



YOUTH IN SRI LANKA

A Review of Literature

Claudia Ibargüen
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Claudia Ibargüen is the Coordinator of the Poverty and Youth programme. She has a BA in Political Science from the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México and a Master of Law and Diplomacy (MALD) from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Boston.

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YOUTH IN SRI LANKA - A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction and Objective of the Review of Literature

The purpose of this review is to assemble and analyse the principal academic debates and discussions on the subject of Sri Lankan youth. The review will introduce prior research and distil the main arguments. It will also recapitulate the areas where studies have concurred and disagreed and suggest issue-areas that have been understudied and require additional exploration.

The principal criterion for inclusion in the review was that the study had to be in some manner related to Sri Lankan youth. However, this review does not purport to venture exhaustively into all aspects dealing with youth nor to offer a complete historical perspective. Certain issues such as: sports, youth culture, reproductive health, and the arts; all topics that are important for youth, have been purposely left out while other topics that have a stronger connection with the theme of poverty are looked at in greater depth. In particular, this survey will canvass the principal studies relating to: youth and education, youth and politics, youth and employment, youth and development and youth and conflict. Despite efforts to gather and include all recent relevant material, significant oversights are expected. These were not intentional and merely reflect the inherent difficulties in detecting all existing documentation.

A rapid inspection of the literature relating to youth in Sri Lanka reveals that a good portion deals with their involvement in the two periods of unrest of

the early 1970s and late 1980s. The extent of youth's participation and leadership in the two violent insurgencies has drawn much attention from both scholar and policy making circles eager to understand this phenomenon. Other topics that have stimulated interest are the high levels of educated youth unemployment and the mismatch between the educational system and the labour market. At the same time other topics have been largely neglected. In particular literature dealing with youth in the plantation sector is scant.

For purposes of clarity and to facilitate its use, this review is divided into the following sub topics:

- A Sociological Discussion of 'Youth' in Sri Lanka
- Singularity of Sri Lankan Youth?
- Youth and Education
- Youth and Employment
- Poverty, Development and Youth
- Youth, Politics and Participation
- Youth and Violent Conflict

It is important to bear in mind that the different subtopics overlap. Issues related to the education system, for example, cannot be artificially separated from issues related to employment or the job market. This literature review will try to underline these connections while at the same time highlighting the main arguments within each subtopic.

A Sociological Discussion of ‘Youth’ in Sri Lanka

In most societies the concept of youth as a distinct category, removed from both “adulthood” and ‘childhood’, is a relatively recent addition. In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, the introduction and expansion of formal education forged a change in the practices of families. With the advent of educational opportunities and the post colonial modernisation process individuals began postponing formal employment and marriage, therefore prolonging this bridge period between childhood and adulthood. This has meant that young people have more time to negotiate their identities, status and roles. However, this new stage in life also comes entwined with feelings of restlessness, insecurity and anxiety (Hettige 1992b).

Although these transformations necessarily impact all youth, Hettige (1992a) is careful to point out that in most societies, Sri Lanka included, this has not meant that youth have become disassociated from their class or origins. Youth face different opportunities and constraints depending on the cultural expectations placed on them, their gender, geographical location, educational qualifications, and social position. Moreover, the structural environment and specific history unique to each country define the manner in which youth are perceived and treated. ‘Sri Lankan youth do not consist of an undifferentiated and monolithic generational entity. They are segmented by social class and by ethnicity, and cannot be characterised by a single unit of values, attitudes or behaviours. Youth experiences here in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, are largely contextual’ (Hettige 1992a).

The rise of this sociological entity known as ‘youth’, has produced contradictory stances from Sri Lankan society. On the one hand, there is an entrenched attitude of disdain for youth. To be considered a ‘youth’ carries a certain degree of disgrace (Hettige 1992a). In Sinhala the word *Tharuna*, for youth, literally means young, hopeful, or ‘one with potential.’ Recently, the word has come to be associated with the concept of immaturity. Being a ‘youth’ is linked to a situation of dependency and being devoid of the obligations that mark a person as responsible. On the other hand,

educational attainment is strongly encouraged and expected. But more education, in essence, postpones young people’s ability to enter into adulthood.

Who should be labelled a youth and who is no longer regarded as one is not always clear-cut. The United Nations categorises those within the age range of 15 to 24 years as ‘youth’. In some countries the upper limit is moved up to 29 years. In Sri Lanka the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) has established the age range to be 14 to 29, although for some activities the upper age range can move up to 35.

Even though age is most often used as the natural segregator of ‘youth’ from ‘non-youth’, in Sri Lanka other aspects, such as marriage and employment, come into play when drawing this line. In Sri Lanka, marriage regardless of when this occurs, often marks the end of youth (Mayer 2002b). This is confirmed by a different treatment by society of the married person and more importantly, by a change in the social roles of that person in its relationship with their community. For example, it has been found that almost without exception when young people marry they automatically stop participating in youth organisations and clubs. (Kuruppu and Renganathan 2004).

Youth is also identified as a transition time between school and employment. If a person is unable to secure what is considered ‘serious employment’ then youth might get extended until such time when this employment is obtained.

In sum, even if the young person is responsible and committed in other areas of his/her life the only way to escape the stigma that is usually attached to the notion of being a ‘youth’ is by finding a recognised job carrying some social prestige, or by getting married.

Singularity of Sri Lankan Youth?

Considerable debate has centred on attempting to determine whether Sri Lankan youth display distinct characteristics that set them apart from youth elsewhere. Two aspects stand out in the literature. First, the assertion that Sri Lanka’s youth are

characteristically bent in favour of violent revolt, and second, the seemingly elevated rates of youth suicide in comparison to rates elsewhere.

The central and catalytic role played by Sri Lankan youth in the violent insurrections of the early 1970s and late 1980s and diverse expressions of violence as a response to dashed aspirations for social mobility appear to be particularly pronounced among Sri Lankan youth (National Youth Survey Overview Report 2000). However, it has also been noted that Sri Lanka is not alone in having its youth elements involved in separatist movements (Uyangoda 1992).

Another idiosyncrasy of Sri Lankan youth mentioned in the literature is its supposedly high levels of fatalism. Whereas youth in other countries exhibit a natural optimism in accordance with their age, Sri Lankan youth are often described as pessimistic. Higher than world average suicide rate in Sri Lanka are cited as a symptom of this pessimism (Fernando 2002). In contrast to this fairly established view, however, the Poverty and Youth Survey results found Sri Lankan youth to be quite optimistic. To the question: 'How do you feel about your future?' a little over 81% answered that they were optimistic and only 5.5% pessimistic. (Ibarguen and Abdul Cader 2004)

These characteristics of Sri Lankan youth are very frequently found in the literature and are also mentioned in general conversations and discussions. Without meaning to disprove them, it is interesting to note that taken together the supposed attributes of inclination to unrest and pessimism could actually be seen as contradictory. If youth have been so involved in uprising then wouldn't this signal that they are confident of their ability to change circumstances? (even if it is through violent means). This seem to run counter to the idea of youth as fatalistic. Similarly, many of the insurgency leaders were young. How is this possible in a society which belittles youth? This paper leaves these questions open as possible areas of further and future research.

Youth and Education

Youth and education has been explored from a number of angles. Some of the most prominent discussions in recent literature are:

- The perception of educational qualifications as a means of social mobility and the frustrations when this is not realised.
- The impact of educational policies, most prominently monolingual instruction, on youth.
- The deficiencies of the educational system in preparing youth for the labour market.

Evidently as a single topic, education is too extensive and complex to be dealt with exhaustively in this review. The purpose of this section is to bring to the fore a number of relevant debates related to youth and their relationship with education and the educational system.

Expectations of education as means of social mobility

In historical terms, Uyangoda, (2000) and Hettige (1992b) detail the prospects for social mobility that the Sri Lankan welfare state facilitated by providing free education. Free education opened opportunities for rural youngsters to enter the ranks of the state bureaucracy and achieve a higher social status than what they could have aspired to as agriculturists.

For a period of time the state did in fact absorb a good percentage of the educated rural youth into its ranks, which contributed to the expectation, still prevalent today, that educational qualifications would automatically translate into white-collar government jobs. In Sri Lanka the capacity of education to act as a social equaliser was definitely present but it had serious structural limitations and the trend began slowing as far back as the 1960s (Uyangoda 2000). Nonetheless, obtaining educational qualifications continues to be perceived by youth and parents as the principal means of moving out of manual jobs and climbing the social ladder. As suggested by Uyangoda, 'free higher education, backed by the expectation of government sector employment is the most powerful

social emancipatory force'. Today these aspirations and expectations are most often frustrated. The job market, both private and public, has not grown at the same pace as the numbers of young people with educational qualifications searching for white-collar jobs (Alailima 1992, Hettige 1992, Mayer 2000).

Frustrations at their limited opportunities are common to both youth with university degrees as well as youth that finished their secondary education. In both instances it is common for rural youth to repudiate agricultural work. Some authors have discussed the responsibility of the education system itself in downgrading the standing of agriculture. Jayasena (1998) contends that the Sri Lankan educational system instead of focusing on national needs and priorities is modelled after the English system. This produces serious contradictions. For example, in the school level curriculum agriculture subjects are not given prominence and there is minimal social recognition if a student chooses to take subjects related to agriculture. Similarly, Lakshman (2002) argues that the educational system in Sri Lanka detracts new entrants in the labour force from manual pursuits in agriculture, fishing and animal husbandry.

Impact of monolingual instruction

In 1961 the state took over all private schools. In 1972 the policy of monolingual instruction was established. This had a profound impact in increasing the gap and inequalities between urban and rural youth. Command of English, necessary for success in the modernised economy, is most often confined to urban youth. Lack of English impeded rural youth from accessing jobs in the expanding private sector or in higher positions in the state bureaucracy. (Hettige 1998, Mayer 2000)

A number of authors have argued that this educational policy further deepened the rural/urban divide, and the polarisation of the 'educated' population into two groups; one, urban and English educated and the other, mostly rural and vernacular educated (Uyangoda 2000). On the English/ non-English divide the Youth Commission (1990) went further, asserting that it had been a factor contributing to student unrest. Similarly,

Serasundara (1998) contends that youth that joined the JVP (People's Liberation Front) came mostly from monolingual educational backgrounds.

Even in areas where different ethnic communities cohabit there is the policy of having separate schools for each group. Apart from intensifying the rural/urban divide, restricting instruction to only Sinhala or Tamil has had the effect of constraining young Tamils and Sinhalese to communicate only with their ethnic peers. As pointed out by Hettige (1998) the policy has confined the majority of the rural population to a worldview where it is difficult to integrate with other groups. 'Rural youth, educated solely in their mother tongue and overwhelmingly about their own culture, religion and ethnic history have a limited capacity to establish links that transcend the ethno-religious divide. Hence, their identity is forged along very parochial lines and it is very difficult to cross ethnic boundaries (Hettige 1998). The implications for coexistence for young people from the same country, even perhaps from the same region, that cannot communicate, are evident. Selvarajah (2003) also argues that national educational policies and structures have served to heighten tensions among the country's multicultural communities by exacerbating the linguistic divide. Further, the author believes that the educational system should assume a key role in conflict resolution by promoting multicultural education policies.

Recommendations for improvement of the educational system

In 1990 the government convened a Presidential Commission on Youth in the aftermath of the violent unrest of the late 1980s. The Commission had as one of its main objectives to examine the challenges for youth and to come up with recommendations to lessen the possibility of a recurrence of the recent violence. The Commission also focused on deficiencies in the educational and employment system that was not offering satisfactory life choices for rural young people. The Commission resolved that a mismatch between education and employment was one of the primary reasons for the youth insurrections that had racked the country.

The Commission brought forward concrete criticisms and recommendations after scrutinising the educational system and in particular its role in preparing young people for the job market. It pointed to excessive centralisation, a lack of continuity in education policy between successive governments, inequality with regard to facilities between urban and rural, lack of a rounded education policy particularly at primary level, and a lack of opportunities for vocational training. The Commission also recommended supplanting the district quota with a grading of schools so that poor children, in schools with deprived facilities rather than poorer districts would benefit. Regarding necessary changes at the tertiary level the Commission pointed to an abundance of qualified people at the higher echelons of professions and too few with intermediary skills. The option of Regional Colleges for those who could not enter University was proposed (although it never materialised) (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990).

A study by Gunawardena (2002) describes the specific skills that employers find desirable in graduates and compares them to the actual skills that are developed in the Sri Lankan educational system. Among the most often mentioned 'desirable' skills are communication skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, decision-making ability and organisational skills. According to employers these are not being properly developed and nurtured in schools and universities. In addition, low proficiency in English is also referred to as a weakness particularly by business owners and managers. These concerns are not only understood from the side of employers. Gunawardena analysed responses from the National Youth Survey and found that youth are aware that the present educational system is inefficient in imparting the key skills that they need and are being sought by the job market.

It is evident that rural youth are cognisant of the disadvantages of not having English skills for employment purposes but they also identify other no less important handicaps. Among the most often cited are the second-rate cadre of teachers and educators in poorer districts. During interviews with youth organisation members it was frequently cited that

a major obstacle for improving employment opportunities was the sheer inadequacy of the teachers serving in the local schools. For some subjects, such as English, teachers are often simply not available, and for other subjects their command and knowledge of the subject matter is substandard (Kuruppu and Renganathan 2004). Moreover, a research project by Mayer on social science graduates found that not enough emphasis was put on improving applied skills instead of theoretical knowledge. (Mayer 2002a)

Another issue that has been explored by academics is the fixation on obtaining formal educational degrees. In Sri Lanka social rewards are overwhelmingly bestowed for achieving 'paper recognition' as opposed to, for example, the advancement of work and life skills outside of the educational system. Gunawardena (2002) examined the National Youth Survey results and found that 70% of respondents stated that they wanted to further their education. The inability to get a job might prod young people to obtain even more degrees in an attempt to get a job in the future or to be 'busy' during the time that they are looking for employment. Some have suggested that this paper trail is often seen by youth as a way to pass the time instead of improving job skills. Youth are aware that the skills that are learned in these technical classes are seldom useful for job placement because the courses are of low quality and the technology is old.

An interesting phenomenon of the Sri Lankan educational system is attendance at tuition classes by young people who are preparing for O/L and A/L examinations. Even if the young man or woman hails from a disadvantaged household, parents will go to great lengths to cover the cost of the tuition classes. Apart from their educational role, it is interesting to note that the tuition classes are one important and socially accepted space for co-ed interaction. It appears these classes play an important role in the socialisation of Sri Lankan youth and in their academic preparation but little research was found on the topic.

Youth and Employment

The structural changes in the labour market and the effects on youth employment

As mentioned above, post independent Sri Lanka integrated a large percentage of its newly educated masses into the state structure by providing them with stable and secure employment in the bureaucracy. In the period before the late 1970s, employment options in rural and semi-rural areas outside the state machinery were few. State employment was practically the only means for the rural educated youth to obtain non-manual employment.

Population growth meant that the number of state jobs had to be continually increased (Jayaweera and Sanmugam 2002). The need for a constant expansion of this bureaucracy, to keep pace with the numbers of educated youth entering the labour force, became unsustainable.

In 1977 the government embarked on a profound structural reform of the economy.¹ One of the objectives of the reforms was to control the unchecked growth of the state bureaucracy. Hence the number of state jobs began to steadily decrease. For example, those employed in the public sector almost doubled from 1971 to 1977, but in the next ten years this number increased only marginally. This happened despite the fact that the labour force increased by almost 25% during this period. (Hettige 1998b). In more recent figures, Gunawardena (2002) reports that the public sector shrank from 21.5% in 1990 to 13.6% in the first three-quarters of 2000. The result, concludes Hettige, has been that monolingual rural youth are left with diminished options for jobs and careers.

In the South employment in the armed forces has offset, to a certain degree, the drop in public employment as this region has been the main recruiting grounds for the Sri Lankan Army. Many households are relatively better off because their young men are in the army and have a constant source of income. Although it is undeniable that

if the peace process is successful this will open opportunities for youth in Sri Lanka it should be borne in mind that in the immediate post-conflict setting, a large number of young demobilised soldiers will face difficulties in reintegrating themselves into the economic and social fabric of their communities. In addition it has been remarked that for many youngsters employment in the military does not only offer remuneration but a sense of belonging, comradeship, and identity that will be difficult to obtain elsewhere.

Despite the steady decrease in public sector employment some have argued that overall liberalisation was favourable in terms of employment generation and for the labour market as a whole, but that the impact on youth unemployment was less than expected. In the aftermath of the 1977 policies, for example, youth unemployment rates fell but are still three times as high as overall rates (Department of National Planning 2002).

The idea behind the economic reforms was that as government predominance decreased the private sector would step in as a creator of jobs. However, a number of authors have pointed that the result of relying on the private sector as the main engine of job creation has been that inequalities have become more pronounced and growth has been much more uneven (Lakshman 1992). For example in the 1990s investment in economic infrastructure was heavily biased towards the Western Province with other areas lagging far behind (Department of National Planning 2002).

Job creation has been concentrated heavily in favour of urban areas and the Free Trade Zones. In the rural areas the private sector has absorbed women into the garment factories but few men. Smaller private firms created jobs in the rural areas, but these were mostly self-employment in the informal sector; manual work in the construction industry and the manufacturing sector; and unskilled and semiskilled jobs in the Middle East. Educated rural youth did not desire these types of jobs (Hettige 1992). There were jobs that had

¹ The key policies of the 1977 package included trade reform (removal of import restrictions and replacement with a revised tariff structure and establishment of Export Promotion Zones), financial reform (interest rate adjustment and opening of the banking sector), limits on public sector participation in the economy and exchange rate realignment.

relatively less favourable working conditions and perks (such as paid holiday, pensions, and concessionary credit) than even lower level government positions. For the jobs that did become available in the private sphere, as a result of the liberalisation policies, employers looked towards the urban English speaking middle classes. In sum, the reforms favoured the more educated, privileged urban youth or the rural youth with little education. The big losers were the educated yet marginalised rural youth. (Hettige 1995).

Link between increased education and unemployment

World-wide it is quite common for youth to face higher unemployment rates than adults. According to some, what seems to be different in Sri Lanka is that it is young people with more education rather than their relatively less educated counterparts who suffer from higher unemployment rates. The weighty concentration of unemployment in educated youth has attracted a great deal of analytical and policy level attention and has become one of the most established postulates in the literature on youth and employment (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990, Lakshman 2002, Mayer 2002b, Department of National Planning 2002).

Supporting the hypothesis that youth unemployment is higher among more educated segments (Lubyova 2001), analysed figures from the 1999 Labour Force Survey Data and found that the presence of 'O' level or 'A' level degrees increased the probability of being unemployed. Similarly, one study argued that the most conspicuous characteristics of youth unemployment in Sri Lanka are that the rates have been higher for those with at least a secondary education (Lakshman 1992, Jayaweera and Sanmugam 2002). The recent National Youth Survey also endorsed this argument. Their results showed that the unemployment rate among educated youth was much higher than among those with little or no education (National Youth Survey Overview Report 2000).

Despite the widespread embrace of the thesis that more educated rural youth present higher unemployment rates, one study in particular has challenged this. A 1995 article argues that youth

unemployment is not predominantly concentrated among educated youth (Dickens and Lang 1996). According to the authors, when statistically controlling the variables of sex and sector, the relation between education and unemployment in urban areas is insignificant. In fact in cities unemployment was highest for those who had between 5 to 9 years of schooling and since the median education in urban areas is 9 years of schooling then, if anything, unemployment can be said to be concentrated in those with less education. In rural areas they found that for the 25 to 29 age cohort unemployment rates were relatively low for males in all educational groups except for those with A/L. However, since A/L graduates in rural areas are such a small percentage of the total population, asserting that educated youth in rural areas face more unemployment is misleading. The authors' study concludes that a clear relationship between education and unemployment is only evident among rural women and that unemployment for men is more accurately described as youth unemployment rather than 'educated' youth unemployment.

An earlier study by Moore (1981) questioned both the fixation by policy makers and academics on the educated unemployed youth segment and also the notion that youth once they become 'educated' refuse to engage in manual agricultural work. The author found that educated rural youth do in fact face more unemployment. However, since these educated unemployed hail almost in their totality from the rich rural families it should not be the focus of policy efforts. For him the policy and development attention should be directed to the badly educated labouring poor. According to Moore, those that do not engage in agricultural work come from families that are already relatively better off and that would not have engaged in labour work in the fields anyway.

Explanations for youth unemployment

The main hypothesis advanced to explain the persistent high rates of youth unemployment in Sri Lanka revolve around a number of structural mismatches or imbalances.

The first, which was described above in the education section, argues that the system produces highly educated individuals but without the skills that are actually required in the workplace. In other words there is a mismatch between the education and skills that job seekers have and offer and what the economy demands.

The second mismatch is related to the numbers of new entrants and the capacities of the economy. An economy growing at an average rate of 4% per annum is simply unable to absorb a labour supply growing at a much faster rate (Alailima 1992).

The third mismatch resides in the expectations of youth and the available jobs. In particular, it is said that educated youth have developed immobile expectations and aspirations on the type of jobs they will take and are unwilling to accept manual or agricultural related jobs. These inflated expectations by educated workforce entrants result in youth being under-employed or unemployed for long periods until they find what they consider to be a 'suitable' job.

The third mismatch thesis was articulated as far back as 1971 in a Report by the International Labour Organisation. It argued that Sri Lanka had not oriented its education to the needs of the labour market and instead by offering free education and government jobs had raised expectations which the labour market would have difficulty in fulfilling. (Seers 1971) Jayaweera and Sanmugam (1992) similarly conclude that expectations are not in tune with reality. Graduates calculate that by earning a degree they will obtain employment in the upper levels. The attainment of this expectation, however, is not dependent on having the degree but on the economy and other aspects of the individuals' background. Lakshman (1992) also echoes the argument that educated youth are not interested in jobs in sectors in which they could actually find employment such as agriculture and fishing. The author contends that as much as 21% of unemployed youth are looking for clerical jobs, whereas only about 4% of the currently available jobs are of this category.

In a direct interview with a District Youth Officer the notion of misplaced expectations was reiterated. He insisted that manual labour is looked down on and that youth very often prefer to be unemployed rather than work in fields such as masonry and carpentry which has no social recognition. A salaried job in the government is the ideal that youth aspire to but this is absurd in economic terms since a mason can earn up to Rs. 500 a day, which is much more than what a lower level government salaried employee earns (Kuruppu, and Renganathan 2004).

Bolstering the legitimacy of these unsuitable expectations is a society that places inordinate value on white collar employment and that has made it acceptable for educated young job seekers to 'wait around' until they find a job that fulfils their aspirations, as opposed to taking a job that is considered beneath them (Lakshman 2002, Gunawardena 2002). This 'waiting period' evidently poses a burden for the not so well to do families. Lakshman proposes that a strengthening of policies is urgent in order to bring job aspirations of the youth more in line with what the economy can offer.

Diverging from this commonly held view, a World Bank study concluded that education does not appear to create unrealistic expectations. It did, however, nuance this assertion by differentiating between 'O' and 'A' level graduates. It found that the aspirations of 'O' level graduates were becoming quite realistic but after 'A' level there was a drastic increase in aspirations, with most of the unemployed coveting professional or clerical jobs (World Bank 1999).

When young people themselves were asked what they considered to be their main obstacles to employment a lack of family connections was often cited. Other constraints voiced by youth were lack of English proficiency; not having the skills that would enhance their employability; and gender discrimination (Jayaweera and Sanmugam 1992). Similarly the Report issued by the Department of National Planning reasons that youth unemployment is a result of the interaction of a large number of factors. It advocates closer attention to household and individual factors that

impinge on employability such as a family's social background, occupational status of parents, access to social networks, transport networks and information (Department of National Planning 2002).

What jobs and occupations do young Sri Lankans desire?

The generally held assumption is that Sri Lankan youth, even with only median educational credentials, will expend every effort to move away from manual pursuits and secure a white collar job, preferably in the government bureaucracy. 'An educated young man cannot see himself as a peasant producer employing his own manual labour' (Uyangoda 2000). This has been explained with three interrelated arguments: first, as a result of societal pressure; second as an effect of economic calculations and third as a consequence of the education system.

Having an occupation that is valued and prized by society is very important for Sri Lankan youth, particularly in rural areas. The 'status of a job' is of prime consideration when searching for a job. In fact, this status is oftentimes more sought out than even higher remuneration for what is considered more menial employment (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990, Mayer 2002). An illustration of this is offered by Hettige who describes how village youths who do not pass their GCE examinations and do not secure white collar jobs discontinue the use of Western dress as that would invite ridicule from status conscious villagers. School dropouts will even address their former classmates as *mahattaya* (sir) if the latter succeeded in securing white collar employment (Hettige 1995).

Some authors explain the flight from agriculture as a pragmatic decision based on the low returns, poor profit margins and general stagnation of the sector (Hettige 1992, Jayasena 1998, Mayer 2000). In addition the primitive conditions of the technology of agrarian production drive educated youth away from agriculture (Uyangoda 2000). The results from the National Youth Survey appear to substantiate this argument as 50% of youth indicated a preference for agriculture if it could make a suitable income (Fernando 2002).

It has also been suggested that the educational system bears the responsibility for detaching new entrants in the labour force from manual pursuits in agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry since, as stated earlier, the school curriculum does not give agriculture academic importance (Lakshman 2002, Jayasena 1998).

If rural youth do not want to be farmers then what do they aspire to? Most authors agree that a job in the state apparatus is still the most sought after alternative for young people holding at least some paper qualifications. Government employment offers stability that is lacking in agriculture, self employed jobs and even those in the private sector. This security, in addition to the regular income, the assurance of a pension and the social prestige, explain its desirability. The predilection for government jobs is present across the board but more marked with educated youth. Hettige (1998) indicates that youth that have obtained higher education feel that it is their inalienable right to get government employment.

The National Youth Survey (NYS) and the Poverty and Youth Survey (PYS) explored the validity of this often repeated assertion. The NYS found that overall, 50% of respondents preferred government jobs. When disaggregated, employment preferences in both urban, estate and rural areas are clearly for government employment. However, this inclination is more pronounced in the North and East provinces and in the rural hinterland. It is significant that only 5% of youth from the North expressed a preference for the private sector (National Youth Survey 1999).

Although the findings of the PYS mirrored to some extent the responses in the NYS, they also uncovered other trends that might open the debate on the seemingly irrevocable assertion that youth always prefer government employment. When asked what sector they would prefer to work in, unsurprisingly the public sector came at the top with 43% of those surveyed. This is in line with the results of the NYS. However, in an open question youth were asked: 'If you could have any job you wanted, what

would it be?' Only 2% of respondents mentioned agriculture but also only 2.9% (almost as small as agriculture) claimed they would desire a government job if they could choose whatever job they wanted. The most preferred option was self-employment or business (27.7%). This could be a reflection of awareness among youth that government jobs are increasingly scarce. It could also mean that youth desire government jobs solely because it has high prestige and because of family and societal pressures, but if they were given complete liberty they would much rather want to be self-employed or have a business (Ibarguen and Abdul Cader 2004).

The above mentioned preference for public sector employment may be traced in part to the status it conveys and its relative stability. However it must also be stressed that the preference reflects reality. In rural areas chances of finding work in the private sector are low. Remunerative and desirable private sector employment is meagre or is reserved for the urban middle classes with social connections and English proficiency. In the conflict zone private sector options are almost non-existent.

Apart from private sector opportunities being low outside of the urban area, there is rejection of private sector employment on the grounds that it is discriminatory and unjust. This was mentioned persistently in the NYS. In an analysis of the NYS results, Lakshman (2002) argues that about half of the youth in the country harbour suspicions about joining the private sector and prefer to wait for a public sector job. The most common explanation is that securing private sector employment requires having the right family connections through family and elite networks (Fernando 2002). However, youth also contend that public sector employment is contingent on the right political relationships and affiliations. Almost to the same degree as in the private sector, hiring practices in the state sector are perceived to be based on connections and political patronage (Mayer 2002).

Young women and employment

The particular trends in young women's employment have generated a fair amount of scrutiny. A component that is often highlighted is the large unemployment differentials between young men and women. Historically, unemployment rates for young women have been at least double than those for men (Moore 1981, Rodrigo 2000, Jayaweera and Sanmugam 2002). The gap has persisted irrespective of whether the overall unemployment rate was rising or falling (Lakshman 2002).

Jayaweera and Sanmugam (2002) note that 'the profile of a young person most prone or vulnerable to unemployment is women graduates from the arts, a rural background and no proficiency in English'. At the same time, however, an irrefutable tendency is that many of the jobs created in the wake of the market liberalisation policies, such as jobs in the Middle East and in the Free Trade Zones (FTZs), have been taken up by young women.

In fact the structural adjustment policies introduced after 1977 have rendered women with a key role in the economy. The two top foreign exchange earners are remittances from Sri Lankans living abroad, mainly in the Middle East, and the garment industry. In both cases women make up the majority of the workforce. In the Middle East about 80% of the economic migrants are women and of the 100,000 workers directly employed in the FTZs, 75% are young unmarried women (Brehaut 2003). In a sense it is young women who are earning a large portion of the income for Sri Lanka. At the same time it is undeniable that many of the jobs taken up by young women are at the lowest rungs of the socio-economic scale.

Migration to the Middle East emerged as a protective measure against unemployment in the 1990s. The trend has been mainly by young people (80% of those who went from 1995-1999 were first time job seekers). The majority of women go as housemaids. The nature of the work, without formal contracts, means that they are often left vulnerable to exploitation (Department of National Planning 2002).

In the Free Trade Zones the workforce is composed almost in its entirety by young women. The majority of the women in FTZs are from rural backgrounds, fairly well educated and from economically and socially marginalised groups (Rosa 1990, Brehaut 2003). The type of employment in garment factories is quite inflexible. Most of it is of an unskilled nature and there is very little prospect of upward mobility or career development. It is implicitly accepted that working life will be of short duration, usually until marriage. (Perera 2000, Jayaweera 2000) It explains why young women, expecting to be employed only for a few years, take up most of the jobs in garment factories.

Much of the literature on the subject has concentrated on the lack of regulations for protection, the negative physical aspects of factory work, and the deplorable living conditions for women in these jobs. For example the scarcity of housing facilities forces women to live in hastily built lodgings, sometimes six to eight sharing one small room. This coupled with physically and mentally arduous working conditions make life difficult in the FTZs (Rosa 1994, Hewamanne 2002, Brehaut 2003).

Despite the agreement that living conditions in the factories is oftentimes harsh and far from optimal the extent to which employment in the FTZ benefits young women remains disputed. In terms of non-economic dimensions Hewamanne (2002) has analysed the impact of FTZ work on the forming of identity for young rural women. She argues that FTZ have rendered a space for these women to renegotiate cultural norms. The upheaval and changes that come as a result of young women's exodus from sheltered patriarchal environments can be found in different spheres and with often-contradictory results. In terms of organisational activities the fact that women live together, are employed in very similar jobs and come to depend to a very large extent on each other for support promotes a strong sense of group consciousness (Hewamanne 2002). Along similar lines another author argues that group consciousness is arguably one of the most striking elements developed among workers, and that this helps in their self

confidence and in their ability to successfully undertake actions to improve their rights (Erfut 2004). This does not preclude, however, that women in FTZ face considerable hurdles and obstacles to organise themselves formally and systematically in order to pursue their demands (Rosa 1994).

On another front, there is also disagreement on the impacts of employment in FTZ's for young women's self image. Authors such as Brehaut (2003) contend that Sri Lankan women in factories have a poor self-image and low confidence. In contrast, others point out that particularly for those women who leave the family and are compelled to organise their resources on their own, this usually leads to higher levels of empowerment and sense of freedom. Having to take decisions and having at least some income that they can dispense according to their needs and desires contribute to an increment in self-confidence and a feeling of independence. 'What is true for all is that they gain a sense of what they want, expect and what they can offer' (Erfut 2004).

Plantation youth and employment

Youth in the plantation sector face distinctive employment issues. Although they are often clustered with the rural youth, the reality is that their options, and until very recently their issues regarding mobility are unique. The literature dealing with the topic of plantation youth and employment, however, is sparse.

Today the tea plantations are suffering from a shortage of labour. This will probably become more acute in the future as more and more plantation youth reject work on the tea estates. An economic survey done in the region found that 48.8% of youth were seeking non-plantation employment. As expressed by a schoolteacher in the region: 'Anybody with even the minimum qualification is not prepared to work in the fields anymore. They might have to work as house-boys (domestic servants) or shop assistants, but even that is more acceptable to them than becoming a worker on the estate' (Subramanian 2001).

The option of employment outside the plantation was not available to the parents and grandparents of

plantation youth but improvements in the educational infrastructure in the estates is starting to open doors for young people to venture outside. Nonetheless, the quality of education in plantations is still among the lowest in the country. For example, the national teacher-student ratio is 1:22 whereas in the plantation schools it is 1:45. The national rural rate for 'A' level is 28.9 but only 16.6 in the estates. (Emmanuel et al 2004)

In such a situation, some analysts indicate that aspirations of plantation youth might be even more inflated than for youth in the rest of the country. Plantation youth will be able to only, at best, land jobs that are only marginally better-paying than those of a plantation worker. This, linked with the historical discrimination against Indian Tamils, constitutes for some observers a potential source of conflict (Subramanian 2001, Emmanuel et al 2004).

Poverty, Development and Youth

Poverty and youth is a cross cutting issue appearing in other discussions within this review such as unemployment, educational opportunities and conflict.

Poverty and conflict

Mayer and Salih (2003) cite the vulnerability approach to poverty as a useful framework to understand the link between youth, poverty and conflict. The vulnerability approach goes beyond the traditional outward manifestation of inadequate income and focuses on the elements that reduce people's available options and life choices. The authors believe that for youth in Sri Lanka this sense of limited life choices is at the heart of what has fed a readiness for violent rebellion.

In Sri Lanka plights of basic survival were not at the heart of what propelled violent responses from youth but issues having to do with social expectations and aspirations and the available means to achieve different life perspectives (Mayer and Salih 2003). This is interrelated with the often-repeated notion that for youth in Sri Lanka it is the relative rather than the absolute sense of deprivation what has fed a sense of frustration among youth. In other words it is the lived deprivation compared to the expectations of that

person (Hettige 1992, Fernando 2002, Siddhartan 2003).

Policies and strategies for youth participation in development

Youth's tendency to become involved in anti-systemic responses has been the driving force in governmental development policies aimed at youth. The policies emanating in the aftermath of the insurgencies of the early 1970s and late 1980s have been mostly characterised as reactive responses.

The typical State youth development scheme relies on reaching out through the promotion of employment in some guise. However the development predicament of youth goes beyond an inability to secure employment and should be understood in a broader context as a lack of life chances (Mayer 2002a). Furthermore, government policies and responses rarely have connections with village based institutions or organisations. They do not involve youth as participants but merely as receivers. In other words, the policies make no effort to support youth in coming up with their own plans to address their own problems. A consequence of this is manifested in an ingrained passivity. Although they often state that they feel excluded, young people in the rural areas would rather wait hoping for opportunities to be offered to them (mainly through the government) rather than willingly become actively involved to create opportunities of their own (Mayer 2002a).

Mayer proposes that a possible alternative is for youth to begin perceiving their problems in a more localised manner. This will help promote a sense of having an improved capacity to influence their lives and contribute more closely to their own development (Mayer 2002a, Hettige and Mayer 2002).

Youth, Politics and Participation

Studies on the participation of Sri Lankan youth in political processes are generally overshadowed by the abundance of papers dealing with their involvement in civil unrest; this despite the fact that most young people in Sri Lanka have never been involved and would not

consider violence as a viable political path. In South Asia, in general, little work exists on the performance of youth in the formal democratic process such as political parties, parliaments, assemblies or local representative bodies (Mitra, Enskat and Frey 2002). Similarly, in Sri Lanka little has been written on youth's involvement in more routine political processes. Learning how most young people (not the few who engage in very visible violent politics) experience conventional forms of political activity has not been sufficiently addressed. To form a more complete picture of youth and politics important questions in this regard need to be addressed: What do young people think about elections, voting and membership in political parties? How do they consider and rate political institutions? And what other forms of civic and community participation do they seek out?

The NYS and the PYS attempted to explore in a more direct fashion, what young people think on political processes. The results from the two surveys offer an intimation of youth's perception of politics. One salient result from the NYS points to a general feeling of political apathy among Sri Lankan youth (Thangarajah 2002). Also worth noting are the high levels of distrust expressed by youth towards most political institutions such as the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the police and to a lesser extent the military. Similarly, confidence for governing bodies, in particular provincial councils, was shown to be alarmingly low (Fernando 2002). In the PYS, youth were asked if they felt they had proper avenues through which they could present their demands to the government. More than half of the young people interviewed (56%) said they did not. On the question of whether they thought that political structures in Sri Lanka needed to change, an even larger percentage (65%) replied in the affirmative (Ibarguen and Abdul Cader 2004). Some of the principal findings of both surveys were that a fairly large percentage of youth perceive political entities as illegitimate.

The high levels of distrust in the political system might be the result of the type of political system that emerged in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The political rules and mechanisms set in place promoted a system whereby procurement of electoral power bases was paramount

to capture political power and control. This encouraged extreme political patronage and politicians viewed youth as a prime target for mobilisation and manipulation in their zeal to obtain the needed electoral majorities (Mayer 2002a). Those who obtained these electoral majorities had to reward their supporters. This led to a culture of 'winner takes all' where the jobs and other prizes went only to party supporters (Mayer 2000). For youth, that either supported the losing party or that were not involved in party politics, this implied systematic exclusion for extended periods of time, or indefinitely, from jobs and other opportunities.

The Presidential Commission met in 1990 in the midst of a foreboding sentiment that unless the social causes of discontent were understood and remedied, staving off another insurrection would be difficult. The report gave a detailed account of the structural obstacles faced by youth in their relationship with the state. It was also a personal rendition of how youth perceive and experience the political sphere. The report was one of the first to reveal how the politicisation of employment was a main source of a great deal of resentment on the part of young people. The Commission described how those who won elections took all the spoils, rewards and benefits and this fed into a spiralling sense of frustration (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990).

The report by the Presidential Commission also exposed the alienation felt by young people for the official institutions of the state. The erosion of public confidence could be traced to institutions that were seen as so atrophied that youth did not perceive them to be performing any necessary or significant function in society. At the same time if youth had any grievances they could not find avenues to express them. The youth that came before the Commission, mainly rural youth, expressed that their daily experiences were marred by constant political arbitrariness. Political structures did not seem to change and in fact seemed to become more rigid and less able to accommodate them (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990, Uyangoda 1992). The conclusion of the Commission was that unless there was a stop to the abuse on the part of

political authorities, the cycle of violence was likely to continue (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990).

Other forms of civic and community involvement

The relation of youth with the public sphere is not circumscribed merely by the organisations and processes sanctioned by the state. Important components in bridging a young person's engagement with the public sphere are clubs, youth organisations, religious groups, etc. These are entities that serve an important purpose in forging the links of a young person with his peers and the larger community. For a young person, having a broad choice of organisations with which to become involved contributes to a healthy process of socialisation. With the exception of an article that looks into children's clubs in conflict areas, and another that concentrates on youth organisations throughout Sri Lanka, few studies were detected that explore the role and the impact of these associations on Sri Lankan youth.

In the Northeast, participation by children and youth in clubs and organisations is modest. A strict social environment where participation by the young, particularly women, is not encouraged is further hampered by years of displacement and security concerns. Further, it has been reasoned that the war has had a dampening effect on the willingness of youth to become active. In the Northeast, particularly in the uncleared areas, youth that took up leadership positions put themselves at greater risk of recruitment from the LTTE (Siddhartan 2003).

For young people in conflict areas keeping a low profile is the most intelligent strategy for independence and even survival. This strategy, however, is not confined only to the Northeast. In the South it is also common for youth to shy away from involvement. Years of unrest have meant that when youth get together to form an organisation they become suspicious in the eyes of other members of the community. One way this has been side stepped is to join religious based youth organisations. In general these are less suspect and therefore have more space to operate. Also it is in religious organisations that the participation of women equals that of men as families are more disposed to

permit women to join if it is within the confines of a structured and supervised environment (Kuruppu and Renganathan 2004).

Particularly in conflict areas, it has been found that engagement in meaningful social action contributes to developing some sense of efficacy in an otherwise disempowering environment. In a mixed Muslim-Sinhala village members of the adolescent club were instrumental in mending bonds of trust and respect across the lines of ethnicity through cultural and educational activities (Hart 2002).

A study on youth organisations directly interviewed members of a wide array of youth organisations throughout Sri Lanka in an attempt to develop a better sense of how youth organisations operate. Some of the issues explored were: Who are usually the members of these organisations? What activities do they engage in? What type of support and pressures do they face? What role do youth organisations play in the lives of young people? (Kuruppu and Renganathan 2004).

A common finding in the two aforementioned pieces was the emphasis placed by young people on the vital role that having been part of a youth organisation or club has had on their personal self esteem and confidence in their effectiveness as a group (Hart 2002, Kuruppu and Renganathan 2004). 'In all locations visited, the participants spoke at length about the increased confidence they now had in themselves and their abilities as a direct consequence of their participation. Girls in particular described how the activities had given them the opportunity to overcome shyness and restrictive social norms' (Hart). No studies were identified, however, which explore in depth the positive impact on the psycho-emotional well being of the active participation in organisations and groups.

Governmental structure on youth

The Sri Lankan government has given a relatively prominent place to youth issues in its political agenda. Issues relating to youth fall under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and the National Youth

Services Council (NYSC). The Ministry is mainly in charge of shaping policies and negotiating the youth budget. The NYSC, under the purview of the Ministry, acts as the principal implementing arm for governmental youth initiatives and programmes. Interestingly, although the Ministry was established in 1979 the NYSC goes almost a decade back as it was formed in 1968 (Salih 2001, Kuruppu and Renganathan, 2004).

Salih (2001) argues that despite having a Ministry focusing solely on youth affairs a disproportionate attention has been conferred to university graduates whom, although consisting of only a small percentage of the overall population, have more political clout.

Youth and Violent Conflict

Youth involvement in violent upheavals has occurred both in the South and the North. As such, and as mentioned previously, a good amount of the literature on youth has focused on the history of this involvement and speculations on their current and future propensity to engage again in violence on a grand scale. Relatively less attention has been directed to other aspects such as psychological repercussions of conflict on young people or the latent tension that exists in many regions between youth of different ethnic groups. Samarasinghe (1998) has aptly pointed that one clear impact of the war on youth in Sri Lanka is that it has deepened the unfamiliarity of young people with each other. 'The fact that today, there are children and adolescents living in the North who have never either played with or encountered a Sinhalese child [and vice versa] is sufficient proof that changes have occurred and of the gravity of the situation'.

Some authors have highlighted that despite their opposition in terms of final goal - the JVP wanted to overthrow the government, while the LTTE wanted to establish a separate Tamil state- the two movements shared similar adversaries and origins. Both emerged among dissatisfied, often rural, yet relatively well educated young people. And they were both expressions of youth dissatisfaction and struggle with a political establishment that was perceived to be

exclusionary (Kloos 2001, Hettige and Mayer 2002, Mayer 2002b).

Youth and conflict in the south

Fernando argues that political activism on the part of youth was evident as far back as the early years of the twentieth century with the formation of the Young Lanka League. However it wasn't until the JVP appeared on the stage, championing a Maoist-nationalist ideology that the activism turned violent. The JVPs political strategy was to mobilise youth, students and Buddhist priests, whereas the traditional left and Communist parties did not pay much attention to these groups. The JVP was also adept at using innovations such as song, and rallies that were effective in attracting a younger generation (Serasundara 1998). In the 1971 uprising, 80% of the participants were from the age group between 15 and 29 years (Fernando 2002).

Kloos (2001) explains the causes of the 1971 youth insurgency on a combination of population and macroeconomic trends arising in the 1960s. At independence Sri Lanka was relatively wealthy and invested into free education and health. As a result mortality rates fell at the same time that an educated population grew. The ranks of healthy, educated youth entering the labour market in the late 1960s jumped considerably at a moment when world prices for tea and rubber were low. This meant that there were fewer opportunities for an ambitious young generation. The JVP embodied for youth the growing dissatisfaction against what was perceived as an insensitive political establishment (Kloos).

The second youth insurrection in the late 1980s has been explained more as a nationalist armed struggle fuelled to a large extent by patriotic feelings against the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) rather than as a violent response to socio-economic grievances (Kloos 2001, Fernando 2002). Kloos argues that the arrival of the IPKF had the unexpected consequence of estranging the Sinhala political elite from the Sinhala masses.

In both cases, but to a greater extent in the second one, the degree of violence and brutality by the insurgency, the counterinsurgency and the government forces was extreme. It is noteworthy, however, that both the JVP and the government forces recruited from almost the same geographical areas and social strata. Both the JVP and the military ranks were populated by young men with at least median educational credentials and mainly from rural southern Sinhala areas.

After the July 1983 ethnic riots, Sinhala chauvinism became a growing feature of the political culture of a large segment of Southern radical youths. Interestingly Tamil chauvinism also grew in a parallel fashion. The sentiments rampant among radical Southern youth were Anti-Indian, Anti-Western, and Anti-Tamil. In more recent times, this has also included a tendency to perceive globalisation as a process that should be opposed because it undermines traditional values and other aspects of national culture.

What made so many young people consider the JVP and its inflammatory discourse as a viable option? A common argument, touched above, was the increasing mismatch between educated youth and the jobs available for them (Presidential Commission on Youth). Lakshman (2002) explains that continuing conditions of unemployment led to erosion of confidence in political and economic systems creating a desire to build up alternative systems. Others express that violent insurrection was a means to express and give voice to a growing dissatisfaction with the domination of the Sri Lankan political and administrative structures by an upper middle class metropolitan elite (Serasundara 1998, Kloos 2001).

The spectre of a third insurrection is a mainstay of discussions on Sri Lankan youth. Some authors point that the conditions that gave rise to the two insurgencies in Sinhalese society are still present and to a large extent have not been addressed (Kloos 2001, Fernando 2002, Mayer 2002). Kloos states that 'the condition for the emergence of the JVP in the 1960s-a mismatch between ambitions and

opportunities-is still there and all that is needed is a charismatic leader to again mobilise dissatisfied youth'. However, other authors contend that key conditions have changed. Youth today would be deterred by the states military might. In addition the main danger nowadays is that frustrated youth will turn to drugs, criminal activity and suicide (Samath 2001). Three other aspects should also influence any quick conclusions on the inevitability of another insurrection. First, the processes and political structures today are relatively more open and flexible. Second, the JVPs recent shift of strategy into an ordinary political actor must be taken into account. And third, international migration has acted as a safety valve for a segment of unemployed youth (Uyangoda 2000).

Youth and conflict in the Northeast

Among Tamil youth the first signs of unrest became apparent in the late 1960s. In 1972 a new constitution gave a supreme position for the Sinhala language and the Buddhist religion. This led to anti-government demonstrations in Jaffna. In the wake of these protests secessionist youth groups such as the Tamil New Tigers formed. Interestingly the first wave of agitation by Tamil youth was not directed at the government in Colombo but at the Tamil political establishment who was seen to have for years followed the Sinhalese political line (Kloos 2001).

The radicalisation of Tamil youth against the Sinhalese establishment came as the 1970s progressed with more restrictive policies, in particular on education. A series of steps by the government gradually reduced the number of Tamil students entering university (Thangarajah 2003). The restrictions on tertiary education and the increasing hostility by the state in the political sphere contributed to a widespread feeling that negotiations so far had not achieved any tangible results. More radical approaches began to be discussed. It is at this crossroads that the youth segment was incorporated in a more systematic manner. In 1975 the various Tamil political parties united under the banner of TULF which included a youth wing (Thangarajah 2003).

The growing legitimacy of a separate Tamil homeland pushed youth into anti-state actions and stances. Initially the activities were more symbolic such as the burning of flags and defacing of name boards. The state retaliated with stronger physical measures, in particular the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1977 which would impact Tamil youth for years to come (Thangarajah 2003).

Youth and conflict in the Central Province

There are very few studies that address the problems of distrust and tension among youth in the Central Province. One exception is a recent paper that, although focusing mainly on vocational training, touched on mutual perceptions that feed into a latent situation of antagonism. In direct conversations with youth it brought to light the reasons both Sinhalese and Tamil youth in this area, feel discriminated and threatened by the 'other'.

Sinhalese youth in the Central Province are aware that they are a numerical minority in this region. At the same time they often maintain that they rarely have access to training institutes which are mainly reserved for Tamil plantation youth (Emanuel et al 2004).

For their part, Tamil youth voiced the opinion that Sinhalese youth look down upon them and don't treat them as equals. In addition Tamil youth asserted that even if they are a majority in the area, services are dominated by Sinhalese which inhibits their access to the services provided by the state (Emanuel et al 2004).

In the employment realm, it is interesting to note that both Sinhala and Tamil consider they are discriminated *vis-à-vis* youth from the other ethnicity. Tamil youth contend that they are sidelined when seeking managerial positions within the plantations as these are usually reserved for Sinhalese and that the private sector gives preference to Sinhalese youth. Sinhala youth, for their part, feel that because of the political clout of trade unions Tamils have better access to jobs (Emanuel et al 2004).

Impacts of violent conflict on youth

The ethnic war and the JVP uprising were extreme situations that impacted the normal 'life cycle' of many young people. In the Northeast most of the past twenty years has been dominated by security considerations. Other activities or priorities were subsumed under the overarching logic of war. A number of studies have commented on the loss of potential and opportunity for a whole generation of young people in this region (Mayer 2000c, Siddhartan 2003).

Apart from life opportunities not fulfilled, youth in the conflict areas had to live in an environment where their physical integrity was always in peril. Young men were constantly a target of suspicion, or perceived as possible 'collaborators' for the other side. Youth had to overcome obstacles in such mundane activities as going to and from school or in meeting socially after dark. For female youth the spectre of sexual harassment at checkpoints was very real component of their day-to-day lives (Mayer 2000c).

The violent conflict also impacted the roles of family members, intra-family relationships and the care and management of children. Parents died or disappeared and young men and women were forced to prematurely become responsible for their households, overnight going from being dependants to becoming the main breadwinners (Samarasinghe 1998, Siddhartan 2003).

Causes of violent youth unrest

Before discussing the specific detonators of conflict and their relative importance Hettige (1992b) points out that youth unrest in Sri Lanka would not have occurred without the 'necessary objective conditions'. This condition is, above else, the presence of a 'mass' of youth as a sociological category. The existence of this mass has much to do with population increase, but is also linked to a multitude of social changes such as expansion of education, increased age at marriage, and the spread of new values and aspirations (Hettige, 1992b). These aspects in conjunction have turned what used to be a group of individuals of certain ages to become a part of a circumscribed category known as 'youth'.

It has been argued consistently that youth radicalism is intimately linked to unresolved contradictions of expanding educational opportunities and shrinking spaces for employment. Those who participated and spearheaded the two violent insurrections in Sri Lanka came, mainly, from the educated rural youth segment. The dissatisfaction and frustration of youth who had not been able to translate formal educational qualifications to 'proper' jobs or a move up the social ladder has been advanced as one of the principal reasons for their attraction and involvement in anti-systemic social movements (Hettige 1992, Uyangoda 2000a, Mayer 2002). Without discounting this sense of frustration as a detonator of conflict other authors contend that to explain anti-systemic views and attitudes it would be better to focus on the sense of relative rather than actual deprivation (Fernando 2002, Mayer 2002b, Siddhartan 2003).

Others authors have explained the tendency of turning to violence as a result of being unable to secure a desired job can be explained more as a response to a sense of abuse of political power from public institutions (Presidential Commission on Youth 1990).

Conclusion

This review has attempted to gather, overview and discuss a wide range of arguments and debates found in the literature on Sri Lankan youth. In particular, it has emphasised those themes that are connected to the larger topic of poverty and development.

The survey of literature found that some topics, such as employment and education, have been well documented but have introduced differing, on occasions contrasting, arguments and perspectives. On other topics, however, production has been more modest. The review identified as the most conspicuous gaps in knowledge:

- Youth in the Central Province
- Tensions among youth from different ethnic groups in multiethnic enclaves
- Psychosocial impacts of the conflict on youth
- Political participation of young people in formal and informal democratic processes
- Political participation of youth in grassroots organisations in particular, and civil society in general

As a more stable situation returns to areas that have been ravaged by years of conflict, it is now essential to forge a clearer perspective on a host of issues relating to youth that were previously neglected.

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