

# The Potential of Youth in Poverty Alleviation in Sri Lanka

Saman Weerawansa\*

Youth is a time of exuberance and strength in the life of a human being. Youth is also a time during which an individual gradually leaves behind childhood and commences the completion of developmental stages. Youth represents the transition from childhood to adulthood and biologically too, it is the most valuable period of an individual's life.

Throughout history, there have been disputes and disagreements between adults and youth regarding the behaviour of the latter. This is also evident from the papyrus found in Egypt. Those adults considered the youth as a group of people that was of no consequence. The papyrus also record the doubts expressed by adults as to the fate of society when the youth become adults. Later, during the time of Socrates, the potential of Athenian youth was also devalued. However, Socrates challenged these perceptions and averred that the youth were a group that did not accept anything unquestionably and was a talented group with inquiring minds engaged in learning.

It should be acknowledged that at present as in the past, the way in which the youth think and act has an influence on the social, economic, political as well as on the whole spectrum of development in a country. Sri Lanka is undergoing many social, economic and political changes in the context of the current phase of globalisation. If the youth, as a progressive generation, recognizes the transformations that are taking place and strengthen their abilities, overcome their weaknesses and use their strength and potential innovatively to meet the challenges they would have the opportunity to develop themselves as well as the country.

Julius Nyerere, a former president of Tanzania also observed that the objective of development in poor countries should be to extricate the people in these countries from deficiencies that arise due to illiteracy and servitude. He believed that the basic aim of development should be the emancipation and freedom of the people. However, only the individual can achieve freedom for him/herself. The individual should be able to act

with self-determination. The individual should have the ability to influence the environment and the society that s/he lives in. Accordingly, development is by the individual and for the individual. It belongs to the individual.

Therefore, although the present generation is confronted with a gamut of problems, the basic strength to overcome these problems is possessed by the youth themselves. Although these challenges are manifested in the form of poverty and unemployment in Sri Lanka, in developed countries youth problems manifest in non-conventional behavioural patterns that assume social proportions.

In 1990, the Presidential Commission on Youth in its report stated that during the past century youth unrest was caused by a rapid growth of population without a concomitant growth in the economy. Many who gave evidence before the Commission were of the view that the present social, economic, political, and moral problems prevalent in Sri Lanka are due to the political culture in the country and that the youth were also responsible for this situation. However, when we consider the total educated workforce we can see that Sri Lanka possesses a young labour force that can contribute to the production of goods and services. It can be seen clearly that if this young labour force is used in an appropriate manner that it would be possible to increase the productivity and efficiency of the development process. While this labour force has the ability to produce economic goods and services, it includes young population groups as well as those who are employed.

Unemployment is most acute among the youth. According to the Annual Report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, unemployment had declined from 10.5% in 1997 to 8.8 % in 1999. However, despite this decline in unemployment Sri Lanka does not compare favourably with other countries in the region. However, if it is possible to utilize the valuable human resources that are available

systematically it would be possible to expect a high level of development in the country.

Paul Preyer, an educationist, was of the view that if countries like Sri Lanka that are confronted with poverty and related problems are to overcome them the people should become masters of their own destiny. He states that the education system should be utilized to avoid the intellectual poverty of the educated as well as the illiteracy and to bring about a transformation the helpless, unenterprising individuals to those who can take charge of their own lives. Further, attempts should be made to achieve the objectives of the educational cycle. Consequently, if the youth are to contribute to social development it would be necessary to stimulate their minds. That is they should be given a voice. Those who are silent and inactive in the face of poverty should be stimulated to accept their situation not as their fate but to take charge of their lives.

For this purpose, first, it would be necessary to guide them to develop a positive attitude and personality. John Dew once said that as a person is born into this world because nature has determined his/her necessity the person should value his/her individuality. If others take decisions on your behalf then you will loose yourself.

While it is necessary to listen to the advice given by parents and elders, the youth should also have the ability to respect varied ideas and views without insisting that their views alone are correct. A survey carried out by the Social Science Faculty of the University of Colombo in 2000 revealed that the youth in this country are dependent on elders and parents for a long period of time. The survey also showed that the period of dependence increased with increasing education (Table 2). In the Sri Lankan political, economic and social context it is seen that youth discontent increases as they are unable to realize their aspirations of finding employment that is commensurate with their education due to various irregularities in the recruitment process.

Table 1

Age Group	Employment
15 - 19 yrs.	26.3
20 - 24 yrs.	68.2
25 - 29 yrs.	73.6
30 - 34 yrs.	71.0

Source: Dept. of Census & Statistics

Table 2 Youth Dependency on Parents

Youth Category	Youth Dependency on Parents		
	Fully Dependent	Partly Dependent	Independent
Total	71.8	10.9	17.3
	81.0	13.2	25.1
Women	85.1	7.8	7.1
Urban	67.0	11.7	21.3
Rural	73.6	10.3	16.1
Estates	65.1	18.0	18.9
15 - 19 yrs.	87.0	6.7	6.2
20 - 24 yrs.	64.0	13.8	22.6
25 - 29 yrs.	41.2	16.3	40.5
Preparing for A/L	77.8	9.1	13.0
A/L Qualified	73.3	10.6	13.6
Degree or Above	75.9	10.1	13.9
Non Schooling	47.4	5.3	47.4

Source: Youth Survey 2000

Table 3 G.C.E. (O/L) 1998 Subjects Passed and Number Appeared

Subjects	Total Number Appeared			
	D+C+S	%	F	%
Wood Work	1584	79.46	860	20.52
Masonry	84	95.45	4	4.55
Mette Work	30	81.35	70	18.67
Radio Technology	353	71.46	141	28.54
Motor Mechanism	773	65.89	127	14.11
Sea Water Fishing	34	97.14	1	2.86
Fresh Water Fishing	9	90.00	1	10.00
Agriculture	106637	79.49	27507	20.50
Gardening	8584	88.53	1112	11.47
Livestock	63	64.29	35	35.71
Pottery	103	91.15	10	8.85
Textile Weaving	413	87.5	59	12.5
Surveying	182	77.12	64	22.88
Home Gardening	125	62.24	27	17.76
Home Science	12287	84.00	23.41	16.00

Source: Data Survey Report 1998 - Dept. of Examinations

\* Lecturer, Sri Lanka Foundation Institute

'Vision for Sri Lanka' due to be launched in 2000 by the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute provides a path for the youth to follow by the year 2005. It states that the youth should overcome attitudes of dependency and that it is the responsibility of the youth to plan their future by themselves. It further states that it is the obligation of the politicians to develop an environment in which the youth could have control over their own destiny.

Further, to develop a productive, efficient group of young people it is necessary that law abiding, modest, enterprising individuals should emerge from the mental and physical development that they undergo. It has also been pointed out that the primary duty and responsibility of the youth is to ensure the emergence of individuals who can overcome challenges, and can initiate work and engage in timely work.

According to psychologists, the development of a basic psychological background required for a generation of youth that is responsible and aware of its obligations will be based on experience. There are three main aspects of self perception as follows:

1. Self perception regarding physical appearance
2. Self perception regarding ability
3. Self perception about social acceptability

What is required for the country today is a young generation that has technical ability rather a generation that has developed the aspects of self perception identified above. Therefore what the youth should endeavour accomplish is to recognize their abilities and develop such special abilities. If these abilities are identified and developed while in school, that would become useful for their future.

Opportunities will arise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century not for ordinary individuals but for those who have special abilities. Therefore, the youth should strive to derive the maximum benefits from their abilities, whether it be in the field of sewing, cookery,

singing, painting, masonry, carpentry or any other vocation. Any skill or ability, if it is beneficial to society, should be developed. An individual's pride in her/his ability will automatically develop when the individual values such ability. The prestige of any profession depends on the manner in which the individual conducts him/herself. It is often heard that there is a dearth of qualified personnel for many job categories for which there is a demand in the labour market. Therefore, the time has come to identify people with abilities that can be marketed and develop their skills. This is also evident from the results of the Living Skills and Technical subjects at the 1998 GCE O Level examination (Table 3).

While a total of 809,088 candidates (including private candidates) appeared for the 1998 GCE O Level examination, the number of candidates who sat for Life Skills and Technical subjects was very low. Although the Presidential Commission on Youth had drawn attention to this trend in 1990 and made recommendations to encourage more students to learn these subjects no substantial change was evident even in 1998. The survey on youth conducted by the University of Colombo has been confirmed this trend. Before analyzing the distortions in employment, the survey has identified the aspirations of some of the unemployed youth.

The survey attempted to identify the areas in which the youth sought employment. The results revealed that rural and estate sector youth, and especially females had a preference for public sector employment (Table 4).

It has to be recognized that there is a wide gap between aspirations and current reality. It has to be accepted that the role of the state is declining in the light of the prevalent national and international social and economic trends. The youth should recognize the trends and opportunities that arise in the context of current globalisation. It becomes apparent that the youth should be represent a wide spectrum of the labour force. Therefore those who are responsible for implementing various youth programmes and the Samurdhi programme should focus attention on this issue so that

a change in the aspirations of the youth can be effected and implementation programmes that are suitable for meeting the challenges of emerging global trends.

When engaging in the production of goods and services it is necessary to look beyond the local market and target regional and international markets. Entry into overseas markets cannot be achieved instantly. To ensure long-term sustainability it would be necessary first, to enter the local market and then seek markets overseas.

At a time when public sector institutions have to compete with the private sector, it is disconcerting to come across increasing levels of corruption and inefficiencies in state organizations. It is necessary that there should be a perceptible change in attitudes and in managerial efficiency and productivity of these organizations. Further, the administrators should recognize the needs of youth and take steps to value them and to divert them to appropriate areas.

Lenin stated that work is life; laziness is death. Karl Marx said that there are no shortcuts to reaching mountain tops and those who are willing to work can reach the summit of those mountains easily.

In the future all professions will command the same value. Within each profession, it is necessary to follow a set of rules. It is necessary to understand that in the future it is only those who have a positive attitude towards them that can build a youthful synergy that is of use to the world.

Sometimes the youth may think that the society is not correct. This is one stage of the mental development of an individual. However, elders too may have observed the deficiencies in the system during their youth. Their struggles against injustices are recorded in history. War and terror continue to erode the youth. They bring not only the youth but also the whole of society to the edge of a precipice. Therefore, the youth should attempt to understand these forces and make their contribution to the building of a better society. Without complaining of the darkness, they should light at least one candle to dispel such darkness. While finding fault and criticizing will only lead to hatred, anger and vengefulness will lead to destruction revolutionary thoughts and ideas will also arise. Ultimately they become allies of those who have taken upon themselves to destroy public property and resources.

If the force that is present in youth is to be strengthened, it is necessary to develop their self-confidence. The youth should be determined not use poverty as an excuse and should attempt to meet challenges and solve their problems successfully. To the extent that the youth are determined to strengthen the youthful force, it becomes possible to reap benefits for themselves as well as to the country.

Life skills that should be developed will pave the way to a strong youthful force. The acquisition of these skills will facilitate decision-making, problem solving, creative thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relations, self-awareness, empathy, and assist in coping with stress. The youth who have these attributes will be able to directly contribute to the development of the country even in the face of poverty.

#### References:

- Hartig, T. National Youth Survey 2000. Colombo: University of Colombo.  
 Vision for Lankan Youth 2000. Colombo: Sri Lanka foundation Institute.  
 Presidential Commission on Youth, 1990.  
 Statistical Handbook. Colombo: Department of Examinations, 1999.

**Table 4 Social Background & Job Preference**

Source Group	State Sector	Private Sector	Self Employment	Other
Total Number	53.40	20.00	24.80	1.5
Male	43.2	21.7	33.3	1.5
Female	66.8	17.9	13.5	1.6
Urban	44.7	27.1	26.1	2.0
Rural	55.8	18.1	24.2	1.5
Estate	52.7	19.5	27.8	--
Western Province	40.5	28.8	28.8	2.6
Central Province	55.8	22.1	22.7	0.3
Southern Province	57.7	18.4	23.0	1.0
Northern Province	75.0	5.5	19.5	--
Eastern Province	72.2	11.9	16.0	--
North-Eastern Province	48.0	21.7	28.3	1.4
North Central Province	57.8	10.6	30.6	1.1
Uva Province	59.8	10.6	26.3	3.4
Sabaragamuwa Province	54.6	19.2	28.6	2.2
GCE A/L Completed	82.3	22.7	11.6	3.3
Degree or Above	72.2	21.5	5.1	1.3

Source: Youth Survey report 2000 - Colombo University