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Rethinking the nexus between youth, unemployment and conflict – Perspectives from Sri Lanka

Harini Amarasuriya, Canan Gündüz, Markus Mayer

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This series of four country case studies explores the ways in which the economic causes, drivers and impacts of conflict have been tackled in different ways in different conflict-affected countries where Alert works. The aim is to encourage cross-country learning, and inform what has become a vibrant international debate in the last few years on how to adapt economic development interventions to conflict contexts, in a way that makes them conflict-sensitive, and able to support longer-term peacebuilding.

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- **Uganda:** the case study illustrates the challenge of planning for “early recovery” in the context of an ongoing and fragile peace process, and identifies opportunities for enabling a peace economy through early recovery;
- **Nepal:** this report explores possible roles for the business community in supporting economic recovery after war, and illustrates the need to link capital-centric peace processes and economic development planning with district-level perspectives and needs;
- **Sri Lanka:** this study looks at some of the conceptual links made between youth, unemployment and conflict, and identifies several gaps in practice; and
- **Colombia:** this case study explores lessons learnt on “alternative livelihood” programming in situations of ongoing violence, and identifies entry-points for conflict-sensitivity.

In addition to the country case studies, the project will be producing a series of thematic briefing papers, as well as training resources, in the course of 2009. For more information, please visit www.international-alert.org/peace_and_economy.

The objectives of the project are three-fold:

- To identify lessons in order to generate evidence-based resources and guidance for policymakers and practitioners to improve the conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding impacts of economic interventions
- To promote uptake of such good practice
- To put the links between economic recovery and peacebuilding on the agenda of relevant in-country and international actors through advocacy, outreach and networking

The project forms part of International Alert’s wider work, ongoing since 1999, on improving business conduct and promoting a peacebuilding approach to economic activities and interventions in conflict-prone and conflict-affected countries. Our firm belief is that just and lasting peace requires broadly shared economic opportunities, including decent work, to redress economic issues and grievances that fuelled violent conflict in the first place, and to address the economic impacts of conflict on the livelihoods and lives of conflict-affected populations.

Indeed strengthening the private sector and market-based economies has become a key concern for development assistance in recent years, including in countries affected by conflict. But while the links between peacebuilding and the economy may be obvious, it is less clear how a peacebuilding approach to such economic interventions can be achieved in practice, and how they can be made conflict-sensitive. Understanding the ways in which these interventions can interact with pre-existing conflict dynamics is crucial given that the allocation of resources and economic opportunities feature prominently as root causes in many conflicts; therefore any external intervention targeting the economic sphere is bound to interact with core conflict issues and the economic legacies left by violent conflict. This will be to the detriment of the local conflict context, and programmes, alike.

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Acronyms

FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GC	The UN Global Compact
HYBT	Hambantota Youth Business Trust
HDCC	Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JVP	<i>Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna</i> (People's Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SPARC	Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre
TEWA	Termination of Employment Workmen Act
UNP	United National Party
WCRWC	Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
YEN	Youth Employment Network

Executive summary, key lessons and recommendations

The frequently made argument that ‘youth unemployment causes armed conflict’ lacks nuance, because it fails to reflect both the multiple factors feeding young people’s frustrations and grievances in conflict contexts; and the multiple barriers young people face in entering the job market. It also glosses over the fact that “youth” is a highly heterogeneous group, divided along class, gender, political, and geographic lines. More emphasis is needed on country-specific exploration of the links between youth unemployment and other socio-economic and political factors that can contribute to marginalisation and discrimination that engender conflict and violence at a more structural level. It would be problematic to develop policy responses across different countries without such an understanding.

This is true in Sri Lanka where several policy initiatives in the past have not led to significant reforms or changes in dynamics that exclude young people from both political and economic spheres in society. Although there have been governmental and donor community efforts to tackle the issue of youth unemployment, these have for the most part not had much impact, given weak conceptualisation of the different drivers of youth exclusion, lack of coherent policy-making, and weak implementation of policy recommendations.

KEY LESSONS

Several overall lessons from Sri Lanka may find resonance in other conflict contexts:

Greater clarity is needed about the multiple factors causing youth participation in armed conflict:

More research and analysis is required to better understand the causes and drivers of youth resentment, grievances, and whether and how these lead to unrest. Youth unrest cannot be seen in isolation from the context that has generated it, or as an inevitable characteristic of the biological or social category of youth. Young people’s grievances are not limited to unemployment, but include social, political and cultural issues as well.

Likewise, youth unemployment cannot be looked at as an isolated problem: Its roots lie deep in social, cultural, economic and political structures and dynamics, as illustrated by some of the issues emerging from the district-level research. Enhancing young people’s skills, while necessary in countries where educational curricula and job market requirements do not match, will not be sufficient to overcome these barriers.

Acknowledging youth heterogeneity: It is also important that heterogeneity among youth is recognised and the ways in which issues such as ethnicity, geography and class shape experiences of youth in different ways is understood. This also requires disaggregated data on youth by sex and age; as well as gender analysis of young people’s experiences and needs during conflict.

Different forms of youth militarisation: Viewing unemployed youth as “at risk” of joining armed groups is only part of the story. As is the case the world over, for many unemployed, often rural, youth, the comparatively good pay and prestige of the state armed forces make it an attractive employment option. And, far larger numbers tend to be part of the armed forces than insurgency groups. While some view this as a potentially positive form of socialisation,¹ in countries affected by

protracted armed conflict, the negative impacts are likely to outweigh possible positive ones. These different types of youth militarisation have implications, not only for “post-war” DDR efforts, but also Security Sector Reform (SSR).

Youth awareness of corruption and patronage breeds disillusionment and cynicism: The research carried out for this report illustrates that young people are very aware of and affected by the surrounding decay of political systems led by adults. In the case of the youth interviewed for this research, disillusionment with “the system” was coupled with a strong degree of cynicism and willingness to take advantage of the same structures, along the lines of ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’. This obviously has implications for bad governance being “learned” by young people and reinforced.

Youth apathy may hold as many risks as youth mobilisation: In many conflict contexts, collective mobilisation of youth for the purpose of armed insurgency or revolution is identified as a major conflict risk. However, another serious challenge for peacebuilding usually receives much less attention: an emerging disillusionment and resulting disinterest among many youth in social change and transformation. Two potential causes for concern follow: first, political currents with a tendency to establish and protect oppressive political regimes are likely to benefit from such youth apathy. Second, youth apathy in social and political issues does not mean young people will become less willing to turn to violence; the type and purpose may however change to include for example more random acts of violence for more individualist purposes.

Young people’s aspirations need to be recognised and reflected in policies and programmes: Instead of merely paying lip service to the potential of youth, genuine effort is needed to understand youth aspirations and concerns and ensure their participation and leadership in community and national policy-making and development. This means trusting youth and allowing them to define for themselves aims for their own lives, but also for wider society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Specifically, the study illustrates the key roles of both public and private sectors in tackling youth unemployment. Here, it generates the following recommendations:

Strong vision and leadership are needed to tackle youth employment and participation at national and district levels: At the national level, a fairly participatory, multi-stakeholder and inclusive process to formulate the National Action Plan for Youth Employment has been largely stalled since its Cabinet approval in December 2006. The momentum behind this initiative, which provides a potentially valuable platform for policy dialogue and change, needs to be rekindled, with active involvement from government, civil society, the private sector and the donor community. At the district level, generating decent jobs in decent numbers will require strong local economic development planning, and a vision and strategies to attract investment in sectors where there is a competitive advantage, as well as socially responsible business practice.

The multiple barriers to accessing private-sector jobs need to be understood, and addressed: At the risk of stating the obvious, the private sector needs to be in a position to create, not just new jobs, but new jobs in the places where it matters for the large majority of young people: across different regions of Sri Lanka, importantly areas outside Western Province. For this, an enabling environment needs to be in place that facilitates and incentivises appropriate private-sector investment in the regions, which is currently not the case. The private sector’s profit motive needs to be recognised by the state, local government and other actors that seek to attract investment to the district level. Secondly, young people feel that many of the jobs created (often casual, or non-skilled labour) do not match their own aspirations, and they are rather suspicious of private-sector jobs, fearful of exploitation, and bitter about the discrimination they feel they would face in trying to access them.

The private sector needs to address real and perceived discrimination in its hiring practices: In order to start attracting young people more to private-sector jobs, businesses need to start getting their own house in order. Better understanding is needed by the private sector about the multiple challenges faced by young people on the labour market and in the private sector itself. For this, more dialogue is needed between private-sector bodies, youth organisations and youth leadership, and youth experts. The private sector also needs to reach out to educational institutes to forge partnerships to strengthen curricula that prepare young people for entry into the job market.

The public sector remains an important source of employment, but recruitment needs to be sustainable: As the National Action Plan for Youth Employment states, self-employment and private-sector employment cannot be regarded as the only solution to tackling youth unemployment. However the current demand for government jobs, as opposed to other sources of employment, is not sustainable, and open to political manipulation. In the past, large-scale public sector recruitment drives have also been used as “stop-gap” measures, or to pacify youth demands. Public-sector recruitment policies and procedures need improving to guard against these problems; and employment opportunities generated need to reflect the levels and kinds of human resource needs of the public sector, and the services and development outcomes it aims to deliver.

1. Introduction

People-centred and participatory approaches to development rightly ask questions about the role of young people in contributing to, and even driving, societal advancement. How can their enormous potential be harnessed? How can young people be integrated into existing societal, political and economic structures, rather than being left out and potentially fomenting revolutions?² Sheer numbers justify this concern: the world population now has the largest ever share of youths (those between 15–24), totaling 1.3 billion people in 2007 in developing countries alone.³ Different societal problems can affect this age group more than others: while young people between 18–24 make up around 24.7 percent of the world’s working age population, they represent 40.2 percent of the world’s total unemployed. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of unemployed youth has increased from 63 million to 71 million.⁴ More still are *underemployed*, facing multiple barriers in entering the formal sector, and are trapped in low-paying and often hazardous jobs in the informal sector. Across different countries, youth unemployment rates are typically 2–3 times the level of that of adults.

Violent conflict further exacerbates these problems. Indeed, young people tend to be disproportionately affected by conflict, and are more likely to be represented in the ranks of armed groups as well as state armies than adults are.⁵ Social systems and structures, often seriously eroded by years of violence, are less able to absorb and offer young people meaningful opportunities in life. Indeed, if marginalisation and exclusion of identifiable groups from social, economic and political spheres and opportunities is a root cause of many conflicts, then young people, frequently facing even more severe exclusion on grounds of age and hierarchy, are more likely to be affected: ‘The increased stress and feelings of hopelessness that are indirectly linked to poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment and poor governance constitute part of a global pattern in areas of armed conflict’.⁶

Against this background, the presence especially of male youths often gets portrayed as a “conflict risk” that makes the instigation and perpetuation of violence more likely: ‘The dearth of opportunities in their communities often leads them to gravitate towards violent conflict and acts of terrorism’.⁷ Most recently, econometric research into causes and drivers of conflict has posited that the presence of uneducated and unemployed, mostly male, youths presents a variable that heightens conflict risk.⁸ Some “youth bulge” theories put it more starkly, predicting that countries with a percentage of 40 percent or more young people of the overall population, combined with other factors, cross a “danger threshold” that makes it 2.5 times more likely that these societies will “tip over” into violence.⁹

As a result, conflict resolution theory and practice recognise youths’ central role in conflict situations, either as “drivers of conflict”, or potential “peace constituencies”. Views about young people’s role in conflict situations indeed range from seeing them as largely passive conflict victims, vulnerable to its negative impacts and therefore to be protected; to grassroots youth and peace activists; and proactive actors perpetuating violence, be it for ideological, psychological, social, or economic reasons (most often a mixture of all these).

The violence that has engulfed Sri Lanka’s North and East regions for more than two decades has been the subject of much research. The two armed youth insurrections in the South led by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People’s Liberation Front – JVP) first in 1971 and then again in 1988–89, as well as today’s potential for youth unrest, remain far less explored. While the violence in the North and East is generally viewed as arising from “ethnic” conflict and a struggle for minority rights, the JVP movement was seen as the coming together of mainly educated, rural,

Sinhala youth frustrated by unfulfilled aspirations and having been misled by opportunistic political movements. While there have been attempts to draw parallels among the grievances experienced by youth among all ethnic groups and across Sri Lanka,¹⁰ the Southern insurrections have drawn more attention from a youth development perspective than the conflict in the North and East. On the other hand, peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives have mainly focused on the “ethnic” conflict.

Focus and purpose of this report

This paper will critically discuss the nexus between youth unemployment and conflict based on field research conducted in the Sri Lankan district of Hambantota. The report builds on the work of International Alert and its Sri Lankan partners in promoting a peacebuilding role for the private sector, and improving governance of the economy in support of peace. The report also seeks to draw lessons for international debate, and eventually policy and practice in other conflict-affected countries, in order to strengthen measures that can address both youth employment and conflict, and better link them to wider peacebuilding efforts. While of course each context remains unique, and requires distinct analysis and responses, we have found that cross-country learning and reflection are an effective means for improving the peacebuilding practice of a variety of actors. This may include the work of governments, civil society organisations, the private sector, as well as the donor community.

The report draws out several key themes that emerged from interviews both with youths, as well as those working on development initiatives for young people. The focus was on understanding perceptions *of* youth, but also perception *about* youth by others, and of the multiple causes and dimensions of unemployment as well as youth unrest. These are then compared and contrasted with some of the national and district-level policy and programmatic interventions that have taken place in Sri Lanka and in the Hambantota District in particular, and it is argued that several gaps can be observed at the levels of analysis, strategy, programming, and impact.

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the socio-economic, cultural and political context within which youth unemployment is linked to conflict?
2. What are the characteristics of youth-focused policies and interventions?
3. What are the gaps between the general analysis of youth as “problematic”, interventions designed to address youth issues, and youth articulations of their own problems?
4. What are the implications of youth grievances for social and political conflict in Sri Lanka?
5. What lessons can be drawn for policy and practice elsewhere?

Methodology

The geographical focus of the report is the Southern Sri Lankan district of Hambantota. While not directly affected by the large-scale, “ethnic” conflict that has engulfed the North and East of the country for over two decades, Hambantota was one of the districts heavily hit by the JVP-led, violent youth uprisings in the early 1970s and late 1980s. This southern insurgency at the time was met with a violent clampdown by the Sri Lankan state, resulting in thousands of deaths all over Southern Sri Lanka. In Hambantota, the experience of youth-led violence also stimulated to some extent an increased awareness and focus on youth issues and attempts to tackle them at the district level. This geographic focus was also chosen because of the relative wealth of research that exists on similar issues in the North and East of the country.¹¹

Field research included interviews and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) led by a lead researcher and a research assistant from the Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC) at Colombo University. One group consisted of youth who had either just completed or were involved in vocational training courses, while the other group consisted of youth who were

seeking employment. The themes discussed in the FGDs included youth opinions regarding the causes of youth frustration and unrest, causes of unemployment, who and what youth regard as responsible for the problems they face, their aspirations, attitudes regarding conflict and violence, youth participation in politics, and their experiences and opinions of youth-focused development interventions.

A questionnaire was also administered to 18 youths (male and female) who participated in the FGDs. The questionnaires covered similar themes to those discussed in the FGD, but required youth to list or prioritise their concerns. Semi-structured interviews were then also conducted with eight agencies randomly selected from among a network working on youth initiatives in the Hambantota District. In addition, eight key informant interviews were conducted with policy-makers from state and non-state agencies as well as representatives of the major political parties active in the area. The paper also draws on the findings from other background research commissioned by Alert on youth issues in the Hambantota District, including a study of the Hambantota Youth Business Trust (see Haniffa, 2007, unpublished) and an analysis of employment opportunities in the private sector in the district (see Fernando, 2008).

A second strand of research involved an in-depth and critical analysis of existing research and writing on youth issues in Sri Lanka, through the specific lens of “youth unemployment and conflict”. A desk-based review of international literature was then carried out to contextualise the study within the wider international debates on this topic. Research focus and draft findings were discussed at two roundtable discussions facilitated by Alert’s Colombo office in 2007 and 2008, with participation from civil society, NGO, academic and donor community representatives.

Limitations of the study

The programmatic and policy interventions examined in this paper are not meant to be a representative sample of all existing initiatives. What was selected at the national level were the policy initiatives that were most frequently mentioned by policy-makers and practitioners, while at the district level, the interventions were chosen from among a network of agencies working on youth employment initiatives. Furthermore, since the research was limited to the district of Hambantota, this study will present mainly the views of Sinhalese youth. While Hambantota has a Muslim community and all existing programmes mentioned that they worked with different ethnic groups, the randomly selected sample of youth interviewed did not consist of any Muslim youth. Thus, the views of youth discussed in this paper refer to a group of youth from a specific context and background.

Finally, this being a qualitative study, the sample has been small and focused on understanding young people’s perceptions, perspectives but also fears when it comes to unemployment and wider societal issues. In that sense, the sample is not broadly representative of youth perceptions across the country (though parallels exist with research carried out in the North and East of Sri Lanka); it does aim, however, to provide insights, lessons and points of reflection from these discussions.

Structure of the report

Section 2 of the report gives a brief overview of some dominant approaches in “youth and conflict” programming internationally, and points out strengths as well as challenges of each. The overall Sri Lankan context within which “youth, unemployment and conflict” debates take place is then presented in Section 3, including youth marginalisation, social mobility, inequality in education, barriers to employment, and existing policy responses. Section 4 then goes on to first give an overview of Hambantota District, to then analyse key findings from the district-level research looking at both perceptions *of*, as well as *about* youth with regard to youth unrest, and various economic and social grievances raised in interviews. Conclusions and implications for programming are then drawn in the final sections, including presentation of key lessons that will hopefully stimulate further debate, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

2. International approaches to “youth and conflict” programming

‘I am not an adult, and I am not a child. [I am] in the middle’¹²

This section looks at prevailing approaches to “youth and conflict” programming.¹³ While in the past, the role and place of youths in conflict and peacebuilding was to a large extent overlooked, and often subsumed under the heading of “children in armed conflict” (briefly discussed below), documentation of experiences during several armed conflicts in the recent past, as well as international advocacy led by NGOs and some states, have put them more firmly on the international agenda (see for example Box 1 below).¹⁴

1 International Advocacy on Support to Youth in Conflict

In 2000, the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) published a large report based on a review of international programmes and policies on health, education, livelihood and protection needs of young people affected by armed conflicts. The report made the following recommendations:

- Ensure that youths affected by armed conflict remain squarely on the international agenda for action.
- Conduct field-based research that accounts for youths’ specific and distinct experiences in armed conflict.
- Identify “good practices” regarding youth programming and increase appropriate programming interventions on their behalf.
- Increase funding for adolescent-specific programming.
- Promote gender equality.
- Empower young people.

Eight years on, these recommendations remain as relevant as ever, as is evident in the Sri Lankan context.

Source: Women’s Committee for Refugee Women and Children (2000). *Untapped potential: Adolescents affected by armed conflict, a review of programs and policies*. New York, US: WCRWC.

2.1. Mapping different approaches

Kemper (2005) distinguishes between three main types of interventions addressing youth issues in situations of violent conflict: rights-based, economic, and socio-political approaches. To some extent, these are “prototypes” that may in reality overlap to some degree; however, the categorisation remains useful in understanding different components of youth and conflict work.

Rights-based approaches, for example as promoted by UNICEF, focus on the protection of children from the negative impacts of conflict, for example, forced recruitment into armed groups.¹⁵ This approach views young people principally as victims and not perpetrators of conflict, or even potential agents of change. Older youths effectively fall between the cracks in the rights-based approaches,¹⁶ as these international legal frameworks only apply to children under the age of 18, so do not cover the wider age cohort.¹⁷ Rights-based approaches have also been criticised

for not taking into account young people's differing experiences during conflict and changing self-perception: a young person forcibly recruited into an armed group, for example, after years of fighting may find it difficult, if not impossible, to be reunited with his or her family and be re-categorised as a "child".

Economic approaches view youths through the lens of "rational agents on the market", and highlight the economic reasons for young people joining violent movements or armed groups. In this analysis, offering a viable and at least equivalent economic alternative to taking up arms should be sufficient for young people to resist that "temptation". According to this approach, unemployed young people are a potential threat to peace processes, and efforts are made to "keep them off the streets" through work-oriented skills training; improved access to microfinance; participation in productive projects; promotion of self-employment or apprenticeships.¹⁸ Supporting young people's need for economic self-sufficiency can enable them to make their own living independently of the family, and realise entrepreneurial creativity. All these are important for a young person's self-esteem, affirmation of his or her place in a society, and transition into adulthood.

However, this analysis misses a whole range of other factors that affect young people's frustrations with their situation, and that can lead to the decision to become militant or join an armed group, depending, again, on their backgrounds and previous experiences: some may have followed calls for political mobilisation and the promise of societal transformation (as was the case for perhaps most of the Maoists' cadres in Nepal, or JVP followers in Sri Lanka, for example); young women fighters are frequently compelled by a hope for emancipation and more equal treatment in the ranks (as in Colombia, and again, Nepal); others take up arms as a means of self-protection, or to defend their families; psychological trauma from past violence, and feelings of revenge or the need to make oneself heard can also play an important role. Where mainstream society does not offer much scope for young people to realise aspirations and acquire a social status, some also join for the sheer "excitement", possibilities of "seeing the world", and a sense of belonging that they feel armed groups can offer.¹⁹

Socio-political approaches, on the other hand, stress that when it comes to democratisation and reconciliation, especially after conflict, the usually largest part of the population should not be left out of the process. In fact, there is much positive potential and creativity in young people that should be harnessed, in this view, for peacebuilding purposes, and young people should be pulled into the mainstream of political processes. This requires support and accompaniment to young people developing and making their voices heard. In other words, youth "peace constituencies" need to be strengthened, in order 'to make an active, socially relevant contribution towards the prevention and peaceful resolution of violent conflicts'.²⁰ Frequently this involves strengthening youth clubs or other types of youth organisations, or involving young people in media initiatives like radio programming.²¹

In societies that are deeply discriminatory against young people on grounds of age and social hierarchies, it is questionable whether youth can exert the influence over other groups in society that is required for peace constituencies to make a more large-scale, systemic impact the way it is envisaged by conflict resolution theory; or whether they see themselves compelled to form more radical political movements instead to challenge old social orders and press for more radical social and political transformation. Especially state-based donors will face limits in supporting programmes that fundamentally challenge state-society relationships or question the role and legitimacy of the state; they may therefore end up "dropping" these more political aspects of programming.²²

Like the other approaches, a pure focus on youth as peacebuilders may risk partial and incomplete analysis of different young people's capacities for both peace and conflict, and hence lead to weak programming. Socio-political approaches are, however, also more likely to really involve young people as partners in decision-making, design and implementation of projects. In that way, projects can model

and encourage democratic participation. They would also need to be open, however, to real shifts in power balance between young participants, project managers and donors to build inter-generational partnerships,²³ and give enough time needed for long-term changes in social relationships.

2.2 The need for multi-dimensional interventions

As is evident from the above, in conflict situations, “multi-dimensional” programming will be needed that can tackle all three, legal, economic, and socio-political aspects of youth inclusion in society. All three areas somehow have to understand different young people’s aspirations and needs, as well as capacities for peace *and* conflict. They also need to go beyond negative views of youth, as either victims or potential peace spoilers. Such a “positive image” of young people should ideally not be dictated by adults, but be envisioned and advanced by youth themselves. This will require different and interdisciplinary types of analysis and technical expertise to be included in youth programmes, spanning economic, human rights, political and peacebuilding expertise.

In practice, this is difficult to achieve as the topic spans a variety of policy and response areas. Within the UN system alone there are several forums and initiatives where “youth, employment and conflict” issues are of relevance, and it is unclear how far they have been coordinated to date, or what joint strategies have been developed. This includes for example, the recently established UN Peacebuilding Commission, an inter-governmental advisory body with a mandate to support peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict through convening all relevant actors; marshalling needed resources; and providing strategic advice;²⁴ the Youth Employment Network, a high-level initiative between the UN, the ILO and the World Bank (see Box 2 below);²⁵ the UN Global Compact;²⁶ and the recent UN system-wide process to develop and implement a UN policy on “Employment Creation, Income Generation and Reintegration in Post-Conflict” (which includes reference to youth employment as a particular priority).²⁷

2 UN Youth Employment Network (YEN)

The Youth Employment Network is a partnership between the UN, ILO and World Bank created in 2001 to mobilise action among member countries on implementing commitments on decent and productive work for youths, agreed at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000.²⁸ YEN identifies four priorities that need to be tackled at the national level to work towards this goal (the four ‘e’s):

- Employability
- Equal opportunities
- Entrepreneurship
- Employment creation

YEN works with UN member states through the concept of “Lead Countries”. Lead Countries are countries that have committed to tackling youth unemployment at the highest governmental level, by formulating and implementing National Action Plans on the issue, providing political leadership at the UN level, and regularly reporting to the YEN Secretariat in Geneva on progress.

YEN also works in a number of conflict-affected countries. Of the 21 countries that have to date agreed to act as Lead Countries for the YEN process, at least nine can be regarded as “conflict-affected” or “post-conflict”: Azerbaijan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Uganda. Yet, to date, there do not seem to have been any specific efforts as part of YEN to look at the challenges to youth unemployment in situations of conflict across countries.

YEN could provide a good platform for member states to explore these issues in a neutral and non-threatening setting; YEN may also be able to draw on technical peacebuilding expertise from across the UN system for this purpose.

The following sections assess critically to what extent such multi-dimensional efforts are happening in the context of Sri Lanka: Section 3 first gives an overview of the youth and unemployment challenges faced in the country; and Section 4 presents the key themes that emerge from research in Hambantota District.

3. Youth unemployment in Sri Lanka – Framing the problem

Marginalisation of a large proportion of Sri Lanka's rural youth, particularly those with secondary-level education and above, is a major social and political challenge. Within the last three decades, Sri Lankan youth have been involved as the main force behind social unrest and violent insurgencies in the country on several occasions.²⁹ Dissatisfaction and frustration of youth, especially educated rural youth, is therefore regarded as one of the major threats to political stability. Consequently, the state has launched a number of programmes and planning strategies to meet the needs of young people, mainly through the rapid promotion of productive employment opportunities for unemployed rural youth.³⁰

As this paper argues, multiple factors play into young people's perceptions and anxieties around accessing jobs, their abilities to do so, and implications for conflict. This section presents challenges Sri Lankan youth face in this regard.

3.1. Youth markers and transition into adulthood

While globally age is usually the most common marker of youth, with those between the ages of 15–29 considered to fall in this category, there are also important cultural markers that can vary from country to country, determining how far young people feel they are successfully transitioning into adulthood. In Sri Lanka, this includes marriage and financial independence. In fact, financial independence is usually a pre-requisite for marriage, especially for men. Hence employment for young people holds additional importance, since not achieving a measure of financial independence precludes them (especially men) from being considered and treated as “real” adults, and is in fact a significant obstacle to marriage. Unemployed and unmarried Sri Lankans face being excluded from the realm of “adults” even if they are beyond the age of 29. The notion of being able to perform certain tasks associated with adulthood is therefore an important consideration in understanding “youth” as a social category.

3.2. Social mobility

Rigid and inflexible forms of social hierarchy make it difficult for marginalised and underprivileged groups to achieve social mobility, which is therefore achieved inter-generationally.³¹ While earlier social welfare measures ensured access to education and health and agrarian reforms provided some means of moving out of rural poverty, issues such as social status, language, and expectations around lifestyle and social status limit upward mobility. In short, social and economic class boundaries are difficult to cross, affecting one's position in life and the kinds of social and political networks that are accessible.

In this context, education is traditionally seen as the most important means for challenging or overcoming these limitations of class, and achieving upward mobility. The investments that families make in the education of their children come with an expectation that their appropriate employment and rise in status will also benefit the parents, previously restricted by class barriers. Parents are therefore anxious that their children, particularly young men, do not get labelled as a “*rasthiyadukarayek*” (layabout) or “*diunu wenne nethi*” (not progressing). Within this context, young people who are “risk-takers”, or who do not follow prescribed and accepted paths of career and social advancement are the cause of much anxiety and disappointment for their families. Self-employment is often seen as such a risky strategy, given the difficulties of

running a business and insecurity of income, and not often encouraged by families or aspired to by many Sri Lankan youths.³²

3.3. Disparities in the education system

While Sri Lanka has an impressive record when it comes to providing broad access to education for children and young people, the disparities in the quality of education have resulted in uneven educational attainments across geographic locations and social groups. Unequal access to employment by different groups largely reflects this varying quality of education.³³ For example, a majority of schools in Sri Lanka do not have adequate facilities to teach science or English. Most employers complain that the lack of English and computer skills are a major drawback for the employability of youth, particularly in the private sector. This is due to both poor facilities, as well as unqualified teaching staff.³⁴

The *quality* of facilities and teaching vastly differ between provinces. For example, Western Province (where the capital Colombo is situated) has the lowest ratio of untrained teachers per number of students (1,009:1), while the number of untrained teachers in the Northern, Eastern and Central provinces is alarming: in the North, the student-untrained teacher ratio is 194:1, in the East, it is 227:1 and in the Central Province it is 416:1. In the Southern province, which includes Hambantota District, it is 900:1.³⁵ While English is a compulsory subject for all grades, not all schools actually have English teachers.

When it comes to university education, among those 2 percent of the relevant age group that attend university, enrolment in different types of degrees is affected by family and educational background, school attendance, family income, and gender differences.³⁶ Thus, the majority of students that enrol for arts, humanities or social science degrees come from low-income, rural, disadvantaged families, with parents not engaged in professional work, whereas students that are enrolled in science degrees, especially medical, engineering, and veterinary science, come from more privileged backgrounds, and subsequently are more likely to access higher-paid jobs.³⁷ While in 2002, the percentage of women among university students exceeded 50 percent, the largest concentration was in the arts and law faculties.³⁸ Women graduates also tended to come from slightly more advantaged economic and social backgrounds, indicating that women from disadvantaged backgrounds face more constraints when it comes to accessing higher education.³⁹

It is clear from this overall picture that for young people it is not just employment per se, or even purely the economic benefits that come with it, that matter, but importantly also the *type* of employment, and how far it can support social mobility and increase social status. To a significant extent, this is not determined purely by merit and attainment, but inequalities in access to education, between the sexes, and is dependent on family backgrounds and expectations.

3.4. Challenges to youth employment

High unemployment and underemployment among young people is an issue for Sri Lanka almost since independence. While boasting high achievements in the education sector, young people are not able to translate these achievements into success in the labour market. Unemployment among young people is almost double the national unemployment rate, while significantly, the unemployment rate among those with the General Certificate in Education: Advanced Level – GCE (A/L) qualification and above is 10.5 percent compared to the national unemployment rate of 5.6 percent. Unemployment among females with GCE A/L educational qualifications and above is 15.5 percent.⁴⁰

Overall unemployment levels have been on the decrease recently: in the fourth quarter of 2007, the unemployment rate was the lowest since 2000, and even the unemployment rate among the

educated has been showing a slight decline since then.⁴¹ However according to the National Action Plan for Youth Employment,⁴² youth unemployment remains at roughly at 40 percent of total unemployment. Furthermore, it is estimated that some 20 percent of those categorised as “employed” in official statistics (this includes those who work even for one day in a given week), are in fact *underemployed*.

In the private sector, cultural and social factors determine employability as much as educational attainment and skills (the same has in fact been observed in the voluntary sector).⁴³ Particular personal characteristics and traits, such as fluency in English and knowledge of a particular type of urban etiquette and appearance often discriminate against candidates who lack urban, middle-class and bi-lingual backgrounds or who do not wish to conform to these expectations. Access to private-sector jobs in effect faces two major obstacles, as described below.

Firstly, these more cultural and social obstacles faced by young people in accessing private-sector jobs have not been effectively tackled. As a result of such perceived (and real) discrimination, there is a significant mistrust among young people vis-à-vis the private sector (and, some argue, the mistrust is mutual), meaning they shun private-sector jobs in favour of public-sector jobs. For example, while the manufacturing sector, usually within export-processing zones, provides a significant number of jobs, these often go unfilled, whereas jobs in the public sector are hugely oversubscribed.⁴⁴ The combination of relative accessibility, sheer numbers of opportunities, job security and the status and networks that derive from a position as a state employee make this a far more desirable option in the eyes of many young people and their families.

Secondly, despite continued faith amongst many government policy-makers and major donors that the private sector will be the “engine of growth” that will provide employment opportunities for youth, jobs have not been generated in the numbers anticipated, and the private sector has not received the same response from job applicants as the public sector.⁴⁵ Indeed, one study finds that in the early 2000s, Sri Lanka lagged far behind other countries when it came to creating jobs, with an 8 percent job creation rate, as opposed to an average of 14 percent across 17 other developed, transitional and developing countries.⁴⁶

The National Action Plan for Youth Unemployment of 2006 identifies two major obstacles to employment creation by the private sector:⁴⁷ firstly, a lack of adequate community infrastructure, especially poor access to roads, electricity and markets, means that especially micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises are prevented from growing and employing more people. Secondly, it has been argued that a labour-market system that offers very high levels of “job protection” for formal-sector workers effectively keeps the private sector from hiring more people in formal jobs (leaving two-thirds of workers in the informal sector): according to the Enterprise and Labour Flexibility Survey conducted in 2007 by the ILO and SPARC, small enterprises in particular increasingly employ non-regular workers.⁴⁸ A high degree of risk and uncertainty is associated with the notion of non-regular employment as these workers are not entitled to various benefits and leave arrangements that regular workers enjoy.

These casual workers are often hired as substitutes to manage unusual workloads, while nearly 70 percent of the companies interviewed hire part-time workers as an alternative to regular workers. This has been attributed to inflexible labour laws (especially the Termination of Employment Workmen Act – TEWA), and resulting high costs involved in hiring regular workers. TEWA prevents retrenchment on non-disciplinary grounds without the written consent from the respective workers in firms with 15 or more employees, as well as “prior approval” by a Labour Commissioner, often leading to lengthy and non-transparent procedures. As consent requires high compensation, companies often tend not to take such actions. This in turn not only incurs severe costs to the companies, but also means they are more cautious about hiring staff full-time. While such stringent labour-laws may therefore need examining, any suggested reforms need to be sensitive to the Sri Lankan context, where a current lack of adequate social security and

unemployment benefits means that for most, loss of employment means a loss of any source of income or livelihood.

3.5. Central politics and youth marginalisation⁴⁹

Despite various government-instigated attempts, many youths do not seem to readily respond to self-employment and vocational training opportunities offered by governmental and non-governmental agencies, as such opportunities are often not in keeping with their own aspirations, desires and expectations. Opportunities created are often stereotypical (e.g. offering traditional livelihoods to rural youth, or types of training for young women influenced by gender stereotypes); additionally, they do not offer the economic and social rewards that many rural youth feel they require to gain a certain social status and integration into “adult” society. Even in the agricultural sector, educated rural youth are often compelled to play a marginal role, mostly as unskilled helpers to their families, not as catalysts and innovators.

There have not been any significant attempts to empower educated rural youth to help them come up with their own plans to address their own problems. Rather, youth are often at the mercy of political leaders and bureaucrats who offer top-down solutions to grass-root level problems. Local groups are rarely mobilised and encouraged to search for alternative livelihoods.

It is thought that this problem prevails mainly due to the lack of a well-functioning civil society at the grass-roots level in Sri Lanka. Over the last 50 years, Sri Lanka has experienced the rise of a system of extreme political patronage built upon the use of welfare-state measures as a means of ensuring votes during elections. This includes distribution of jobs within the state-controlled labour market by political elites, largely among their own party followers. As a consequence, there is a fairly widespread perception of social injustice when it comes to access to employment among youth, given hiring practices based on political choice and connections, rather than objective job requirements and merit.⁵⁰ Elsewhere in the country, this has been articulated clearly by one 20-year-old woman from Welligama: “Here youth are supporting politicians. After that they demand jobs. Only those who work for politicians find employment. Otherwise even with education they have to just wait. This happens because most of the jobs are under manipulation of the government”.⁵¹

The consequences of this political culture are visible in the way development planning is undertaken in Sri Lanka. Although meant for the local level and with special emphasis on reaching the needs and aspirations of the younger population living in marginal rural areas, all planning activities are still highly centralised and controlled by the Colombo urban elite. Rather than involving local people in the formulation and implementation of development plans that are locally viable, centrally-driven development processes create income and employment opportunities for a vast number of Colombo-based bureaucrats closely associated to the ruling party.⁵² As one male adolescent from Hambantota put it: “If one can call the ruling party a caste, possibly a caste is benefiting more from the country’s development activities. Resources are divided up according to the political party that is in power. When a successive government takes over, immediately the workers in the opposition lose their jobs and the ruling party supporters replace them.”⁵³

3.6. Government and development responses to youth unemployment⁵⁴

Past government initiatives

There have been several attempts over the last few decades to develop equitable and transparent youth policies. However, despite a number of initiatives to formulate a comprehensive youth policy for Sri Lanka (including a Presidential Commission and various ministerial initiatives) there is as yet no overall policy document available.⁵⁵ Although some relevant line ministries have recognised youth as an important constituency, and refer to youth in sectoral policies (e.g. on education, employment,

migration, SME development, vocational training etc.), implementation of policies and programmes related to youth has been lagging. The reasons include institutional fragmentation and duplication caused by a multitude of line ministries and various ministerial authorities dealing with youth issues without a central coordinating body; no measures to ensure complementarity of sectoral policies (e.g. school-to-work transition cuts across education, training and employment areas); and a lack of implementation of relevant policies and programmes, or monitoring of progress.⁵⁶

Trends

Whilst youth disillusionment with distribution of resources and governance practice has played a key role in fuelling all the major violent challenges to state authority since national independence, state development policy in Sri Lanka has predominantly engaged on youth issues through efforts to improve their participation in the labour force and national economy. Political reform processes have also generated provisions for increased youth representation within local government, but these do not seem to have sufficiently addressed the frustrations experienced by many young people.

Indeed, the approaches taken by successive governments have fallen short of the recommendations put forward in March 1990 by the Presidential Commission on Youth, established at the tail end of one of the most profound crises of governance in the country's post-colonial history. Rather than systematically and directly addressing the causes of anti-systemic ideology amongst young people drawn either to the insurrectionist version of the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (People's Liberation Front – JVP) or the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), governments have instead tended to rely on security-oriented policies of detention, arrest, rehabilitation and extra-judicial punishment as both defence and deterrent in the face of radical activism or militancy.

Local and international development players' approaches to the role of youth in Sri Lanka have also dominantly focused on employment. Large donors like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank focus their strategies over the next few years on stimulating especially rural economic growth; as well as improving the investment climate for the business community to enable them to create jobs. A recent joint assessment by ADB and World Bank identified the following obstacles in Sri Lanka's business climate: (i) an uncertain policy environment, 'particularly on account of conflict'; (ii) macro-economic instability; (iii) the cost of finance; (iv) poor infrastructure, including access to electricity; and (v) a rigid labour market. The latter is of particular importance for job creation for youth; here donors like ILO and World Bank are now moving to offer support to the government for moving from "job protection" to "worker protection".⁵⁷ Such proposed large-scale policy shifts need to be based on a careful assessment of the local context and likely impacts, including not only the labour market itself but also cultural, social and political factors that influence labour-market dynamics, and vulnerability of workers.

Some organisations have shown a more explicit interest in fostering values that they identify as conducive to democratic and pluralist attitudes – particularly in relation to inter-ethnic relations. These usually small-scale initiatives have taken place in parallel to those of the state, or sometimes in cooperation with state sectors and institutions dealing with children and young people.

Indeed the same approaches are largely reflected at the district level (these are discussed in Section 4 below): for the majority of organisations working with young people, youth unrest and youth violence in the past was the primary motivating factor for addressing youth issues. While preventing the kind of violence that took place in the 1970s and 1980s was a major concern, there was also apprehension regarding rising crime levels and increasing involvement of youth in criminal activities. Interviewees also expressed anxiety regarding criminal activities of army deserters or problems associated with the increased militarisation of young people. All these were seen as indications of the propensity of youth to get involved in "anti-social" behaviour unless kept in check.

While a wide range of causes for youth frustration were identified by many organisations working with young people, youth unemployment was seen as the primary cause of youth unrest. Thus, understanding and responding to the causes of youth unemployment forms the basis of most youth-focused interventions in the district.

4. District-level findings

This section discusses the key themes that emerged from interviews both with youths, as well as those working on development initiatives for young people. The focus was on understanding perceptions of youth, but also perception *about* youth by others, and of the multiple causes and dimensions of *both* youth unrest *and* unemployment.

4.1. Overview of Hambantota District

Hambantota District lies in the Southern province of Sri Lanka along the south-eastern coast line. Ranked as the third-poorest district in the country, 32 percent of its population is ranked as poor.⁵⁸ Agriculture and fisheries are the primary sources of livelihood in the area, which is also one of the key paddy-producing districts of the country. Industrial development is weak, with Hambantota accounting for a mere 1.6 percent of the manufacturing establishments in the country employing less than 0.5 percent of the workforce.⁵⁹ Along with its dry and arid environment, frequently referred to as the “deep south”, Hambantota has a reputation in the national consciousness of being a neglected and isolated area.

The coastline of Hambantota directly experienced the tsunami in 2004. Almost 17,000 families were affected by the disaster with the death toll at around 3,000. More than 4,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. The fisheries and agriculture sectors were badly affected with more than 90 percent of the fishing fleet destroyed and many agriculture areas impacted.⁶⁰

Hambantota District is currently in the political limelight, as it is the present Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s electorate. In fact, the Rajapakse family has been involved in politics in Hambantota for many years, with the president’s father, uncle, brothers, cousins, and son being politically active in the area. The Rajapakse family has represented the electorate of Beliatte in the district and has held positions as party organisers in the area for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) for many years. Hambantota is also the electoral area of another powerful politician, Sajith Premadasa, the son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa from the United National Party (UNP). In addition, Hambantota District lays claim to the only *Pradeshiya Sabha* (“Local Council”) that is controlled by the Marxist *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP). Thus, all three major political parties in Sri Lanka have significant influence in the district and compete aggressively with each other to build and maintain their voter base.

Furthermore, it was also the site of considerable violence during the two JVP-led insurrections in 1971 and 1989, and was one of the JVP strongholds in 1989. The support among the youth for the JVP during the time was later seen to reflect the marginalisation of the area from development resources.

4.2. Perceptions of youth unrest and political mobilisation

Indeed the example of JVP violence, a movement of “angry young people”, came up in all the interviews that were conducted in the course of this study. Depending on the interviewee’s political affiliation and sympathy, the JVP was described as a revolutionary movement that emerged in response to the blatant corruption and discrimination in society, to being an opportunistic political party that manipulated, and finally let down, frustrated, and also somewhat naive, young people. JVP followers were described as holding hatred towards society, or anger and envy of others. As

one politician said “*JVP eke inne oluwen weda karana aya nevei, papuwen weda karana aya!*” (Those who work with the JVP are those who work with their hearts and not their heads).

Today, even though the JVP has entered the political mainstream and parliamentary politics, it is still viewed as having the potential to mobilise youth in similar ways, particularly educated youth, given its strong support base among university students. For many organisations consulted, an important reason for working with youths was preventing a repetition of this type of violence in future (Box 3 below gives an example). Meanwhile, other political parties have also recognised the power of youth mobilisation and have launched their own movements to attract youth. This has resulted in political parties now competing with the JVP for control of student movements within universities, often leading to violent clashes between the different factions. The current president’s son has also recently launched an organisation aimed at mobilising youth, which has received wide publicity.

3 Hambantota Youth Business Trust

One example of the high level of concern created by the JVP-led violence of the 1980s, and its influence on youth programming is the Hambantota Youth Business Trust (HYBT) which was initiated by the Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce (HDCC). HYBT was a deliberate response to what was seen as the primary cause that led to the mobilisation of youth: youth unemployment. As mentioned previously, the Hambantota District was a stronghold of the JVP movement and witness to many atrocities that directly affected members of the HDCC. Thus, the need to prevent such incidents was urgently felt by the members. Also, there was a sense that the youth had genuine grievances which successive governments had failed to respond to, and that therefore there was a possibility of a repetition of the kind of violence experienced during the 1980s JVP insurrection. The business community was seen to be in a particularly strong position to address the issue of youth unemployment.

Source: Haniffa (2007, unpublished). *The Hambantota Youth Business Trust*. London: International Alert.

This anxiety about the JVP has clear economic dimensions, given some of its strategies during the 1980s which included attacks on economic targets in order to undermine and destabilise the government. The JVP enforced *hartal*, or curfews, during which all activities were forbidden; they damaged infrastructure; demanded that businesses shut down during *hartals* or that industries stopped production. The JVP trade union strength had also grown considerably by then. Even currently, the ability of the JVP to mobilise trade union action and disrupt economic activity is recognised and feared. The apparently Marxist theoretical bent of the JVP is often read rather simplistically by the business sector, especially in Colombo, as anti-open economy or anti-business. The very organised and visible JVP protests (inside and outside parliament) against multi-national companies, and certain development projects, contribute to this perception. Other political party representatives consulted during this study described the JVP as “spoilers”, “anti-development”, or filled with “envy” and “jealousy” against those who do well economically; although it was also acknowledged that they highlight some relevant societal issues like corruption, environmental consequences of some development projects, and workers’ grievances.

Practitioners’ views regarding youth involvement in politics were cautious. Most were critical of the ways in which youth were currently engaged in politics, claiming that they worked for politicians only for narrow, personal goals and not with the idea of developing the country. Some mentioned that earlier, young people were more selfless and politically active for the good of the country; i.e. there was disapproval of the fact that youth were engaged in the *wrong* type of politics; not that they were politically active per se. While they felt that youth need to be engaged in developing the country and shaping the country’s future, there was also apprehension about the directions youth politics would take unless their propensity towards “radical”, extreme positions or self-serving

politics purely for personal gain was managed. The “emotional immaturity” and “gullibility” of youth were seen to prevent them from engaging in principled, responsible and more far-sighted politics.

Youth themselves, however, were well aware of attempts by political parties or others to manipulate them. They expressed anger that they were being used by politicians for their own ends. They also expressed frustration that none of the current political parties seemed to be representing their interests and issues. What was apparent was a sense of disappointment regarding the political process and democratic institutions as such: ‘*hemadama abuwenawa*’ (‘we get fooled every day’) or ‘*mokata dunnath dukai*’ (‘we are disappointed whoever we vote for’). This chimes with earlier, country-wide findings of the 2000 National Youth Survey: here, nearly half of all youth (47%) had expressed ‘no trust at all’ in political parties and elected representatives, and 71 percent of all survey respondents did not think that Sri Lankan society was just.⁶¹

4.3. Militarisation of youth

Focus group participants were equally clear that the armed forces were currently an employment option they would consider if they had no other choices. Employment with the army was viewed with a mix of realism and patriotism. Few referred to any special patriotic feeling or sense of responsibility as sons and daughters of the *Ruhuna*.⁶² In fact, they were quite aware of the fact that employment in the armed forces entailed huge risks. Those who join the army don’t talk about their experiences, said some. They suspected that this silence was an indication that the reality of life in the armed forces was quite different to the image of glamour and excitement generally portrayed in the Ministry of Defence recruitment drives.

The recruitment drive among the armed forces that resulted from the escalating conflict in the North and East was viewed with anxiety. Interviewees mentioned the fact that increasing unemployment resulted in more young people choosing the armed forces as an employment opportunity. It was believed that people in areas such as Hambantota feel that the population of *Ruhuna* had played a prominent role in the defence of the country in the past, and thus had a certain patriotic and nationalistic tendency and special responsibility to protect the country.⁶³ This was seen as a manipulation of young people by the politicians and media.

4.4. Youth mobilisation, or disillusionment and apathy?

As discussed previously, the concerns of practitioners and policy-makers regarding youth and conflict were somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, there were fears that youth would engage in radical or “the wrong type” of politics if they were allowed to be politically active; on the other hand, there was also recognition that as “future leaders” youth *should* have a role to play, conditional on the approval by the wider community and that they should not challenge existing systems too much.

But what is the current potential of youth to be politically mobilised? If it is true that political and economic grievances lead to youth radicalisation and potentially to conflict, then the current political climate of increased polarisation and centralised control over politics, coupled with poverty and rising costs of living as against increasing consumer aspirations should be an ideal breeding ground for renewed Southern insurrection.

Instead, a growing sense of apathy and cynicism was apparent among young focus group participants. For instance, the majority of youth interviewed unequivocally stated that there was no point in resisting or challenging discrimination and corruption in society. They expressed a deep sense of disillusionment with politicians and politics. In fact, many stated that they would not even vote in a future election while some cynically said that if putting up party posters ensured

a job they would do even that, but not because they had any faith in politicians. They spoke of being let down by political movements (*'anatha wenawa'*).

The youth also spoke about the difficulties of organising themselves collectively. For one thing, they felt that there was no encouragement for young people to organise themselves and when they did, they were viewed as a threat. Young men in particular spoke about how parents and the community viewed groups of young people getting together with suspicion. They also felt that the current economic situation left little room for collective organisation. Life was hard, they said, and all their time was taken with trying to make enough money to meet their needs. There was no time to attend meetings, read or discuss politics.

Youth felt there was a culture of impunity and injustice that was not worth challenging since there was no hope for transformation in the current context. Some mentioned a prominent minister as an example of such impunity, and the lack of any action on the part of the government to punish or discipline him for publicly harassing and threatening journalists. On the other hand, they felt the state cracked down hard and did not shy away from violence when it came to controlling university student protests or trade union actions.

One of the sharpest criticisms young people had of politicians and generally those in authority was the lack of transparency and accountability with regard to the distribution of resources and opportunities. Interviewees were well aware that the “right” political connections were necessary to benefit from the considerable state-led development projects taking place in the district currently. They described how even competitive exams for public-sector jobs were manipulated and over-ridden by local politicians. In their view, getting a job in the current large-scale construction industry of Hambantota harbour was impossible without a “chit” from a powerful politician in the current regime. As they said, in rural areas one’s political affiliation was passed down through generations. Thus, even if they had different political affiliations from their families, they were often linked with the family political affiliation and therefore depending on which party was in power, could either share in the benefits of power and political largesse or be excluded.

Instead of fighting this system of political patronage, some youth felt it might be easier to accept and make use of it, and to profess allegiance to those in power in order to benefit from opportunities as the only way out of economic distress. Bypassing the formal structures and using systems of patronage was viewed by them as the most effective means of coping with the system. Given the failure of past movements to challenge political patronage and corruption, some youth clearly preferred opting for a more individual pursuit of their aspirations by the same means. Violence could be an option, some felt, if it helped them get ahead with this individual pursuit; but did not seem a promising avenue for transforming social injustices. In a context where there are limited resources and some lack the privileges of class or connections to bypass the inherent inequalities within the system, participating in these practices was viewed as a necessary evil.

Representatives of the political parties as well as those working with young people interviewed were also aware of this sense of apathy and cynicism among young people. Some ascribed the apathy of youth to the values and culture of the capitalist system and particularly the influence of the open economy and liberalisation programmes whose influence was reaching even rural areas. According to them, the main values influencing young people were those of consumerism and individualism whereas the discipline, sacrifice and sense of collective responsibility required by collective movements were antithetical to such values. Therefore, many felt that what was happening was a *de-politicisation* of youth and an increasing trend towards turning away not merely from collective mobilisation, but any kind of political activism unless it was instrumentally linked to some sort of personal gain.

Others felt youth cynicism was an indication of the fact that modern youth could not be manipulated as easily as in the past, since they were more aware of the failures of the past. Some also expressed

fears that youth only worked for their own advantage and not for the sake of a higher ideal; and as a result would be less resistant to corruption.

This should not be overstated to imply that political activism among youth is currently completely absent; for example, student union activity within universities is still an influential factor in university politics and political parties (particularly the JVP continues to have a strong youth membership). However, the negative opinions of youth about political processes and democratic institutions as well as their acceptance or even their complicity in using available means to reach their aspirations means that although critical of the situation, they are not necessarily committed to social change or transformation. Therefore, the general view that youth turn to violence in order to radically mobilise against unfair and unjust social systems may be somewhat out of step with current reality in districts like Hambantota.

4.5. Sense of unequal access to education and skills

One of the most outstanding features of Sri Lanka's public services is the system of free education which has been in place since before independence. However, the education system has also been blamed for churning out unemployable young people with curricula that are out of step with the labour market.

The experiences of most of the youth interviewed during this study reflected the impact of existing inequalities in accessing quality education. Only one of the youth interviewed had a degree. They did not express positive feelings about their experiences of school and obtaining education. Certainly, most of them felt that they were deprived of a good education due to their geographical location and poverty. They felt that the quality of teachers was poor in the schools they had attended and that the schools were not adequately resourced.

Many in fact expressed feelings of regret about their schooling and lack of adequate guidance from adults, which had left them not only with a lack of proper skills but also with little information or resources to figure out any career options, find employment, or make future plans: “We haven't been trained to think”, said one youth who was receiving training in a vocational training institute at that time.

The politics of language

Lack of proficiency in English is something that youth themselves, as well as policy-makers, education professionals and politicians, have identified as a significant impediment to accessing jobs, especially in the private sector.⁶⁴ The use of the English language is not just a matter of skills, however, and is a deeply divisive issue. It has its roots in Sri Lanka's colonial history, and is associated with the elite and the upper classes, which continue to dominate social, economic and political power in the country.⁶⁵ The *kind* of English spoken is in fact as important, and as indicative, of one's socio-economic background.⁶⁶

The majority of monolingual, non-urban, Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking youth are hugely affected by this effective exclusion from jobs and higher strata of society that requires proficiency in English.⁶⁷ This is experienced by most as a form of social exclusion and discrimination. The youth interviewed resented the fact that English was a pre-requisite for accessing certain jobs, despite the fact that the education system did not furnish them with this skill.

4.6. Multiple barriers to private-sector employment

Many of the programmes observed during the research viewed unemployment as rooted in a lack of the right skills (and attitudes) of young people, i.e. their weak *employability*, and thus

were aimed at improving those to prepare them for employment in the private sector or becoming self-employed. Most vocational training and other initiatives targeted youth with O/L and A/L qualifications or even those who had failed these examinations. While self-employment was also promoted as an alternative form of employment, and many of the agencies interviewed included entrepreneurship training, micro-credit support and even mentoring, there was little available information on the efficacy of such programmes or the success of self-employment as a livelihood strategy.⁶⁸ There was no evidence that vocational training for self-employment was based on any kind of market assessment or idea of feasibility or potential areas for self-employment. Some agencies provided support for starting small or medium business enterprises (such as through developing business plans, linking to micro-credit or providing equipment for starting projects), but this was not consistently done across the different projects.

However such “supply side” work only addresses part of the problem. A lack of guidance or understanding of viability of self-employment options will likely cause confusion among beneficiaries of such programmes, and make them less successful. Moreover, when it comes to jobs in the private sector, a sense of humiliation regarding “not having the right profile” and alienation prevails among young people, reinforced by programmes that seek to change their attitudes so that they “fit the bill”. As a result, youth may actually shun private-sector jobs, even where they are available.

Those youth employment programmes reviewed did not reflect such political and cultural factors that influence youth preferences for jobs in the public sector, language issues, or even the socio-economic problems faced in engaging in self-employment. These include for example young people’s difficulty in accessing finance given lack of collateral; lack of safety nets for young entrepreneurs; and lack of information on available options for business support.⁶⁹

Meanwhile given that the public sector continues to be seen by many young people as a promising source of employment, its recruitment practices and political control and discrimination in the “hand-out” of public jobs also need looking into and addressing. In addition, weak local economic structures mean that districts like Hambantota do not actually attract the level of private-sector investment from outside the district that can generate a significant amount of jobs to start with. In many rural areas, outside investment means jobs in export-oriented industries like garment factories; and here youth were suspicious of the type of jobs available in the private sector outside of the main cities, and the working conditions. Generating decent jobs in decent numbers will require strong local economic development planning at the district level, and a vision and strategies to attract investment in sectors where there is a competitive advantage, as well as socially responsible business practice. In most districts, these are currently largely absent.

4.7. Lack of gender sensitivity

At the programming level, it was evident that unemployed, educated, mostly male youth were of primary concern. Only two of the programmes reviewed for this study had a specific gender focus in their youth work and an explicit strategy for including young women in their projects. Of these, one was a women’s organisation and the other worked with unemployed youth with a specific gender focus. While in theory other programmes are open to participation from all, irrespective of gender or ethnicity, the barriers different groups may face in accessing them were not analysed or addressed.

Especially for young women, cultural norms of what is considered “appropriate” behaviour and “suitable” employment, as well as worries about personal safety, sexual harassment and reputation, are important determinants in the kinds of jobs they are likely to seek out or reject.⁷⁰ In particular, women working in industries like garment factories, migrant work, or tourism, which all require leaving their home and communities for sometimes far-flung places, face social stigma, as well as tough and often exploitative working conditions. Outside of Colombo, these are often the only job opportunities available for young women in the private sector. Reports of widespread sexual

harassment, pregnancies, abortions and sexually transmitted diseases have resulted in women workers, especially in Sri Lankan Free Trade Zones and those going for jobs to the Middle East and other countries, being viewed as victims of their own loose moral behaviour.⁷¹ Purely working on enhancing young women's skills will not address these social and cultural challenges, and the real risks young women face.

While young women were encouraged to participate in non-traditional vocational training activities, almost all programmes admitted that they had fewer participation rates among women. They also expressed concern that young women, constrained by societal limitations, would be less able to utilise the skills gained later on in viable employment. For instance, although women were given training in “non-traditional occupations” such as welding, motor mechanics, and masonry, they faced difficulties in finding employment in these sectors. Practitioners admitted that gender discriminatory practices among employers were a major barrier for entry into these non-traditional sectors by trained women.

4.8. Youth as “change agents”?

Although the potential of youth as “agents of change” and “future leaders” was stressed by policy-makers and practitioners, and many of the youth programmes were undertaken with the recognition of this potential, the interventions themselves did not reflect this thinking. Even though all interviewees strongly criticised prevailing economic and political systems and conditions, none of the youth programmes reviewed dealt with imparting the skills to challenge these conditions to address their own problems. Rather, there appeared to be implicit encouragement to find the means of coping *within* the system and to accept the impossibility of change or transformation. This further limits the possibility of young people to experience and use democratic means as a way of transforming their social and economic milieu through such programmes.

Moreover, if practices of patronage, clientelism and “bypassing” formal structures and processes are in fact central to the everyday life and political activity of most Sri Lankans, the transition of youths into adulthood is to a significant extent influenced by their ability to acquire a position in society from which they can develop networks that enable them to garner sufficient social and political capital “to get things done,” for instance secure employment or access services.⁷² Thus the strategies employed to negotiate everyday life in fact reproduce the patronage and corruption that perpetuate structural inequalities and discrimination. As a socialisation process, it may also make it less likely that young people, as they enter adulthood, will act as social critics or change agents.

Again, purely working with young people on their skills, at a project level, will not help address these much wider socialisation challenges, and what are essentially deep problems of governance.

5. Conclusions, key lessons and recommendations

As is evident from the previous sections, policy initiatives as well as youth programmes in Hambantota seeking to reduce conflict by means of job creation have struggled with several gaps:

- **Analytical gap:** Programmes were not necessarily informed by a thorough analysis of the multiple factors that contribute to youth frustrations and resentments; or indeed the multiple factors inhibiting young people from accessing jobs. The nature and forms that violence at the community level may take in the future could be different from past large-scale youth insurgencies, due to the changes in the political and social context in Sri Lanka described earlier in the paper. For instance, there are already indications that random, personal and petty acts of violence are on the increase within communities, as is violence to protect particular vested interests.
- **Strategy gap:** As a result, strategies for addressing either unemployment, or youth unrest, were not well developed or clearly defined (that is, their “theories of change” flowing from their interventions to wider impacts were not well articulated).⁷³
- **Programming gap:** When it comes to youth unemployment itself, most interventions targeted principally supply-side issues. This is an important contribution to making young people more employable; however many of the constraints faced are actually on the *demand* side, i.e. the availability, appropriateness, and accessibility of job options. On the peacebuilding side, programmes did not set out to equip or empower young people to engage critically with and tackle some of the other serious concerns and frustrations they experience (which can also, arguably, fuel conflict), namely a deep sense of social injustice, various types of discrimination, and corruption.
- **Implementation gap:** Meanwhile, those policy initiatives that have generated strong findings and recommendations have not been effectively implemented or turned into changed practice on the ground.

As a result, these factors make it difficult to assess how far programmes have had a positive impact on the problems identified – either in terms of job creation, or peacebuilding. Overall, there also emerged a serious *trust* gap: mistrust was evident on the part of young people about politicians’ and policy-makers’ motives; the private sector’s willingness to give them decent jobs; and the equity of development efforts. On the part of development practitioners themselves, while youth potential was mentioned consistently, there was a clear undercurrent of mistrust of young people for their “propensity to violence”; lack of political judgment and easy malleability; emotional immaturity; and lack of right attitudes for employment. Such mutual perceptions are bound to affect the effectiveness of youth programming, be that through job creation or otherwise, for peacebuilding; but more importantly the *quality* of engagement between young people and adults, be that as employers or development practitioners.

Many of these factors are present, in perhaps a similar or somewhat different shape, in other conflict-affected countries where young people are seen to be a “risk” to peace. Several overall lessons from Sri Lanka may find resonance in other conflict contexts:

- **Greater clarity is needed about the multiple factors causing youth participation in armed conflict:** More research and analysis is required to better understand the causes and drivers of youth resentment, grievances, and whether and how these lead to unrest. Youth unrest

cannot be seen in isolation from the context that has generated it, or as an inevitable characteristic of the biological or social category of youth. Young people's grievances are not limited to unemployment, but include social, political and cultural issues as well.

- **Likewise, youth unemployment cannot be looked at as an isolated problem:** Its roots lie deep in social, cultural, economic and political structures and dynamics, as illustrated by some of the issues emerging from the district-level research. Enhancing young people's skills, while necessary in countries where educational curricula and job market requirements do not match, will not be sufficient to overcome these barriers.
- **“Youth” heterogeneity must be acknowledged:** It is also important that the heterogeneity of youth is recognised and the ways in which issues such as ethnicity, geography and class shape experiences of youth in different ways is understood. This also requires disaggregated data on youth by sex and age; as well as gender analysis of young people's experiences and needs during conflict.
- **Different forms of youth militarisation must be considered:** Viewing unemployed youth as “at risk” of joining armed groups is only part of the story. As is the case the world over, for many unemployed, often rural, youth, the comparatively good pay and prestige of the state armed forces make it an attractive employment option. And, evidently, far larger numbers tend to be part of the armed forces than insurgency groups. While some view this as a potentially positive form of socialisation,⁷⁴ in countries affected by protracted armed conflict, the negative impacts are likely to outweigh possible positive ones. These different types of youth militarisation have implications, not only for “post-war” DDR efforts, but also Security Sector Reform (SSR).
- **Youth awareness of corruption and patronage breeds disillusionment and cynicism:** The research illustrated that young people are very aware of and affected by the surrounding decay of political systems led by adults. In the case of the youth interviewed for this research, disillusionment with “the system” was coupled with a strong degree of cynicism and willingness to take advantage of the same structures, along the lines of ‘if you can't beat them, join them’. This obviously has implications for bad governance being “learned” by young people and reinforced.
- **Youth apathy may hold as many risks as youth mobilisation:** In many conflict contexts, collective mobilisation of youth for the purpose of armed insurgency or revolution is identified as a major conflict risk. However another serious challenge for peacebuilding usually receives much less attention: an emerging disillusionment and resulting disinterest among many youth in social change and transformation. Two potential causes for concern follow: one, political currents with a tendency to establish and protect oppressive political regimes are likely to benefit from such youth apathy. Second, youth apathy in social and political issues does not mean young people will become less willing to turn to violence; the type and purpose may however change, to include for example more random acts of violence for more individualist purposes.
- **Young people's aspirations need to be recognised, and reflected in policies and programmes:** Instead of merely paying lip service to the potential of youth, genuine effort is needed to understand youth aspirations and concerns and ensure their participation and leadership in community and national policy-making and development. This means trusting youth and allowing them to define for themselves aims for their own lives, but also for wider society.

Recommendations:

Specifically, the study illustrates the key roles of *both* public and private sectors in tackling youth unemployment. Here, it generates the following main points:

- **Strong vision and leadership are needed to tackle youth employment and participation, at national and district levels:** At the national level, a fairly participatory, multi-stakeholder and inclusive process to formulate the National Action Plan for Youth Employment has been largely stalled since its Cabinet approval in December 2006. The momentum behind this initiative, which provides a potentially valuable platform for policy dialogue and change, needs to be rekindled, with active involvement from government, civil society, the private sector and the donor community. At the district level, generating decent jobs in decent numbers will require strong local economic development planning, and a vision and strategies to attract investment in sectors where there is a competitive advantage, as well as socially responsible business practice.
- **The multiple barriers to accessing private-sector jobs need to be understood and addressed:** At the risk of stating the obvious, the private sector needs to be in a position to create, not just new jobs, but new jobs in the places where it matters for the large majority of young people: across different regions of Sri Lanka, importantly, areas outside Western Province. For this, an enabling environment needs to be in place that facilitates and incentivises appropriate private-sector investment in the regions, which is currently not the case in Sri Lanka. The private sector's profit motive needs to be recognised by state, local government and other actors that seek to attract investment to the district level. Secondly, young people felt that many of the jobs created (often casual, or non-skilled labour) did not match with their own aspirations, and they were rather suspicious of private-sector jobs, fearful of exploitation, and bitter about the discrimination they felt they would face in trying to access them.
- **The private sector needs to address real and perceived discrimination in its hiring practices:** In order to start attracting more young people to private-sector jobs, businesses need to start getting their own house in order. Better understanding is needed by the private sector about the multiple challenges faced by young people in the labour market and in the private sector itself. For this, more dialogue is needed between private-sector bodies, youth organisations and youth leadership, and youth experts. The private sector also needs to reach out to educational institutes to forge partnerships to strengthen curricula that prepare young people for entry into the job market.
- **The public sector remains an important source of employment, but recruitment needs to be sustainable.** As the National Action Plan for Youth Employment states, self-employment and private-sector employment cannot be regarded as the only solution to tackling youth unemployment. However the current demand for government jobs, as opposed to other sources of employment, is not sustainable, and open to political manipulation. In the past, large-scale public-sector recruitment drives have also been used as “stop-gap” measures, or to pacify youth demands. Public-sector recruitment policies and procedures need improving to guard against these problems; and employment opportunities generated need to reflect the levels and kinds of human resource needs of the public sector, and the services and development outcomes it aims to deliver.

Endnotes

- 1 World Bank (2007a).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 World Bank (2007).
- 4 ILO (2008).
- 5 UN (2005).
- 6 UN (2003).
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Collier and Hoeffler (2004).
- 9 See for example Cincotta, R. (2005)
- 10 See Hettige and Mayer (2002) for an analysis of the ways in which youth in different parts of the country described the problems they faced.
- 11 See for example, Mayer and Salih (2003); Sidharthan (2008).
- 12 A 20-year old Rwandan, quoted in WCRWC (2000).
- 13 This section draws heavily on Kemper (2005).
- 14 The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) has been at the forefront of these efforts. See for instance (WCRWC, 2000).
- 15 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and regular reports by the UN Secretary General on Children in Armed Conflict (e.g. A/51/306).
- 16 "Youth" is defined differently in different countries, and age is only one marker that distinguishes "adolescence" from "adulthood". The UN and World Bank refer to the age group between 15–24 as youths.
- 17 UN (2005).
- 18 See, for example, Nagarayan (2005).
- 19 See, for example, Brett and Specht (2004).
- 20 Paffenholz (2002).
- 21 The Washington-based peacebuilding organisation Search for Common Ground, for example, has a conceptually and strategically well-developed body of work involving children and young people in media programmes for peacebuilding. For more information, see www.sfcg.org
- 22 Kemper (2005).
- 23 For example, see USAID (2005).
- 24 See <http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding/>. Given the role of the Commission in advising a number of different conflict-affected countries, many of which face youth employment issues (e.g. in Burundi and Sierra Leone), the issue is likely to arise in its work at some point.
- 25 See <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/yen/>
- 26 The UN Global Compact is an initiative set up in 1999 to encourage businesses to partner with UN agencies to work towards achieving development goals. Member companies sign up to the ten Global Compact Principles, four of which address labour issues that are relevant for youth unemployment in many GC local networks; it also recently set up a working group on labour issues. See <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/>
- 27 See UN (2008).
- 28 See UN Millennium Declaration, UN General Assembly resolution A/res/55/2.
- 29 For example, Hettige (1996 & 1997).
- 30 For example, SDA (1997).
- 31 Uyangoda (2003)
- 32 See for instance Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007).
- 33 Fernando (2008).
- 34 2006 School Census, Department of Census and Statistics.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Jayaweera and Shanmugam (2002).
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Gunawardene (2003).
- 39 Jayaweera and Shanmugam (2002).

- 40 Department of Census and Statistics (2007).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007).
- 43 Amarasuriya (2007).
- 44 Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007).
- 45 Statement made by Minister of Labour at the launch of the YEN Youth Unemployment Report, September, 2007.
- 46 World Bank (2006), cited in Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007).
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 ILO and SPARC (forthcoming).
- 49 This section is based on Mayer (2002b).
- 50 CASS/SAI (2000), Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest (1990), Peiris (1996 a & b), Uyangoda (1995).
- 51 Welligama youth, female, 20 yrs, O/L educated/National Youth Survey (2000). Cited in Hettige and Mayer (2002).
- 52 Mayer (2000).
- 53 Hambantota youth, male, 18 yrs, O/L educated/ National Youth Survey (2000). Cited in Hettige and Mayer (2002).
- 54 This section is based on Galapatti, Gunasekara, and Mayer (2007, unpublished).
- 55 A draft National Youth Policy drafted in 2007 drew heavy public criticism that it had allegedly plagiarized sections from the South African Youth Policy. It was subsequently shelved and attempts to formulate a new policy have been slow to take off.
- 56 The National Action Plan for Youth Employment of 2007 was generally viewed as a broadly participatory and consultative process; however since the final plan got endorsed and published, it is unclear what steps have been taken to implement it.
- 57 World Bank (2007b).
- 58 Department of Census and Statistics (2002).
- 59 Department of Census and Statistics (2005).
- 60 International Water Management Institute (2005)
- 61 Hettige and Mayer (2002).
- 62 Historically, the areas ruled by the Sinhalese kings were divided into areas known as Ruhuna, Maya, and Pihiti. The south of the country, including the modern district of Hambantota, was known as the Ruhuna. King Dutugemunu, the hero of the Mahavamsa Chronicles, purportedly responsible for “uniting” the country after winning the war against the Tamil king Elara who ruled in the north, was a prince from the royal family that ruled the Ruhuna area.
- 63 The fact that they thought they had the blood of King Dutugemunu in them also made them believe that that they are of “true Sinhala” lineage, according to some respondents.
- 64 This section draws from an earlier paper by Amarasuriya (2007, unpublished).
- 65 These divisive politics of language are acknowledged by policy-makers: the Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest of 1990 for example mentions the notion of “kaduwa” (sword) in describing the deep divisions over the use of English, used especially in universities to describe the power that the English-speaking elite are seen to have to “cut down” the Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking majority (Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest, 1990).
- 66 “Not-pot” English is a disparaging reference to the “incorrect” usage of the English language as exemplified by the pronunciation of these two words (Gunasekara, 2005).
- 67 Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest (1990).
- 68 Weeratunga (2008).
- 69 Ministry of Youth Affairs (2007).
- 70 An example is the concept of *lajja-baya* which was mentioned on several occasions, and can be roughly translated as “a fear of shame” or “respectability”. The fear of being labelled without *‘lajja-baya’* is very much a part of the socialisation process of young women, and likely to affect which jobs they will or will not go for. See also de Alwis (1997).
- 71 Hewamanne (2003).
- 72 Based on Galappatti et al. (2007, unpublished).
- 73 See for example OECD (2008).
- 74 World Bank (2007a).

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