



YOULEAD

IMPACT

Together for a brighter future for the Youth of Sri Lanka

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Focused partnership leads to a historic pedagogy mandate for vocational instructors

In early 2021, the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) that oversees policy and planning for vocational education in Sri Lanka mandated technical, pedagogical, and industry exposure training for teachers to maintain their course accreditation for the first time.



YouLead also developed a curriculum in the competency-based format to deliver structured NVQ programs in pedagogy.

Over the last three years, YouLead also helped develop 25 new curricula and revise 41 existing curricula to better address the needs of youth and make them workplace-ready. The progress made with the curricula, however, exposed the need to improve teacher competencies for more effective and interactive training.

This potentially transformative mandate came as a result of a four-year partnership between TVEC and USAID's youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, to improve the way that vocational education is taught and to build more direct linkages with private sector employers.



Pedagogy training sessions conducted in 2018 and 2019

YouLead works closely with TVEC and major public and private sector Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions to identify the training needs for their trainers in each program and institution.

This new policy will ensure all technical and vocational trainers have proper teaching skills and tools in addition to their technical qualifications.

other cases, instructors have not had any interaction with the industry they are tasked to prepare youth to enter, for more than 10 years and have not kept abreast of technological and managerial changes.

With the support of TVEC, the relevant data collection on training requirements by each institution is now complete and is being tabulated. The resulting training programs are anticipated to commence in the final quarter of 2021.

Pedagogical training and industry exposure are currently undervalued in the development of a skilled workforce. Over 55 percent of the 292,000 students exiting the secondary education system and not entering a university, rely on vocational training to prepare them for their journey into the workforce, thereby making vocational training a significant factor in the development of Sri Lanka's youth.

Effective vocational pedagogy allows trainers to closely match teaching and learning methods to the needs of their students and the changing demands of the modern workplace.

In collaboration with TVEC, YouLead will continue to enable the successful implementation of this mandate for pedagogical, technical, and industry exposure for vocational instructors, which will, in turn, accelerate the development of a more skilled youth workforce geared to meet industry demands.

Trainers, however, are often former students or industry experts without any formal teacher training. In many

Recognizing the impact pedagogy has on vocational training and the youth workforce, YouLead has to date coached 38 master trainers on improved teaching techniques, who have in turn trained 600+ instructors.

The EU Commits US \$ 3 million for Tourism Resilience in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's tourism industry is still reeling from the dual impacts of the April 2019 attacks and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, pushing many SME businesses to the brink of collapse.

While some efforts are being made to mend the industry's financial woes, the EU identified an opportunity towards tourism resilience by rebuilding the industry with a focus on creating authentic, sustainable and uniquely Sri Lankan experiences. The EU has dedicated approximately US \$3 million in funding in three vital areas spanning emergency grants, crafting new signature experiences and skills development and training.

The EU is supported in this effort by USAID, which has added another \$800,000, leveraging the on the ground expertise of its youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, to support with implementation.

This is the first time the two donor agencies have pooled their resources to deliver support for an industry in distress in Sri Lanka.

Key elements of the Tourism Resilience Project include grant facilities to help struggling tourism SMEs to cover their operating and personnel costs until tourism revenues increase. The grants will also help retrain staff within the industry, ensuring the continuity of businesses and their services.

Secondly, the new signature experiences will create a novel approach to promote the diversity and authenticity



Scenic vistas of the trail

of Sri Lanka to travelers and help bolster visitor numbers through wellness, exploration, discovery and adventure, which is in line with emerging global travel trends.

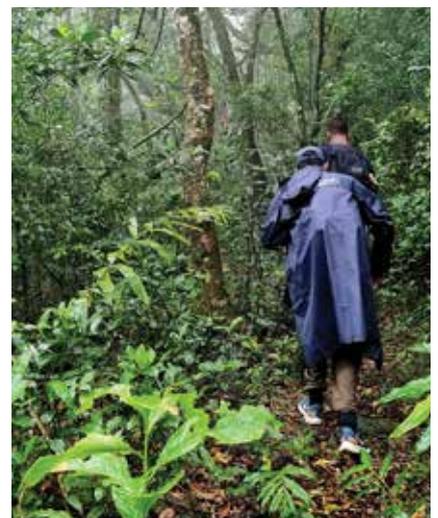
The trail also expands the reach of tourism livelihoods by creating opportunities for entrepreneurs along the trail to provide accommodation, refreshments, recreation, and other services for travelers.

Finally, a series of workforce and enterprise capacity building projects will be rolled out to ensure staff retention, upskilling and foster a startup culture within the tourism sector.

However, the success of the project hinges on the speed in delivery, expertise and access to the cross-section of stakeholders. YouLead is well placed to do this, having responded quickly in the aftermath of the April 2019 attacks by supporting the tourism industry underwrite private sector-led recovery initiatives and facilitating the creation of the Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance, which arose out of YouLead's Tourism Skills Committee.

The Tourism Resilience Project will help address the urgent needs of the tourism industry, setting it on a trajectory for a more resilient future, at a faster pace.

The joint exercise also demonstrates the critical importance of the tourism sector to Sri Lanka's economic recovery and underscores the need to use this initial exercise to put in place a long-term sustainability and tourism resilience plan in line with the government's vision for Sri Lanka tourism and the private sector's drive to grow the industry.



A forest path along the trail

Enabling SMEs to explore growth opportunities amid COVID-19 chaos

“2020 was a bad year for us. We paid a premium for raw cashew and because of the lockdown, we could not recover our cost,” says Kabeer, a 40-year-old native of Eravur, with over 25 years in the cashew processing business. At the peak of his business, Kabeer employed a team of 20, peeling and roasting up to 100 kilos of cashew a day.

“We barely managed to restart the business this year and when we were almost nearing capacity, the third wave shut us down again,” says Kabeer, who obtained a loan from HNB in April under a special scheme that did not require the customary requirement for collateral.

The loan helped him to tide over working capital requirements and pay a small salary for the workers, who depend on this income.

Sri Lanka’s Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SME), like Kabeer’s cashew processing factory, are an essential cog in the economy, employing an estimated 45 percent of the workforce and contributing up to 50 percent of GDP. The growth of such SMEs, however, is constrained by the availability of funding without collateral, physical infrastructure, technology availability and access to information. While the specific issues holding back growth differ between urban and rural entrepreneurs, access to funding tops the list for both.

Seeking to bridge that gap, USAID facilitated a credit guarantee agreement between the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and HNB in 2018.



SME business owner, Mr. Kabeer at his cashew processing facility in Eravur

However, only 30 loans were disbursed in the first 18 months. USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship program, YouLead, engaged directly with HNB’s regional managers to train them on the credit guarantee and how best to use it. In the nine months since October 2020, 320 SME loans totaling more than Rs. 200 million (nearly one million US Dollars), was dispersed by HNB using the USAID credit guarantee, supported by YouLead.

“Most of the small and medium scale businesses that apply for a loan run home-based businesses and don’t have much in terms of collateral. They also don’t have any financial records to evaluate their cashflows and repayment capacity,” an SME officer with the bank said.

Over 90 percent of loans disbursed by HNB under the DFC credit guarantee agreement are below Rs. 250,000, going towards ventures in agriculture, fisheries

and dairy farming across the North and Eastern regions.

The credit guarantee also prioritizes lending to women and SMEs outside of the Western Province, with 42 percent of loans (134) going to women-owned businesses and 74 percent of loans (236) going to SMEs in the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Twenty-three new startups received 40 percent of the total value disbursed despite representing only seven percent of the total number of loans.

YouLead aims to encourage this momentum in SME lending, through USAID’s/DFC’s partner financial institutions in Sri Lanka, so that more beneficiaries like Kabeer will finally have access to funding to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

30 prominent business leaders linked to young entrepreneurs showcased on reality TV

USAID's youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, has been coordinating since 2019 with TV Derana in Sri Lanka and Jordan-based Partners for Good, on the development of a reality TV show that started filming in July 2021, which promotes and encourages youth entrepreneurship.

With YouLead's support, 30 finalists from the more than 4,000 applicants, were matched to high-profile Sri Lankan business leaders.

The applicants are all aspiring startups led by young women and men from across the island, who are looking for a breakthrough in the market for their products and services. They will each have an opportunity to pitch their business to a panel of judges and win an award of over Rs. 4 million, however, prior to the pitch stage, the startups receive an extensive one-on-one mentoring from eminent industry leaders.

Globally, it is estimated that less than 50 percent of startups make it to through to four years (Inc.com). The missing link is often, experienced mentorship from someone who has personally navigated the complexity of running a business. Mentoring gives young entrepreneurs an opportunity to have open discussions with someone who is not vested in their business like a partner or investor. Understanding the significant role mentorship plays in entrepreneurship, YouLead emphasizes the need for mentoring—particularly for youth entrepreneurs who may not have that confidence gained through a longer life experience.



Panel discussion featuring 5 eminent mentors.

It is noteworthy that 20 percent of the mentors are women and in many cases, this will be the first time that 15 percent of the finalists on the show are women, giving the thousands of potential women entrepreneurs in the televised audience, an opportunity to hear the perspectives of a successful female business leader.

Learning from such role models, builds confidence and enables young women entrepreneurs to better visualize their potential success. The individual attention from mentors such as Janaki Kathriarachchi, Founder of Ranbath and Three Star Organics and Dr. Kishu Gomes, Group CEO of Dreamron, has given the mentees a unique perspective on business and enabled the young entrepreneurs to better develop and polish their product or service offerings before taking it to market.



Media photo featuring guests of honor from USAID, Derana and YouLead.



USAID Deputy Mission Director Debra Mosel addresses gathering.

In 2020, YouLead helped 538 new businesses get started—78 percent of them, women-owned and has developed an entrepreneurship curriculum adopted by 13 training institutions, with several others in process of customizing it for their own use.

Future Careers BRIDGE Program spawns IT startup by young entrepreneur



Careers BRIDGE participant and now young entrepreneur Mr. Abdul Basith

“You will hear about Zemdoo one day, and it will be as popular as Amazon or Google or Zoho,” says 25-year-old Abdul Basith, an aspiring young entrepreneur, venturing out to develop his own tech startup. Growing up, he fostered the dream of being part of Sri Lanka’s ICT industry. However, his local school did not offer science, math or technology streams, diverting Basith away from his passion.

Determined to pursue a career in ICT, Basith enrolled in an affordable Higher National Diploma program and participated in a bootcamp organized by the Sri Lanka Association for Software and Services Companies (SLASSCOM) and Trace City, and later interned for a partner ICT company for six months. “During my internship, I realized I had to

learn much more than just programming and code. This is when I heard about the Future Careers BRIDGE Program,” says Basith.

He was among 16,000 youth who registered for the Future Careers BRIDGE Program, a collaboration between SLASSCOM and USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, that is persuading the ICT sector to create entry level openings for youth without degrees.

Top performances from the program joined the pilot Future BRIDGE Digital Bootcamp, an intensive six-month program partnering with the Open University of Sri Lanka. The Bootcamp aims to improve industry demanded foundational skills and the basics of tech-based entrepreneurship.

This program helped me pick up skills and tools that I may not have otherwise learned on my own, including the training on starting my own company. This boosted my confidence and helped me take on an e-commerce site for a business that was affected by COVID-19. I am now working on a news website for a former colleague and an app

and want to eventually build a Sri Lankan unicorn,” says Basith.

To further enable youth like Basith to enter the ICT sector, YouLead facilitated a public-private sector dialogue between the Vocational Training Authority (VTA) and SLASSCOM to discuss broader plans to engage the private sector in improving the employability of students coming from VTA ICT programs. As a first step, the Transformative ICT Instructor Upskilling Program was launched in September 2020 to train and upskill 218 National Vocational Qualification L5 ICT instructors attached to VTA centers.

The program supported ICT instructors in re-orienting their roles and teaching strategies from an industry-driven approach. Eight out of nine cohorts of 220 ICT instructors finished the program by June 2021.

Sri Lanka’s ICT sector has grown rapidly over the last decade, pushing the limits of the country’s education system to churn out more graduates annually. However, youth like Basith are left out due to their lack of a degree and skills to match the needs of the sector. YouLead will continue to engage the ICT industry to increase their participation in the Future Careers BRIDGE Program and create a gateway for youth like Basith to find work and experience in the sector.

International recognition for skill development collaboration between Airtel and YouLead

The Airtel and YouLead collaboration enabled 21for21 campaign to win a gold award in the category of Social Awards – Short Term Initiatives, at The Annual Change Maker Awards organized by the Bharti Foundation, India, in recognition of the impact the ‘21for 21’ online initiative had on the youth of Sri Lanka. The objective of the campaign was to introduce 21 critical skills for youth employment and entrepreneurship in the 21st century.

The 21for21 initiative was a result of YouLead’s ongoing, close partnership with the private sector, to expand its outreach efforts and encourage young Sri Lankans to continue skill development despite COVID-19 restrictions.

As COVID-19 severely disrupted in-person training in 2020, the YouLead ‘Stay home and learn’ effort to provide uninterrupted online learning evolved into soft skills training. This inspired ‘21for21’, a 21-day effort to educate youth on 21 soft skills critical to success in the 21st century, in commemoration of World Youth Skills Day.



The ‘21for21’ online soft skills training campaign reached 2.3 million people and engaged over 190,000 youth through social media content and webinars. YouLead and its partners, continue to develop digital solutions and advance the use of new channels to make skills training accessible and sustainable for youth across the country.

Who we are

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

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:
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Our impact partners

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

