



YOULEAD

# IMPACT

Together for a brighter future for the Youth of Sri Lanka

VOLUME 02. ISSUE 3

## Leveraging Reality-TV to drive entrepreneurial thinking among youth



The winner of Derana StartUp 2021 Ushan Chaminda flanked by (on the left) First Runner Up Venura Wijesekera (Steth 19 - Wireless Stethoscope) and (on the right) Second Runner Up Menaka Keerthi (Burn Blast Efficiency Stove)

Growing up as a native Sinhala speaker, Ushan Chaminda found it hard to learn and catch up on the latest technology trends, which were mostly published in English. Despite the odds, he persevered in his desire to learn about technology and converted his childhood weakness into a business. In April 2022, Gavesha, Ushan's IT learning app for Sinhala language speakers, won the grand prize in Sri Lanka's first-ever, youth-focused, entrepreneurship reality TV show, Derana StartUp 2021.

**Gavesha, an IT learning app in Sinhala teaches kids and enthusiasts how to build and program devices to perform simple functions.**

He plans to use his learning and the Rs. 3 million in prize money he received from participating in the reality show to fast track his business expansion locally and explore the potential of launching it elsewhere in Asia or Africa, where children face difficulties learning about technology due to the language barrier.

Ushan was among more than 5000 youth entrepreneurs from across Sri Lanka, who vied for a spot among the top 30 contestants who would compete in the live rounds on StartUp 2021. The series finale was held on the 9th of April 2022 representing the culmination of 13 weeks of episodes that saw the original group of 30 winnowed down to just one champion.

**The finale of Derana StartUp 2021 was seen by over a million viewers (across TV and online) and received over 467,913 SMS votes from viewers wanting to have a say in who the winners would be.**

The content shared online and across the social media platforms associated with the program also generated over 1.37 million in engagement during the period.

USAID's youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, engineered the relationship between TV Derana in Sri Lanka and Jordan-based Partners for Good, on the development of the reality

TV show and helped coordinate the outreach to youth entrepreneurs, as well as the selection process for both participants and the mentors who helped the participants hone their business idea, improve their access to market, and guide their plans for growth.

StartUp2021 promotes and encourages youth entrepreneurship and seeks to create awareness among rural youth about the kind of impact one can make by starting your own business.

Unemployment among youth (under 35) is estimated at 16 percent, three times the national unemployment rate, and youth-led enterprises account for less than four percent of startups in Sri Lanka. Celebrating youth like Ushan, however, illustrates that there are many avenues available to a successful career and helps make youth, and their families, more receptive to the idea of starting a business.

**YouLead is taking a multi-pronged approach to promote entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka, especially among rural youth and women.**

This includes a series of success stories and case studies of successful entrepreneurs, with an increased focus on entrepreneurs from outside the Western Province, which have also been shared across YouLead's social media platforms to help change perceptions surrounding entrepreneurship and encourage more youth to consider entrepreneurship as an employment alternative.

# Sowing the seed of entrepreneurship across rural Sri Lanka



Eager to start their own business and increase their household income, mothers attend the entrepreneurship development training program with their infants and young children.

Gently rocking her four-month-old infant in her arms, 21-year-old Maduwanthi paid close attention to every bit of information that was shared during the workshop, with the hope of bettering her future. Maduwanthi attended all five days of the Entrepreneur Development (ED) workshop organized for Samurdhi (state welfare organization) beneficiaries to help them set up or grow their own business ventures.

USAID’s youth employability and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, is working with the Department of Samurdhi Development on an ambitious plan to encourage more than 13,000 low-income families to start a micro-business or improve any informal economic activity they are engaged in.

**The goal is to create new, mostly rural, enterprises and help struggling families diversify their household income—an outcome made all the more important with Sri Lanka in the grip of an unprecedented economic crisis.**

By the end of June 2022, 127 training programs were completed in eight districts with YouLead support reaching more than 5,000 participants. By the end of August, YouLead expects to complete

270 programs, ultimately resulting in more than 5,000 new micro-enterprises and self-employment opportunities across Ampara, Anuradhapura, Hambantota, Kilinochchi, Kurunegala, Matara, Monaragala and Vavuniya.

The program aims to reach youth and women like Maduwanthi from a small village in the Monaragala district, who is keen to learn the fundamentals of starting and running her own business. Her informal efforts to sell vegetables started when COVID related lockdowns disrupted her husband Awantha’s income as a fish seller.

**Awantha, a former farmer, used his contacts to procure fresh produce and set up a vegetable stall for Maduwanthi. Two years on, the couple is now looking at expanding their business and sourcing supply for other retailers.**

“I realized that we need to be more financially prudent and learn how to keep a track of our income and costs. I was still breastfeeding my baby but also didn’t want to miss the opportunity to learn. So I just brought my baby along,” says Maduwanthi. “Everyone was very supportive and some of the Samurdhi officers even helped care for the baby when I was doing

the group work. I learned a lot, including how to manage my cash flow and expand our business.”

Most Samurdhi recipients are engaged in micro-scale agriculture and/or daily wage work and were hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic resilience is greatly enhanced when there are diversified earning opportunities for the family and stronger financial literacy. The impacts are magnified when women have an opportunity to directly contribute through self-employment or livelihood opportunities that generate cash.

**Like Awantha and Maduwanthi, many more households across Sri Lanka are dealing with job losses and increasingly irregular income, making it harder to cope with escalating costs and supply shortages.**

YouLead’s Entrepreneurship program aims to support these communities establish their own business and generate an additional source of income for their households. The Samurdhi program builds on the success of a 2019 pilot project in Matara, where over 1500 Samurdhi livelihood support recipients attended a five-day training program focused on financial literacy. By 2021, an estimated 469 participants had started businesses and continued to operate through COVID-19 related lockdowns. Over 78 percent of the businesses were women-owned.



Maduwanthi attending the entrepreneurship development training program with her four month old infant.

## Going above and beyond to achieve excellence



Vindya Silva - Partnerships Director, YouLead

An active animal rights activist and a mum of one, Vindya Silva has the arduous task of bringing people and organizations together to create solutions to tackle youth unemployment, gender inclusion in employment, and promote entrepreneurship. Her work as the Partnership Director of the USAID project for youth employment and entrepreneurship, YouLead, was recently recognized as the winner of the 2021 Tarek Nabhan Award.

The coveted award is intended to recognize those individuals who go above and beyond their assigned roles and job responsibilities to achieve excellence, and those who embody IESC values through their sustained behavior and contributions to the organization and to the impact of the programs.

Vindya was nominated by her colleagues for her creativity and work ethic in securing new partnerships and expanding YouLead's existing partnerships. Since 2018, she has consistently demonstrated a positive attitude and strong problem solving skills.

Some of Vindya's big partnership wins include her work on the expansion of the Future Careers BRIDGE Program, which has a total of 22,937 youth enrolled, with 45% of them being women, by the end of Q2 2022. This includes 5,703 students who were progressing through the leaderboard, towards employment in the ICT sector. The Future Careers BRIDGE Program was co-developed by SLASSCOM and YouLead in 2019 to break industry norms

by creating an opportunity for youth without a university degree, to join the ICT sector in Sri Lanka.

Another breakthrough that was made under her leadership was to secure a competitive \$1.3 million grant from the Yum! Foundation to build commercial kitchens in vocational training centers country-wide. 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 Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry for over 2,100 economically disadvantaged youth and more than 140 PWDs per year, starting from 2022.

Vindya also facilitated a partnership with the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUCSL) to train and certify more than 36,000 electricians across nine districts, enabling all electricians to be qualified and licensed by the end of 2025. This also helps improve safety levels in homes and buildings in Sri Lanka, where an estimated 85 percent of the island's more than 45,000 electricians do not possess a formal qualification or professional training.

Her work with the entrepreneurship team to realize the Derana Startup2021 reality TV show featuring 30 young entrepreneurs is another major milestone and true achievement.

### About the award

The Tarek Nabhan International Achievement Award was established in 2013, in honor of Tarek Nabhan and his 31 years of service and dedication to IESC. Tarek began his career in our IESC Egypt office and retired from IESC's home office in 2014 as the Vice President of Global Operations. Employees are nominated by their colleagues, and one recipient is selected annually to receive the award.

# Women Entrepreneurs on the fast track to growth



From the left, Bhagya Sandakalum - Blue Fish, Shivani Tymonne - Miris by Islandmon, Tina Lobo - True by Tina, Heidi Hattenbach - Foreign Service Officer at U.S. Department of State, Shenuka Umagiliya - Balamu, Lasni Silva - Lacto Boost and Sashini Jinasena - Leo the Label, the six women entrepreneurs who made it through in the first cohort of the AccelerateHER program.

*The AccelerateHER program is the most recent in the series of programs initiated by YouLead to encourage women to take charge of their economic futures via employment and entrepreneurship.*

YouLead takes a proactive approach to promoting the need for skills, entrepreneurship, and the importance of employment at multiple levels, starting from the school level and going all the way up to young women in rural villages across Sri Lanka. This will enable young women to keep engaging in the training and development programs needed to make them economically productive and independent and help Sri Lanka achieve its future economic and social development goals and drive it towards a knowledge-based economy.

USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead, strengthened its ongoing partnership with Hatch Works, providing upskilling and mentorship services to a select group of aspiring young women entrepreneurs through an accelerator program branded ‘AccelerateHER’.

**Women represent more than 52 percent of the population but are estimated to represent less than 25 percent of the nation’s entrepreneurs. The curated, three-month AccelerateHER program funded by the United States Embassy in Sri Lanka, was designed to address this gender disparity in entrepreneurship by upskilling women entrepreneurs and helping them grow their nascent businesses.**

Seven women entrepreneurs had access to tailored support from business coaches, experienced mentors, and investors including other women business owners. Up to Rs. 1 million in funding was also available to the female founders to help accelerate their business growth. Over the three months, the seven businesses recorded significant growth, with many seeking additional investment to expand their enterprises.

“AccelerateHer was a result of a remarkable partnership with the US State Department and Hatch who share a joint passion for amplifying female voices, accelerating their success, and creating a deep culture where women are leading, shaping, and raising the future. Throughout the past 90 days, these entrepreneurs were stretched beyond their comfort zones to transform their business, while taking on career duties, import, currency and travel restrictions, pandemic aftermath and limited access to material,” said Ruvanara Tillekeratne, Program Manager - Hatch Works (Pvt) Ltd.

**Over 17**  
partnerships including retail partners worth well over Rs. 20 Million

**5 out of 6**  
teams doubled their product lines and increased quantities by 100%

**70%**  
of teams doubled their sales and revenue

**90%**  
also expanded their teams, making them employers for the first time and creating much needed jobs in the economy

### 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

**29,242** | Number of individuals with new or better (self) employment following the participation in YouLead program

Female 12,434	Male 14,110	Unspecified 2,698
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**32,249** | Number of individuals completed project assisted workforce development program

Female 15,334	Male 15,326	Unspecified 1,589
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**70,953** | Number of individuals received career and occupational guidance and counselling services

Female 40,223	Male 30,083	Unspecified 647
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**800** | Number of new businesses start-up following the project support

Female 598	Male 161	Unspecified 41
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**30,648** | Number of youth (age 15-29) trained in social or leadership skills through project assisted programs

Female 15,318	Male 15,309	Unspecified 57
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**1,537**

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

**76**

**in the system**

Number of technical curricula developed or improved

**1,833**

Number of trainers receiving training by YouLead

