

Case Study – July 2022

'Square-rule Paper Engineers':
People, Power, and Participation in
Sri Lanka's Million Houses Programme

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's Million Houses Programme (MHP) was officially launched in 1984 with the goal of improving infrastructure and providing shelter for all through the construction of one million houses by 1989. The MHP exemplified a dramatic policy shift in providing houses for the poor, specifically, the rural and urban poor who until the MHP had been living in temporary shelters or inadequate housing for generations. The architects of Million Houses Programme—that is, the bureaucrats and technocrats at the frontlines of implementation—describe it even today, nearly forty years since its inception, as an authentic effort by the state at mobilising a people-centred approach in providing housing for the poor. Indeed, the MHP's 'people's process' set a global benchmark in aided self-help housing. The MHP was conferred the World Habitat Award in 1988, influenced the Global Shelter Strategy 2000, and influenced housing programmes of the World Bank and United Nations, as well as slum upgrading programmes and housing policies of countries in the global South (Joshi and Khan 2010). In Sri Lanka, the MHP had a significant impact on tenure security and citizenship (UN Habitat 2018). In urban areas, especially in the capital city of Colombo, the MHP transformed informal low-income settlements—i.e., slum and shanty communities—into legitimate neighbourhoods by building infrastructure such as roads, wells, and community centres; providing services such as water and electricity, schools, and a local government representative; and by issuing residence permits with a legitimate postal address that demarcated parcels of land to each family. Despite the dramatic shifts in policy under subsequent regimes that has resulted in the eviction and relocation of low-income neighbourhoods, especially following the end of the Civil War in 2009, working-class communities have rejected their former status as squatters and claim their right to the city. In rural areas too, tenure security was strengthened through permits and grants, and people's sense of ownership has had an impact on how much they invest in house improvement.

Using the framework of the 'Sandwich Strategy', this introduction will first evaluate in brief the triggers, openings, government responses, and powershifts of the Million Houses Programme before elaborating the case study in depth.

Triggers

The MHP is regarded as the legacy of the Prime Minister of the time—Ranasinghe Premadasa—who was also the Minister in charge of the Ministry of Local Government, Housing, and Construction. However, the MHP was an outcome of several triggers. Influenced by British architect and scholar John Turner, self-building and self-managing of low-income housing and neighbourhoods had been gaining traction in planning departments of the academy and international development communities from the 1960s (Harris 2001). In Sri Lanka when a coalition government under the leadership of Sirimavo Bandaranaike took over in 1970, it appointed Pieter Keuneman—a member of the Marxist Communist Party of Sri Lanka—as the Minister of Housing who enforced radical social legislation and pro-poor programmes with an emphasis on increasing welfare housing (Samaratunga and O'Hare 2003). The Ceiling on Housing Property Law (1973) compelled many landlords to sell property to their long-term tenants, and it was under Keuneman's leadership that the Aided Self-Help housing programme was first introduced. The sweeping land-reform introduced at this juncture freed up land in both urban and rural areas enabling the MHP to utilise them.

The Bandaranaike-led coalition became extremely unpopular for several reasons and were resoundingly defeated in 1977. Regardless, it is clear that housing for the poor had become a critical political issue at this time: housing was one of the key campaign promises of the United National Party that won a landslide victory. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was at this time that the World Bank launched their 'Sites and Services' programme and UNICEF their Urban Basic Services aimed at improving urban low-income communities (Joshi and Khan 2010). The programme acted as a catalyst for reviving, and also forming, community-based organisations that later became central to the implementation of the MHP (UN Habitat 2018). The success of the MHP can also be attributed to Prime Minister Premadasa's foresight in recognising and appointing bureaucrats such as Susil Sirivardana and Lalith Lankatilleke who were committed to John Turner's pro-poor housing philosophy, and for collaborating with academic institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and University College London (UCL) who were working with the ideas of Turner.

Openings

In fulfilling its promise of 'housing for all', the UNP Government established several key government institutions that coordinated the implementation of the MHP throughout the island, namely, the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the National Housing Development Authority. Government Officials of these institutions had to unlearn their top-down approach to welfare provision, and learn how to work with the people (Sirivardena 2020). Arguably, the most successful policy that galvanized the participation of people in the MHP was collaborating with community-based organisations (CBOs). In urban areas, the MHP worked with CBOs that had been revived in the implementation of World Bank and UNICEF funded programmes. In rural areas, *Gramodaya Manadalayas* (Village Development Councils) were set up by expanding and restructuring existing CBOs. The literature is vague on the exact origins of these CBOs. Nevertheless, what is important is that the MHP legitimized these organisations by collaborating with them, which in turn encouraged people's participation because they experienced first-hand its tangible benefits (Hamid 2020; Kodagoda 2020; Lankatilleke 2020; Sirivardena 2020).

The MHP heralded a new housing philosophy by putting into practice what is known as the 'enabling' approach of the Aided Self-Help programme (UN Habitat 2018). The aim was the state provide infrastructure and services to support people's autonomy in the construction and improvement of their houses and planning of their neighbourhoods. It meant that people, instead of the state, would plan and design their houses and communities, and have control over its construction. What made the MHP unique was that it was the first time a state, rather than an NGO, was adapting this philosophy as its principal housing policy (Lankatilleke 2020; Sirivardana 2020). Unlike all other 'top-down' development programmes implemented by the state since gaining independence from British rule in 1948, the government and the bureaucracy, through the MHP, decided to trust the ability of people to "create, deliver, and take responsibility for their [own] self-improvement" (Sirivardana 1988, 23). This philosophy seemed to go against deeply rooted ideas of Sri Lanka's welfare state that had, until now, 'delivered' development to the people. The MHP marks a significant shift from centre-controlled housing for the poor to a state-supported 'people's process' that recognised people's potential for creativity.

Responses from within government

The jury is still out on whether the MHP was ultimately a success in fulfilling its promise of a million houses. Within the first year of the Million Houses Programme, construction of 44,000 houses had commenced, and by the end of the first year 36,000 houses had been completed (Sirivardana

2020). By September 1985, in the short span of two years, the MHP had reached a total of 79,118 families, at least 10,000 of Sri Lanka's 25,000 rural villages, and also townships and urban centres in all twenty-five of Sri Lanka's administrative districts (Sirivardana 1986). This was a dramatic change from the state's previous housing programme—The Hundred Thousand Housing Programme—that had only managed to build around 5,000 houses in its first year. In subsequent years, the MHP was undermined by political rivalry from within the UNP. Rivalries between the elite politicians of the UNP and the 'common-man's' Prime Minister, Ranasinghe Premadasa, resulted in severe budget cuts for housing programmes. This was compounded by the introduction of the IMF's Structural Adjustment Policies that demanded the Sri Lankan state to severely cut back on its welfare policies, including housing.

Ultimately, one cannot ignore the fact that the MHP was implemented during one of the most turbulent times in Sri Lanka's political history. Sri Lanka was on the threshold of becoming 'South Asia's Singapore' when in 1983 the ethnic conflict escalated into civil war, forever transforming the country's destiny and her hopes and vision for itself. In addition to draining state's resources, the war also claimed many of Sri Lanka's political leadership, including President Premadasa in 1993. Much of the vision of the MHP, as well as other development programmes initiated from the late 1970s onwards was undermined by political instability, and led to yet another dramatic change in government in 1994, whose housing policies contravened with the MHP's vision and ethos (Abeyasekera et al 2019; UN Habitat 2018).

Power shifts

The majority of rural and urban land in Sri Lanka on which low-income settlements are located is state-owned but ownership is fragmented across several government agencies who have opposed land consolidation under a single state authority (GOSL 2017). Additionally, building laws have always prohibited the construction of houses on land less than seven perches¹. The Urban Development Authority's (UDA) Slums and Shanty Improvement Programme (1977–1984)—the forerunner of the MHP—introduced a 'special projects' provision that allowed low-income households to construct houses on land amounting to 37.5 to 50 square meters (Joshi and Khan 2010). Under the MHP the initiative to provide not just shelter, but a home, was solidified through tenure security. As emphasised at the outset, the provision of residency permits to low-income households enacted a significant shift in people's right to the city and their citizenship. In evaluating the success of the MHP, tenure security, we argue, trumps the quality of housing. Many of the urban low-income communities that were upgraded and improved during the MHP have fallen into disrepair for various reasons, including shifts in housing policies for the poor and Sri Lanka's economic crises. According to the survey conducted by Colombo Municipal Council with Sevanatha (an NGO) in 2012, there were 1,735 underserved settlements in Colombo. Of these, 682 settlements were considered fully upgraded with secure tenure, services, and reasonably good quality of housing. Of the balance 1,053, around seventy-eight percent have some form of tenure security of tenure with only 22.6 percent having no security (GOSL 2017). Additionally, over eighty percent of households in low-income neighbourhoods have legal access to water and electricity, and almost all the children attend state schools in Colombo due to the provision of a legal address (GOSL 2017).

The success of the MHP may seem serendipitous. It illustrates how seemingly contradictory ideologies and political rivalries led to cohesion rather than disintegration. At the macro level the international discourse on people-led bottom-up development that opposed state-led top-down development harmonised rather than collided with the neoliberal discourse on 'aided self-help' and the dictates of the IMF and World Bank to curtail the welfare state's direct involvement in protecting

and promoting people's socio-economic wellbeing. It can be argued that the pulling back of the state was one of the primary reasons for the MHP's success in promoting a people-led process. At the national-level, budget cuts and political rivalries rather than derailing Premadasa's vision to build a house for every family, inspired the MHP. Overall, the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) has been the main provider of housing finance from the inception of the MHP to the present, which attests to the lasting legacy of people-oriented institutions despite policy changes at the macro level (GOSL 2017).

Structure of the case study

The structure of the Million Houses Programme case study is as follows:

1. **Methods and Limitations**
2. **Background and context** essential to understanding and evaluating the MHP
 - a. Sri Lanka's housing policies (1948–1982)
 - b. The international discourse on self-help housing
3. **Politics and personality**—a brief insight into the MHP's chief architect, Ranasinghe Premadasa, and the political milieu of the time.
4. **The 'conception' of the MHP** provides an overview of the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme—an important precursor to the MHP—and describes the transition to the MHP. The section also introduces two more personalities that were integral to the MHP—Susil Sirivardana and Lalith Lankatilleke.
5. **1983: The experimental year of the MHP** explains the conditions that led to the transition from the HTHP to MHP.
6. **Decentralisation** describes the MHP's key principle, and the structures, institutions, and processes of the MHP that enabled decentralisation.
7. **Getting the buy-in** argues why house-ownership was critical to the success of the MHP.
8. **Implementation of the MHP** describes how the programme was implemented in rural and urban areas.
9. The **Conclusion** reflects on the factors that contributed to the MHP's success.

Methods

The case study of the Million Houses Programme is primarily 'a discovery led' descriptive case study. Its main aim is to describe the events, processes, and relationships that led to the conceptualisation and implementation of the MHP. A case study approach allows a researcher to focus on "one instance of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences, [and] processes occurring in that particular instance (Denscombe 2010, 52)."

The research questions guiding the case study are: How did the Million Houses Programme come into being? What were its key processes and outcomes? The Million Houses Programme case study focuses on not only on the product, but on the processes, personalities, and relationships, as well as the historical and socio-political contexts that made it a success. By describing how they are interconnected and interlinked, the case study unravels these complex relationships to illuminate how they influenced each other. In addition to a review of the limited literature on the Million Houses Programme and the history of housing policies in Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka's political history was reviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of the background and context that led to the MHP.

This case study also draws from six interviews conducted in February 2020 with key persons involved in the conceptualisation and implementation of MHP, as well as two academic-activists involved in urban planning in Sri Lanka.² The objective of conducting these interviews was to get a first-hand account of some of the particularities of the MHP. The interviews enriched the case study by providing us with information on the political milieu of the time, how the technocrat-planners responded to the sudden budget cut for housing that eventually 'birthed' the MHP, and some of the interactions with the community.

Limitations

Much of the existing literature that is accessible on the Million Houses Programme tends to study the programme's mechanisms, processes, and outcomes from a macro perspective. There seems to be a dearth of accessible literature that provides in-depth analyses of any one aspect of the Million Houses Programme. More importantly, the dominant narrative when evaluating the MHP is positive with very little critical analysis of its challenges and shortfalls. Much of the early literature, namely in the form of case-studies when the MHP was being implemented, were produced by the MHP's academic partners: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Development Planning Unit (DPU) of University College London (UCL). This core literature, unfortunately, was inaccessible to the authors of this paper.

Although our aim in conducting interviews with key persons was to obtain some of the missing details, our objectives could only be partially fulfilled. Without exception, all the interviewees held the MHP in high esteem and presented it as a success story. This is especially true of their descriptions and evaluation of the community's involvement in the MHP, especially the rural *Gramadoya Manadalayas* and the urban Community Development Councils (CDCs). Even when we probed about challenges, setbacks, and failures, and also political rivalries within the communities and CDCs as well as tensions between the community and the state, the interviewees, including the member of the CDC, did not share any information that was critical of the MHP and its mechanisms and processes. They presented the MHP as a time when there was a symbiotic relationship between the state and the people.

Given the 'positive' tone of the literature and the interviews, the case study cannot but help reflect some of the hues of the rose-tinted glasses through which the information on the MHP is documented and recalled by its key implementers. If the case study were based on empirical research rather than a review of the literature, a more nuanced and critical case study of the MHP would have been possible.

Background and Context

International discourse on housing

John F. C. Turner

Ideas that underpin housing policies and programmes in Sri Lanka were not conceived in a vacuum. In fact, there were vibrant global discourses on housing in the post-World War II period, and anecdotal evidence suggests that key individuals involved in housing policy and implementation in Sri Lanka engaged with these ideas, specifically the writings of John Turner and the 1976 Vancouver Declaration following the first-ever United Nations conference on Human Settlements or Habitat I. Prime Minister Premadasa was known to be a prolific reader and kept abreast of international political trends (Sirivardana 2020). Lalith Lankatilleke—the architect of the urban housing programme—started his career as a UN volunteer working with Habitat for Humanity and had experience in implementing ‘self-help’ programmes in Botswana, Seychelles, and South Sudan (Lankatilleke 2020).

John F. C. Turner is perhaps the most influential thinker on housing for the poor in the developing world. The number of his books we found in the library of the National Housing Development Authority and the frequent mention of his name by all the key people we interviewed for the case study suggest that Turner’s ideologies were in circulation when the Hundred Thousand Houses and Million Houses Programmes were being conceptualised in Sri Lanka. Turner’s primary contribution was to share his experiences of squatter settlements in Latin America, specifically Peru, with urban scholars around the world. He emphasised the value of ‘self-help’ as an approach to low-cost housing to a growing chorus of writers from the West who spoke of the rights and capacities of the urban poor (Harris 2001; Harris and Giles 2003). For Turner, self-help was not limited to the investment of labour by the owners in building their homes, but it included the process of owner design and management. ‘Who decides’, or the element of autonomy, was a fundamental feature of Turner’s ideas (Turner 1976). His ideas caught the attention of international housing circles in the late 1960s, when he urged planners to think of ‘housing as a verb’, and to see squatter settlements as solutions, not problems (Turner 1972). He argued that “the best results are obtained by the user who is in full control of the design, construction, and management of his own home (Turner 1972, 158).” What Turner meant by ‘best results’ were houses that best catered to the changing needs and circumstances of the people that lived in them. On the basis that homes are adapted, framed, and used by people with ever-changing lives, he argued that housing should be viewed not as a noun but as a verb. His ideas gained traction when they moved beyond the academy and into development practice.

Sites and services

Turner’s work strongly influenced the agenda of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements hosted in Vancouver in 1976 and informed the thinking of the World Bank’s Sites and services programmes (Mathey 1997; Schon 1987; Ward 1976). ‘Sites and Services’ schemes usually refer to providing land to the poor, either on ownership or land lease tenure, along with a bare minimum of essential infrastructure needed for habitation, including water supply and sanitation, waste disposal, road planning and drainage, credit mechanisms etc. By 1973 the World Bank had initiated a programme to provide loans for housing projects that primarily followed site-and-services

schemes that mandated self-help. Turner and his colleagues played a key role in developing more flexible policies of site-and-services over the years that followed, which have been adopted in national policy around the world (Peattie and Doebele 1973).

The 1976 Vancouver Declaration of Human Settlements followed the recommendations of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and subsequent resolutions of the General Assembly, particularly Resolution 3128, through which countries expressed their concern over the serious condition of human settlements in developing countries. The declaration called for solidarity between national governments and the international community to create effective human settlement policies and spatial planning strategies adapted to local conditions, especially for disadvantaged groups. The declaration also emphasised conceptualising mechanisms for people's participation in planning, building, and management of their human settlements.

Sri Lanka's housing policies (1948–1982)

The housing policies in Sri Lanka's post-independence history from 1948 until 1982 are characterised by three distinct phases culminating with the fourth phase—the Million Houses Programme in 1984 (UN Habitat 2018; GOSL 2017):

- 1948–1970—Housing is a growing need, but not a priority of the welfare state
- 1970–1977—Redistribution of excess houses from the elite to the lower-classes
- 1977–1982—The Hundred Thousand Houses Programme
- 1983—the experimental year
- 1984–1989—The Million Houses Programme

The overview is critical to understanding some of the important elements that laid the foundation for the conceptualisation and eventual success of the MHP.

The housing policies in Sri Lanka's post-independence history from 1948 until 1982 are characterised by two distinct approaches that mirror the global trends of the time. From 1948–1977, under the welfare state, housing was a key tool for achieving social equity. Housing was integrated into the post-independent state's welfare agenda, where the government adopted a provider-based model. The provider-based model is contrasted with a support-based model of housing provision where the state builds in the form of housing schemes for the poor, rather than supporting people to build their own houses. The year 1977 represents a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's political history and socio-economic destiny, for it marks the liberalisation of the economy under the newly elected United National Party (UNP). Housing became a top priority of the new government's economic development goals, and housing policy became central to the developmental state. Despite a significant shift in policy priorities and approach to housing provision, the government maintained a provider-based paradigm as the key modality through which housing policies were implemented from 1978 to 1982.

1948–1970

From 1948–1970, under a post-independent welfare state, housing was integrated into the state's welfare agenda, with the government adopting a provider-based technocratic model. Housing was recognised as a basic need and regarded as a tool, at least in theory if not in practice, for achieving social equity. A number of state institutions were set up to control rents and support the

construction of new houses, which resulted in housing schemes for the lower-middle classes; but housing for the poor did not feature prominently in the state's welfare programmes (Gunaratne, Sirivardana, Jayaratne, and Edirisinghe 1991; Niriella 2010). Universal education and healthcare were the state's top priorities soon after gaining independence, and, in response to the global financial crisis in the 1930s, self-sufficiency in food. By the first decade after independence, however, the population had grown at an annual rate of 2.8 percent—the fastest recorded in the history of the island (Department of Census and Statistics 2019). The increase in population was concentrated primarily in the Southern and Western parts of Sri Lanka. Unlike in the rest of Asia, Sri Lanka was not characterised by rapid urbanisation and 'mega-city' development (Perera 2015). Urban areas, especially the capital city of Colombo, were, however, characterised by low-quality housing stock and scarcity of housing units. The congestion in Colombo had started in the nineteenth century when Colombo, under British colonial rule, became its administrative centre and the island's economic hub resulting in rural to urban migration from all class groups for employment purposes (Niriella 2010; Perera 2015).

The population increase in rural areas from 1948 onwards was addressed by new land colonization and re-settlement schemes introduced by the government in the scarcely populated Dry Zone, where previously the ancient Sinhalese irrigation-based civilizations had thrived. Although the first post-independent government had an elite social base, its political representatives were committed to redressing the grievances of peasants who had suffered under the mass-scale land grab by the British (Bastian 2009). The flagship programme of the state during this period was the Dry Zone Resettlement programme that allocated land for landless peasants in the island's Dry Zone. These new agricultural settlements were also intended to produce rice and other agricultural produce with the aim of achieving self-sufficiency in food, and were supported by all regimes in the decades following independence.

In the urban areas, the private sector was entrusted with catering to the needs of the upper middle-classes (Niriella 2010). Although the government set up mechanisms to provide housing loans to cooperative and building societies, as well as to local government authorities such as municipal, town, and village councils to construct housing schemes with the aim of meeting the housing needs of the lower-middle and working classes, there is little evidence of whether these initiatives resulted in substantive change in the housing situation of the urban and rural poor (Niriella 2010 and 2016). From 1955 to the 1960s, the government's main achievement was the establishment of four housing schemes mainly catering to lower-middle-income state employees, or 'government servants', namely mid-level administrators and clerical staff working in state institutions, and teachers in state schools (Samaratunga and Hare 2013). Two housing schemes were located in the outskirts of the Colombo metropolitan area—Kiribathgoda and Enderamulla—and two were high-rise flats built in the heart of the metropolis—Bambalapitiya and Anderson flats.

Looking at government housing policies from 1948–1970, we observe a trend with earlier policies supporting middle-class housing driven primarily by the private sector, and later an emphasis on lower-middle-class groups with a heavier role played by the central government. These trends coincide with changes in the ruling parties, which were, since independence, coalition governments. By the 1960s the state was moving towards a more socialist ideology with the election of left-of-centre governments that had substantial representation from members of the political Left.

1970–1977

The General Election of 1970 ushered into power the United Front—a coalition government led by the first woman Prime Minister with a strong left-wing political orientation. The cabinet minister of Housing and Local Government was Pieter Keuneman—a representative from the Marxist Communist Party. His vision for housing was influenced by the Mutual Group Self Help Programme implemented in Cuba by Fidel Castro (Redman 2005). The Ceiling on Housing Property Law aimed to limit the number of houses owned by any one individual and family. One of its aims was to stop the rich from being ‘slum lords’ over their poor tenants by transferring ownership to them (UN Habitat 2018). Keuneman was also the first to introduce Aided Self-Help housing where the state was responsible for providing the land, building materials, and services while the beneficiary provided labour. The policy on shelter he introduced aligned with other radical social legislations of the time, which emphasised redistribution and proposed radical structural changes in the political economy, i.e., land reform, import-substitution, new welfare measures, and nationalization of local and foreign banks (Fernando and Kearney 1978).

During this period, Sri Lanka recorded the slowest rate of economic growth since independence, and a crisis in the balance of payments mainly due to the international energy crisis (Gunasekera 2003). Regardless, from 1972-1976 the UF government invested 5 percent of the country’s GDP on public and private sector housing, which included the building of new units as well as the upgrading of existing housing schemes (Economic Review 1988 as quoted in Niriella 2010). The government’s public sector housing programme consisted of two programmes: the Direct Construction Programme, and Aided Self Help (ASH). Under the Direct Construction Programme, the country’s first multi-storey housing schemes for the urban working classes were built in Colombo, namely, Maligawatte, Soyzapura, Bloemendhal, and Wolfendhal (Gunasekera 2003). The government also initiated a slum and shanty improvement scheme, which was carried out by the Common Amenities Board under the direction of the National Housing Department. The first Aided Self Programme in the Greater Colombo Area was also inaugurated during this time in Hendala (Gunasekera 2003). It is estimated that anywhere between 4,700 (Weerapana 1986) and 33,700 (De Tissera and Ganesan 1982) new housing units were constructed between 1970 and 1977. These programmes are important precursors to Prime Minister Premadasa’s vision to provide shelter for all.

The UF government also introduced laws that were critical in improving the housing situation of the poor. The Condominium Property Act No. 12 of 1970 and the Apartment Ownership Act of 1973 regulated rents in high-rise buildings and transferred ownership to tenants (Samaratunga and Hare 2013). The Ceiling on Housing Property Law No 1 of 1973 is still considered as one of the most radical policies that stripped the elite of their vast estates. The law restricted individuals from owning more than one house per family plus one for each dependent child under the age of eighteen. Furthermore, the law also vested power with the Commissioner of Housing to acquire ‘excess units’ from landlords, with some compensation (Niriella 2010). Landlords could not object, and the law resulted in the acquisition of a significant number of housing units, especially flats and smaller housing units, which were subsequently sold for a nominal fee to existing lower-middle and working-class tenants. Five years after introducing the Ceiling on Housing Property Law, some 12,347 tenements units out of a total of 17,253 units were vested with the Commissioner of National Housing (CNH), and 5,365 units of the vested housing units were transferred back to the occupants under freehold titles (CMC, Sevanatha, and UN Habitat 2006). The rest were managed by the CNH as government-owned residential quarters. The acquisition of private property

that housed low-income groups by the state laid an important foundation for the subsequent success of the Million Houses Programme. For those who had been ‘squatting’ on private or government land, the threat of eviction always loomed large even though they may have occupied the land for generations; hence, investing in building and home improvement was a low priority (Kodagoda 2020). Property ownership was pivotal in motivating the poor to build their own houses. Private property that was acquired by the State at this time was subsequently redistributed to the poor during the MHP.

We would argue that a critical foundation of Prime Minister Premadasa’s legacy—adequate shelter for all and the Million Houses Programme—was laid by Pieter Keuneman and the UF government. The most important was sweeping land reform, which freed up land in both urban and rural areas enabling Premadasa to utilise them for his housing programmes (Sirivardana 2020). The UF government was defeated by the Premadasa’s United National Party in 1977 in a landslide victory. ‘Housing for all’ was a key election promise of the UNP. Although Premadasa’s vision, as will be discussed in detail, had at its base the same motivation as Keuneman’s—the welfare of the poor—there were two important differences: the UNP’s vision was articulated from the perspective of ‘development’ rather than equity for the poor; and redistribution was not integral to the vision of either the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme or the MHP.

1977–1982

By 1977, the population had grown to fourteen million of which only two point five million were residing in private housing with the remaining eleven point five million living in semi-permanent or improvised housing (Redman 2005). With eleven point five million Sri Lankans living in ‘unofficial housing’ or ‘shanty’ dwellings, there was certainly a pressing need, if not an urgency, to address the lack of suitable housing for the poor. Shanty communities were concentrated mostly in the island’s capital Colombo, which, by the late 1970s, accounted for sixty percent of the country’s urban population (UN Habitat 1985). By 1981, more than half of Colombo’s population was estimated to be living in substandard housing without adequate access to water and sanitation, including toilets (Robson, section 2.4; UN Habitat 1985).

The outcome of the 1977 election was the stunning electoral win by the right-of-centre United National Party (UNP) whose five-sixth majority in parliament resulted in the adoption of a new constitution which provided for an executive president. The leader of the UNP, J.R. Jayawardena, became the President. The Minister of Local Government, Housing, and Construction—Ranasinghe Premadasa—was appointed the Prime Minister but retained his ministerial portfolio. Building a ‘hundred thousand houses within five years’ was Premadasa’s specific election pledge to the people. There were many bureaucrats, like Susil Sirivardana, who were happy about the new government’s commitment to housing. With an unprecedented budget allocation of ten percent of GDP for housing in 1979 and 1980, they believed that Sri Lanka’s housing problem could be solved (Sirivardana 2020).

The Housing and Urban Development Programme was the second lead programme in the new government’s development strategy. The rural economy was on the decline primarily due to policies of the colonial administrators. Even though governments that were elected during the post-colonial period took measures to rectify the problems of the rural masses, the results were either short lived or were not transformative enough. The outcome was internal migration of people

from rural areas into cities in search of better economic prospects. The urban population, particularly in Colombo, was expanding during this period; and for this population, housing was not the only need. In addition to housing, they needed access to water, sanitation, employment, health, and education. A focus on housing alone would no longer be effective. The late 1970s was also a period in which various ideas of 'development' that were salient globally, were trialed in Sri Lanka through foreign-funded "Integrated Rural Development Programmes" (IRDPs). In Prime Minister Premadasa's vision, housing was an 'engine of development' and an 'engine of growth' (Sirivardana, 1988). Previous state institutions were deemed structurally incapable of handling this decisive shift to housing as 'development', and the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) were established in 1978 and 1979 respectively to support the government's development agenda. In 1978 the UDA developed a Slums and Shanty Improvement Programme (1978–1984) for provision of basic common amenities in Colombo and other townships. This was undertaken in conjunction with the World Bank's 'sites and services' projects implemented through UNICEF, Save the Children, and Japanese aid (Kodagoda 2020; Sirivardana 2020). For the first time in the post-independent state, housing policy was not developed in isolation, but integrated into urban development.

The Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (HTHP) was also initiated in 1978 and will be discussed in detail later in the case study as it is an important precursor to the Million Houses Programme. Prime Minister Premadasa did not hesitate to publicize his government's commitment to housing in international platforms. His address at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on September 29th, 1980, urged the UN to declare an international year of shelter for the homeless. His proposal was unanimously accepted with much acclaim (United Nations Sri Lanka, 2016). In many ways, the proposal from Sri Lanka led by Prime Minister Premadasa set the tone for discussions at the General Assembly. The year 1987 was selected as the 'Year of Shelter' to focus worldwide attention on housing needs. The UN also launched a global campaign to provide shelter for all by the year 2000.

Politics and Personality

Ranasinghe Premadasa

Ranasinghe Premadasa was born in 1924 in Keselwatte—a low-income settlement in central Colombo. Although not poor—his father owned a fleet of rickshaws which he rented out to coolies for passenger transport—Premadasa allegedly belonged a 'washerman's caste'—considered as one of the lower caste-groups in the Sinhala caste system (Wijayadasa 2012). Premadasa's family background is critical to understanding the trajectory of his political career, his leadership style, and the dualist place he occupied as an outsider but also an integral member of the United National Party—a party whose British educated leaders came from elite English-speaking families who shared kinship connections (Shastri 2004). After attending local schools for his primary and post-primary education, Premadasa was admitted to St. Joseph's College—a prestigious Catholic

school in Colombo—for his secondary education. Although he qualified to enter University College London, he never enrolled (Wijayadasa 2012). As a young man growing up in a tough working-class neighbourhood, Premadasa was attracted to the social and moral regeneration movements of the time inspired by the Buddhist revival. In 1939 he founded the ‘Sri Sucharitha Movement’—an organisation committed to uplifting the lives of youth in low-income settlements. It offered a night school for youth, promoted temperance, and engaged in religious and literary activities.

In 1948 he joined the Labour Party and entered municipal politics in 1950. In 1955—just five years after entering politics—he became the Deputy Mayor of the Colombo Municipal Council (Spalling 1993; Wijayadasa 2012). He then joined the more moderate United National Party (UNP) in 1956 under Dudley Senanayake’s leadership. Although Premadasa was unsuccessful in the General Election of 1956, which was based on ‘first-past-the-post’, he had managed to garner second highest number of votes in the district. Thereafter, Premadasa’s potential as an effective political leader with popular appeal and vision was recognised within the party. He was entrusted with reorganising the UNP at the grassroots level, which entailed his visiting every district in Sri Lanka (Wiggins and De Silva 1994). Premadasa held many important portfolios in the first decades of his political career: MP for Colombo District, Parliamentary Secretary and then Minister of Local Government; Chief Opposition Whip; deputy leader of the UNP, and eventually the Prime Minister in 1977. Local government is responsible for developing and maintaining infrastructure such as by-roads and smaller bridges. One of the first projects Premadasa initiated as Minister of Local Government was to construct pre-fabricated bridges in the first-ever working-class housing scheme of Maligawatte, which connected the various neighbourhoods (Wijayadasa, 2012). Although Premadasa had distinguished himself as the ‘common-man’s’ leader and was strategically used to popularise the UNP, once the party won its landslide victory in 1977, Premadasa faced tough competition to be recognised as its next leader, and was frequently undermined and even ridiculed by his elite colleagues.

Premadasa’s legacy project

Premadasa has been working since the mid-1950s to turn the left-leaning working-class settlements of the Colombo district into UNP wards, and his efforts paid off when the UNP won the election with a five-sixth majority in 1977. When the new government adopted a new Constitution which provided for an Executive President, Premadasa was appointed Prime Minister, but held his portfolio of Minister of Local Government, Housing, and Construction. Despite his centrality, Premadasa was up against powerful players within the UNP who had already been given grand economic development projects initiated by the newly liberalised economy to oversee, namely the establishment of the Free Trade Zones, and Mahaweli Development Scheme, which had the potential of becoming their legacies. Premadasa too needed his own legacy project—a programme that at least matched if not exceeded his rivals’ grandiose programmes—which would earn him the position of the next party leader. Premadasa had an affinity towards housing, possibly because of his own experience growing up in a working-class settlement in Colombo. It was in this context, and having been Minister of Local Government, that he made the election promise of building a ‘hundred thousand houses’ for the poor (Venugopal, 2010).

Moral and market imperatives of the UNP government

The newly elected UNP government in 1977 had to operate within several 'moral parameters' in order to earn legitimacy and maintain the stability of the state. From the 1930s onwards, Sri Lanka had evolved to become a socialist democratic state with relatively generous welfare provision (Venugopal, 2010). The UNP had to continue support for established public welfare services, namely free education and health; they had to absorb unemployed youth to public-sector employment; peasant agriculture and rural life had to be protected against local capitalist expansion and price pressures; pervasive poverty and inequality had to be addressed; and they had to promote Sinhala language and patronage of the Buddhist religion. At the same time, the newly liberalised economy faced immense pressure from international monetary institutions and bi-lateral donor nations to introduce market reform and curtail the welfare state.

During the UNP's election campaign the party had self-consciously appropriated the language of socialism and equality, which had previously defined its left-leaning opponents. The Open Economy reforms contradicted the UNP's 1977 election manifesto (Ceylon Daily News 1977). Although a right-wing political party, the UNP's conservative and elite political agenda has always existed within the boundaries of a strong welfare state. Its strong pro-American and pro-Western orientation meant that they reached out to the United States and United Kingdom for development funding, which invariably came with ideas of open markets, liberalisation, and integration with the global economy. On the home turf, they had promised voters that the shortage of goods caused by the Import Substitution policy of the previous socialist coalition would never happen under the UNP's watch. The Open Economy reforms were introduced not only because the conditionalities of foreign funding demanded them, but also because there was conviction among the UNP leadership that the new economic model would usher in economic prosperity to the people. In this context, the UNP needed to tread carefully in managing state-society relations and not completely dismantle the country's welfare orientation at the onset of neoliberal reforms. James Brow (1990) describes Sinhala nationalism as a "dominant code of moral regulation" that politicians seek to draw upon. The UNP adopted Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology to promote its vision of a renewed nation-state, which was captured in the popular UNP slogan of the time—*dharmishta samajaya* or 'a righteous society'. Premadasa, with his grounding in Buddhism and a sound understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist populism especially among the working classes, played a key role in promoting the symbols and rituals of Buddhist religiosity (Venugopal 2010).

The Hundred Thousand Housing Project (HTHP) was implemented amidst sweeping market reforms in Sri Lanka. The tensions and contradictions of a liberalising state shrouded in Buddhist religiosity and Sinhala nationalism is captured in James Brow's (1990) account of the opening of one of the first projects of the HTHP by Premadasa:

Celebration of the national past, and recital of the exemplary lessons it contained, were prominent features of the ceremony. The official speeches recalled that the splendid civilization of the Anuradhapura kingdom was sustained by devotion to Buddhism, and emphasized that prosperity could again be achieved if the people, assisted by government projects like the village awakening programme, were to acquire the habit of self-reliance, mutual cooperation and virtuous living that their ancestors had displayed (p.131).

The ‘Conception’ of the Million Housing Programme (MHP)

The Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (HTHP)

The MHP was preceded by the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme (1977–1982). The MHP cannot be explained without first discussing the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme. The experience gained during its implementation influenced the revision of housing policy in Sri Lanka, as well as led to major revisions in the operationalizing and implementation of policy. A discussion of the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme is critical for understanding the ‘radical’ nature of the MHP, especially in deviating from housing initiatives that had hitherto been implemented by the state, and for coming up with an unprecedented alternative in state policy and implementation.

The HTHP had three sub-programmes: Aided Self-Help, Direct Construction, and Housing loans. The Department of National Housing was the state agency that initiated the programme (Weerapana n.d). Shortly after the commencement of HTHP, in April 1979, a new agency with wider powers—the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA)—was instituted to spearhead the programme. Fifty percent of the proposed hundred thousand housing units were built by the Aided-Self-Help (ASH) method in rural areas (Development Planning Unit [DPU], n.d). The government provided the land, the layout plan, the design, building materials and technical advice. The family or household was then responsible for building the house using the state guidelines provided with the designated materials provided. The programme was managed centrally from Colombo through district offices in each of the project locations. Each project had about sixty houses, each on a plot of about twenty perches.³ The projects were run by a Supervising Officer (SO), usually a young Technical College graduates who would live on the site (Gunaratne, Sirivardana, Jayaratne, and Edirisinghe 1991).

The bulk of HTHP units were in rural areas as the programme was designed to provide distributive equity. The government built “Type-Plan” houses and distributed the units equally between all the electorates, five units per electorate in the first year, ten in the next and later, twenty and third houses per electorate (Sevanatha 2006). Materials were supplied through a centralised system (DPU n.d.). Some materials were transported over long distances to the projects even while those materials or alternatives were available from within the project region. In general, the houses built under ASH were constructed with high quality materials and had adequate detail (DPU n.d.). One-third of the housing units, some of which were for middle- and upper-middle income groups, were built in the urban areas by direct construction (Gunaratne, Sirivardana, Jayaratne, and Edirisinghe 1991). The remaining funds were earmarked for the slum and shanty upgrading programme which was primarily implemented in Colombo (Gunaratne, Sirivardana, Jayaratne, and Edirisinghe 1991).

The ASH method benefited individuals because it gave them the flexibility to work at their own pace, decide on the scope of their building effort including garnering community help and make changes to their house plans (Redman, 2005). These were all choices that were not available for people in the direct construction programme. However, the ASH did not give the builders flexibility in choosing building materials and cost. The Self-Help Programme provided small housing grants

to individuals interested in upgrading or building their house relatively independently. In the Direct Construction (DC) programme, the NHDA determined all of the elements of the house and it was handed over to its eventual owner once construction was completed (Redman, 2005). The DC programme proved to have costing issues, poor quality of construction, corruption amongst the contractor, and home-dweller dissatisfaction (Redman, 2005).

The housing needs of urban low-income settlements were handled by the Slum and Shanty Division of the Urban Development Authority, which was established in 1978 (Urban Development Authority Law 1978). Many of the projects were based in Colombo and were small scale projects. These were: permanent upgrading which included improvements to the physical, social, and economic environment of the settlements; temporary upgrading; relocation within the site; and relocation to alternative sites where better housing was provided along with ancillary facilities and community services (Sevanatha, 2003). The UN Centre for Human Settlements identified some of the projects under the HTHP as part of a global sample to be featured as international “demonstration projects (Sevanatha 2003).” These projects were to trial innovative methodologies in urban and rural low-income housing. The four projects selected from Sri Lanka were: Maligawatte west (inner city slum improvement), Seevalipura (shanty upgrading), Navagampura (site and services/relocation), and Malkaduwawa (urban neighbourhood upgrading).

Lessons learned

The ambitious one hundred thousand houses target was comfortably reached within the five-year period (Hameed, n.d). It allowed housing to be distributed equally between 168 electorates, established a new identification of the state’s role in housing for the people, and housing was recognised as a political priority. However, the programme was riddled with challenges and mistakes (Hameed, n.d). These included: a lack of choice with regards to site selection and building material; a centralised bureaucracy which caused wastage and delay; high cost of labour and materials; and the displacement and relocation of people into completely new environments, sometimes a significant distance away from town centres under the urban programmes, which created issues with accessibility to towns, water supply, and sanitation. The emphasis of the HTHP was very much on the production of new houses, and therefore the provision of community-related facilities received low priority. Inspections of HTHP projects revealed poorly maintained public wells, unfinished roads, and other inadequate fixtures (DPU n.d).

Further, despite the formation of housing committees, the NHDA took unilateral decisions on almost all of the issues including costs, technology, size and location of houses, thereby providing little opportunities for house builders to make decisions and have choices (Hameed, n.d). Overall, the HTHP appeared to be somewhat of a hurried interpretation of the ambitious vision of Premadasa (Weerapana, n.d). Regardless, during the five years of the HTHP, housing gained significant recognition as a long-term strategy and programme in the development efforts of the Sri Lankan government.

From a hundred thousand to a million houses

Mutual respect and effective communication characterised the relationship between Premadasa and his team of technocrats and administrators implementing the HTHP (Sirivardana, 2020). By 1981–1982 they were all aware the HTHP was not sustainable due to the high cost of construction

and the relatively slow progress of the number of houses being constructed; it was clear the HTHP needed a rigorous evaluation. It came as a shock, therefore, when Premadasa promised 'a million houses' on his election campaign trail preceding the 1982 General Election. Susil Sirivardana, General Manager of the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), recalled his shock when he found out while reading the newspapers that the Prime Minister had announced a new housing programme (Sirivardana 2020).

In October 1982, Ranasinghe Premadasa became the Prime Minister for the second time, after the United National Party won the election of 1982. A parliamentary committee appointed a Task Force to assess the existing housing policies and develop a Five-Year Programme of Housing (Weerapana, n.d). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had strongly recommended austerity measures on the government's social expenditure, which included a ceiling on all public investment on housing and urban development (Weerapana 1986). The civil war in Sri Lanka had already begun and a large proportion of the national had to be allocated to the war effort. The economy of the country had also slowed down as the stimulus expected by the Open Economy reforms was yet to be realized. The resources allocated for shelter activities in the national budget had already been trimmed by almost 20 percent in 1981–1982 (Weerapana, n.d.). This was, at least in part, attributed to the bitter competition between Premadasa and his political rivals who were vying to become the UNP's next leader once the incumbent's second term was completed in 1987. As Premadasa's popularity grew, his rivals had, allegedly, banded together with the Finance Minister—Ronnie de Mel—to curtail Premadasa's ability to implement his legacy project by severely cutting the budget for housing.

At the same time, the planners at the Ministry of Housing were already concerned about the cost of housing. The previous target of building a hundred thousand houses by the end of 1982 was reached at a cost of LKR sixty-three billion (US\$3.64 Billion)⁴ (Premadasa 1981).⁵ A further 102 million US Dollars had been invested to improve water supply and sewage disposal facilities in Colombo (Premadasa 1981). The cheapest housing unit that the government could provide through direct construction cost more than \$770⁶ (Marga Institute 1986). The beneficiaries could not afford to pay this amount for shelter; neither could the government sustain its commitment to the subsidies. Moreover, the programme had failed to reach the most in need—the urban slum dwellers (Robson, n.d). The implementing team behind the HTHP acknowledged the need to re-evaluate existing strategies given the pressure it had put on the economy, as well as the political interference in beneficiary selection (Robson, n.d.). The process of HTHP allowed municipal officers plenty of room for corruption. There were no strict guidelines on how to select a family to award a house; and there was no transparency in allocating land sites to low-income earners. This provided leeway for municipal officers to allocate land and housing for those who paid them bribes. Taking advantage of the lack of transparency in the process of HTHP, municipal officers allocated houses based on political favouritism, mostly upon the request of powerful politicians. They also allocated land and housing for middle income earners who could afford to pay a bribe to the municipal officers, which invariably followed a recommendation from a politician (Redman 2005, 30).

The Task Force was chaired by the Additional Secretary (Development) of the Ministry of housing and comprised officials representing the agencies under the ministry who were involved with the Hundred Thousand Houses Programme, and, therefore had prior experience and knowledge (Weerapana, n.d). The Task Force chose to examine the issues through a series of working papers. This transparent and academic approach to the process of evaluation demonstrates Premadasa's style of leadership: he trusted the technocrats and administrators he had appointed, gave them the

freedom to come up with new ideas, and encouraged all plans to be presented in writing, which he read diligently and returned with careful notations in the margins (Lankatilleke, 2020; Sirivardana 2020). Therefore, it was indeed surprising that those involved in the HTHP had not been consulted on Premadasa's ambitious new promise of a million houses. Yet, rather than being discouraged, they were keen to realise Premadasa's dream, and the Task Force rose to the challenge.

After two months of weekly meetings and consultations, the Task Force was to present their findings to the Prime Minister (Weerapana, n.d.). The discussions so far had produced, theoretically at least, two options for the implementation of the Million Houses Programme: they either continue with HTHP's provider-based model; or develop a new, cost-effective plan for housing (Redman, 2005). In reality, it was clear to the Task Force on Housing that the resources available for the next phase had been dramatically reduced, and they would have to conceptualise a radically different programme that could function with limited resources (Sirivardana, 2020). What Premadasa had proposed during his election campaign was simply unattainable logistically and financially without a serious re-assessment of the provider-based methodology (Redman, 2005). It is at this critical juncture that two more personalities demand more than a cursory introduction—Susil Sirivardana and Lalith Lankatilleke—whose contribution to the conceptualisation and implementation of the MHP was their life's work and legacy as much it was Premadasa's. It was their independently formed ideas about trusting people and their processes that informed the implementation plans of the MHP's rural and urban programmes. The introduction is also important because it illustrates our theory of alchemy and serendipity: although from very different socio-economic backgrounds, life experiences, and career-paths, the coming together of the three personalities was serendipitous, and the synchronicity between their ideologies and vision was the alchemy the MHP needed to succeed.

Susil Sirivardana

Susil Sirivardana was appointed the General Manager of the NHDA under the HTHP, and later became the Director of the Million Houses Programme and oversaw the rural arm of the programme. Born into an elite family in Colombo, Sirivardana completed his higher education at Oxford University (Rampton, 2010). Upon his return from England, he accepted a teaching position in a remote area of the Vanni in Anuradhapura, located in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka, an indication of his 'left-leaning' politics and commitment to working in the 'peripheries' rather than the centre. Much to the amazement of the interview board, he had come to the interview clad in national dress, and carrying a reed bag, which held his Oxford degree certificate (Jawad, 2005). When the interview board asked why he was taking up such a job despite his highbrow qualifications, his response had been "why not?" During his time in Anuradhapura, Sirivardana closely observed and understood the lives and lifestyles of rural people. His writings about village life, while revealing the inimical challenges of securing livelihoods and other hardship, also carry an element of admiration for the spirit of the rural poor. After several years of teaching in the Vanni, he moved back to Colombo and took up a post in public service.

Sirivardana soon became an insider in the intellectual circles in Colombo. Sirivardana was an active supporter of the Marxist-Leninist JVP party in the early 1970s. After the JVP insurrection Sirivardana was arrested, imprisoned, and convicted by the Criminal Justice Commission (Alles 1990; Criminal Justice Commission 1976). Sirivardana recalls how Premadasa, an MP from Colombo at the time of the court case, always came for the court hearings (Sirivardana, 2020). When the UNP came to

power in 1977 and decided to pardon all those convicted by the Commission, Premadasa invited Sirivardana to join the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction, specifically to get involved in the HTHP.

Srivardana is a firm believer of decentralization of governance and public programmes, and also an advocate of using traditional material and techniques, possibly due to his experience in Anuradhapura. He shared the disappointment the bureaucrats of the NHDA and UDA experienced when the housing budget was slashed by the government, but also the mixture of incredulity and excitement they experienced when challenged to build, “not a hundred thousand, but a million houses.” For him, the affordability of housing for the poor: “was a hard truth to stomach. But it had to be done, we had to come up with a solution, and minimum shelter was the way to go.” By this time, he was well acquainted with John Turner’s ideas and had read *Freedom to Build*. He spoke of MHP as a “revelatory experience” that strengthened his “faith in the creativity and inventiveness of the poor.” For Sirivardana, MHP was about “trusting the people [and] their processes.”

Lalith Lankatilleke

Srivardana’s counterpart in the urban sector of the MHP was Lalith Lankatilleke, an architect-planner by profession and recognized globally as the “father of the people’s participatory process of reconstruction (UN Habitat Sri Lanka—News, 2014).” He spoke of his early discontent with “architects and planners telling people what to do and how to build the spaces that they use (Lankatilleke, 2020).” After completing his degree from the University of Moratuwa in Sri Lanka, he joined UN-Habitat in 1978 and went on to serve in Seychelles and South Sudan where he experimented successfully with Turner’s ideas. On his return to Sri Lanka in 1984, he saw a vacancy for the post of General Manager of the MHP and immediately applied. Susil Sirivardana and Lankatilleke, according to both of them, “instantly got along.” Lankatilleke became the General Manager of MHP and was primarily responsible for developing the urban programme of the MHP. Lankatilleke is credited with introducing several important processes that became the cornerstone of MHP’s success mainly in the urban, but also rural sectors. These include the ‘family profile’ register, the ‘Community Action Plan’, and ‘Community Contracting’, which will be discussed in detail later.

1983—The Year of the Great Experiment

In retrospect, the success of the MHP is attributed to its radical philosophy: housing programmes implemented by governments limit the creative capacity of individuals; people's ingenuity and intuition in shaping their environments, when trusted and supported, motivate people to design houses according their own needs and improve their communities (Clark and Brana 1984). In 1983, however, this philosophy was mere rhetoric: untested and risky. Where previously the state had spent an average of LKR 30,000 on each house, it now faced the challenge of building a house for LKR 5,000—less than eighty percent of the original cost. But a promise had been made—a million houses—and it had to be fulfilled. Could the state risk giving full autonomy to the people and also build a million houses? The stakes were impossibly high.

When the Task Force met the Prime Minister, they laid out their plans for a radical, but necessary, new approach. People would be entrusted with building their houses using local materials and indigenous technologies; the government would only provide a start-up loan of LKR 5,000 recoverable over 35 years, and only support the process. With lower resource allocation per household, a larger pool of beneficiaries could be potentially reached (Clark and Brana 1984; Weerapana, n.d.).

The Minister Premadasa was willing to take the risk, but not without first testing if the experiment would work (Sirivardana 1986 and 2020). The year 1983 was designated as a 'Year of Planning' during which time the Task Force were instructed to develop a detailed operational plan, and design a pilot programme (Sirivardana 1986; Weerapana n.d.). Premadasa reaffirmed his intention to construct 'One Million Houses' (Weerapana, n.d.), and publicly discussed in his speeches the shortfalls of the HTHP while hinting at the forthcoming experiment of greater community involvement:

Have we in this attempt at mediation taken on too much? Have we taken on tasks that the village community may have been better able to do themselves at a lesser cost and greater degree of personal satisfaction? Have we burdened the people by tying them up with a centralized bureaucracy? (Premadasa cited in Robson, n.d., section 6.5.)

The Prime Minister's speeches during this period signal a significant shift in the government's approach to housing from state as provider to state as enabler, from centre controlled to devolving power to individuals and communities. Was Premadasa's hand forced? The answer is not a simple 'yes'. This tectonic shift took place not only in the context of the country's liquidity crisis, neoliberal reforms that imposed budget cuts on social welfare and services, and the channeling of a large proportion of the country's resources towards the civil war. The lessons learned from the HTHP also played a pivotal role, as did perhaps the statistics of the 1981 Housing and Population Census. The Census showed that for every house the government had built, there were six new private dwellings that had been erected (Department of Census and Statistics 1982; Sirivardana 2020). The state, which included the planners of the NHDA and UDA, had to accept that it was clearly not the 'authority' on housing; its efforts were, in reality, marginal to people's building processes (Sirivardana, 2020).

The budget cuts posed a serious impediment to Premadasa's political and personal ambition of becoming Sri Lanka's next President. But Premadasa was known for his perseverance, and his willingness to push boundaries and take risks. Nothing was going to stop him from fulfilling his promise. Spearheading the MHP was like "killing three birds with one stone" for Premadasa (Liyanage, 2020). First, he needed to shine as a formidable candidate for the Presidential nomination. Second, his own experience growing up in an urban low-income settlement perhaps inculcated the feeling that he 'must do for his people.'⁷ And lastly, he needed to 'win the love' of the people (Liyanage, 2020). A combination of the country's economic and political trajectory, coupled with Premadasa's own ambition and aspiration and the experience of completing HTHP contributed to creating the 'ripe' conditions for the shift in the government's approach to housing from a provider-based to a support-based model.

Process testing

By March 1983, the basic structure of the Million Houses Programme was in place. The programme consisted of six sub-programmes: (i) the Rural Housing Sub-Programme (RHSP); (ii) the Urban Housing Sub-Programme (UHSP); (iii) the Plantation Housing Sub-Programme; (iv) the Mahaweli Housing Schemes; (v) the Major Settlement Housing Schemes; and (vi) the Private Sector Sub-Programme, plantation (Russell and Vidler, 2000; Wickrema, 2005). The Rural Housing Sub Programme (RHSP) and the Urban Housing Sub Programme (UHSP) were implemented by the NHDA and the UDA respectively. The other four programmes were implemented by various lead agencies.⁸ The pilot programme was to be implemented under the Rural Housing Sub-Programme (Sirivardana 1986). It consisted of two main programmes. The first was the Demonstrations Projects Programme. It was to be implemented by building a demonstration house in all 245 Divisional Secretariats ('AGAs' at the time). To commence, the NHDA's new house-building philosophy, structure, and processes were articulated in the 'Guidelines for the Demonstration Projects'. These were presented and discussed with the housing officers of the NHDA through several workshops, training programmes, and working-group meetings (Sirivardana 2020). The new 'Housing Options and Loan Package' was introduced. The pilot phase was supported by several important schemes, namely the World Bank funded training programme in basic skills in carpentry and masonry, and the 1983 low-income house design and building competition (Sirivardana 1986). The second was the District-wide implementation of the programme in Anuradhapura, which covered 173 *Gramadoya Manadala* or Village Development Councils. Here too the new loan programme was tested, as well as the effectiveness of District Housing Committees to support people's building initiatives.

Sirivardana (2020) described the first demonstration projects that were built in 1983, and fondly recalled how thrilled people were to 'show-off' to the authorities the pilot houses they had designed and built on their own. Sirivardana (1986) describes 1983–1984 as the year of 'rooting and grounding' whereby the officials of the NHDA and others outside who remained deeply sceptical had to be convinced (p.95). The participating families, on the other hand, needed little encouragement and 'spontaneously' took to the new programme. The district-wide programme in Anuradhapura also proved to be a success. Families were chosen based on who showed promise for successfully completing their houses, either through their past history of house improvement, or by collecting materials with the hope of building in the future (Clark and Brana 1984). Families with exceptionally bad housing were also selected. With the support of the District Housing Committees, the selected families: designed and constructed their own houses; contracted specialists from the community when needed; found or sourced building materials from their immediate

environment; and, when they could not, liaised with the Housing Officers to purchase them at discounted rates from commercial manufacturers (Clark and Brana 1984). That housing was a process, or a 'verb' as described by Turner, was clearly demonstrated during the MHP's experimental phase. People always designed and built houses with their needs, routine, and priorities foremost in their minds, and also with future extensions in mind (Clark and Brana 1984; Sirivardana 2020). When given the opportunity to build, the experiment proved that people showed remarkable creativity, confidence, and motivation.

For a paradigm shift to happen, a radical shift in perception must also take place. Officials of the Ministry of Housing, when asked to visit the newly transformed villages before they were formally 'declared open' by the Prime Minister, were unimpressed (Hamid 2020; Sirivardana 1986 and 2020). There were no shiny new buildings or beautifully paved roads as there was in the HTHP. Sirivardana (1986 95) argues that the position the NHDA took was "that the old and the new programmes were indeed incomparable; the new programme was invisible to us, but highly visible to them (the villagers)." The Prime Minister immediately understood, or 'saw', how this new form of 'success' had to be perceived and encouraged the NHDA to continue with their plans. Three key initiatives are attributed to the success of the pilot programmes (Sirivardana 1986). The village-based pilot programme launched in Anuradhapura demonstrated that family initiatives to build their homes, when supported through local institutions, both state and community-based, were successful from a populist, bureaucratic, and developmental perspective (Sirivardana 1986). The demonstration projects in each Division Secretariat did not allow for any 'glossing over'; every officer in charge had to prove that it could be done with the allocated funds. Finally, the monthly progress review meetings hosted in Colombo for the district managers to discuss their progress reports were not just a bureaucratic exercise, but a space in which the implementers at all levels of the MHP could engage in critical dialogue and learn from each other's experiences (Sirivardana 1986).

MHP—the 'New Path'

Once the pilot programmes had proven successful, the Million Houses Programme (MHP) was officially launched in 1984. The Ministry of Housing Task Force produced a housing manifesto titled the '*New Path*', which was printed in the MHP Implementation Guidelines. The new slogan of the MHP was: "Minimal intervention maximal support by the state. Maximal involvement of the builder families." The guidelines outlined the philosophy of the MHP by emphasizing people's autonomy and house building as a timeless tradition, now being supported and by the state.

The MHP is founded on the Mainstream of Sri Lankan house-building—a tradition of house-building by individual families [...] Home-building families occupy a pivotal position. Like the farmer who grows our food, the home-builders will be taking the vital shelter decisions. The key decisions regarding costs, technologies, standards, infrastructures, siting and environment—the where, the how, what and by who—will be taken by the community of home builders. Thus, they become the main actors in the country's housing and settlement process [...] People's participation will increase a thousandfold, and improve qualitatively. Communities will be responsible for their shelter more than ever before. Tradition will be reinterpreted anew.

Funding was generated through the national budget, foreign grants, and the income from the newly established Housing Lottery (Samaratunga and Hare, 2013).

The NHDA was the apex institution that administered MHP. While NHDA took leadership of the entire programme, its primary focus was the rural sub-programme. The UDA undertook the implementation of the urban sub-programme. There were two foreign academic institutions that got involved in the MHP through pre-existing connections and partnerships. The Development Planning Unit (DPU) of University College London (UCL)—which had already collaborated on many infrastructure-related projects with the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka—became involved in MHP from the inception phase. DPU had a reputation for its avant-garde work in the philosophy of housing development in India and Africa, and DPU's founders—Charles Abrams and Otto Koenigberger—had advocated for it in the 1960s (Wakely 1986). Much later, I.A. Hameed who was tasked with establishing Community Development Councils of MHP's urban programme, went on to complete his graduate studies at the DPU where he documented the entire MHP process in an eight-volume compilation. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had connections with the Commissioner of Housing in Sri Lanka, and two academics—Nabeel Hamdi and Reinhard Goethert—were hired as consultants to MHP. UCL and MIT played an observational and consultative role in the MHP process. Hamdi and Goethert went on to become global authorities on participatory housing development in later years owing largely to their experiences with the MHP.

Decentralization as Key Principle: Structures, Institutions, and Processes

The NHDA was accustomed to the provider-based housing model of HTHP that was hierarchical and bureaucratic in its decision-making, facilitation, and organization. The MHP was ten times the size of HTHP, and there were practical difficulties in mobilizing personnel to facilitate the construction of a million houses. Instead, officials at the NHDA realised that as the apex body administering the national programme, it was more realistic to decentralize the organizational core from central government in Colombo to local and municipal authorities, and from the local governance bodies to the people. Such an approach would ensure better control and facilitation, and greater accessibility by the beneficiaries. Decentralization was a change in decision-making and implementation structure, although it was important to the success of the MHP. Decentralization was effective because of the innovative institutions and processes that were introduced to truly enable a 'people's process' from the ground-up.

Decision-making structure

The decision-making structure of the rural and urban sub-programmes was as follows (Redman 2005): For the rural sub-programme, the Minister of Local Government, Housing and Construction, Minister of Cooperatives, and the Minister of Public Administration were responsible at the cabinet level. While the decision-making authority was the Minister of Local Government, Housing and Construction, the other two ministers played a supporting role. At the national level, the Department of Housing, Department of Local Government, and the Department of Public Administration were empowered to carry out the MHP. District level actors such as the Government Agent and

Assistant Commissioner of Local Government, and institutions such as the District Development Council, NHDA District Office and the District Union Thrift and Credit Cooperative Societies (TCCS) coordinated with the national level. Divisional level actors and institutions such as the Assistant Government Agent and the Provincial Council connected with the district level as well as the *Gramodaya Mandalayas* that worked closely with village-based NGOs, religious institutions, and the NHDA housing officer who reported directly to the NHDA district office. At the grassroots level, the village TCCS, *Grama Sevaka* (the most immediate representative of the central government in villages at the smallest level of governance, which is called a Grama Niladhari (GN) Division), and the communities were involved in the process.⁹

In the decentralized structure of the urban sub-programme, the first two layers of governance—national and district levels—were the same as that of the rural sub-programme. At the divisional level too, while all of institutions and actors remained the same, the District Development Council was replaced by the Housing and Community Development Council (HCDC), an apex body that connects all the Community Development Councils (CDCs) at the grassroots level. At the basic level of governance (GN level), the *Grama Sevaka* and Community Development Councils worked closely with the NHDA housing officer and NGOs. They were the first point of contact with neighbourhoods and community TCCS.¹⁰

Gramodaya Mandalaya

The *Gramodaya Mandalayas* (Village Awakening Committees) in rural areas played a pivotal role in mobilizing support for the MHP's rural sub-programme (Wanigaratne 1997). These committees evolved from grassroots organizations (GROs), which are well-functioning community-level horizontal organizations that have historically been part of rural life in Sri Lanka (Wanigaratne 1997). They are often spontaneously generated as a response to rising needs of communities and are generally organized around cultural values (around religious institutions), economic values (agriculture and artisan production), and civil values (civil society) (Wanigaratne 1997, 218). In the 1950s, different types of GROs were formed, either with the intervention of the government, or organically by the villagers. They included Rural Development Societies, farmers' societies, women's organizations, funeral aid societies, mutual aid societies, religious societies, and youth societies. Over time, however, as the traditional structure of Sri Lankan villages changed, the GROs increasingly became distributors of government welfare benefits (Bandaralage 2009; Wanigaratne 1997).

GROs were indispensable to every successive post-independence government because they were an important intermediary in nation-building, distribution of welfare benefits, and rural development. This led to the proliferation of GROs by different governments. For example, Multi-Purpose Cooperative Movement and Cultivation Committees were established in 1958, Agricultural Productivity Committees were set up in 1972, and *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were officially established in 1978 (Bandaralage 2009). *Gramodaya Mandalaya* (GM) is now a political committee consisting of representatives from several villages (Hennayake 2006). The official establishment of GMs was started by the UNP in order to organize and mobilize rural citizens and groups. GMs came under the District Development Councils (DDCs) that were composed of all the Members of Parliament in a given electoral district. Under the *Gramodaya Mandala Fund Act of 1982*, the GMs were empowered to undertake village development activities which contribute towards strengthening the village economy, social welfare and cultural and community development. The main objective of GM scheme was to mobilize the existing village level organizations to participate in local development and administrative activities (Abeyrama & Saeed 1984). Once a GM was formed in each GN division, it had representatives from all existing village-level voluntary organizations.

They had the responsibility to identify development needs of the area and work with higher level authorities such as the Assistant Government Agent (a political appointee) to implement the activities. The GM consisted of heads of the non-political organisations in an electoral district. However, the final decision to include an organisation in a GM rested with the the Minister in Charge at the time, Premadasa. (Abeyrama and Saeed 1984, 24).

During the MHP, the *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were utilized to coordinate the building or renovation of houses. Along with the *Gram Niladhari*, the *Gramodaya Mandalaya* assisted the housing officer to choose the recipients of the MHP, and then monitor the building process. Housing plans were developed with the help of technical officers and approved by the Housing Officer. Households then had to submit their building plan, usually comprising three to four stages, to obtain the first installment. Thereafter, supervision of the building process was coordinated through the *Gram Niladhari* and the *Gramodaya Mandalaya* with technical assistance provided by the Housing Officers. In rural areas, coordinating the purchase and storage of raw materials proved to be difficult as households kept to varying timelines. Although the cost of materials would have been cheaper if households coordinated amongst them, the *Gramodaya Mandalaya* could not motivate them to do so.

Premadasa and grassroots organisations

Although the *Gramodaya Mandalaya* consisted of the heads of non-political organizations, the final decision-making power rested with the Minister in charge—the Minister of Local Government—Ranasinghe Premadasa. Political interference in GMs was inevitable as the key decision maker at the national level (the minister) and the divisional level (Assistant Government Agent) were both political actors. Badaralage (2009 121) notes that traditional leaders of GROs were gradually sidelined as new leaders were elevated through political patronage. Hence, community leaders supported by the political leadership galvanized support for political parties by manipulating welfare benefits in favour of their clients and supporters. Niriella (2016 94) notes that village leaders affiliated with the UNP enjoyed more power within GMs by electing its members for all village level organizations.

Community Development Councils (CDCs)

Organized self-help groups formed at the level of the community known as Community Development Councils (CDCs) played a central role in the urban sub-programme of the MHP. The CDCs origins are debated. They are officially recorded when UNICEF's Urban Basic Services Improvement Programme (UBSIP) either set up or used existing community mechanisms for effective implementation through community reach from 1978 to 1986 (Joshi and Sohail 2009). The UBSIP came under the purview of the Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction, the Common Amenities Board (CAB), and the Public Health Department of the Colombo Municipality Council (Sevanatha 2001). The field staff of CMC's Health Department facilitated the formation or formalisation and the registration of CDCs. The CDC structures helped to formalise and systemize community participation for the UBSIP, which worked towards enabling access to basic services (Joshi and Sohail Khan 2009).

Kodagoda, a CDC office bearer from Seevalipura (or Wanathamulla), a well-known low-income urban settlement in central Colombo, charted out the beginnings of CDCs with UNICEF and Save the Children (Kodagoda 2020). According to him, the CDCs were mobilized by UNICEF and Save the Children as a strategy to involve the communities in sending their children to school. In the late 1970s, Seevalipura had been a squalid urban settlement built on marsh land. The community could only access a few local schools due to their low income status and notorious reputation. Many children had not enrolled in school. At the inception, Save the Children had donated books to children through the CDCs. In later years, CDCs had been mobilized by UNICEF and other INGO initiatives to promote vocational training among community members in the fields of carpentry, driving and construction work. The concept had been designed to produce a workforce among settlement residents to service the surrounding middle-class neighborhoods. "We were a community that was sleeping," said Kodagoda, referring to the 'helplessness' and 'ignorance' (his words) of residents in the settlement. "The training provided by the CDCs helped produce skills among the resident, which later became useful during community contracting of MHP," he added.

The CDCs were strengthened under the MHP by the local authorities as they were used to encourage community members to take on roles as decision-makers in the MHP process (Redman 2005). According to the interviews, the officers of the NHDA engaged with communities by first approaching a known community leader about scheduling a community meeting. The meeting would be announced through written notices and word-of-mouth. On the day of the meeting, the NHDA officers would discuss with the community the overall vision of the MHP emphasizing the importance of their involvement in improving their communities. Nominations for office bearers would be suggested and sometimes a vote was taken to confirm. When we asked how the NHDA managed the existing leaders of the community, especially the notorious variety that ran illegal operations, we were told that they were rarely interested in getting involved as there was no "real money to be made (Hamid 2020)." People who took an active role in the CDS were people like Mr. Kodagoda who believed in Premadasa's vision and were motivated to transform their communities.

The CDCs were made up of five members elected by the community often with the Community Leader as the chairman. When a community member required a particular service, they would engage the CDC, who would then submit a request on their behalf to the local authority (Redman 2005). Women became key members of the CDCs, handling a lot of the construction and organisational work (Redman 2005). The Treasurer and Secretary posts of CDCs were commonly held by women (Kodagoda 2020). I.A. Hameed (2020), who initially worked as a NHDA District Manager in Trincomalee, was pulled into strengthening CDCs in the urban sub-programme. He notes that the CDC was an important mechanism to bring out people's 'voice' in planning and housing development. He recalled the way in which a Community Action Plan exercise began: "we gathered for the discussion and we said to them, 'you are all coming as national planners. This is going to feed into the national plan. Your descendants will curse you if you do a bad plan (Hameed 2020).'" In fact, the Community Action Plan developed by the CDCs did feed up to the National Action Plan. Also, key office bearers of each of the CDCs represented their communities at the local government level.

Mr. Kodagoda (the CDC leader) as well as our other key informants talked about the planning meetings with great enthusiasm. It was a time and place where 'people's processes' came alive. Facilitated by the NHDA, and often with Mr. Lankatilleke present, the CDCs, through the 'Community Action Plan', were asked to make several critically important decisions about their communities. Communities were mapped out on sheets of paper, divided into neighborhood blocks, and roads

laid out. Plots of two to three perches for each household were allocated. In some cases, not all members of the community could remain if the minimum plot size were to be allocated to all. Mr. Hamid (2020) recalls how when a community from the Wellawatte-Dehiwela canal bank was relocated to Badowita in Mount Lavinia, communities came up with the criteria by which some members were relocated elsewhere due to land constraints.

The CDCs, however, cannot be entirely thought of as organisations 'created' by development programmes. Some academics, ethnographers and practitioners that study the city of Colombo, such as Nishani Gunatilaka and Nihal Perera, suspect that CDCs were informal social networks dating back to the 1950s when Premadasa was the Deputy Mayor of Colombo (Gunatilaka 2020; Perera 2020). Most urban settlements are multi-ethnic and multi-religious, and the most potent fault line that polarizes people is their political party affiliation. Premadasa seemed to have understood this reality well. After joining the UNP in 1956, Premadasa and M.H. Mohammed were tasked with turning the mostly left-leaning, working-class settlements into UNP support bases. They worked closely with informal CDCs for nearly 20 years until the 1977 election that delivered a monumental victory to the party. Their main method of gaining people's support and loyalty was to provide material 'things' (i.e. material goods, jobs, opportunities, etc.) to the settlers and to intervene in case of confrontations with law enforcement. After the 1977 election, Premadasa became the Minister of Local Government, Housing, and Construction, and M.H. Mohammed became the Minister of Transportation. Even today, there is a generation of people living in these settlements that were employed by the two ministries due to their political affiliations with these two UNP strongmen. These informal networks that were organized and mobilized for a political purpose in the 1950s evolved to become formal CDCs during the UNICEF programme. During the MHP, the existing CDCs were further formalized and absorbed into the programme as community mechanisms.

The CDCs were utilized as and certainly became a community building mechanism. Mr. Kodagoda does not remember the CDC or any other community-based organisation being so active in the community until the UBSIP programme and subsequently the MHP. When we asked him whether the ubiquitous 'Death Benevolent Society' existed prior to the UBSIP and MHP, he said he does not remember. He conjectured "this was a temporary shelter, not a home [...] We were aware that we were living in illegal houses, so because of that not many people had that community feel". However, a Death Benevolent Society was one of the first off-shoots once the CDCs were revived. During the UBSIP programme, the CDC took responsibility for cleaning the shared latrines (toilets) that had been built for the community. In addition to food distribution during times of crisis such as floods, the CDC began to organize various activities for women, children, and youth like sports days and speech and debate competitions (Kodagoda 2020).

The CDCs and the community-led processes it introduced during the implementation of the MHP was successful because it did what they promised: decision-making power over their lives (Kodagoda 2020). Communities that had regarded themselves as 'illegal' and 'marginal' to the polity and the city were given recognition and legitimized as citizens. By asking the poor to design their communities, the MHP, through the CDCs instilled a sense of dignity and purpose. Kodagoda remembers it as a time of great hope, where "people felt they were doing something not only for themselves, but for the country".

Community Action Plan

The Community Action Planning (CAP) methodology of MHP was an innovation introduced by the programme's General Manager—Lalith Lankatilleke (Lankatilleke 2020; Sirivardana 2020). This methodology was primarily implemented in the urban sub-programme. It evolved within the NHDA as an exercise to encourage community participation and decision-making regarding housing. They were structured workshops convened by NHDA officers and the CDCs. In these workshops, the residents were asked to identify socio-economic and physical problems and needs within their settlements, and to propose strategies and activities to resolve them (United Nations 2005; Russell and Vidler 2000; Joshi and Khan 2009). Hameed (2020) spoke of the sequence of these workshops: “first, they were asked to list all the issues. Second, they had to prioritize. Third, they needed to propose short- and long-term solutions. Lastly, with the help of NHDA, they set timelines and discussed the resources that were needed”. The activity that preceded the Community Action Plan was the “Family Profile” exercise where each family was given a square-ruled book and was asked to design their home. Kodagoda (2020) talked about how important he and his community felt when drawing a plan for their houses using the squares to calculate the dimensions of each room and space. “We had become engineers!” he told us. He recalled how every one of them designed their houses with a verandah or patio so they could keep their front doors open—a house on two-perches of land did not have much ventilation, sit outside and enjoy the evening breeze, and also park their bicycles safely.

Subsequently, the NHDA organized follow-up workshops to strengthen the capacity of CDCs to undertake the tasks, finalize and layout a block plan, formulate community-specific building codes, introduce Housing Options and Loan Plans (HOLPs), familiarize the residents with procedures for undertaking small infrastructure projects, and initiate group credit programmes for income generation activities (Sevanatha 2006). Lankatilleke (2020) recalled the enthusiastic participation of the CDC members, and how, despite his commitment to trusting the people, he continued to be amazed by the gap between how people thought of their houses and neighbourhoods and what the professionals had in mind for them. He recounted one particular discussion in which the planners had proposed roads within an urban settlement. The planners had proposed a road wide enough for a fire truck to enter in case of an emergency, according to UDA guidelines. But the people had opposed the idea saying that “fire trucks don’t come to help us, we have always put out our own fires [...] just build us roads wide enough to comfortably carry a coffin and junctions wide enough to turn a corner without falling into the drain.”

At these workshops, the NHDA reiterated the government's commitment to award a two-perch plot of land to each family. “These workshops, at times got heated because some people had more land that they had acquired and were not willing to give it up,” said Gunatilaka (2020). Both Kodagoda and Lankatilleke mentioned such exchanges, but added that “the issues were resolved by the CDC members in a peaceful manner (Kodagoda 2020; Lankatilleke 2020).” Gunatilaka (2020) however, noted that residents did not always comply: “These settlements had thugs and they reacted violently when asked to give up the land that they had acquired over time.” There had been times when the CDCs could not negotiate plot allocations in a civil manner with some residents. “Premadasa did not hesitate to use legal- and extra-legal means to take care of those problems,” she added (Gunatilaka, 2020).¹¹

The workshops convened by CDCs and NHDA were used to introduce Community Building Guidelines in order to maintain building lines, open public spaces, and the location of kitchens and latrines (Dayaratne and Samarawickrama 2003). Lankatilleke (2020) commented that these guidelines were 'loose' and that there was flexibility built into them:

There was really only one rule—smoke from one kitchen could not go into their neighbour's kitchen. We stipulated three criteria only. The people had to ensure their health and safety, their neighbour's health and safety; and not obstruct anyone's access to basic services (i.e. drains, sewage, etc.) (Lankatilleke, 2020).

It can be argued that the Community Action Plans played a pivotal role in reducing the risks and costs of collective action for community members. These meetings brought communities together, formalized a local planning and decision-making process, and provided them with an elected body to take their plans and views forward to the level of local government and also eventually informed the National Action Plan. The follow-up workshops further strengthened the scope for local collective action, which they acted upon not so much by articulating more needs or demanding more rights, but by assisting the state's (and also INGOs') distribution of services and, in times of crisis such as floods, emergency aid.

Community contracting

The involvement of the CDCs in decision-making led to another important feature of MHP's decentralized model—community construction contracts (also referred to as community contracting). Once the Community Action Plan was completed, and housing and public infrastructure priorities were identified, the construction contracts for building were awarded to the CDCs (Yap 1994; Lankatilleke 2020). This decision was made when the MHP, through their experienced with the HTHP, realised that private contractors often did substandard work but charged high prices. The CDCs employed residents from the settlements to carry out the construction. The simple philosophy was that residents, because of their vested interests in the community, would be motivated to do a good job, and dare not 'cheat' their neighbours for fear of reprisal. By the time this method was introduced, the residents that had previously completed training in masonry, carpentry, and other construction-related work were ready to undertake these contracts. The first community contract was awarded in January, 1986 after residents of Seevalipura expressed dissatisfaction about their public well. The well was constructed under UBSIP and was outsourced to a private contractor through the conventional tendering process (Yap 1994). The well could not be used at the same time by men and women for bathing. The new well the community designed had separate areas for men and women to bathe in privacy, and also to wash clothes without getting in the way of the bathers.

Lankatilleke (2020) spoke about the challenges of navigating the bureaucracy in order to award the construction contracts to the people:

NHDA was not willing to budge on their standard tendering procedures. But we argued that contractors typically keep 30–40% for themselves. And we generate our budgets based on those numbers. Here, we negotiated that the margin would be 15% instead of 30 or 40%. The 15% would go to the community, and the community would do their own construction.

He wrote a proposal titled “Prajā idikireeme athwela” (Community Building Partnership) in which he formulated the idea of Community Contracting. His proposal was approved, and the residents of Seevalipura were awarded a contract to build a second well, despite the resistance from other office-based staff. “The people re-built the well. It was beautiful and within the stipulated budget,” said Lankatilleke. The successful completion of the well and the quality of the construction convinced the NHDA into accepting CDCs as prospective contractors for small, community-based infrastructure projects. CDCs, in collaboration with the NHDA, identified sub-projects in urban settlements, approved engineering designs, and cost estimates. Kodagoda (2020) had been the accounting officer in his CDC and he fondly remembered this period as an “exciting time.”

“We implemented the work by hiring skilled and unskilled labourers from within this settlement. It was cheaper, and it gave them work and a wage”, he said, noting that people were paid for their labour for the construction of these projects (Kodagoda, 2020). Neither Lankatilleke, nor Hamid, nor Kodagoda discussed issues of equity. When we asked if anyone ‘cheated’ the system by doing substandard work or by taking off with the funds, they were all nonplussed. It was outside contractors who had cheated them. Community contracting was regarded as an unequivocal success because community members were accountable to each other and dared not live with the ‘shame’ of being called a fraud by his/her neighbours.

As with all successful initiatives, there were notable individuals that injected fundamental principles and experimental processes of people-driven housing, which, in later years, became the basis for MHP’s claim to fame. The innovation of a community-centred, participatory housing programme administered by local authorities, supported by national institutions, which has now become a global ‘best practice’ emulated by other countries seemed to have materialized under the political economic conditions discussed previously, and also due to the involvement of two key individuals who worked in a bureaucratic capacity—Susil Sirivardana and Lalith Lankatilleke.

Getting the Buy-in of the People: The Promise of Ownership

The Million Houses Programme seemed to have had the right ‘alchemy’—a combination of actors, institutions, and processes—that worked together to produce the ‘gold’ that was needed. However, we believed that some other factor had to explain why communities were motivated to participate and contribute their time, money, and energy into building their homes. While some of the actors we interviewed—Sirivardana, Lankatilleke and Hameed—seemed to think that the communities did not need much convincing when it came to improving their homes and neighbourhoods, we believed that there had to be a more fundamental cause that explained people’s commitment to MHP. As Gunatilaka (2020) and Kodagoda (2020) and secondary sources reveal, it was the promise of ownership (of land and a home) for the communities that ensured a high level of people’s participation in MHP. Given his experience growing up in an urban settlement, Prime Minister Premadasa understood this all too well.

Premadasa knew how and why people lived in poor conditions in urban settlements. Gunatilaka (2020), who conducted an ethnography in Seevalipura, notes that “back in the 1970s and 80s, people lived in slums not necessarily because of dire poverty, but because of the uncertainty surrounding the ownership of the land”. Conversations with residents now in their 70s also reveal that the reason they did not invest in building proper houses, was due to the uncertainty that they would someday lose the land (Fernando 2020). “There was a lack of confidence and certainty about their lives in a particular place, and Premadasa could relate to these sentiments” (Gunatilaka 2020). In his 1981 Address at the fourth Session of the UN Convention on Housing Settlements in Manila, Premadasa delivered a speech in which he alluded to the importance of ownership (Premadasa 1981):

To us the importance of a home—the crucible in which the soul of the nation is forged through the family—and its importance in maintaining traditions and values of the society are abundantly clear. I believe, with all my heart that if you give a man a decent home, you have laid the sure foundation of making him a decent and useful member of the community. Think then of the tremendous savings—the social costs—that you see through the prevention of disease, disorder, lawlessness, the pollution of the environment and the loss of life itself if you can give a man a home. I can illustrate with many examples from my own country that the benefits of providing a home is not only material, but also moral and spiritual.

At the time MHP was implemented, very few governments had secured people’s right to adequate housing (Sidoti 1996). But Sri Lanka was ahead of many other nations in terms of not just acknowledging the right to housing, but protecting, promoting and delivering that right.

Ownership in the Urban Housing Sub-Programme had far-reaching consequences for residents living in informal settlements and shanties. The laying down of roads and streets and allocating house numbers meant every household now had a formal street address recognised by the Postal Authority. Not only could they receive mail, a street address meant they could send their children to better schools, and apply for jobs—an address was needed for the application forms, and for sending notifications regarding interview dates, etc. A street address provided an opportunity for social mobility.

Premadasa’s mantra

Premadasa’s speeches during the early stages of the MHP were remarkably tailored to inculcate hope, desire, and determination in people about owning a house. He asked people to recite the following mantra every morning—“I will own a house, my family will own a house, we will build a house.”¹² He urged people to start believing their dream of owning a home. The idea of owning a home that resonates throughout Premadasa’s speeches in the early 1980s seemed to have been incorporated into the promotion of MHP within the communities. Gunatilaka (2020) notes that NHDA officers were deployed to describe what the MHP was going to do for the people, and CDCs adopted a sequence in which they marketed the programme. First, they declared that the government is “going to give you ownership over your land”; second, they emphasised that the arrangement was going to be a “house for a family, not a house for a house”; and lastly, they enthusiastically conveyed that “it is you who will build your home (Gunatilaka 2020).”

To supplement the promise of land ownership, the NHDA then offered residents the Housing Options and Loans Package (HOLP). HOLP was funded by donor agencies such as UNICEF and USAID, and the funds were used to offer low-interest loans to low-income families for the purpose of building their homes. Each family qualified for a loan of LKR 5,000–15,000 disbursed in three instalments. The loan package enabled people to initiate construction, as until now they did not have access to credit from banks or credit unions given their low incomes. The rural and urban sub-programmes had different HOLP packages as the type of dwelling and conditions varied in the two settings. The package included different types of housing, based on a gamut of housing needs among poor families.

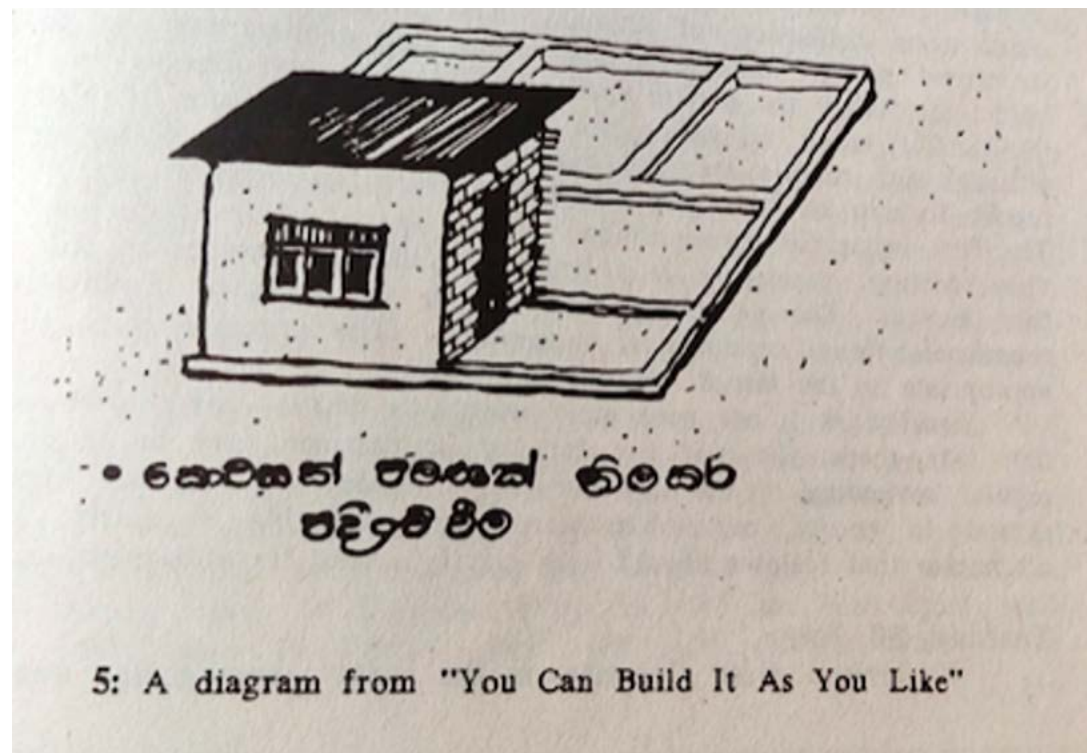
The residents had a choice to pick a housing option and the corresponding loan package on the basis of their housing need and the ability to repay the borrowed amount (Sirivardana 1988). The loan packages were flexible so that the applicants had the option of borrowing only for what they needed and could afford at the time. For example, as most families had some form of shelter, NHDA issued loans for them to upgrade the existing structure, such as building a toilet or a roof. As such, MHP did not require building of an entire house, or demolition and reconstruction of houses. These flexible and 'smart' loans allowed families to work on one or two small projects in their homes by offering them funds to buy material and/or labour (Redman 2005). Once a family applied for a loan, it had to go through the bureaucratic hierarchy for approval. This caused delays and the NHDA ran the risk of losing people's interest due to the bureaucratic red tape. In order to counter the delays of issuing loans, the NHDA put in place a mechanism to provide small start-up loans to keep the momentum high. The NHDA National Coordinator maintained a fund that was disbursed to the district-level implementing agency (i.e. Housing Development Council; District Development Committee; Municipal Council, etc.), which further allocated funds for CDCs and Gramodaya Mandalayas. The housing loan applicants could directly access these start-up funds from the community-level institutions.¹³

Implementation of the MHP

Rural Houses Sub Programme (1983–1989)

The Rural Houses Sub-Programme developed detailed implementation guidelines by January 1984 (Sirivardana 1988). As part of the RHSP, the NHDA distributed a publication titled, “You Can Build it as You Like” (see Figure 1), which detailed an incremental building strategy, learned through their experiences during the pilot phase, that encouraged participants to build in accordance with their current situation, but with the hope of improving it in the future (DPU n.d).

Figure 1. Illustration from “You Can Build it as You Like,” which encouraged rural residents to build houses in accordance with their current situation.



Source: Slettebak 1986, p.19

The rural programme was structured so that each of the twenty-five districts allotted were run from a district office in the main town. The programme was administered by the NHDA and monitored by a District Housing Committee. Each district was divided into Assistant Government Agent (AGA) divisions or Pradheshiya Mandalayas. Each Pradheshiya Mandalaya (PM) was divided into different Gramodaya Mandalayas (GM). In turn, each GM covered 500 families. This number either corresponded to a cluster of villages or made up only a part of a larger village. For example, the Kegalle District had a population of 680,000 and therefore was divided into ten PMs and 201 GMs.

The *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were given the tasks of selecting beneficiaries, supervising the use of loans, and ensuring the recovery of the loans (Ailapperuma 1985). The process consisted of each village committee receiving an annual allocation of loan funds from the District. Loan applicants were interviewed by Housing Officers, who would give technical advice and decide the scale of the loan. Then the family had to fulfill certain conditions in order to have each loan installment released (Robson n.d.). For example, they had to clear the site and dig the latrine for the first installment. Subsequent installments corresponded with three other stages stipulated by the District Housing Managers. These requirements varied from district to district. The collection of the loan repayment was the responsibility of the local thrift society (Robson n.d.). The devolution and decentralization of supervision and effective functioning of the RHSP was such that the *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were obligated to maintain consistent implementation as their performance would be the basis for further funds, as well as to maintain the confidence of their communities (Ailapperuma 1985).

The District manager ran a team of administrative and technical staff including the Housing Officers (HOs). Most of the HOs had the required technical knowledge as they had experience supervising at least one major ASH project under HTHP (DPU n.d). They also were likely to have attended technical training workshops held by the NHDA. Each HO covered one *Pradheshiya* (local authority area) and lived within that division. The *Gramodaya Mandalaya* drew up a list of loan applicants for approval by the Divisional Committees. Individuals applied for loans to their local *Gramodaya Mandalaya* (DPU n.d). Thereafter, it was up to the Housing Officer to interview the individuals and assess the practicality of their application. The HO was required to help the individual develop a building plan, a list of building materials needed, and a budget for the project. He was expected to assess the financial situation of the individual and assist them by making a loan recommendation (DPU n.d). The record of the HO interview usually included a sketch of the building plan and a list of the building requirements. For the RHSP, loans ranged from LKR 5,000 (for upgrading work) to LKR 7,500 (new structure) (DPU n.d).

While the loan process was standardized, the decentralization of the programme allowed for personalized support and tailoring. For example, three families in Makualla had received NHDA loans to build or upgrade their homes and they received personalized institutional support (Slettebak 1986). While they all took similar loans (about Rs. 6,000), the size of construction, disbursement of funds, and level of completion was individually adjusted as per each family's access and ability (Slettebak 1986).

The Housing Officers of the NHDA played a crucial role in the implementation of the RHSP as they were the main point of contact and guidance for the beneficiary families (DPU n.d). Their role was meant to be as technical advisor, but they ended up working as "quasi social worker and administrators" (DPU n.d., 7). This added burden of work came to light when a number of cases of poor supervision were found during a review of the Gampaha district (DPU n.d). The HO was responsible for making a site visit at each stage of the loan to make sure that the conditions of the loan were being met. They also checked the quality of the construction and advise the home builders. The HO, in addition to visiting their construction sites, were required to pay one visit to the District office each week, spend one day running training and awareness-raising programmes, and attend meetings of the Gramodaya and Pradheshiya committees when they were convened (DPU n.d).

Sevanagama

Sevanagama was a unique rural expansion programme (Slettebak 1986). While it operated outside of the RHSP framework, it utilized some of the same mechanisms including state loans. Interestingly the responsibility over this programme surpassed the chain of command and was given entirely to the local chairman of the Gramodaya Mandalaya (Slettebak 1986). The difference between Sevanagama and the normal rural housing structure was that it was even more decentralized and represented a true bottom-up approach (Slettebak 1986). It is relevant because it was created during the same time period as the RHSP, and exemplified the state as supportive, not authoritative. Sevanagama happened fortuitously, and highlights Premadasa's style of leadership. The chairman of the GM had worked previously with the twenty-four families in the village and had organised the building of a community 'Shrama Nivasa' center. The Prime Minister on his visit to inaugurate the centre was so impressed by the efforts that he offered each family a grant of Rs. 5,000 if they could build their own houses over the next year (Slettebak 1986). The grant was given to the chairman of the GM to coordinate.

Urban Housing Sub Programme (1985–1989)

Started in 1985, the urban housing sub-programme (UHSP) consisted of housing projects in fifty-one designated Municipal and Urban Councils in the country (Robson, n.d). The UHSP had a similarly decentralized, but different structure to the RHSP. The UHSP worked through a network of Community Development Committees (CDC), which was responsible for identifying beneficiaries, arranging loan payments and collecting repayments (Robson, n.d). The CDCs mobilized their communities and acted as the community's mouthpiece during the various stages of development. By 1987, there were 400 CDCs in the country (Robson n.d.). The biggest obstruction to the urban programme according to Lankatilleke (2020) was the UDA legislation on the minimum space that can be allocated for a house, which, at the time was six perches. The working-class settlements barely had two to three perches per household, sometimes even less. If people were not to be relocated and resettled, the RHSP had to work with the existing land area as land scarcity in urban areas made it difficult, if not impossible, to expand the existing settlements. Lankatilleke and his team found a loophole in the UDA legislation that allowed "special project areas" where households were able to construct a legally acceptable permanent house on plots of two perches (fifty square metres or 544 square feet) (Lankatilleke 2020). This prevented the mass-scale displacement of low-income communities that were dispersed across the Colombo Metropolitan area.

Site selection was carried out by the NHDA and the technical staff of the Local Government Authority. Preference was given to communities occupying government land; 'build-ability', and communities that had community-based organizational structures in place (Hameed n.d). Once the project was selected, a project officer contacted the community through a formal or informal community leader such as a respected elder, native doctor, or through a community-based organization (Hameed n.d). The Housing Officer then informed the community about the housing plan and requested a meeting. The meeting informed the community about submitting a housing proposal and requested them to appoint a representative body to oversee the community planning and construction; this included members of minority groups, political groups and a significant number of women (Hameed n.d). The communities then elected their CDC to oversee the building and loans processes.

The metropolitan area which included the Colombo and Dehiwala MCs and UCs had a combined population of approximately one million (DPU n.d). In this area, individual loans would be managed by the Colombo district manager. A special Urban Housing unit existed to work specifically with slum upgrading projects, run from the NHDA's head office under the DGM for urban housing (DPU n.d). The role of the HO in the urban programme was very similar to that of the RHSP. The Urban Housing Unit for the slum upgrading projects was made up of programme officers who were a part of the former slum and shanty division of the NHDA and therefore had considerable experience in upgrading projects (DPU n.d). The teams working on Colombo operated through a network of Community Development Committees (CDCs) (DPU n.d).

Programme and Housing Officers interviewed applicants, gave advice on design and construction, and then made loan recommendations based on an assessment of ability to pay (DPU n.d). The individual householder was responsible for obtaining building materials. Also, similar to the RHSP, the HOs supervised the construction, in addition to organising and designating plot boundaries. A Community Development Officer (CDO) supported each project. Some of them were trained health visitors employed under the Medical Officer of Health during the implementation of the UNICEF programme (DPU n.d).

In addition to upgrading projects in vacant land areas, special sites and service schemes were organized such as the Navagamgoda project on Baseline Road, Colombo (DPU n.d). Layouts were designed by architects and engineers on plot sizes of about two perches (DPU n.d). The CDCs would operate in the same way that they did in the upgrading projects. Further, within the two perches, the chosen families were free to design their house unit. For most of the units, communal latrine and bathing facilities were built (DPU n.d).

Navagamgoda and Aramaya Place

The Navagamgoda and Aramaya Place experiences illustrate that the experiences of the various projects of RHSP differed based on the socio-economic differences even within the working-class settlements (Fernando et. Al. 1987). Under the RHSP the Navagamgoda project came under 'Sites and Services' involving 425 families, and Aramaya Place was an 'Upgrading Project' working with sixty-four families (Fernando et. Al. 1987). A comparative case study of Navagamgoda and Aramaya Place describes how LKR 15,000 were given uniformly to house builders, regardless of socio-economic strata, which caused a disparity in loan repayment (Fernando et. al. 1987). For lower income families in Navagamgoda the repayment was a strain and had an impact on the quality of their construction. The result was unfinished houses, with no extra money spent on home improvement unlike those families who had higher incomes at Aramaya Place (Fernando et. a. 1987). Moreover, because the NHDA followed an incremental housing strategy and strict building standards were not imposed, poorer families built sub-standard houses, which has not stood the test of time. The NHDA also did not force their technical advice on families. In Navagamgoda, there is evidence of families accepting and rejecting the advice given. In general, the experiences of building in Navagamgoda and Aramaya Place differed due to what may seem like minor, but were in reality significant differences in socioeconomic status. The somewhat higher income families at Aramaya Place were able to use their contacts and capital to get quality building material and labour, while the lower income families at Navagamgoda were sometimes cheated by masons and contractors and could not access to high quality building materials (Fernando et. al. 1987).

Conclusion

The meteoric rise of the Million Houses Programme from 1983 onwards began to slow down and fizzle out by the last years of the 1980s due to the extreme political volatility that characterised Sri Lanka's history of the time. By 1986–1987 Sri Lanka was in the grips of a bloody civil war fought between the Government of Sri Lanka and Tamil separatists of the North and East demanding political autonomy. Prime Minister Premadasa became the central figure opposing India's involvement in Sri Lanka's domestic politics. Long standing grievances of rural youth from the South gave rise to an armed militant group—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)— that wanted to overthrow the government. The signing of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in mid-1987 precipitated an insurrection from the South led by the JVP that debilitated the state. When he took over as President in 1989, Premadasa was facing armed conflict at two ends: the 'ethnic conflict' in the North and East, and the JVP-led insurrection of Sinhalese youth from the South. Although Premadasa had promised 1.5 million houses on his Presidential election platform, the MHP's last years are unrecorded. The subsequent literature that evaluated the programme insist the goals were met, but whether a million houses were built is a matter of conjecture. The one point five million houses never really took off the way the MHP did, and fizzled out following Premadasa's untimely death in 1993.

The MHP as an example of a Sandwich Strategy?

MHP is a strong example from Sri Lanka of how decision-making shifted away, albeit not completely, from the state and became more inclusive of people's ideas and aspirations. In the post-colonial period, the Sri Lankan state increasingly consolidated power at the central administrative and political apparatus, and the process of MHP marks a humble, yet notable departure from this orientation. It is also noteworthy that this departure came at a particular political moment in the global arena when the value of the 'big state' was problematized (*vis-à-vis* policies such as the Washington Consensus), and limited state intervention as a policy was gaining popularity in the developed and developing world.

The CDCs and the *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were essential pillars of the decentralized model, as these community-level organisations served as interlocutors to state agencies on what people wanted and how they wanted to build their houses. Of the two institutions, the Gramodaya Mandalayas had a broader mandate of 'development' in rural areas that extended beyond housing. They also fell directly under the Ministry of Local Government, an important cabinet ministry with a broad mandate to develop and strengthen smaller units of governance. Given the political nature of the Gramodaya Mandalayas, the direct link to, and the influence of the subject minister made it possible for GMs to take on various development projects that ranged from small irrigation projects to education. The role of the CDCs seemed to have been limited to housing and sanitation, which were also the initial reasons why they were established or formalised during the UBSIP programme. From the inception, they too came under the purview of the Colombo Municipality Council and the Public Health Department.

While both GMs and CDCs represented community voices, it does not mean that the state or politics was absent in either of these organisations. The character of organisations and their politics are often shaped by the people in them and their political affiliations and loyalties. Gramodaya Mandalayas were political bodies by design, as they stemmed from District Development Councils (DDCs) that have a direct link to the government. The composition of GM members, the influence of the Minister in Charge in nominating its members, and political interference in its decisions blurs the clear distinction between the state and citizens. It is difficult to ascertain (based on this case study) whether a GM member loyal to a particular political party would advocate for projects that represented the interests of his or her community, the political party, or that of a particular politician to whom he or she was loyal. In contrast, the CDCs in urban areas did not have such deep-rooted ties to the state. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the members that became CDC members were long-term loyalists of certain political parties and/or politicians. Here too, it is difficult to contend whether (or how many of) and to what degree the 212 CDCs or Gramodaya Mandalayas that were set up to represent the community actually did so. In any case, investigating the extent to which 'people's voices' were represented in the process of MHP or delineating the community from the state in the programme is beyond the scope of this case study. While GMs and CDCs played an important role in mobilizing the grassroots for housing and other activities, they waxed and waned over time, depending on the priority they received at the national level, particularly as Sri Lanka, at the time, was in the throes of a civil war. Gramodaya Mandalayas, which derived from the traditional village council system of Sri Lanka, were disbanded in 1987. These institutions were replaced by *Pradeshiya Sabhas*, which are highly politicized institutions led by elected officials and with greater powers. The CDCs still remain under the CMC and the Public Health Department. Their role, however, is currently diluted for two related reasons. One, there is little room for CDCs within the processes of the Urban Development Authority, a hierarchical institution with formidable power and clout, and driving all matters related to urban development. Two, over time, state officials who remember the role played by the CDCs (in the UDA or other government institutions related to housing, health and public works) have either retired or are deceased. For similar reasons, the membership of CDCs and its office bearers have also changed over time. According to Liyanage (2020), during the illustrious years of MHP when the state and CDCs worked well together, the CDC leaders had gone through comprehensive training programmes that engrained in them the role they ought to play in representing the community and working with government officials. But as MHP fizzled out, such trainings were no longer a priority. In her observation, the CDCs that are functioning relatively better at present are those that previously had well-trained and passionate community leaders who invested in a second line of leadership. In any case, there is no evidence that the CDCs constituted a political movement even during the MHP, or transformed into a grassroots movement that went on to demand other rights from the state. When they functioned, they continued to work with the state and their political representatives in the same way they always had.

While MHP would serve as an example of a 'sandwich strategy' where the state met the people half way, and there was significant involvement of the communities in the process of housing, it should not be considered an 'intervention' in a classic sense. The mobilization of communities to make their voices heard to the hierarchical state was not 'created' or 'implemented' as part of a project. Rather, they were existing, organic social networks that were galvanized for the purpose of housing (and politics). As discussed in various sections of this case study, timing was everything. A critical moment of political change in Sri Lanka in 1977 correlated with global discourses and praxis of neoliberal economic reforms, decentralization of governance and people-driven housing. The charismatic

leadership of Prime Minister Premadasa was another key ingredient. The significance of housing to him based on his own experience in an urban under-served settlement in Colombo, coupled with his insatiable political ambition, pushed him to take on housing as his legacy-generating as a way of positioning himself as a national leader, both within the UNP and outside of it. A motley crew of bureaucrats led by Lankatilleke and Sirivardana emerged in the picture with ideas that were considered 'radical' by state institutions at the time. Together they made waves and inspired state officials to reorient themselves in working with people on housing. The CDCs and the GMs were also existing community networks that gained a new lease of life by MHP. It is difficult to contend that the alchemy of ideas, actors, politics, institutions and a sense of contingency (i.e. budget cuts for housing post neoliberal reforms) can be engineered, or whether MHP can be replicated in Sri Lanka or elsewhere in the world.

Successes and challenges—an overview

The MHP cannot be evaluated purely from an economic perspective. According to Sirivardana (2020) it was about improving people's quality of life (QoL). We would argue that it went beyond the conventional models of QoL and wellbeing, to encompass ideas about the 'good life' where people's sense of agency and self-worth were enhanced by recognising their capacity to take control of their lives and aspire for a different future than they had first envisaged. The MHP is known worldwide as an innovation that facilitated the 'people's process' of housing development. As we discussed earlier, there were several economic and political factors, such as a curtailed budget for housing in the context of neoliberal economic reforms and the civil war, which created conditions for the state to move towards the support-based model of housing, deviating from the previous provider-based model. The programme empowered poor families to make decisions about housing and build their homes through the provision of loans and technical advice. This process significantly limited the state's involvement in housing, and moved the responsibility to the households. In a sense, it shifted the burden of housing from the state to the citizen, but the latter was happy to take the burden as it enabled land and home-ownership, asset accumulation, and legal status (Redman, 2005).

The counting of project completions was done in terms of 'families benefited' as opposed to the conventional counting of units completed. A final count does not exist in any of the reports we have examined. This was because the Million Houses was not always the construction of a new housing unit, but was based on the needs of the families, i.e., upgrading a house, expanding, building a toilet, etc. (Sirivardana n.d.). The success of the programme is evidenced by the actual cost of houses built or improved on during the initial years of the MHP. When the NHDA calculated the 'real cost' of the houses built, they found that households had at least spent three to four times more than the loan on constructing their houses, both in terms of labour and materials (Sirivardana 2020). In fact, some of the houses built during the MHP exceeded what the state had spent per house during the HTHP, which was LKR 30,000. This proved that people wanted control over house building, and were far more motivated to build when the state supported rather than built their houses for them. Moreover, for the poor, in both urban and rural areas, owning a house was a "dream come true."

The participation of communities had brought down labour costs. The programme encouraged homeowners to use traditional materials and methods of construction, which helped to drastically reduce material costs as well. That said, the additional cost of construction was made up through personal savings of the beneficiaries. Moreover, because many were first-time house-builders,

mistakes were to be expected, despite guidance by the Housing Officers. A survey of a small number of houses found that a reasonable standard of construction had been achieved, but many houses had poor finishes which were often explained by families running out of money and postponing the final touches (DPU; NHDA). This was observed in the HTHP as well. That said, it was found that the MHP houses revealed a new wave of improvisation and experimentation with the use of both traditional and conventional methods. The state's role was limited to one of facilitation and coordination, which reduced the state's intrusion into private lives. The construction pace was faster as the owners themselves were motivated to complete their homes within their timelines. In general, the process seemed to have elevated the participation and the satisfaction of the communities.

The MHP exemplified community participation at a national level. As Hameed (n.d.) notes, community participation in housing or public works is not new to Sri Lanka, as it is common for families to pool resources and assist each other. MHP seemed to have harnessed this traditional practice and applied it on a national scale. MHP produced several best practices in the area of community participation, such as Community Action Planning and Community Contracting. Communities that were mobilized through CDCs and Gramodaya Mandalayas got an opportunity to make decisions about their homes and exercise their creativity and strength. The process would have inculcated a sense of dignity and pride in segments of people that were previously dispossessed and downtrodden.

Foreign aid was a primary source of funding for the housing loans. Because the funding agencies did not fully understand the ground-level realities of the MHP, especially its financial schedule and the momentum needed for the successful delivery of services to the community, there were sometimes delays in the disbursement of funds (Redman 2005). The funding bodies were also suspicious of Sri Lankan government agencies. As Sirivardana (1988) notes, the donors firmly controlled funding due to the fear of corruption in local agencies and beneficiaries (Sirivardana and Lankatilleke 1987, 29). Sirivardana (2020) reflected that despite the MHP not stipulating any conditions on how the funds were spent by the households, he did not even for a moment suspect that people would cheat the government by using the loans to spend for things other than housing. Sirivardana's belief in and commitment to the MHP and its processes is evidenced by his claim. However, both he and many others claimed that the final cost of the houses people built, which exceeded the loan, attested to this.

There is no doubt that the MHP succeeded in mobilizing communities at the level of the grassroots. The literature indicates that both urban and rural communities 'bought in' to the state's objective of improving shelter and ensuring a home for every citizen and worked together to realize the vision. However, like the MHP programme itself, the community-level organisations it strengthened and formed during the implementation process seemed to have gradually fizzled out. This was clearly evident during the evictions of urban low-income communities in 2013–14 under the Rajapakse regime's 'Urban Regeneration Programme' that aimed to transform Colombo into a 'world-class city.' The CDCs did not play a prominent role in protesting the evictions. Nor did they come forward to prove their legitimacy as communities that had been issued 'ownership cards.' In fact, the dominant narrative of the time was still about 'illegality,' and many communities only wanted time to move out to the state-built high-risers; they did not challenge the evictions (Maqsood et al, 2019). With the death of Premadasa in 1993 and a change in government in 1994, the polity of the 1980s seemed to have dramatically changed.

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Notes

- 1 One perch = 50 Sq. Metres or 544 Square Feet
- 2 We have obtained the permission to use the real names of the following key persons:
 - Dr. Susil Sirivardana. General Manager, National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) during MHP (6th Feb 2020)
 - Lalith Lankatilleke. Senior Advisor, NHDA during MHP (18 Feb 2020)
 - I. A. Hamid. First Premadasa Scholar to Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, and officer of the Urban Development Authority (UDA) (27 Feb 2020)
 - Mr. Kodagoda. General Treasurer, Community Development Committee (CDC) and community leader in one of Colombo's low-income neighbourhoods developed under the MHP (28 Feb 2020)
 - Prof. Nihal Perera. Urban planner and administrator during MHP (17 Jan 2020)
 - Nirmani Liyanage. Researcher and activist (urban development) (Jan 2020)
- 3 One perch = 50 Sq. Metres or 544 Square Feet
- 4 USD 1 = LKR 19
- 5 This figure was taken from a speech made by Premadasa in 1981. The GDP figure for SL in 1982 was USD 4.76 billion. It is not possible that the government spent 76% of its GDP on housing. Also, this figure may have been for several years and not just 1982. The authors don't think it's necessary to calculate this as % of GDP because there are some unknowns.
- 6 USD 1 = LKR 26
- 7 He often used the term to refer to his supporters, but was perhaps an oblique reference to people from his socio-economic class
- 8 These were: the State Plantation Corporation (SPC) and the Janatha Estates Development Board; the Mahaweli Authority; the Land commissioner; and the Housing Finance Institutions and Regulations Authorities (Russel and Vidler, 2000).
- 9 This description is based on a diagram printed in Redman (2005), p.40.
- 10 This description is based on a diagram printed in Redman (2005), p.41.
- 11 During the civil war and prior to it, R. Premadasa was known to deploy his own vigilante groups 'to take care of things' when legal means were ineffective. During the 1980s, there were several paramilitary groups such as Kola Koti (Green Tigers), *Kalu balallu* (Black Cats), and *Kola Balallu* (Green Cats) that were known to carry out orders of Premadasa and a few other political leaders of the UNP government (Seneviratne, 2019).
- 12 Based on ten archived radio clips from 1983–1986 at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, 1983–1986).
- 13 This description is based on a diagram printed in Redman (2005, p. 62).

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