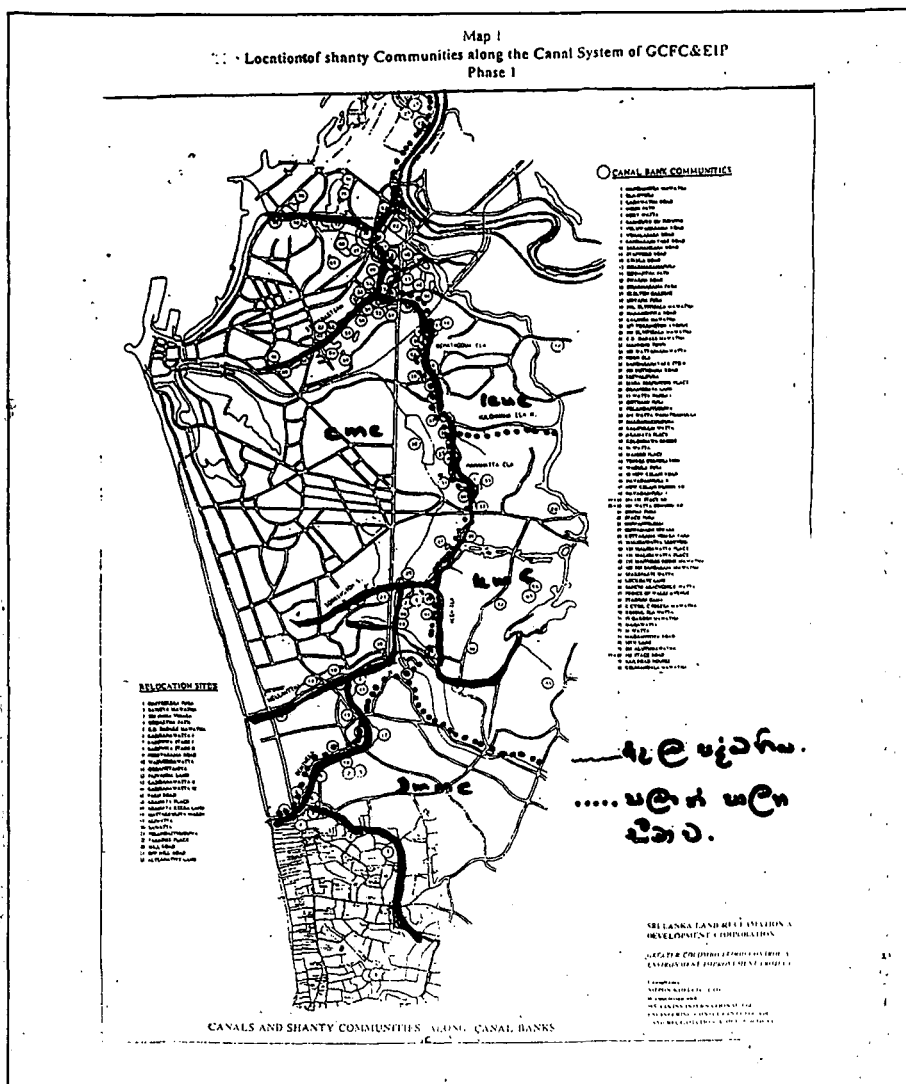


Green settlements project



by **Fathima Razik Cader**

Sri Lanka celebrated her Independence recently and going back in time to the pre-Independence era, the City of Colombo had many picturesque sites - amongst them a sedate and smooth boat ride down the canals linking certain points in the city.

Fifty-five years later, it is but a distant dream in the minds of those who were fortunate enough to have had that pleasurable boat ride in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. Times have changed and innumerable changes have taken place. Peace today is a viable prospect - but it is the tranquillity of the years gone by that seems difficult to achieve. However, we can live in hope that a boat ride along the canals that connect certain points in the City of Colombo could become a reality in a few years time.

The Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, through the 15th century till 1948 built the City of Colombo. During that period, the colonial rulers paid great emphasis on promoting Colombo as a seaport to encourage trade and commercial activities. The development of the city *per se*, was done in a somewhat ad hoc manner although records show that eminent British town planners - Sir Patrick Geddes and Sir Patrick Abercrombie had drawn city development plans for Colombo during the early part of the 20th century.

Today, only an area of 37.32 sq. km. in extent comes under the purview of the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC). This relatively small area has less than one million inhabitants and the CMC functions under the powers derived from the Municipal Council Ordinance enacted in 1885, and since then, this Ordinance has been supplemented by hundreds of other Acts and by-laws. Some of the services provided by the CMC are maintenance of roads, drainage, sewers, public parks, public toilets, solid waste management, recreational and health facilities.

A survey done in 1998/99 estimates around 1506 urban poor settlements within the city limits and a majority of these are located in the northern and central parts of Colombo. The shanties are spread along the canal reservations, railway line reservations and in low lying swampy areas located mainly in the eastern and southern parts of Colombo. The lack of basic amenities such as human waste and garbage disposal systems have resulted in the canals being fed with human and solid waste.

This results in water being polluted and stagnating in most of the canals. The soil around the canals is also polluted. Passers-by are only too aware of the stench that emanates from the canals whilst there is ample opportunity for disease causing mosquitoes to breed freely. Little wonder then that dengue, encephalitis, filariasis, malaria and diarrhoea and dysentery - the last two due to lack of pure drinking water periodically become major health issues not only in Colombo but in other parts of the country as well.

The lot of these families living along the canal banks is pathetic to say the least. Apart from lacking basic amenities, they constantly live under a cloud of threat that of eviction, floods during the monsoons, lack of pure drinking water all underlaid by inadequate income to meet their day-to-day

needs. These conditions have led them to commit crimes, indulge in prostitution and drug-trafficking and in contrast, have also made them resilient enough to cope with and withstand any hazards in order to survive.

Thus these social ills have to be addressed as a matter of priority. Ignoring them will result in more environmental degradation. And these poor settlers will be helped to overcome all the problems they face - help from a core group which has been formed under the aegis of the Public Health Department (PHD) of the CMC. This core group will plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the programme to eliminate the problem the settlers face and in the process, achieve their goal of bringing back to the City of Colombo, clean and beautiful canals.

To achieve this, hard work and co-operation are the important ingredients. As a matter of fact, the quality of life of those citizens who live along the canals will improve in leaps and bounds once the plan of action gets under way.

Along with that, almost all health and social hazards will gradually be eliminated. Its implementation, as are other projects of the Public Health Department, participatory. All stakeholders will be co-opted, motivated and encouraged to carry out their part of the programme to ensure its continuity and overall success.

For a start, the PHD authorities will identify children, youth and women living along the canal banks as vital participants and then conduct a series of awareness programmes on the important aspects.

According to Dr. Pradeep Kariyawasam, Chief MOH - CMC, the first programme, as an experiment, was conducted in 1998. Encouraged by the response, Dr. Kariyawasam has drawn up a feasible long-term programme to clean up the canals, have clean homes along the banks and hopefully, an unpolluted canal that can be used for transport, washing and bathing.

The United Nations Committee on Human Settlement (UNCHS) is closely associated with the CMC in its plan of action. A key element is the coordination of inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration (e.g. NGO's and the private sector) underlined by good governance.

Appropriately called "Green Settlements", the environment around the canal banks will be free of pollution in the years to come. As a matter of fact, an aspect of the Green Settlements Project is the "Green Star Home" project which has been successfully conducted over the last few years especially in relation to identifying the deadly dengue mosquito breeding sites within residential homes in various parts of the city. In respect of the canal banks programme, essentially, (a) solid waste management and (b) sanitation are the two factors that will be dealt with at the very outset.

Solid waste is a problem that a high percentage of the residents (in the cities and suburbs) of Sri Lanka face. On the other hand, local authorities - municipal, urban councils and other bodies, have not been able to address this issue to the satisfaction of all concerned. Lack of garbage disposal facilities, manpower and finances within local authorities have all led to the disappointing state of affairs in this regard.

Complaints are the order of the day and to those on the other side of the fence - it is a

thankless task. How then does one try to at least minimise the problem of garbage disposal which has reached alarming proportions? Says Dr. Kariyawasam, 'by creating the necessary awareness in a manner that they understand, that they need to co-operate, not dump their garbage into canals as that is the easiest and convenient thing to do and then by giving them alternate solutions'. What then are the alternate solutions? First, the garbage should be sorted out - bottles, plastic items, tins, paper and other reusable items should be collected separately. Leaves and other bio-degradables should also be sorted out and once this is done, the rest would be minimal in quantity and therefore easier to dispose of - through garbage collectors of the municipality.

Garbage thus sorted out will be a source of income to the settlers who are within the low-income group. Recycling will be actively promoted and arrangements made to educate the children (in their spare time), youth and women to take up appropriate cottage industries which will be financially rewarding. The awareness programme will also educate the settlers on the health hazards that could be prevented if solid and other waste are not dumped into the canal.

According to the records maintained by the Epidemiological Unit of the PHD, communities living along the canal banks and others who are considered under-privileged are frequently affected by many environment related diseases. One reason cited is their basic lack of knowledge in areas of good hygiene and cleanliness and secondly, lack of resources to adopt healthy measures to conserve the environment. In fact, nearly 50 per cent of the metro-population live under the so-called 'poverty line' and if this poverty is ignored, it will be a serious threat to both the environment in particular and the rest of society in general.

The CMC spends a large percentage of its resources on medication and takes prompt action every time there is an outbreak of a mosquito borne disease. Added to which, with the development of the city taking place at a rapid pace, the CMC has to face the attendant complex problem. For example, the infrastructure has not kept pace with progress and development, increasing traffic congestion, and other social issues are problems that keep increasing by the day.

Therefore, the challenge before the CMC is to ensure that the living standards of this nearly 50 per cent of the city population improves and that they will eventually be absorbed into and come under the formal city administration.

This challenge then has to be met through adequate health and welfare facilities to all citizens in general and to the urban poor in particular, by evolving innovative strategies which should be community based and participatory in nature. This will then create an eco-friendly environment, gradually alleviate poverty, promote good health and acceptable living standards.

This is the vision of the Public Health Department of the Colombo Municipal Council, now a highly motivated unit with Dr. Pradeep Kariyawasam at the helm. Their mission is to work towards their goal, and all civic-minded citizens will no doubt laud and support this venture.

(Continued next week)