



YOULEAD

IMPACT

Together for a brighter future for the Youth of Sri Lanka

VOLUME 03. ISSUE 2

US Ambassador Chung celebrates the 100,000th individual receiving YouLead’s one-on-one career guidance



US Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung presenting a commemorative certificate to Dilumi

By mid-2021, Dilumi Ekanayake was struggling to figure out her next steps after her GCE Advanced Level. She studied mathematics for her Advanced Level and excelled in the school cadet program with the hope of enrolling at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University for her undergraduate education. However, COVID-19-related travel restrictions, school closures, and the limitations of online learning, disrupted her studies and her plans for her higher studies.

“I wasn’t sure what to do next and what career to choose, but I knew I wanted to study something before finding a job,” says Dilumi.

“It was during this time that I came across the ‘Ata pass’* show that aired on Facebook and called the hotline to find out more about career guidance and how I could decide on my future career path.”

The timing of her appointment made her officially the 100,000th person to have received one-on-one career guidance from a Career Guidance Practitioner (CGP) trained thanks to USAID’s Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship program, YouLead.

Professional, independent career guidance helps youth understand the intersection of their capabilities and interests and can give them the confidence to pursue the career options for which they are best suited and most likely to succeed. Without such support, youth, particularly young women, often have their educational and career pathways chosen for them focusing more on jobs that are historically “appropriate” or “safe” with little regard to their interests or the job market.

“The guidance I received helped me identify my career path based on my skills and the progress I could make in that field,” said Dilumi who also shared the next steps she has chosen. “I enrolled in a one-year draftsperson program at the Technical College in Aruppola, Kandy. I hope to progress in this field and encourage other young women with aspirations in being a draftsperson or architect or civil engineer, to pursue their dreams and that they too can go all the way through the vocational training path.”

With the economic crisis spurring hasty life and employment decisions for many people, it is more important than ever to make sure youth like Dilumi are linked to employment opportunities and receive professional, up-to-date guidance so they

can make informed decisions regarding their future employment, education, or entrepreneurship options.

YouLead trained nearly 2,000 career guidance practitioners across public and private sector institutions, enabling them to steer the lives and aspirations of more than 100,000 youth from some of Sri Lanka’s poorest communities.

YouLead’s two-pronged approach to give youth one-on-one guidance and to train thousands of CGPs and teachers, helps ensure that youth with the fewest post-secondary opportunities—i.e. those who can most benefit from career guidance—receive the professional support they need. The programs also encourage young women to continue their education and pursue a career or engage in training and development programs that will help them be economically productive and independent.

Number of individuals who received career and occupational guidance and counselling services

100,118

Female 55,789 **Male 43,490**

*Refer article titled 'Generation Awake' responds to the call to chart their own career paths.

‘Generation Awake’ responds to the call to chart their own career paths

In October 2022, USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, launched a drama series titled ‘Ata Pass’ on social media with a storyline that challenged long-held misconceptions about education and careers. Based on the dramatic shifts in sentiment observed among ‘Generation Awake’—a name coined to capture the zeitgeist of youth awakened by Sri Lanka’s socio-economic upheaval, the series channeled the appetite for change to empower youth to take a more active role in their education and career choices through unfettered access to YouLead’s tools and resources.

While talent is distributed evenly throughout Sri Lanka, opportunity is not. Many factors including poor access to information, cultural norms, and deference to elders frequently combine to leave youth with few independent choices in their career and education paths.

Consequently, youth are in the habit of passively accepting the outcomes that unfold for them, which do not support their true potential. ‘Ata Pass’ charted the journey of eight youths from different backgrounds, brought together by circumstances beyond their control, desperate to reach a common destination. They overcome challenges through their own collective determination and ingenuity against all odds, reflecting ‘Generation Awake’ characteristics.

Each character’s story represents a misconception in the typical youth approach to success and as the story unfolds, each encounters a moment of truth that dispels the misconception and illuminates a path to a better future trajectory. The series included both Sinhala and Tamil dialogue and was subtitled for universal consumption. Key episodes of the drama were also enacted within a popular online gaming platform by eight popular gamers and live streamed to their audiences. This was a ‘first’ in Sri Lanka with two of the streaming videos trending at #5 and #8 and extending the reach of the behavior-change message within the large local gaming population.

‘Ata Pass’ was a social media hit, with a reach of almost seven million—attracting between 475,000 and 850,000 views for each of the ten episodes on Facebook, YouTube and Tik Tok.

Over 70% of this audience was between 18 and 35, across priority districts. Engagement (reactions, comments, and shares) of 131,000 was maximized by providing viewers the ability to vote on a key decision the characters should take to overcome a challenge each week. Real time youth online sentiment was also incorporated into the storyline as the drama progressed through a social-listening-enabled sentiment analysis.

‘Ata Pass’ established the contextual relevance of career guidance, paving the way for a parallel social media campaign re-marketed to all youth who viewed the drama, enabling immediate enrollment for guidance.



Scenes from the first episode of Ata Pass



A post with the eight gamers that was shared with their audience base and a scene from the live stream of Ata Pass within the popular online game

“ඒක ගොඩක් හොඳයි.. මට මම ගැන ස්වයං අධ්‍යයනයක යෙදෙන්න පුළුවන් වුණා. මාව දැකලා නැති උනාට ඒ සර් මං දිහා බලන් ඉන්නවා වගේ මං ගැන කතා කළා. මම පුදුම වුණා. වෘත්තීයක් තෝරාගන්න මට ලොකු පෙළඹවීමක් ලැබුණා.” – Saumya Madhushani, Matara.

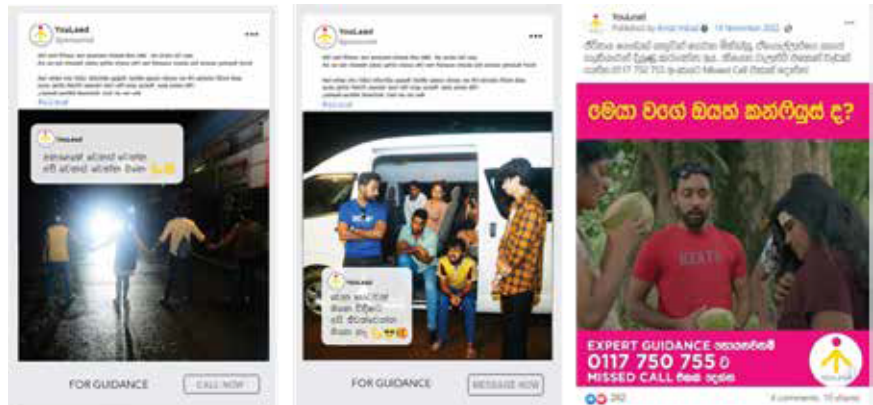
Translation: The session was very good. I was able to do a self evaluation. Sir described my qualities as if he knew me, even though we had never met. I was amazed. I received much motivation to choose a career.

“රටේ ආර්ථිකේ එක්ක මොනවා කරන්නද කියලා මට හිතාගන්න බැරි වුණා. සර් මට හොඳට පැහැදිලි කළා. පාඨමාලා ගැන මට දැනුමක් තිබුණේ නැහැ. සර් මට මම කවුද කියලා ,කියලා දුන්නා.ගැලපෙන පාඨමාලාවක් හොයලා දුන්නා” – Sandamini Malhari, Colombo.

Translation: I was lost due to the current economic situation. Sir provided clarity. I had no idea about vocational training. Sir helped me discover my potential and suitable training options.

Feedback from youth who completed Career Guidance appointments with Skill Development Officers.

A task-specific call center catering to both Sinhala and Tamil communities was set up to connect with all enrolled youth and schedule Career Guidance appointments with YouLead-trained Skills Development Officers. The call center was run by youth volunteers from the Sasnaka Sansada Foundation and the Fordyce Youth Club in Hatton.



Parallel 'call-to-action' campaign posts with different modes of enrolment.

This outreach campaign unlocked access to USAID-funded YouLead Career Guidance to all youth across the country, resulting in over 16,000 direct youth subscriptions, 60% from the Tamil community, and a further 6,000 through institutions that wanted to sign up their members and beneficiaries. The call center set up over 7,000 Career Guidance appointments within 10 weeks.

“I discovered Career Guidance through the ‘Ata Pass’ drama on Facebook. ‘Ata Pass’ was a great concept for my generation - It made me realize that I needed to discover the right path to my future.” – Dilumi Ekanayake from Kandy, YouLead’s 100,000th Career Guidance recipient.

The highly contextual ‘Ata Pass’ campaign exceeded expectations in making the online youth population reevaluate their role and realize the relevance and benefits of proactively changing this status quo. It paved the way for informed youth education and career choices by unlocking access to YouLead-enabled career guidance for all. Encouraging such behavioral change is an ongoing process that requires a consistent and long-term outreach effort. ‘Ata Pass’ provides a sustainable, extendable platform to engage youth in this process.



Watch all 10 episodes of Ata Pass. [CLICK HERE](#)

More than 4,000 women from largely low income, rural communities formalize new micro-enterprises



Priyanthi now employs five women from her local community and has ambitions to one day support over 200 families.

Priyanthi Konthasena has ambitious plans to one day operate a garment factory that supports over 200 families in her community. Priyanthi recently took the first step in working towards her dream by registering her business and employing five women from her community.

She is among an estimated 49 percent of individuals receiving poverty assistance, who went on to formalize their business activities after completing a five-day entrepreneurship development (ED) program implemented by USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead.

The program aims to provide the fundamentals of starting and running a business, particularly in rural areas. Most rural poor are engaged in micro-scale agriculture or daily wage work. Through this YouLead program in partnership with the Department of Samurdhi Development (Sri Lanka's poverty alleviation agency), more than 4,000 women have formalized enterprises that enable them to provide

food security and livelihood income for their families and communities. The impact is stronger when women like Priyanthi are able to move their businesses to the next level and start employing local community members. In addition, research indicates that when women earn cash income, they are more likely to devote that income to better education and nutrition outcomes.

For Priyanthi, participating in the ED training program allowed her to understand how to develop a business plan, keep proper accounts and put down a strategy for growing her business.

“I also learned about formalizing a business, the importance of maintaining a separate set of accounts, product costing and pricing, and managing people. This learning transformed my life and my business.”

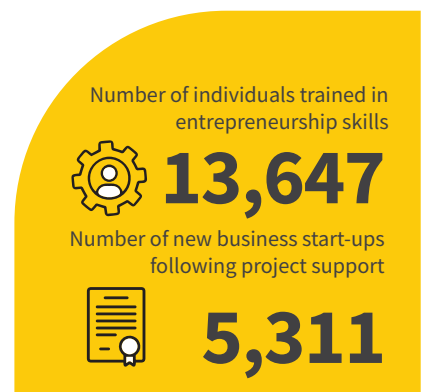
The Samurdhi program builds on the success of a 2019 pilot project by YouLead in Matara, where over 1,500 Samurdhi recipients attended a five-day training program focused on financial literacy. By the end of 2022, a sample survey of 9,156 individuals who participated in the training found that 4,522 participants or 49 percent, had formalized their businesses. Over 75 percent of the businesses were women-owned.

Priyanthi was among 13,647 rural women and youth who attended one of the 276 ED training sessions conducted by YouLead. She credits the program with helping her bounce back from challenges she faced. “I would encourage more young women to pursue their dreams of being an entrepreneur. We should be able to face any challenge and not stop until our dreams have come true.”

The high success rate is largely attributed to a highly localized selection process that engaged representatives of the poverty agency at the most local government administrative unit (Grama Nilalhari). Participants for the training were selected based on their demonstrated aptitude for entrepreneurship based on the local Samurdhi officers' observations and discussions during field visits. The local officers also provide follow-up support and monitoring for the beneficiaries.

The five-day programs offer alternative livelihood opportunities at a time when the economic crisis threatens to push many further into poverty. They have an 82 percent completion rate despite being conducted during a fuel crisis and a period of political turmoil.

YouLead also revised its ED curriculum to include new modules on Exports and Digital Marketing that will better align the curriculum with changing market conditions. As digital marketing is constantly evolving, the module was specifically completed in a digital format to compel students to complete the learning online so they better understand what digital tools are available and how to use them.



Accelerating employment for women in tourism through work-readiness training programs"



Lidvina and Madushani are among a growing number of young women now aspiring to build a career in tourism

“I was inspired by how tourism has developed in other destinations and how they use the local culture, the cuisine, and our environment to improve the experience of tourists,” says Lidvina Rubi, a 27-year-old native of Nuwara Eliya who participated in a workforce development program initiated by the Tourism Resilience Project (TRP), a European Union program with additional support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Another Nuwara Eliya native and small restaurant owner, Madushani Liyanage, says that women now have the opportunity to start their businesses as she has and contribute positively to the community with jobs and economic growth. “The training exposed me to the true potential of the industry and the opportunities in wellness tourism. I want to learn more about the industry, explore new business opportunities, and work towards attracting more visitors to my restaurant.”

TRP has conducted 15 work-readiness training programs and updated the skills of 604 MSME employees and tourism students including 166 females, mostly residing along The Pekoe Trail—a 300km walking path, developed by the TRP, which meanders through the central highlands of Sri Lanka.

The training programs covered a range of sector-specific modules including customer service and problem-solving, waste management and environmental sustainability, and introduction to wellness tourism. Most of the employees and youth trained, come from rural communities along The Pekoe Trail and have had little access to training opportunities.

Lidvina, who currently works as a reservations agent for the historic Grand Hotel, and Madushani are among a new generation of young women entering the tourism industry and helping re-mold long-held negative stereotypes about working in tourism.

“A few years ago, even my parents would not have consented for me to join the industry. But now, more young women from my neighborhood, most of whom previously preferred to join the apparel industry, are making a shift to tourism,” says Lidvina, who now aspires to start her own homestay with the support of her family.

Lidvina adds that “My sister is now open to the idea of working in the tourism industry as well, as there are more opportunities now available to women.”

This new sentiment was reflected in the training participants, 27 percent of whom were women—a sharp increase from industry average of less than 10 percent female participation¹. Thanks to comparatively robust visitor numbers since mid-2022, Sri Lanka’s tourism industry is looking to attract new talent into the industry and shore up staff numbers. Changing long-held perceptions about the industry and supporting women in tourism are vital to increasing female participation in the tourism workforce. This is a priority for TRP’s work readiness training programs.

TRP is part of the European Union’s 5.7-million-euro investment in support of Sri Lanka’s tourism recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Project is implemented as part of the YouLead program with additional support from USAID, which is helping small businesses prepare for the resumption of international tourism. TRP commenced its work readiness and skills training programs in June 2022 targeting employees of Micro, Small, and Medium Scale (MSME) tourism businesses and students enrolled in tourism-related training programs.



¹<https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2020/02/24/so-sri-lanka-more-like-so-where-are-all-the-women-in-the-hotel-industry/>

Who we are

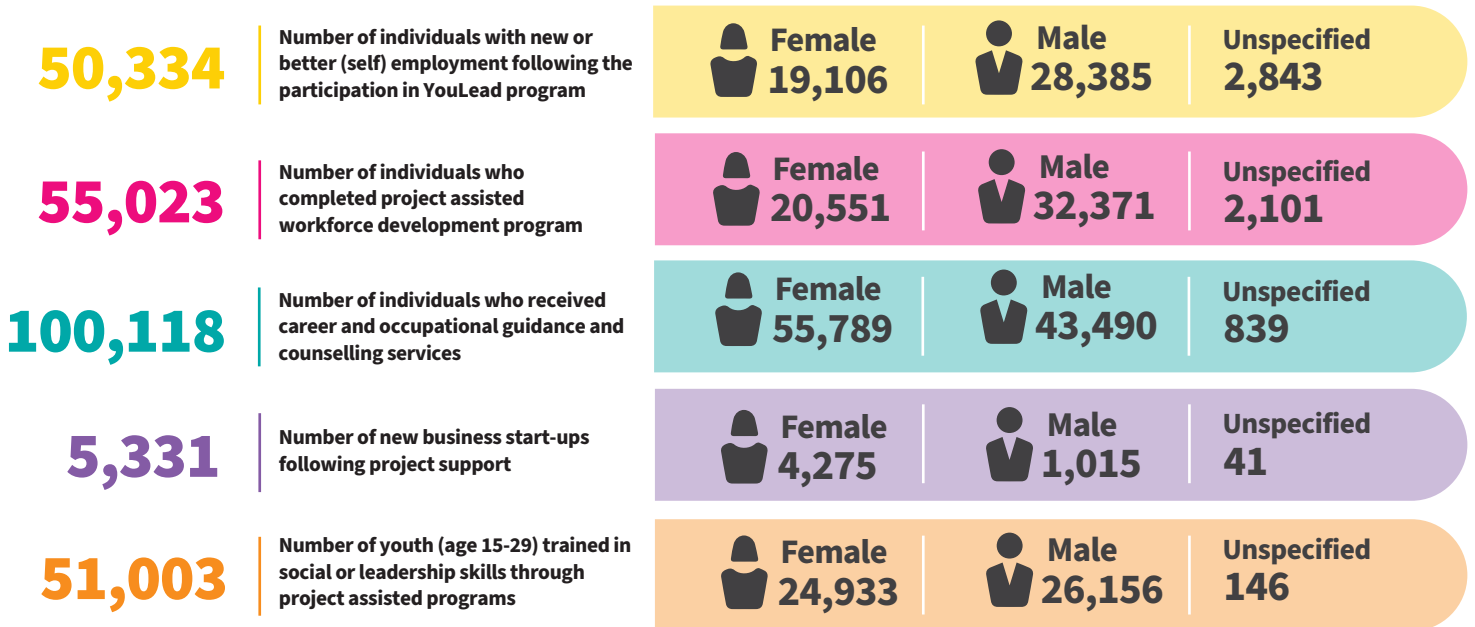
YouLead is a 7-year project funded by the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)**. Its aim is to improve technical and vocational education, create a more skilled workforce and link youth to more productive careers by supporting and strengthening students, teachers and institutions. It encourages entrepreneurship by giving young people the skills needed to run their own enterprises and improve their access to mentoring and financing.

How to reach us

Together, we can do more, so we welcome mutually beneficial collaborations with private, public and development sector organizations and individuals.

For inquiries, please contact Vindya: vsilva@youlead.lk

Our Community Impact



2,305

Number of career/ occupational guidance practitioners trained to deliver better services

88

Number of technical curricula developed or improved

2,413

Number of trainers receiving training by YouLead

