HUMAN DEVELOPMENT FROM A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE
Sustainable, equitable human development is not possible without youth. And yet younger people, worldwide, are not as prominent on public policy agendas as they could be. Where policies are in place, implementation may fall short.

These issues in Sri Lanka make the topic of youth a highly appropriate theme for the 2014 National Human Development Report. It examines the diverse conditions in which different groups of youth live, exploring the opportunities, constraints and freedoms available to them. These will determine if they will thrive in the present as well as their prospects for a successful transition to adulthood. The report considers various approaches to youth by state and non-state agencies, and provides an opportunity to assess the status of youth in relation to existing policies, institutions and actions to advance their human development.

The 2014 National Human Development Report comes at an opportune moment. Sri Lanka has reached a point of transition in its economy, with high aspirations that depend in part on the energy and productivity of youth. Only a few years past the end of a protracted civil war, where many youth took up arms against the state, it faces new opportunities to significantly engage youth in reconciliation. For this, youth must no longer feel excluded from development, or shut off from their hopes for the future. Finally, there is gathering political momentum and commitment to youth, as reflected in the 2014 agreement on the first National Youth Policy, and Sri Lanka’s hosting of the 2014 World Conference on Youth and the 2013 Commonwealth Youth Forum in conjunction with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

A brief overview of the report

The starting point for the 2014 National Human Development Report was young people themselves, through a National Youth Survey conducted in 2013 that reached nearly 3,100 youth from every district of Sri Lanka (see also appendix 1.1). Their perspectives, captured in questionnaires and 15 focus groups, are used as the basis for assessing the current situation of young people across varying socio-economic and cultural contexts, and their participation in development.

The survey was conducted since most national data are not disaggregated for youth, and do not cover areas such as social integration, and civic and political participation. Two previous youth surveys took place in 1999-2000 and in 2009; data from these were compared with that generated in 2013 to track trends among youth. The focus group discussions included special efforts to reach marginalized youth, institutionalised youth and former combatants. The report also drew on qualitative material gathered for developing the National Youth Policy in 2013.

A National Steering and Advisory Committee consisting of members of the government, UN agencies, research institutions and youth representatives provided input throughout the preparation of the report. An initial consultation process validated five critically important themes, around which the report is structured: education, employment, health, civic and political participation, and post-war reconciliation and social integration. Initial research findings were discussed with various stakeholders, and a consultative meeting held prior to finalizing it.

The report delves into pressing issues such as access to tertiary and higher education opportunities, the availability and accessibility of decent work and necessary skills, the ability of the health care system to provide youth-friendly services, and post-war social and political orders shaping young people’s attitudes and participation.

Analysing youth perceptions, as was done through the survey, is important, because they drive youth action and engagement with development. This analysis can provide impetus for reflection, debate and dialogue, including on current gaps between policies intended to benefit youth and actual implementation. A more nuanced understanding of youth today may help policy makers and development practitioners move towards policies and programmatic actions closely attuned to youth
Towards human well-being

In looking at the status of youth in Sri Lanka, this report is grounded in a human development perspective, which recognizes that people’s quality of life is more than just income and economic growth. Human development involves asking questions about what people can actually do and be. It emphasizes expanding choices and enlarging human freedom, in a manner that is equitable and empowering. Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, whose work greatly influenced the conceptualization of human development, argues that development goals need to improve people’s ‘capabilities’—their ability to act and reach their full human potential. Human development therefore requires attention to both development processes and outcomes, towards the overall aim of human well-being.

Well-being has many definitions. It may be subjectively defined, psychologically assessed or evaluated in terms of people’s quality of life. A range of factors affect well-being, varying across socio-economic and cultural contexts. Some factors may seem to contradict each other, as when enhancing economic growth compromises universal welfare. Which factors are more important? What is the ideal level of provision or entitlement? How do we account for the fact that individuals or groups may need different resources to achieve satisfactory capabilities? What is the ideal level of education, for instance? How do we ensure that both young men and women or youth from differing socio-economic situations access education equitably?

Setting development goals and deciding how to reach them are both critical in determining the well-being of diverse individuals and communities. These choices define how capabilities and freedoms are prioritized and made accessible, and thus what different groups can be and do. This process affects the general population, and groups within it like youth, who can be highly heterogeneous. It is highly pertinent to examine how and which choices have been made in Sri Lanka, given its history of disparities and the consequences, including conflict, that have arisen accordingly.

A turbulent history

Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948, after being both a Portuguese and then a Dutch colony. Colonial experiences had a significant influence on socio-cultural patterns, such as in terms of religion and language, and on political and economic systems. The transition to independence was relatively smooth, marked by great hopes for the new nation. Universal franchise had been granted in 1951, and a multi-party democracy was soon in place. Sri Lanka adopted strong welfare policies early on, ensuring consistently strong performance on core development indicators, particularly in health and education.
Economic and employment opportunities grew, but so did certain divisions. Sinhala and Tamil nationalism emerged and generated ethnic tensions. More youth gained an education, but felt frustrated due to limited options to advance economically, and to participate in political and social spheres.

In 1971, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front), a primarily youth-driven Marxist group, launched an insurrection, largely attributed to educated youth frustrated by the inability to fulfill their aspirations. By the 1980s, there were several Tamil militant groups fighting to establish a separate homeland for the Tamil community, and by the mid-1980s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had established itself as the dominant military group, and systematically either absorbed into its own wings or eliminated other Tamil militant groups.

The period from 1988 to around 1990 was one of the most violent in the country’s history. In the North and East, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam battled the Sri Lankan military as well as the Indian Peace Keeping Force. In the south, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna launched a second insurrection. By the early 1990s, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna had been brutally suppressed. In 2009, the military defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Today, for the first time in several decades, there is no civil war.

These conflicts have taken a tremendous toll on youth as both agents and victims of violence. Many thousands were killed, disappeared and maimed. Many more thousands of families have been affected. Since independence, youth in general have had a tense relationship with the Sri Lankan state, expressing, sometimes violently, their disappointment with the failure of mainstream political institutions to address their grievances and their exclusion from the development process.

With Sri Lankans now finally enjoying a period without war, deep reflection and thought are necessary to understand the multiple factors driving so many young people to take up arms against the state. Sri Lanka has an opportunity to put in place mechanisms, systems and processes to ensure that youth no longer feel left out. It is the best possible moment to act so that the tragedies of the past may never again be repeated.

**Social investment leads to high human development**

Over the years, Sri Lanka’s consistent investments in health and education have allowed it to perform relatively well on the Human Development Index (HDI), a composite of health, education and income indicators. On the 2014 global HDI, Sri Lanka achieved a score of 0.750, placing it in the high human development category (figure 1.1). It ranked 73 out of 187 countries and territories on the index and ranked highest among countries in South Asia and higher than some East Asian countries (table 1.2).

Most countries ranking close to Sri Lanka have significantly higher per capita gross national income (GNI), such as $20,150 for Saint Kitts and Nevis, which ranks at 71, and $13,451 for Iran at 75, compared to $9,250 for Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka’s strong performance in health and education also make it well positioned to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by their 2015 endpoint.

Figure 1.1: Sri Lanka is now in the HDI’s high human development category

Source: UNDP 2014
Currently defined as a lower middle-income country, Sri Lanka aims to increase its per capita GDP from $3,280 in 2013 to $4,000 by 2016. Economic prospects have been strong, as Sri Lanka has maintained relatively high 6 to 8 percent growth rates in recent years, despite the global economic downturn. The economy is shifting towards the services sector, with enhanced performance in industry and a slight decline in agriculture. Transformation is further encouraged by an educated labour force of around 15 million people.

Economic policy tends towards liberalization, although the public sector remains large, and dominates the financial, utilities, health and education sectors. Open economic policies have spurred growth and trade, yet greater productivity and employment generation remain imperatives for translating growth into development. Dependence on remittances from migrants abroad to meet foreign exchange requirements, a weak manufacturing base and high levels of national debt make Sri Lanka vulnerable to instability.

On other aspects of human development, Sri Lanka’s health sector has performed remarkably, achieving low levels of infant and maternal mortality, high immunization coverage and a life expectancy of 74 years. Education achievements are also substantial, with a literacy rate of 91 percent reached through free education. Decades of health and education investments have allowed Sri Lanka to deal with basic development problems that continue to plague many countries in its region and at a similar income level. For instance, literacy rates in neighbouring South Asian countries are far lower, such as 62.8 percent in India, 54.9 percent in Pakistan and 56.8 percent in Bangladesh, compared to 91.2 percent in Sri Lanka. The maternal mortality ratio in India is 200 deaths per 100,000 live births;
the ratio in Sri Lanka is 35 deaths per 100,000 live births.\textsuperscript{11}

Globally, Sri Lanka compares favourably on the HDI-related Gender Inequality Index, particularly in South Asia. In 2013, Sri Lanka ranked at 75, compared to Bangladesh at 115, Nepal at 98 and Pakistan at 126. Algeria and Colombia, ranked close to Sri Lanka on the HDI, placed at 81 and 92, respectively.\textsuperscript{12} Sri Lanka has virtually achieved the MDG targets of eliminating gender disparities in primary, secondary and tertiary education.\textsuperscript{13}

Today, in a time of greater stability, Sri Lanka has a strong foundation for progress (see appendix I.5). Prospects for accelerated growth and development fuel aspirations for a knowledge-based, high-value economy. This vision, however, will require broad-based reforms, and long-term social, political and economic commitments, including to youth.

**Disparities persist: no room for complacency**

Despite its significant achievements, Sri Lanka still has manifold development challenges; it cannot afford to be complacent. Human development disparities have been a particularly troubling issue, as chronicled in earlier National Human Development Reports in 1998 and 2012. In 2012, for example, the poorest 20 percent of Sri Lankan citizens received only 4.5 percent of total household income, while the richest 20 percent enjoyed 54.1 percent.\textsuperscript{14} The fact that disparities are generally believed to have contributed to the protracted civil war as well as the youth insurrections in 1971, and in 1988 to 1989, underlines the urgency of closing gaps. Cutting the roots of conflict is central to meaningful reconciliation that can both hasten economic revival and form the basis of long-lasting peace.

Strong economic growth has helped Sri Lanka meet the MDG on poverty. But greater prosperity has failed to reach certain areas, particularly conflict-affected regions, the estate sector and some rural communities.\textsuperscript{15} The portion of the population under the national poverty line fell from 15 percent in 2006 to 6.5 percent in 2012,\textsuperscript{16} but more than 80 percent of the poor live in rural areas. Uva Province, with a substantial estate sector, and areas formerly affected by war, remains particularly vulnerable to poverty, although rates in the estate sector in general have sharply declined from 32 percent in 2006 to 6.2 percent in 2012.\textsuperscript{17} The Western Province, with the highest level of economic growth and strong performance in all areas of human development, is home to 14 percent of poor Sri Lankans. A large proportion of people who have recently emerged from poverty are vulnerable to shocks that might push them back into it.\textsuperscript{18}

Traditionally, people in the estate sector have been considered a vulnerable group, despite years of targeted interventions. They lag behind on all human development indicators. The majority are from the Indian Tamil ethnic group, who arrived in Sri Lanka as part of its colonial history, and whose status as full citizens was debated for many decades. This combined with the particular circumstances of the estate sector, which ties their livelihood and living arrangements closely with a specific industry, mainly tea manufacturing, shapes how their choices and freedoms have been understood and realized.

Specific social, cultural and political processes similarly define prospects for women, youth, populations in conflict-affected or rural areas, or those raised speaking Sinhala or Tamil. Approximately 14.6 percent of youth were below
the poverty line in 2006 to 2007, falling to 8.9 percent by 2009 to 2010, and reflecting an overall decline in poverty rates. Youth in the estate sector are still the poorest, while poverty is lowest among urban youth. Among women, labour force participation rates are much lower than those for males, and the participation rate of women in politics is one of the lowest in the South Asian region—puzzling for a country where female participation in education is equal to if not better than that of men. Women’s representation in the national Parliament has never exceeded 6 percent. In local government in 2006 it was a mere 1.8 percent. The disparity is not simply about women not being successfully elected: Only 6.2 percent of political party nominees were women for the 2004 parliamentary elections and 7.5 percent for the 2008/2009 provincial council elections respectively, thereby creating inequality at the point of nomination itself.

On other dimensions of human development, Sri Lanka faces serious shortfalls in tertiary education. The education system is not equipped to produce an adequately skilled workforce and capable citizenry, both requirements for moving towards a knowledge-based economy and global competitiveness. While at primary levels there is almost universal enrolment, at higher levels disparities appear, those with better incomes stay in school longer.

For both health and education, gaps in service quality are leading an increasing number of Sri Lankans to rely on private provision. Over time, this will compromise the long cherished non-discriminatory nature of these services. Already, with some families, for example, able to spend on extra tuition to make up for inadequate facilities in state schools, educational achievements are beginning to mirror socio-economic inequalities. The excellent public health network has managed to deal with many health issues, but demographic and lifestyle changes have increased non-communicable diseases, and a shift to private care for these will likely affect equal access to health services.

Human development disparities are not always immediately obvious in Sri Lanka. National figures and statistics often mask pockets of vulnerability and marginalization. Even considering district level variations in measures such as the HDI or its companion inequality-adjusted HDI may not reveal disparities, since the lowest value in the HDI, for example, is higher than that of other South Asian countries, with the exception of the Maldives. Examining development indicators in conflict-affected areas in the North and East, or predominantly rural districts such as Moneragala, or districts such as Nuwara Eliya and Badulla with large estate populations, reveals some gaps. This shows how certain population groups, due to a combination of social, cultural and political reasons, lag behind the rest of the population.

The 2012 National Human Development Report, which focused attention on regional disparities in Sri Lanka’s development, states that this is a concern because “...inequalities in a democratic, multi-ethnic society can feed discontent, and are incompatible with peace, as the country’s past has demonstrated. Where social, political and economic inequalities grow among culturally or spatially distinct groups, they can provide the basis for discontent people to garner political support that can then spill over into conflict.”

The global post-2015 Development Agenda, currently under discussion to follow the MDGs, has as one potential aim the concept of ‘not leaving anyone behind’. This kind of thinking encourages commitment to rapid, equitable growth, not at any cost, but sustained for the long term, and inclusive enough to overcome development challenges such as unemployment and resource scarcity.

Exclusion falls heavily on youth

The consequences of disparities are particularly important for youth. These not only result in the exclusion of certain groups and constraints on human development, but have added impact since youth are particularly sensitive to exclusion. They respond in various ways, and it plays an important role in how they contest, negotiate and challenge social contexts. Much attention in Sri Lanka has
gone to youth who have turned to rebellion, but there are other responses, such as withdrawal from mainstream society or increasingly cynical attitudes, that also deserve examination. Looking at the concerns articulated by youth can reveal issues overlooked by adults. Slogans of youth rebels in insurrections in 1971 and 1988 to 1989 reflected their perceptions of the sources of oppression. *Colombo kiri, apita kokiri,* loosely translated as 'Colombo gets the cream while the rest of us get the dregs', was a vivid expression of the resentment youth felt about disparities between the centre and the periphery. This phrase continues to reverberate today. The term *kadawa,* used especially by university students to refer to the English language, denotes its power to cut down to size those who do not speak it, and reflects the elitism and system of privileges constructed around the use of the language and its associated culture.

National Youth Surveys conducted in 1999-2000 and in 2009 revealed that many youth consider Sri Lankan society to be 'unjust'. The Presidential Commission on Youth in its 1990 report documented how youth described the lack of justice in terms of social and political patronage networks that institutionalize discrimination within society and polity.

**Youth: some definitions and demographics**

Global recognition of the importance of youth as a broad category with its own prerogatives extends back to 1965, when Member States of the United Nations endorsed the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding among People. In 1995, Member States committed to a World Programme of Action for Youth.

Psychological and developmental theories have deeply influenced the demarcation of youth as a distinct stage of human development. These suggest that youth is a particular life stage between childhood and adulthood marked by specific characteristics. Many theories, based on experiences of youth in the West, propose that youth move through relatively linear development process, progressively achieving greater autonomy and the ability to exercise choice as they reach adulthood. This doesn't account, however, for the diverse ways that cultures differentiate between stages of human development, even in basic terms such as the boundaries of age (box 1.1).

The United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years, as generally the time when a person may leave compulsory education and obtain his or her first employment. In Sri Lanka, a youth is categorized as someone between the ages of 15 and 29 years, which is the definition applied in this report. Informal criteria marking the transition from youth to adulthood include obtaining employment and entering marriage. For many Sri Lankans, these steps allow them to establish themselves as independent individuals, not simply their biological age.

**BOX 1.1: VARYING DEFINITIONS OF YOUTH**

The definition of youth varies widely around the world. Compared to the Sri Lankan definition spanning ages 15 to 29 years, for example, the African Youth Charter specifies the ages of 15 to 35 years. Socio-cultural, demographic and economic reasons can influence these definitions.

United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Population Fund denote different age categories within youth. For instance, those between the ages of 10 and 19 are adolescents, between 10 and 24 are young people, and between 15 and 24 are youth. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as someone up to 18 years old.
According to Sri Lanka’s 2012 Census (table 1.3), 23.2 percent of its population is between the ages of 15 and 29 years. The portion of youth declined from 26.8 percent in 2001, with decreases for both men and women (table 1.4). The female-male ratio is almost the same. The distribution of youth at the provincial level is around 23 percent, except in the Eastern Province, where youth are 26.1 percent of the population. The majority of youth, almost 77 percent, are in rural areas, corresponding to overall population distribution.

The National Youth Survey 2013 found that for age categories within youth, distribution across the provinces is somewhat uneven. The Northern Province has the lowest concentration of youth aged 15 to 19 years at 4.7 percent. North Central and Uva Provinces have the lowest concentration of youth over 20 years. The Western Province has the highest concentration of youth in all age categories. Figure 1.2 shows the ethnic breakdown of youth, which corresponds approximately to the national distribution.

**Table 1.3: A profile of Sri Lankan youth: most still live in rural areas**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>Mid age</th>
<th>Elders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of total population</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estate</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Western          | 48.7 | 51.3 | 100 | 23.4 | 21.8 | 22.6 | 23.8 | 22.5 | 23.1 | 23.5 | 22.7 | 23.1 | 29.3 | 33.0 | 31.2 |
| Central          | 47.5 | 52.5 | 100 | 28.3 | 25.5 | 26.8 | 22.9 | 22.1 | 22.5 | 22.7 | 22.3 | 22.9 | 26.1 | 30.1 | 27.9 |
| Southern         | 46.2 | 51.8 | 100 | 26.5 | 23.7 | 25.1 | 21.6 | 21.7 | 21.6 | 21.5 | 21.7 | 20.6 | 30.4 | 32.9 | 32.7 |
| North            | 47.9 | 52.1 | 100 | 28.6 | 25.8 | 27.1 | 21.5 | 21.7 | 21.6 | 20.3 | 21.2 | 21.6 | 29.5 | 31.3 | 29.6 |
| East             | 48.2 | 51.8 | 100 | 28.6 | 25.8 | 27.1 | 21.5 | 21.7 | 21.6 | 20.3 | 21.2 | 21.6 | 29.5 | 31.3 | 29.6 |
| North West       | 48.2 | 51.8 | 100 | 26.8 | 24.0 | 25.3 | 22.4 | 22.1 | 22.2 | 21.7 | 21.9 | 21.8 | 29.1 | 32.1 | 30.6 |
| North Central    | 48.6 | 51.4 | 100 | 28.1 | 26.3 | 27.2 | 23.1 | 23.4 | 23.3 | 22.8 | 23.3 | 23.0 | 26.0 | 27.0 | 26.5 |
| Uva              | 49.0 | 51.0 | 100 | 27.0 | 26.0 | 26.5 | 24.6 | 24.1 | 24.4 | 24.2 | 21.3 | 21.3 | 27.2 | 28.6 | 27.9 |
| Sabaragamuwa     | 48.7 | 51.3 | 100 | 25.1 | 23.2 | 24.1 | 22.4 | 22.7 | 22.5 | 21.9 | 21.4 | 21.6 | 30.7 | 32.6 | 31.7 |

Source: Department of Census and Statistics 2012.

**Table 1.4: The youth population is shrinking over time**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-29</th>
<th>15-29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Census and Statistics 2012.

Figure 1.2: The ethnic composition of youth tracks the broader population

In the National Youth Survey 2013, 26 percent of respondents were married (figure 1.3), and among them, 66.5 percent were women. Around 56 percent of married youth were aged 25 to 29 years old. Six percent in the 15 to 19 year old age group were also married, 71 percent of whom were women. While the overall age of marriage has increased, marriages at an early age still occur among young women. A United Nations Children’s Fund supported study pointed out that this was influenced by the fact that marriage is seen as a means of managing teenage sexuality, especially among young women. Those who experience sexual relationships outside of marriage are demeaned, and marriage is viewed as a means of protecting their ‘respectability’.26

Parents appear to wield considerable influence when it comes to decision-making about marriage. In the National Youth Survey 2013, 47.5 percent of respondents said their marriage decisions were influenced by their parents; a rate that rose to 55 for women (figure 1.4). While marriage is an important cultural criterion in determining the transition from youth to adulthood, the decision to marry is influenced quite significantly by an individual’s family.

![Figure 1.3: Young women are more likely to be married](image)

![Figure 1.4: Differing influences on key life decisions](image)

Source: National Youth Survey 2013
Beyond the youth bulge

In much of the world today, demographic and socio-economic changes have cast a spotlight on youth. Many countries are experiencing a ‘youth bulge’, where younger people constitute a high proportion of the general population. This is generally seen as an advantage, since youth can be a highly productive group. But it is also viewed as potentially disruptive and challenging, given the unpredictable volatility when large numbers of youth confront poverty, high unemployment and rapid urbanization. The relationship between youth and violence needs to be further investigated, however, since it cannot be assumed or considered inevitable.

Sri Lanka experienced a youth bulge some years ago. Today, the percentage of those between the ages of 15 and 29 is declining. As a result, Sri Lanka faces different issues than many other developing countries, such as the declining influence of youth as a constituency and lost productive advantages associated with high numbers of young people.

Further, a growing elderly population is a concern. Sri Lanka’s development successes have allowed fertility to decline and life expectancy to rise, so its population is ageing. By 2030, within South Asia, Sri Lanka will probably have the highest proportion of people over 60 years old. A shrinking workforce and an increase in the dependent population could adversely affect the welfare of young working people. Welfare reforms will be needed to take care of the ageing population.

Changes in socio-economic circumstances, where youth are staying longer in education, and delaying the ages of marriage and childbearing, have meant that youth today are different compared to earlier generations. The ‘youthful’ phase has extended, whereas earlier the transition from childhood to adulthood happened more quickly. Global economic challenges have resulted in many waiting longer for their first employment. Unstable economic situations and the global financial crisis have meant that now young people depend on parents and the state for longer periods. Difficulties in finding jobs or not being able to get jobs that give them financial independence have meant that youth are not able to set up their own homes like they did before.

Globally, attempts to respond to issues youth face typically draw on either the problem/prevention model or the positive youth development model. The first is influenced by psychological theories of human development. It attempts to identify ‘youth at risk’, and seeks to prevent problems of delinquency, violence, early sexual activity, etc. It identifies certain behaviours as problematic and inimical to healthy development, and intervenes to prevent them. The second model tries to move away from identifying youth as ‘problems’ to focusing on their assets. It aims to develop skills and opportunities for young people. Both models look at youth as individuals and assume that youth need to change to improve their situation.

Youth interventions in Sri Lanka contain elements of both models. The recent history of violent attempts by youth to capture the state has influenced a view of them as potentially ‘violent’. These ‘anti-system’ actions have been largely attributed to ‘frustration’ as a result of employment opportunities not matching the high education levels and aspirations of young people. Youth have also been described as ‘emotional’ and easily manipulated by political parties.

A number of interventions, including by the National Youth Services Council, the National
Youth Corps and other youth-focused organizations, have attempted to identify ‘at risk’ youth, and channel their energy and initiative towards ‘safe’ activities such as education, training, art, drama and sports. Influenced by the positive youth development model, these interventions are usually described in terms of empowering youth and increasing their participation and agency.

A third approach to working with youth is to recognize the multiple social, cultural, economic and political influences on them. These encompass the complex facets of youth identity—such as class, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexual orientation. Taking this more comprehensive view allows understanding of all the forces that can constrain and empower youth, and that determine, in human development terms, what they can be and do, or their capabilities and freedoms.

This report takes this third approach in exploring how Sri Lankan youth can build their capabilities and participate in development. It looks at how the identity of youth is constructed, and how this process influences understanding of youth, and the definition of problems and opportunities.

**Sound policies need implementation**

As background to the coming chapters, Sri Lanka has several policies directly or indirectly targeting youth. The Mahinda Chinthana, the Government’s development policy framework, contains specific references to youth, especially in relation to expanding education and job opportunities.

The 2014 National Youth Policy’s vision is “to develop the full potential of young people to enable their active participation in national development for a just and equitable society.” It is organized around three pillars of enabling, empowering and ensuring youth, and takes a multisectoral approach capturing links among different sectors that affect youth well-being. An important aspect is the recognition that youth are not a homogenous category; their experiences differ for various socio-economic and cultural reasons. The policy highlights the need to target specific youth groups to address their unique situations, defining 10 priority groups:

- Unemployed youth
- Youth from war-affected communities
- Youth who are excluded, discriminated against and exploited
- Youth at different education levels
- Young women
- Rural youth
- Low-income urban youth
- Youth in conflict with the law
- Youth on estates
- Differently abled youth

The National Youth Policy identifies several strategic policy intervention areas, including education and skills development, employment, health and well-being, civic engagement, social exclusion and discrimination, and peace and reconciliation. It has recommended a high-powered Presidential Youth Development Commission to implement and monitor the policy, and the appointment of a Youth Ombudsperson to respond to the grievances of young people. The Presidential Commission on Youth established in 1990 also recommended the latter, but the position has yet to be established.


The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development, the National Youth Services Council and the National Youth Corps are the key state institutions responsible for youth development. Many other institutions come under their purview, such as the Vocational Training Authority, the Tertiary and Vocational Training Commission, and the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority. The National Youth Services Council is one of the largest youth organizations in the country, with 11,235 youth clubs and a membership of about 443,912 as of 2014. Its goal is to reach 1 million members by 2016. Numerous non-governmental agencies work with youth, especially on vocational training and skills development.

In 2011, Sri Lanka launched the Youth Parliament to build leadership skills among youth and facilitate
dialogue. The 2nd Youth Parliament was constituted in 2013, and its debates and recommendations made public and shared with the national Parliament for the first time. But the Youth Parliament still faces challenges in being more representative and influential in advocating on behalf of youth.

An enduring challenge for Sri Lanka has been difficulties in implementing policy, despite a reasonably well-developed policy framework. Very few policies have actually been implemented through actions improving the lives of young people. One of the most important policy interventions involved the recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Youth established in 1990 after the 1988-1989 youth insurrection. The Commission called for addressing the strong sense of injustice expressed by youth who testified before it. It noted this sense of injustice was primarily due to political patronage, especially with regard to discarding merit as a condition for employment; the use of English to oppress those from rural backgrounds; corruption; and bureaucratic apathy. Introducing examinations to the selection process for public sector jobs was one subsequent attempt to reduce discrimination in employment, yet youth continue to perceive public sector employment as highly politicized.

Many of the Commission’s findings and recommendations are echoed in other policy documents, such as the 2007 Action Plan for Youth Employment and the 2014 National Youth Policy. The fact that the same recommendations are being suggested 24 years later reflects the serious gap in implementation. During the focus group discussions conducted as part of the National Youth Survey 2013, a consistent complaint from youth was the lack of policy implementation. They expressed disillusionment and cynicism regarding the possibility of change or transformation—a dangerous attitude, since it leads to both alienation and mistrust of the possibility of change through peaceful and democratic means.

One reason for non-implementation of policy in Sri Lanka is that policies are generally linked with a political party or ministerial leadership. With a change of power, the new government feels compelled to disassociate itself with the past and stamp its own identity on new initiatives. This tendency does not augur well for policy.

A more independent policy development mechanism would be one way to contend with the lack of implementation. Public institutions need to have a degree of autonomy from political party manoeuvrings so that policies are developed and implemented with a long-term vision in mind. Policies are also sometimes developed without accounting for local contexts and needs, or a proper assessment of the implementation capacity of institutions. Consequently, at the local level, there is little support for the structures and people who are expected to translate often complex initiatives into meaningful actions.

The 2014 National Human Development Report provides a unique opportunity to examine the situation of youth in relation to existing policies. In analysing youth perspectives on their own situations, and the systems in place to facilitate their development, it recognizes that what youth think, drives their actions and willingness to engage constructively in the world around them. The report’s analysis could provide impetus for reflection, debate and dialogue on the gap between policies and practice, as well as a more nuanced understanding of youth. This would help policy makers and practitioners more closely respond to the realities that youth face today, as well as their expectations, aspirations and attitudes.

While in the past youth in Sri Lanka have been associated with participation in violent politics, the human development approach used in this report locates youth within a broader context, taking into account the political, social, economic and cultural influences shaping their lives. With multiple policy initiatives in place, the report details some of the gaps in and constraints on implementation. It provides fresh viewpoints on longstanding policy issues and flags emerging concerns.