CIVIC AND
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

YOUTH AND
DEVELOPMENT
Youth participation in civic and political life is important because youth should be part of finding solutions to the difficulties they face, rather than simply being passive recipients of support identified and prioritized by adults. Youth are constantly referred to as the ‘future’. Society therefore has an immense responsibility to ensure that they have opportunities to experience citizenship, and political and social responsibility as preparation for the roles they will assume. This will shape how they choose to engage, or not, in coming decades. Sri Lanka’s history is a testament to how suppressing or ignoring youth interest in their society and the world around them can end in tense and violent stand-offs, with tragic consequences for all concerned, especially young people.

This chapter focuses on how youth exercise their civic responsibilities and engage politically in Sri Lanka, and the barriers they face. Given a legacy of violent youth insurrections, a historical perspective helps assess the past and the present.

A global imperative: include youth in development

As the 2015 expiry date of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) draws nearer, and discussions on post-2015 development goals accelerate, consultations on the role of youth have stressed youth-inclusive development. This imperative is gaining momentum across the world, through platforms such as “Beyond 2015”, “World we want 2015” and the recently concluded World Conference on Youth 2014. An increasing global urgency around making youth enabling partners within global processes of change is interwoven with the reality of an increasingly ‘young world’, due to the growing youth bulge in many countries. The immense power of youth needs to be tapped as part of finding solutions to problems such as debilitating poverty, overwhelming unemployment, a deteriorating environment and gaps in governance.

More than 85 percent of youth live in the developing world. In South Asia, one of the fastest growing regions economically, yet home to the largest concentration of poor people, one-fifth of the population is between the ages of 15 to 24 years. India alone has some 200 million young people, the largest number ever to transition into adulthood, both in South Asia and the world as a whole. In Egypt, more than 65 percent of the population is under 30, as is nearly 70 percent in Africa (both sub-Saharan and North Africa). Youth uprisings in Venezuela and the Arab countries, and the global Occupy Movement are indications that youth around the world are experiencing injustice, and are organizing to challenge what they see as the causes of growing inequalities and insecurities.

Why is youth activism largely outside mainstream political structures? Are they unwilling to subscribe to the values of mainstream politics? Does their restlessness indicate their desire to challenge the values of the older generation, and to participate in finding solutions to problems that affect their lives and the environment around them? Understanding the experiences of Sri Lanka’s youth, given a history of violence, is especially important in considering these questions.

Sri Lanka, with a closing demographic window, is not experiencing a significant youth bulge. But it still needs to include youth in its development process. They otherwise are likely to perceive society and the political system as unfair, and, in frustration, to contest social norms they see as preventing their successful transition to adulthood. Young people need to be part of solutions to issues affecting them, including through participation in power and decision-making processes.

Political participation and the concept of citizenship are closely interrelated; they express the extent to which youth feel they belong. This sense is linked to access to various social actions that influence civic and political processes, such as formal and informal voluntary work, participation in family and community networks, and formal and informal political activities. Yet all too often in Sri Lanka, youth are not involved; they end up feeling excluded.
A tense history with the state

Historically in Sri Lanka, youth have had a major political role, with several political movements drawing mainly from young people. The 1970s, in particular, saw youth highlighting issues of social injustice and inequality. Early youth movements in the North during this time attempted to organize around issues of caste, ethnicity and socio-economic discrimination. In the South, youth agitated for employment opportunities in line with their educational achievements.\(^1\) Youth led several armed insurrections.

By the 1980s, the growing tension between ethnic groups influenced youth politics as much as mainstream politics, which took on distinctly nationalist slants. In the South, the motivation for the second Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front) insurrection was the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force and proposed constitutional reforms for the devolution of power. At the same time, university students were agitating against the proposal to establish Sri Lanka’s first private medical college.

These movements and debates were spearheaded by the student community — most notably the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) and rival student movements such as the Independent Student Union (ISU). Positions taken by these two movements were distinctly different in relation to the ethnic issue although they were both left leaning. The latter advocated for devolution and against discrimination against ethnic minorities; the former took a more Sinhalese nationalistic position. While these debates and tensions were building in the Sinhalese-dominated areas, in the Tamil-dominated areas, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was rapidly gaining control of the Tamil militant movement. The period ended tragically, with the death and disappearance of thousands of young people, due to violence perpetrated by state and para-military groups as well as intra-youth violence.

Youth-led insurrections were largely influenced by disappointment with the post-independence state, which failed to address inequalities.\(^2\) On three separate occasions, youth attempted to capture state power or to establish an alternative state, rather than trying to bring about changes within existing systems. Examining the complicated and problematic relationship between youth and the state is essential to understanding the history of youth rebellion in Sri Lanka.

The post-colonial Sri Lankan state has played a central role in mediating economic, political, social and cultural interests, such as by providing health and education services, transport, food and employment. It thus became extremely significant in how people live.\(^3\) But it has also been primarily dominated by elite groups, resulting in relationships of paternalism and patronage. Rather than the state strengthening citizen entitlements, it has been a paternalistic provider of resources, position and privileges, favouring some groups and excluding others, such as ethnic minorities, youth from marginalized backgrounds\(^4\) and those who hold dissenting positions.

Successive governments have maintained the rhetoric of the paternalistic and benevolent state, despite the fact that welfare measures have been gradually stripped away as economic pressures set in. But this has not meant replacing the state with the market or other economic and political relations mediating how citizens are able to access resources and entitlements. Instead, a powerful state is imbued with the rhetoric of welfarism, mixed with the growing influence of neoliberal, market-driven interventions (also strongly mediated by the state) that focus on individual responsibility and market forces. No substantial political or social reforms have led to less hierarchical, more democratic social relations. This anomalous, state-centric neoliberalism means that state power has actually increased over the years, while the patronage system has extended to many areas of people’s lives.\(^5\) Some groups continue to fall through the cracks, with little means to influence or access resources and power.

State responses to past youth insurrections were extremely violent, leading to large numbers of deaths and mass destruction. Increasingly violent responses have gradually led to an intolerant and
repressive approach towards youth engagement in politics. This manifests, for example, in attitudes towards youth political activism in universities, where authorities are extremely wary. Even in recent times, this has led to clashes between youth groups and university administrations.

In society at large, there is a general wariness about youth political activism. Youth who attended focus group discussions as part of the National Youth Survey 2013 described how mainstream media reproduce negative images of youth, and projected student politics as violent and inappropriate. There is also the perception that university students receiving free education funded by taxpayers should not be spending their time on demonstrations and protests; they should focus instead on their studies and securing employment. Youth themselves, however, appear to be on a course distinctly different from that of the past. It is notable for a high level of disenchantment with politics and an unwillingness to engage.

**Declining participation**

Political participation in conventional electoral politics is guaranteed for all citizens through Sri Lanka’s Constitution. Each political party has a youth quota of 30 percent. Strengthened by the National Youth Services Act of 1969, the National Youth Services Council, a designated body for the management of youth affairs across the country, attempts to facilitate youth participation. As of 2014, the council manages 11,235 youth clubs with around 443,912 members.

Established in 2002, the Youth Corps provides personality development training and vocational education. The Yovun Balakaya (Youth Brigade) was initiated to provide training and educational opportunities. More recently, the Yovun Senanka (Youth Corps) and Nil Balakaya (Blue Brigade) were launched by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Other political parties have their own youth wings, such as the Jathika Yuvan Peramuna (National Youth Front) for the United National Party (UNP). The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna has several youth-related organizations, including the Socialist Student Forum, Socialist Youth Forum, Youth Socialist Women’s Front and several youth-dominated trade unions.

Figure 5.1: Youth vote, but do little else to participate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party work</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign petitions</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in protests and demonstrations</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media campaigns</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with activists or rights movements</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union activities</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apart from exercising their right to vote, however, very few youth take part in political decision-making, or voice their opinions at community, district or national levels. Low rates of participation persist across locations, and ethnic and religious identities. In the National Youth Survey 2013, 72 percent of respondents indicated that their primary choice of engagement was through voting (figure 5.1). Only a much smaller 5 percent appeared to be involved in direct activism.

In key informant interviews conducted as part of preparing this report, a citizen journalist active on social media and a social activist commented on the apathy of middle class youth, who are disengaged from the problems of youth in lower-income and excluded groups. Most youth activists said that while a small portion of Sri Lankan youth were very politically active, their concerns were not shared by the majority of the population.

Student civic and political engagement, generally high in the past, seemed to be declining, with only about 30 percent of survey respondents claiming to have taken leadership roles in school, such as being a prefect. Fifty percent said that they have not had active roles in student meetings, 66 percent have not been involved in student councils, and

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**Figure 5.2: High percentages of youth do not take leadership roles**

![Graph showing high percentages of youth not taking leadership roles in various activities.](image)


**Figure 5.3: Most youth are not active in workplace decision-making**

![Graph showing high percentages of youth not being involved in workplace decision-making.](image)

61 percent have not taken any role in community-based organizations. Participation in state-supported youth initiatives was low, with 85 percent of respondents noting that they did not participate at all in National Youth Services Council activities, and 92 percent that they did not participate at all in the Youth Corps (figure 5.2).

According to the survey, youth participation in the workplace was very low as well, with 85 percent of respondents indicating that they do not participate actively in staff meetings, 93 percent saying that they do not attempt to influence decisions at the workplace, and 92 percent not actively participating in trade unions (figure 5.3).

Usually people think that running for an election is the only form of political participation. But trying to fulfill the needs of people through exercising one’s role within the society, and being able to address injustices are also means of political participation. Politicians of the present day lack interaction with people. They do not make decisions with sound knowledge of the problems faced by the people. If people are to experience authentic social and economic justice, our contribution to society should not be based on political affiliations. The youth should be empowered to safeguard rights. And mechanisms that reinforce privileges should be abolished. Youth should be involved in politics with a notion that they will act with an understanding of the needs of the present and the future. And that they will provide impartial service, and equitable rights to people in order to facilitate their well-being with freedom. Usually there is a family government in Sinhalese politics, and the Tamils are confined to the same situation that they have been in for the past several years. The youth who are involved in politics today are the children of those who are already in the political arena.

Past incidents have created a frightening situation hindering one’s confidence to get involved in politics directly or indirectly. For instance, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is considered as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. So there is interference when people get involved in party activities. In addition to that, the youngsters who engage in this party are seriously monitored, and these situations limit the contribution of these youngsters in politics. Youth need skills, and when collaborating and mobilizing people, questions remain on the ability of youth to mobilize and gather people. Their inability to answer questions raised by the public or the opposition, and to face challenges is a concern we must address.

Summary of the Focus Group Discussion in the Northern Province

Pessimistic beliefs, diminished interest

One needs money, power and connections to participate in decision-making. There is no chance for those of us who struggle with financial difficulties and families to support.

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion, Southern Province

Attitudes and views of youth on politics and related institutions expressed in focus group discussions conducted as part of the National Youth Survey 2013 were very negative. Many young people blamed the political system for the ills they faced. In the previous 1999-2000 National Youth Survey, youth were also extremely pessimistic about the political situation of the country, with 65 percent stating that the situation was bad and 36 percent that the future would get worse. According to the 2013 survey, 49 percent of youth thought that politics was becoming more violent.

Levels of trust among youth towards most public institutions, such as the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the police, and the pradeshiya sabhas (the lowest unit of local government), appear to be alarmingly low. The 2013 survey found that 89 percent of respondents expressed low trust in political parties, a much higher percentage than in the 1999-2000 survey, where only 47 percent of youth stated that they did not trust political parties or elected representatives. In 2013, 79 percent of youth reported low trust in provincial councils, compared to 55 percent in the 2009 National Youth Survey.
Youth in the focus group discussions for the 2013 survey remarked there was no point in resisting or challenging existing systems and practices. This was due to economic grievances, family obligations, fear of engagement and the belief that change is impossible. The survey indicated that 42 percent of respondents were not at all interested in discussing politics with friends and family, 81 percent were disinterested in participating in campaigns, 40 percent did not read or follow political news, and 90 percent did not engage in Internet discussions on civic and political matters. On a more positive note, 88 percent of youth said that they are interested in what is happening immediately around them.

During the focus group discussions and stakeholder consultations for this report, many young people stressed the importance of youth learning more about their role in civic and political engagement and decision-making. They felt that their peers are not knowledgeable and empowered enough to influence civic and political outcomes. When asked about gender in politics, 71 percent of survey respondents said that they would not invariably vote for a male politician (table 5.1), and 74 percent agreed more women should be in politics. But 68 percent said women had adequate opportunities to be in leadership positions, a notion belied by actual participation rates. The percentage of women holding seats in the national Parliament was 5.8 percent in 2013, compared to 33.2 percent in Nepal, 19.7 percent in Bangladesh and 10.9 percent in India. Seychelles, closer to Sri Lanka on the HDI, has 43.8 percent. Evidently, youth are unaware of the challenges faced by women in leadership positions, or of how gender shapes identity in ways that can constrain what a person can or cannot do. Many women leaders are subjected to sexualized jokes and questions about their ‘respectability’. Increasing political violence has made it extremely difficult for them to engage in political activities.

The lack of interest among young women in decision-making and political activism is notable.

| Table 5.1: A majority of youth believe more women should enter politics |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| **More women should enter politics**                        | (%)       |
| Strongly disagree                                            | 6.1       |
| Disagree                                                     | 20.7      |
| Agree                                                        | 22.5      |
| Strongly agree                                               | 49.6      |
| No response                                                  | 1.0       |

| **I would always prefer to vote for a male candidate**      | (%)       |
| Strongly disagree                                          | 16.8      |
| Disagree                                                   | 55.1      |
| Agree                                                      | 16.9      |
| Strongly agree                                             | 10.2      |
| No response                                               | 1.0       |

| **Politics in my locality is becoming more violent**        | (%)       |
| Strongly disagree                                          | 10.3      |
| Disagree                                                   | 39.0      |
| Agree                                                      | 30.2      |
| Strongly agree                                             | 19.3      |
| No response                                               | 1.1       |

| **Young women have adequate opportunities**                | (%)       |
| Strongly disagree                                          | 4.6       |
| Disagree                                                   | 27.1      |
| Agree                                                      | 29.6      |
| Strongly agree                                             | 37.6      |
| No response                                               | 1.1       |

Some women in the focus group discussions felt that politics is not their domain. Despite their educational achievements, and considerable advantages compared to other women in the South Asian region, socio-cultural barriers remain steep, and they are not transferring these to employment or the public sphere. Many stereotypical notions about the ‘right’ place of women in society have apparently been internalized.

*How many female politicians do we have? From the ground level the societal norms on gender are preventing women from exercising their political and civic rights. It appears that together with the society at large, women themselves have internalized that they are confined to a certain role that does not include exercising their right to participate. The attitudes towards women are very negative. Even women themselves vote for male candidates.*

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion, Southern Province

Youth seem to be desperate to migrate out of the country for better [perceived] living conditions. Becoming a waiter in Italy seems to be more prestigious and rewarding than working and living here. I think this is a generation that would prefer to escape from realities than actively participate to change things for the betterment of a large community.

Provincial council member, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

They may be living in poverty, unemployment, and vulnerable conditions, but it appears that they have succumbed to those difficult living conditions. It’s almost like they have no energy and the drive to change those unfortunate situations that affect their lives. Social media, mobile phones, reality TV programmes and musical concerts appear to be easily facilitating this obliviousness. However, when we were young about 20, 30 years ago, we wanted to change things, we were angry and restless to challenge the unfortunate situations that were affecting our lives and our communities.

Provincial council member, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

**Alienation and self interest**

Youth are not a homogenous mass. Their identities are interwoven and complex, influenced by families, communities and socio-cultural environments. But a certain distaste for or tiredness with politics held true across ethnic and other divides among youth respondents to the National Youth Survey 2013. In contrast to the past, youth today were unaware of their political and civic roles, and no longer willing to associate with political leadership or global and local change agents. Earlier generations felt excluded and wanted to establish systems more responsive to their needs; today’s generation seemed to feel that transformation is not possible.

Young people—and adults—participating in the survey and the preparation of this report saw youth as largely interested only in frivolous past times influenced by a consumerist, materialistic culture. Provincial politicians in focus group discussions described youth as lacking prospects, goals and ambitions about their own development, let alone that of their communities. Youth were constantly referred to as oblivious to larger political issues and ground level problems.

Youth are disinterested to join a roundtable conversation if we [politicians] invited them. They have no trust in the system or the state. They have limited themselves to the cyber space, away from real life politics.

Provincial council member, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

When I first came into politics I was about 22 years old. The 1990 Presidential Commission on Youth Report recommended the political participation of those who are under 35 years of age, and that created the space and gave the opportunity for me to enter into politics. There were a number of other young
politicians who entered politics with me; and all were active members of youth clubs and associations. However, what we experienced was difficulty in engaging in politics with older politicians. Our opinions were belittled due to our younger age and it was difficult to convince older politicians of our ideas and thoughts. Back then they did not pay much attention to what we have to say, and this created disillusionment among young politicians, and those who aspired to get into politics. I think this disillusionment has grown over time. What we observe today is mere apathy among young people as they simply feel that their opinions do not matter within an adult-led political sphere, and that there is no point entering politics.

Provincial council member, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

Responses to the survey suggested that youth appeared to seek political favours as their only means of obtaining access to certain resources such as employment, while at the same time expressing severe discontent with the influence wielded by politicians and political parties in power. Youth said they were disillusioned by party politics, and noted the difficulty of participating without financial support and political connections. At the same time, they did not reject the possibility of aligning with politicians for their own benefit. Politicians lure youth, particularly young men, with promises of jobs and other benefits. Youth appeared to take very cynical and pragmatic decisions based on their assessment of how favours, resources and privileges were distributed.

Any tangible ideas from young people on how to hold their local leaders accountable were less evident in the National Youth Survey 2013 findings. The main response involved distancing themselves from any activity ‘tainted’ by politics. Economic dependence, lack of opportunities and low confidence in existing institutions have led a majority of youth to focus more on achieving economic independence by finding a job rather than asserting their rights.

...youth are disinterested to engage with the society. I think there has been a drastic change of societal values and how we co-exist with one another, and how we feel each other’s pain and difficulties. I think the youth have lost these values somewhere along the lines. Perhaps it’s the ways in which the education system nurtures young people, it could also be what they learn from their families and communities, or the disillusionment towards how politics operate in Sri Lanka and how grievances are answered through existing systems.

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

Despite the disengagement of youth from mainstream politics, they have been attracted to alternative or more radical political movements, as has happened in other parts of the world. In the past, both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna positioned themselves as alternatives to mainstream parties. Alienated youth, especially in leftist movements, formed the core cadres of both. While it is tempting to understand this as part of the youth culture of rebellion, it may also have been the result of youth seeing prospects for transformation and an end to exclusion in alternative ideologies.

Many alternative or radical groups call upon people to participate in creating change, and offer leadership as well as opportunities for people to mobilize themselves. Mainstream political groups, on the other hand, appear to be mainly interested in upholding the status quo. They are beset by internal conflicts, charges of corruption, nepotism and political patronage. Sri Lanka’s major political parties from both ends of the ideological spectrum are dominated by the political and social elite, meaning that youth not part of these groups feel left out and tend to be drawn to the opposition.

Today, of course, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has been militarily defeated, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is part of the political mainstream. The recent split within the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, however, where a group left the party protesting (among other things) that it was getting too comfortable within parliamentary politics, shows that youth continue to feel suspicious of mainstream parties. The Inter University Students Federation, which had supported the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, broke away and aligned itself with the new faction.

Youth are also active in emerging extremist religious groups, many of which offer a strong critique of the current political system and of politicians in general. They position themselves as providing an alternative to politics as usual, a strong pull for youth, even though some have been accused of links to various members of political parties.
Sources of apathy

The National Youth Survey 2013 and associated focus group discussions brought to light the sources of apathy and disillusionment among young people. Among survey respondents, 37 percent said that escalating corruption prevents their participation in civic and political affairs (figure 5.4), while 27 percent of youth identified politicization, 8 percent violence, and 10 percent the inability to speak openly as other major barriers. Focus group discussions revealed that youth view political participation largely in terms of party-based politics. Their disillusionment with political parties thus influenced how they view political activism.

Parties are not succeeding in attracting the young constituency. Youth feel that it is questionable how youth friendly the current political sphere is and the space for participation in spaces such as youth clubs. Discussions also pointed out a poor understanding of democracy, good governance and democratic principles, which could result in conscious or unconscious decisions to restrict involvement in civic and political affairs. Media, educational attainment, family and party politics were identified as key influential factors shaping the ways in which youth perceived societal issues and their consciousness of exercising their roles. Economic grievances, and family and work obligations appear to be limiting factors. Youth said that organizing themselves collectively is a challenge, with very little societal support to organize themselves, especially since parents and the community at large observe such collective efforts with suspicion. Provincial Council members described the lives of youth as revolving around social media, mobile phones and tuition classes, and said that there is simply not enough time for them to make many friends or associate with peers, another barrier to youth organizing themselves.

Extract from the report of the Focus Group Discussion, Western Province

A lack of opportunities and freedom

Given the right opportunities and freedom, young people in focus group discussions asserted they have a strong will to participate in politics. See also the statement by young political leaders in box 5.1. But survey respondents described limitations on their options, citing, for example, the lack of avenues for young people to present their demands to the government. In focus group discussions, they described their involvement as being sought only during elections, when politicians need the youth vote.

According to a 2004 Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) study, at all decision-making levels, youth described constraints on their freedom and rights. This feeling was particularly common among young girls and women. While in school, young people
are rarely allowed to make independent decisions, as they remain financially dependent on their families. After school, particularly if they remain unemployed, they feel disempowered. When youth in the post-war Northern Province were asked if they felt free to protest or attend a demonstration against political injustice, 47 percent said no, only 11 percent felt completely free to do so, and 26 percent said they were not sure.

The UNDP Socio-Economic Baseline Report 2011 on the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts found young people in the North did not want to assume leadership roles because they feared being suspected of having links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam if they displayed leadership qualities. As a result, young people, especially young men, shield away from decision-making, so that such roles were assumed by older members of the community, the opposite pattern from the time of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam dominance. The report claimed that young women ex-combatants were forced to remain indoors and away from the public domain in order to avoid suspicion. This deliberate distancing reinforces the limited part that young people can play at the community level and restricts integration into normal life.

**BOX 5.1: STATEMENT ON THE CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH**

By the Young Political Leaders Forum of Sri Lanka
Dated 24 July 2014
Colombo

Young people are often described as disengaged from civic and political engagement. Yet, their role as active agents for change remains fundamental, especially in a post-war society such as Sri Lanka.

Given the above, we, the undersigned members of the Young Political Leaders Forum of Sri Lanka (YPLF), strongly believe in the need to actively engage youth in civic and political participation. As a group of concerned young politicians, we therefore call for the implementation of the following set of recommendations:

1. Restructure the Sri Lanka Youth Parliament to enhance its transparency and representation.

2. Strengthen existing platforms under the National Youth Services Council, such as the youth federations and youth clubs, to achieve effective representation of all youth, irrespective of their political affiliation and/or social background.

3. Establish a Youth Caucus in the national Parliament.

4. Ensure that political parties increase, by 10 percent, the participation of young adults, under the age of 40, by 2020.

5. Revise the current electoral system to allow young people from different backgrounds to enter politics.

6. Form party platforms at the national level to promote political and civic education among young politicians.

7. Introduce a Code of Ethics to all politicians; especially parliamentarians, as an effort to rebuild trust and confidence in the political system.

8. Add effective strategies to the National Youth Policy Action Plan 2014 to increase the participation of young people in political and civic engagements/activities.

9. Ensure that youth are meaningfully involved and actively engaged in national monitoring mechanisms in order to guarantee accountability for commitments and transparency at all levels.

10. Integrate civic education in all curriculums, including at universities.

11. Guarantee the right to information, as well as the freedom of speech and opinion to all, including marginalized youth.

12. Recognize the importance of voluntary movements working for positive social change as influential actors for peace and development. Voluntary activities need to be encouraged at all levels, including in the university and workplace, without misguiding and involving youth in hate campaigns.

13. Identify mechanisms to enhance civic engagement among young people in a democratic way.

14. Use social media as an effective tool to increase the engagement of youth in civic and political participation.

Signatures:
Vasantha Senanayake, Member of Parliament, Sri Lanka Freedom Party
Shehan Semasinghe, Member of Parliament, Sri Lanka Freedom Party
Niroshan Perera, Member of Parliament, United National Party
Harin Fernando, Member of Parliament, United National Party
Hunais Ferook, Member of Parliament, All Ceylon Muslim Congress
Raghu Balschandran, Representative, Tamil National Alliance
Hostility to student activism

University students who participated in the focus group discussions for the National Youth Survey 2013 thought that a university is a good nurturing ground for youth political participation. First and foremost, the knowledge gained equips students to be more conscious and critical about what is happening around them. Second, the internal culture is such that building coalitions among peers becomes less arduous than within society at large.

You will easily find likeminded and dedicated people to collaborate, thus making participation much more convenient.

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion,
Southern Province

Student politics can nurture new leaders to act on issues in their communities. In contrast to politics at large, significant numbers of women participate in student political movements, although there have been very few in leadership positions. University students in the focus group discussions repeatedly confirmed that both men and women have equal space and respect within the student political sphere, but the situation is completely different and discouraging outside the university. They said that a majority of women active in student political movements refuse to pursue politics after leaving the university due to the pressure to be confined within a patriarchal framework, family obligations and economic constraints. This shows the strength of gendered norms and values in society, since even though they are exposed to leadership and other forms of engagement while at university, female university students view this as a temporary phase.

Within the university women work shoulder to shoulder with men, and are important contributors to student politics. However, when they leave the university, they tend to live up to the stereotypical gender role.

Young Man, Focus Group Discussion,
Southern Province

Sri Lanka’s political system has long been hostile to student politics. Student-led youth movements are regarded as linked to particular political groups and parties, and there is very little tolerance towards student political activism. This has led in many instances to repression of student unions and student leaders. Youth involvement in politics in universities is often portrayed as a problem of ‘discipline’ and ‘manipulation’ of youth by political parties. The Inter University Students Federation in particular has come in for sharp criticism because of its alleged link to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and later to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna breakaway faction, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

Authorities are particularly hostile to student unions, and many universities have been experiencing problems. Although the Universities Act No 16 of 1978 provides for the establishment of unions, some have been either banned or made effectively dysfunctional through the refusal of authorities to conduct union elections.

An adult-centred society

Sri Lanka is an adult-centred society, where adults are respected, irrespective of their status in the family or society. Adults do not support or encourage youth to be active in their communities, and expect young people to obey their advice and directives. Young people, by default, consult adults, teachers and religious leaders when making decisions.

These socio-cultural norms have influenced the general goals of young people to be confined to studies, employment and contribution to the income of their families. Parents constantly encourage their children to pursue ‘respectable’ and uncontroversial careers such as becoming a doctor, lawyer or engineer, a tendency that shapes the consciousness of youth and how they act in society. Adult dominance is reflected in school as well as other social domains such as religious and work environments.

The reluctance among adults to encourage youth to be more politically and socially active is linked to the consequences of the violence the country has
experienced in the past. Youth leadership roles are treated with lesser importance, unless exercised within carefully managed and controlled environments. The focus group discussions confirmed parents do little to encourage their children’s political and civic engagement. Having witnessed three youth insurrections, they appear to be fearful that their children might get involved with the ‘wrong type of politics’.

Youth in the focus group discussions said that those who go against this norm may face harassment and intimidation. University student activists, for instance, are often subjected to arrest, and engage in confrontations with the authorities and sometimes even the security forces. The message is clear, youth stated: their political activism, unless under the protection of those in power, carries the risk of sanctions.

Formal and informal youth organizations, while limited, are spaces for youth to develop their critical thinking, leadership and decision-making skills with their peers. But adults often create and lead these for youth, according to the focus group discussions. Youth-driven initiatives are rare or subject to the directives and patronage of political parties. Youth commented that those aligned to the political party in power are given special privileges, while others are excluded, discriminated against and/or regarded as ‘troublemakers’.

Focus group discussions conducted with a number of youth groups revealed that youth felt concerned about the extent to which these mechanisms provide genuine liberty to voice their opinions and influence outcomes. Youth said that truly democratized participation for them must not be influenced by or confined to agendas of adults.

**Attempts at inclusion**

I question who controls current youth politics? How youth friendly is the political sphere?

*Young Woman, Focus Group Discussion, Southern Province*

The troubled history between student activists and university authorities has given rise to various efforts to address the ‘problem’ of student politics within the university system. One is the Leadership Training for University Entrants (also called the Leadership, Attitude and Positive Thinking Development Training) introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Defense and Urban Development in 2011. This initiative is somewhat controversial, since the university community has questioned the fact that the training is conducted in military camps. Officials from the Ministry of Higher Education have cited the lack of 'discipline' among students as one of the reasons for problems in universities, and contend that the training deals with this problem. The training has also been promoted as a response to the practice of 'ragging' in universities, but university academics have argued that it is more important to implement laws against ragging.

Leadership and personality training have become common means of encouraging youth to participate. While available through both state and non-state agencies, they are not linked effectively with actual decision-making. The Youth Parliament, for example, was established to cultivate leadership skills, but in the focus group discussions, young people expressed disappointment about its selection process, which they felt could have been more transparent. They also commented that views and opinions expressed in platforms like this are not properly translated to broader policy platforms and implementation processes. Youth who participate are often those searching for a political career or other career advantages. These forums seem less able to attract youth disenchanted by the mainstream.

Through the focus group discussions, it was clear that very few youth are interested in the continuation of village level youth societies. The majority of these state and non-state platforms aim largely to manage youth and prevent them from being misguided. That these platforms are largely adult led and controlled, however, raises questions on whether or not they have encouraged apathy among youth and deepened their internalized sense of pursuing only 'adult approved' roles.
While the situation is different within the university system, only an extremely small minority of youth become students there, and even then, they are likely to face suppression of their political activities. The burgeoning number of private universities and higher educational institutes do not expose students to youth-led organization and political activism at all. As youth apathy and disinterest increase, spaces for activism or learning about political and civic engagement are not opening up, and in fact, seem to be rapidly diminishing.

**Turning to social media**

The Internet seems to be an arena where youth are beginning to participate politically. In focus group discussions, youth said they enthusiastically take part in conversations on politics and what's happening around them via social media. These conversations were described as very rich and engaging.

*Facebook and social media are an excellent medium to communicate your thoughts and opinions. Within the student political movement, if we are having a demonstration or a gathering we use social media to inform our peers. We also send news alerts via mobile phones to a larger student audience. Social media and mobile technology have been helpful when mobilizing masses.*

*Young Man, Focus Group Discussion, Southern Province*

Social media have proved useful in certain social movements. Recently, young people have been extremely active on a variety of issues, including in responses to religious extremism and funding cuts to education. Some of these initiatives have spilled over to the public space. In a key informant interview, a citizen journalist observed, however, that while campaigns have been successful in bringing attention to overlooked concerns, the connection between greater awareness and actual policy change or government action remains dubious.

Another citizen journalist said in a key informant interview that gender equality was the only area in which activism on social media had transformed into gradual recognition and change within wider Sri Lankan society. But he stated that “social media empowers youth on solely a communicative level.”

An economist from a research organization mentioned that most Sri Lankan politicians still interact with the masses via traditional media, with many candidates not using social media at all. Among the older generation active in politics, most agreed that traditional media have a certain legitimacy, and that social media are significantly weaker competitors.

Nonetheless, many younger social activists mentioned in key informant interviews that they rely to a greater extent on social media, which they see as being more reliable and trusted sources of information, paralleling the views of some youth in Egypt and other such countries where the traditional press is highly restricted. Social media provide a relatively free space allowing multiple views to be expressed, although that includes in some cases youth entanglement with various extremist groups.

**Limited volunteerism**

*Figure 5.5: Very few youth are volunteers*

Engaging in voluntary work is often an important avenue for youth to get involved in civic activities. Voluntary work inculcates values of social responsibility, participation and leadership.

Volunteering is extensive in Sri Lanka, mostly through non-formal activities. Formal volunteerism generally takes place in not-for-profit organizations, and may involve registration of volunteers, assigning work to them, and monitoring and evaluation. Non-formal
volunteering refers to the spectrum of activities outside any formal organization, with people acting either as individuals or in groups, on either a periodic or on-going basis.\footnote{15}

It is difficult to assess the size and extent of non-formal volunteering, as it is by definition, not highly organized and often not very visible. Not all volunteers wish to publicize their work as it is done purely for their personal satisfaction. Assisting the vulnerable has been encouraged through religious values, and a number of religious and faith-based organizations engage in both formal and non-formal volunteer work. Some individuals volunteer for personal reasons, without any associations with organizations.

A United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Youth Volunteerism Online Survey with 300 responses and several key informant interviews found that around two-thirds of respondents agreed that non-formal volunteering makes as much of an impact as formal volunteering. A key conclusion was that non-formal volunteerism appears to be more common, in line with recent global findings\footnote{16} and the National Youth Survey 2013.

The UNV research found that the majority of youth respondents were interested in volunteer work, while 34 percent were not. Various factors restrict participation. In the National Youth Survey 2013, over 88 percent of respondents were not involved in any formal voluntary work either at the local or national level (figure 5.5). Around 55 percent cited lack of time as a reason for not being involved. About 49 percent said they did not have enough information on volunteering at organizations. The UNV survey corroborated this tendency. It also reported that around 52 percent of respondents highlighted time constraints due to intensive competition involved in school examinations. Other issues included a lack of recognition of how volunteer work can help in acquiring employment and higher education opportunities.

Organizations working with volunteers provided some insight into challenges faced by youth, such as conflicts when assignments fall on school days; the need for youth to contribute funds in certain circumstances; and the unwillingness of parents to allow their children to volunteer given concerns they may be subject to bad influences. Among the UNV Youth Survey respondents, however, 70 percent disagreed with the idea that their parents prevented them from engaging in volunteer activities. The National Youth Survey 2013 produced a similar finding.

Educational institutions need to pay more attention to strengthening civic consciousness and social responsibility among young people. Unless these values are inculcated at a fairly young age, youth may not develop them later on. Both the National Youth Survey 2013 and the UNV research show that while youth are willing and motivated to volunteer, the education system does not support them. A broader value-based curriculum may be required, where education is understood as not simply providing a labour force, but also civic-minded, socially responsible citizens. See box 5.2 for an example of youth volunteering.

**Box 5.2: Youth Volunteers Help Integrate Children with Disabilities in Education**

Village children with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of education. The causes are multifaceted: they include poverty, ignorance among family members and the community, difficulty in accessing pre-school facilities and/or social stigma. Pre-school teachers may be reluctant to admit children with disabilities, as this may result in pressure from parents and other pre-school children, and extra effort in working with children with disabilities. Teachers may also lack appropriate knowledge and skills.

Youth volunteers in the Community Based Rehabilitation of Persons with Disability programme are providing these children with pre-school education. Under the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare, the programme, mainly implemented by volunteers, operates in the Rajangane德 Divisional Secretariat in the Anuradhapura district. It initiated the 'Apey Iskoley', literally meaning 'Our School', which is a multipurpose welfare centre for persons with disabilities, including children and their parents/caretakers.

A 20-year-old volunteer who has recovered from a brain tumour has initiated a pre-school for children with disabilities at the centre. She also provides training for pre-school teachers to motivate them to admit children with disabilities; over the past three years, she has succeeded in having 12 children with disabilities join normal schools. This is a contribution towards inclusive education and the mainstreaming of children with disabilities.
Policy perspectives: new notions of participation

The National Youth Survey 2013 confirmed that young people remain on the margins of most democratic processes in Sri Lanka. Many present themselves as passive recipients of development who feel that systems and practices are not worth challenging since transformation appears impossible. They perceive themselves to be at the mercy of top-down solutions, and are apathetic in finding answers to their problems. Growing cynicism and disillusionment stem from the belief that there is too much violence and corruption for engagement to be meaningful.

Initiatives to promote youth political and civic participation are largely led by adults, while youth-led initiatives are suppressed or expected to fall in line with adult approval. Moving outside accepted activities can result in suppression and sometimes even violence. Sri Lanka’s adult-centred society and adult fears of ‘radical’ youth have driven this tight control.

Given the history of youth violence in Sri Lanka, however, state and civil society need to engage more seriously with youth. An apathetic, cynical and passive generation of young people is as detrimental to a country’s 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.

Institutional responses also exert a strong influence on young people, with law enforcement, educational and health services shaping how youth participate in society. The 2014 National Youth Policy has recommended steps to improve the professional skills of people working with youth, including through training and education, and by setting standards and regulating accordingly. This could foster a more youth friendly institutional environment, and facilitate youth participation and leadership.

Marginalized youth need to receive specific emphasis in opening opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes. Many state and non-state institutions have mechanisms for youth participation, but make little effort to reach excluded youth. Issues such as language, class, gender and ethnicity need to be factored into these mechanisms.

The specific constraints of young women call for special attention. Education alone cannot empower them. The social and cultural environment needs to actively support women’s participation and leadership. This area can be hard to address, since it involves critically examining entrenched social norms, values and cultural traditions. But Sri Lanka has a history of women in top political positions, and as leaders in civil society, trade unions and political movements. They need to be made known as role models for young women today. Women need room to network and support each other collectively. Established women’s groups have an important role in supporting younger women.

Youth-led mechanisms also require more space to be active. Suppressing student councils and leaders within the university system contravenes the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and is inimical to youth participation. Educational institutions, especially at higher levels, need to encourage independent, self-reflective and mutually respectful student activism.

Adult-controlled youth participation mechanisms should be reconsidered in light of the legitimacy of youth involvement in decision-making. Institutionalizing democratic systems for youth
participation and decision-making includes providing equal opportunities, ensuring the participation of different stakeholders, and upholding transparency and accountability.

One way of facilitating youth civic and political participation is through volunteerism. But the current competitive educational culture is proving to be a significant barrier. Volunteerism could be integrated more closely with school curricula, so that civic and social responsibility and leadership skills are explicitly identified as desired outcomes of schooling.

More broadly, the values and goals of education could be revisited, towards linking education to the larger goals of producing socially responsible and engaged citizens. 'Quality' education is key. It should help children and youth develop critical, analytical and independent minds, and not just require them to see the world through the eyes of adults. New measures could give children and youth opportunities to develop a range of participatory models and leadership skills.

Formal and informal education both should assume greater roles in strengthening responsible civic and political engagement, and creating awareness of basic principles. Access to information at all levels will help young people make informed, meaningful contributions, and to engage in effective dialogue without being isolated from debates that may be taking place or decisions being made. A commitment to working on the basis of shared principles is vital. It should be rooted in respect for young people's capacities as agents of change, and a willingness to recognize them as equal stakeholders and partners.

Technology clearly has potential for supporting youth leadership. Empowered youth should be able to use technological platforms and resources not only to express and communicate their concerns to decision-makers, but also to mobilize for change, and most importantly to innovate and help their communities to achieve well-being, peacefully and through democratic means.

Sri Lanka needs to learn from its past. Its post-independence history has been marred by political violence, where youth were primary agents and victims of conflict. One of the major reasons propelling youth towards violence was their alienation from mainstream political processes and institutions. Today's youth are too disillusioned by the failures of the past to follow the same path, but they are as alienated from and disenchanted with politics as earlier generations. It would be naïve to think that current apathy and cynicism will prevent youth from resorting to violence. There is a great danger that they may be driven towards the kinds of movements that do not seek transformation but destruction, and that may prove to be far more dangerous than in the past. The rise of small, but influential extremist religious groups, which can be highly divisive and inflammatory, suggests this trend.

It is necessary to rethink the relationship between the state and society in Sri Lanka. The welfare model has been key to significant human development achievements in health and education. But political reforms did not accompany these initiatives, which has meant that relations based on hierarchy and patronage mediate how people are able to access these benefits. This has been inimical to democratizing society. The ruling political and social elite has become a supra-class, governed by different rules.

Unless this weakness in political and civic relations is addressed, the political and civic participation of youth will likely not improve in any meaningful way. This may be the single most important factor determining whether or not Sri Lanka can truly build the kind of society where youth will flourish, while ensuring sustainability, inclusivity and justice. It has a choice about whether the future will involve well-being for some—or for all.