

Small and Medium Towns in Sri Lanka:

A Situational Analysis and their Planning Significance

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There is an urgent need to formulate a national urban development policy which would include a component connected with the small and medium towns. Today these towns perform a key role in providing urban support in the predominantly rural regions and as suburbs in the predominantly urban regions. But since there is no explicit national urban growth strategy they lack spatial structuring which can enable them to secure more effective urban-rural complementarities, states Professor Willie Mendis, Head of the Town and Country Planning Department, University of Moratuwa in this paper. In a previous paper, published in the Economic Review of April 1982, he dealt with the "large" towns and a national urban growth strategy.

Background and Purpose of Paper

In Sri Lanka, one out of every five persons lives in urban areas. In the latter, only nine of its towns exceed 50,000 population in size, of which six have populations of over 100,000 persons. Of the latter too, only one exceeds half a million while the rest are well below 200,000 population in size. In such a context, the small and medium towns can be regarded as those with populations below 50,000 persons in each. Such towns in the Sri Lankan urban perspective have become significant as suburbs and also as "service centres" to the rural hinterland and as "market towns" for rural producers.

In the above circumstances, a study of their pattern of prevalence by location and structure, of their rates of growth, and an analysis of their relevance in development, all become useful areas for enhancing the fund of knowledge needed in planning of the Urban Sector in Sri Lanka. In particular, at this juncture when urban areas are being consciously promoted as contributors to economic growth, specific attention on the small and medium size towns will be most appropriate to achieve three objectives, as follows:

- (a) to determine the framework of a national urban development strategy which will incorporate them in a hierarchical manner that would simultaneously ensure complementarity with rural development.
- (b) to ascertain how they could act as foci of urban needs of rural people and as centres capable of accommodating the rural surplus of those persons electing to live in them.

- (c) to determine a suitable spatial structure of urban settlements which in turn will facilitate the securing of economic objectives through the rationalisation of the location of investments.

This Paper is hence an attempt to study and analyse the previously stated factors of small and medium towns with a view to formulating recommendations that would permit the realisation of the above mentioned three objectives.

Methodology of Study

This study has utilised the definition of "urban" as employed in the national census. Accordingly, only those towns designated as Municipal Councils, Urban Councils, and Town Councils have been considered. Further, for the reasons noted previously, this study has defined those urban areas below 50,000 population — size, as small and medium towns in the Sri Lanka context. In this connection, those towns below 10,000 population will be regarded as small towns and others between 10,000 and 50,000 population as medium size towns. (See Figure 1)

The format of the study has firstly included a classification of the small and medium towns by number and size. Their growth rates have next been discussed. Thereafter their locations and spatial structuring have been analysed. The conclusions and recommendations for development planning, arising out of the study, comprise its final section.

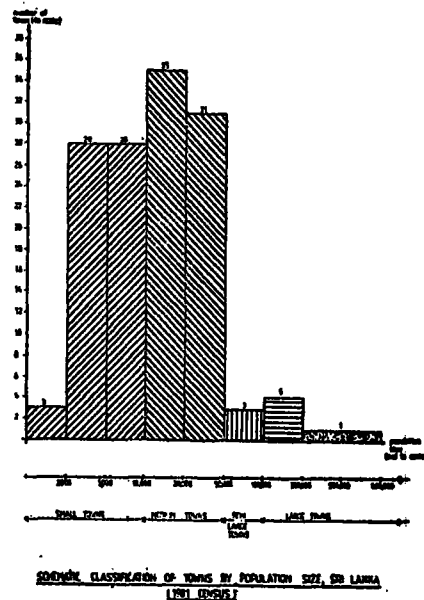


Figure 1

Classification of Small and Medium Towns by Number and Size

In the post-independence period (i.e. 1946-1981) the magnitude of the urban population living in small and medium towns has increased by 1.34 million or at an average of 384,000 persons per decade (See Table 1). Further in that same period, one out of every two urban persons in Sri Lanka has been living in small and medium towns. Presently (1981), 1.8 million persons live in such towns.

In addition, the number of small and medium towns in the post independence period have always been greater than 85% of all towns in the country. (See Table 2). Accordingly, they have performed, and continue

Table 1 POPULATION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS IN POST-INDEPENDENT SRI LANKA 1946-1981

Census Year	1946	1953	1963	1971	1981
Population in Small & Medium Towns	439,582	429,968	1,014,442	1,612,197	1,782,971
Share of Total Urban Population (%)	43	35	50	57	56
Share of Total Population (%)	7	5	10	13	12

Sources: *Urbanization in Sri Lanka*, Mendis (1981) p.3. *Statistical Abstract* (1979) p. 30/31 and *Census of Population* (1981) p. 3.

Note: Percentage figures have been rounded.

Table 2 SHARE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS IN TOTAL NUMBER OF TOWNS IN SRI LANKA 1946-1981

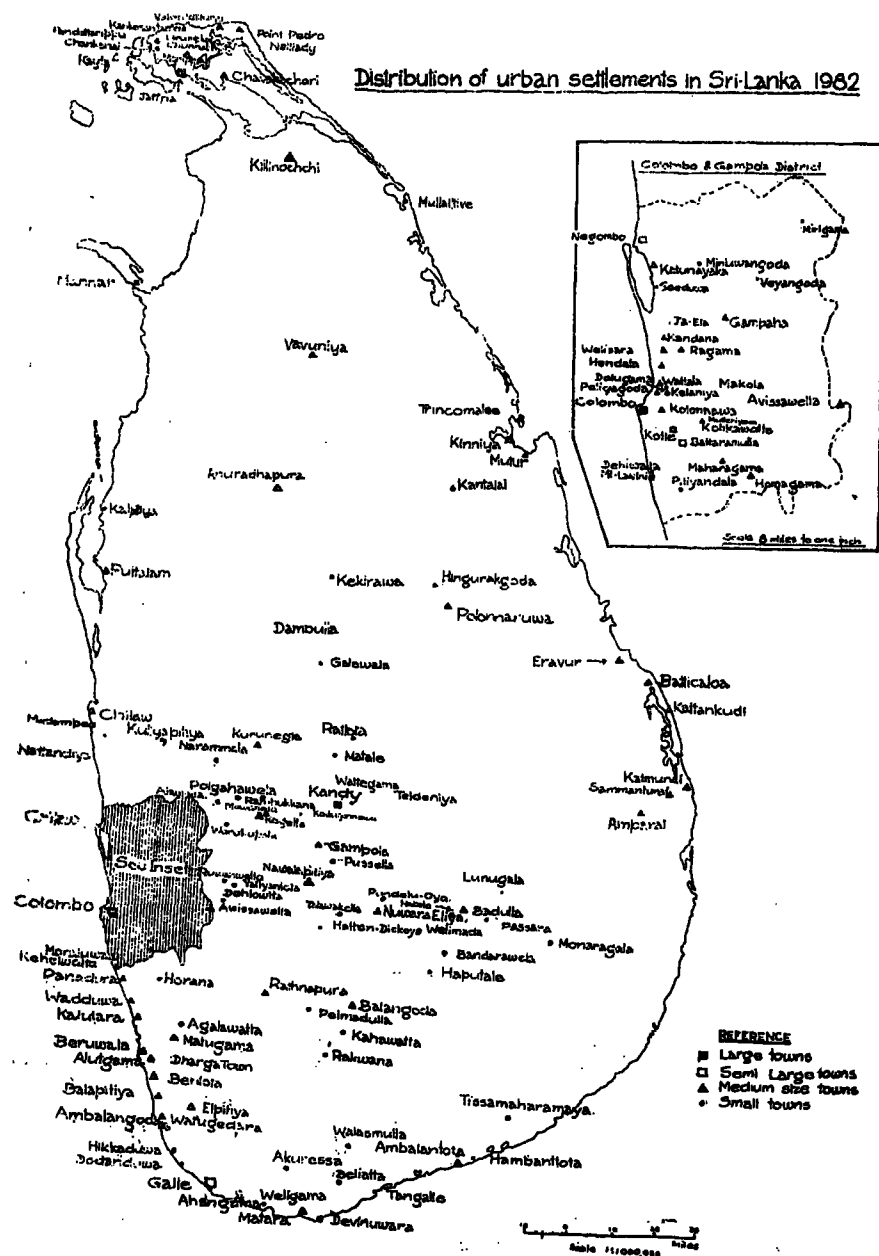
Census Year	Total Number of Towns	Number of Small & Medium Towns	Share of Small & Medium Towns in all Towns %
1946	42	37	88
1953	43	36	85
1963	99	92	93
1971	135	130	96
1981	134	125	93

Source: *Urbanization in Sri Lanka*, Mendis (1981) p. 31.

Table 3 DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION IN SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS, SRI LANKA BY SIZE AND NUMBER OF TOWNS 1946-1981

Census Year		Size of town in terms of Population						
		Below 2000	Small Towns 2000 to 4999	5000 to 9999	All Small Towns	10,000 to 19,999	Medium Size Towns 20,000 to 49,999	All Medium Size Towns
1946	Number of Towns	3	9	7	19	13	5	18
	Population	3601	28386	55874	87861	174598	177123	351721
	% of Total Urban	0.4	2.8	5.5	8.7	17.1	17.3	34.4
1953	Number of Towns	3	8	4	15	15	6	21
	Population	4062	28338	29691	62091	213150	154727	367876
	% of Total Urban	0.3	2.3	2.4	5.0	17.2	12.5	29.7
1963	Number of Towns	9	21	23	53	21	18	39
	Population	15342	74681	158280	248303	278153	487986	776139
	% of Total Urban	0.8	3.7	7.9	12.4	13.8	24.2	38.0
1971	Number of Towns	9	32	30	71	34	25	59
	Population	10819	104095	215848	330762	499561	781874	1288095
	% of Total Urban	0.4	3.7	7.6	11.7	17.5	27.5	45.0
1981	Number of Towns	3	28	28	59	35	31	66
	Population	5173	90518	199189	294880	511138	967957	1488095
	% of Total Urban	0.2	2.8	6.3	9.3	16.0	30.5	46.5

Source: *Urbanization in Sri Lanka*. Mendis (1981) p. 31.



to play a significant role in the national urban scenario. It is thus contended that they have acted in concert to avoid large-scale migration to the large cities.

In terms of population living in the post-independence period it is revealed that a large share of them have always lived in the medium size towns. (See Table 3). Thus, as seen in Table 3, the population living in the medium size towns with between 10,000 — 19,999 people, alone have always been greater than the cumulative total of all classes of the small towns.

Within its own categories (as shown in Table 3) the largest share of the population of small towns is in its 5000-9999 class. In the case of the medium size towns, the largest share of its population is in the 20,000 - 49,999 class. Hence in both types of towns their biggest classes have always held the largest share of their separate populations.

In terms of actual numbers, the small towns have been nearly equal or greater than the numbers of medium size towns in the post independence period. On the other hand it is noteworthy that while the number of medium size towns have been continuously increasing since 1946, the corresponding situation in the small towns has been a decrease in the Census years 1946-1953 and 1971-1981.

By a classification of small and medium towns in terms of major administrative units, which comprise District Capitals and Municipalities, the numbers of medium size towns which consist of the latter, far exceeded the corresponding numbers of small towns in each of the Census years 1971 and 1981. (See Table 4). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in overall terms, a greater proportion of all District Capitals and Municipalities comprise small and medium towns.

Table 4 NUMBERS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS BY MAJOR ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS: SRI LANKA

Census Year		1971	1981
District Capitals (Total: 24)	...	4	3
Municipalities (Total: 12)	...	16	17
	Small Towns	0	0
	Medium Towns	6	6

Table 5 DISTRIBUTION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS BY AVERAGE ANNUAL RATES OF GROWTH 1971-1981

Average Annual Rates of Growth (%) in the Inter-Censal Period 1971-1981		Below Zero	Zero	1.00	2.00	3.00	Above
		Zero	to	to	to	to	5.00
		0.99	1.99	2.99	4.99	5.00	
Numbers of Towns (in 1981)	Small Towns	3	1	23	14	6	9
	Medium Size Towns	7	0	15	26	13	3

Note: The Medium size town of Amparai was not included in the 1971 Census and hence its growth rate has not been computed. Accordingly the total number of medium size towns in the above Table is 65 and not 66 as reflected in Table 3.

Pattern of Growth of Small and Medium Towns

The average annual growth rates of the small and medium towns during the last inter-censal period (1971-1981), provides interesting data for study. They reveal that 30 or about half the total number of small towns are presently growing at rates higher than the national urban growth rate of 1.2% per annum. However, as shown in Table 5, twenty-seven of their number (ie, nearly half their total), are also growing at rates of less than 1.0% per annum; with three of them even growing at negative rates. Thus in overall terms, the data in Table 5 suggests that, at present, the population in a majority of the small towns are not increasing very rapidly.

On the other hand as shown in Table 5 in the case of medium size towns, 39 or more than half its total number, are presently growing at rates higher than the national urban growth rate. Further, only twenty-two medium size towns, (ie one third of its total), are growing at rates less than 1.0% per annum. Hence in overall terms the data in Table 5 suggests that at present, a greater number of the medium size towns are growing at rates faster than those of small towns. In this connection, the growth rates which provide greater propensity in the medium size towns are those between 1.0% to 1.99%, and 2.0 per cent to 2.99 per cent.

However, a comparative observation of the data in Table 5, for small and medium towns, indicates that there were more medium size towns with negative growth rates and also less of them at the other end of the spectrum with rapid growth rates.

Table 6 shows the complete list of small and medium towns and their individual average annual growth rates.

Location and Spatial Structure of the Small and Medium Towns

In terms of location, at present, 31 of the 59 small towns and 28 of the 66 medium size towns are located

in the Dry Zone. (See Table 7 and Map 1) The remainder are located in the Wet Zone.

Table 7 also shows the distribution of small and medium towns by Districts in 1981. It indicates that Gampaha District had the largest number of medium size towns, with Jaffna, Kalutara, Colombo and Galle Districts following thereafter with five or more such towns in each. It further indicates that Badulla District had the largest number of small towns, with Kegalle, Puttalam, and Hambantota Districts following thereafter with five such towns in each.

DISTRICT-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF THE TEN LARGEST SHARES OF POPULATION IN SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS, SRI LANKA, 1981

MAP 1

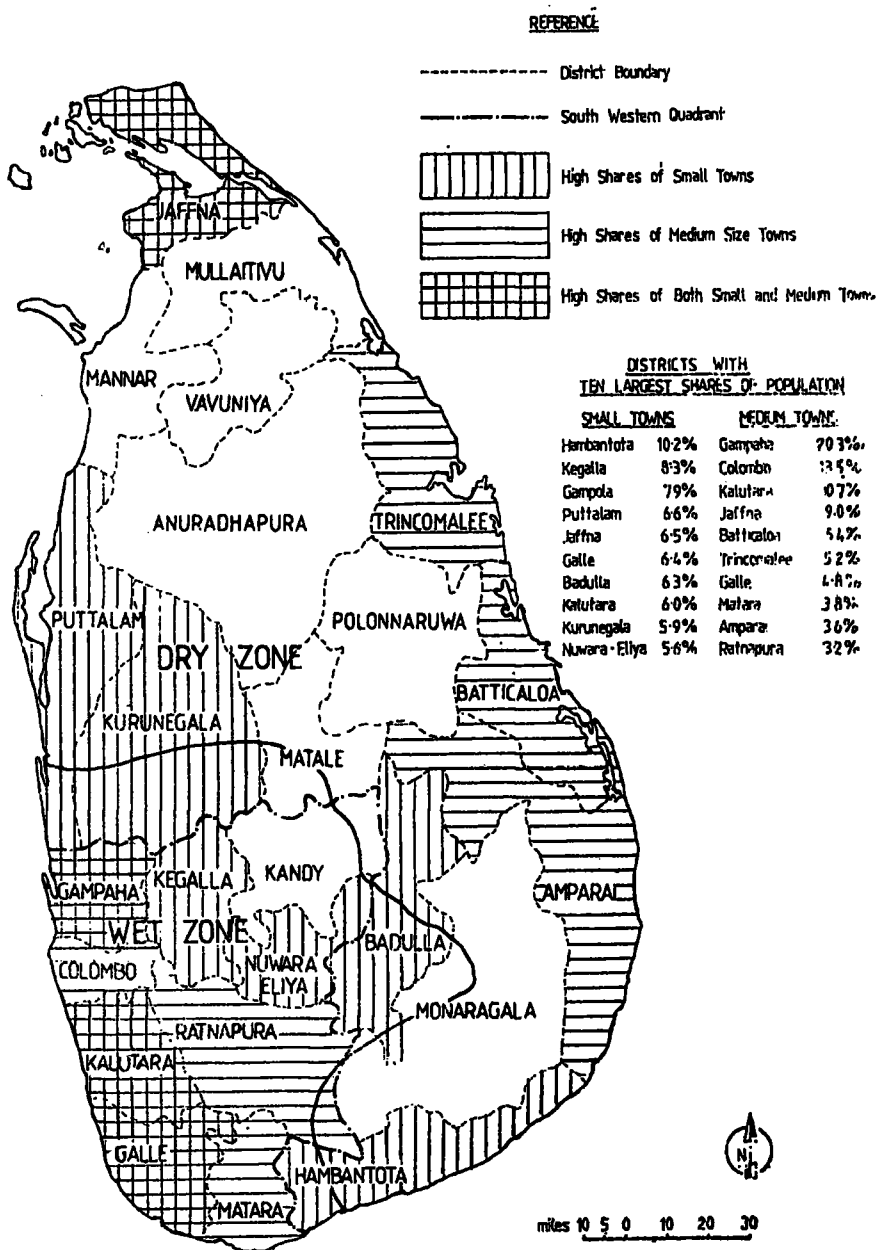


Table 6—AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH RATES OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZE TOWNS IN SRI LANKA, 1981

SMALL TOWNS			MEDIUM SIZE TOWNS		
District	Name	Ave. Annual Growth Rate (%)	District	Name	Ave. Annual Growth Rate (%)
COLOMBO	Piliyandala	1.27	COLOMBO	Avissawella	1.53
				Kolonnawa	1.11
				Mulleriyawa	-0.22
				Kotikawatta	1.09
				Homagama	2.76
KALUTARA	Horana	1.40		Maharagama	2.38
	Alutgama	1.55	KALUTARA	Beruwala	2.23
	Agalawatta	0.00		Panadura	1.25
				Kalutara	0.96
KANDY	Kadugannawa	-0.44		Wadduwa	0.96
	Wattegama	6.70		Matugama	1.52
	Pussellawa	0.26		Keselwatta	1.62
	Teldeniya	0.88		Dharga-town	1.89
			KANDY	Gampola	-0.40
MATALE	Galewela	1.05		Nawalapitiya	0.31
	Dambulla	1.48	MATALE	Matale	-0.031
	Rattota	0.08	NUWARA-ELIYA	Nuwara-Eliya	3.04
NUWARA-ELIYA	Talawakelle	3.50			
	Pundalu-Oya	0.36	GALLE	Ambalangoda	0.87
	Hatton-Dickoya	0.75		Elpitiya	1.47
				Bentota	2.01
GALLE	Ahangama	-0.19		Balapitiya	-0.43
	Dodanduwa	0.47		Wagedera	0.18
	Hikkaduwa	5.05	MATARA	Matara	0.69
				Weligama	0.84
MATARA	Devinuwara	0.37	HAMBANTOTA	Ambalantota	3.49
	Akuressa	1.71	JAFFNA	Chawakachcheri	1.02
HAMBANTOTA	Tangalle	0.94		Point Pedro	0.98
	Hambantota	2.39		Valvettitira	1.46
	Beliatta	0.78		Killinochchi	9.75
	Walasmulla	2.22		Nelliady	0.25
	Tissamaharama	4.74		Kankasanthurai	2.59
				Chunnakam	1.39
JAFFNA	Chenkanai	1.96		Pandatheruppu	1.93
	Manipay	1.80		Urumpirai	1.95
	Kayts	0.64	MANNAR	Mannar	2.97
MANNAR	None	—	VAVUNIYA	Vavuniya	1.84
VAVUNIYA	None	—	BATTICALOA	Batticaloa	1.68
BATTICALOA	None	—		Kattankudy	1.40
AMPARAI	None	—		Eravur	0.21
TRINCOMALEE	Kantale	5.72	AMPARAI	Amparai	—
KURUNEGALA	Kuliyapitiya	0.77		Sammanturai	1.06
	Polgahawela	0.57		Kalmunai	1.90
	Alawwa	3.71	TRINCOMALEE	Trincomalee	0.75
	Narammala	1.38		Mutur	3.48
PUTTALAM	Madampe	0.54		Kinniya	-0.81
	Wennappuwa	1.14	KURUNEGALA	Kurunegala	0.53
	Dankotuwa	1.45	PUTTALAM	Puttalam	1.94
	Nattandiya	0.96		Chilaw	1.83
	Kalpitiya	4.28	ANURADHAPURA	Anuradhapura	0.41
ANURADHAPURA	Kekirawa	3.23	POLONNARUWA	Polonnaruwa	2.35
POLONNARUWA	Hinguragoda	3.61	BADULLA	Badulla	-0.49
			MONERAGALA	None	—
BADULLA	Bandarawela	2.24	RATNAPURA	Ratnapura	2.83
	Haputale	0.12		Balangoda	1.86
	Hali-Ela	0.49			
	Passara	0.09	KEGALLE	Kegalle	1.26
	Lunugala	1.88		Mawanella	2.72
	Welimada	-0.15			
MONERAGALA	Moneragala	4.52	GAMPAHA	Ja-ela	1.23
				Wattala-Mabole	1.06
RATNAPURA	Kahawatte	2.71		Peliyagoda	0.19
	Pelmadulla	1.24		Gampaha	0.60
	Rakwana	0.48		Seeduwa-	
KEGALLE	Rambukkana	2.36		Katunayakc	2.20
	Yatiantota	1.21		Hendala	2.62
	Warakapola	2.09		Dalugama	1.56
	Ruwanwella	0.90		Kelaniya	0.59
	Dehiowita	0.43		Kandana	1.49
GAMPAHA	Minuwangoda	0.95		Ragama	2.69
	Veyangoda	0.26		Welisarn	2.44
	Kochchikade	0.87	MULLAITIVU	None	—
	Mirigama	3.63			
MULLAITIVU	Mulaitivu	4.61			

It is also seen from Table 7 that there are no small towns in four of the Districts and no medium size towns in two of the Districts; all such Districts being situated in the Dry Zone.

In terms of the shares of population, Table 7 indicates a wider spread of the shares in the medium size towns and less so in the small towns. Thus Map 2 shows the district-wise distribution of the ten largest shares of population in the small and medium towns. It indicates a high concentration in the South-West and in the Northern tip of the country. A lesser concentration is evident on the Eastern coastline.

Map 3 shows the location of small and medium towns which have high rates of population growth. It indicates three distinct high growth rate zones in the south, south-west and the east.

The combined considerations of Map 2 and Map 3 suggests (as follows) a spatial structure of four segments; the development of which can be influenced by small and medium towns.

- i. South-west segment
: Districts of Gampaha, Colombo, Kalutara, Galle, Matara, Ratnapura and Kegalle
- ii Central segment
: District of Nuwara-Eliya
- iii. Eastern segment
: District of Trincomalee
- iv. Northern segment
: District of Jaffna

Planning Issues Connected with the Small and Medium Towns

The prevalence of a large share of the urban population in the small and medium towns which make up more than three fourths of all towns, is an indication of the high reliance on them in the urban scenario in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, they comprise an important factor for consi-

Distribution of small & medium towns with high rates of population growth

MAP 3

1981 census

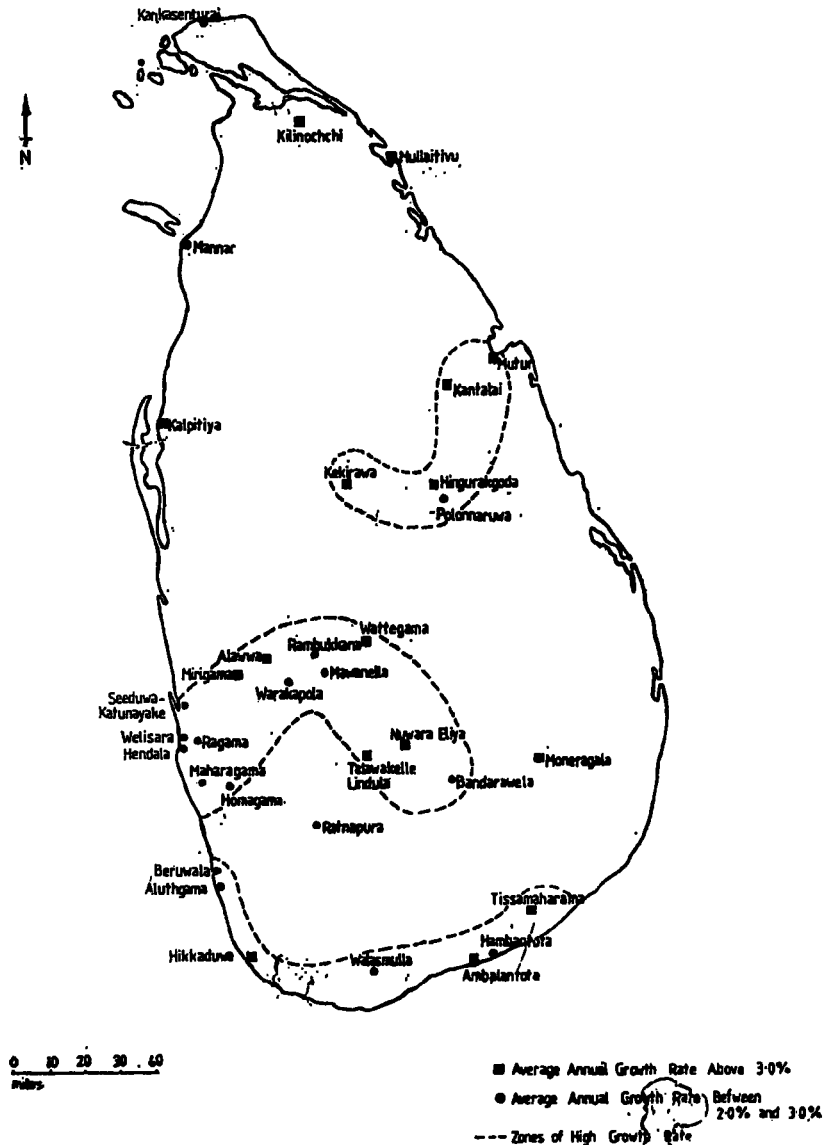


Table 7—DISTRICT-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF SMALL AND MEDIUM TOWNS IN SRI LANKA 1981

District	Zone	Small Towns			Medium Size Towns		
		No.	Population	%	No.	Population	%
Colombo	W	1	6508	2.2	6	201621	13.5
Kalutara	W	3	17668	6.0	7	159317	10.7
Kandy	W	4	13266	4.5	2	32889	2.2
Matale	D	3	9063	3.1	1	29745	2.0
Nuwara Eliya	W	3	16547	5.6	1	21319	1.4
Galle	W	3	18874	6.4	5	72063	4.8
Matara	W	2	14513	4.9	2	57034	3.8
Hambantota	D	5	30340	10.2	1	11076	0.7
Jaffna	D	3	19159	6.5	9	133227	9.0
Mannar	D	NIL	0	0	1	14469	1.0
Vavuniya	D	NIL	0	0	1	18511	1.2
Batticaloa	D	NIL	0	0	3	79565	5.4
Amparai	D	NIL					
Trincomalee	D	1	7293	2.5	3	75969	5.2
Kurunegala	D	4	17379	5.9	1	26519	1.8
Puttalam	D	5	19481	6.6	2	42293	2.8
Anuradhapura	D	1	5427	1.8	1	36248	2.4
Polonnaruwa	D	1	8966	3.0	1	11793	0.8
Badulla	D	6	18524	6.3	1	32954	2.3
Moneragala	D	1	6048	2.0	NIL	0	0
Ratnapura	W	3	11582	3.9	2	47617	3.2
Kegalle	W	5	24676	8.3	2	28826	1.9
Gampaha	W	4	23244	7.9	11	301437	20.43
Mulaitivu	D	4	7202	2.4	NIL	0	0
All Districts		59	294,880	100.0	66	1,480,095	100.0

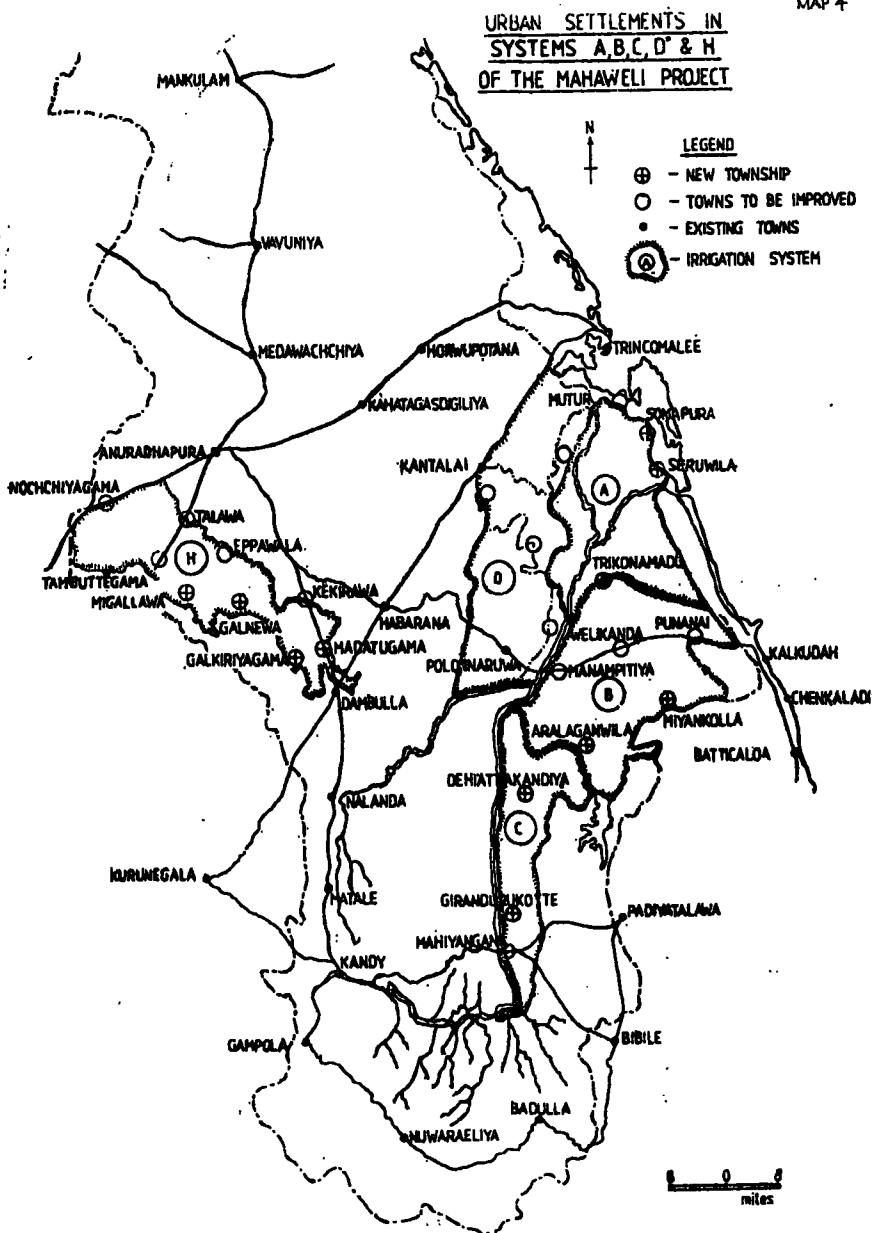
deration in development planning at all spatial levels.

In the above connection, the location of nearly half the number of small and medium towns, and also of more than one third each of their populations in the Dry Zone, indicates the useful role they are performing in the process of development in the predominantly rural areas. They comprise a vital link for supporting rural producers and accommodating the surplus rural labour. By such means they thus demonstrate urban-rural complementarity which is necessary for effective rural development.

It was also noted, in the preceding sections, that a large proportion of District capitals and Municipali-

ties comprise small and medium towns. This is a further confirmation of the functional specialisation needed in the development process and how such services can be provided even in small and medium towns.

In the above context, it is however necessary that in order to rationalise the location of investments and services, that these small and medium towns be consciously integrated with each other and with higher order towns within a designed spatial structure. Such a feature can be secured through an urban growth strategy which can become instrumental in promoting appropriate economic development strategies at both national and sub-national levels.



A national urban growth strategy is in fact necessary to complement the economic strategies. Such a link is vital for whatever economic philosophy being followed by a Government in power. It is thus equally relevant for "free market economies" as well as for "centrally planned economies".

In both, it will provide public and private investors with a choice of locations carefully selected according to various levels of potential for growth and equity. In such a context, it does not interfere with "free market" conditions, but grants it credibility and also acts as a stimulant to it. Accordingly, a well conceived urban growth strategy will enable investors to gain confidence in the fact that overall analysis for location of investments has already been done for them by the planners in terms of both private and public benefit. In addition such a strategy will particularly assist public investments in prioritisation and choice of location for productive as well as infra-structure projects. In this way, the overall process of development will take place in a desirable manner and in the appropriate places.

However, presently there is no explicitly stated urban hierarchy nor is there an urban growth strategy in the development process. Accordingly, the stimulus needed by the small and medium towns in certain Districts which have the potential for securing economic development objectives also do not exist. Thus, the small and medium towns in the southern and eastern Districts in particular appear to hang isolated in the absence of integrated regional development plans for them. In these circumstances it is now opportune to construct Development Plans for a "Trincomalee-Polonnaruwa-Batticaloa region" and a "Galle-Matara region".

In large contiguous urban settlements, the small and medium towns play a vital role either as suburban commercial centres or as more important sub-regional centres. In such a context they act as urban economic entities. Thus, the small and medium towns in the urban regions of Colombo and Jaffna possess the potential for such roles. In planning these Urban regions, these towns can be fashioned to achieve a stated development strategy.

On a national scale too, the absence of a stated urban growth strategy indicates that the small and medium towns are not being promoted to suit a desired pattern and direction of urban growth. Presently, the analysis of the distribution and rates of growth of the small and medium towns, when considered together with the distribution of the large towns too, suggests that the

national urban spatial structure straddles a South West - East axis through the central and north-central land mass*. The only urban area located outside this axis is that in the Jaffna District. Hence taking into account the settlements in the Accelerated Mahaveli Programme (see Map 4), and the desirability of promoting future populations to settle outside the dense south-west, a desirable national urban strategy could be fashioned on a broad urban corridor between the south-western seaboard (focusing on Colombo), and the eastern seaboard (focusing on Trincomalee). Within such a corridor the small and medium towns could perform a significant role in structuring different hierarchical services and production units.

Thus, taking into account the analysis of the data in Map 2 and in Map 3, together with the location of the country's large urban centres and of the towns in the Mahaveli Project areas, a corridor of about 50 miles width may need to be examined further for determining its final dimensions that will be utilised in a planning strategy. This corridor needs to be supplemented with two other designated urban regions; one in the south (around Galle) and another in the north (around Jaffna). The former may be an area of around 10-15 miles radius from Galle and the latter an equal size radius from Jaffna. It would then include the cluster of small and medium towns in them with its larger counterparts.

The promotion of the integration of small and medium towns within a stated urban hierarchy and also a designated urban growth strategy must be based on a national spatial planning framework. The latter is required to facilitate both plan formulation and also plan implementation. In this connection, it may therefore be timely to design a suitable network of macro "planning regions" in the national spatial fabric. Within this the small, medium and large towns and their own urban regions can be consciously developed. Such regions will also provide the linkage of urban-rural complementarities so that the continued emphasis on agricultural development can be steered to secure comprehensive rural development.

The domination of the rural sector in national economic development strategies is a pointer to the importance and reliance that will continue to lie on small and medium towns. Accordingly, as stated earlier the latter will, even in the future,

* The author regards large towns in the Sri Lankan context as those above 100,000 persons in each. They are presently (1981), Colombo City, Moratuwa, Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia, Kotte, Kandy and Jaffna.

comprise a large proportion of the towns and of the urban population.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The main conclusions arising out of the analysis in this paper are that:

- (i) The small and medium towns, consisting of those between 10,000 and 50,000 populations, have always comprised more than 7/8ths of all towns in Sri Lanka. They include a large proportion of District Capitals and half the Municipalities in the country.
- (ii) Presently (1981), one out of every two urban people live in small and medium towns. The share of such population in the medium size towns (ie 10,000 - 50,000 population), is greater than that in the small towns (ie below 10,000 population).
- (iii) Presently, the population in a majority of the small towns are not increasing rapidly; while the reverse is true of the medium size towns wherein the propensity is provided by those growing at rates between 1.5% and 3.0% per annum.
- (iv) Seven out of the ten towns with negative growth rates are however medium size towns.
- (v) The distribution pattern of the small and medium towns indicate that by number they are equally divided between the wet and dry zones. By concentrations, they are clustered in the south-western quadrant and are also found in groups in the central, eastern and northern districts of the country.
- (vi) The small and medium towns perform a key role in providing urban support in the predominantly rural regions, and as suburbs in the pre-dominant urban regions.
- (vii) However, there is no explicit national urban growth strategy. Hence the small and medium towns lack spatial structuring in securing more effective urban rural complementarities.
- (viii) The current trends in the demographic characteristics of the small and medium towns indicate that they will continue to dominate the national urban scenario in Sri Lanka in the foreseeable future.

The recommendations for action are as follows:

- (a) It is recommended that an explicit national urban development policy be formulated urgently, including therein a component connected with the small and medium towns.
- (b) In the above context, it is also recommended that the

role and function of the small and medium towns in both urban and rural sectors be consciously recognised and their economic base accordingly strengthened by integrating them in the plans for the development of the corresponding urban and rural regions. The latter should be specifically incorporated in the Settlement Planning policies of the Accelerated Mahaveli Development Programme.

- (c) It is further recommended that the presently existing urban spatial structure be incorporated in an appropriate national urban growth strategy. In this connection, the urban corridor between Colombo and Trincomalee and the urban regions around Galle and Jaffna should be further studied for refinement of their territorial dimensions which need to be included in such a strategy.
- (d) It is also recommended that the national urban growth strategy be a component of an overall economic development strategy and be based upon a macro-economic planning framework for the effective realisation of economic development objectives.

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