



YOULEAD

IMPACT

Together for a brighter future for the Youth of Sri Lanka

VOLUME 03. ISSUE 3

Putting Sri Lanka on the global wellness tourism map

The Pekoe Trail developed by the Tourism Resilience Project (TRP) will be ready to welcome international tourists commencing this summer. In anticipation of this milestone, the seeding of this entirely new kind of wellness experience in Sri Lanka, among European travelers, has been more than 12 months in the making. Starting in 2022, TRP embarked on a carefully planned process of narrative building, influencer engagement, endorsements and user-generated content to ensure that awareness, interest and demand for The Pekoe Trail hits escape velocity just as the trail comes alive.

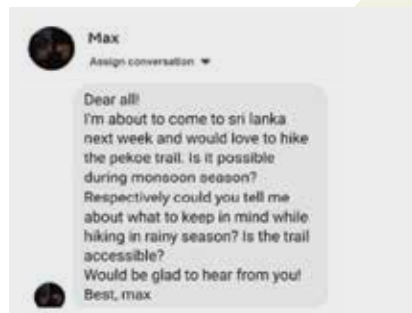
Building the unique Pekoe Trail narrative has been achieved through a sustained international social media campaign and the publicity received through international travel media.

Owned trail Facebook and Instagram channels have a combined reach in excess of 17 million to date in the key markets - UK, France, and Germany, while video content produced to showcase the trail have been viewed 13.6 million times by finely targeted social media users, creating engagement of 2.2 million.



This content has also been used extensively by Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion

Bureau (SLTPB) at international tourism expos for destination promotion and amplified by the Sri Lanka Tourism Alliance (SLTA) social media destination marketing campaign, funded by the European Union (EU).



These efforts have paid off handsomely by catalyzing earned media—i.e. the coverage that the project did not pay for—in a wide and growing range of international travel media.

The Times UK, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, Drift Magazine, Daily Telegraph, South China Morning Post, Wanderlust, Outdoor Magazine, and most recently on June 20th, The New York Times have all featured The Pekoe Trail, making it a novel experience that's putting Sri Lanka back in the international media spotlight.

This coverage is worth many multiples of the project's paid media efforts.

In January this year, experienced trail marathon runner Hyun Chang Chung, completed the first ultra-marathon on The Pekoe Trail in 59 hours, generating much interest on social media and some of the most engaging content of the trail among both international hiking enthusiasts as well as destination seekers alike.

In June Tom Sigler, an Instagram influencer with a loyal following of European hiking enthusiasts, experienced the trail and generated immediate interest in his spontaneous video stories, with detailed posts to follow shortly. Tom is the first of several international influencers to walk the trail, deployed by TRP and SLTPB, carefully handpicked based on follower profiles.

All media activity directs prospective travelers to the information rich, navigation friendly Pekoe Trail website where their interest is converted to an in-depth exploration and nudge toward travel planning. The website will soon be paired with the bespoke trail app currently under development, which is designed to enhance the trail experience through turn-by-turn navigation, issue of trail passes, trail audio stories, and user content sharing on social media.

The Pekoe Trail is a signature wellness experience of the Tourism Resilience Project, funded by the EU with additional support from USAID. It is designed to take advantage of current global travel trends through responsible development, attracting new traveler segments to Sri Lanka. The synergized effort to create a strong foundation of long-term demand for the nation's latest wellness tourism product will ensure not only the success of the trail itself but also its entire eco-system, which provides new opportunities in tourism for trail communities and SMEs.



Creating an Occupational Career Guidance eco-system to accelerate skilled migration

“We have had many individuals coming to us, desperate to migrate. They are willing to take any low-skilled job abroad,” says Nadeeshani Kumari, a Development Officer (DO) from the Pahatha Hewaheta Divisional Secretariat in Kandy. “At first we didn’t know how to guide them. The Occupational Career Guidance (OCG) training we received enabled us to guide them towards skilled migration, and the opportunities available to them to get the right qualifications to secure a skilled job.”

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's (SDC) Skilled and Resilient Migrant Worker (SRMW) project, with support from USAID's YouLead project, leads the effort to make Occupational Career Guidance available to everyone who aspires to migrate for work.

At the end of March 2023, the SRMW project had trained 543 development officers, career guidance practitioners, and staff of district partners in the project’s five priority districts of Anuradhapura, Kandy, Kurunegala, Puttalam, and Vavuniya.

The OCG curriculum was developed by SRMW in 2022, with the aim to ensure potential migrant workers and returning migrant workers have access to gender-responsive skills qualifications, and increased employability in skilled jobs in local and global markets.

A record high of more than 311,000 Sri Lankans left for work overseas in 2022, highlighting the sense of urgency or desperation felt by many aspiring to migrate, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic chaos that ensued in early 2022. This figure is almost certainly an undercount as it does not include those who migrated on visit visas in search of employment, those with direct employment offers, or those who have migrated under country-specific migration programs.



Nadeeshani Kumari, a Development Officer from Kandy conducting a one-on-one Occupational Guidance session with a youth aspiring to migrate.

Such urgency can lead to hasty, uninformed decisions that can contribute to negative experiences in the workplace and hamper any progress and financial gain they would have hoped to make it through migration. Low-skilled workers are particularly vulnerable. Finding ways to get better information, occupational guidance, and opportunities for skills development to prospective migrant workers, will help minimize the negative impacts of overseas work while maximizing the positive ones, such as ensuring that when they return, they do so with skills and knowledge that will contribute to Sri Lanka’s continued growth.

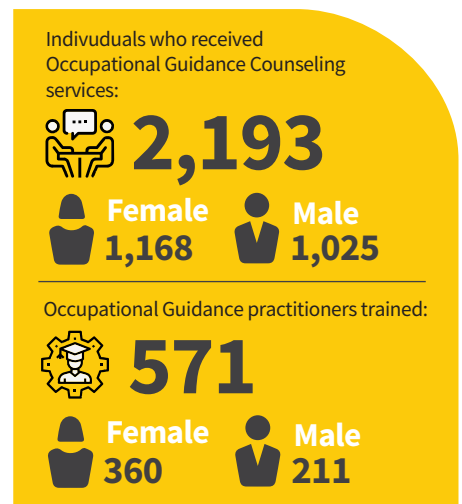
While migration for employment plays a significant role in the country’s road to recovery, an emphasis on skills development can help reduce the multitude of risks they face, when seeking employment overseas.

Skilled migrants report fewer incidents of abuse and higher job satisfaction, often returning with skills that make them valuable in the Sri Lankan job market.

In March 2023, SRMW, together with the trained DOs based in Kandy, conducted the first in a series of one-on-one guidance sessions for individuals aspiring to migrate for work.

To-date over 2000, youth received guidance on accessing skills qualifications, opportunities to migrate as skilled workers, and the processes in place to obtain higher skills qualifications based on experience.

The SRMW project is currently working with the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI) to introduce OCG as a module in its National Diploma on Career Guidance. The project will also explore opportunities to institutionalize the OCG curriculum at national-level vocational training institutions, to ensure youth from marginalized communities across Sri Lanka, can also receive guidance that supports their aspirations to migrate and build a career in a skilled occupation.



62 Tourism MSME’s become more resilient through Small Grants

Small Grants facilitated by the Tourism Resilience Project (TRP) are helping micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in the tourism sector, emerge from the crippling effects of COVID-19 and the tourism downturn that followed..

By May of 2023, 62 tourism MSMEs received grants valued at LKR 1 million each to help them gear up for the ongoing tourism recovery in Sri Lanka.

The European Union (EU), working together with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA), introduced the Small Grants Facility in September 2021 through the Tourism Resilience Project. This was a rapid-response program designed to help struggling tourism MSMEs make their product offering more resilient, retain vital employees, and enable a rapid resumption of their business upon the recovery of international tourism. Located across the country, these grantees were all enterprises registered with SLTDA that had lost business due to the pandemic, yet demonstrated their resilience by adjusting their business models and/or demonstrating a willingness to retain staff and prepare for the resumption of tourism by investing in capacity building.

Hilldale Retreat (Private) Limited, a boutique villa with 8 rooms located in Labookellie, Nuwara Eliya, is one of the MSMEs that fully utilized their grant. Their occupancy had plummeted to 0-10% by 2022, from a pre-Pandemic average of 70%. Mr. Heshan Fernando, Managing Director, explains how the grant helped them remain in business and build for the future: “The funds helped us to hang on during that difficult period, when a lot of small operators failed. We used the funds to continue operating, paying our employees and utility bills.” The business then focussed on strengthening its online presence, to tap into the tourism traffic that was slowly coming back.



Staff at Hilldale Retreat, ready to welcome tourists.

“We used some of the grant funds together with our own investment, for a new website and a fully-fledged booking engine. Now, we are in good shape to capitalize on the international travel revival.”

Bookings started picking up from August 2022 onwards, and occupancy improved significantly in January 2023 with visitors from Western Europe starting to return.

Lakarcade (Pvt) Ltd., a retailer of novelty gifts, souvenir items, and authentic Sri Lankan handicrafts based in Colombo 2, is another grantee who made full use of their grant. The funds helped them maintain their supply chains, not only securing their resilience but also creating a trickle-down benefit to their small-scale suppliers. “The funds were a godsend because we were in a critical cash flow situation and our craftspeople were on the verge of collapse without the patronage of businesses like ours. But because we were able to meet our overheads with the grant, we were able to free up funds and give them an assurance to continue buying whatever they could produce. This has helped so many craftspeople at grassroot level survive,” explains Mr. Ajith Perera, Chief Operating Officer.

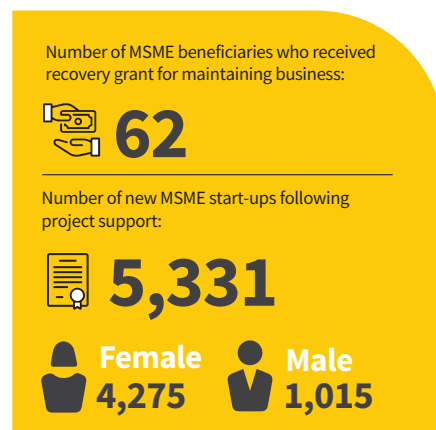


Lakarcade, restocked and ready for tourists.

Lakarcade has now built-up stocks of handicrafts to meet demand as tourism resumes.

“Now we are ready with stocks for the tourist season. Already there is a marked improvement in sales.”

The YouLead implemented Tourism Resilience project is funded by the European Union, with additional assistance from USAID. Supporting the tourism sector to retain jobs and small businesses, and improve sustainability, innovation, and resilience with a small business focus, is one of its key priorities. The MSMEs who have overcome challenges with the help of the Small Grants Facility are now better placed to capitalize on the return of tourists to the country.



Five state-of-the-art training kitchens open in vocational institutions

New career paths in the growing Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry, are opening up for youth in Sri Lanka with the deployment of the nation’s first-ever purpose-built training kitchens in Amunukumbura, Thelambuyaya, Kuliya-pitiya, Orugodawatta, and Narahenpita.

An initial batch of 86 youth have already enrolled in the new QSR Crew Member training offered at these facilities and are on their way to a level 3 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ).



Students receiving practical training in a the state-of-the-art kitchen

These state-of-the-art training kitchens and the industry-specific curriculum designed to go with them, are the result of the collaboration between Pizza Hut Sri Lanka (Gamma Pizzacraft Lanka) and USAID’s youth employment and entrepreneurship project, YouLead. Titled ‘Equal Slice for Everyone’, this program is funded by a grant from the Yum! Brands Foundation and aims to create new and alternative employment opportunities to help struggling families diversify their household income. Yum! Brands Foundation is the charitable arm of Yum! Brands, which owns the global Pizza Hut brand. This collaboration is also actively endorsed by Taco Bell, Domino’s, McDonald’s, Burger King, Popeyes, and Subway, with pledges to support training and employment opportunities.

The QSR Crew Member training on offer at these training kitchens are generating high demand in the current economic climate. The course is designed for quick and targeted skills development through the Vocational Training Authority (VTA), and the Department of Technical Education and Training (DTET).

Students put in two days of theory in the classroom, and another three days of practical training each week to qualify within three months.

This fast-tracked, comprehensive approach to skills development, is proving popular in today’s economic environment with youth in need of access to in-demand qualifications, that can prepare them for the workplace quickly. In the words of 22-year-old Uduli Gunawardena enrolled at the Orugodawatta Center, “Other NVQ courses take 1 year, and many students don’t do the 6-month technical training. There is also less contact with the trainer during the technical training. So compared to that, this 3-month course is of very good value, because we get the practical training as well as theory in 3 months, and we have access to the trainer throughout this time.”

For those like Chamod Dilhara, a 20-year-old from Kotikawatte, this program opens up new possibilities and alternative career paths. He worked as a mason with his father until the decline of the construction industry during COVID-19 and the subsequent financial crisis. “I was at home for 9 months with no work at all, because the construction sector was down. Then I saw a newspaper advertisement about this course. I was drawn to it because it is to do with food. I feel there is a better future here,” remarked Chamod.

Catering to demand, five more training kitchens will be constructed within the year, overcoming challenges in sourcing specialist equipment and sharp cost increases.

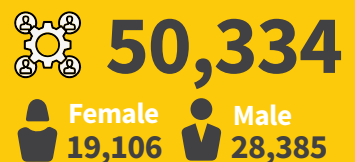
These will be set up in locations including Jaffna, Anuradhapura, and Nuwara Eliya. With 10 master trainers fully trained by YouLead, and the QSR industry already on board, it is expected that up to 600 youth such as Uduli and Chamod will receive training this year and enter the QSR industry.

Pizza Hut and YouLead will continue to deliver fifteen such training kitchens offering industry-specific curricula over the next 2 years, creating more vocational training facilities to enable youth, to find better employment in growing industries like QSR, while supporting youth aspirations through this period of economic downturn.

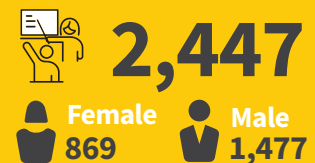
Individuals with new employment following participation in workforce development programs:



Individuals with new or better self-employment following participation in YouLead programs:



Number of trainers who received training from YouLead:



Who we are

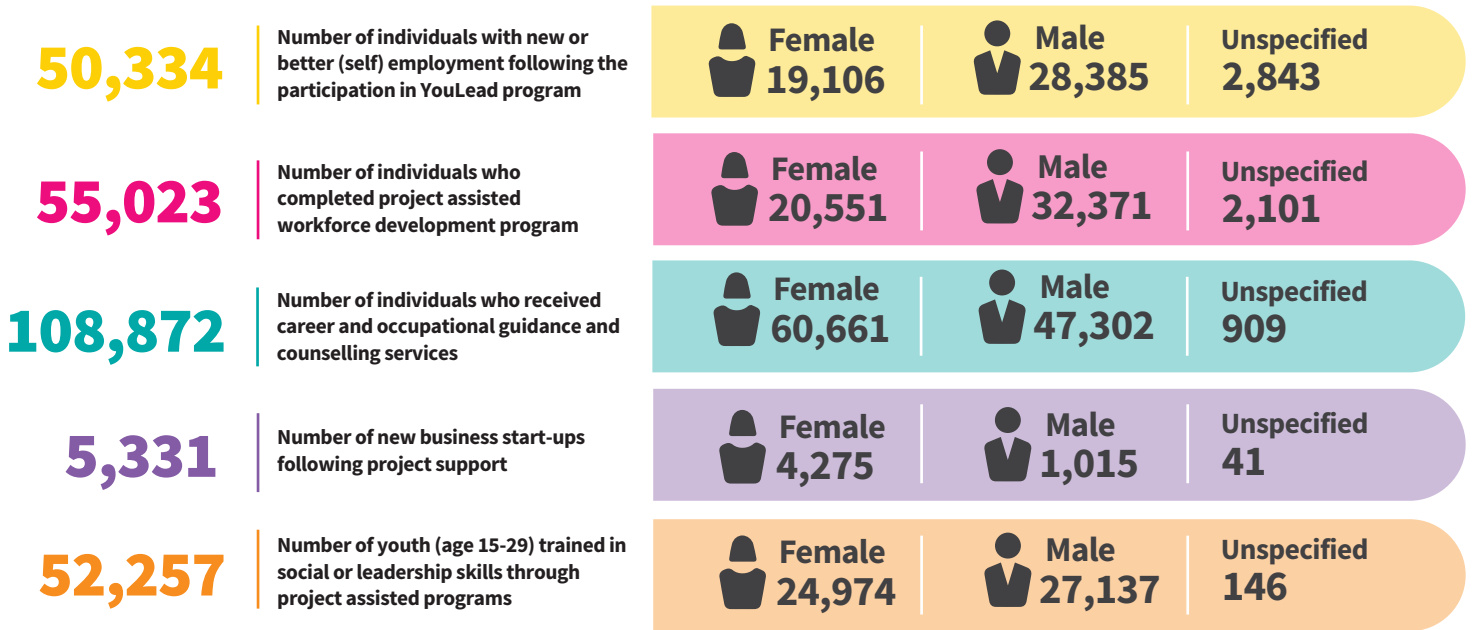
YouLead is a 7-year project funded by the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)**. Its aim is to improve technical and vocational education, create a more skilled workforce and link youth to more 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.com

Our Community Impact



2,763

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

88

Number of technical curricula developed or improved

2,447

Number of trainers receiving training by YouLead

