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REORGANIZATION OF THE URBAN SYSTEM IN SRI LANKA

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The Urban System in Sri Lanka is dominated by a vast functional urban region (fur) known as the Colombo Metropolitan Area (CMA). Despite numerous development activities undertaken by successive Governments since achieving Independence in 1948, there has not been a significant impact on the demographic and functional primacy of Colombo. This paper focuses attention on the factors responsible for the evolution of the urban system and discusses recent efforts of the Government to reorganize it.

1. The Evolution of the Urban System

1.1 The Pre - Colonial Era (prior to 1505)

Urban centres in Sri Lanka pre-date colonial rule. During the pre-colonial era, the relative importance of urban centres in Sri Lanka changed from time to time. Hence no city (with the exception of Anuradhapura) could dominate the urban system for long periods. Evidence from historical sources reveals that only Anuradhapura - the first capital and planned city of the Sinhala kingdom, remained as the chief city in the urban system for several centuries. It was established in the dry zone¹ in the 4th century B.C. Other urban centres at the time included regional capitals, sea ports and trading centres.

In the 11th century the kings were forced to transfer the administrative and religious capital to Polonnaruwa and later to other localities in the dry zone due to recurrent South Indian invasions. By the 13th century a combination of factors which included the destruction of reservoirs and the disruption of economic activities by invading armies had affected this hydraulic civilization in the dry zone to such an extent that there was a drift of the population to the more humid south western quadrant known as the wet zone. The administrative capital was shifted to new locations in the south west. Hence by the end of the 14th century the dry zone was depopulated and its former capital cities declined in importance. As a result of this distribution significant proportion of the population came to be concentrated in the wet zone.

1.2 The Colonial Period (1505 - 1948)

At the time the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505, the capital of the Sinhala kingdom - Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte, was located in the south western lowlands. The Portuguese selected a small port called Colombo which was situated

a few miles to the west of the capital city, to set up a naval base and a fortress. The Dutch who defeated the Portuguese after 1 1/2 centuries and captured the maritime districts preferred to keep Colombo as the chief port and administrative centre. In addition to the towns already in existence, a new city called Kandy had emerged at this time in the wet zone hill country. It grew rapidly as the capital of the Kandyan (Sinhala) Kingdom due to royal patronage.

After the British conquered the whole country in the early decades of the 19th century, they retained Colombo as the capital and chief port. There was a relative decline in the importance of the two capital cities of the Sinhala Kingdom viz. Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte (which became a suburb of Colombo in the 20th century) and Kandy which had flourished during the Portuguese and Dutch periods. Colombo was the locus of the new transport network. When the Suez canal was constructed in 1867, Colombo became a vital link in international trade routes. In order to compete successfully with other ports in the Indian Ocean, breakwaters were built in Colombo to create a deeper and a safer artificial harbour. As Colombo was the Administrative Capital and chief port of the colony, all the higher order commercial, health, educational, cultural and other functions were concentrated in Colombo which attracted a large number of foreign and local migrants.

In order to maintain an integrated and an authoritative administrative structure, the British also established provincial and district capitals at strategic locations. Thus, former capitals and other important urban centres such as Anuradhapura, Kandy, Jaffna, Trincomalee and Galle acquired new administrative functions and were linked by road and rail to Colombo. Further, the introduction of plantation agriculture to the South Western quadrant in the 19th century provided a stimulus to the growth of small towns at road and rail intersections as collecting and distributing centres while the hill country towns gained an additional importance as advantage as holiday resorts due to the salubrious climate.

Thus the foundation for the colonial urban system was laid down in the 19th century, with the externally oriented port and multi functional capital city ranking first in the urban system. However in 1871, Colombo had not yet become a Primate city since the Index of Primacy (measured by the 2 city Index) shows that Colombo was only 1.9 times larger than the second city (Galle). By 1881, the degree of Primacy had risen to 2.7 after which it increased rapidly to 6.3 in 1931 (Table 1).

2. The Urban System in the Post - Independence Period (1948 - 1981)

2.1 Rank Size Shifts in the Urban System

Between the census years of 1946 and 1981, the number of towns in Sri Lanka rose from 42 to 134 and its urban population increased from 1,00,000 to 3,195,000. As revealed in Table 2, the number of cities (>100,000) increased from 1 to 6 during the same period. An interesting characteristic is the proliferation of small towns

Table 1 Primacy of Colombo

Indices	1901	1921	1931	1946	1953	1963	1971	1981	
								Colombo	CMA
2 City Index (Ja=P1/P2)	4.0	5.8	6.3	5.9	5.5	4.6	3.6	3.3	23.8
Second City	Galle	Jaffna			Dehiwela Mt. Lavinia			Jaffna	
4 City Index (Jb=P1/P2+P3+P4)	1.43	2.1	2.3	2.1	1.9	1.8	1.5	1.3	9.3

(>20,000) from 30 in 1953 to 102 in 1971 due to the elevation of Town Councils to urban status². The distribution pattern illustrated in Figure 1a, shows that the majority of small towns are widely distributed in the dry zone while the medium (intermediate) size towns and cities are concentrated in the wet zone.

Significant shifts in the ranks have occurred in the urban system in the post - Independence era as indicated in Figure 2. Colombo retained its supremacy but regional capitals located at important transport nodes that had enjoyed high ranking positions as administrative and commercial centres have been superseded by rapidly growing suburbs of Colombo. Figure 1b shows that many cities and medium sized towns had either been stagnating or growing slowly during the last intercensal decade of 1971 - 1981 either due to saturation within town limits or to lack of dynamism.

2.2 Suburbanization and the Creation of the CMA

One major factor which caused shifts to occur among the higher levels of the urban system is the emergence of suburbs around Colombo. By 1948, the primacy of Colombo had been firmly consolidated due to its pivotal position in national and international trade as well as the initial creation of the administrative hierarchy with power concentrated in Colombo and the centralization of higher order functions.

Even 40 years after Independence, Colombo continued to maintain its demographic and functional supremacy not as a single city but as a vast functional region called the Colombo Metropolitan Area (CMA).

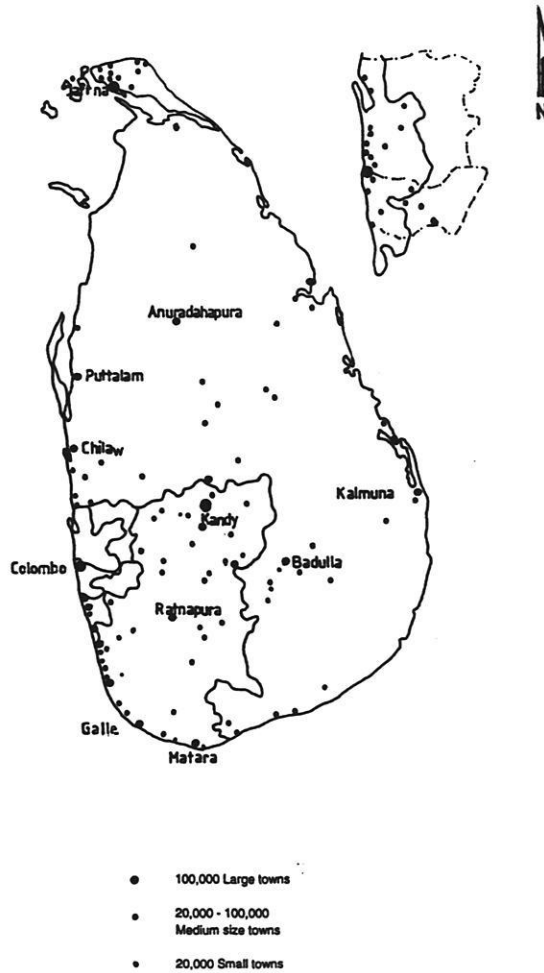
The CMA comprises the central city (Colombo), old suburbs (in the inner crescent), new suburbs (in the outer crescent) and the rural area including non-suburban towns (Figure 3). During the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, Colombo grew by annexation and in - migration. Later, its horizontal expansion was curbed by local Authorities administering the adjoining suburbs and in-migration was reduced when city-bound migrants were enticed to suburbs by relatively low rentals and low land values. The older or the inner crescent had been formed by 1948 and

Table 2 Urban Population According to Size of Towns (1946-1981)

	SMALL TOWNS					INTERMEDIATE SIZE		CITIES	TOTAL
	< 2000	2000 to 4999	5000 to 9999	10,000 to 19,999	20,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 99,999	≥ 100,000		
1946	3	9	7	13	5	4	1	42	
Population	3601	28386	55874	174598	177123	221388	362074	1023044	
Percentage of total urban	0.4	2.8	5.5	17.1	17.3	21.6	35.4	100.0	
1953	3	8	4	15	6	6	1	43	
Population	4062	28338	29691	213150	154727	383038	426127	1239133	
Percentage of total urban	0.3	2.3	2.4	17.2	12.5	30.9	34.4	100.0	
1963	9	21	23	21	18	5	2	99	
Population	15342	74681	158280	278153	487986	379265	622578	2016285	
Percentage of total urban	0.8	3.7	7.9	13.8	24.2	18.8	30.9	100.0	
1971	6	32	30	34	25	5	3	135	
Population	10819	104095	215848	499561	781874	411311	823798	2848116	
Percentage of total urban	0.4	3.7	7.6	17.5	27.5	14.4	28.9	100.0	
1981	3	28	28	35	31	3	6	134	
Population	5173	90518	199189	511138	976957	195094	1216830	3194899	
Percentage of total urban	0.2	2.8	6.3	16.0	30.5	6.1	38.1	100.0	

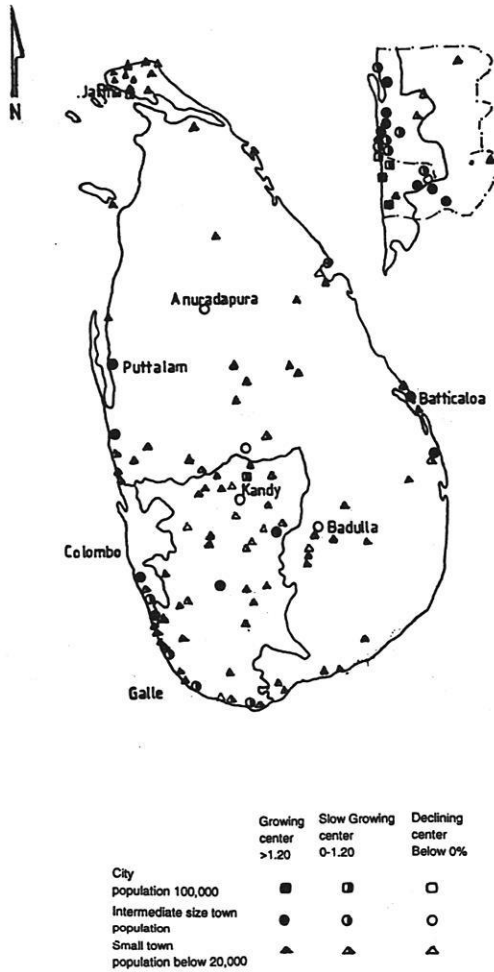
Source Dept. of Census and Statistics, Colombo

Figure 1a Distribution of Towns (1981)



the outer crescent appeared by 1971 as shown in Figure 3 as well as former regional capitals in the periphery (WANASINGHE 1985). These 2 suburban crescents have appropriated a significant proportion of CMA's population growth. Between 1963 - 1971, while Colombo grew at the rate of 9.9 percent, the majority of suburbs in the inner crescent gained between 20 - 39 percent. During the 1971 - 1981 intercensal period, the growth rates of suburbs in the outer crescent surpassed those of Colombo and the inner crescent (WANASINGHE 1985). This rapid growth is attributed to residential growth as well as to spontaneous suburbanization of commerce, industries and offices and the planned suburbanization of administrative activities

Figure 1b Trends in Population Growth (1971-1981)

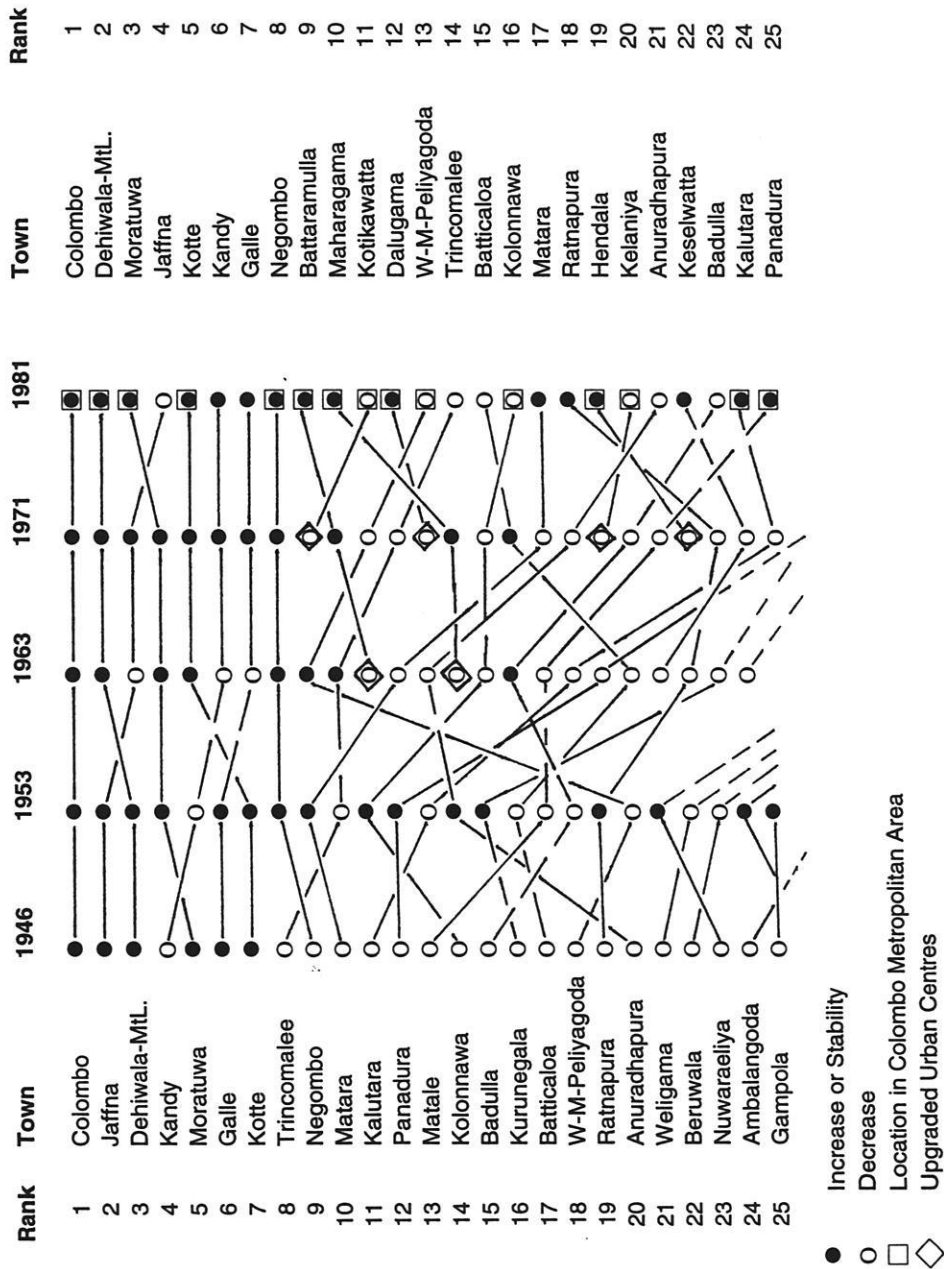


after the establishment of Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte in a suburb, as the administrative capital of the country.

2.3 The Opening up of the Dry Zone

Another factor which contributed to rank size shifts at the lower level of the hierarchy is the stimulus received from State aided colonization schemes in the dry zone during the 20th century. The dry zone which was the most developed and densely populated area before the 13th century had been neglected for 7 centuries. In 1946, it contained only 33.7 percent of the total population although it covered 75

Figure 2 Rank of Major Urban Centres in Sri Lanka (1946-1981)



percent of the land area. The opening up of the dry zone for colonization by the provision of water, land and infrastructure facilities and the eradication of malaria attracted migrants from the densely populated wet zone. Population in Vavuniya and Anuradhapura - Polonnaruwa districts in the dry zone increased by 644 percent and 509 percent respectively during post-war years (1946-1981) in contrast to 174 percent in the Colombo district. As a result, instead of a single in-migration stream to the Colombo District (a part of the CMA) which occurred before Independence, 2 migration streams have appeared in recent years - one directed towards the CMA and the other towards the dry zone (WANASINGHE 1992).

The environment created by population growth and agricultural development in the dry zone provided the necessary stimulus to the expansion of existing urban centres and the emergence of incipient service centres, some of which were upgraded to urban status after 1963. Their impact on urban growth is also reflected in the relatively high average annual growth rate (aagr) of 11.1 percent experienced by urban population in dry zone districts as opposed to 5.2 percent in the wet zone districts during the 1953 - 1963 intercensal decade. The corresponding figures for the 1963 - 1971 period were 6.0 and 4.9 percent respectively. During the last intercensal decade of 1971 - 1981, when the aagr of urban population in the country declined to 1.2 percent, small towns located in or near Colonization Schemes such as Ambalantota, Hingurakgoda, Tissamaharama and Moneragala had aagrs ranging between 3.5 and 4.7 percent (WANASINGHE 1986, 1987).

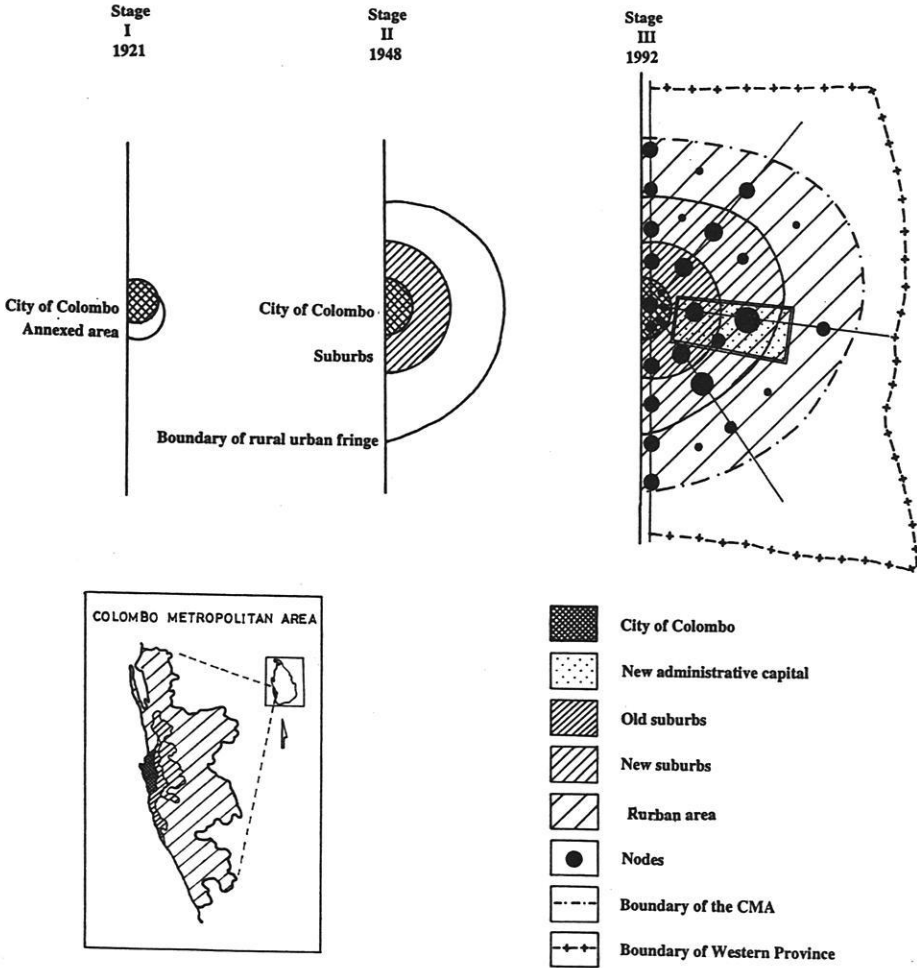
3. The Impact of Recent Policies on the Urban System

3.1 Trends in Economic Growth in the Post-Censal Period (1981 onwards) and the Strengthening of the CMA

Population estimates after 1981 indicate that the aagr of urban population has increased from 1.2 to 1.58 percent between 1985 - 1990 while that of rural population declined from 1.79 to 1.26 percent. Projections for the 1990 - 1995 period reveal that while the aagr of urban population was expected to rise to 2.19 percent, that of rural population was projected to drop to 1.0 percent. Thus, if the Urban Rural Growth Difference (URGD) is used as a measure of the tempo of urbanization, it can be concluded that the tempo which was slow in the past had accelerated after 1985.

This impetus to urban growth was provided by developments in the economy of Sri Lanka. Two of the lead projects launched by the Government in 1977 had an urban bias viz. a) the Urban Development and Housing Programme and the establishment of the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and b) the Greater Colombo Economic Commission (GCEC). The UDA promoted large scale investment of public and private sector funds in urban areas and introduced liberal financial incentives which encouraged individuals and companies to invest in approved property development to cater to the rapidly increasing demand for commercial, industrial and residential

Figure 3 Evolution of the Colombo Metropolitan Area in the 20th Century



land especially in the CMA. The Greater Colombo Economic Commission established 2 Free Trade Zones in its area of authority in the Northern part of the CMA resulting in the rapid increase of foreign and local investment as well as number of factories and industrial employees in the CMA.

The period after 1981 is therefore characterized by a rapid growth in real estate, building construction, money broking, banking and insurance; retail and wholesale trade; industries; transport and communications. Most of the activities are concentrated in the CMA which increased the immigration rate (both permanent and temporary) thus reinforcing and strengthening the supremacy of the CMA. Consequently the population of the CMA which stood at 2,763,000 in 1981 was estimated to increase to 3,340,000 by 1992 and projected to rise to 3,753,000 by 2001.

3.2 Economic Growth and Towns in the Periphery

During the last intercensal decade (1971-1981) towns in the periphery had not succeeded in attracting investment or people but economic growth after 1981 resulted in towns such as Kurunegala, Ratnapura and Bandarawela growing at rates ranging between 1.7 to 3.7 per annum according to estimates provided by Urban Local Authorities' as shown in Table 3. However, in common with Galle other "underbounded" towns in the country continued to stagnate due to saturation in congested high density wards near the CBD under utilization of less developed and unserved wards and residential growth in the more accessible settlements outside the city limits. Hence in contrast to the aagr of 0.8 percent in Galle, its incipient suburbs grew at rates as high as 4 percent between 1971 - 1981. Unless these areas are incorporated into the "underbound" towns, their rank position in the urban system will fall down even further.

3.3 Devolution of Power

The 13th Amendment to the Constitution introduced in November 1987 devolved key functions to Provincial and Local Councils. One major goal of devolution is the promotion of regional development in order to reduce disparities between the core (CMA) and the periphery. The Southern Provincial Council has recently formulated a regional development plan which would contribute considerably to town growth in its region.

3.4 The New Urban Strategy

In order to facilitate devolution and to strengthen urban institutions, improve resource mobilization, maximize access to urban services, facilitate investment by the private sector and address environmental problems in peripheral towns the UDA

Table 3

Growth of Population Selected towns in the periphery

Name of Town and Local Authority	Population		AAGR 1971-1981 (%)	Estimated Population 1991	AAGR 1981-1991 (%)	Population Projections	
	1971	1981				2000	2010
1. Galle (MC and PC/DC)	71,266	76,863	0.8	82,000	0.6	87,900	96,000
2. Anuradhapura (UC and PC/DC)	34,734	35,981	0.4	57,700	4.8	65,000	74,300
3. Ratnapura (MC and PC/DC)	31,614	37,354	1.7	47,700	2.5	55,600	65,900
4. Kurunegala (MC and PC/DC)	24,352	26,198	0.7	30,900	1.7	36,000	42,700
5. Nuwara Eliya (MC and DC)	17,288	20,471	1.7	25,300	2.1	30,600	37,800
6. Bandarawela (UC)	4,410	4,914	1.1	7,000	3.6	9,100	12,000

Source : Urban Settlement Profiles, Urban Development Sector Project for medium and Small Urban Centres, final Report II, GOSL, MPPI, UDA, ADB August 1992.
MC : Municipal Council UC - Urban Council
PC : Provincial Capital, DC - District Capital
AAGR : Average Annual Growth Rate

is implementing a new urban strategy with ADB funding (WANASINGHE 1987). Sixteen small and medium sized towns in the periphery with the potential for development, (out of which 11 are District and Provincial capitals) have been selected for development. The towns are predominantly service centres but they lack suitable serviced sites, a regular water supply, good roads a communication system and 3 phase electricity to attract industries. The new Urban Strategy encourages investment in these towns by providing the necessary infrastructure facilities for industrial growth and it is expected that population growth rates will increase rapidly.

3.5 Conclusion

The above analysis shows that due to the actions of successive Governments since Independence substantial changes in the urban system during the past 46 years have occurred. Due to primacy and suburbanization towns within the CMA have risen to higher ranks within a short period, thus pushing the former regional capitals to lower ranks. In future, the devolution of power and launching of the new Urban Strategy will undoubtedly contribute to the reorganization of the urban system³.

NOTES

1. The dry zone is an agro-climatic zone characterized by seasonal and low rainfall. It covers approximately 75% of the land area. See Figure 1.
2. All agglomerations administrated by Municipal, Urban and Town Councils were classified as urban at the census of 1981.
3. I wish to thank Mr. G.F. de Alwis, Senior Staff Technical Officer, University of Sri Jayewardenepura for the neat and accurate maps.

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