

# A Success Story of a Community-managed Bus (Praja Bus) Service

*This article is the seventh in a series of articles by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) exploring various dimensions of poverty in Sri Lanka.*

The 'Community-managed Bus Service' or the 'Praja Bus' in Kosgala, Halpe and Kithulpe villages was initiated by Lanka Forum for Rural Transport Development (LFRTD) and initially financed by Intermediate Technology Development group (ITDG), now known as Practical Action. LFRTD recognises the differences in urban and rural transport needs and the low priority given to rural transport service. This is the result of the considerably lower income generated from rural routes in the interior areas and the severely dilapidated condition of the rural road network which often cannot support the operation of a bus service.

The *Praja Bus* serves 3 villages of Kosgala, Kithulpe and Halpe in Kithulpe Grama Niladhari (GN) division of the Kuruwita Divisional Secretariat division of Rathnapura district, and provides transport to about 4,534 people of 1,030 families (Kosgala – 240 households; Kithulpe – 390 households; and Halpe – 390 households). The communities are situated about 13km away from Rathnapura town and about 6km away from Kuruwita town. They travel to and from Rathnapura and Kuruwita towns for health, education, marketing and administrative requirements. The route that the *Praja Bus* takes is typical of the rural road network, yet the community has successfully managed the bus for the last ten years, showing that community-managed transport services could be a viable solution for rural routes that are considered non-viable by private sector transport service providers.

This article evaluates the success of the '*praja bus*' service in Kosgala, Halpe and Kithulpe villages based on data collected for the socio-economic evaluation of the community bus for LFRTD by a research team from the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in 2008. Primary data was collected through interviews with key informants of the project and the community, focus group discussions and household interviews. Secondary data was collected from past evaluation reports and reports of the social mobiliser at the implementation stage.

## The Initiative and its Impact

The service was started as a pilot initiative, designed around the concepts of community participation and self-management, and was based on recognition of the capacity of rural communities to design, implement and maintain a transport service of their own. The project was implemented by the Rural Transport Promoters Guarantee Company, a local community-based organisation set up for the purpose. At the time of the CEPA study, majority of

the villagers working in the formal sector, both state and private, were using the community bus for their daily transport needs. So were the children going to the village school. The children going to schools in Rathnapura were using the bus in the afternoons to come back home. Those visiting patients in the hospital were also using this bus quite regularly since the schedule of the bus was convenient. It was also used to transport agricultural produce, mainly rubber, from the village directly to the city, bypassing the middleman, which enabled the producer to get a higher price. The time saved both by taking one bus to the town and avoiding going to the nearest bus stand on foot has been invested on other economic activities by the villagers. The convenience, the reliability and the safety that the bus provided were also highly appreciated by the community.

The positive impact of the bus and the road on the Kosgala, Kithulpe and Halpe villages and those that live along the route where the bus service is provided was clearly evident from the discussions. The community had, at an early stage, taken an initiative to widen the road in order to make it easier for the bus to travel on the route, and this improvement has made it possible to provide a better of transport service for the villagers.

## Why it Worked?

The community seems to value the service provided by the bus beyond the economic or financial benefits that it brought them. The distinction between other public transport services and the community bus service was very obvious. '*Ape bus eka*' (our bus) attitude that the community has with regard to the project shows the high level community ownership felt by the members of the community. During a community-level focus group discussion, some villagers mentioned that the horn/sound of the bus in the morning gives them a sense of happiness and assured transportation for the day. The success of this community bus service as opposed to privately-owned bus is that they were able to balance both the quality of the service while sustaining its profitability. This was possible because the primary objective of this bus service was not to make profits, but to provide a service. The quality of the service was reflected by its punctuality, regularity and reliability and good attitudes and behaviours of both conductor and the driver. Passengers of the bus felt a journey was safe for all including women and schoolchildren.

*The driver and the conductor of the bus are very friendly and they are from the village. They know each and everyone in the village including the children going to the school. They take care of them during the travel time. We can send them alone to the tuition in our bus. We know for sure that the children won't be abused in this bus.*

*(Community Discussion in Halpe, 2008)*

**Gayathri Lokuge\***

*Centre for Poverty Analysis*

The community was informed when the bus service was not available. This community bus service was more punctual than the irregular service of the Sri Lanka Transport Board bus from Karapincha to Rathnapura, which was used by Kosgala community before the project. It was perceived by the community this bus service will be continued without any problem since the bus service is regular than any other bus service in Sri Lanka.

## Managing the Service

The community bus service was managed by the Rural Transport Promoters Guarantee Company which comprised of 7 company directors and 15 members. The company has successfully managed the bus service for the last 10 years. The old bus had been replaced two months ago with a new one financed by the sale of the old bus and through a lease. The profit made by the bus at present was sufficient to service the lease of the new bus and to cover running costs.

But, there have been instances in the past where the income from the bus has been insufficient for the up keep of the service, and the company directors have had to contribute finance from their personal funds. The financial difficulties were mainly attributed to the bad road conditions since a sizable amount from the income had to be spent on the repairs of the road and regular repairs of the bus caused due to the bad road conditions. The tarring of the road earlier this year had solved this problem and steadied the income flow now.

Based on the records kept by the company, and on discussions with the directors, the researchers calculated that, if one excluded the institutional expenses of running a company, the *Praja bus* will make an annual profit of a little less than two lakhs (Table 1).

While an annual income of nearly rupees two lakhs may be insufficient for a private company to be viable, this project is viable since it is a non-profit making, social service venture of the community itself.

## Difficulties Faced by the Company

Despite the continued provision of the service, the bus committee or the company directors feel that they are under a certain amount of strain in maintenance of the bus and the company. For the amount of money they receive, the effort and the time spent on maintaining the company has become an unwanted burden. They discussed the difficulties of the financial requirements of maintaining the

\* Researcher at Center for Poverty Analysis

company; the village/company directors lacked knowledge and skills of the legal functionalities of a company and the unnecessary rigidities of the company structure.

Even though the community chose this pilot project because they had the necessary leadership and the skills and knowledge to undertake a business venture, and have managed the project for a decade, the company directors feel that a different level of skills and knowledge is required for the maintenance of a company. The company president has brought in a minimum set of skills and experience as a state employee and social worker. At the beginning of the project, the directors were given a training on the maintenance of financial records. It is with this knowledge that the company has managed the project. Financial records are maintained at a minimum standard with income

and expenditure records are kept on daily basis, but no analyses have been done. Management decisions with regard to the bus service seemed to have been taken almost intuitively rather than based on an analysis of the available financial records.

The current committee members have a strong personal commitment to the project because of their involvement from its inception. This perceived personal responsibility has several implications. It is this sense of responsibility or the feeling that if the community bus project failed at some point, then it is their almost personal failure, that has mainly brought this project this far. The wealth of experience that they have accumulated over the years by managing the project has undoubtedly helped them overcome some of the difficult phases and make the project a success. But, it was evident from discussion with the directors that this has been a

strain, and a gap has been created between the committee and the community.

### What are the Lessons?

Despite initial speculations about the success of the community bus service, the communities of Kosgala, Halpe and Kithulpe have proved the viability of the service is beyond economic and managerial terms. The *praja bus* is something that is theirs, and they take pride in it, and it has become a part of their lives.

The positive impact of the service is undoubtedly felt by all the communities that it serves. It has ensured a service for the demand from the community even amidst pit falls. The skill and the determination of the community are also important in managing a project of this nature. The type of vehicle could be a converted truck or a smaller bus, depending on the existing demand, and the choice needs to be made by the community after a close examination of their existing resources and needs.

In the context of deteriorating rural transport service provision, and the need to link rural communities to markets and growth centres, the story of the '*praja bus*' needs to be shared more widely as a viable alternative, and the knowledge and invaluable experience of the company directors need to be conveyed as a source of inspiration to other communities that are facing the same challenges.

### Reference

Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA). 2008. *Economic, Social, and Environmental Evaluation of Community Bus Services, Sri Lanka, Draft Final Report, prepared for Lanka Forum for Rural Transport Development (LFRTD)*

**Table 1**  
**Income and expenditure of the company**

Costs	Expenses (in LKR)			Income (in LKR)
	Daily	monthly	annual	Annual
Driver	450			
Conductor	350			
Tea	100			
Time keeper	50			
Urban Council ticket	20			
Diesel	5,000			
Service		5,600		
Axle repairs (Rs 5150 every two months)	2,575			
Tube		1,500		
Ticket book		1,750		
Monthly instalment (finance)		56,465		
Insurance			40,000	
Permit			3,500	
Total	5,970	67,890	43,500	
Total annual expenses	2,077,560	814,680	43,500	
			2,935,740	3,132,000
Profit (Without company expenses)				196,260