

# SRI LANKA NATIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2014



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NATIONAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

## NHDR 2014

# YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENT



## Executive Summary

### Human development from a youth perspective

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

These issues in Sri Lanka make the topic of youth a highly appropriate theme for the 2014 National Human Development Report. It examines the diverse conditions in which different groups of youth live, exploring the opportunities, constraints and freedoms available to them. These will determine if they will thrive in the present as well as their prospects for a successful transition to adulthood. The report considers various approaches to youth by state and non-state agencies, and provides an opportunity to assess the status of youth in relation to existing policies, institutions and actions to advance their human development. It uses the Sri Lankan definition of youth as a person between 15 and 29 years old. Youth currently comprise just over 23 percent of the total population.<sup>1</sup>

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

In looking at the status of youth in Sri Lanka, this report is grounded in a human development

perspective, which recognizes that people's quality of life is more than just income and economic growth. Human development involves asking questions about what people can actually do and be. It emphasizes expanding choices and enlarging human freedom, in a manner that is equitable and empowering.

### Behind this report: what young people think

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

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

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



## Impressive human development gains, and disparities

Sri Lanka is notable for its human development achievements, despite a legacy of violent conflict. This is due in part to consistent investments in health and education. Sri Lanka's score on the 2013 Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure of income, health and education, was 0.750, placing it in the high human development category. It ranked at 73 out of 187 countries and territories, higher than other South Asia countries and even some East Asia states.<sup>2</sup> Sri Lanka has either achieved the indicators and targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or is very much on track to achieve them before or by 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Currently defined as a lower middle-income country, Sri Lanka aspires to become a knowledge-based, high-value economy. It aims to increase its per capita GDP from \$3,280 in 2013 to \$4,000 by 2016.<sup>4</sup> Economic prospects have been strong, with relatively high 6 to 8 percent growth rates in recent years<sup>5</sup>, despite the global economic downturn. The economy is shifting towards the service sector, with enhanced performance in industry and a slight decline in agriculture.

On other aspects of human development, Sri Lanka's health sector has performed remarkably, achieving low levels of infant and maternal mortality, high immunization coverage and a life expectancy of 74 years. Education achievements are also substantial, with a literacy rate of 91 percent reached through free education.<sup>6</sup>

Sri Lanka's key development challenge today is a tendency towards increased inequality, despite a strong economy. In 2012, the poorest 20 percent of Sri Lankan citizens received only 4.5 percent of total household income, while the richest 20 percent enjoyed 54.1 percent.<sup>7</sup> More than 80 percent of the poor live in rural areas,<sup>8</sup> and people on estates and former war-affected areas are still more likely to be impoverished than in other parts of the country.

While there is almost universal enrolment in primary education, at higher levels, those with

better incomes stay longer in school.<sup>9</sup> In terms of gender equality, Sri Lanka compares favourably with other countries in South Asia, especially in education, but far fewer women end up in the workforce, and their participation rate in politics is one of the lowest in the region.

Disparities affect young people in distinct ways, including in access to higher education opportunities, the availability of decent work, the responsiveness of the health care system and their ability to participate in decisions affecting them. Further, the consequences of disparities are particularly important for youth, who are highly sensitive to them. Disparities are generally believed to have contributed to Sri Lanka's protracted civil war as well as youth insurrections in 1971, and in 1988 to 1989. This underlines the urgency of closing gaps. Cutting the roots of conflict is central to meaningful reconciliation that can both hasten economic revival and form the basis of long-lasting peace.

In this process, it is important to recognize that youth respond to disparities in various ways. These need to be considered not in isolation, as a 'problem' only of youth, but in terms of the families and communities in which youth live, and the socio-cultural influences at work. The focus in Sri Lanka has primarily been on youth who responded through rebellion, but other responses, such as withdrawal from mainstream society or increasingly cynical attitudes, also deserve attention.

## Youth and education

Education is a human right. It is also one of the most important means of achieving broader development goals such as reducing poverty, improving health, strengthening social justice, and sustaining peace and development.

One of the most significant issues Sri Lanka faces is the uneven quality of and access to education, despite its commitment to universal provision. Well-resourced schools are concentrated in the Western Province; facilities are fewer and of poor quality in rural areas across the country, where

close to 70 percent of Sri Lankans live.<sup>10</sup> Regions with a high concentration of plantation communities or that have been affected by war have found it hard to catch up with national educational achievements. The National Youth Survey 2013 found that 44 percent of youth in the Western Province had attained the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level (A/L), but only 15 percent had done so in Uva Province, which has many estates and a high poverty rate.

Disparities in education have been highlighted over the years, and initiatives taken to redress them, including increases in top-level 1AB schools. Disparities are not simply in infrastructure, however, but also in the learning experience. The education system places excessive focus on competitive examinations, while giving far less attention to the quality of teaching and education administration. Poor quality is also reflected in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes through teaching methods as well as textbooks, despite a laudable record on educating girls.

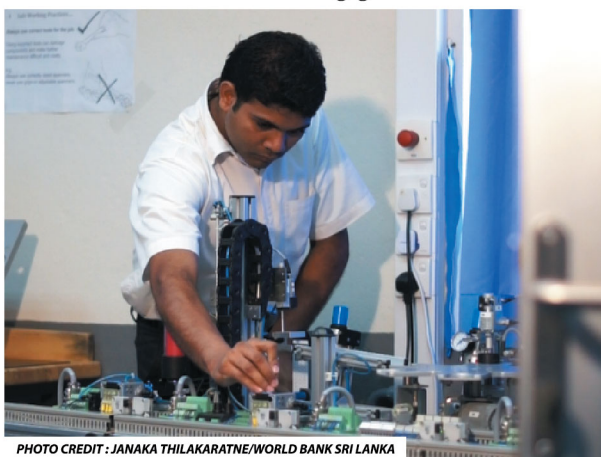


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Extra tuition classes, typically focused on coaching to pass examinations, have become an accepted part of schooling. In the National Youth Survey 2013, 56 percent of youth had participated in these; 33 percent of those taking the classes did so during school hours. They described this as due to the competitiveness in the education system. This has serious consequences for the quality of education. Training mainly to pass examinations does not include critical, analytical, problem-solving or independent thinking skills beneficial for employment, higher levels of education and ultimately the achievement of a knowledge-based, higher value economy.

Despite impressively high rates of enrolment at primary level, Sri Lanka's education system is unable to retain youth at the higher levels. A relatively high 37 percent of youth do not proceed beyond upper secondary level, even though education is highly valued in Sri Lankan society.<sup>11</sup> The National Youth Survey 2013 revealed disappointment with what schools could offer, with 23 percent of respondents saying they dropped out 'because they didn't find school useful'.

A concerted focus on higher education will be imperative for Sri Lanka to reach its development aims, including by building on a skilled workforce. Survey respondents said they think that university education, especially in the state university system, does not guarantee employment, however. Only 2 percent of survey respondents reported being engaged in higher education. Among Sri Lanka's many public and private technical and vocational education and training institutions, the quality is not high enough to satisfy demands from either domestic industry or the changing world economic environment.

## Youth and employment

Access to employment is a vital determinant of youth well-being. Sri Lanka has been grappling with the issue of youth employment for several decades—their labour force participation rates lag behind those of older groups.<sup>12</sup> Unemployment for people aged 20 to 24 years has been around 40 percent for the past decade, with only a slight decline in the last year to 36 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Youth unemployment stems from a range of factors, such as mismatched skills, limited employment creation in the formal private sector, youth aspirations misaligned with actual job opportunities, a lack of entrepreneurship, and deeply entrenched social factors of class, ethnicity and caste. There are sharp regional disparities. Unemployment is particularly high in areas directly affected by the armed conflict.

Young women face additional barriers related to gender, as evidenced by workforce participation rates dramatically lower than their educational



achievements. While gender stereotyping confines women to certain types of jobs, their participation is affected by a multitude of other factors, from employer preferences for men to family choices to their own limited confidence in moving outside the home.

Youth said that qualifications, skills in Information and Communications Technology, English language fluency and training experience are important in securing employment. Yet for public sector jobs, they listed other factors—54.4 percent of respondents to the National Youth Survey 2013 pointed to political connections, 34 percent to recommendations from professionals and 30 percent to family connections, which young people often do not have. The situation is similar for the private sector. The lack of a level playing field fosters a sense of discrimination.

Survey respondents acknowledged that vocational education can be important in securing a job, but described it as an unattractive option; 62 percent had not undertaken any vocational courses. Many youth said they preferred higher skilled, professional employment, and viewed the economic return from vocational education as limited.

Self-employment comes with other challenges, including the inability of youth to access finance, and their lack of business skills and basic financial literacy. Youth who are self-employed have little to show in terms of income and market access, particularly in rural areas, which discourages other young people from pursuing this path.



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Youth at large tend to limit their career choices within traditionally popular categories. About 52 percent of respondents to the National Youth Survey 2013, mostly young women, reported they preferred to work for the Government, especially in education. Respondents were mostly not interested in agriculture or self-employment, largely because of irregular patterns of income and a lack of confidence in taking risks. Some youth consider migration a serious option for improving their lives, but are not always informed of potential consequences.

Since many factors feed into the problems youth have in transitioning into the workplace, Sri Lanka may need to consider comprehensive reforms, moving beyond the conventional emphasis on balancing the demand and supply of skills. These reforms may need to operate across educational, societal and macroeconomic arenas.

## Health and well-being of youth

Health and well-being are crucial for youth, both now and later as they establish a foundation for adulthood. For decades, Sri Lanka has had an impressive record of health care provision. New challenges have come, however, from recent demographic, epidemiological and socio-economic shifts. Rapid declines in fertility and increased life expectancy have resulted in a growing number of people over the age of 60.<sup>14</sup>

Currently, nearly 60 percent of Sri Lankans turn to public services for health care. State spending on health accounted for 45.8 percent of the total as of 2009; the rest comes from private sources.<sup>15</sup> Given increases in non-communicable illnesses such as heart disease and cancer, and an ageing population, chances are that public funds for youth could decline if public health care spending remains within current limits.

The increase in non-communicable diseases is in part linked to lifestyle shifts, such as changing eating habits and decreased physical activity. The National Youth Survey 2013 found, for example, that only about a quarter of respondents were actively involved in sports.

Youth face a number of barriers to accessing health care, particularly cost. Youth spending on health care despite free public services could indicate that services have failed to keep up with demand, due to insufficient investment and the inability to cater to youth-specific needs.

Around 80 percent of survey respondents had a fair knowledge of nearby general health care services, but knowledge of available sexual and reproductive health and mental health services was poor: 55 percent and 59 percent, respectively, said that they did not know about these services close to where they live.

Shame and legal barriers were among the major obstacles preventing youth from accessing sexual and reproductive health services. This points to dominant cultural norms and values that consider sexual relations only for married people, leading youth to assume that there are legal barriers to services if they are unmarried. These norms are contradicted by the reality that a significant portion of youth and adolescents seem to be sexually active.<sup>16</sup>

Over half the National Youth Survey 2013 respondents were unaware of contraceptive methods. While the incident of teenage pregnancy appears low by international standards, it is higher on estates, a special concern, owing to the risk of complications for young mothers. Socio-cultural pressures and a lack of opportunities appear to push many unmarried teenagers with unwanted pregnancies to have abortions,<sup>17</sup> which are both illegal and frequently unsafe.

Youth are vulnerable to patterns of abuse and violence, although in terms of gender-based violence, 92 percent of National Youth Survey 2013 respondents said that they did not know any young person who had experienced it. Stigma and low awareness may explain this tendency. Homicides, other purposely inflicted injuries and suicides are major causes of death among youth,<sup>18</sup> but 14 percent of National Youth Survey 2013 respondents were afraid of accessing mental health care, and 8 percent felt ashamed by the idea. Many stated that mental health care is not sensitive to their needs, and expressed a lack of confidence in it.

Smoking and alcohol use among youth are significant,<sup>19</sup> which could be due to factors besides peer pressure, including high stress related to uncertainties about the future, and the lack of jobs, education and other opportunities.



PHOTO CREDIT: WHO SRI LANKA

## Civic and political participation of youth

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. This notion is gaining ground around the world, including through the process to define the global post-2015 development agenda. Political participation and the concept of citizenship are closely interrelated, and express the extent to which youth feel a sense of belonging to their society.

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. Past youth-led insurrections were largely influenced by youth disappointment with the inability of the post-independence state to address inequalities and overcome the dominance of elite groups.

Political participation in conventional electoral politics is guaranteed for all citizens through the Constitution of Sri Lanka. A youth quota of 30 percent applies to candidates in each political party. Apart from exercising their right to vote, however, very few youth take part in political



decision-making. According to the National Youth Survey 2013, 72 percent of respondents indicated that their primary choice of engagement was through voting. Only a much smaller 5 percent appeared to be involved in direct political activism.

Trust in most public institutions was alarmingly low among survey respondents. Eighty-nine percent said they had little trust in political parties, a much higher portion than in the 1999-2000 National Youth Survey, where only 47 percent of youth stated that they did not trust political parties or elected representatives.



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On a more positive note, 88 percent of youth affirmed that they are interested in what is happening immediately around them. Many stressed the importance of youth learning more about their role in civic and political engagement and decision-making. They felt that their peers were not knowledgeable and empowered enough to influence civic and political outcomes.

When asked about gender in politics, 74 percent of survey respondents agreed more women should be in politics, and 68 percent said women had adequate opportunities to be in leadership positions, despite very low actual participation rates. 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. The lack of interest among young women in decision-making and political activism was notable, with some women in the Focus Group

Discussions stating that politics is not their domain. Many stereotypical notions about the 'right' place of women in society have apparently been internalized.

Student politics can be one important avenue to encourage new leaders, but the country's political system at large has long been hostile to this notion, in part through the association of student-led youth movements with risks of violence. Adults in general typically do not encourage youth to be active in their communities, consistent with social norms where adults dominate decision-making.

Voluntary work can bring youth into civic activities, and many youth say they are interested in volunteering. The education system, however, with its emphasis on time-consuming exam preparation and lack of attention to broader civic values, does not effectively support them.

### Youth and post-war reconciliation and social integration

Making the transition from war to peace is a complex undertaking for any society. While the end of violent conflict prepares the ground, transforming the underlying social, economic, political and cultural causes of conflict requires sustained and focused attention.

Many Sri Lankan youth who have grown up over the past 30 years are experiencing life without war for the first time. For most of their lives, they have been exposed to ideologies teaching them to be suspicious, fearful and mistrustful of each other. They have been separated spatially, linguistically, politically and culturally. Today, they have an opportunity to not only enjoy the dividends of peace, but also to be active in finding non-violent and peaceful ways of expressing their idealism and their quest for social justice. Youth need to be central to post-war reconciliation and help lead the transition from conflict to peace.

Sri Lanka's civil war has often been described as an ethnic conflict, with a profound effect on youth not only in terms of the direct costs of war, but also in how nationalist ideologies have shaped their



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identities. While early youth mobilization was primarily around issues of class inequality, over time, ethnic lines hardened and nationalist ideologies took precedence.

Unsurprisingly, youth in the National Youth Survey 2013 showed a strong awareness of ethnic identity; 46 percent said that their sense of belonging to their ethnic identity in fact intensified after the war. Young people also saw ethnic politics as deeply divisive in Sri Lankan society, but they highlighted as well structural divisions around class, caste and power relations. Language remains a volatile issue, with youth still largely mono-lingual, despite the Official Language Policy and concerted efforts to teach the national languages and English as a link language in schools.

Youth in Focus Group Discussions were highly critical of parents and families for encouraging selfishness, characterized by the pursuit of individual success and material well-being, which they considered barriers to social integration. They referred to an awareness of and sensitivity to other people as essential to ensuring that people bridge differences. Youth said they have high ideals about the kind of society they want to live in, but felt that adults and social institutions, in their pursuit of selfish interest, do not encourage these, and in fact contradict youth ideals.

The National Youth Survey 2013 showed that youth recognized the need for specific measures to strengthen social integration. Among respondents, 68.5 percent stated that young people were more

aware now about the right to be treated equally and without discrimination. This is a positive signal, showing that youth see equality as key to social integration and their role in promoting it.

They also demonstrated awareness of how challenging it can be to bridge differences in a pluralistic society. More than 50 percent of survey respondents agreed that strengthening development activities in areas lagging behind was important, but emphasized sustained interactions among groups as among the other requirements for reconciliation. Sri Lankan youth clearly want to move beyond identity politics and towards equitable development.

### Future directions: a call to action

In many ways, Sri Lanka today is at a crucial moment, with the end of its 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.

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.



From a human development perspective, Sri Lanka's early investment in health and education was right on track. Given impressive returns, Sri Lanka now needs to carefully consider how to build on progress already made and ensure it is not reversed. 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.



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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. 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.

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. Many important—and still highly relevant—policy recommendations on youth are in the 1990 report of the Presidential Commission on Youth.

The challenge is to transform policies 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.

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. An independent, youth-led watchdog body would

allow youth to have more oversight and influence over policy implementation.

This National Human Development Report 2014 presents some policy perspectives in the following chapters. A few key points are reiterated here as a call for action.

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

There is a major lack of education policies. 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. The national discourse as a whole needs to move beyond the current emphasis on examinations and employability, and towards broader, more humanistic education. Necessary steps forward could include 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. Interventions for the educational empowerment of youth also need to consider 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. This 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. 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. Tertiary education reforms could include diversifying academic programmes and aiming at higher order skills to make the workforce globally competitive. Internships and mentoring at the higher secondary level could foster the transition to work. Minimum wage provisions need to be implemented.

### **Uphold sexual and reproductive health rights**

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.

### **Take youth participation seriously by dropping barriers**

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. 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.

### **Embrace everyday values that cut the roots of conflict**

Peace and development in Sri Lanka will depend 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. 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

Norms and values around gender clearly need to shift if progress towards gender equality is to continue. 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.

While successive Sri Lankan governments have attempted to respond to the issues raised by youth, many of these well-intentioned initiatives have not always had desired outcomes. 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.

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.

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