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RAPID ASSESSMENT OF SRI LANKAN YOUTH FINAL REPORT

JANUARY 2016

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DISCLAIMER

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

According to the Sri Lanka 2012 Census, 23.2 percent of the population is between 15 to 29 years of age. Sri Lanka does not have a youth bulge problem as seen in many other parts of the world. However, youth are a significant constituency with problems specific to the school-to-work transition in life that is a marker of the shift to adulthood. It will be important to have their support to stabilize the transition to democracy and to keep the economy growing.

Methods

The youth rapid assessment used a framework modeled on USAID's guidance and proceeded through four steps: A desk review in Washington of mission strategy and program documents, recent reports on youth in Sri Lanka, and statistical information; internal consultations with key Asia Bureau experts in Washington; fact-finding meetings in Colombo and site visits to multiple areas of the country to conduct interviews and focus groups with project implementing partners, collaborating partners, selected beneficiaries, and other key stakeholders; and a mission out-brief and summary of the team's findings and recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Unemployment is the most significant issue facing youth. Youth unemployment rates are significantly higher than the regional average. Under-employment is particularly problematic for the poor, rural, less educated, and women. Youth aspirations are out of line with the realities of the labor market, but poor information systems perpetuate this situation. Migration both domestically and internationally is becoming more popular due to lack of opportunities at home.

The major cause of youth unemployment, identified by all of our informants, is that the education system, including technical and vocational education, fails to prepare students for the workplace. Soft skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving are not developed under the current curriculum. Exposure to languages, particularly English, and computer skills could help job prospects in addition to reconciliation and social inclusion.

Youth are most affected by reproductive and mental health concerns. Awareness of services for reproductive and mental health is poor, with more than half of youth unaware of service availability. Poor access to these services may affect employment outcomes. Sri Lankan youth also face developed world health problems (i.e., non-communicable diseases). Malnutrition still exists but mostly affects rural female populations. These health problems, if left unaddressed, can negatively affect employment prospects for youth.

The fear of youth as a force to destabilize the country persists. This has bled into how the structures that should enable youth engagement are used rather to manage youth—such as the youth societies, youth council, etc. In response, youth have largely disengaged from civic and political participation, yet they still have optimism for change under the new government.

Recommendations

Integrate youth and address youth issues across the USAID portfolio in Sri Lanka. At the least, include youth as a cross-cutting issue in the Country Development & Cooperation Strategy given that their problems reflect the challenges to society at large.

For a youth specific activity, start with the highest priority problem but take a holistic view of youth and their needs when addressing it. All informants identified the top need for youth as employment. In a youth specific activity, combining employment with aspects of education, health, civic engagement, reconciliation, and inclusion—which are all linked to the employment problem—is vital. A focus on employment would also help avoid the sensitivities that still exist around mobilizing groups of youth.

Work to encourage systemic change rather than treating symptoms. Seek to create change at the root of the problem within the system rather than addressing a symptom. For example, informants universally identified the education system as a major contributor to youth unemployment. USAID could find strategic ways to partner schools with the private sector or linking those schools introducing new civic education courses to civil society organizations. Work on information systems including media would be another systemic approach to an issue underpinning the labor market and other youth problems.

Leverage local capacity. There are many organizations doing good work already on the ground. Work through them rather than competing with them.

Engage the government. A successful youth population needs the support of government stakeholders. Clear government guidance will enable the rest of society to take more action on youth engagement in all areas without fear of reprisal.

Prioritize Outcomes for Women. Set a high target for young women—not only for their participation in schools, civic organizations, and in the public and private sectors, but for their ability to benefit from that participation. Women are one of the most vulnerable segments of Sri Lankan society. The measures needed to fix problems that women face will address deeper societal issues and problems that are faced by everyone.

PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

The purpose of this rapid youth assessment is to inform USAID/Sri Lanka's Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) development and serve as an initial analysis for programming that will fall under it. This assessment is cross-sectoral and focused on youth aged 15 to 29 years, as most data resources define youth using that age range. See Annex 1 for details on the methodology, Annex 2 for the schedule of stakeholder meetings, and Annex 3 for the list of sources consulted.

Figure 1. Age-Sex Pyramid Evolution

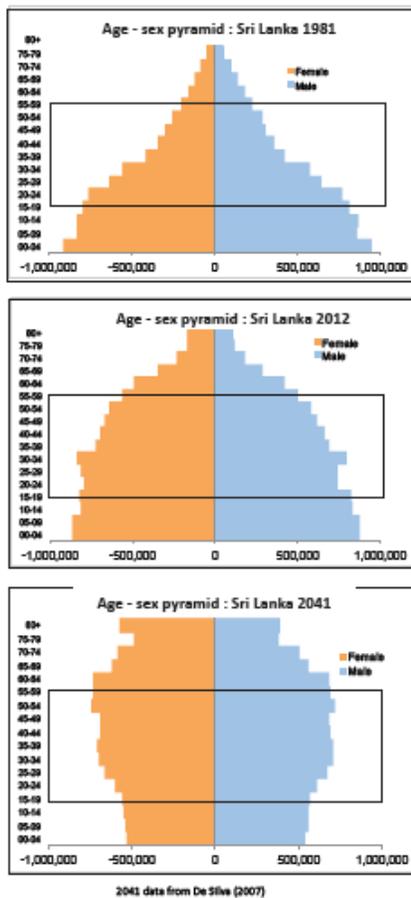
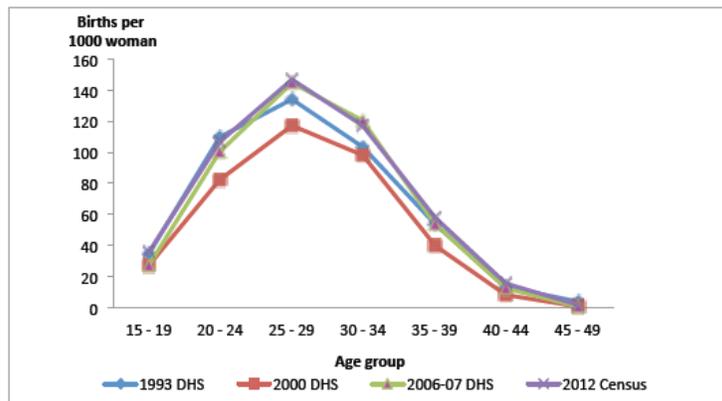


Figure 1 shows that Sri Lanka is not expected to experience a youth bulge, but there is some opportunity for a demographic dividend with the current youth cohort (until the 2030s) if fertility declines further.¹ Current census data is not showing a clear trend in fertility decline (see Figure 2), but it is clear that more than half of all births occur before age 30, which is a consideration for working with female youth.²

Figure 2. Age Specific Fertility Trends



According to the Sri Lanka 2012 Census, 23.2 percent of the population is between 15 to 29 years of age. This is a decline from 26.8 percent in 2001. The 2013 National Youth Survey found that the distribution of youth by ethnicity approximately matches the broader population. Sinhala represent 72.8 percent of the youth population with Sri Lankan Tamil making up 13.7 percent, Moor 9.7 percent, Indian Tamil 3.2 percent, and other ethnicities comprising 0.5 percent.³

While Sri Lanka does not have a youth bulge problem as seen in many other parts of the world, youth are a significant constituency with problems specific to the school-to-work transition in life that is a marker of the shift to adulthood. It will be important to have their support to stabilize the transition to democracy and to keep the economy growing. Marriage is another marker of the shift to adulthood. The mean age at marriage of males and females in Sri Lanka has started to decline gradually and stood at 27.2 years for males and 23.4 years for females in 2012.⁴ This decline may be due to increased optimism post-conflict, but if unemployment problems continue to plague youth, they may decide to delay marriage in the coming years. Looking forward over the longer-term, it is

¹ *Census of Population and Housing 2012: Key Findings* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning), p. 14.

² *Ibid*, p. 34.

³ *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development* (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 10.

⁴ *Census of Population and Housing 2012: Key Findings* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning), p. 28.

expected that old age dependency ratios will continue to rise should fertility rates decline. The current youth cohort needs to maximize their economic output to stabilize that demographic transition over the next 30+ years and to keep fertility at replacement rate to prevent new economic problems for the country.

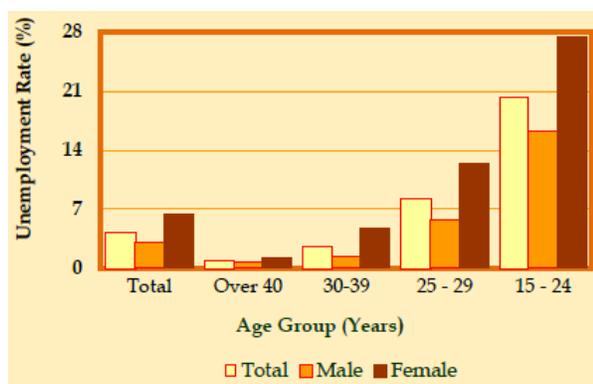
CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR YOUTH

The *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development* draws from an extensive and representative national youth survey executed in 2013. With small exceptions, which will be noted, the stakeholder interviews confirmed that the survey findings still hold in early 2016. Given this validation, this section presents the top line findings from that youth survey along five categories—employment, education, health, civic & political participation, and reconciliation & social integration—with additional observations from the stakeholder interviews and other sources as relevant.

EMPLOYMENT

Everyone interviewed identified unemployment as the most significant issue facing youth. Youth unemployment

Figure 3. Sri Lankan Unemployment Rates are Highest for Youth and Women



rates, at 20.3%⁵, are significantly higher than the regional average of 9.9%, although on par with Europe at 20%.⁶

This may be driven by a combination of significantly higher rates of unemployment for women and the global tendency for educated youth to have higher unemployment rates. However, it should be noted that greater employment rates for the less educated typically mask a large under-employment problem among the poor since they will engage in whatever occupation they can find, while more affluent youth can afford to be unemployed while searching for a better fit. Figure 3 shows that youth, and women across all age brackets, have the highest unemployment rates.⁷

Women are a particular employment challenge. Their labor force participation rates are quite low, averaging 34.7 percent overall. Women tend to work more at younger ages (see Figure 4), but drop out of the labor force over time, presumably for housework, as 62.8 percent of economically inactive women report. Among youth, there is little difference between participation rates in the urban and rural sectors, but significantly more women participate in the estate sector (20.6 percent of 15-19 y.o., 44.8 percent of 20-24 y.o., 66.3 percent of 25-29 y.o.).⁸ This may be because they are

Figure 4. Sri Lanka Labor Force Participation is Very Low for Women

Age group/Sector	Labour Force Participation Rate (%)		
	Total	Male	Female
Total	53.3	74.6	34.7
15 - 19	15.3	20.7	9.8
20 - 24	52.9	70.4	37.7
25 - 29	63.9	92.5	41.5
30 - 39	68.0	96.3	43.6
40 +	53.4	75.7	34.3

⁵ *Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey: Annual Report 2014* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Policy Planning, Economic Affairs, Child, Youth, and Cultural Affairs), p. 23. This rate is for 15-24 year olds.

⁶ *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015* (Geneva: International Labour Organization), p. 6.

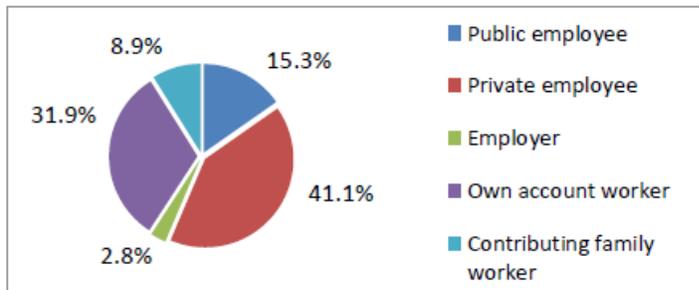
⁷ *Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey: Annual Report 2014* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Policy Planning, Economic Affairs, Child, Youth, and Cultural Affairs), p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7, 9, & 12.

helping to anchor housing benefits through their employment and because jobs are readily supplied to the willing. There is also a fair amount of variation in women's participation by district. Of the young women that would like to work, their unemployment rates are double those of men.⁹

"There is currently far more emphasis on building the private sector and linking people directly to the market so that the role of the state is minimized. Yet this shift has not been accompanied by any transformation of the relations that position people differently within Sri Lankan society. Consequently, the private sector often reproduces many of the hierarchies that privilege certain people over others."¹⁰ This is an important consideration given that the private sector engages the vast majority of the population. Only 15.3 percent of workers are employed by the public sector (see Figure 5).¹¹

Figure 5. Public vs. Private Workforce

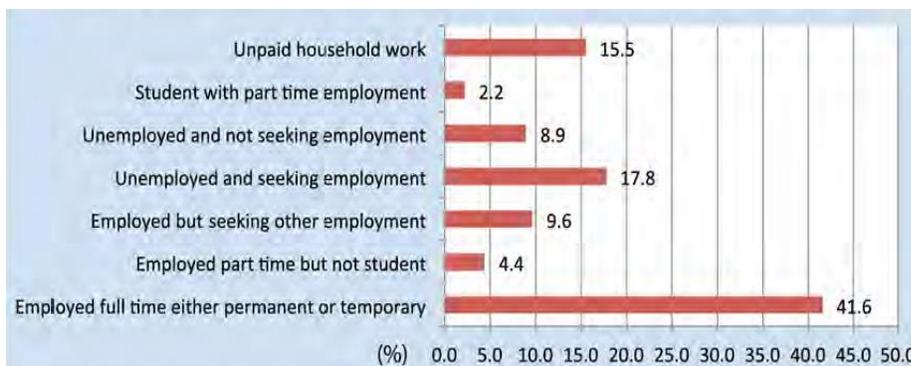


This reality is at odds with the aspirations of youth, who almost universally prefer public sector employment. There is even a belief among youth that the government “owes” them a job; some stakeholders speculate this is a result of the free education system. In focus groups, youth noted they are willing to take a salary cut to have a public sector job for the job security and status, and thus, they direct their education with that in mind.

Youth tend to seek jobs for social status, and their aspirations are not informed by the labor market or economic sector trends.¹² While there is a persistent perception that youth are not interested in agriculture, the USAID partner working in this sector noted that it is true only of traditional agriculture. New, technology-enabled agricultural practices are of interest.

Of the youth that do find work, most are in unstable jobs (see Figure 6). However, there is a promising trend in the amount of time it takes young job seekers to find work: 73 percent reported finding work within 12 months.¹³

Figure 6. Youth Employment Status



Most interviewees brought up a mismatch between the skills youth develop in their education and those required in the workforce.¹⁴ Poorer youth, rural youth, women, and those that struggle in school have fewer viable options.

⁹ Ibid, p. 10 & 23.

¹⁰ Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 102.

¹¹ Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey: Annual Report 2014 (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Policy Planning, Economic Affairs, Child, Youth, and Cultural Affairs), p. 17.

¹² Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 39.

¹³ Ibid, p. 35.

These groups also tend to have higher rates of under-employment and to be in the informal sector (except for women who do better in the formal sector).¹⁵ Of those 15-19 years old, 16.6 percent drop out of school to pursue work, ironically putting them at a disadvantage to compete in the job market.¹⁶ Unfortunately, women are often directed to traditional sectors and roles, such as home-based employment, that limit their economic potential. Language barriers mentioned later in this assessment are significant. There are sizeable wage gaps reported between sectors, employment statuses (monthly vs. daily earners), and for women versus men.

Generally, lack of information or awareness of how to find information is a constraint to the labor market matching process. Youth get information about job opportunities from the newspapers (40 percent) or social networks (30 percent). But many perceive that special connections are required to actually get the job, which creates a sense of discrimination (that may be real). Ten percent of youth prefer to be self-employed. This matches results of international research that ten percent of the population have the characteristics required to be an entrepreneur. But these youth have a hard time getting started, particularly due to lack of financing.¹⁷ Youth lack information about what skills are required for what job, and what a career pathway might look like. There is a belief that taking an entry level position marks one as "low level" permanently without opportunity to advance. Vocational education has a bad reputation, but of the youth who found work within a year, 85 percent had vocational training.¹⁸ Even these institutions lack proper information from the private sector to gauge how many students should pursue which vocations for employment in which parts of the country. Each district has its own labor market nuance, further complicating the situation.

Migration is a significant factor for youth employment, both within Sri Lanka and internationally. While census data did not specify age cohorts, it noted that 2.7 million people had migrated to other provinces as of 2012. One in four people in the Western Province is a migrant. Of the migrant population, 20.4 percent moved to find work. Many more women migrate to new provinces, but marriage or accompanying family members could account for this.¹⁹ International migration for work has increased in popularity over the last couple of decades, with one out of eleven households now having at least one member living abroad temporarily. Of these, 67 percent are in the Middle East. Interestingly, while women used to go overseas (typically as domestic labor) more than men, that trend has reversed. In 2012, 85 percent of the population temporarily living abroad was doing so for employment and of those, 60 percent were men and 40 percent were women.²⁰ Yet stakeholders perceived that it was the women that were doing most of the migration. While the remittances from migration are of substantial benefit to the economy and individual households, these youth migrants are more vulnerable to instability of employment, abuses while away from their family and community, and trafficking for those venturing abroad. Stakeholders also reported that the family left behind can suffer as well, particularly children of women who migrate for work, who lack adequate protections in their mother's absence. While migration cannot be stopped and provides a valuable outlet for labor oversupply, it can also be a source of "brain drain". Yet if youth can be enabled to migrate safely for decent work, they could either gain valuable experience to bring back to the domestic labor market or they could serve in a beneficial diaspora function over the longer-term.

The mismatch of labor force cognitive, technical, and soft skills to labor market demand is a global phenomenon, yet seems to be more acute in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan firms are twice as likely to indicate an inadequate labor force

¹⁴ This mismatch was further validated for four specific sectors by the International Labour Organization in 2015. This report also finds that the education systems's emphasis on technical skills is problematic. See http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_359346.pdf.

¹⁵ *Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey: Annual Report 2014* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Policy Planning, Economic Affairs, Child, Youth, and Cultural Affairs), p. 27-28, 31-32.

¹⁶ *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development* (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 35.

¹⁹ *Census of Population and Housing 2012: Key Findings* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning), p. 46, 48-49.

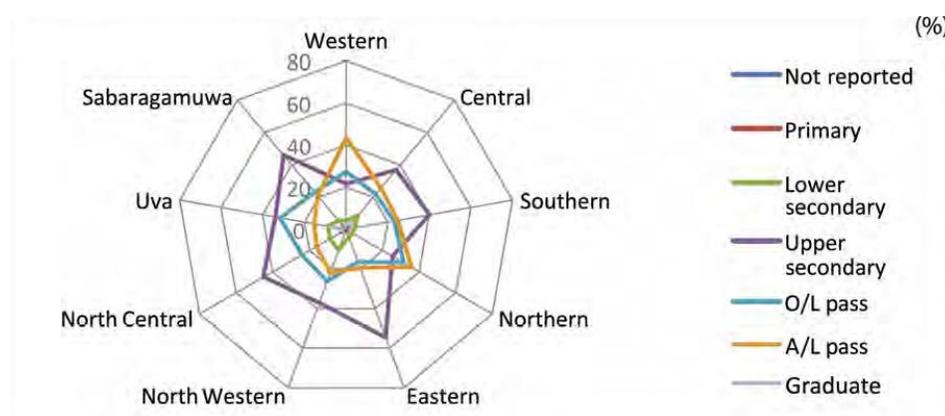
²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 54-55.

as a severe constraint than firms in Pakistan or Nepal. There is a body of research that examines the problem, including a World Bank study that identifies five probable drivers of the mismatch that will need to be addressed if the employment problem for youth is to be resolved. Those are: 1) the formal wage economy not generating jobs to match new labor market entrants, 2) poor or wrong market signals creating unrealistic employment opportunity expectations, 3) migration of skilled workers, 4) insufficient labor market information to guide policies around skill demand and supply provision, and 5) outdated and unresponsive technical and vocational training programs without performance incentives.²¹

EDUCATION

Broadly speaking, the Sri Lankan education system is doing well, as evidenced by the high literacy rates; however, there remain issues of uneven quality and access. The areas lagging in education are generally those that also struggle with poverty, marginalization, and exclusion since these problems reinforce each other (see Figure 7). Due to the limited types of schools in rural areas, these students tend to end up in the arts. This leads to oversupply in this stream, and these graduates see higher rates of unemployment or are forced to take lower skilled work in other sectors. Despite "free" education, 60 percent of dropouts cite school costs as the reason.²²

Figure 7. Highest Level of Educational Achievement



Sri Lankan women often surpass men in educational achievement: girls are more likely to stay in school than boys. In 2012, there were 591,087 youth at the "O level" of education of which 51 percent were girls. At the next level ("A level"), of the 468,880 youth, the percentage of females increased to 56.4 of the total.²³

University capacity is extremely limited. As access and achievement continue to increase at lower levels, the percentage of qualified youth admitted to university is trending downward. This is a source of frustration for those youth who see higher education as the path to good employment. In the 2010/2011 school year, only 22,016 students were admitted—15.2 percent of those qualified.²⁴

Technical and vocational training is widely available in a range of topics. However, perceptions of quality and usefulness are low among youth, so most shun this option. Of the total labor force, 16 percent have received this type of training, but among them 25 percent are still unemployed. This may be the result of inadequate training or

²¹ Halil Dunder et al., *Building the Skills for Economic Growth and Competitiveness in Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: The World Bank), 2014, p. 7 & 9.

²² Ibid, p. 17-19, 26.

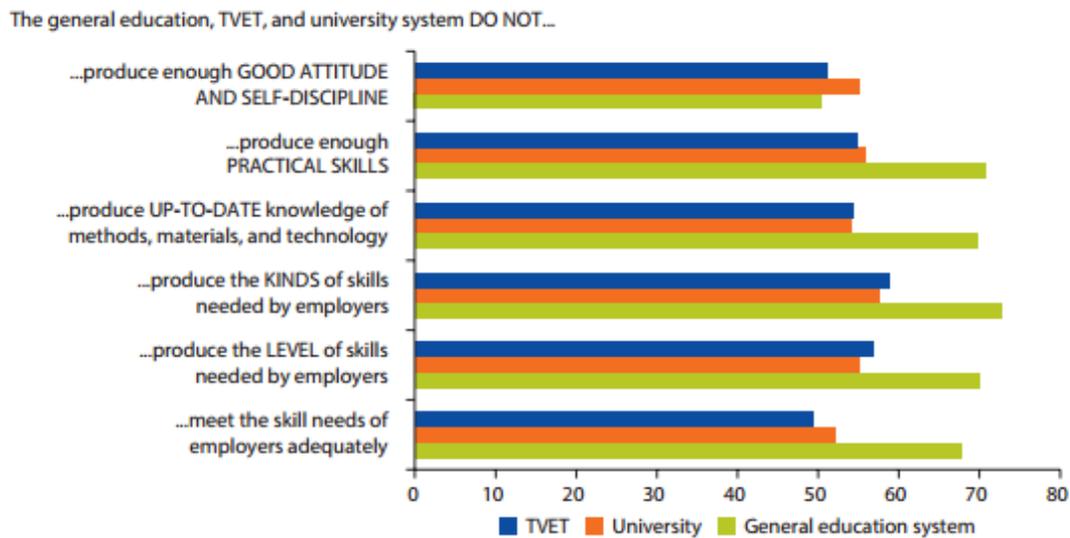
²³ Ibid, p. 20.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 22.

training in areas without job openings. Youth also express a preference for professional occupations, which are not supported with this type of training outside Colombo.²⁵

The greatest criticism of the education system is that it is too academic, increasingly competitive, and yet fails to prepare students for the workplace. Soft skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving are not developed under the current curriculum. Exposure to languages, particularly English, could help job prospects. While the census data show that youth have greater language proficiency than the general population, particularly in urban areas, the youth still perceive their capacity to be well under what is required in the job market. Language is also a key barrier to reconciliation and social inclusion. The situation is similar with Internet skills. While youth have far more usage than the over 30 population, those surveyed feel it is not sufficient.²⁶

Figure 8. Employer Perceptions of Educational Systems



Among interviews, many stakeholders pointed to the education system both as a source of youth problems and an opportunity for broad change. For the youth cohort, the employer perceptions of youth preparedness for work is influenced by the employers faith in these education systems (see Figure 8).²⁷ Organizations have found ways to collaborate at the community level to introduce important awareness initiatives, such as sex education and civic education, into the schools.

HEALTH

Reproductive and mental health are the most important issues for the youth cohort. Awareness of services for reproductive and mental health is poor, with more than half of youth unaware of service availability. When seeking guidance in these areas, most turn to family and friends, which helps perpetuate misinformation and cultural or religious norms.²⁸ Several stakeholders noted that these issues exacerbate the difficulty for youth of finding good employment.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 24-25.

²⁶ *Census of Population and Housing 2012: Key Findings* (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning), p. 39.

²⁷ Halil Dunder et al., *Building the Skills for Economic Growth and Competitiveness in Sri Lanka* (Washington, DC: The World Bank), 2014, p. 11.

²⁸ *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development* (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 52.

Reproductive health is especially tricky due to social and religious norms. Youth tend to seek reproductive health information at school. While a significant number are sexually active, the majority do not know about contraceptive methods, which also puts them at higher risk for sexually transmitted infections. In 2004, 50 percent of infection cases were in youth. Less than 25 percent of adolescents in school understand menstruation, conception risk, and signs of pregnancy. Intercourse is first experienced, on average, at 15 years for girls and 14 years for boys, with a higher percentage having homosexual intercourse. Most say their first experience was outside of a romantic relationship. This may be a reflection of what anecdotally is a high incidence of child abuse and gender-based violence, including rape (official statistics would be underreported). Interviews reflected the lack of reproductive awareness, reporting a number of pregnancies among single women, particularly in more vulnerable populations like the free trade zone migrants. The teenage pregnancy rate is highest in the estates.²⁹ Many of these youth reportedly seek illegal and unsafe abortions.

The need for psycho-social counseling came up multiple times in interviews. These youth have experienced a variety of types of trauma, depending on their cohort. Yet it remains taboo to seek help, or services simply do not exist. They are war affected, away from home, subject to gender-based violence³⁰, abused, under extreme academic pressure, stressed about finding work, socially isolated, or marginalized. Emotional abuse was reported by 31 percent of male students and 25 percent of female students. In the Southern Province, 22 percent of male students and 16 percent of female students reported physical abuse. Ten percent of children aged 10-13 years admitted sexual abuse, with the majority being boys. Most perpetrators are family members. The stakeholders interviewed that provide counseling all said that demand far outstrips what they can supply. Most of these youth suffer in silence due to the social stigma. More than a quarter use tobacco or alcohol. Others abuse drugs, which are reportedly easy to get in some communities. Suicide rates are high, with 21 percent of youth reporting to personally know another who has attempted it.³¹

With Sri Lanka's middle income status, it is increasingly seeing "developed" country health issues like non-communicable diseases driven by lifestyle shifts in eating and physical activity. Only a quarter of youth are engaged in sports. Still, "developing" country health issues remain. For example, one in six women of child-bearing age was malnourished in 2006-2007, with 62 percent of those being 15-29 years old. Prevalence of malnutrition among women on estates was twice that of urban women.³²

CIVIC & POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The history of youth insurrection still looms large in Sri Lanka. While the major events, spearheaded by university students, happened some time ago, the memories of the violent response of the government at the time remain vivid. Those youth were motivated by disappointment with the government's failure to address inequalities and were met with death and disappearance on a large scale. Hostility to student activism and repression of student unions and leaders continued for years. Now there are emerging extremist religious groups that have a strong pull for youth, although informants feel they are largely marginal.³³

The fear of youth as a force to destabilize the country once more persists. This has bled into how the structures that should enable youth engagement are used rather to manage youth—such as the youth societies, youth council, etc. They are created and led by adults with youth-led initiatives a rarity. Even in youth dominated settings, such as

²⁹ Ibid, 55-58.

³⁰ UNFPA's "Gender-Based Violence Factsheet" has a chart of major studies conducted and topline findings; available at <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/srilanka/drive/FactSheetsGBV.pdf>.

³¹ *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development* (Colombo: United Nations Development Programme), p. 58-60.

³² Ibid, p. 51 & 54.

³³ Ibid, p. 66, 72, & 75.

school, only 30 percent of youth report taking leadership roles at any time.³⁴ Among stakeholders, some did not even know if the Youth Parliament still existed.

The lack of youth-led initiatives is also a reflection of the larger cultural orientation towards adults rather than youth. Adults expect youth to obey them, and often they do by default. Parents do not encourage civic and political engagement from fear of consequences should those youth become active on the "wrong" side.

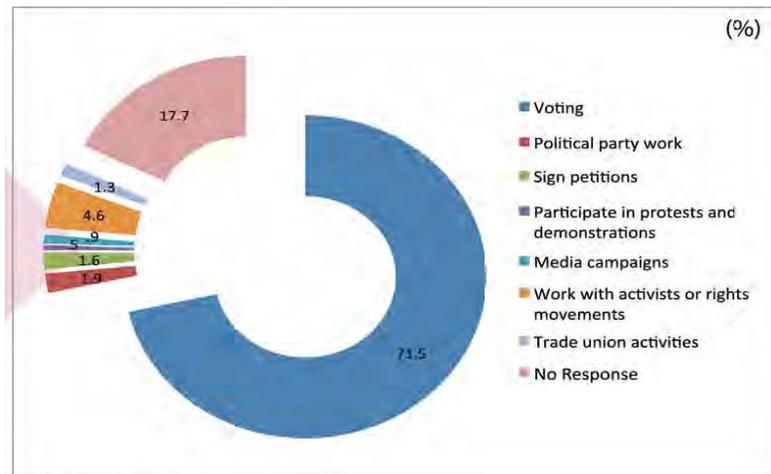
Figure 9 shows the responses from the 2013 National Youth Survey which clearly show that aside from voting, youth are largely disengaged.³⁵ This was supported in interviews with youth by the assessment team: there was near-universal voting, but little else to say. Several organizations noted that they have explicitly tried to get youth involved in rights activism, but cannot get them to come. It is not evident if the lack of engagement is due to ineffective outreach (knowing that youth use different communication channels) or if youth apathy or fear was the barrier. One organization acknowledged that it probably needed to try different means of outreach.

There are initiatives such as leadership training to try to stimulate youth participation, but they lack links to actual decision-making—stunting their effectiveness. There is a pronounced gender gap, with female youth noting that this type of decision-making and activism was not for them. Further, few youth seem to have any awareness of the challenges for women to participate in politics.³⁶ Interestingly, while interviewees noted this issue among the broader youth population, all of the organizations had youth staff or volunteers who seemed quite dynamic, including women. One young Muslim woman was the first female practicing lawyer in her town.

At the time of the 2013 National Youth Survey, youth were quite pessimistic about everything connected to the government; for example, 89 percent had low trust in political parties.³⁷ This is the area that seems to have shifted most during the last couple of years. Interviewees and youth focus groups still largely expressed dissatisfaction with the government, yet they were still hopeful that change would happen. The election "was like waking up from a bad dream" according to one key informant. There is still a sense of anticipation that something might change, but everyone noted that it better happen soon. The majority of interviewees expressed the sentiment that things have changed at the top, but the rest of the system remains unchanged, with the same people playing the same roles. The observation that a state welfare model underpinned advancement in health and education means that, in absence of political reform, hierarchy and patronage will continue to determine access and frustrate youth civic engagement.³⁸

All interviewees were asked about role models for youth. Most interpreted this, at least initially, to mean among civic and political leaders. All laughed in response to the question. Repeatedly the assessment team was told that if local role models emerged, they were quickly co-opted by the political parties. Even the emerging youth leaders

Figure 9. Youth Political Engagement



³⁴ Ibid, p. 68.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 67, 75-76.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 70-71, 76.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 69.

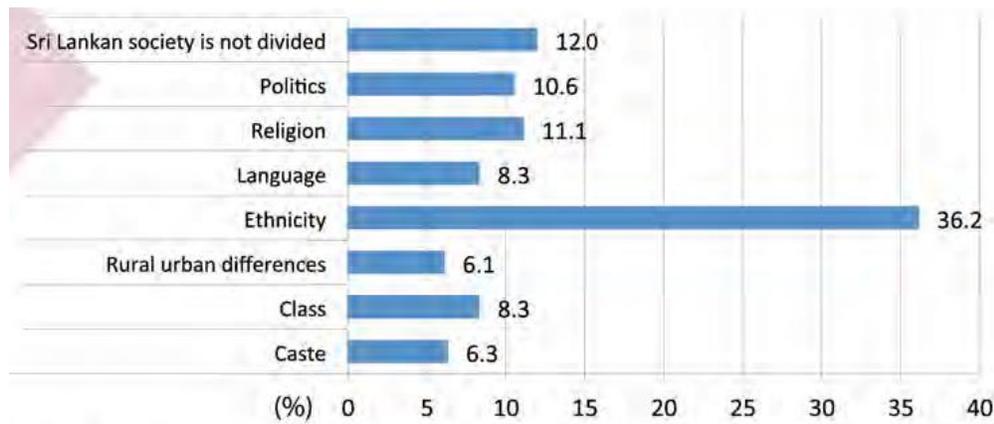
³⁸ Ibid, p. 80.

were seen as quickly succumbing to the corruption of the system and forgetting those they are meant to represent. This speaks to the underlying distrust that has not dissipated, as well as a lack of clarity about how to be or engage with a role model, especially for women.

RECONCILIATION & SOCIAL INTEGRATION

"Sri Lanka's civil war has often been described as an ethnic conflict based primarily on questions of identity and belonging."³⁹ For youth coming of age during the conflict or in the period immediately after, issues of reconciliation and social integration are important. They have been shaped by this environment directly and indirectly through nationalist ideologies. Society changed during this time to reflect ethnicity as the most important identity, and 36 percent of youth also point to ethnicity as the most important factor dividing Sri Lanka (see Figure 10). Religion is an emerging point of conflict, particularly between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims. There is some variation among opinion on divisive factors by province and ethnicity. For example, in Northern Province, 75 percent of Moors think religion is most divisive, while 19.7 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils point to caste.⁴⁰ Ultimately it is a mix of all the factors noted in the chart below that determines where a youth fits in the societal hierarchy.

Figure 10. Youth Opinions on Factors Dividing Sri Lankan Society



Language is a particular barrier, as noted in the education section. If youth cannot communicate across ethnic groups, their ability to feel included and reconcile their differences is severely restricted, job prospects aside. In the survey youth were asked to rate their skills in other tongues: 97 percent of Sinhalese youth said their Tamil was poor. Promotion of English as a linking language between Sinhala and Tamil speakers can also lead youth to be excluded if they do not speak it well. It is seen as a language of the elite and can be polarizing from that perspective. This issue is complex as it connects to the colonial past and is reflected in youth perceptions of their ability to use English rooted as much in the social and cultural capital around English as it is in actual competency.⁴¹

Yet, even with the tensions of the conflict and the language barriers, 72 percent of youth think there is now more interaction among ethnic groups than in the past. As with all things, there is nuance among the youth cohorts based on sex and ethnicity, as shown in Figure 11.⁴²

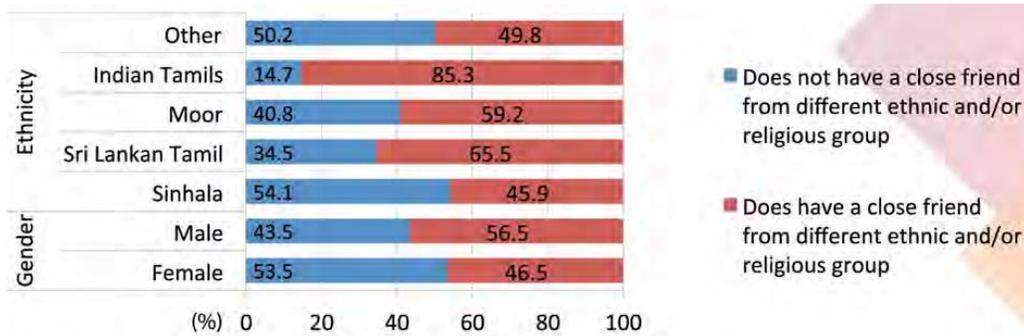
³⁹ Ibid, p. 85.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 85-86.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 87-88.

⁴² Ibid, p. 88-89.

Figure 11. Youth Friendships Across Ethnic Lines



This change is pronounced. Compare the chart above with the results of the National Youth Survey of 1999/2000 when only 5 percent of Sinhalese, 14 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils, and 22 percent of Muslim youth had a friend from another ethnic group.⁴³ During the 2013 survey, youth groups spoke of the importance of exchanges between groups and the same came up during the assessment interviews. Youth noted that they stay in touch over the longer-term through social media groups. This continued interaction will be the key to reconciliation over time.

Youth are also positively inclined to social inclusion. They understand equality as part of inclusion, with 68.5 percent acknowledging awareness about rights to be treated without discrimination.⁴⁴ However there remain challenges. Reintegration of ex-combatants is a difficult and long process at the community level, for example. Interviews also covered the difficulties for the disabled.

While women do well on several fronts in society, there is a new conservatism that is creating challenges for female youth. Those that engage in public activities in a non-traditional stance (i.e., not as virtuous and docile) are subjected to ridicule and humiliation. These themes were particularly apparent in interviews with Muslim women-led and legal aid organizations. As noted in the previous section, women have internalized the belief that they should not engage in civic or political matters and those that try meet hardship. The conflict left a disproportionate number of female-headed households—23 percent in 2012. Young widows experience high stress from stigma associated with widowhood and remarriage. Female ex-combatants have a harder time being accepted back into their communities and struggle to fit back into traditional expectations.⁴⁵ Muslim women who would like to wear the hijab find restrictions on headscarves and requirements to wear saris rather than their clothing of choice an impediment both in educational and work environments, limiting their options for advancement.

The majority of youth surveyed pointed to two main channels to create more change for reconciliation and inclusion—families and educational institutions. Both can reinforce the positive attitudes that youth tend to have on these topics or perpetuate negative norms such as those for women.⁴⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth issues are national, so considering where to focus efforts is a challenge. The focus of most USAID/Sri Lanka programming has been in the north and east because of the population’s great need and lagging development post-

⁴³ Ibid, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 89.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 94-95.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 92-93.

conflict. But youth throughout the country are having similar problems. The youth in the estate sector are extremely vulnerable, and those working in the free trade zones lack adequate protections. Migrant youth, disabled youth, female Muslim youth, etc.—all have specific vulnerabilities and challenges to their economic, civic, and social engagement. Meanwhile, many Sri Lankans fear a restless and unemployed body of youth in the south that is reportedly already creating strife around religious divides. Others point to the rural areas generally as a source of frustration and discontent that will spread and gain momentum as it did in the past. Some informants noted that pockets of interventions that help only a chosen few actually create discontent among youth that are excluded from these interventions. And all youth engagement actions must bear in mind the uneasiness that society holds from past youth insurrections. Ultimately, there is no single segment of youth that stands out as the one USAID should target. The mission will need to determine any targeting based on alignment with the CDCS goals and results framework (e.g. poverty alleviation, inclusion, stabilization of the potentially volatile, etc.).

Based on data presented in this assessment, stakeholder interviews, emerging practice, and evidence from USAID's broader youth portfolio, the assessment team makes the following recommendations outlined below.

1. **Integrate youth and address youth issues across programming:** Youth must be meaningfully integrated throughout the USAID portfolio and included as at least a cross-cutting issue in the CDCS, given that the problems of youth reflect the challenges of society at large. This integration requires a mandate within each mechanism to both engage and benefit youth, with a youth target where appropriate. All activities that count person-level indicators should disaggregate by age cohort.⁴⁷ Activities that work higher than the person-level can still incorporate a youth lens. For example, just as a policy project would consider the implications of reforms for women, it can do the same for youth.

This will also require a uniform definition of youth within the mission portfolio. As noted in the USAID Youth in Development Policy, internationally, youth programs often focus on 15-24 years, but USAID frequently broadens to 10-29 years to capture more of the continuum of youth development. Sri Lanka tends to use 15-29 years. In the estate sector, 10-15 years seems to be the most important age to reach youth before they migrate for work. Nationally, unemployment rates point to a greater need for assistance among younger cohorts (see Figure 3).

2. **For a youth specific activity, start with the highest priority problem but take a holistic view of youth and their needs when addressing it:** We recommend a focus on employment with aspects of health, civic engagement, reconciliation, inclusion, and education packaged with it, as linked to the employment problem. This approach would also help avoid the sensitivities that still exist around mobilizing groups of youth. Employment is not controversial and has open government support. The un-/under-employment issue is complex and underpinned by inclusion problems. But it is clear that there is a mismatch between employer needs, youth skills, and youth aspirations/expectations. In addressing this mismatch, there will certainly be opportunities to integrate social interactions that support reconciliation, awareness raising about health services to keep youth more productive in the workforce, or civic education about their rights in the workforce. Job training will not solve the problem, as the human resources managers from MAS Holdings clearly explained. Without a holistic support system, these youth will struggle to succeed—particularly if they are from a more vulnerable group.
3. **Work to encourage systemic change rather than treating symptoms:** Wherever possible, interventions should seek to create change at the root of the problem within the system rather than addressing a symptom. For example, almost universally the stakeholders pointed to the education system as a

⁴⁷ Standard disaggregation age brackets are 10-14, 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, and 30+. However, even a simple 15-29 and 30+ would be helpful to track impact and reach for youth.

source of problems and an opportunity for change. Even in the absence of education funding, USAID could find strategic ways to partner with schools by building linkages with the private sector or perhaps between schools introducing new civic education courses and civil society players that could contribute content. There are also possibilities that work with media could lead to systemic change across sectors. There are indications that part of the employment challenge is rooted in the absence of an information system that can elucidate potential career pathways, role models in those fields, the education and skills required, the labor market trends in those sectors, the salaries in those fields, and current job openings. Improving the information systems would help resolve the mismatch discussed above. Addressing root causes in this manner is one way to have broader, sustainable change for more youth across the country, given that there is not one “most vulnerable” cohort. Several stakeholders explicitly noted that scattered interventions are not sustainable or meaningful. They said the system is driving these results for youth and so it is the system that must be changed.

4. **Leverage local capacity:** There are many organizations doing good work already on the ground. Do not put in place a project that will compete with them. These organizations may face limited funding and capacity, but they are the ones that will potentially still be on the ground in 20 years. They also can help fill the role model gap by creating a strong cadre of community leaders, but only if we work through them and encourage them to meaningfully engage youth rather than continue the tradition of "managing" youth. Encouragingly, all of the organizations interviewed had youth on staff, at least in proportion to the population structure, if not more. Some very clearly are hoping to cultivate their future leadership from among these youth.

At a tactical level, a youth specific activity could be designed to have a strong grants under contract facility to enable this approach. Alternatively, USAID/Sri Lanka could explore a locally competed procurement, although this might be challenging given that most organizations seem to be quite localized in reach (not surprising considering the operating constraints under the previous government). This is also an opportune time to support local capacity since the new government has reduced security measures and greatly increased the ability of these organizations to do their work freely. See the civil society and media assessment for analysis on this topic.

5. **Engage the government:** We did not get a chance to speak with government officials during the rapid assessment, but their cooperation will be a critical aspect moving forward. Youth voted in large numbers, and the new government has expressed strong interest in helping them, particularly with employment. Find the champions and allies at whatever level and use them. This should be an ongoing effort by USAID staff directly in addition to through implementing partners. There are at least 15 government bodies that have some youth mandate. They need to be brought together to articulate a vision for youth and their respective roles and responsibilities. Perhaps USAID (in collaboration with other donors) could convene this group through the Ministry of National Policy and Economic Affairs to start a meaningful discussion. Even a simple youth statement would be helpful. At best, the government would ultimately issue a broad Youth Policy. The government itself will also need education to reorient toward youth engagement from youth management. If this convening does happen, youth representatives should be present and have a voice and some level of agency.

Why does this matter so much? With the stigma of the past youth uprisings, adults who are willing and able to support positive youth development will hesitate until there is a clear mandate from the government encouraging youth engagement. One of the adult leaders interviewed noted that there is no vision or guidance for working with youth. The government must fill this "guidance gap" for public, private, and civil society sectors to reorient. Involving youth in creating that guidance will set the tone and provide encouragement for others to follow suit.

- 6. Prioritize outcomes for women:** Women are one of the most vulnerable segments of Sri Lankan society. The measures needed to fix problems women face will address deeper societal issues and problems that are universal. For example, if young female entrepreneurs are able to access start-up capital and market information to succeed in a business venture, young men will be able to do the same. If female youth are able to effectively engage in civic matters and take on leadership roles, their male counterparts will find their own barriers eased as well.

So set a high target for young women—not only for their participation in schools, civic organizations, and in the public and private sectors, but for their ability to benefit from that participation. What the targets should be will depend on the development outcome and related indicator examined. For example, there are already more women in higher education, so 50 percent would not be high. With women's participation in the labor force at around 35 percent, a target of 50 percent would be significant. Findings of the gender assessment will need to be considered against this youth assessment, recognizing that women in different age brackets have differing levels of access and agency in all societies.

In sum, this is an opportune time to make strides in the way Sri Lankan institutions engage youth. As noted in the *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014*, "An apathetic, cynical and passive generation is as detrimental to development as one that is violent and destructive. Youth need to have self-belief and hope. Whether or not they develop these is heavily swayed by the attitudes and actions of adults around them."⁴⁸

The emerging USAID/Sri Lanka portfolio under the new CDCS should strive to support this in a variety of ways with consistency of message. As specific programs are developed under the new strategy, it may be necessary to do some targeted, deeper youth analysis, including exploration of what other donors are doing in specific areas. Aspects of this analysis could be included in statements of work for implementers to conduct during start up processes, and the findings should be shared broadly.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 106.

ANNEX A: METHODOLOGY

The youth rapid assessment used a framework modeled on USAID's guidance for cross-sectoral youth assessments.⁴⁹ The assessment methodology proceeds through four steps. The first was a desk review in Washington which involved a review of mission strategy and program documents, recent reports on youth in Sri Lanka, and statistical information to identify information gaps; the second consisted of internal consultations with key Asia Bureau experts in Washington along with a parallel effort by the Colombo team; and the third was fact-finding meetings in Colombo and site visits to multiple areas of the country. The Colombo team conducted preliminary interviews and focus groups with informants, and upon arrival of the Washington-based team lead, conducted in-person interviews, discussions with project implementing partners, collaborating partners, selected beneficiaries, and/or other key stakeholders to allow for a range of perspectives about the potential for youth programming in Sri Lanka. The final phase was completing a mission out-brief and a brief report which summarized the team's findings and programmatic recommendations.

USAID assembled a two-part assessment team. The Washington team was Kristin O'Planick, Enterprise Development Specialist in USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education & Environment, and David Fox, Sr. Social Sector Analyst, USAID's Asia Bureau. Kristin O'Planick traveled to Sri Lanka in early January 2016 to lead the Colombo team, consisting of Sunera Schaller, Development Program Specialist, Ivan Rasiah, Project Development Specialist, and Bandula Nissanka, Senior Economic Adviser. Eileen Derby from USAID's Middle East Bureau also assisted the Colombo team during December 2015.

In December 2015, the Washington team drafted questions for the interviews and focus groups to take place in Sri Lanka, based on feedback from the Colombo team. Interviewing followed a semi-structured format, with questions tailored to the individuals/groups being interviewed; later interviews built on information gleaned in earlier ones. The assessment team conducted approximately 26 interviews of more than 100 people. Most interviews involved one to four individuals, but some were group interviews, including with senior Foreign Service Nationals in USAID/Sri Lanka, civil society activists, private sector representatives, and youth from a variety of backgrounds. The team conducted interviews in 1) Colombo; 2) the South in Galle and Matara; 3) the North in Vavuniya; and 4) the West in Puttalam. Time did not permit travel to the Central and Eastern districts; however the team interviewed an organization working with plantation youth in Central. The team leader devoted four days to analysis and the development of findings, conclusions and program recommendations.

The team wishes to express its gratitude to all the stakeholders who provided their time and insights, as well as the USAID/Sri Lanka staff who seamlessly executed a tightly packed interview schedule.

⁴⁹ See <http://www.equip123.net/docs/e3-CSYA.pdf>

ANNEX B: STAKEHOLDER MEETING SCHEDULE

Itinerary for Sri Lanka Youth Assessment Eileen Derby December 16-21, 2015

December 16-20: Colombo

Meeting with SPICE
Meeting with Asia Foundation

Monday, December 21, 2015: Galle-Matara

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|-----------|--|
| 0900–1000 | Discussion with Muslim youth groups in South (5-10 participants) |
| 1000–1100 | Discussion with Sinhala youth groups in South (5-10 participants) |
| 1130–1230 | Meeting with Sevalanka South staff on their experience/lessons learned in youth work under USAID-funded youth skill development activity |
| 1230–1400 | Lunch and Travel to Matara/Kamburupitiya |
| 1430–1600 | Meeting with Youth Progressive Foundation in Kamburupitiya |
| 1630–1730 | Meeting with Sinhala-Muslim Youth reconciliation group (ICES) in Matara |

Itinerary for Sri Lanka Youth Assessment Kristin O'Planick January 06-16, 2016

Wednesday, January 06, 2016: Colombo

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|-----------|--|
| 0930–1000 | Meetings with PPS and Youth Assessment Team |
| 1100–1200 | Meeting with Economic Growth |
| 1200–1300 | Meeting with Governance and Vulnerable Populations |
| 1300–1400 | Meeting with Acting Mission Director |

Thursday, January 07, 2016: Colombo

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|-----------|----------------------|
| 0830–0930 | Travel to Katunayake |
|-----------|----------------------|

- 0930–1030 Meeting with Right to Life for discussion on youth and insurgencies
Venue: R2L office in Katunayake
- 1030–1100 Travel
- 1100–1230 Meeting with Free trade zone activists on youth and economic opportunities
Venue: Women’s Centre office, Ekala
- 1230–1400 Lunch and Travel
- 1400–1500 Meeting with MAS Holdings on youth and economic opportunities
Venue: Nirmaana Main Board Room, MAS Active Trading Nirmaana, Phase II, EPZ – Katunayake
Participants: Chandana Rajawasam, HR Manager, Shadowline; Nilantha de Silva, HR Manager, Nirmaana

Friday, January 08, 2016: Colombo

- 0900–1000 Meeting with Chandula Palith Abeywickrema (CSR Sri Lanka) on youth empowerment
Venue: American Center
- 1200–1300 Meeting with David Dyer (SOLID) on youth and economic growth
Venue: American Center
- 1300–1430 Lunch and Travel
- 1430–1530 Meeting with ICES on youth and reconciliation
Venue: ICES

Monday, January 11, 2016: Colombo-Vavuniya

- 0830–0900 Meeting with Angie Hermon, GVP
- 0900–1000 Meeting with Sunil Dombepola on plantation youth
Venue: USAID
- 1200–1300 Lunch
- 1330–1830 Travel to Vavuniya

Tuesday, January 12, 2016: Vavuniya-Anuradhapura

- 0900–1100 Workshop/Discussion with Sevalanka Youth group from Jaffna/Mullaitivu
Venue: Sevalanka
- 1130–1300 Workshop/Meeting with SLCDF on youth and livelihood

- 1300–1400 Lunch break
- 1400–1500 ORHAN disability organization on vulnerable youth
- 1500–1630 Travel to Anuradhapura

Wednesday, January 13, 2016: Anuradhapura-Colombo

- 0800–0900 Travel to Puttalam
- 0930–1030 Meeting with Muslim Women’s Development Trust on Muslim youth and women’s issues
Venue: MWDT office
- 1100–1200 Meeting with Change Organization on protracted IDPs and Muslim youth issues
Venue: Change office

Thursday, January 14, 2016: Colombo

- 1000–1100 Meeting with Sevalanka Foundation on youth and peace building
Venue: American Center
- 1100–1200 Meeting with Public Affairs Section about youth engagement work
Venue: PAO office
- 1400–1500 Out-brief with A/MD, PPS, and other staff
Venue: Seaside Conference Room

ANNEX C: SOURCES CONSULTED

Census of Population and Housing 2012: Key Findings. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2012.

Chandrasiri, Sunil and Ramani Gunatilaka. *The Skills Gap in Four Industrial Sectors in Sri Lanka.* Colombo: International Labour Organization, 2015.

Global Employment Trends for Youth. Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2015.

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Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey: Annual Report. Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Policy Planning, Economic Affairs, Child, Youth, and Cultural Affairs, 2014.

Sri Lanka National Human Development Report 2014: Youth and Development. Colombo: United Nations Development Programme, 2014.

USAID. *Youth in Development Policy.* Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2012.

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