

Urban Agriculture as a Mechanism for Urban Upgrading



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Medicinal plant can be grown on or inside houses

Traditionally, agriculture is not included as an activity in land use and zoning plans in urban development, although city greening is accepted as part of city beautification and landscaping. Still, people in urban areas in Colombo have always been involved in various agricultural activities, like growing vegetables, plants for curry leaves trees such as coconut, raising livestock and pigeons and fishing in inland waterways.

People living in areas that are vulnerable to flooding and who have no alternative land available for relocation are still living in underserved shanties.

Within this context, Sevanatha with the support of Colombo Municipal Council selected a settlement called Halgahakumbura as the pilot site for an urban agriculture project called “Making the Edible Landscape”. The objective of this project initiated in 2003 was to preserve and promote the practice of urban agriculture to improve family income and food security. The project sought to mobilise communities and local authorities to use urban spaces (arable lands in private and public ownership, along canals, roads and power lines, on rooftops, etc.) for growing vegetables, raising livestock and to use inland water bodies for fisheries. In general, city people like to grow plants and trees more than raise animals, and growing trees is a tradition in Sri Lanka.

In an early analysis, Sevanatha concluded that formal upgrading of Halgahakumbura would not be possible, but that there was a vast potential within the community for improvement of housing and basic amenities. Sevanatha took on this challenge and proposed this settlement as a pilot site of the project for urban agriculture. The Halgahakumbura community was mobilised, and community organisation strengthened, through the existing Community Development Councils (CDC) established by the Public Health Department of Colombo Municipal Council. Four CDCs were formed by demarcating the settlement into four zones based on the

These activities are considered non-urban, and increasingly agricultural lands have been converted into other uses. Fortunately, people in Colombo irrespective of the income or other divisions in the society, still use whatever space is available for growing vegetables, trees and for livestock farming.

Colombo is the capital city of Sri Lanka and over the past twenty years it has introduced various innovative methods for improving housing. In the 1970s, more than half of the city’s population was living in underserved, congested slums. Now the majority of the urban poor have secure land tenure and access to private and individual water and sanitation facilities. According to the 2002 Poverty Profile of the City of Colombo, 70% of families in underserved settlements are living in their own houses and 45% have access to an individual water supply and private toilet facilities. Most of these families are living in settlements that have been upgraded by

government housing programmes since 1980. Despite this achievement, still 23,116 out of 77,612 poor families live in underserved settlements (Sevanatha and Colombo Municipal Council, 2002). There are several reasons for this. One is the city’s bureaucracy, another is the over-dependency on government. As a result, only those settlements situated on public lands with fewer legal and physical constraints have been upgraded.

Halgahakumbura Low-income Settlement

Halgahakumbura is located in Ward 32, Wanathamulla, in CMC on approximately 10 acres of land. The settlement comprises 2,742 people living in 556 housing units. Of these, only 79 (less than 15%) can be considered permanent housing units. The settlement was formed by illegal occupation of an area formerly used as a dumpsite, next to a canal. The settlement does not have common facilities. The main income sources of the people are unskilled labour and informal business activities. The average monthly income per family is estimated at Rs. 4,000. Twenty years ago, only 48 households had individual water connections; the other 508 were sharing 8 water stand-posts to collect their water. Only 162 houses had improvised individual toilets and there was no proper drainage system, which increased the risk of flooding. Since that time, people in Halgahakumbura have built their own homes, obtained basic water supply needs and enjoyed other municipal services such as education and health facilities. They now also have voting rights to elect members for the municipal council and national assembly.

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physical boundaries and the size of population to ensure a large community representation in settlement upgrading. The next activity of the project was the preparation of a Community Action Plan (CAP) in partnership with the municipality. In a community workshop people were given the opportunity to identify problems to decide on solutions and strategic actions for each of the prioritised issues.

The Major issues identified by the people in Halgahakumbura settlement were: lack of drinking water supply, lack of sanitation facilities including drains flooding during the rainy season, insecure land tenure, improvised housing, high rate of unemployment among youth.

As this settlement is located close to a major canal of the city under a high-tension electricity power line, no government agency was willing to carry out the on-site upgrading, although government agencies like National Water Supply Board agreed to provide water as this is common practice in other parts of the city as well (without considering ownership). The next step was mobilisation of the households to improve their agricultural activities. People in Halgahakumbura had already been growing various vegetable plants for their own consumption and trees to provide shade and landscape their own housing premises.

More than 500 families in Halgahakumbura are talking about the improvement work done in lane A. It has given a new look to all of the houses. People use the improved lane happily and proudly because they improved it themselves. It is used not only for walking but also for other purposes such as a space for drying cloths and some food items, a meeting place and a children's play area.

Local residents have named this lane "Ekamuthu Mawatha", which means "United Lane". House numbers are displayed at the entrance to the lane, so postal carriers can now easily identify houses to deliver letters. Lane improvement has increased the value of houses and reduced people's fear of eviction. This activity has led people to improve their houses and home gardens.

Under the urban agriculture project in Halgahakumbura the people were first encouraged to continue and improve their agricultural practices. Existing agricultural practices by people were recorded on a map and photographed. This helped the project team to understand the available knowledge among the people about agriculture. Secondly, information and new knowledge on agriculture in an urban context was provided. The project team was assisted in this by the Department of

Agriculture. Many people were keen to be engaged in agricultural production since this as an activity through which people can get recognition from the municipality for their occupancy in the city. The participants indicated that they like to practise agriculture collectively in order to obtain project support and municipal services. Collective activities by the people in the settlement have been organised in relation to access roads or lanes, as they are commonly known in low-income settlements.

Improvement of urban agriculture goes hand-in-hand with a better organised living space. Project guidelines include increasing access to housing units, improving sanitation and wastewater disposal on site, minimising solid waste through household composting, improving lighting and ventilation of housing units and improving home gardens.

The "Making the Edible Landscape" project has motivated people to develop their own rules for lane improvement. Lane improvement has added previously unused space to housing plots and neighbours collectively agreed to recognise their housing plots in order to build better housing. Improved access roads have increased the value of houses and the beauty of the neighbourhood. Each housing plot is now connected to small drains, which are eventually connected to the main drains of the settlement. Small drains now prevent frequent flooding in the settlement. People themselves have named their improved lanes and house numbers are displayed at the entrance to the lane. Naming the lane and numbering the houses are important steps because they allow people to have various services provided at the household level, especially postal service and water and electricity, since the bills have to be delivered to their houses.

People engage in agricultural activities after lane improvement because this is encouraged and supported by the municipality and Department of Agriculture. Sevanatha helps people in the settlement improve their own houses, provides information together with the Department of Agriculture, and holds demonstrations on urban agriculture practices such as cultivation tower, crop

management, technology adaptation, cultivation racks, edible air-scrappers, hydroponics, cultivation bags, and composting methods. In addition, communities have been given learning opportunities to adapt various edible landscaping tools jointly developed under the research project on edible landscaping conducted by McGill University, Canada. This includes settlement upgrading, space arrangement for livelihood development, growing techniques and integration of edible plants into home and settlement landscaping.

People living in settlements that have not yet been upgraded welcome municipal support for this purpose as it is an important way for them to obtain security of tenure. More importantly, when the settlement is upgraded and improved by its inhabitants, the government tends to relax strict rules and regulations and eventually people have more chances to obtain ownership of land that they currently occupy. Thanks to all the positive contributions made by the inhabitants themselves, Sevanatha and the municipality, the households have been able to collectively reduce their fear of eviction and improve their living conditions.

Notes

1) The project is executed by the Colombo Municipality and SEVANATHA, and is technically and financially supported by McGill University-Montreal, ETC Urban Agriculture -the Netherlands and IDRC-Canada.

The author is heading a leading urban-based NGO called SEVANATHA - Urban Resource Center that has been successful in carrying out various innovative practices related to urban land tenure, housing, service delivery, waste management, community building and livelihood improvement.

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