

Poverty and Youth Issues in Sri Lanka

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Foreword

This series of Poverty Briefs (No. 1 to 10) was produced for OXFAM Great Britain (GB) by the Centre for Poverty Analysis to provide a macro overview of key thematic areas relating to poverty, of relevance to Oxfam GB's work in Sri Lanka. They are specifically designed to provide Oxfam GB programme staff with insights into the major issues, concerns, and debates within these themes and their linkages and effects on poverty in Sri Lanka. They also aim to highlight potential areas for policy advocacy by Oxfam GB. This input was used in staff preparation for Oxfam GB's Strategic Review in August 2004.

Oxfam GB's mission is, to work with others to overcome poverty and suffering. Its current programme focus is on: Livelihoods and poor people's access to markets; Gender equality, empowerment and ending violence against women; Public health promotion and access to quality water and sanitation facilities; Emergency preparedness and response; Relationship building between and within communities; and Empowerment of the poor through building of Community Based Organisations.

The views and opinions expressed in the Poverty Briefs are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam GB or the Centre for Poverty Analysis.

This series of Poverty Briefs was prepared in mid 2004, prior to the events of the Tsunami on 26th December 2004. The context and issues discussed in some of the Briefs could have changed since then.

Poverty and Youth issues in Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Within the overall poverty agenda in Sri Lanka, the topic of youth has had a relatively high profile. This is mainly because of the widespread involvement of young people in the two violent insurrections that racked the country in the early 1970s and late 1980s. Subsequently, efforts have been directed at trying to explain what caused such an extreme reaction by young people. It has been increasingly acknowledged that elements related to poverty, unemployment, and marginalisation were crucial.

The overall purpose of this Brief is to discuss some of the most salient poverty issues that affect young people in Sri Lanka. The paper will be structured into five sub-topics. The first will examine the formal and societal definitions of 'youth' It will also explore what is meant by 'poor', against the backdrop of current debates on different aspects of and approaches to poverty. The second will set out the demographic profile of youth in Sri Lanka. The third will discuss issues that affect poor youth in different geographical spaces such as the south, north and east, and the plantation sector. The fourth will analyse the topic of youth unemployment. The final section will focus on the main government players and programmes addressing youth. It will also critically assess the present policy environment and identify areas for potential advocacy work.

2. Setting the Stage

The definitions of 'poor' and 'young' are neither universal nor static When does an individual cease to be considered young? How can we best recognise a young person who is poor?

Who should be described as a 'youth' is not always clear-cut. The United Nations categorises those within the age range of 15 to 24 years as 'youth'. In Sri Lanka the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) has established the age range to be 13 to 29. In this country other aspects, apart from age, such as marriage and employment, are often more important in determining society's perception of someone as a youth.

In most instances, by either marrying or securing “serious” employment a person ceases to be considered a youth and becomes a full-fledged member of society. A young man, for example, who is young in years but who has obtained a socially recognised job such as a government post will be regarded and treated differently from a peer who is older but who has been unable to acquire a job. The disparaging attitude of society towards the young goes some way in explaining the fixation of youth on securing ‘proper’ white collar employment.

It is now commonly agreed that furthering our understanding of poverty requires attention to many aspects. In simplistic terms, poverty can be analysed in monetary and non-monetary terms. Monetary aspects include insufficient income to cover basic consumption needs. Statistics on poverty often rely basically on income-based measurements.

In Sri Lanka, one of the poverty indicators developed by the Department of Census and Statistics is based on Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES). The most recent, published in 2002, makes use of per capita income, food expenditure, etc. to determine where poverty is concentrated and to rank the districts in the island. Figures are not disaggregated by age group or gender so they have limitations if we try to use them to pin-point particular areas where poor youth are concentrated. It is fair to surmise, however, that where national levels of poverty are high, higher levels of poor youth will also be encountered. HIES figures suggest that conditions are more dire in the districts of Hambantota, Ratnapura, Moneragala and Badulla. Hambantota was the only one out of these four districts that did not improve compared to the last HIES conducted in 1995.

An analysis of poverty and youth in Sri Lanka that relies solely on income offers an incomplete picture. The most obvious limitation of the HIES is that it does not include figures for the north and the east. In addition, looking solely at income indicators could distort conclusions. For example, because household economies in the estates are highly monetised, one might conclude that the situation of poor youth in this sector is not as pressing. In reality, they are among the most marginalised and non-income poverty aspects for youth in the plantation sector are grim.

The ‘capability approach’¹ is a notable non-income approach. It concentrates on

¹ The capability approach has been mainly endorsed by Amartya Sen. See, for example, Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.

abilities/capabilities (in the present) to choose life options (for the future). This approach appears particularly suited to a study of young people. It is when they are young that men and women evaluate their potential to achieve the type of life they would like to lead and assess their capacity to make choices and to access the resources they need to achieve their goals. This approach can contribute to the overall picture by steering attention to issues that are relevant when discussing poverty and youth, such as social marginalisation, lack of access to political and social structures, powerlessness, and feelings of exclusion.

3. The Demographics of Youth in Sri Lanka

For the age cohort of 15 to 24 years the total population in Sri Lanka is of around 1,797,000 males and 1,733,000 females. This comprises approximately 20% of the total population. If the age group from 25 to 29 is included this jumps to around 28% of the population. A majority of Sri Lanka's youth live in the rural sector (over 75% during the 1963-2000 period), while the more economically developed Western province is home to nearly a third. The number of young people with no schooling has declined steadily over the years. Literacy rates amongst the young in Sri Lanka are high with still prevalent, but rather small, gender and urban/rural disparities.

In 1981 Sri Lanka presented a demographic pyramid typical of a developing country. It had a broad base with the single largest population group, with 12.5% of the total, between the ages of 0 and 4. This trend has been changing and will continue to do so in the coming decades. Lowered fertility rates coupled with declining mortality levels have led to the expansion at the mid-level of the pyramid. In 2001 the largest segment could be found among those in the age range of 15 to 19 with close to 11% of the total population, followed by those 20-24 with roughly 9%. In 2021 it is estimated that the largest age group will be between the ages of 35 and 39 years of age.

The preceding statistics suggests that issues that concern youth need to be addressed urgently. In terms of numbers they constitute today the bulk of the population. Their successful integration today will mean that in 15 to 20 years, when they are at the height of their productive and intellectual capacity, and they make up a numerical majority, Sri Lanka will be able to reap the benefits.

4. Poverty and Youth Issues Nationally and by Geographic Location

The provision by the state of universal education and health care became an entrenched policy of all post-independence governments. By educating and keeping their population healthy, as well as through a number of subsidies, the social welfare state offered possibilities of upward social mobility. However, with the sluggish growth of the Sri Lankan economy, the pace and coverage began to be seriously compromised by the late 1960s. In the following decades, the economy continued to show unremarkable growth. It has been argued that the effect of this 'sharing of poverty' instead of 'sharing of wealth' was felt most acutely by youth from the more depressed regions who grew up with expectations nurtured by the welfare system.

Sri Lankan youth have relatively good human capabilities. They have, in a sense, the 'raw materials', in the form of good education and health, to be able to access different life choices. However, in Sri Lanka it has become evident that having those capabilities does not assure young people the ability to choose. A number of constraints conspire against young people translating their human capabilities to a range of life choices. Some of these constraints, such as a persistently stagnant economy, are relevant across the island. Other constraints are more prominent in particular geographical contexts.

4.1 North and East

The principal constraints faced by youth in the 'conflict region' are:

- A contracting economy offering extremely limited diversity in choice for employment.
- Deterioration of education in terms of both infrastructure and human resources.
- Mobility constraints.
- A political environment that discourages independent initiatives.

In the areas directly affected by the separatist conflict a whole generation of young people have come of age in an environment with very restricted opportunity structures. They have fewer opportunities than their parents. In some parts of

this region, the argument can be made that young people have not been able to develop their human capabilities or 'raw materials' referred to above. In other words, particularly in LTTE controlled areas the government supply of health and education was ground to a halt or was sporadic at best. Therefore, the usual argument, that young Sri Lankans, despite low incomes, are educated and healthy, does not necessarily hold throughout this region.

The war has had serious effects on the economy of the region. It has been calculated, for example, that in the period from 1990 to 1995 the overall economy in the Northern province decreased from \$350 million to \$250 million. The instability brought about by the war reduced investment. More than anywhere else, employment for young people was restricted to a scaled down public sector or, alternatively, the armed forces of either side.

On another front, the war contributed to a deeply ingrained atmosphere of mistrust. This influenced the type of responses that youth received from local authorities and the community. In the conflict region youth have found it difficult to organise independently. Youth organisations, for instance, are viewed suspiciously. Often it is assumed that 'the other side' is manipulating any youth movement. Therefore an element that frequently helps poor youngsters to expand their self esteem has been, to a large extent, curtailed.

Young people made up the bulk of the armed forces on both side. They have had to bear a good deal of the physical and psychological effects of the war. Therefore, physically and psychologically disabled young people form a particularly vulnerable subgroup within the larger group of young people in the north and the east.

4.2 Estate Sector

Limited capacity for integration to other economic sectors and regions is the principal constraint faced by youth in the 'estate or plantation' region.

Some of the districts in the plantation sector such, as Badulla, have some of the highest rates of poverty (as measured by the HIES). Others such as Nuwara Eliya figure towards the middle of the District rankings. It is agreed, however, that taken as a whole estate households are amongst the poorest in Sri Lanka and estate youth are among the most disadvantaged.

For estate youth, poverty is experienced both in low consumption, but most importantly, in their very limited capacity to, if they so desire, move beyond the bounded life and work of the estates. There are a number of reasons: their physical remoteness to the main engines of growth in the cities and in the Western province; up until very recently, legal restraints on their mobility; and also language and cultural barriers that lower their capacity to reside and compete for jobs outside the estates.

Education for the present generation of plantation youth has improved dramatically compared to the education that their parents, who were not even considered Sri Lankan citizens, received. The quality is still, however, 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.

It has been pointed out that youth unemployment in this sector should be very low since there is, in fact, a shortage of labour. Jobs are available in the plantations but for many the education that they obtained has stoked their desire to have a larger array of options for their future. In a recent survey almost half of youth in the plantations declared that they do not wish to do the same work as their parents.² The reality, however, is that their ethnicity, their lack of Sinhala, and their substandard education suggests that their desires, in the vast majority of cases, will be met with failure. The repercussions in the near future of large numbers of dissatisfied and frustrated estate youth, that can not find outlets for their expectations, has not been sufficiently considered.

4.3 South

The principal constraints faced by young people in this region are:

- Exclusion from employment and other opportunities brought about by excessive politicisation

² See Emmanuel S., Fernando, Mayer, M., and Wagawathe, N. (2004). Youth in Vocational Training and Conflict Prevention. Development Co-operation in the Context of Crisis and Conflict, Colombo: GTZ.

- For those living in remote inland areas of the southern region³ marginalisation from engines of growth.

The JVP-led insurrection of 1987-1989 was mainly carried out by young men from the south of the country. Therefore, a good deal of deliberation on the topic of youth has been directed at this region. The movement was of such a violent nature and the degree of youth discontent so high that in its aftermath, in 1990, the government convened a Presidential Commission in an attempt to understand what elements had been at its core and to come up with recommendations to lessen the possibility of recurrence.

A question that surfaced repeatedly was whether the violence had been driven by poverty. The conclusions of the Commission and of subsequent analysis was that those involved in the uprising did not hail from the bottom rungs of the socio-economic scale. Most were youngsters who had a certain degree of education but who had been unable to translate that education to satisfactory job placements.

The Commission found that what seemed to be particularly explosive in the South was a sense of rampant abuse of political power on the part of public institutions. This was felt most acutely when trying to secure government employment. Many young people felt they were effectively blocked from jobs by unfair and politicised hiring practices. The Commission interviewed a large number of young people who expressed their frustration at living in a situation in which political allegiances and knowing the right people were more important than merit and qualifications. This entrenched system of rewards and opportunities linked to influence and networks (an extreme manifestation of which is the 'chit system') at least partly explains the discontent among youth in the south.

Although it has been noted that poverty did not seem to have a direct influence on the youth rebellions in the south, it is obvious that this exclusion from opportunities is suffered most intensely by poor youth. Generally, it is poor people who have the least developed network of contacts and influences.

³ The 'Southern Region' includes the districts of Galle, Matara and Hambantota which form part of the Southern Province plus the district of Moneragala which falls within the Uva Province.

The south has been the main recruiting grounds for the Sri Lankan Army. Many households are better off because their young men are in the army and have a constant source of income. This, however, reveals a potential source of instability in the future as demobilised soldiers return to their villages in the south and find that opportunities for getting ahead are either small or still determined by favouritism and connections.

5. Youth Unemployment and Poverty

Unemployment among young people is three times greater than unemployment among the general population. This has frequently been posited as one of the main reasons why young people are unable to escape poverty. Others, however, point out that only a small percentage of unemployed youth actually come from the most disadvantaged households. Youth unemployment is found much more in the rural areas among the better educated and the less poor. The unemployment rate among youth with O and A levels stood at 12.9% and 17.4% respectively in the first quarter of 1999 while the unemployment rate for young people with less education was substantially lower.

Three main reasons are generally put forward to explain the persistent high rates of youth unemployment among the better-educated.

- The first argues that the education system produces individuals without the skills that are 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 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.
- The third relates to the expectations of youth and the availability of jobs. In particular, educated youth have developed inflexible expectations of the type of jobs they will take. These inflated expectations cause them to wait for long periods until what is considered a suitable job becomes

available. A majority of young people who are self-employed or in the private sector will be willing to take salary cut if they get offered a government position. There are two possible explanations for this. First, government employment is seen, especially in the rural sector, as bestowing social recognition. Secondly, it is seen as the only type of secure employment.

Although youth unemployment is supposedly not as prevalent among the poorest of the poor it does undeniably have insidious effects on both monetary and non-monetary aspects of poverty and youth.

Waiting a long time for a secure public sector job poses a greater burden on poorer families. Less well-to-do families will often invest their small savings to educate a son or daughter. The hope is that the youngster can then gain a public sector job which will assure a steady income and afford social respectability. The reality is that because of the highly politicised nature of hiring practices it is youth from poorer families that have a harder time obtaining employment.

Inability to get a job does not have merely financial effects. It undermines a young person's prospects of achieving future goals. Unemployment also has adverse effects on cognitive abilities and long-term loss of self-confidence.

6. Government Players and the Policy Dimension

Players

In Sri Lanka issues relating to youth fall under the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs. The Ministry is mainly in charge of shaping policies and negotiating the youth budget. The National Youth Services Council (NYSC), under the purview of the Ministry, acts as an implementing arm for governmental youth initiatives and programmes.

Under the NYSC, a body catering particularly to poor youth is the National Youth Services Co-operative (NYSCO). The purpose of the NYSCO is to provide soft loans and encourage entrepreneurship in members of youth organisations that are affiliated to the NYSC and, in addition, to encourage youth leadership by offering positions in the management of the organisation. The NYSCO has come under criticism from

certain sectors on the grounds that it has ceased to offer these opportunities and that it acts mainly as a space to give jobs to NYSC personnel.

Policy Environment

The typical youth development scheme has relied on reaching out through the promotion of employment and the creation of new state sector vacancies. The stagnation of the economy, with the inescapable reduction of public sector jobs, meant that in the most recent governments (up until the present one) this policy tool was used sparingly.⁴

Nonetheless, noteworthy efforts to understand the youth issue in a more holistic manner have taken place. The 1990 Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth, has been the most thorough governmental inquiry regarding youth. The Report outlined recommendations for far reaching changes in the educational and public administration sphere. Unfortunately, as often happens after the initial urgency has worn off, and later when it is perceived as an initiative of a previous administration, most of the suggestions in the Report never materialised.

Another attempt was made in 1999-2000 to examine youth issues in detail and design a National Youth Policy. In the effort the government called upon other actors with specialised knowledge. The Committee included individuals from the academic and local NGO sector. It also included contributions from other government entities such as the Ministry of Samurdhi and the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA). This National Youth Policy also did not see the light of day and remained in draft form on account of the change of government in late 2001.

Recent Youth Policies

The most important programme of the previous UNF government the 'youth corps' incorporated a private sector bias to deal with youth unemployment. Its strategy concentrated on teaching English and computer skills in an effort to improve the chances for rural educated unemployed youth to access the private market. The youth corps elicited criticism as it was seen as a duplication of efforts and, most importantly, because it bypassed the NYSC. However, it also was an innovative attempt that went further than the mere creation of

⁴ The public sector shrank from 21.5% in 1990 to 13.6% in the first three-quarters of 2000. See Gunawardena, C. (2002) Youth and Education, in Hettige, S.T, and Mayer, M. (eds.) Sri Lankan Youth Challenges and Responses (pp. 89-118). Colombo: Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung.

government jobs. With the change of government, it seems likely that this programme will be phased out.

In the first few months, the new UPFA government offered an intimation of their approach to youth issues. In a change of approach from the previous government, and more in keeping with traditional strategies of dealing with youth unemployment, the government announced it would create 30,000 new government positions. The massive recruitment process of graduates was due to begin in August 2004. The move faced allegations of political patronage by the Combined Association of Unemployed Graduates (CAUG) who affirmed that recent reports show that politicians are favouring supporters instead of following established procedures.

In addition, the government disclosed that a National Youth Plan will be formulated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. This initiative probably intends to revive the efforts of the defunct National Youth Policy of 1999.

Final Comments on Government Policy and Potential areas for Advocacy

- The practice of waiting for government jobs has negative effects on poor youth and their families. Addressing this requires taking into account two aspects. First, jobs in the private sector need to have the type of rewards (such as security and pension) that are valued in government jobs. And second, efforts need to be directed at encouraging attitudes that views all jobs, not only those in the government, as socially respectable and merit-worthy.
- It is imperative that the government follows strict and transparent guidelines in the allocation of the 30,000 new government vacancies. If the process falls into the characteristic spiral of political favouritism it will serve as proof to a large number of young people that their capabilities to influence their life are tenuous.
- In the near future a number of sub groups within youth will need particular attention. These are demobilised soldiers, psychologically and physically disabled youth and plantation youth.
- At a high policy level the single most noteworthy opportunity to influence youth policy will be the process of drafting the National Youth Plan (NYP). As expressed by government officials the intention is for the

main points of the Plan to be negotiated with stakeholders at all levels. If the process from 1999-2000 is followed then the Commission will be integrated not only by government but also by members of civil society.

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