



SOCIAL FUNDS INNOVATIONS NOTES

A Story of Social and Economic Empowerment: The Evolution of “Community Professionals” in Sri Lanka

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This note explores the critical and innovative role played by “Community Professionals” in the Village Self Help Learning Initiative and Gemi Diriya programs in Sri Lanka. It describes the strategy used by the projects to mobilize and strengthen grassroots resource persons in support of achieving the Bank’s mission of poverty reduction and livelihood improvement in rural Sri Lanka. In Gemi Diriya, Community

Professionals are proving to be a driving force behind establishing sound village organizations, building capacity at the village level and promoting villager-villager learning. Institutionalizing the role of grassroots professionals by creating a “Community Professional Learning and Training Center” has allowed the program to scale up in a cost-effective and sustainable manner.

While demand-driven programs have been able to deliver impressive results at the local level, scaling up and achieving sustainability on a large scale has proved to be an enormous challenge. One reason is that typically, community-driven development (CDD) programs serve a large number of small, widely dispersed communities, and managing such programs requires close, continuous and intense support especially during the early stages of implementation—support to technical teams at the project level as well as to community groups. CDD projects have tried using a range of strategies and institutional options (such as NGOs, private sector agencies, local governments, line agency staff, project facilitation teams, etc.) for mobilizing communities and building capacity on a large scale. However, not all of these have been successful, partly because of weak capacity in the countries that they work in, partly because of the costs associated with hiring and training a large number of staff (or outside agents) able to support the many villages covered by the project and also owing to questions of sustainability and dependence.

Lessons from the **Community Development and Livelihood Improvement** Project—better known as

Gemi Diriya—may be able to provide an answer to some of the challenges described above. The Sri Lankan experience demonstrates that building a network of “Community Professionals” (CPs) and involving them in all aspects of project implementation provides an effective strategy for scaling up in a sustainable and cost effective manner. The program’s home grown “para-professionals” who themselves are community members provide a unique and sustainable resource—they have local knowledge, are able to communicate effectively with their peers, are trusted by the communities, and are motivated to find local solutions to their communities’ problems. The project engages Community Professionals not only to support “new” communities but to also train project staff and external agents involved with the project. Indeed they have become the chief spokespersons for promoting community driven development in Sri Lanka!

THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITY PROFESSIONALS

Sri Lanka is commonly regarded as a country of enormous economic and human potential, held back by years of internal conflict. With a per capita income of US\$1010

per year (2005, WDI), almost a quarter of Sri Lanka's population are still poor, and 90% of them live in rural areas or on agricultural estates. There are large regional disparities in poverty incidence, with the south and northeast showing higher levels of poverty.

Against this background, a Village Self-help Learning Initiative (VSHLI) was piloted in 1999 in three villages in the poor north-central province of Sri Lanka. The main objective of the initiative was to introduce and test a model of participatory rural development that focused on empowering local communities to find their own solutions to local development problems. Key actions included mobilizing communities, building inclusive, accountable village organizations, and supporting their self-management. Villagers drove decision-making at all stages of the project cycle, demonstrating that poor rural communities could successfully articulate and plan for their priority needs, implement and sustain local infrastructure and income generation sub-projects, contribute 30% of the capital cost from their own funds, and share the benefits equitably with all sections of the community.

As the pilot got underway, institution building and ensuring transparent management of village funds were key priorities. Difficulties with conventional financial management and procurement procedures were addressed through a process of workshops with participation of Bank staff and local government officers, but *led by community members themselves*. The implementation hurdles were overcome largely through innovative community-led thinking and problem-solving. These community members went on to record the newly agreed guidelines, synthesized in a “community operational manual”. Bank staff found themselves watching from the sidelines of a process that was entirely community-driven, with youth playing a leading role. As one government officer noted as an aside, “You have made them Bank staff!” Rather than the transformation of the young villagers into global technocrats, his remark reflected the process of empowerment of community members, who had wholeheartedly embraced the decision-making and management process.

Given this resourceful cadre of committed grassroots leaders, a strategy was needed to harness their capacity

in a sustainable way that benefited both these individuals and their communities. How could their strengths be utilized to support expansion of the program, and further nurtured to enable more widespread deployment of these marketable skills? What would be needed to facilitate this?

THE GEMI DIRIYA COMMUNITY DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT MODEL

In response to the Government of Sri Lanka's request to scale up VSHLI as a vehicle for rural poverty reduction, the Bank-financed Gemi Diriya program became effective in October 2004. At the center of the program are inclusive membership-based Village Organizations (VOs) that are registered as *peoples' companies*, under the Sri Lankan Company's Act. The organizations are responsible for prioritizing and managing local development needs and funds, including investments in productive infrastructure and economic livelihoods. The Gemi Diriya model is embedded within an ethical framework (“Golden Rules”) that emphasizes good governance, equity, transparency and cost- efficiency when dealing with the use of public finances. A long-term process of capacity and institutional development supports sustainability of Village Organizations and their self-financing *federations*, as well as promoting partnerships with the private sector and responsive local governments.

Institutionally, the project contracts external support organizations—local NGOs—to carry out the initial information campaign in villages, facilitate participatory planning and appraisals, and support formation of the Village Organization and preliminary training of its office bearers. The NGO role is time-limited, however, and they exit after preparatory institution building activities. The Village Organization is left to function by itself, with support primarily from technical teams sent by the Gemi Diriya project agency. Additional demands for technical expertise are contracted by the Village Organization using a Capacity Building Fund.¹

¹ Once established, Village Organizations have access to a Village Development Fund that finances three main areas: (i) Capacity Building; (ii) Community Infrastructure Services Sub-projects; and (iii) Livelihood Support.

Even though this structure is designed to avoid dependence on external agencies, ongoing hand-holding and guidance is undoubtedly needed for strengthening the Village Organizations. Project field teams provide for this, but it is recognized that this too is an external dependence and cost. The idea of Community Professionals and their Learning and Training Center emerged in direct response to these numerous challenges.

In the early stage of the project, the Capacity Building Fund, managed by the Village Organizations, was used to bring in technical assistance in the form of grassroots leaders from other villages where skills and lessons have already been learnt. New villages were therefore being guided by their more experienced peers, who shared skills and experience and assisted with activities. As this intra-village skill-sharing practice increased and as members from new villages volunteered time for helping their own and other Village Organizations, a framework was needed to document, institutionalize and efficiently manage the longer-term capacity building and recruitment/deployment of these emerging Community Professionals. Given a huge projected demand, the idea of establishing and managing their own Community Professional Learning and Training Center emerged.

The Center's key objectives are to: (a) develop community capacity and confidence in planning, implementing and monitoring their own development; (b) act as a support and/or service delivery agency, providing "community to community" services; and (c) provide an opportunity for the community members, especially poor youth and women, to generate income and develop skills that will lead to future employment within the Federation or outside.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING OF THE COMMUNITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND TRAINING CENTER

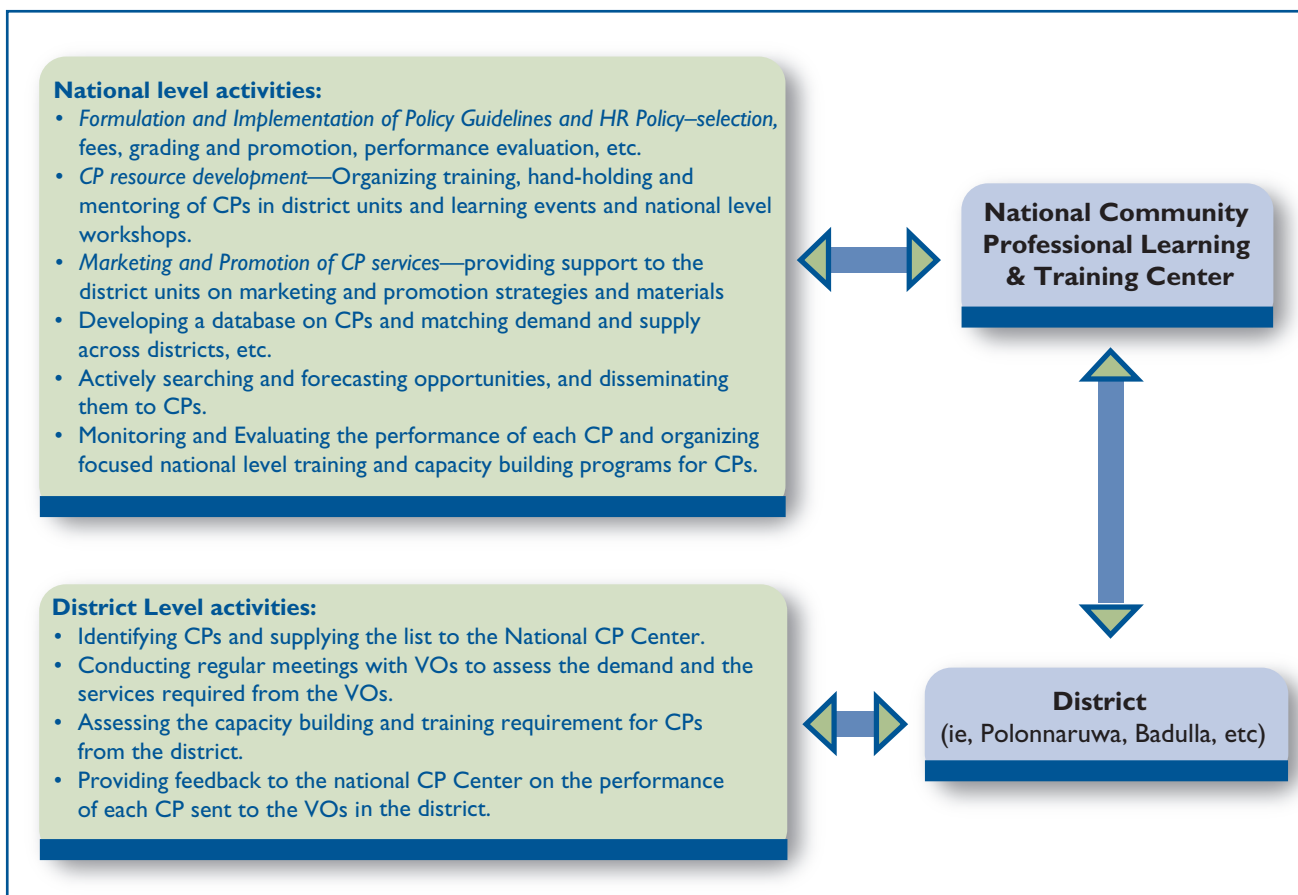
The "pioneers" among the Community Professionals formulated the idea of a national Community Professional Learning and Training Centre that would serve as a hub for district level centers, following a franchise model.

The National Center is in the process of finalizing its institutional set-up, and will consist of: (i) a management team; and (ii) a Mobile Capacity Building team to train, mentor and monitor the community Professionals in the field and build their capacity and confidence in a cost-effective way. The Mobile Capacity Building team organizes basic training on key themes of village planning,

Community Professionals support WB project supervision missions

Given the challenge of effectively monitoring compliance of fiduciary and accountability aspects and building confidence and capacity of a large number of stakeholders, Bank implementation support teams have invited the participation of a group of Community Professionals on their missions. These Community Professionals join Bank teams on their village visits, participate in discussions and share their experiences with the newly formed Village Organizations. The Community Professionals: (i) check compliance of villages with the "Golden Rules" while implementing Village Development Plans (VDP); (ii) identify gaps in implementation and issues that need more support and guidance from the Gemi Diriya team; (iii) build confidence of the communities by sharing with them their own experiences and how problems were resolved; and (iv) start a process of community-to-community transfer of knowledge and skills. This strategy has been extremely successful in enhancing insights into field issues, checking compliance with the project rules, identifying practical solutions to various local level problems and building a community-to-community network. Owing to the success of these visits and as an explicit part of the scaling-up strategy, World Bank missions now regularly seek the services of Community Professionals to participate on implementation support missions.

Figure 1: Institutional diagram of CPLTC franchise structure



implementation, institutional strengthening and good governance, as well as demand-driven capacity building as requested by Community Professionals and the village communities. The Mobile team develops materials and simple manuals, provides hands-on support to the Community Professionals through field-based action learning and monitors their performance, seeking regular feedback from Village Organizations.

To guide the functioning of the centers, clear eligibility criteria for hiring community professionals have been defined, a selection process has been agreed to, and a system of grading and promotion is in place, starting from entry level trainees, through to “grade A” Community Professionals who have at least three years field experience and one year as trainers. In addition, a

formal salary structure, code of ethics, exit policy and capacity building strategy have been instituted.

Community Professionals and Federation representatives conceptualized, formulated and finalized the institutional structure and functions of the Center during district-based workshops which allowed participants adequate time to discuss the proposals back in their villages. Village communities retain a central role in the eligibility, selection and grading processes.

An explicit plan is in place to promote and market this local resource among wider communities within and outside Gemi Diriya, to institutionalize cost-effective strategies of delivering quality services that can compete effectively with other agencies.

A critical factor for the Center is to assess the demand for services that can be provided by Community Professionals. These include current requirements and a realistic estimate of potential service requirements for future expansion within the Gemi Diriya area. This will then be followed by matching the supply-side availability and capacity-building of Community Professionals with demand-side requirements. In 2005, the Community Professional center in Polonnaruwa District alone generated more than 1,000,000 Rs. worth of business! The business volume is expected to increase ten-fold as more and more villages demand services.

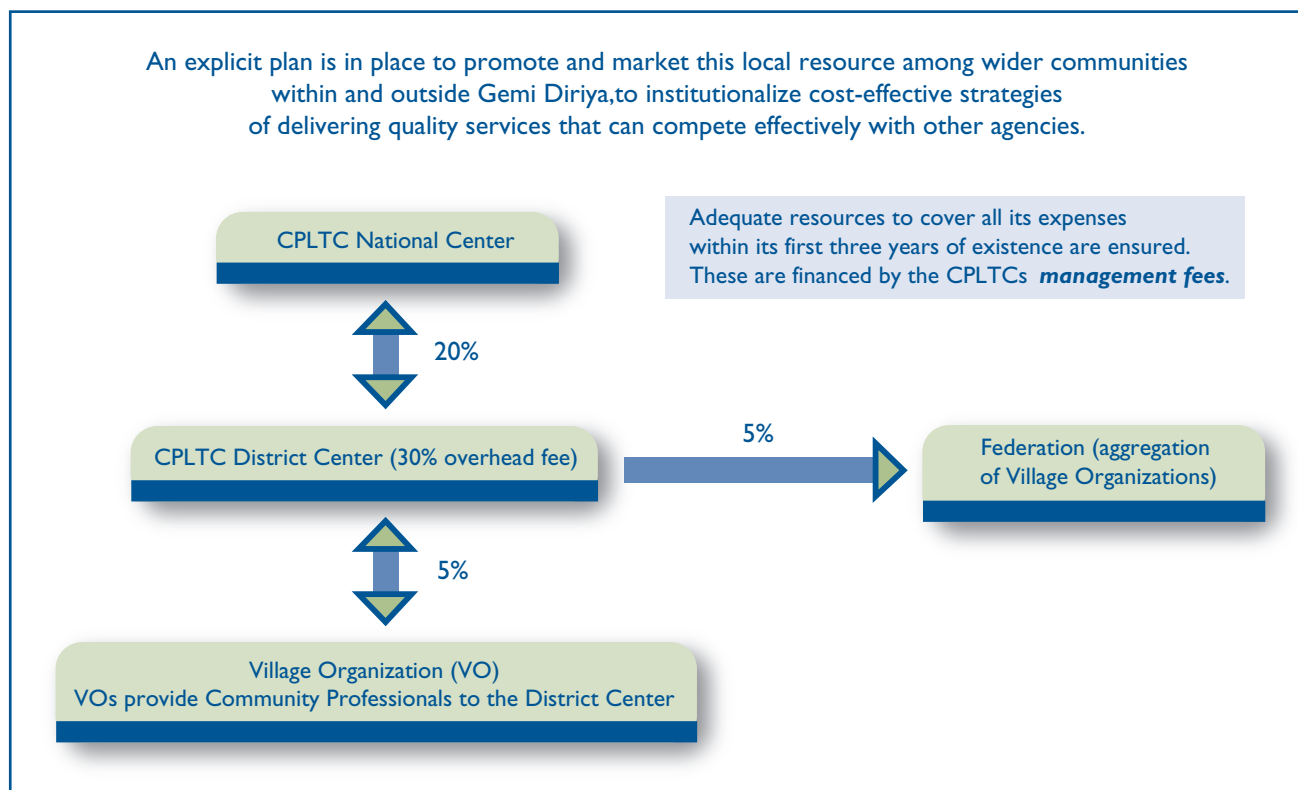
LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPACT TO DATE

The emergence of Community Professionals has shown some interesting lessons and results on the ground. Unlike outside facilitators, Community Professionals have

a stake in their community's development, are better suited to identifying the constraints and opportunities in their villages, and are much more effective in instilling confidence and mobilizing their communities. They also tend to be more accountable to their communities as they live there and enjoy local legitimacy and trust. The development of the Centers as a community resource and rural institution has inherent elements of sustainability. The Sri Lankan experience is demonstrating that, as community-driven poverty reduction programs face the demands of "scaling-up" a network of Community Professionals—unlike contracted external agencies—can help this to be done in a realistic, cost-effective manner. They provide the energy, the innovation and the devotion required to bring about sustainable change in the rural space.

As of June 2006, the Community Professional Center is running on its own resources—80% of funds are being

Figure 2: Fund flows and institutional linkages of Center with Federation/Village Organization



mobilized through its services to the village communities and the Gemi Diriya Foundation. By its third year, the Center expects to be fully funded through its own revenues. This is an efficient way of transferring knowledge from community-to-community. Importantly, the centers are also a very good source of income for poor families—especially poor youth and women. The fact that young people have taken the development of their villages into their own hands represents a dramatic behavioral shift from the past where they would be underemployed or migrate to the cities in search of work.

A ROAD MAP FOR THE FUTURE

To ensure that the Community Professional Center survives beyond the Gemi Diriya program, a longer-term business plan is being developed that will enable Community Professionals to market their skills and experience

to other hiring entities such as the Government of Sri Lanka, donors, NGOs or Community Based Organizations. Given the demonstrated entrepreneurial attitude and aptitude of the Community Professionals, many are also interested in gaining skills that would make them attractive for private sector job opportunities. The Center is considering linking with an academic or vocational institute so that some of the best performing Community Professionals may pursue further education that could guarantee them enhanced job opportunities in the future.

The CP Center has shown a path for the future—it has galvanized the community. As one Community Professional, Kamili, said, “Our problem is a village problem and village problems are ours.” She continues, “We think for the poor, we are the poor, and we help the poor.”

Community Professionals play a key role in training Gemi Diriya field staff

In addition to their direct support to villages, Community Professionals are also playing a critical role in orienting and training the Gemi Diriya field and district staff and support organizations. As part of recruitment process, the Gemi Diriya Foundation organizes a one-week village immersion course for all new recruits and partner organizations. These orientation sessions are organized and facilitated by the CP center and, unless the recruits pass this test of immersion, they do not get selected. CP center support and technical assistance is also sought by Gemi Diriya Foundation for various capacity building activities of the project teams, and in organizing workshops, learning events and monitoring progress in the field. Their trainings have been acclaimed as highly effective by a large number of international participants, including the World Bank.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this note are entirely those of the author(s) and should not be attributed in any manner to the World Bank, to its affiliated organizations or to members of its Board of Executive Directors or the countries they represent.

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