



YOULEAD

IMPACT

Together for a brighter future for the Youth of Sri Lanka

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USAID Helps Women in Rural Communities Start Businesses and Stay Resilient

Mrs. Mala Wijethunga lives in the rural village of Morawaka in Southern Sri Lanka. Her husband, like others in their community, earns a living by working as a laborer or by cultivating small rice paddy fields. It is a precarious existence because when unexpected expenses arise, like from a sickness or injury, it can drain savings, drive families into debt and leave them in poverty for generations.

By providing access to training from the USAID-funded youth skills development and entrepreneurship project, YouLead is helping rural women break the poverty cycle.

After participating in the YouLead micro entrepreneurship development program for Sri Lanka's rural communities, Mrs. Wijethunga successfully launched her own sweets business. By being self-employed, she now has more control over her time and can prioritize and do what's important. Also, as a female entrepreneur, she is now able to provide additional income to her family and protect them from unexpected shocks like COVID-19.

"The training taught me proper marketing, costing and pricing methods, to ensure my business is profitable," says Mrs. Wijethunga.



Micro Entrepreneurship Development Workshop, Matara district, Dec 2019

In addition to improving her own business, the knowledge Mrs. Wijethunga acquired from the training sessions, also helped her husband, a day laborer, increase profits from his welding workshop.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mrs. Wijethunga's business added an extra LKR 15,000 per month to the family's income, which allowed them to build up their savings. During the coronavirus shutdowns, earnings from the business dropped to LKR 8,000-10,000 per month. However, because they still had this income, as well as their recent savings, the family was able to avoid debt and any major financial difficulties.

Mrs. Wijethunga was not the only success. Of the 407 participants who started their own businesses after attending YouLead's training sessions, 343 (84%) were women and almost all of them were from rural areas.

A survey of those who attended YouLead's entrepreneurship training in Matara found that 407 of 1,243 participants had started their own businesses.

YouLead's training programs are a joint initiative with the Department of Samurdhi Development, Sri Lanka's poverty agency. Using a curriculum developed by a YouLead-facilitated stakeholder working group, which included public and private sector partners, Samurdhi staff provided training on financial literacy, as well as on other skills and knowledge needed to start micro-enterprises or develop self-employment.

Attendees were Samurdhi recipients, who were primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture or daily wage work. They were severely affected by the economic downturn brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, through YouLead's training program, they have the hope and knowledge needed to open up opportunities for hundreds of rural families.

Due to the success of these training programs, the Department of Samurdhi Development is now working with YouLead, to not only replicate them but to expand the program to five additional districts.

Inspiring Positive Careers: USAID-funded Tamil Language Film Goes Viral!

With Sri Lanka facing a second wave of COVID-19 infections, YouLead, USAID's youth skills development and entrepreneurship project, wanted to encourage the country's young Tamil-speakers, to stay resilient during curfews and social restrictions. To do this in an impactful way, it took the unique step of sharing its message through a movie with the online premier of 'Agni Siragugal' (Wings of Fire) on 6 November 2020.

In just 24 hours, over 100,000 young people, had watched the film, 'Agni Siragugal' and shared it more than 1,500 times, which was exceptional for branded Tamil content in Sri Lanka.

Written and directed by award-winning director Ilango Ram, the film premiered simultaneously on YouLead and other popular community social media channels. It was also promoted on multiple platforms, including YouTube and WhatsApp. Targeted at students who had just completed their Advanced Level examinations, the live event and campaign reached 1,647,000 individuals.

The film tells the story of a young Jaffna girl with big dreams, who challenges the status quo and embraces career guidance, to develop the skills that ultimately make her a success.

Most of the people who watched the film were from Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern Provinces, where Tamil communities are still recovering from



the country's civil war. These areas have limited economic opportunities and struggle with some of the nation's highest youth unemployment rates. The film was able to spark lively conversations about careers and the importance of skills development for young people in these communities.

"All children can be achievers if they are encouraged by their parents. Congratulations to everyone who brought this wonderful work to life." - Uday Kishok Kumar, parent from Trincomalee.

By using a creative and engaging film that challenges preconceptions about skills development and acceptable professions, YouLead has been able to inspire behavioral change and motivate young people and women to pursue skilled, in-demand careers.

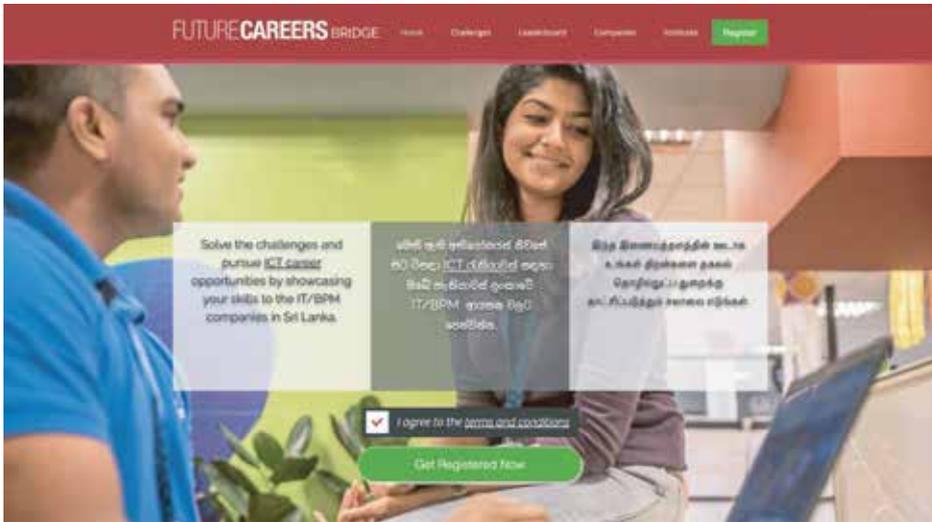
With the film and campaign continuing to engage audiences, YouLead plans to launch additional skills development campaigns, that not only give Sri Lankan Tamil youth access to positive and informative local content but also helps empower them, so they can take control of their futures.

"This film really reflects (the) current situation. Personal abilities should not be overlooked by parents. Talent transforms us into achievers. This film is entertaining and informative to teachers, students and parents." -

Jeyarajah Venujan, 28, from Jaffna.



Opening Up Sri Lanka's ICT Industry to More Young Sri Lankans



To encourage Sri Lanka's ICT industry to hire skilled youth without university degrees, YouLead collaborated with the Sri Lanka Association of Software and Service Companies (SLASSCOM), to develop and execute the Future Careers BRIDGE Program. Launched in March 2019, this unique and ambitious program provides a set of 29 'gamified' challenges, which participants must complete to be eligible for employment.

Over 6,600 young Sri Lankans have already registered for the Future Careers BRIDGE Program, of which 41% are women.

There are currently 761 students progressing through the BRIDGE leader board. For top performers to further enhance their abilities and make themselves more employable, the opportunity to participate in supplementary skill-up programs was provided.

These included the Digital Boot Camp Level-up course and English Language Training.

In the Digital Bootcamp Level-up course, top-performing young men and women acquire the work readiness skills needed for highly sought-after ICT jobs. To achieve this, each student's progress is closely monitored and evaluated.

Training sessions focus on boosting an individual's confidence, so he or she can perform at their best, in interviews with potential recruiters from Sri Lanka's top ICT companies.

Through individual and group training sessions over a period of two months, 26 of BRIDGE's top students were able to successfully complete the Digital Bootcamp Level-up course.

The ability to communicate in English gives individuals a considerable advantage when seeking employment in the ICT industry, so YouLead teamed up with SFL and the Gateway Language Centre, to offer an English Language Training course for top performers during the BRIDGE boot camp. To complete the course, participants were tested and ranked on 5 criteria: effective communication and speech, interaction, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

22 students have completed BRIDGE's English Language Training course and received recognition certificates, from the Gateway Language Centre, which will help secure jobs at SLASSCOM-member companies.

With the ICT industry continuing to expand, young Sri Lankans are getting more and more opportunities to enjoy rewarding and lucrative careers in this very dynamic field. It is for this reason that SLASSCOM and YouLead are currently in the process of upgrading the Future Careers BRIDGE Program. Soon to be launched, the next version of BRIDGE will build on its considerable success of attracting high-potential ICT professionals and accelerating their online skills development.

Switzerland and the United States Team Up to Up Skill Sri Lanka's Migrant Workers

Sri Lanka's migrant workers have contributed enormously to the country's economy, yet opportunities for them to advance their careers have been limited. To remedy this, the governments of Switzerland and the USA have joined hands to initiate the Safe and Resilient Migrant Workers (SRMW) project and give migrant workers the career guidance and skills development they urgently want and need.

The SRMW project combines the strengths of USAID's YouLead, specialists in career guidance and vocational skills development, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), who work to improve the overall safety and well-being of migrant workers.

Launched in Colombo on 2 March 2021 by Ambassador Dr. Dominik Furgler of Switzerland and Ambassador Alaina Teplitz of the United States, SRMW is designed to make overseas employment safer and more rewarding by providing better occupational information and by increasing the skill levels of Sri Lankans going abroad for work. It will also help reintegrate returning workers by assessing their capabilities and linking them to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in Sri Lanka.

With more than 50,000 migrant workers returning to Sri Lanka due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRMW project comes at a very critical time as many returnees have very few employment prospects.

According to research conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO), Sri Lanka's remittances from migrant workers in 2017 were a massive US\$7.19 billion (approximately 63% of total export earnings and 9% of GDP). However, despite their considerable contributions, most migrant workers, are in low-skilled jobs, which makes it difficult for them to reintegrate into the country's workforce when they return. This is especially true for female migrant workers.

In Sri Lanka, though unemployment is on the rise, skilled workers in industries such as construction are in short supply. To open up these opportunities to returning migrant workers, SRMW will evaluate their capabilities, get them a formal vocational qualification, and link them to employers seeking skilled workers. This also has the potential to make future outward migration safer and better paid in the future, fuel the country's economy through increased



remittances and promote long-term growth when workers apply their improved skills in Sri Lanka.

The United States and Switzerland have provided economic and humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka for more than 70 years, including more than US\$2 billion dollars towards development projects.

YouLead's SRMW project team is geared to take on the challenge of serving the needs of large numbers of returning migrant workers with a focus on women and the skillsets that will help them re-enter the workforce. Through its strong relationships with the private sector and training organizations, YouLead is well placed to make a significant impact on the lives of these hardworking Sri Lankans.

Who we are

YouLead is a 7-year project funded by USAID and 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 finance.

Collaborations in gender specific upskilling programs: YouLead welcomes the opportunity to collaborate in public, private or donor project initiatives in the ICT, Healthcare and Tourism sectors.

TVET approved private training and higher education institutes: YouLead will explore opportunities to collaborate on internal capacity building, youth career guidance, the creation of industry-led curricula, etc.

Upcoming partnership opportunities

Private sector collaboration in the Construction Sector: YouLead is seeking partnerships with medium to large scale private sector organizations in the construction industry who are interested and committed to jointly implementing workforce development programs addressing skills gaps at different levels of labor, uplifting the industry’s image and attracting more women to the construction sector.

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 impact partners

The partnerships that create an impact together for a brighter future for the youth of Sri Lanka

