smith, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to secure the livelihoods of the relocated poor to make development more sustainable. It is against the above background this paper examines long term outcomes of involuntary or voluntary relocation exemplified by three relocation projects implemented from 1990’s in Colombo city, Sri Lanka. Poor and marginalized families living in unauthorized underserved settlements in flood prone areas around the city of Colombo have been relocated as a flood risk reduction strategy and as an opportunity to rebuild their lives in secure locations. The paper has three parts: introduction and research methodology (adopted for the study), part one- discussion on characteristics of urban poor in Colombo and the impact of floods, part two- discussion on the main features of the selected relocation projects (on issues and problems where relocatees have major difficulties of coping) and finally the summary and conclusion.

### 1.1. Colombo City, Urban Poor and Floods

Sri Lanka’s total population is about 20,277,597 and 28.8 percent of them live in the Western Province (Census, 2013). Over two million inhabitants live in Colombo and Gampaha districts. Relatively higher annual population growth rates were reported from Gampaha and Kalutara districts mainly due to migrants opting to settle down in these districts when compared to Colombo.

According to the 2011 Census only 18.3 percent of the population lives in urban areas (See Table 1) which enumerate Municipal (23) and Urban (47) Council areas indicating very low urbanization. Prior to 1987 Municipal, Urban, and Town Councils were considered urban areas but thereafter, Town Councils were merged (87 TCs) with Rural Councils (Pradeshiya Sabahas) which miss calibrates the urban population of Sri Lanka. The dense population living in urban centers such as Homagama, Beruwala, Weligama are Pradeshiya Sabhas (PS) which do not identify as urban areas. This significantly reduces the urban population figures but in reality Sri Lanka’s urban population share could be as high as 48% (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development, 2016).

*Table 1: Urban population (1963-2011)*

Year	Urban Population (%)
1963	17.15
1971	19.51
1981	18.62
1989	17.36
2001	15.59
2011	18.3

Source: Census and Statistic Department, 2013

Colombo city has the highest population of 555,031 (CMC, 2014) with a population of 5.8 million in the Colombo metropolitan region and Sri Lanka’s commercial hub has the highest urbanization rate in the country (World Bank, 2012). This means that 28% of total the population occupies 6% of the country’s landmass. Moreover, 61% of the urban population lives in the Western Province which generates much of the capital, human resources, services and technology that contributes to economic growth and job creation.

Urban population expansion causes a variety of socio-economic problems such as; high density and deteriorating urban services that are most common in South Asian countries (Arachchige Don Neville, 1994). Various studies have confirmed that a large proportion of the urban poor in Colombo live in slums and shanties within the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) area (Hettige, 1990; Silva and Athukorala, 1991). A survey carried out jointly by the Sevanatha and the CMC in 2012 has identified a total of 123,185 families living in 1735 underserved settlements (CMC, 2014).

Most of these illegal settlements have sprouted near canal banks or low lying land, which are often exposed to natural hazards like floods. During the last 30 years Colombo city has been prone to regular floods which effects 1.2 million people annually (Project Insights, 2013). Floods are caused by a combination of factors such as; unauthorized constructions (slums and shanties) obstructing the water flow, clogging and lack of regular maintenance of drainage canals, backwater build-up in the main canal system, and commercial development in wetland reservations (Project Insights, 2013).

## **2. Research Methodology**

A cross sectional study design was used for the study. Hundred structured interviews were conducted with Sahaspura relocated families selected by using simple random sampling technique. Interviews were conducted with 102 heads of households who were relocated under the Lunawa Environmental Improvement and Community Development Project (LEI & CDP) using the same sampling technique. All 284 households at Owita stage three relocation settlement constructed under FPHEP project were interviewed. Key informant interviews were conducted with government and community based development society officials in both locations. All interviews explored relocated respondents socio-economic situation before and after. Both primary and secondary data were collected from the above sources. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used not only to enter data but also for data analysis.

## **3. Voluntary or Involuntary Relocation of Underserved Settlers as a Flood Risk Reduction Strategy**

Relocation has been adopted as a vulnerability reduction strategy to reduce the risk of floods of those who live in flood prone areas, to improve their living conditions and environment. The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) adopted an involuntary resettlement policy in 2001 to address those effected by donor funded development projects but many are displaced due to natural disasters and conflicts, where no uniform policy to addresses their concerns. Though there are significant differences among displaced populations the need for a national policy to guide the relocation processes cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is important to have a relocation policy as well as a widely accepted implementation mechanism for the sustainable relocation of displaced people due to natural hazards. It is against this background, the following section discusses the salient features of three such relocation projects implemented by the Sri Lankan government since the early 1990's.

### **3.1. The Colombo City Flood Prevention and Human Environment Development Project (FPHEP)**

The Colombo City Flood Prevention and Human Environment Development Project (FPHEP) was implemented by the GoSL to relocate the shanty dwellers living in the embankments of canals in and around the CMC area with the intention of repairing the canals (to control flooding) and to improve the socio-economic status of the urban poor. The project was initiated in the early 90's by the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) and the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Board (SLLRDB) with funding from the Japanese government. The squatters were relocated to seven locations (Sri Maha Vihara Mawatha, Badowita, Bathiya Mawatha, Obeysekarapura, Dematagoda Aramaya Road, Kadirana Waththa and Wadugoda Waththa) in the immediate suburbs of the CMC to maintain their existing social relationships and livelihoods unharmed. They received one to two perches of land and Rs. 20,000 as an interest free loan to build their houses.

“Owita” is the largest relocated settlement under the FPHEP project situated in the Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia Municipal Council area that spreads over 35 acres of land. This settlement is divided into four stages (viz. 1, 2, 3, and 4) and the number of plots in each stage varies depending on the land allocation (See Table1).

*Table 2: Number of housing units allocated for each stage by extent of land for each stage*

	Stage -1	Stage-2	Stage-3	Stage-4
Number of plots	136	364	284	93
Extent of land allocated	4 acres	14 acres	11 acres	6 acres

Source: Land Reclamation and Development Board

The infrastructure includes public and individual water supply and electricity connections to the households. There are two Buddhist temples and two Christian churches in the settlement and a few shrines for deities within private premises. There are three national schools (two for girls and a co-ed), one primary school, and two pre-schools in the settlement. There is a GN office, Water Board office and a Garbage recycling centre, around twenty-five grocery shops and a telecommunication centre.

Owita is socially and economically marginalized because of the nefarious activities carried out by some of the settlers (such as drug peddling, trading illicit liquor, crime and violence, etc.) and their casual employment. A key informant notes: –

*Outside people believe that all the thieves and thugs in the region live in this settlement, so, we do not like to say that we live in ‘Owita’. If we say so, principals in the surrounding schools show reluctance to admit our children in their schools and people cannot find decent employment*

Conversely, some settlers say that the situation is getting comparatively better because of frequent police raids. In 1993-94 when fieldwork commenced there were three types of settlers; re-settlers, old settlers and unauthorized settlers. In 2000-2001 there were four different types of settlers:

1. Former settlers – families who resided in the area before the resettlement project commenced
2. Re-settlers – families resettled under FPHEP project
3. New settlers – families who either purchased land from the re-settlers or have received them from various politicians
4. Unauthorized settlers – new settlers who have bought land from second or third generation re-settler or others who do not legally own land. All available land including the playground has been occupied by this group and according to the GN data, there are about 25 such families in the settlement.

Most re-settler’s had difficulties in constructing their houses as is evident from the interviews conducted at Owita stage two and three. This was because they had no savings or access to a bank loan because the government allocation of twenty thousand rupees arrived in four installments (Rs. 6000, Rs.4000, Rs.4000 and Rs.6000). Some families also used this money to send a family member for foreign employment or it was used for some other purpose. These reasons prompted some to leave the settlement by selling the plot of land to outsiders although it was illegal to do so. Relocatees also complained about poor common facilities (poor road access, lack of street lights and community centres etc.) at the time of the fieldwork. It is evident from the data that the authorities were not completely involved in the selection of relocatees nor in the relocation process as a result the relocatees did not have

much information about the complete relocation process. Authorities were only concerned on the pre-relocation stage and did not head attention to the socio-economic conditions after relocation though they were relocating poor or chronic poor populations. This indicates that special attention is necessary when relocating vulnerable populations whereas authorities understood relocation as giving a plot of land. Moreover, because the re-settlers were not active participants in the process their adjustment should have been closely monitored by project staff for at least five years. It is against this context, these research questions about real application of Home Owner Driven Approach which was used to relocate displaced people to Owita settlement.

### **3.2. Lunawa Environmental Improvement and Community Development Project (LEI & CDP)**

The Municipal Council areas of Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia (population 222,101 in 2008) and Moratuwa (population 187,588 in 2008) are two heavily populated areas in the Colombo District (Census and Statistics - 2013). Due to the scarcity of land and unplanned urban development, even the uninhabitable areas were used for human settlements. The Lunawa lagoon is one such area that was encroached by the ever increasing urban population which caused many environmental and health issues.

The settlement was unplanned, resulting in waste disposal problems, lack of proper sewerage facilities, clogged drains and succumbed to regular flooding and eventual displacement of people.

The economic context reflected a typical urban underserved settlement where they were either engaged in illegal endeavours or were from the informal sector. In 2000 Lunawa Environmental Improvement and Community Development Project (LEI & CDP) was underway with financial support of the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) as an extension to the Colombo Flood Control and Environmental Improvement Project (CFC & EIP) assisted by the Government of Japan.

Under the LEI & CDP, unplanned settlements around the Lunawa lagoon were to be converted into an eco-friendly and planned settlement. The project had the overall objective of improving the living conditions of people by mitigating the flood damage through improvement of urban drainage and canal systems.

The objectives of the project

- Upgrading the living conditions of resettled (870 households) and underserved communities in the inundated area and communities along the new canal and Lake Front
- The focus was on settlement and community development of user communities in the area leading to and generating a sustainable area based urban development process without floods

Therefore, the project included compulsory involuntary resettlement of populations and it is the first project that exercised Sri Lanka's National Involuntary Resettlement Policy into practice.

Effected households were given three options under the project:

- 1) Settle in four relocation sites prepared by the project with all basic infrastructure such as; access roads, water supply, electricity and sewage facilities
- 2) Settle in lands purchased by project effected persons (self-relocation)
- 3) Settle in the original site after regularising the plots (on-site resettlement) (UN-HABITAT, 2009).

The particular community was selected for the research due to their nature of displacement and resettlement being predominantly development oriented. All three locations, namely Lake View Garden, Hike Terrace and River Side Garden were involuntary relocation sites under the LEI & CDP. These locations were subsequently chosen to

accommodate a number of families displaced from the tsunami. Two perches land and Rs. 400,000 (in four installments) was given to the relocated communities. The beneficiaries had the opportunity of constructing their own houses according to their needs and wishes.

Findings from the research reveal new settlements built under the LEI & CDP were situated within 5 km of their previous place of residence which did not disrupt their livelihood and way of life. Unlike in other programmes, the government and the project officials of LEI & CDP worked together and took the responsibility of passing the information to prospective beneficiaries. Similarly, relocatees of the three settlements were educated on house designs which can be constructed with Rs. 224,000 on the land given to them. Houses were constructed by the beneficiaries and they were given the authority to oversee and select the personnel and material required to construct the houses.

It is evident from the data that a majority of LEI & CDP (65%) have indicated their choice of preferred settlement and 62% of them have received it. When inquired from the sample of relocates (who took the final decision to relocate in the present location) nearly 70% had decided to relocate to the preferred locations, while another 28% were requested by the project officials to settle in the given location. The relocated communities had more bargaining power with the stakeholders, which enabled them to campaign for a better deal.

The most important lessons behind the success of the relocation project is that investing time and resources for careful relocation planning, implementation, short and long term monitoring. They also collaborated with various partners (NGO's) who acted as strong links between the relocated families, the project team as well as with local authorities in the relocation process which built good relationships. Inclusions of host communities in the project and preparing resettlement sites through community contracts (UN-HABITAT) (2009).

### **3.3. Sustainable Township Programme (STP)**

Sustainable Township Programme (STP) began in 1998 under the new Urban Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan of the Peoples' Alliance (PA) government. Originally it was expected to relocate 66,000 urban underserved people in six different places around Colombo. Namely; Minikelanipura, Kochchikade, Slave Island, Borella, Narehenpita and Wellawatta. The Sahaspura complex is one of the six planned compact townships under the Sustainable Township Programme of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. The 13 storied high rise has 671 apartments with a floor area of 300 to 600 square feet with amenities such as individual water, electricity and telecommunication, community and entertainment facilities, pre-schools and day care centres. Each family had to pay Rs. 25,000 as maintenance fee for the apartment and when occupying they were provided with a deed of ownership. As and when each of the designated family is moved into an apartment they were expected to give up the land previously occupied by them. A management board responsible for the maintenance of the housing complex was appointed through a mutual agreement between STP and Sahasa dwellers.

A research study conducted in Sahaspura revealed that the size of the population resettled has serious implications with regard to management of the scheme, provision of public amenities, social organisations and intra community relationships. The study suggested, that low rise housing complexes each comprising between 100 to 200 units seems to be the most appropriate way to accommodate disadvantaged or underserved communities in the city (Hettige et.al. 2004). Moreover, there was no proper program to increase the income of the households as most of them were engaged in casual employment and the income that they earned was insufficient to meet their expenses. In this context, they were worried about paying individual water and electricity bills on a monthly basis which were new expenses as they used common taps and kerosene oil lamps before. Majority of the relocatees were also concerned about constricted space of the housing unit.

Under the Colombo Urban Renewal Project, Relocation of Underserved Settlements which is somewhat similar to Sahaspura is being implemented by the UDA since 2011. The main objective of the project is to eliminate shanties

and other dilapidated housing from the city of Colombo by moving them from their present unhygienic and poor environmental conditions to new housing schemes with international standards. Plans are underway to relocate 70,000 households within the next six years (construction of 30,000 low cost housing within the next three years and another 40,000 housing units before 2015) in ten locations. These apartments consist of a floor area of 450 square feet consisting of two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen with individual water and electricity supply. What is important to note here is that the active participation of effected people into the relocation process was very limited and the size of the housing unit was further decreased which led to more resistance from the selected communities for relocation into these high rise apartments. Nevertheless, authorities did not want to revise the relocation plan to accommodate at least some of the people's concerns other than moving forward with the original plan which is a clear sign of forced relocation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper discussed the forced relocation of the urban poor previously living in flood prone areas. After examining the long term impact of these relocation projects some of the positive lessons learned as well as drawbacks have been discussed.

It is evident that these projects have managed to somehow control floods in the Colombo city in to some extent, but there is a grave concern about relocated people's situation in their new locations as FPHEP project did not implement and manage the relocation process carefully as a result some of them became more vulnerable to chronic poverty conditions and took ten or more years to adapt to the new environment. However, people who have relocated under LEI & CDP project adapted to the new environment in less than five years as a result of proper implementation of people centered relocation policies which has impended taking into consideration it as a process with the participation of the people with more financial resources to construct self-help housing with increase sense of ownership compared to FPHEP project. It is important to note that these good practices are not properly followed in contemporary relocation projects which lead to relocation failures and people become more and more vulnerable to poverty and chronic poverty situations which in turn end up in "development disasters situations". In this context it is advised to adopt and implementation of relocation policy guidelines to relocate disaster induced displaced people and to relocate them in the future to make these people more secure.

The lessons learned no doubt in turn will assist to minimize relocation failures in the future by completely implementing people centered relocation policy guidelines developed with the intention of achieving following objectives:

1. Devise a mechanism that would enable the communities to successfully cope with various risks and stresses generated as a result of the shock of involuntary relocation and the relocation process.
2. Make the prospective 'relocatees' aware of the relocation process (or stages of relocation) with a time-frame agreed upon to complete the successful relocation process by affected persons and implementing agencies.
3. Make the relocation process to be participatory, transparent and accountable.
4. Assist particularly the most vulnerable groups (female headed households, hidden female headed households, households with disabled, chronically ill members, poor households) to be successfully adapted to the new location, restore their livelihoods in order to improve their living standards. The programme should ensure that the displaced people improve or at least restore their previous standard of living.
5. Ensure the people affected due to involuntary relocation programmes to be promptly compensated. Also make awareness among the people about the process for redressing their grievances to facilitate easy access and quick response to resolve issues.

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