

A case study on establishing and running a community bus service in rural Sri Lanka

Ranjith de Silva¹³

Abstract

In 1998, a pilot project was implemented in Sri Lanka to assess the feasibility and capacity of a village community to manage its own community bus service. Sixteen years after its inauguration, the bus service is still in operation, despite the fact that the project implementing agency withdrew its support about six years after the service was established. The current article describes the rural transport challenges which led to the idea for the project, the challenges faced by the community and project team in creating and running the service, and the lessons learned from the past sixteen years. One of the indirect impacts of the project was the improvement of a rural access road, which resulted in a number of other changes in the transport situation of the villages. The article also briefly describes a number of similar rural transport projects which drew on the experience of this project.

Keywords: community-based systems, rural transportation planning

1. Background: The wider context of rural transport in Sri Lanka

With the liberalization of the economy of Sri Lanka in 1977, the private sector was allowed to invest in the transport industry, ending the monopoly of state-owned transport Central Transport Board (CTB). While private operators were not interested in operating services where they could not earn a profit, the CTB maintained skeleton services in remote rural areas as a heavily subsidized transport service. At the same time, the government introduced a system via the National Transport Commission (NTC), which governed the private transport services, that pays a subsidy to the private sector to extend their services to identified "low-income" bus routes formerly operated by CTB.

This failed, however, to attract the private sector, which was more interested in the urban bus service market. It was also evident that the conditions of rural roads prevented the bus owners (including the CTB) to start operations due to high vehicle operating cost (VOC). Historically, Sri Lankan rural communities looked to the government to provide and maintain roads, but state policy prioritizes highways and other bitumen paved roads for motorized traffic, to the detriment of the 70% of Sri Lanka's road which link villages to the main transport infrastructure. Furthermore, the government, particularly local government, had neither the financial resources nor the technical capacity to improve the standard of rural roads.

As routes in more isolated areas became "uneconomical", bus services were discontinued and roads were further neglected. The lack of low cost and efficient goods transport services from villages to market centers became a critical issue faced by the rural farmer population. In the absence of such services, farmers were compelled to use public transport services (buses) to reach markets, spending long hours and travelling very early to avoid heavy passenger traffic, as well as facing more product wastage.

The decrease in bus services also affected access to education and medical facilities. Normally in rural Sri Lanka, travel to medical and educational facilities comprises a significant proportion of a rural household's travel needs. Since most schools in the villages have inadequate facilities or are limited to primary classes, students who wish to attend schools with better facilities must travel about 10-20 kilometres daily to the towns. They usually have to walk 2-3 kilometres before they reach a bus route. At the same time, villagers seeking medicines must travel to privately-owned dispensaries located at least 3-5 kilometres from the village. Many villages do not have access at all to such dispensaries and the nearest medical facilities are in the towns, at least 5-7 kilometres away.

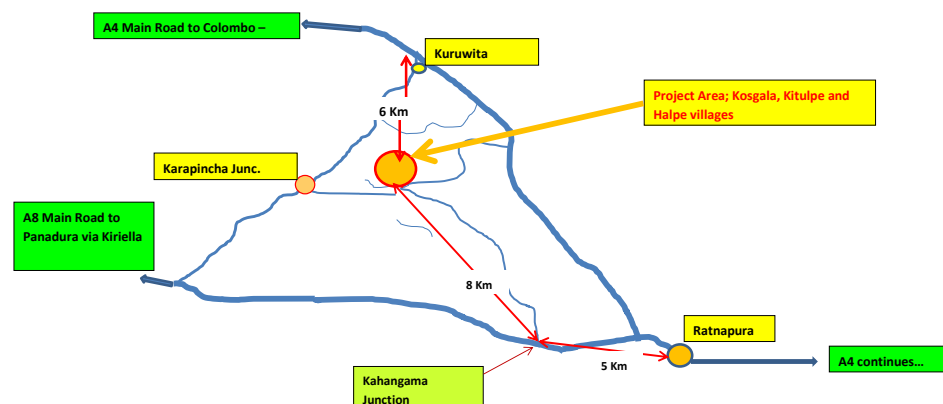
¹³ Former Regional Coordinator for Asia, International Forum for Rural Transport and Development. Email: ranjithsd@sltnet.lk

Against this backdrop, the Lanka Forum on Rural Transport Development (LFRTD), a national network of state transport organizations, transport professionals, rural transport promoters, non-government organizations (NGOs) and individuals, came up with the idea that a rural community may manage its own transport service if it is given the required resources and training. The LFRTD decided to pilot test this concept in the Kithulpe Grama Niladhari division of the Kuruwita Divisional Secretary division, Ratnapura District, roughly 100 km south-east of Colombo. The main source of livelihood within the Grama Niladhari division was agriculture, mainly rice production and rubber and tea plantations. Many people were wage labourers in either agriculture or gem mining. Ratnapura is famous for its gem industry and at least one member of each household is engaged in gem mining. Private sector enterprises and garment factories in and around the area were the other sources of employment.

2. Transport needs at the start of the project

The target population for the bus service was the villagers from the adjoining villages of Kosgala, Kitulpe and Halpe (Figure 1). The total population of the three villages during the feasibility study carried out in October 1996 was 3,500 persons belonging to 740 families. Besides these people, another 150 families from nearby villages were expected to benefit from the bus service.

Figure 1. Road map of target area (not drawn to scale)



Source: Author's own illustration.

In 1996, only a limited number of vehicles were running on the road that passes through the village. There was a CTB bus service to the village of Kosgala but that service was irregular and often unavailable. The villagers said this CTB bus service was started in 1973 but gradually deteriorated in the early 80s and was abandoned later. There were two bus services available in 1996 that could be accessed by walking about 4-6 km, but these buses were usually overcrowded with passengers.

The community is situated about 13 km away from the Ratnapura town at one end and about 6 km from the Kuruwita sub-urban area (a small town on the Colombo-Ratnapura main road) at the other end. The villagers accessed the towns of Ratnapura and Kuruwita for most of their needs, such as health care, secondary education, the market, and other services (see Table 1). Further details are provided below.

2.1 Agricultural Produce

Nearly 95% of the families living in the three villages in 1996 were dependent on agriculture and gem mining. The major crops were rubber, tea, minor export crops (spices) and rice (paddy rice). The nearest markets for rubber and minor export crops were located in Ratnapura and Kuruwita. Products were transported to the markets either by bus or bicycle.

2.2 Consumer goods

Consumer goods were available at the village store but were quite expensive compared to the

goods in nearby towns due to the high transportation costs. Shopkeepers hired three-wheelers to transport the goods.

2.3 Education

The children who attended schools (secondary or higher education) in Ratnapura town had to walk long distances to get to the nearest bus route early in the morning. They also returned late after school and spent a lot of time waiting for transportation in the absence of regular transport services.

2.4 Health

The nearest hospital to the village was also located in Ratnapura town. Villagers had to walk far to get to the nearest bus route. The buses were also overcrowded and it was difficult for a sick person to travel in those conditions.

Table 1. Distance to basic services from Kosgala village

Service	Location	Distance
Primary education	Village	20minutes by bus, 1 hour walk
Secondary education	Ratnapura and Kuruwita Town	Ratnapura, 13 km; Kuruwita, 6 km
Primary health care	Available in one of the village houses	Within the village
Hospital	Ratnapura or Kiriella	Kiriella, 40 minutes by vehicle; Ratnapura, three wheeler price 600 Indian rupees (Rs) (\$8.00) in Year 2000
Post office	Village	Thirty (30) minute walk
Communication Centre	Ratnapura town	Ratnapura, 13 km, 10 minutes by bus
DS office /other relevant government offices	Kuruwita	Kuruwita 6 km
Market for consumer goods	Kuruwita sathi pola (weekly market)	Kuruwita 6 km
Market for produce	Kuruwita town	Kuruwita 6 km
Police	Kuruwita town	Kuruwita 6 km

Source: LFRTD (1996)

3. Project design

The goal of the project was “To assess the sustainability and ability of rural communities to manage their own transport services based on their own accessibility needs” (Banda, 1996).

3.1 Selection of the community and feasibility study

In 1996, the LFRTD selected Kosgala as the project location for several reasons. First, the Kosgala community was suffering from severe transport difficulties due to the unavailability of a regular bus service and poor road conditions. Second, the LFRTD and its project partner, the Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG, now called Practical Action), believed that the project management of such a new enterprise was beyond the normal village community-based organization (CBO) activities since it required a different set of skills and a strong CBO. With the presence of the SANASA Society (Thrift and Credit Cooperative Society), the Kosgala community appeared to have the capacity to manage such an enterprise. A feasibility study was conducted and the conclusion was that the project could be implemented in Kosgala.

Following the feasibility study, LFRTD, with the assistance of key members of the CBO, identified the issues related to the project implementation. It was suggested that the condition of the road section within the village be improved in order to accommodate a bus. According to the directors of the company who were responsible for the management of the bus service, the SANASA Society in the area was given the responsibility to undertake the road surface improvements which involved widening the road from 8 feet to 10 feet. This task was completed before the start of the bus service. As described in Section 4 below, the improvement of the road led to a number of indirect impacts which were both good and bad for the community bus service.

3.2 Institutional arrangement between the stakeholders

ITDG, as the principal partner of LFRTD, provided the initial social mobilization of the community. From conceptualization, it took almost three years to mobilize the community through various programmes, such as *shramadana* (free labour) for road construction. ITDG played a key role in mobilizing the community by stationing a full time social mobiliser in the village before the project and by assigning a part time project manager and a communication office for about one year after the project commenced.

The social mobiliser based in the village was able to iron out some of the conflicts of interest between some sections of the community. The village leadership also had the capability to get everyone together, especially for the *shramadana* campaigns organized for the road construction. The project benefited from the presence of a social mobiliser, particularly in facilitating interactions among villagers as well as in conducting collective exercises. Later on, RTP Ltd. and the Pradeshiya Sabha (local authority) also became stakeholders of the project by making contributions.

3.3 Project Budget and costs

ITDG agreed to donate 900,000 Sri Lanka rupees (SL Rs) (about US\$16,700 at the rate of \$1=L54.00 Sri Lanka rupees (SL Rs) as at March 1996) as part of the capital to purchase the brand new bus (Lanka Ashok Leyland¹⁴). This was about 60% of the capital requirement. It also provided project management with engineering and social inputs. The full cost of the bus was 1,400,000 SL Rs (\$25,925). The balance was raised from the following:

- a. 500,000 SL Rs (\$9,260) was borrowed from the Peoples' Bank through a commercial bank loan, repayable over a period of 5 years.
- b. 250,000 SL Rs (\$4,630) was raised from a loan from the SANASA Cooperative Credit Society on more flexible terms of repayment than the commercial bank loan.
- c. Locally raised funds by the community through a Lottery and other contributions.

The community inputs in cash and in kind were very high, especially during the widening/construction/repair of sections of the access road, which was around 46% of the estimated cost of the road project. The total labour contribution was 9,700 man-days. The CBO (later formed into the bus company) managed to raise 40% of the balance required for the capital and working capital was obtained from soft loans from the SANASA Society and from a lottery conducted in the area.

The registration fee, insurance premium costs, etc., were also covered by the collected funds. LFRTD managed to get the bus driver trained on basic bus maintenance by the Lanka Ashok Leyland free of charge through negotiations made between its member the NTC.

In addition, ITDG shouldered the salary of the social mobiliser that was assigned to the village for 2 years, provided technical inputs in the access road improvements and carried out basic accounts and bookkeeping trainings to the officials of the bus company.

3.4 The Bus Company

To make it easier for the community to access credit from commercial banks to purchase the bus, LFRTD pioneered in setting up the CBO to the status of a Company by Guarantee registered

¹⁴ This is the brand name of the bus.

with the Registrar of Companies of Sri Lanka. The Company was named Rural Transport Promoters Limited by Guarantee (RTP Ltd). The company directors (ten in number) were elected annually by the community at the annual general meeting as a pre-requisite set by the Registrar of Companies. The annual general meeting consisted of 100 representatives from 6 community organizations (e.g. Village Development Organisation, Thrift Societies, Welfare Associations, etc.) in the village.

The widespread community representation in the company provided transparency, while the submission of ratified audited statement of accounts to the LFRTD and the Registrar of Companies assured the correct use of funds.

4. Challenges in implementing the project

4.1 Burden of the initial loan

The project had financial difficulties in the early stages mainly due to the burden of substantial loan repayment (payback) installments. However, the bus managed to reach the breakeven point by the end of the second year and gradually started to earn profits from the third year onwards. Notably, the company was able to earn more regular profits after it sold the first bus in 2008, paid all the outstanding debts and invested the balance on purchasing a new (second-hand) bus with much lower operational costs.

The company also began hiring out the bus to outside parties for pleasure trips and pilgrimage during weekends and on public holidays in order to earn extra income. In recent years, this has become a major source of income for the bus.

4.2 Poor infrastructure led to route diversion

Due to the dilapidated condition of the access road running through the village, the community bus did not operate for ten (10) months on its normal route in 1998 (Gunetilleke and Jayaweera, 2002). The bus took an alternate route from Ratnapura through Kuruwita to terminate at Halpe. This resulted in increased income due to the higher number of passengers on the alternate route.

4.3 Competition from a new CTB Bus

A CTB bus introduced in the same route in 2011 became a major competitor to the community bus. According to Chandra Kanthi, secretary of the bus company, the average number of passengers in 2011 was about 600 per day but declined to around 480 per day since the introduction of the CTB bus. No daily records on the number of passengers are kept by the company but it can be calculated from the ticket counterfoils. However, the decrease in the number of passengers has been offset by the increased income from hiring out the bus for pleasure and pilgrimage trips and also by a bus fare increase instituted in 2012 by the NTC.

4.4 Difficulties in running the service

The community found it difficult to run the company economically and socially. In particular, it was a challenge to submit the required audited statement of accounts and reports to the registrar of companies, since these cost money and require the service of an expensive company secretary. The company stopped submitting reports about 7 or 8 years ago. When consulted in May 2014 for this case study, the Secretary of RTP Ltd. suggested a move away from company status to a more manageable village level society or association.

4.5 Emergence of village factions

Banda et al., who carried out an evaluation in 1999, three years after the commencement of the bus service, say that at the time of the evaluation, two factions emerged in the village to take control over the bus service management (Banda, 1999). LFRTD intervened at this point to negotiate between the two parties and settle the matter.

4.6 Decline of community “ownership”

In the early years of the project, the community had a sense of ownership towards the bus service, referring to it as “Ape Bus eka” (our own bus). However, according to the present Secretary of RTP Ltd., that sense of ownership gradually declined as the bus service continued. For example, the community members did not take part in routine road maintenance work with enthusiasm and leadership, as they did during the initial period of road construction. Only five (5) active members are looking after the interests of the company now, with the rest having moved out of the village or are simply no longer interested in the bus company.

5. Impact of the project

Although the project was evaluated several times over the past sixteen years, no comparative survey on the impact of the project has been done continuously over time. However, the overall impacts of the project based on a number of post-project evaluations are summarized in Table 2 below.

5.1 Direct impact of the community bus service

a) Access to education and healthcare

The community was able to operate the bus service on a timetable that catered towards its travel needs. The school children attending secondary and higher schools in Ratnapura take the bus that leaves the village at 7.10 a.m. to reach their schools on time. The return bus takes the teachers to the primary school in the village. Earlier, school attendance was very poor due to the non-availability of transport.

Passengers, especially women and school children, felt safe with the journey, assured by the quality of service, particularly the punctuality, daily schedule and good attitude and behavior of both the conductor and driver (CEPA, 2009). Furthermore, because the bus timetable was adjusted to correspond with the community’s needs, patients and other villagers could travel more easily when going to the hospital or clinics.

b) Economic benefits for commuters

The reduction of transport expenses for the villagers was an important impact of the community bus service. Transport expenses were reduced in two ways. First, travel route became shorter. Before the project, villagers had to take two buses and walk about 2 to 3 km to reach the nearest town. With the project, there is one bus straight from the village to the town. Second, travel time was reduced. The surplus time was used for production and leisure, which improved the quality of life of the people.

The punctual and continuous bus service provided community members who are formally employed outside the village assured transport service to and from work. The schedule of the bus was convenient for the employed community members going to work since they can take the bus close to their place of residence. The impact was also felt on the return journey from work.

5.2 Indirect impact of the project

a) Impacts of the access road

As noted above, a section of the road which ran through the village was improved by the communities in the three villages at the start of the project. One of the impacts of the road improvement was to increase the number of vehicles on the road, which then reduced transport costs. The improved road also received the attention of the Pradeshiya Sabha, the lowest level of local government in Sri Lanka, which then agreed to pave the community-constructed road.

Since the bus runs on a fixed schedule and transporting goods in bulk is difficult, some traders within and outside the villages use other modes of transport. The bus was used to transport only small amounts of outgoing agricultural produce and incoming consumer goods, but certainly at a

much lower cost than hiring vehicles.

When the road surface was improved and became motorable, people in the village started buying new motor vehicles. The number of three-wheelers and motorbikes increased. There are about 20 three-wheelers in the village now and the number of motorbikes has increased from about 60 in 2006 to about 120 in 2009. The increase in the ownership and use of three and two wheelers in the village is thought to have reduced the income of the bus.

A section of the paved road, about 750 meters, is still in a badly dilapidated condition due to illicit gem mining carried out in the area. Government authorities have not made an effort to stop the activity and people believe that it is due to political influence. In the near future, the existing road may disappear.

Table 2. Impacts comparison of baseline and post intervention data

	Before the project	After the project
1. Access to education		
1.1	Retaining teachers in the village primary school was a problem because transport from Ratnapura was not available.	The teachers can use the community bus for the afternoon trip at least, if not for the morning trip. There is a delay of about 20 minutes in the morning as the bus has to return from Ratnapura around 7.30 am.
1.2	The school children could not participate in extracurricular activities in school and were unable to attend private extra classes due to lack of transportation back to the village in the late hours of the day.	Children are using the bus to go for additional classes after school or during weekends and to come back home after they finish extracurricular activities such as sports in the afternoons.
1.3	The children who attended schools (secondary/higher education) in Ratnapura town had to walk long distances to get to the nearest bus route early in the morning. They also arrive home late after school and had to spend a tiring time walking home in the absence of regular transport services.	Students attending schools in Ratnapura have a regular bus service at their door steps that run on the timetable that caters to their needs.
2. Access to healthcare		
2.1	The ante-natal and post-natal clinics were held by the midwife in the house of a community member. However, for emergencies and to visit a doctor, people had to go to Ratnapura and pay a lot for transportation.	For regular visits to the hospital and clinics, and to visit patients, people have the convenience of the community bus. The bus timetable had been prepared to meet their preferred travel times.
2.2	The cost of hired transport was very high due to the dilapidated condition of the road.	With the road improvements and the community bus, the cost of hired transport considerably went down.
3. Meeting economic and other needs		
3.1	<p>Kosgala villagers used the irregular CTB bus or walked about 45 minutes to reach the Karapincha-Ratnapura bus route.</p> <p>Kitulpe villagers walked to Karapincha (30 minutes) and took the bus to Kuruwita and then to Ratnapura. Both Kuruwita and Ratnapura buses were frequent.</p> <p>Halpe villagers took the bus to Kuruwita and then to Ratnapura.</p> <p>Communities in all the three villages had to bear the high cost of transport as a result of changing buses and walk substantial distances.</p>	<p>There is a significant change in the travel needs and patterns of the communities in the three villages of Kosgala, Kitulpe and Halpe due to the substantially reduced transport costs.</p> <p>The time spent walking to take the bus as well as the extra time spent by taking two buses is saved. This surplus time is used instead for production and leisure, which has led to the improvement in the quality of life of the people.</p>

	Before the project	After the project
3.2	The nearest markets for agricultural produce of the village such as rubber and minor export crops were located in Ratnapura (13 Km) and Kuruwita (6 Km). The people transported them either by bus or bicycle.	Travel with agricultural produce has been made much easier with the community bus service to Ratnapura town that fetched farmers much better prices than in Kuruwita town. Farmers can also hire vehicles now to transport their produce as the condition of the road has been improved and the transport costs have gone down.
3.3	Consumer goods were available at the village stores but were quite expensive when compared to goods in the nearby towns. This was due to the high transport costs, since the shop keepers had to hire transportation (three-wheelers).	Moving of goods and services in to the village has become easier since the bus service is easily accessible. The grocery shops and boutiques in Kitulpe and Kosgala have almost all the essential consumer goods sold at competitive prices. The bus service has helped shop keepers save on the cost and time spent on transportation.

Sources: Banda (1999); Gunatilleke and Jayaweera (2002)

6. Lessons learned from the community bus service project

6.1 Lessons Learned

a) The idea that 'rural transport service is unprofitable' is misleading.

Private bus owners are not interested in operating bus services in the rural areas because of the small number of passengers (due to low density population) and a low profit margin. The NTC pays a subsidy to buses operating in these unprofitable routes but only the government-owned CTB is interested and only because of political pressure.

However, this project was able to challenge the idea that rural transport service is unprofitable. The main reason for the commitment of the community was their transportation needs. Most need-based projects, with proper and appropriate management, do have success stories. The replication of this pilot project has to be based on the lessons learned so that certain conflicts of interest among parties, both inside and outside the community, can be avoided. Community mobilization and trainings on management and basic financial management are also necessary.

b) The commitment of the community changes.

In the beginning, the enthusiasm of the entire community was high. The community participated in the road development work by contributing free labour and providing other required resources free of charge. The concept of shramadana or donation of labour has existed in the culture of Sri Lanka for thousands of years. When there is a common need and good leadership, people get together to donate time and labour. Before 1977¹⁵, the sharing of labour, animals and equipment was a prominent cultural concept in the agriculture sector in rural Sri Lanka.

However, the attitude of the community towards the bus service changed as the project reached its 16th year of operation. The "our bus" attitude towards the bus service gradually decreased. This change in attitude is normal given the span of 16 years. Nevertheless, the commitment of the five enthusiastic members teaming up to take the bus service forward is commendable.

c) Good quality infrastructure is necessary.

An important factor explaining the success of this project, which was not initially planned, was the renovation of the road. Bus services operated on dilapidated roads will have high vehicle operating costs.

In 2002, two and a half years after the commencement of the bus service, the CBO (later the bus company) felt that the footpath connecting the adjoining villages Halpe and Kitulpe also had to be

¹⁵ Free labour-sharing by farmers in each of their agricultural plots, in the rural agriculture sector in Sri Lanka was quite eminent. Since 1977, with the introduction of liberal economic policies by the government, labour gradually became a source of income for the people and nothing was available for free even for sharing.

widened and given an improved surface in order to extend the bus service to Halpe (an endpoint). They felt that it will benefit the community in Halpe and also add to the income of the bus service. As a member of the LFRTD, the ITDG did the road improvements using their own technology and methodology for community participation. ITDG provided the technical assistance and the community, together with the support of the SANASA Society, contributed land, labour and local materials. The technology to improve the road surface was left in the hands of government authorities.

d) The company structure and the community's capacity to maintain it need to be rethought.

It is obvious that, on their own, poor communities are unable to make big capital investments. Donations and/or a system developed by financial institutions and NGOs are needed. In the case of this project, the main reason for setting up the company was to enable the community to access credit from commercial banks for the purchase of the bus. However, the requirements were difficult to deal with and manage and this later became a burden on the community.

For example, at the start of the project, RTP Ltd. signed an agreement with LFRTD that RTP Ltd. will provide regular feedback on the bus service and, more importantly, that it will obtain written consent from LFRTD in case the company wants to sell the bus. However, these records were not retained by either LFRTD or the RTP Ltd. In addition, the Secretary of the bus company had only four financial statements (1998/1999, Jan-Dec 2000, 2008/2009, and 20012/2013) available as at 11 May 2014. The bus company also has no record of the number of passengers on daily basis. One has to count all the passenger ticket counterfoils if data on this is needed.

According to the present members of the company, it is difficult for a community-run initiative to maintain the status of a registered enterprise under the Registrar General. Money and skills are needed to comply with the requirements for the audited annual reports and annual statements of account. Hence, considerable thought should be given on an alternative system that is manageable for a village community.

e) There is a gap between the company and the community.

The decision-making authority was and still is in the hands of the Committee or the Board of Directors. The Board makes decisions as and when required, such as the replacement of the bus, and the provision is made under the constitution or the company by-laws. In the past, the members (the community) were not adequately informed and this may explain the gradual loss of interest of members and the current situation.

The CEPA (2009) further added that "over the past 5 years the relationship gap between the existing committee and the community seems to have widened. The committee over the years seems to have become more involved and concerned with keeping the project alive rather than making a conscious effort to involve the community at large with the management of the bus. In conjunction, the community also seemed to have become less involved given the time constraints caused by the nature of their main occupation, agriculture" (p 20).

However, all reports, including financial reports, are circulated to members during the annual general meetings where the conduct of the Committee (the Board of Directors) can also be questioned. The current members of the committee acting as company directors have remained in their positions for several years because no new faces were introduced to the company. These current members are also all from Kithulpe. Over the years, the representatives from Kosgala dropped out of the Committee due to various reasons and disputes.

f) Strong social inputs are needed.

For future community bus service projects, community mobilization and an assessment of the location and road access of the villages are needed before selecting an appropriate project site. Social mobilization will help the community understand the different concepts and responsibilities, and thus minimize disputes. Figure 3 shows the process developed from the LFRTD project experience.

This was later adopted by another Practical Action¹⁶ project in Orissa, India.

It is desirable for a strong local NGO or CBO to stay with the community and give advice and guidance. The LFRTD has not kept in touch with the bus company. From 2004, there were only two instances. One was in 2008 when the bus company asked for permission from LFRTD to sell the bus, and second, in 2009 for a project evaluation carried out at the request of LFRTD. The interest of LFRTD gradually dropped and the bus company and the community had no guidance and support in resolving their social and management problems.

Figure 3. Community participation cycle (based on LFRTD project experience)



Source: Practical Action South Asia

7. Conclusion

The main benefit of community managed systems is that they cater to the communities own needs. The voice of the community is heard and overall management takes a sense of ownership. It is not profit-oriented like a private enterprise. Nevertheless, the commitment of the community will gradually decay if the system loses the attention and active participation of the community.

The continuation of the current project is attributed to the personal commitment of the Board. An evaluation report conducted by CEPA in 2009 stated that “the perceived personal responsibility of the company directors 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 the discussion with the directors that this has put an unnecessary strain on them. It has also meant that a gap has been created between the committee and the community” (p 20).

Despite many setbacks, the bus is still in service and managed by the remaining five energetic and courageous members. It also earns a profit and the present board is thinking of replacing this bus with a better one. Similar projects that have since been implemented in Orissa, India, as well as in other parts of Sri Lanka and Nepal, suggest that it is possible to successfully manage such a transport initiative in a simpler way than by maintaining a very small registered company like RTP Ltd. that impose a burden on the village community. Moreover, communities that engage in these initiatives need the backing of local and community based NGOs and/or the State.

¹⁶ The Practical Action (PA) South Asia Office in Sri Lanka (formerly ITDG) is a founding member of the LFRTD and also a key stakeholder of this project. They had active transport programmes in Sri Lanka, Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Nepal and India. PA was involved in the community-managed transport service project throughout the entire duration and was very keen to learn how a rural community can manage its own transport service. Having analyzed the key lessons learned from the community bus project, they introduced the “community managed” transport service concept to two locations in Sri Lanka and two other locations in Orissa, India. Practical Action Nepal replicated this management concept in the Gravity Ropeway projects in rural Nepal.

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