

# IMPACT

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## ‘Urban Harvest’: Rethink, reconstruct and regenerate the future of Colombo

BY ANURADHA KODAGODA

We as a country are experiencing a multi-layered crisis like never before; amalgamated by food insecurity, threatened livelihoods, shortage of essential medical items and rising protection concerns.

The significant reduction in agricultural production last year, compounded by the rising prices of fuel and basic food items, have made food unaffordable for a segment of the population. Research conducted by the United Nations has found that there is a possibility of a severe food shortage in the country in the latter part of the year and the Government has also acknowledged the same.

### Urban Harvest

Taking proactive measures to convert the crisis into an opportunity, the Mayor of Colombo, Rosy Senanayake in collaboration with Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) and the ONE team launched the ‘Urban Harvest’ project recently where they hope to cultivate 600 acres of land in the city to grow essential food crops that can be harvested quickly.

“The CMC is taking the very first step together with the ONE team to help the residents of Colombo by implementing a comprehensive strategy to address the food shortage,” Mayor Rosy Senanayake told guests at the launch of the program.

“We are working hand-in-hand with the city dwellers and helping them to overcome this challenge successfully. Our initial plan is to use the areas on either side of the lawn of CMC for urban agriculture purposes and we hope it will set an example for other departments and offices in Colombo to use their abandoned lands for urban cultivation,” she said.

Statistics show that residents of Colombo are at particular risk due to its dense population and the low-income status of approximately 60 percent of the population. Therefore, the Mayor stressed the importance of bringing the food crisis to the serious attention of every city dweller as vegetables, fruits and other food essentials that help to live a healthy life will

not be easily accessible and affordable to everyone in the near future.

“We strongly encourage residents in Colombo to cultivate essential food crops in their unused bare lands, home gardens, balconies and rooftops,” Mayor Senanayake said.

The ‘Urban Harvest’ website and social media platform is now open to the public and the aim of the website and social media platform is to educate, train and engage the public with the ‘Urban Harvest’ project.

### ONE Team

ONE Team is the collaborative effort of young professionals in various fields to implement sustainable solutions for the economic crisis in the country.

Member of ONE team and co-founder of Good Market, Achala Samaradiwakara said, “We are pleased to collaborate with the CMC and support the ‘Urban Harvest’ project, an original brainchild of Mayor Senanayake. There are several things that we hope to achieve through the project. One is to educate city dwellers about urban gardening and impart knowledge and facilities to start their own urban gardens in their own limited space.

“It is true that living in urban areas it’s hard to find space for gardening. But by using urban gardening techniques anybody can grow food even with the limited space available. We are training teams to share this knowledge among city dwellers and encourage them to grow within the limited space that they have, to overcome this crisis and this will also lead to a change of attitudes that will also benefit the country in the long run. This will give enable us to grow healthy, nutritious food and eliminate malnourishment,” she said.

Urban gardening is undoubtedly a promising approach to enhance household food security and well-being. By going through a rigorous data collection and mapping process in Colombo, ONE Team is ready to share its knowledge among city dwellers by implementing a door-to-door knowledge sharing facility through trained volunteer groups of



Rosy Senanayake



Achala Samaradiwakara



Visakha Tillekeratne

youth about the positive impact of home gardening to addressing food insecurity and malnutrition as well as providing additional benefits such as income and livelihood opportunities for resource-poor families and a number of ecosystem services.

A group of retired agriculture officers are working with ONE Team and do the training for the volunteer technical group. The ‘Urban Harvest’ information desk that has setup at the Public Library is exclusively for Colombo city dwellers that provides information regarding urban gardening.

“In the second phase of the ‘Urban Harvest’ project we hope to supply seeds and equipment through the technical teams and there will be a continuous process of monitoring and advising until city dwellers become thorough in the subject,” Samaradiwakara added.

### Food dehydration

Efforts are being made through the ‘Urban Harvest’ to prevent the waste of vegetables and fruits associated with weekly fairs in Colombo. The project also aims to impart knowledge on food dehydration which will also help to create new employment opportunities in the long run.

“According to research statistics, huge food wastage is associated with

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urban weekly fairs. The Mayor raised this issue weeks ago and as a solution we hope to share food dehydration knowledge where the vegetables and fruit vendors can use dehydrated food for their domestic use without wasting it and sell the excess and make some additional income,” Samaradiwakara said.

ONE Team hopes to complete the first phase of ‘Urban Harvest’ activities within four months and expand to the next phase of the project.

“Our main mission is to introduce a sustainable model for city dwellers by securing their right to nutritious food while maintaining the cleanliness and elegance of the city. We also hope to strengthen the data system with more research and empirical data to understand the importance of the role of urban gardens in a crisis and post-crisis situations, and assessing their economic value and impact on food security, nutrition and economic growth,” Samaradiwakara said.

diwakara said.

The 1920 hotline is a demand driven agricultural extension approach that operates from 8 am to 4.15 pm everyday including weekends and public holidays. Anyone who has queries about the ‘Urban Harvest’ project or anything related to urban gardening can call the number.

### Soup kitchen

Community Kitchen is a concept that became popular in Colombo and the suburbs over the past few weeks where people got together and prepared and shared healthy, affordable meals especially among low-income city dwellers who have been severely affected by the recession. The ‘Urban Harvest’ project in collaboration with the Colombo Municipal Council and Voice for Voiceless Foundation is ready to launch a Soup Kitchen with the involvement of volunteer groups in Colombo.

Visakha Tillekeratne said, “Through the ‘Soup Kitchen’ concept we encourage people to get involved with the process of preparing their own meal that will lead to develop unity among the community while eliminating the idea of depending on charity.”

The ‘Soup Kitchen’ will be launched in Colombo on July 1. Considering the large number of severely affected people due to the recession, the ‘Soup Kitchen’ will operate through a coupon system giving preference to pregnant mothers, children, disabled people and the elderly in low-income families.

“To source the vegetables for the ‘Soup Kitchen’ the team of Voice for Voiceless is hoping to collect good vegetables that are discarded from supermarkets and we are in a discussion with a few supermarkets to get their sponsorship for this endeavour.”

“We are also working to raise financial resources through crowdfunding without going behind big donor fundings. The Voice for Voiceless team is working with genuine transparency.”

“However, it is paramount to be vigilant not to drive this great cause towards a dependency syndrome. Therefore, we encourage the beneficiaries of this project to start cultivating their own food crops and creating livelihoods by linking them with the ‘Urban Harvest’ project.”

“Our intention is to make them self-sufficient within three to four months by converting the ‘Community Kitchen’ into a ‘Community Garden,’” Tillekeratne added.

It is somewhat a proven fact that household urban agriculture promotes individual wellbeing and restores a stable sense of oneself, while ameliorating economic hardship. Therefore, ‘Urban Harvest’ will be a reason to re-think, reconstruct and regenerate the livelihoods and lifestyles of city dwellers that have been severely affected by the economic downturn.

