

**Commonwealth Local Government Forum
Research Colloquium**

Improving local government: The commonwealth vision

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**A new approach in institutional partnerships between local government and
research: Tackling urban poverty in Colombo, Sri Lanka**

The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has over the years experimented with many innovative methods to overcome the challenges faced in developing the underserved settlements (slums and shanties) within the city. The role of the CMC as the initiator and leader of the Colombo Focus City Project within the Global Focus City Programme of the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada is a potential model for local governments which are exploring new avenues of funding and policy development.

Most external funding for development projects originate from multi and bilateral aid or via international non-governmental institutions. The local counterpart for bilateral, and most often multilateral aid is frequently a state institution. Over the last decades there has been an overt move away from the state sector and a shift towards the non-state sector as implementing partners. In the case of international funders the preferred partner or recipient has long been non-state organizations. It is rare for a local government body to provide leadership for the country study of a global action research programme.

The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) has both a regulatory and service provision mandate within the city of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Ensuring a basic standard of service provision to the underserved settlements within the city has required the CMC to deal with regulatory / legal, socio-political and funding challenges. The strong welfare orientation of the state has however, motivated the CMC to attempt a range of innovative methods to upgrade the settlements. The inability to use central or local government funds on 'illegal' settlements has led the need for accessing funds from other sources. Bilateral and multilateral 'project money' has been one source. Learning from this experience, the CMC decided in 2006 to lead a bid for an action research project inviting two domestic non-state institutions to partner with them. The Colombo team was selected and became the only one of the 8 teams within the global IDRC Focus City programme to be led by the local government partner.

This paper will outline the history of the CMC in how it has attempted to manage the service provision to the underserved settlements in Colombo. It will also explore the partnership between several non-state organizations and the Municipal Council that led to the development of the joint action research project and the implications that this has for future partnerships between state and non-state agencies as well as with external international funders. The paper argues that this unique institutional arrangement, while

challenging, may have a positive long term influence on how policy is developed given the close proximity of key policy influencers to the project.

The paper is a one in a series of working papers to be prepared by the Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA). The Colombo Focus City team is made up of the Colombo Municipal Council (team leader) and Sevantha, a Sri Lankan non-state agency specialising in urban poverty, and CEPA, a Sri Lankan poverty research institution.

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