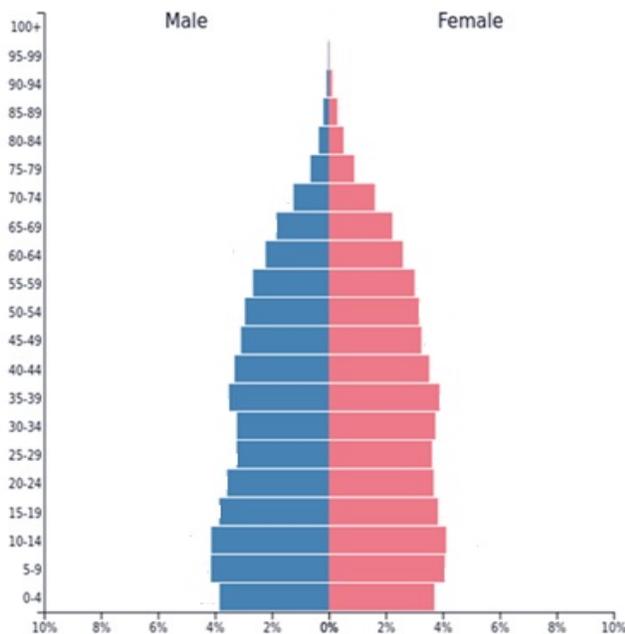


Case Study on Youth Issues: Sri Lanka

Introduction:

Sri Lanka has a total population of 20 million inhabitants, of which 14.9 per cent is made up of youth. This figure is marginally below that of the Asia-Pacific region at 15.4 per cent. However, 10.0 per cent of Sri Lanka's population constitutes older persons, see figure 1 - notably higher than the regional average at 8.4. The older person dependency ratio in Sri Lanka is

Figure 1: Population pyramid, 2017

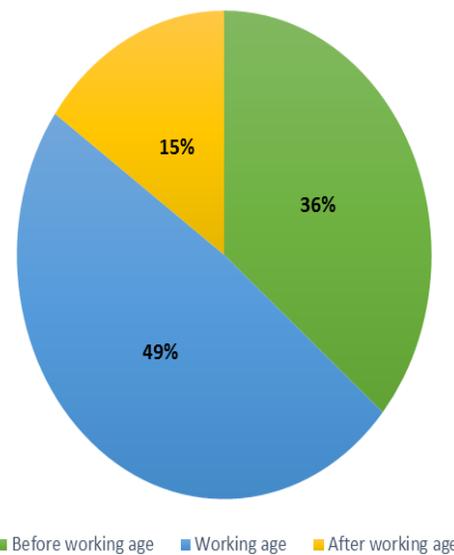


Source: PopulationPyramid.net

15.0 per cent, a high figure compared to the 12.4 per cent of the region as a whole, see figure 2. Since 2000, the older person dependency ratio has increased, and the last 7 years alone have seen a rapid growth of 40 per cent. At the current rate this figure will continue to rise, and thus the population of Sri Lanka is entering demographic transition phase four, that of an ageing population. In this regard, Sri Lanka stands out as one of the success stories of considerable advancements in human

development in South and South-West Asia. Early investments in health and education have resulted in significant reductions in infant mortality, increased life expectancy and decreased fertility. The life expectancy at birth is currently 75.5 years, a figure only surpassed in the subregion by the Maldives and Turkey at 77.6 and 76.0 years, respectively. In terms of the fertility rate, it has been in stasis, if not slightly decreasing, since 2008. In 2017, the level was only 2.0 live births per woman, a figure just below the replacement rate. This signifies the potential, or the beginning of, a declining population, which raises concerns and heightens the need for the government to invest in youth. These changes in Sri Lankan society have

Figure 2: Dependency ratio, 2017



Source: UNESCAP statistical database

influenced the nation's demographic status. The population is projected to reach its peak of 21.9 million people in 2031 and start declining after

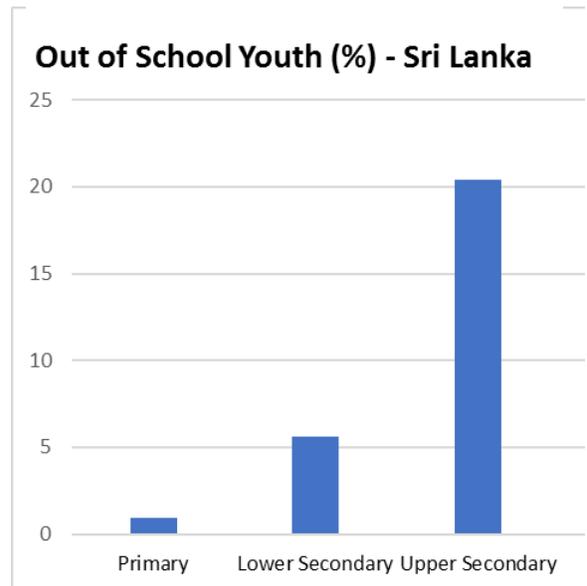
2046.¹ By 2041, one out of every four citizens is expected to be an older person,² making Sri Lanka the most aged society in South and South-West Asia. This trend is caused by Sri Lanka's low population growth rate, currently at 0.4 per cent.

Sri Lanka's Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2015 is 0.76, which puts the country in the high human development category, positioning it at 73 out of 188 countries and territories for the Asia-Pacific region. Sri Lanka is, however, still a very rural-centric country, with 80.6 per cent of the population living in rural areas. In terms of GDP (PPP), the latest data show that Sri Lanka is in the top 14 countries in Asia and the Pacific, with US\$806 million. Regarding GDP per capita, this was US\$3,910, compared with the Asia-Pacific regional average of US\$6,331. However, the latest data from 2015 show that government expenditure on all education (primary, secondary and tertiary) accounted for only 2.2 per cent of national GDP.

Education:

SDG4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Despite several challenges, Sri Lanka is making steps to satisfy the SDG 4 prerequisites. Unfortunately, data relating to education in Sri Lanka are scarce and the most recent statistical inputs are from several years ago. The data concerning the percentage of out of school youth comes from varying years, from 2011 to 2015. It indicates that government funding directed towards primary education has had an effect as only 0.92 per cent of children in Sri Lanka are out of primary school. The out of

Figure 3: Percentage of Out of School Youth



school rate in lower secondary is also quite low at 5.6 per cent. However, it is concerning that

Source: UN Statistical Database³

20.4 per cent of upper secondary youth are not in school, see figure 3. This results in few young people enrolling in tertiary education; in 2015 the figure was only 308,000 tertiary enrolments. However, statistics in 2016 reveal that government expenditure on secondary education was 49 per cent of national expenditure on education, therefore, it is secondary education that sees the highest investment by government. The youth literacy rate, is also high, at 98 per cent, according to the most recent data in 2010, see figure 4.

In spite of successes, government expenditure on all education accounted for only 2.2 per cent of GDP in 2015. When this figure is compared

¹ World Bank, 'Sri Lanka's Demographic Transition: Facing the Challenges of an Aging Population with Few Resources', 2012

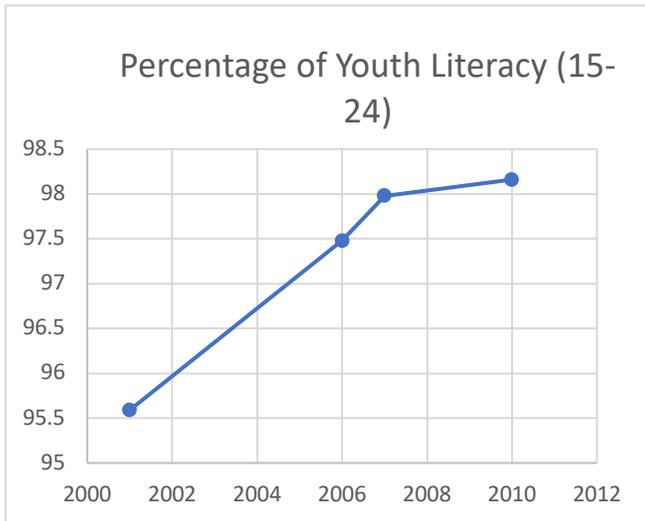
² World Bank, 'Sri Lanka's Demographic Transition: Facing the Challenges of an Aging Population with Few Resources', 2012

³ Latest available dates: Primary-2015; Lower Secondary-2013; Upper Secondary-2011

with other middle-income, or even low-income countries, in the Asia and Pacific region, it is strikingly low. Timor Leste invested 7.8 per cent of GDP into education in 2014, and Viet Nam devoted 5.7 per cent. The only country to invest less in education than Sri Lanka is Myanmar. This

Figure 4: Youth Literacy Rate (%)

low figure



Source: UNESCO statistical database

indicates the priority accorded to education, yet it must be remembered that successful educational outcomes are not achieved by high educational expenditure alone. Other factors, such as well-designed, inclusive and effective educational policies, can greatly improve the educational situation for all. Such policies and programmes do not have to be costly, while their implementation plays a vital role in ensuring positive educational attainments.

In accord with this notion, Sri Lanka has recently implemented a national vocational qualification system (NVQ) which aims to provide students with the necessary skills and qualifications to find vocational work following education. Traditionally, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) exams have been the primary qualifications used by universities, institutions of higher learning and employers in Sri Lanka to determine eligibility for further study or

employment. However, as is evident from figure 3, many students fail to pass, or even sit, these exams, thus creating a skills deficit in the work force, with employers struggling to find young people with the adequate skills and experience. Although this new qualification system satisfies the SDG 4 requirements of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, there have been some challenges in its implementation. Many employers still rely heavily on the traditional GCE examinations when hiring youth and are unaware of the new NVQ system. The differing exam results of many graduates enrolled in this programme often go unrecognized or spurned. Much stigma is also present in Sri Lanka surrounding vocational work and training, which should be addressed in line with SDG 4 and 8.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, the surge in youth engagement in vocational education has greatly decreased the skills deficit of Sri Lanka's workforce in areas that are vital to economic development, such as tourism, automobile repair and building and construction. With the option of vocational training, a rise in the percentage of youth completing secondary education should result, as more young people see the significance of vocational education for securing work. A total of 1,500 training sessions for schools have been conducted as well as youth clubs and programmes. Annually, roughly 70,000 students enroll in public- and private-sector vocational schools, with students from rural, low-income families representing the largest cohort. Over 15,000 students have found employment

following graduation,⁴ which includes self-employed income generating activities supported by government subsidies. Initiatives can have a great impact on education and preparing students for future employment, and such programmes do not have to be costly.

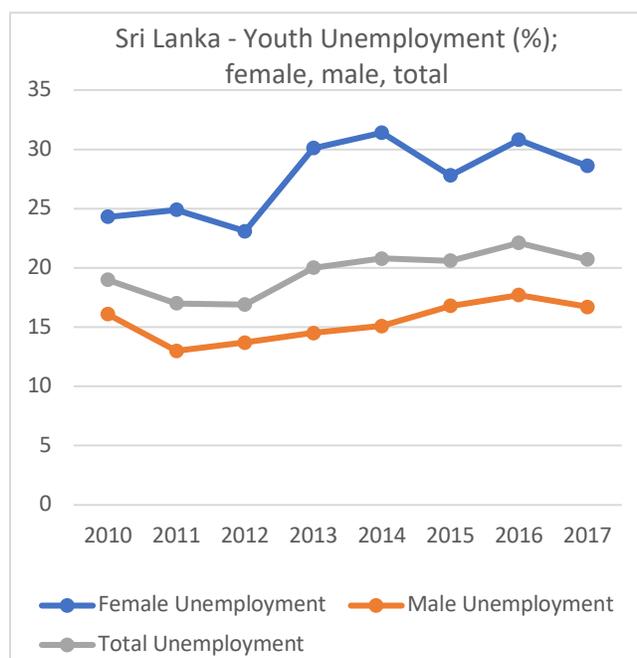
Youth Employment:

SDG 8 aims to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. This goal is specifically targeted at ensuring vulnerable groups - such as young people, women and persons with disabilities - enter the labour force.

Migration trends have seen many youth leave Sri Lanka in search of work due to the lack of available jobs in their home nation. Recent estimates suggest that over a million migrants work abroad, while the annual reported outflows are about 200,000 people.⁵ Over the years, foreign employment has generated substantial inflows of remittances and acted as a proxy solution to local unemployment. A key issue involves the opening of overseas employment opportunities for many women who may not have been active in the local labour force, or in low paid/informal occupations such as domestic work.

A total of 51.4 per cent of Sri Lanka's working age population are employed, however, the latest statistics from 2014 show that 27.7 per cent of the young population in Sri Lanka fall within the bracket of Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). The percentage of unemployed youth for both sexes is currently 20.7 per cent in 2017. There is also a great disparity between the female unemployment rate, at 28.6 per cent, and the male unemployment rate of 16.7 per cent. As figure 5 illustrates, the female

Figure 5: Youth Unemployment Rate (%); male; female; total



unemployment rate in Sri Lanka has remained high, which is surprising, given the consistently

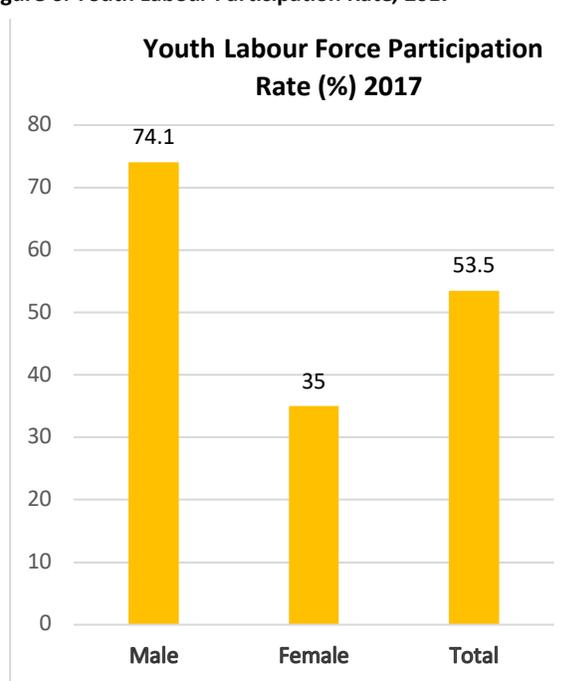
Source: UNESCAP Statistical Database

high educational attainment levels and other social indicators of women in the country. Figure 6 then indicates that the female unemployment rate is masking a serious issue – 65 per cent of young women in 2017 were not participating in the labour market, thus meaning they were not employed, nor in search of work. This figure is concerning and demonstrates that the majority of young women, being outside the labour market, are at an economic disadvantage. Women's economic empowerment would greatly benefit Sri Lanka, as an increase in female labour force participation, or a reduction in the gap between women's and men's labour force participation, tends to promote economic growth.

⁴ Youth Policy Toolbox, available at: <http://yptoolbox.unescapsdd.org/portfolio/national-vocational-qualification-system-sri-lanka/>

⁵ ILO, available at: <http://www.ilo.org/colombo/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

Figure 6: Youth Labour Participation Rate, 2017



Source: UNESCAP Statistical Database

Another issue of concern is that almost two-thirds of total employment in Sri Lanka is informal employment.⁶ There is great instability in informal employment and the characteristics include a lack of protection for non-payment of wages, retrenchment without notice or compensation, unsatisfactory occupational health and safety conditions and an absence of social benefits such as pensions, sick pay and health insurance. Many young men and women in Sri Lanka are forced into this type of work due to schools failing to provide students with vocational skills which would prepare them for formal work following upper secondary education. A lack of work experience and availability of formal jobs has also contributed to

⁶ ILO, available: http://www.ilo.org/colombo/areasofwork/WCMS_127383/lang--en/index.htm

many young people working in informal employment.

To address the aforementioned issues, Sri Lanka has initiated many government funded programmes in an attempt to reduce the youth unemployment rate. However, there have been several challenges in satisfying the SDG 8 requirements. A primary issue is that most investment is concentrated in large cities, leaving those in rural communities behind. As seen, roughly 80 per cent of the population of Sri Lanka exists in rural areas where access to technology and ICT equipment is severely limited. Another striking issue noted earlier is the education that students receive does not reflect current trends in the job market, thus many students are unprepared to enter the labour force. Apprenticeships, work experience opportunities and vocational trainings are on offer from the Government, yet, issues have occurred with these initiatives such as a lack of supervision during apprenticeships and the unrecognition of vocational qualifications by employers.

Low government expenditure on education contributes to youth employment promotion programmes being supported by inadequate infrastructure, such as under-resourced career development centres. A lack of institutional support has also been noted as banks and credit unions are slow or unwilling to introduce flexible and low-interest loans to youth, and often business counselling is not comprehensive. In this context, traditional views, culture and attitudes to education and the labour market should be challenged as they have a detrimental effect on young people entering the work force. 'White collar jobs' are idealized and other positions are not deemed acceptable. Dropping out of school is often preferred to vocational

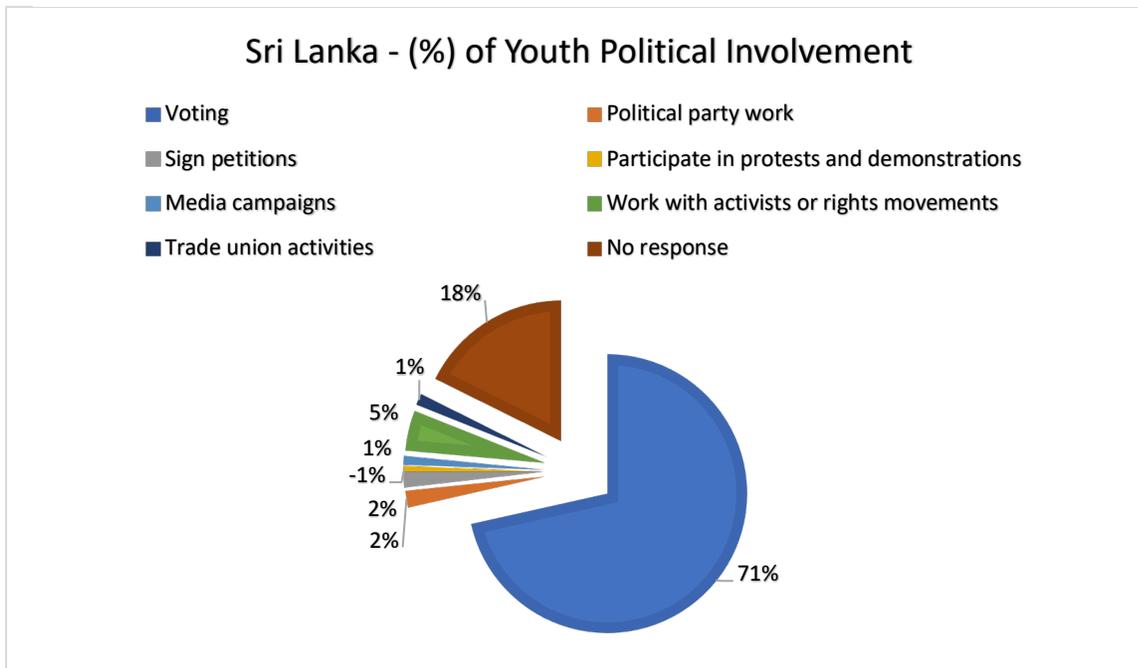
training. Despite these challenges, nationally accredited vocational programmes have enrolled 85,000 youth with 80 per cent of these students securing public or private sector employment following graduation from the programmes. Organizations assisting the school-to-work transition have noted the registration and assistance of 16,530 job seekers as well as the placement of 25,000 students in public and private sector internships and apprenticeships. It has also been observed that 68 per cent of interns in technological fields were offered positions by their host companies within a year of their internships beginning.⁷

Civic Engagement:

Historically in Sri Lanka, youth have had a major political role, with several political movements drawing mainly from young people. State responses to these youth-led political movements were often violent, resulting in a

large number of deaths and widespread civil unrest – thus, a mentality of intolerance and oppression in the face of youth engagement in politics has imbedded itself in much of Sri Lankan society. There is a wariness amongst Sri Lankan authorities towards youth political engagement; moreover, as is evident from figure 7, there is a high level of political disenchantment amongst Sri Lankan youth and an unwillingness to engage. Political parties often have their own youth corps, or youth wing, yet under 10 per cent of Sri Lankan youth express a desire to engage politically through direct activism, see figure 7. This is contrasted with similar lower-middle income countries such as Thailand and Indonesia which have 52 and 46 per cent of youth respectively engaging in political activism.⁸ However, the majority, 71 per cent, of young people vote in Sri Lanka. While this is a high figure, when compared with available data from similar income countries, Sri Lanka is shown to

Figure 7: Percentage of Youth Political Involvement



Source: National Youth Survey (UNDP), 2013

⁷ Youth Policy Toolbox, available at: <http://yptoolbox.unescapsdd.org/portfolio/public-employment-service-pes-centres-epes-sri-lanka/>

⁸ UNDP, Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia, 2014

have a comparable, if not lower, figure for youth voting. Viet Nam and Thailand experience higher voting turnouts amongst youth at 81 and 84 per cent respectively.⁹

According to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017, which scales countries from 0, highly corrupt to 100, very clean. Sri Lanka was rated as 38, putting it 91st on the scale of perceived corruption out of the 130 countries measured.¹⁰ The high corruption perception index found in Sri Lanka affects young people's desire to become involved with politics. Despite these perceptions, given the right opportunities and freedom, young people in Sri Lanka have a strong willingness to participate in politics. In this regard, an initiative supported by the Government of Sri Lanka is the Sri Lankan Youth Parliament (SLYP). The SLYP aims to politically engage youth, to develop leadership skills and to develop the practical knowledge in youth communities on issues and challenges in the political sphere. The main aim, however, is to build a second generation of proficient leaders and ensure the constructive involvement of youth in the development agenda of the country. The SLYP has tackled issues such as political disengagement and disenchantment, and been very successful in engaging youth. After only three annual youth parliaments, almost 20,000 young people were directly and indirectly educated and trained in Parliament proceedings, rules and regulations. Roughly, 1,500 youth-led service projects were proposed and implemented during the 2015-2016 session and these projects have benefited more than 262,500 youth nationwide.¹¹

⁹ UNDP, Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia, 2014

¹⁰ Corruptions Perception Index, 2017. Available at https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017

¹¹ Youth Policy Toolbox, available at:

<http://yptoolbox.unescapsdd.org/portfolio/sri-lanka-youth-parliament-sri-lanka/>

Recommendations:

Education

In spite of progress made in furthering educational enrollment and completion, significantly greater efforts are needed to ensure that out-of-school rates in secondary education for both sexes decrease. Given the significance of education, the government should promote expenditure and increase the percentage of GDP spent on upper secondary and tertiary education. Finally, negative attitudes towards vocational education and work should be tackled and the availability of vocational training, apprenticeships and internships should be enhanced.

Employment

In terms of youth unemployment, or vulnerable employment, systems should be put in place ensuring decent working standards in informal jobs. At the same time, regulations and procedures relating to businesses and enterprises should be simplified and incentives such as credit offered. This would encourage employers of informal workers to seek legal recognition. In terms of a disparity between female and male workers, many of the gendered norms that eventually morph into constraints to labour demand originate in the family unit, are built on in the education system, and are cemented into place in society. While it is difficult, there is a critical need to remove attitudinal and societal bias towards traditional gender roles.

Civic Engagement

Finally, despite initiatives such as the SLYP, youth political engagement is still low. The government should invest in youth corps and encourage the active participation of young people in the nation's politics. When opening opportunities for young people to partake in decision-making processes, a significant emphasis of this

development should be on marginalized youth. Youth political activism should be harnessed rather than feared and young women should be specifically targeted to ensure their political involvement.

