Sri Lanka has achieved a rapid growth rate of over 6 per cent annually, after ending the brutal separatist war in 2009. Government has promoted productive employment programmes for its citizens for peacebuilding, lowering the total unemployment rate from 8.3 per cent in 2004 to 4 per cent in 2012. (Central Bank of Sri Lanka) Yet, unemployment among young people remains significantly high.

Youth unemployment and underemployment

At an unemployment rate of 18.9 per cent for youth aged between 15 and 19 years old and 11.3 per cent for youth aged between 20 and 29 years old in 2012, the country faces a potential socio-economic challenge. (Central Bank of Sri Lanka) Most of them are self-employed or work for small enterprises. Better educated young people often choose to remain unemployed and bid their time trying to attain jobs in the public sector because of job security, good remuneration packages and high social status. In contrast, those with lower education and from vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds are mostly underemployed in informal sectors, which are characterized by a lack of social protection, career advancement and training opportunities. (Secretariat for Senior Ministers, 2012)

The Government strongly supports enterprise growth and increase in productivity and efficiency to promote national economic growth and decent job opportunities for young people.

Young women

There is a prevalence of cultural and social barriers for female employment, evidenced by higher unemployment rate of young women (24.2 per cent against 16 per cent for young men, for youth aged between 15 and 24 years old in 2013) and gender disparity in wages. (Secretariat for Senior Ministers, 2012) To handle the underlying issues of gender discrimination in the work place, the Government aims to strengthen legal and institutional infrastructure and encourage entrepreneurship development among women and skills development in information technology, nursing and hospitality industry. It also cooperates with the big players in the private sector to increase recruitment of female graduates and placement of more women in management training programmes, while providing job search assistance to them.

Rural youth

Most rural youths are engaged in agriculture industry. According to the National Human Resources and Employment Policy for Sri Lanka (NHREP), the Government adopts strategies to increase competitiveness of the agricultural sector through practical and entrepreneurial skills training and attracting private sector investment in large and medium scale farming and food processing industry to create more decent job opportunities for young people in rural areas.

Child labour

The Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act sets the minimum age for employment at 14 and employment in hazardous work at 18. In 2012, 9.2 per cent of children were reported to be working. (United States Department of Labor, 2012) Children who are unable to access school are particularly vulnerable to the worst forms of child labour, with some being trafficked internally for commercial sexual exploitation and others found in bonded forced labour. The Sri Lanka’s Roadmap to 2016 specifies time bound goals to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.
External labour migration
In 2010, over 24 per cent of total labour force sought employment abroad, mainly in Middle East (56.1 per cent in 2012). (Central Bank of Sri Lanka) With only 1.5 per cent of total migrant workers working in professional jobs, the Government aims to promote skilled migration through better skills training to ensure that nationals choose migration by choice. (Secretariat for Senior Ministers, 2012) It has also established a number of bilateral agreements with labour receiving countries to protect migrant workers overseas.

Education and Skills Development
Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is traditionally considered as the option for “dropouts” and “failures” of the formal educational systems. However, the Government aims to promote TVET as a preferred option for young people by improving the systems of vocational training in order to enhance the employability of first time job-seekers. A national career guidance council is proposed as a public-private partnership exercise to direct and guide all career guidance activities in the country.

Government Priorities
To achieve national economic development and peace, the NHREP was stood up to invest in human resources to enhance national's knowledge, skills, creativity, entrepreneurship and productivity. Every five years, the National Youth Development Secretariat reviews the National Youth Policy to provide guidelines to harness the full potential of young Sri Lankan people to facilitate their active participation in national development for a just and equitable society.

The ILO and youth in Sri Lanka
The ILO has provided support to achieve full, decent and productive employment of young men and women since 1948. It aims to enhance employability and productivity of young people through promoting market-oriented skills training and measures to facilitate labour force entry. It also cooperates with the Government to guarantee that disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in conflict-affected regions have equitable and enhanced access to more and better job opportunities.

Policy and Programme Recommendations
As part of the United Nations System-Wide Action Plan on Youth and the National Youth Policy, the following activities can be conducted to support youth employment in Sri Lanka.

- Provide entrepreneurship and skills development programmes including agriculture and food processing industry to enhance the productivity of rural youths.
- Provide information sessions on migration and market-oriented skills development trainings for youths and support a comprehensive legal migration system to prevent exploitation of the young workers abroad
- Strengthen the employment service centers and provide career guidance available to young people including higher education graduates.
- Strengthen the capacity of the social partners and promote tripartite solutions to youth employment at both national and local levels.

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More information is available at www.ilo.org

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