Human development, as an approach, is concerned with what I take to be the basic development idea: namely, advancing the richness of human life, rather than the richness of the economy in which human beings live, which is only a part of it.

Amartya Sen, Professor of Economics, Harvard University and Nobel Laureate in Economics, 1998

In many ways, Sri Lanka today is at a crucial moment, with the end of the prolonged war five years ago, and the transition of its development strategies and trajectories. For many decades since independence, Sri Lanka was hailed for its welfare state model, where publicly funded health and education services became basic entitlements of citizens. This was largely responsible for a strong showing on certain key development indicators such as literacy and life expectancy. Progress on social indicators, however, has not been matched in the economy or in terms of political reforms.

Sri Lanka has in fact been somewhat of a development anomaly, with some social indicators on par with those of economically more advanced countries. Some of its human development challenges differ from those in countries at similar levels of economic development and in the South Asian region. Sri Lanka cannot be categorized easily. Universal development aims and targets do not fully reflect its situation. In terms of the MDGs, for example, it has achieved or is close to achieving many of the targets, certainly on poverty and education. But it faces challenges in areas not reflected in the goals, such as in disparities between different groups of youth. While aiming for global targets, Sri Lanka needs to factor local specificities into its development aims and programmes.

Understanding the broader development context is important when analysing the situation of youth. Many issues discussed in this report have arisen not necessarily because ‘youth-specific’ interventions have been ineffective. Instead, limitations in larger institutional, political, economic and cultural processes and structures have curtailed the potential for change. For any intervention or policy to be effective, broader institutional structures and processes need to be properly aligned.

Youth issues cannot be isolated from larger social concerns, even where they may have specific consequences for youth. While youth insurrections have challenged society and social structures as a whole, they never asked for more youth-specific policies and interventions, but broader social, economic and political transformations.

Towards pursuing a different model

Despite Sri Lanka’s impressive human development indicators, economic growth now seems to take precedence in the envisioning of development goals. This is not surprising, given the lag in economic development. But there is a danger of forgetting how, despite economic woes, human development has remained strong, testifying again to the need to understand Sri Lanka’s unique development situation. Sri Lanka’s strength lies in its healthy and educated population. It needs to build on this comparative advantage. Economic growth should not come at the cost of health and education, specifically in terms of equal access to high-quality services as highlighted in global discussions on the post-2015 development agenda. A development model focused on economic growth only is unsustainable, as has been proven in multiple cases around the world. Countries that have best survived the global economic crises recently are those that continued to balance economic and social policies.

In the past several decades, Sri Lanka has witnessed a steady decline in investment in health and education, shifting financial burdens to individuals, families and the private sector. This is having a significant impact on quality of access and service quality. The health sector, despite a history of outstanding service, is struggling to meet new challenges, and respond to changing demographics and health needs. Similarly, the education system struggles to maintain quality and relevance. The implications for the economy and particularly for employment are potentially severe. Policymakers tempted to prioritize economic growth and make ‘economically rational’ decisions also need to take into account accomplishments from daring to follow a different development model in the past.
From a human development perspective, Sri Lanka’s early investment in health and education was right on track. Given the impressive returns, Sri Lanka needs to carefully consider how to build on progress already made and ensure it is not reversed. The decisions it makes will have profound consequences for youth, since their capacity and potential are inextricably linked with investments that Sri Lanka makes in developing its people. Future development trajectories also need to be considered in light of past conflicts, which arose from the keen sense of social injustice felt by many youth. Development initiatives thus need to respond to injustice and otherwise take the concerns of young people seriously.

Building on the achievements of the past does not mean that innovations are unnecessary. Existing structures and provisions need to be assessed for relevance and responsiveness to new conditions, such as those related to disparities, service quality, and changes in lifestyle and demography.

Disparities remain a concern

This report affirms that disparities in development persist, and are multidimensional and interrelated. They are not shaped simply by income inequalities, but also by factors such as gender, ethnicity, language and political affiliation. For instance, although women do not appear to experience discrimination in accessing education, their educational achievements do not translate into better employment or higher levels of political participation, suggesting that traditional gender norms outweigh the ‘modernizing’ effect of education.

Youth are extremely cognizant of and sensitive to these disparities. The language they use to describe their experiences is imbued with a sense of being outsiders. In the process of preparing this report, politically active youth spoke of how disconnected they felt outside of their political groups, and how discouraged they were when they tried to deal with the ‘real’ world. University students talked incessantly about the different ‘groups’ within universities—some are ‘insiders’ or belong, and others are ‘outsiders’ and don’t belong. Often these groups are divided by language, particularly English. Youth described how English symbolized a whole system of privilege and exclusivity, denied to those ‘outside’ certain cultural and social circles.

Unemployed youth spoke bitterly of how political connections and social networks triumph over hard work and merit in the job market. Youth from ethnic minority communities discussed being distrusted and subject to surveillance simply for being identified as the ethnic ‘other’. School and university students highlighted the competitiveness of the education system, and how differences in values between parents and children are leading to strained and distant relationships within families, and constraining youth contributions to civil and political spheres.

These disparities and feelings of ‘otherness’ need to be taken seriously. They represent the kind of alienation that youth feel from a world that they believe is constructed for them by adults, without encouraging their empowerment or consistently responding to their needs. It appears that youth are withdrawing into themselves—the distrust they express in institutions, and their disengagement from civic, political and social activities all point to a kind of distancing from decision-making spaces and bodies. Incidents of self-harm and suicide; alcohol, tobacco and drug use; and violence among youth are some of the more dysfunctional manifestations of this sense of alienation.

PHOTO CREDIT: NAVI SR LANKA
Reversing this trend calls for a return to some of the values and ideals expressed in the earliest global Human Development Reports from over 20 years ago. These recognized that true wealth lies in a happy, contented and capable citizenry. Achieving that goal depends in large part on investing in enhancing the capabilities and freedoms of youth, and placing confidence in their energy, enthusiasm and idealism. Rhetoric and policy need to be coupled with specific action and interventions providing youth with the space to realize their hopes and create their futures.

**Celebrating and renewing success**

Sri Lanka does not need to look too far for inspiration; it lies in the courage and vision of its early policy makers, who invested in people long before the Human Development Reports had been thought of. As shown in this report, there are several excellent policies in place. The challenge has been to transform these into action, and link them to sustainable national goals rather than just immediate political aims. What Sri Lanka needs today are not more policies, more frameworks and more action plans; rather, it needs leadership to transform existing policies and frameworks into actions that benefit people.

One way forward is to strengthen governance structures and processes, including transparency and accountability in policy- and decision-making. More effective mechanisms are needed to evaluate and assess the performance of those in political leadership positions. Policy makers, bureaucrats and other officials in the public, private and non-state sectors also need to be more accountable. Appointment of officials to important bodies should be through independent mechanisms. Public trust in institutions should be strengthened, since the loss of confidence can create a dangerous situation where individuals rather than public interest drive actions.

Sri Lanka needs to celebrate the successes it has achieved in the past and renew these in light of current challenges. It needs to value the passion and idealism of its youth, including those who sacrificed their lives to fight for what they believed. The violence of the past has made Sri Lanka wary of rebellious youth, of dissent and critique, yet these very characteristics, creatively channelled, could lead to positive social, political and economic transformations that adults are too timid to consider. Creating an environment where youth can flourish is probably the greatest investment Sri Lanka can make in its future.

**Taking up the challenge of policy implementation**

Sri Lanka’s development challenges are complex and multifaceted. There are no easy answers. What this report highlights repeatedly is how political and social contexts have determined the effectiveness of development policies and programmes.

Sri Lanka has many existing policies, programmes and initiatives containing plenty of specific plans to address the issues discussed in this report. Yet youth continue to face some of the same problems that they confronted in the 1970s, just before Sri Lanka experienced its first youth rebellion. While many advances have been made since then, groups of youth have fallen through the cracks. They experience discrimination and exclusion based on a variety of factors, and as a result, perceive society as being unfair.

A persistent feeling of grievance expressed by young people reflects a particular relationship between the state and its citizens, as well as the specific nature of the Sri Lankan state. Simply to describe the relationship in terms of a welfare state does not capture the extent to which the state intervenes in the everyday functions of people’s lives. It has become the chief facilitator of people’s material existence, be it in providing employment, enabling social mobility, distributing goods or managing group interests. In such a situation, different social groups should feel secure in their relationship to the state, including less powerful ones. When various groups experience this relationship differently, with some groups feeling excluded, a rupture occurs. This is not simply an existential crisis, but a material crisis undercutting people’s abilities to live decent and dignified lives.
This context calls for considering the relationship between development policies, programmes and the state in Sri Lanka. Whereas welfare mechanisms previously ensured some measure of basic services to all, the erosion of the welfare system has meant that those social groups with a difficult relationship with the state are often excluded not simply from the outcomes of development programmes and policies, but also participation in shaping programmes to respond to their needs.

There is currently far more emphasis on building the private sector and linking people directly to the market so that the role of the state is minimized. Yet this shift has not been accompanied by any transformation of the relations that position people differently within Sri Lankan society. Consequently, the private sector often reproduces many of the hierarchies that privilege certain people over others. This can be clearly seen in its failure to meet the employment needs of youth, for instance. It recruits largely through exclusive personal and social networks, even as constraints on national expansion have confined much private sector growth to the relatively well-off Western Province.

This kind of tendency underscores how acting on intentions expressed in development policies and programmes requires social and political transformation as much as efficient planning. There needs to be a realistic assessment of the degree to which policies and programmes are embedded within social and political processes and institutions they seek to transform. Actions identified in many of the policies and programmes discussed in this report have been around for many decades, in different forms. Many recommendations that came out of the stakeholder consultation conducted for this report are already stated in these. There seems to be broad agreement about what needs to be done—on paper, but not in practice.

One possible spur to action might come from explicitly emphasizing the socially and politically transformative potential of development in a manner benefitting the society at large. Further, there is a need to move beyond the process of policy development, notwithstanding how much commitment and consultation may have been brought to that. Ensuring ownership and accountability for acting to implement policies could be advanced in part by more systematic mechanisms for monitoring and review. These also need to be applied regularly to adjust policies to changing circumstances.

Several key policies related to youth have been developed over the past several years. They include:
- The National Youth Policy 2014
- The National Action Plan on Youth Employment 2008
- The National Policy and Strategy on Health of Young Persons 2011
- The National Policy on Maternal and Child Health 2012
- The National Policy Framework on Social Integration 2012
- The National Plan of Action to Implement the Recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission 2012

The extent to which these have actually resulted in specific interventions and actions is unclear, making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness. The National Youth Policy has proposed a mechanism for monitoring implementation: a high-level Youth Commission. Instead of focusing only on the National Youth Policy, however, the Commission could be responsible for monitoring and tracking the implementation of all policies relevant to youth. Integrating a mechanism directly into policy development and implementation would encourage regular reviews.

The proposed Youth Commission would benefit from the representation of different stakeholders, such as from the non-governmental and private sectors, in addition to the currently designated ex-officio members of the public sector. While youth representatives have been included, they would be in the minority. An alternative would be to consider an independent, youth-led watchdog body allowing youth to have more oversight and
influence over policy implementation. The participation of youth has been stressed globally, as seen in the 2014 World Conference on Youth. In the Colombo Declaration that resulted, governments and youth jointly called for “an enhanced and active role for youth in policy formulation and implementation and evaluation of processes related to development.”

National planning and budgeting mechanisms also need to strengthen coherence across different policies and ensure adequate resources for implementation. Disconnects between different initiatives otherwise limit their effectiveness.

Some priority perspectives: a call to action

Many important policy recommendations on youth first appeared in the recommendations from the 1990 report of the Presidential Commission on Youth. See box 7.1 for a summary highlighting some recommendations where implementation is most relevant to youth today.

**BOX 7.1: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 1990 REPORT OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON YOUTH**

**The Depoliticization of Society (Chapter 1)**

Hold elections to grass-roots institutions on the basis on the individual acceptability of candidates rather than their political affiliation.

Formulate and adopt a code of conduct for politicians reflecting norms crucial to the health and continuity of public life. Some youth-specific matters that might find expression in such a code are:

- Do not compel school children to participate in partisan political functions or ceremonies.
- Functions organized in schools as part of the regular routine should not be made use of, even indirectly, for political purposes.
- An open competitive examination for public sector employment should include an aptitude test where appropriate.

- Equity considerations pertaining to district, ethnic identity and other factors must form the basis of recruitment for public sector employment.

**Youth Alienation and the Erosion of Institutions (Chapter 2)**

Make it obligatory for all political parties contesting provincial council elections to nominate not less than 40 percent of their candidates from within the age group 18 to 30 years.

**Settlement of Youth Grievances (Chapter 3)**

Set up a Youth Ombudsman who would not need to have grievances channelled through Parliament as a prerequisite for any inquiry.

**Education and Employment (Chapter 4)**

Although the mismatch between education and employment is an urgent problem to be addressed, the commission does not believe that the sole aim of education should be employment creation.

Education should equip students with skills and knowledge so that they may pursue a vocation of their choice, given the opportunity and minimum standards. Also, education should develop personality traits so that the student becomes a self-reliant, self-determining individual who is able to contribute to the life of his or her community.

**Mismatch between Education and Employment (Chapter 5)**

It is important to set up a manpower unit, within the relevant ministry, that will be in charge of manpower projections. These should be published every six months to evaluate government projects and investments in terms of manpower development.

The industrialization policy needs to promote investments and growth in rural areas, especially the South and districts of high unemployment. It is important that urban-rural disparities, which are the basis for many grievances, are not widened as a result of a major thrust towards industrialization centred in urban areas.

Identify rural geographic units, such as one Divisional Secretariat Division in each district, as growth centres for infrastructure development and planning, and consider granting special tax incentives to industries that invest there. Also, as the existing banking sector is wary of
lending to young people, establish a separate banking system to extend credit to young entrepreneurs in rural areas.

Schemes for vocational training, the development of entrepreneurial skills and the encouragement of self-employment should include young women.

**Disparities Aggravating Social Inequality (chapter 6)**

Resource allocations to schools should be on the basis of annual grading linked to available facilities and student teacher ratios.

Vigorous initiatives are required to offer incentives to teachers who work in difficult areas.

Disparities in income and living standards are a major source of discontent, envy and frustration. Lower level salaries cannot be completely disproportionate to those at higher levels, particularly when the former are insufficient to meet the rising cost of living.

**Language Policy (Chapter 7)**

Strong measures should be taken to prevent linguistic discrimination. These could include a requirement that all job interviews should be conducted in the language chosen by the person to be interviewed. The envisioned official language commission should be set up to ensure that there is no discrimination against those who seek employment, and that information from all government departments as well as the private sector is provided in all three languages.

**Ethnic Harmony (Chapter 9)**

To promote national unity and communal harmony, and in this regard use 'Sri Lankan' when referring to nationality in birth and marriage certificates, etc.

A devolution package needs to be finalized, based on a negotiated consensus, to enable the provincial council system to be viable and effective.

**Note:** Minor edits for length and clarity were made to the recommendations.  
Source: Sri Lanka Sessional Paper No. 1-1990

This National Human Development Report also presents some policy perspectives in the preceding chapters; a few key points are reiterated here as a call for action.

**Make education about more than just a job**

When considering existing policies, there is a major lack of those focusing on education, despite its crucial role in the lives of youth and all other aspects of development. The system is highly divided, with extreme differences of opinion among policy makers, academics, teachers, students and education service providers. A transparent and consultative policy development process could start with dialogues among different stakeholders and the larger community to build clearer consensus on the role and relevance of education in contemporary society.

A sustained, in-depth analysis of the current situation of education, combined with a vision for where the country is heading in the next several decades, could move the national discourse beyond the current emphasis on
examinations and employability, and towards broader, more humanistic education. This could better align with youth expectations, change societal perspectives and contribute to the long-term development of the country as a whole.

In this process, the ‘how’ of teaching and learning calls for as much focus as the ‘what’. This requires a comprehensive review of curricula at all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary; an assessment of the pedagogy employed in educational institutions; and an emphasis on the process of teaching and learning rather than just focusing on examination results. It depends on considerable investment in teacher training, support, job satisfaction and social recognition.

Interventions for the educational empowerment of youth have to not only take into consideration the quality and relevance of educational systems at various levels, but also gender, age, civil status, norms, societal structures, geographical location and economic status in order to understand how these may present obstacles for particular groups.

Improve employment choices

A lack of information on the job market is a serious impediment that could be addressed by surveying enterprises to determine which economic sectors are growing, which occupations and skills are needed, and what kinds of training are warranted. Information could be disseminated through career guidance centres, job service centres and other relevant institutions so that youth can make informed choices. This would eventually help many see the rewards of investing in skills and higher education that better meet demands.

Detailed mapping of regional challenges and opportunities could back specific strategies to improve the employability of young people, in terms of appropriate skills and the development of enterprises that can readily absorb youth. Robust collaboration among the education, labour and industrial fields could do much to boost the relevance of skills education. Tertiary education reforms could include diversifying academic programmes and aiming at higher order skills to make the workforce globally competitive.

Negative attitudes about vocational training could be addressed through the school curricula to increase the likelihood of students choosing these courses; internships and mentoring at the higher secondary level could foster the transition to work. Minimum wage provisions need to be implemented and a wage-setting system linked to productivity put in place.

Uphold sexual and reproductive health rights

Sri Lanka’s substantial investments in health care have not overcome some obstacles for youth, particularly in the area of sexual and reproductive health services. Socio-cultural influences can result in a lack of awareness among youth, an unwillingness to use services or services that do not respect youth needs. At the same time, teenage pregnancies and pregnancies outside marriage, early marriage or cohabitation and homosexual relations are realities for many young people.

Legal concepts such as the age of discretion, evolving capacity and the right to information should be embedded in legal and policy documents to ensure young people realize their right to sexual and reproductive health information and services. There is also an urgent need to sensitize parents, religious groups, teachers and the society at large on the sexual activity of youth, and the importance of access to family planning services. Youth themselves need comprehensive sexual and reproductive health knowledge to make informed decisions. While some youth get this in school, such initiatives also need to be part of non-formal education and vocational training programmes. Out-of-school youth should have ready access as well.
Take youth participation seriously by dropping barriers

Given the history of youth violence in Sri Lanka, state and civil society need to engage more seriously with young people. An apathetic, cynical and passive generation is as detrimental to development as one that is violent and destructive. Youth need to have self-belief and hope. Whether or not they develop these is heavily swayed by the attitudes and actions of adults around them.

Institutions have a central role in the lives of youth, particularly those in law enforcement, education and health care. They need to be youth friendly, and facilitate youth participation and leadership. While many state and non-state institutions have mechanisms for youth participation, they need to be more proactive in overcoming barriers related to language, class, gender and ethnicity. They should move away from models designed and controlled only by adults for youth, and recognize that youth need to assume leadership roles and have a voice in shaping their own agendas. Access to information at all levels will help young people make more informed, meaningful contributions.

Educational institutions, especially at higher levels, need to encourage independent, self-reflective and mutually respectful student activism. Formal and informal education both should do more to cultivate responsible civic and political engagement, and create awareness of basic principles.

It may be most important to rethink the relationship between the state and society in Sri Lanka, since relations based on hierarchy and patronage are inimical to democracy. Unless this weakness is addressed, the political and civic participation of youth will likely not improve in any meaningful way.

Embrace everyday values that cut the roots of conflict

Youth rebellions have erupted largely from feelings of exclusion and discrimination based on multiple factors. These cut across ethnicity, language, the politics of patronage, class differences, gender, caste and religion; policies and programmes could do more to consider links among them. Progress will depend as well on a careful, continued examination of and response to the root causes of conflict.

Values of mutual respect, tolerance and appreciation of diversity need to become part of the everyday experiences of Sri Lankan youth. This requires first the recognition that all forms of nationalism have consequences, and second a commitment to pluralism. Basic institutions, particularly in education, public administration, law enforcement and the justice system, need to be examined for how they can foster values of reconciliation and social integration, particularly social justice, equity, non-discrimination and respect for the rule of law.

Shift gender norms to advance gender equality

Sri Lanka has made impressive advancements towards achieving gender equality in education and improving the health of women. But persistent gender
norms, mediated by culture and society, interrupt women's advancement in other areas, particularly employment and political participation. Norms and values around gender clearly need to shift if progress towards gender equality is to continue. This can be a difficult process, although as a starting point, Sri Lanka is fortunate that it does not have some of the extreme, life-threatening forms of gender discrimination seen in other parts of the world.

Moving forward, all young women and men need to be encouraged to explore their full potential and express themselves without fear of humiliation, stigma, or loss of respectability and status. This requires a close examination and questioning of the subtle ways in which gender identities and barriers are institutionalized within education, the legal system, religious bodies, the family, and the broader political and social environment.

**Social justice and inclusion: now is the time**

Sri Lankan youth have often been the focus of public attention for their violence and political extremism. But a close analysis shows that they have also been at the forefront of highlighting some serious flaws in the post-colonial Sri Lankan state, its polity and society. Their efforts to draw attention to these flaws have often unfortunately had tragic consequences. While successive Sri Lankan governments have attempted to respond to the issues raised by youth, this report shows that many of these well-intentioned initiatives have not always had desired outcomes. This report attempts to understand why—an extremely pertinent question if Sri Lanka is to break away from its past cycle of violence.

One important conclusion is that it is not enough to have good policies to bring about change. Change requires fundamental transformations in political, social and economic structures. To bring about such transformations requires leadership and genuine commitment among lawmakers, bureaucrats and development practitioners, putting aside personal and political ambitions for the greater good of youth and ultimately all citizens.

Further, changes to improve the lives of youth do not simply require youth-specific interventions. The multiple forces influencing young people need to be understood, along with the reality that youth can flourish only in societies where all citizens experience social justice and inclusivity. In this regard, Sri Lanka needs to address youth experiences and perceptions of exclusion and marginalization, and the diverse drivers behind them.

Sri Lankan youth have always yearned for social justice. They have made great sacrifices while endeavouring to attain it. Surely, now is the time to take the opportunity to address shortcomings of the past.