Training work-ready youth for the fast-growing Quick Service Restaurant sector

Supporting youth access to skilled jobs in Sri Lanka’s Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) Industry, USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead is working with Gamma Pizzakra/f_t Lanka to build 28 vocational training units focused on developing talent for the international quick service restaurant industry. This will include three purpose-built centers to train Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in Sri Lanka.

The 28 centers are expected to support direct employment in the QSR industry for over 2,100 economically disadvantaged youth and more than 140 PWDs per year starting from 2022.

Sri Lanka’s commercial food service industry and the QSR industry in particular, is witnessing exponential growth as a result of multiple new international franchises and a plethora of new, local businesses setting up shop to cater to the insatiable appetite of the urban population. However, a lack of skilled staff is threatening to hinder their growth momentum.

At current levels, it is estimated that the formal industry alone needs between 6,000 to 8,000 new skilled recruits annually, while Sri Lanka’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector only produces about 1,200 graduates a year.

Compounding the issue, the youth graduating from the TEVT centers are not workplace ready, due to their lack of training in the use of modern industrial kitchen equipment. This program will help address the high unemployment rate among Sri Lanka’s 18-25 age group, which stands at over 21% according to the Department of Census and Statics.

It is also estimated that less than 29% PWDs, who account for 8.7% of the population, are engaged in some form of economic activity.

Mr. Kaushal Mendis, Human Resources Director of Pizza Hut & Taco Bell said, “We strongly believe in inclusivity and feel there is an opportunity for us to make PWDs a productive part of our active workforce. In 2018 we launched the world’s first Pizza Hut which is exclusively operated by PWDs in Thimbirigasyaya, where service levels are on par with any other Pizza Hut outlet. Our goal is to have PWDs represent 10 percent of our entire workforce in the near future.”

Gamma Pizzakra/f_t has committed to provide more than one percent of the time of store managers and above levels to provide mentoring, training and guidance support at the proposed vocational training centers and expects to offer employment to several hundred vocational trainees annually. YouLead will further support the program with curricula development, facilitate its national certification and train instructors to be on par with industry standards.
Building resilience in youth skills development amid COVID-19 restrictions

USAID enabled youth from across Sri Lanka to actively engage in Skills Update ‘21, an innovative, virtual skills fair and forum featuring an eminent panel of skills development experts, the Vocational Training Authority (VTA) and the private sector, in celebration of World Youth Day on the 12th of August.

Participants had the opportunity to interact in real-time with experts on how Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can bridge the skills gap, widened by the pandemic.

The forum also garnered significant interest and participation from many leading private and public sector counterparts, including Keells Retail, Amrak Institute of Medical Sciences, Pizza Hut, SLASSCOM and CareerME, who played a pivotal role in disseminating career information related to their respective industries. Each partner was allocated a virtual information booth through which they provided insights on current employment opportunities as well as on the world of work.

As a precursor to the virtual fair, a social media outreach program encouraged youth to share stories of their upskilling efforts during the pandemic. Their responses were used to create five motivating stories in Sinhala and Tamil to encourage those who engaged with them to register for Skills Update’ 21.

COVID-19 dealt a severe blow to the economy and in consequence, to youth development, as many programs that focused on youth, relied on physical presence and one on one interactions.

The Skills Update ’21 virtual skills fair proved to be an effective platform for youth to actively engage with career guidance counselors, facilitators, speakers, and private sector partners.

Making the content available for four weeks thereafter, for anyone who missed the opportunity to connect live, brought in more youth who continued to access the content and post positive feedback.

Youth account for nearly a quarter of Sri Lanka’s population and the COVID 19 pandemic has created new career and entrepreneurship opportunities for youth to explore. However, to take advantage of these new opportunities, the youth need to keep pace and remain resilient in skills development.

YouLead is continuing to support this process by taking a multi-pronged approach to improve the quality of and access to vocational training for youth across Sri Lanka and has adapted its strategies to cope with the challenges brought on by the COVID 19 pandemic. This includes upskilling trainers and instructors to transition to remote teaching and counseling and facilitating online career guidance counseling programs.

On average, 500 youth visited each of the private sector partner booths and availed themselves of a unique opportunity to discuss career aspirations with prospective private employers.

A YouLead publication, supported by USAID,
Funded by the European Union
Motivating young women to pursue education and careers in STEM

USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, leveraged media attention on the International Day of the Girl Child, to encourage young women to pursue their dreams and aspirations in their education and career choices. The motivational campaign focused on the underrepresentation of females enrolled in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) educational courses or pursuing careers related to these fields, in Sri Lanka.

**Underscoring the need for women to have the same education and career opportunities as their male counterparts and promoting role models in STEM, YouLead collaborated with Women of STEM Sri Lanka to change the narrative while breaking down stereotypical views surrounding STEM education and women.**

YouLead engaged with Prof. Neelika Malavige, Lakmini Wijesundera, Sathya Sambavathas, Dr. Sivasinthujah Srikokulan, and Dr. Jeevani Jayasinghe, all of whom are recognized as prominent Sri Lankan women in STEM and are leading in the fields of immunology, tech entrepreneurship, engineering and chemistry, and are helping to shape the future of the country.

A series of inspiring video messages were recorded in Tamil, Sinhala and English. These candid and highly motivational video series were promoted on social media targeted at young women who had explicitly expressed an interest in STEM careers.

The posts reached over 600,000 women and achieved over 40,000 video views.

The campaign aimed to change the narrative of many Sri Lankan youth who do not have much influence over their educational and career choices due to cultural norms and deference to elders. This is especially true for girls who are more likely to have additional constraints placed on their choices due to traditional perceptions around gender roles and “appropriate” careers.

The field of STEM is still considered to be male-dominated, a notion backed by the low female enrolment rates recorded by the University Grants Commission, indicating the significant gender divide in the field, which has resulted in the loss of human capital, talent and skill that could have been harnessed to address the labor shortage in emerging sectors like ICT.

Female enrollment in engineering at Sri Lankan Universities was at 24 percent in 2017 while those in technology and computer science remain below 50 percent according to the numbers published by the University Grants Commission.

The low representation of women in such fields can be attributed to several reasons, including the negative stereotypes about girls’ competencies in subjects like mathematics, engineering and IT, and the social, cultural and gender norms centered on what professions and fields of study are most suitable for women.

YouLead is actively working to encourage young women to look beyond traditional barriers and motivating them to consider alternative education and career possibilities as a crucial first step in overcoming the challenges faced by the girl child.
Vocational Sector Instructor Upskilling Program Expands Opportunities for Sri Lankan Youth to Join the ICT Sector

The Transformative Teacher Upskilling Program is a key part of a multi-pronged effort initiated by YouLead, USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, together with the Sri Lanka Association of Software and Service Companies (SLASSCOM) to address the high unemployment rate among Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) ICT graduates and the need to produce more workplace-ready youth. This program provides the opportunity for instructors in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) courses at vocational training institutions to take a class themselves, completing their industry exposure training, a vital step towards improving the quality of students graduating from TVET ICT courses.

Despite the higher unemployment rate, the courses are in high demand, with more youth showing a deep interest in acquiring critical ICT skills to gain an edge in their quest to join the fast-growing ICT sector.

Over 200 ICT instructors at the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 4 & 5 of the Vocational Training Authority (VTA) participated in the program, which supported ICT instructors towards reorienting their roles and teaching strategies from an industry-driven approach. The program also provided insight and exposure to the culture and working structure of the ICT industry, creating awareness for the in-demand skills needed to produce employable graduates from TVET ICT courses.

The program helped open a dialogue between the academia and the industry, exposing the need to improve the quality of training to address the unemployment issue among ICT graduates, which is the highest amongst all TVET courses.

Sri Lanka’s ICT sector is facing an acute skills shortage and will need upwards of 12,000 new recruits annually as it makes a push to triple its earnings by 2025.

The industry also imposed a bachelor’s degree minimum qualification requirement, in keeping with the shift in the nature of the business over the last decade from a Business Process Management (BPM) centric industry to a software and knowledge centric sector.

To help bridge this gap and provide more opportunities for youth without a formal university degree to enter the ICT workforce, YouLead initiated a dialogue between the SLASSCOM and the VTA in 2020. This led to an enduring public-private-donor partnership to introduce and institutionalize programs such as upskilling for instructors along with the Future Careers BRIDGE platform for VTA students at its centers islandwide. The Future Careers BRIDGE program was recognized as a pathway for VTA ICT students to enter the ICT workforce and requires VTA ICT students to complete a set of basic to advanced ‘gamified challenges’ to be eligible to secure employment in the ICT industry.

Over 3,600 VTA ICT students are currently progressing through the Future Careers BRIDGE program and will be eligible for the Digital Bootcamp, an intensive three-month program that focuses on improving industry demanded foundational skills and the basics of tech-based entrepreneurship.

As part of the overall progress being made to improve the quality of TVET ICT graduates, the program has seen 15 new tech companies come on-board as BRIDGE recruitment partners who have pledged to hire TVET ICT graduates in the next few quarters. Discussions are ongoing with 35 other partner companies to support the program.
Evening Learning Circle helps keep 13-Years Guaranteed Education Program alive during the lockdown

The Evening Learning Circle took the teachers’ changing role and their increased personal commitments when working from home into consideration and developed an interactive program from 9 pm to 10 pm, spread over five days.

The teachers gained a better understanding of their role as career guidance practitioners and discussed topics such as vocational education entry, career guidance tools for vocational personality identification and understanding entrepreneurship intention development.

The classes also provided information about National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), the world of work, global skills for a successful career, organizing career guidance programs for school going youth, and collaboration with stakeholders.

The group, which included 108 female teachers, also received the support and guidance they needed to help the students, who would otherwise be left behind, because of their vulnerable circumstances and lack of understanding on how to forge ahead with their inherent skills and capabilities.

Despite the many challenges faced by the teachers, the Evening Learning Circle program was well received, with one of the highest retention rates over other digitally delivered programs. YouLead will use the learnings from this program in a pilot study and will adopt them into other teachers’ training programs in the coming year.

In a first for training programs conducted for teachers who are also career guidance practitioners, a group of 120 from Puttalam and Kurunegala took part in a late evening learning program focused on adapting to changing responsibilities and demands of teachers during the lockdown.

The Evening Learning Circle is a novel concept introduced by USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, to give school teachers of the national 13-Years Guaranteed Education Program an opportunity to understand how they could minimize dropouts by motivating students, helping them evaluate their options and continue to acquire new skills amidst travel restrictions.

However, COVID 19 related lockdowns threatened to cripple the progress and brought on a new set of challenges for these students and their teachers, both of whom barely had a year of exposure to the new program. Teachers were burdened with their own set of challenges including the lack of space to conduct online classes, maintaining the interest of the students, coping with additional commitments while working from home and adjusting to the new normal.

In 2019, Sri Lanka adopted the “Guaranteed 13 years of Education” program, aimed at an estimated 80,000 students who drop out of the school system each year due to poor grades at the Ordinary Level Exams. The curricula include 26 subjects, including English, ICT, Entrepreneurship Development, and Sports, coupled with vocational training courses. This hybrid curriculum would enable youth who do not continue their education beyond Ordinary Levels to receive 13 years of guaranteed education and obtain a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) 4 certificate at the end of the two years, improving their career prospects significantly.

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Who we are
YouLead is a 7-year project funded by USAID, the EU and the 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Unspecified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29,242 Number of individuals with new or better (self) employment following the participation in YouLead program</td>
<td>14,110</td>
<td>12,434</td>
<td>2,698</td>
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<td>32,249 Number of individuals completed project assisted workforce development program</td>
<td>15,326</td>
<td>15,334</td>
<td>1,589</td>
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<tr>
<td>62,709 Number of individuals received career and occupational guidance and counselling services</td>
<td>26,731</td>
<td>35,795</td>
<td>183</td>
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<tr>
<td>800 Number of new businesses start-up following the project support</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27,794 Number of youth (age 15-29) trained in social or leadership skills through project assisted programs</td>
<td>14,040</td>
<td>13,754</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Number of career/occupational guidance practitioners trained to deliver better services | 1,119 |
| Number of technical curricula developed or improved | 76 |
| Number of trainers receiving training by YouLead | 1,302 |