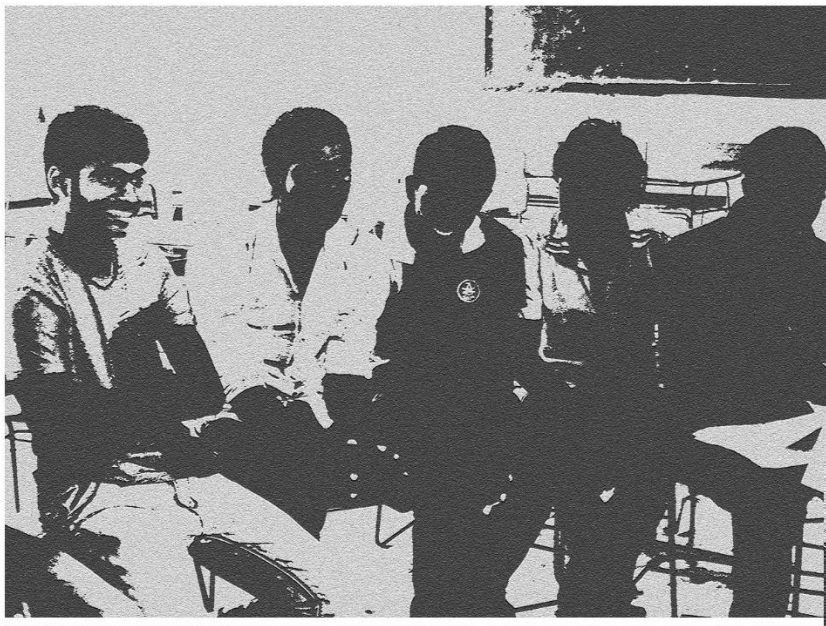
PLANTATION TAMIL YOUTH LIVELIHOOD ASPIRATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

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SOCIAL SCIENTISTS' ASSOCIATION
COLOMBO

2014

SSA SOCIAL SCIENTISTS' ASSOCIATION

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Youth aspirations and their frustrations came to the forefront of official, academic, and civil society attention in Sri Lanka from the 1970s onwards (for example, International Labour Office 1971; Presidential Commission on Youth 1990). It became recognised that, outside of a small minority from the rich and the urban middle-class, young people experienced multiple forms of discrimination leading to political, economic and social exclusion from higher education, public and formal private sector employment, grants of state land for cultivation, political representation and public office, economic development, and so on. In addition, young women are subject to gender bias and subordination in a patriarchal and socially conservative society.

Youth resentment and protest in these circumstances has occasionally manifested in the form of anti-state movements, of a non-violent and violent nature (Hettige and Mayer 2002). There have been two insurrectionary attempts by Sinhala youth in the south of the island in 1971 and 1987-1989; as well as the armed youth movements of Tamils in the north and east beginning in the early 1970s. Hundreds of thousands were drawn into these conflicts and many tens of thousands perished in them too.

In analysis of the social profile of these movements, it was found that they were led by, and initially composed of, young men with formal school education but frustrated by their inability to further their education in a public university (where education is nominally free) or to obtain white-collar public sector employment (associated with high social status and job security). In Sri Lanka, persons aged between 15 and 29 years are defined as youth and they number 23.2 percent of the total population (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 10).

However, for a range of reasons, Plantation Tamil youth have been marginal in discussion on youth policy. This group did not directly participate in the anti-state movements of the preceding four decades; although they could not escape being embroiled in those conflicts. They also did not conform to the social profile of young insurgents because most did not complete school education nor aspire for places in state universities or non-manual occupations in the state sector.

Beyond these, in any case, their social origin has long structurally excluded their community from state and society in Sri Lanka. As members of a minority ethnicity known as Tamils of recent Indian origin; as Tamil-speakers in majority Sinhala-speaking regions; as a largely stateless people stripped of their franchise and citizenship rights (and therefore legal documentation) until quite recently; and as a community whose place of work, residence and recreation were in the same enclosed geographical space (the estate), Plantation Tamils were segregated and isolated from the mainstream; and with limited opportunities for mobility.

Consequently, even within their peer group, and in mobilisation and representation of young people's issues and interests, Plantation Tamil voices are rarely heard. At the same time, activism on Plantation Tamil issues has been focused in recent decades on issues of electoral and state reform to secure greater political representation in local, provincial and national governments; while trade unions have confined themselves to wage bargaining with employers. Therefore, even within the Plantation Tamil community, there is limited interest in youth concerns and issues.

This double-neglect from both within and without the Plantation Tamil community, is the main justification for the present research on Plantation Tamil youth aspirations and challenges in relation to their livelihoods.

The core questions that the research study sought to investigate are as follows:

- *How are Plantation Tamil Youth livelihood aspirations constructed (as well as differentiated by gender), and in ways that are unique to an ethnic minority community of rural agricultural workers in spatially segregated areas?*
- *Why are Plantation Tamil Youth in off-estate employment concentrated (or 'trapped') in low-paid, low-skilled occupations in the unorganised sector that do not offer job security, rights at work, and social protection?*

1.1 Background

The Plantation Tamil community is a subset of a larger group of Tamils of recent Indian Origin; which is Sri Lanka's third largest ethnic minority community (after Tamils originating in the North and East of the island, followed by the ethno-religious Muslim community). 'Indian Tamils', as they are officially classified, number in excess of 842,000 or 4.2 percent of the total population of 20.48 million. Mostly Hindu by religion, there is also a substantial Christian minority of different denominations.

Their enumeration is believed to be grossly flawed by many political and civil society representatives of this community. There is anecdotal evidence that many Tamils of recent Indian-Origin have self-identified themselves as 'Sri Lankan Tamils' instead of as 'Indian Tamils', in the national census, particularly since the restoration of their citizenship rights in the late 1980s and onwards. Their actual number may therefore be anywhere between 1.2 and 1.5 million, or between 6 and 8 percent of the population (Devaraj 2006: 39-65).

Sri Lanka's plantation community has its origins in the mid-to-late 19th century. As the colonial economy became more integrated in the world market, the British administration encouraged the cultivation for export of coffee on industrial lines, that is in plantations or estates owned and operated by private proprietors and later companies. Coffee being a seasonal crop, only temporary labour was

required to work for short periods on the estates. In the absence of 'free' wage labour, as villagers in areas adjacent to the estates were not landless nor without other sources of income, the proprietors began recruiting workers from southern India. These male workers would travel across the Palk Straits to pick coffee for a few months each year before returning to their natal villages.

However, when tea cultivation took off, following the coffee blight in the middle of the 19th century, there was requirement for a resident labour-force to be engaged in production and related activities of a perennial nature. These workers – men, women and children – immigrated from the southern districts of India, particularly the Tamil-speaking parts. In 'fine plucking' in Sri Lanka, that is the removal of the bud and the next two leaves from the tea bushes, there is the gendered belief that women's 'nimble fingers' are better suited to the task than that of men. Therefore, women's waged labour has been critical to tea production and their social reproductive role crucial to renewing the labour-force.

Over time, this community took settled form, albeit with its internal differentiations of caste (Balasundaram et al. 2009) and class. Through physical isolation on estates that were private property and therefore not freely accessible to outsiders; through linguistic and ethnic difference from the Sinhala-speaking communities in those areas; and through differences of caste, class and recent immigration from the Tamil-speaking communities in the Northern and Eastern parts of the island: a distinct ethnic consciousness and identity evolved (Skanthakumar with Rajakaruna 2014).

Plantation Tamils are dispersed across regions where tea and rubber are cultivated, mainly along and surrounding the central massif. Their numerical concentration is in the Central province (especially Nuwara Eliya district) and Uva province (especially Badulla district); even forming the local majority in certain divisions (administrative areas). Therefore, those regions have been the focus for political and civil society activism on Plantation Tamil issues and interests; as well as of research studies.

In stark comparison, there has been almost indifference towards Plantation Tamils who are local minorities in Sinhala-majority districts elsewhere; as political parties consider it difficult to secure seats in those areas under Sri Lanka's current district-based electoral system; and as the agenda of some political and civil society actors has been to promote a *Malaiyaha* (Hill-Country) Tamil identity while seeking political and cultural autonomy in their region of numerical concentration.

Nevertheless, in districts such as Moneragala, Ratnapura and Galle, there are urgent and pressing needs for the community which are simply unmet by official agencies, non-governmental agencies and the political parties that claim to represent Plantation Tamils: including their employment and social security rights, especially post-retirement; housing and land rights; improved school facilities; documentation; decent jobs; physical security from communal violence, etc.

The present research has therefore selected as its field sites low-country districts in the south-western quadrant of the island, where Plantation Tamils are an interspersed minority, being mindful of the skewed focus on the up-country region in the central highlands.

1.2 Socio-Economic Context

The estate sector has been synonymous with poverty, deprivation and social exclusion of the Plantation Tamils (Sinnathamby 2012). The plantation was structured as a 'total institution' where its workers would begin and end their life-cycle, from cradle to grave. Privately-owned from their inception, excepting for the period between 1975 and 1992 when nationalised, all the roles and services associated with the state were undertaken by estate management.

Workers and their household were accommodated in barrack-type 'line-rooms'. Their children attended the estate school which provided limited education. The estate hospital or medical clinic administered basic health care. It was only after the state take-over of the estates and with complementary funding from bilateral and non-governmental international development agencies, that schools and hospitals gradually improved, with corresponding improvements in literacy and educational level as well as primary health care and morbidity rates. Births now take place outside the estate in government hospitals, which reduced maternal and infant deaths considerably (United Nations Development Programme 2012: 7), because of their higher standard of care, better facilities and qualified staff in comparison with estate hospitals.

For decades, even as absolute levels of poverty declined in other the urban and rural sectors, the rate of reduction in the estate sector was much slower. In fact, between 1990-91 and 2002, the poverty headcount in the estates actually increased (coinciding with the transition from nationalised to privatised management and ownership), leading one multilateral agency to suggest: "poverty in the estates is endemic and linked to factors that affect the sector as a whole and to factors that have changed little over time" (World Bank 2007: 90).

Nevertheless, the most recent data from 2012 presented below, shows an overall dramatic improvement in several indicators for social and human development, in relation to the estate sector in preceding years. Thus there has been reduction in the poverty head count; average household income has risen considerably; there is greater access to energy and light; and sanitation has improved.

TABLE 1: SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS

2012 (provisional)	ESTATE	RURAL	URBAN	ALL-ISLAND
Poverty Head-Count Index (%)	6.2	7.5	2.4	6.5
Household Income (LKR per month)	31,895	42,184	68,336	46,207
Education (up to Grade 5 only) (%)	41.6	24.5	19.5	24.4
Electricity (%)	82.8	87.5	97.0	88.9
Drinking Water Source (Safe) (%)	43.2	89.0	98.7	88.7
Roof-Type (Permanent) (%)	33.4	91.3	95.0	89.5
Toilet Facilities (Exclusive for Household) (%)	75.9	90.8	88.6	89.8

Source: Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka 2014, Central Bank of Sri Lanka: Colombo, various tables and pages

However, as the statistics above also illustrate and as is underlined by poverty studies, the estate sector lags behind even the rural sector in many other areas.

The average household income is lower than in the rural sector, which is probably because of the greater dependence of estate households on income from estate work which is low; whereas rural households generally have more diversified sources of income such that their dependence on earnings from farm-work is reducing over time.

Access to potable drinking water is a continuing challenge for estate residents, as demand increases over time for household and other uses, including livestock rearing and vegetable cultivation. There are conflicts within the estates, between households at different elevations and therefore differential access to water; as well as conflicts between estates and the villages surrounding them in the case of shared water sources.

A stark disparity is evident in the quality of housing on estates in comparison to the rural and urban sectors. As mentioned earlier, the traditional type of worker housing on estates is the line-room, which is well below the standard for decent shelter. Since the 1980s, there have been efforts to improve and expand existing housing and build better types such as twin cottages or single houses. However, over 60 percent of housing still comprises of line-rooms and as the data above reveals, most housing lacks permanent roof materials which is a major issue in a physical environment subject to storms, heavy rains, gale-force winds, and earth-slips.

The incidence of malnutrition among children under the age of five, and of anaemia in expectant mothers, is also much higher in the estate sector in comparison to the urban and rural sectors. Thus, almost 46 percent of estate children were underweight in comparison to 31 percent of rural children and almost 18 percent of children in urban areas (World Bank 2007: 58). The main causes are food supply and poor knowledge of nutritious foods.

The implications of this background need to be grasped in full measure, to appreciate the consequences on the full physical and mental development of estate youth. The historical and institutional legacy of neglect and discrimination shapes their educational performance, their attitudes about themselves and their communities, and their aspirations for their own future.

1.3 Literature Review

There are few studies on Plantation youth in general and their aspirations including livelihood expectations, which is one justification for the present research. Understandably, each study also has its particular focus and limitations of scope, field sites and so on.

Vijesandiran (2002) locates the situation of Plantation youth within socio-economic processes of development affecting the plantation sector, to argue that despite their rural location, the condition of young people on the tea and rubber estates is not identical to those of rural youth of Sinhala ethnicity in the surrounding areas. His research is based on a survey sample of 800 plantation youth in eight districts: Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Matale, Badulla, Kegalle and Ratnapura.

The author sees the out-migration of Plantation Youth to towns and cities as inimical to the socio-economic development of the Plantations. This point of view is common among trade union and political party representatives of the Plantation community for whom there is vested interest in sustaining a distinct identity as Plantation Tamils with a captive and resident population to be monopolised by these actors as members and voters.

His recommendations centre on addressing problems and devising solutions in three broad areas: (i) education and skills; (ii) government programmes and policies and (iii) institutional reform or building (Vijesandiran 2002: 82-84).

The experiences of Plantation Youth in the unorganised sector are explored by Muralitharan (2003?). His study sampled 544 males and 187 female youth in 14 divisions of four districts: Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Kandy and Ratnapura. The majority of plantation youth sampled were employed in shops, 'hotels' (that is, restaurants), and in garment factories. The author argues that the main task facing trade unions and non-governmental organisations is organise informal sector workers including through non-formal and creative strategies such as mutual assistance funds, counselling, welfare associations, providing labour market information, etc.

One significant finding is that the level of educational attainment – that is ordinary-level or advanced level – did not determine the type of regular employment in the informal sector. Rather, gender was a greater determinant of occupation.

Women were concentrated in domestic work, garments and other light manufacturing industry, and in minor administrative and clerical roles. Men were employed as salespersons in textiles, groceries, jewellery and pharmacy stores; as well as in commercial establishments such as bakeries, restaurants and hotels; and to a lesser extent in tailoring, driving and as barbers (Muralitharan 2003?: 16-18). Males in casual or temporary employment were in the non-plantation agricultural sector, construction, gardeners, sweepers, private bus conductors. Plantation youth in self-employment were agricultural workers, three wheel drivers, street vendors, poultry and livestock farming, home-based micro enterprises, and in illegal activities such as moonshine (kasippu) distillation and sale, gem-mining and quarrying (Muralitharan 2003?: 21).

Kamalarathana and Galhitiyawa (2010) set out to understand the nature of aspirations among estate youth, based on 10 case-studies and 5 focus group discussions in private and state-owned estates in Badulla, Kandy and Nuwara Eliya, and the factors that have influenced those aspirations.

A shared aspiration among male and female youth is to leave the plantation for the city (that is Colombo or other towns). They believe that there are greater opportunities for them there; and that the rewards and experiences will be more satisfying than those on the estate. Women and men who were surveyed also associated greater opportunities for their children outside of the estate. This included access to schools with better facilities and teachers than estate schools.

The plantation is recognised to be a cage or trap, whose inmates can never escape from the endless cycle of poverty, alcoholicism, domestic violence, and under-employment. However, women were more cautious or wary of leaving the estate, because of the gendered risks and insecurities of living and working outside of their household, community and estate.

According to the authors, the major factors that shape these aspirations are the impact of the media especially satellite television that broadcasts South Indian teledramas; as well as the example of Plantation youth who migrated to urban centres and return with cash and consumer goods as well as tales of the city.

1.4 Methodology

The first phase of the study began with desk research to review the literature on Plantation Tamil youth. In this period, there was also scoping of potential field sites in the plantations in the Galle and Ratnapura districts. Efforts had to be made to establish contacts on the estates and to assess feasibility of focus group discussions on-site; as well as to establish the criteria for the youth participants ensuring diversity rather than homogeneity.

The second phase of the study was to conduct focus group discussions on the selected estates. In Divitura Estate near Elpitiya in Galle district, there was one discussion with a 9 woman group and

another with a group of 7 men. The purpose of segregation of the genders was to create a space for young women in particular to speak freely. In Springfield Estate near Rakwana in Ratnapura district, there was one discussion with 8 men and another with 6 women.

Interviews were also conducted with key informants in the respective districts such as the Youth Services Officers in respective divisional secretariats; the Principal of an estate school; the Job Placement Officer at the Vocational Training Authority; and the CEO of a non-governmental organisation.

The third phase of the study was to review transcripts of the interviews; discuss and interrogate them internally with colleagues; and to prepare the research report. Concurrently, there were key informant interviews with stakeholder representatives in Colombo, based upon field data and observation.

Those interviewed were representatives of the National Youth Services Council that operates across the island through over 11,000 youth clubs with a membership of over 443,000; the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), which is a state-funded statutory provider of technical education; the semi-governmental Thondaman Foundation that runs Prajashakthi E-Kiosks in several estates providing IT and internet access as well as awareness raising activities for youth; and the Berendina Foundation, which is a non-governmental organisation active in service provision in the plantations as well as in self-employment programmes.

As the focus of the research was on the resident plantation sector community, the study excludes the smallholding tea and rubber sector. Previous studies of the Plantation Tamil community have been in high elevation estates largely in the Central and to a lesser extent Uva provinces. To understand the conditions and experiences of Plantation Tamil youth in other parts of the island, the field sites chosen for this study were in low and mid-elevation estates in the districts of Galle (in the Southern province) and Ratnapura (in the Sabaragamuwa province). These estates produced both tea and rubber. They are privately owned (by regional plantation companies), and with a long resident plantation community population.

In Sri Lanka, 'youth' is defined as persons between the ages of 15 and 29. However, for the purposes of the present study, the Plantation Tamil youth who were interviewed were aged between 16 and 24. This was to narrow in on the age-group which is in transition from school to work. The youth who participated in Focus Group Discussions were all resident on estates.

2.0 LABOUR MARKET DEVELOPMENTS

Since the 'open economy' or liberal economic reforms after 1977, Sri Lanka's production base and distribution of employment has changed rapidly. At time of independence in 1948, the island's economy was mainly agricultural with paddy and coconut grown for domestic consumption and tea and rubber cultivated for export revenues. The industrial sector was small: mainly light industries related to the agro-export trade; household items; food and beverages. The service sector was already showing dynamism as urbanisation and the middle class grew, buoyed by the rubber boom during the Korean war.

However, soon prices of primary commodities fell, while the import bill for finished and intermediate manufactured goods; oil; and food items increased. The balance of payments crisis worsened following the decline in tea revenues following bad weather affecting yields, while the price of oil quadrupled in the early 1970s. The balance of payments crisis intensified, coupled with rising levels of youth unemployment and under-employment.

The incoming government in 1977 was pro-market and pro-private capital. It deregulated the import-export trade and the domestic economy; and introduced foreign investment friendly incentives and reforms. The objectives of the reforms were to diversify the economic base from agriculture to industry; to boost foreign exchange through export-oriented industrialisation; and to increase employment opportunities through greater private sector dynamism.

Since the shift to export-oriented industrialisation in the late 1970s, the export of industrial goods (primarily ready-made-garments) has been the largest single source of export earnings and contributes over 30 percent of gross domestic product (double what it has been in 1950). In 2013, earnings from industrial exports peaked at USD7.749 billion; of which textiles and apparels constituted USD4.5 billion (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014b: 129).[1]

Meanwhile, the agricultural sector's share of economic output has dwindled from 35 percent in 1950 to a little over 11 percent presently. The services sector is the largest contributor to gross domestic product at around 59 percent or more than industry and agriculture combined.

In fact, the outcomes in relation to redressing the balance of payments deficit and in stimulating employment did not match the stated objectives, though there has been structural transformation of the economy [Skanthakumar 2013]. Outside of the macro-economic vision and strategy of the post-1977 governments, it was the demand for unskilled labour in the petro-dollar fuelled West Asian

[1] There is high level of import dependence on the primary and intermediate goods for industrial production, unlike in the agro-export sector, which markedly reduces net revenues. The major markets for industrial exports are the United States, the United Kingdom and India.

economies, that buffeted the crisis caused by structural adjustment at household and national level. Each year, many tens of thousands of women leave the island to work as domestic servants in Arab households. Their salary that is remitted is Sri Lanka's largest source of foreign revenue, now in excess of USD6 billion each year.

There was also an exponential expansion in the size of the armed forces and police in the context of Sri Lanka's long war (between 1983 and 2009). Many hundreds of thousands of young men and to a lesser extent women were recruited over the years. Indian-Origin Tamils were of suspect loyalty because of their ethnicity and were not recruited into the armed forces. Small numbers joined the police force but faced ethnic discrimination and rarely stayed on. The educational qualifications for promotion were in any case often absent among the Plantation Tamils.

2.1 Trends

The main labour market trends that accompanied the economic changes were that agricultural employment as a share of total employment shrank; industrial employment grew considerably; while service sector jobs expanded becoming the main source of new jobs.

As of the last quarter of 2013, the labour-force in Sri Lanka was 8.7 million (out of a total population of almost 21 million); of which 64.6 percent were males and 35.4 percent were females. The low rate of female participation in the labour force (in comparison with other South Asian countries), has been a puzzle for many decades. The high rates of literacy among women and the visible presence of women in waged labour since the 19th century would otherwise suggest greater equality of labour force participation with men. However, this is not the case.

Meanwhile, the influence of neoliberal ideology that promotes contraction of the state sector and its substitution in service provision by the private sector, underpinned by the conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment programmes that Sri Lanka embarked upon after 1978, slowed public sector recruitment.

The growth of the public sector post-independence had reflected political and public consensus on the social welfarism as a goal of state policy. Thus, in addition to the expansion of schools and hospitals, and the spread of administrative services and cadre into local government, the state also nationalised certain strategic industries and services such as the port, oil and gas, bus transport while also establishing public corporations in steel, paper, import and export, as well as retail.

As the language of state switched from English to Sinhala after 1956, Sinhala-educated rural youth who were also now benefiting from the social investments that improved the quality of their education allowing many to enter state universities too, were attracted to jobs in the public sector. This employment had in any case long been prestigious as it is associated with a job for life, allowances and benefits, pension upon retirement and high social status (Hettige 2005). So long as the official language had been English, only minor grades were able to accommodate vernacular

(Sinhala and Tamil) educated youth. Once, Sinhala displaced English, the door was opened to Sinhala-educated youth to aspire to higher staff grades and career advancement within the public sector.

Clearly, Tamil-speakers were in the main excluded from these opportunities. In the Tamil-speaking North and East, where administrative services had to be staffed by Tamil-speakers, there was some opening for Tamil-speakers to be employed. However, these jobs were monopolised by better-educated Northern Tamils who had the formal qualifications for recruitment as well as social networks to apply for posts. The Tamil-speaking Muslim community and Indian-Origin Tamils from the plantation sector in particular were rarely able to compete for these jobs.

One interesting trend is that changes in the composition of employment between the agricultural and industrial sectors in particular, have not matched the changing composition of economic production, as illustrated below. That is, agricultural employment continues to be very important despite its declining contribution to the economy; while the growth of manufacturing employment has been slow despite its increasing contribution to gross domestic product. The most dynamic sectors of the economy have not stimulated employment in proportion to their growth; and most of the jobs that are created lack permanency with its attendant labour and social security benefits; are unregulated by protective labour laws including occupational safety and health as well as restrictions on over-time and guarantee of paid holiday leave; and without collective bargaining and trade union rights.

TABLE 2.1: DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT ACROSS SECTORS

SECTOR	1948	1971	1981	1990	1998	2000	2012
Agriculture	62	50	45.5	47.1	39.1	36.0	31.0
Manufacturing/ Industry	7	9	9.9	13.6	22.0	23.7	26.1
Services/Other	31	41	44.6	39.3	39.0	40.3	42.9

In manufacturing employment, the new jobs created were in the export-oriented sector and based upon women's labour. This helped to boost women's labour force participation. It created new kinds of employment for rural Sinhala women in particular, who migrated to the Export Processing Zones in the Western and Southern provinces. In the initial stages, recommendation letters for jobs were provided by government parliamentarians. Unsurprisingly, these MPs favoured their constituents and family members of their known political supporters. Once again, Plantation Tamils were excluded from this patronage. Further the private sector companies preferred Sinhala speakers for ease of management, as their own supervisory staff would not have been able to communicate in Tamil.

In the formal private sector too, there is structural discrimination against Plantation Tamils, as recruitment to middle-level and higher positions depends on English-speaking ability. The proficiency in English in plantation areas is poor because of the poor quality of English-teaching in estate schools as well as environmental factors which make Sinhala and not English the second language for most. Non-English speaking youth of all ethnicities have felt excluded from blue-chip private sector firms because of the operation of elite school networks where past pupils favour the recruitment of former students of their own schools.

Lakshman (2004: 290) also observes that despite the growth of self-employment (own-account workers), this is not a dynamic sector in capitalist market terms. Much of it is undertaken by house-wives who are seeking to combine unpaid domestic work with income generating activities. However, they lack the capital and technical know-how to grow their businesses even where it has survived and stabilised. Their market base tends to be small and highly localised. They are also vulnerable to losing their customers to competitors, from the informal and formal sector. Plantation Tamils have generally shown limited interest in self-employment. This can be attributed to difficulties of raising seed capital; of access to land for livelihood activities; and of marketing and distribution networks.

2.2 Youth Unemployment

According to official statistics, the rate of unemployment has declined sharply in the past decade. It is now estimated at 4.1 percent. Women are three times as likely to be unemployed as men. However, the definition of both employment and unemployment is highly controversial. The consensus is that open unemployment is low; while under-employment is high. The more illuminating statistic is that unemployment is concentrated among the age-group of 15-24 (Department of Census and Statistics 2014: 11). In other words, youth unemployment is the highest among all age groups: around 19 per cent of the total unemployed.

Trends in the 1990s indicate that first time job seekers are a very high proportion of the unemployed (Lakshman 2004: 278). While their numbers were initially evenly spread across the urban and rural (including estate) sector; by the end of the 1990s, the numbers were heavily skewed towards the urban sector: in other words, it was easier for first time job seekers to find work in the urban sector, whereas in the rural sector employment opportunities were fewer.

A persistent trend is that the more years of schooling, the greater the likelihood to be unemployed. Those with the highest level of educational attainment are unlikely to take any job that is available and for which they consider themselves to be over-qualified. Those who complete their Advanced Level in particular, but are unable to enter university, are likely to wait or 'queue' for the white-collar jobs they desire (especially in the public service or formal private sector) even if it means being out

of work for months or years. As the numbers of Plantation Tamil youth completing their Advanced Level has increased, this trend is also found among this group, particularly women.

Only around 14 percent of school-leavers eligible to enter university, are able to secure a place in a state university. This fortunate few number around 22,000 each year. Around 30,500 register for external degree programmes of public universities; while 10,000 go abroad for their studies. This leaves a larger number than those with higher education options, without suitable and affordable alternatives for their continued education (Chandrasiri 2014: 86).

The recent national human development report drawing upon an all-island youth survey observes: "the transition from school to work continues to be a rocky one, for a variety of reasons...they include a lack of marketable skills, inadequate formal private sector jobs, youth aspirations that exceed actual capabilities, low levels of entrepreneurship, and deeply entrenched social factors of class, ethnicity and caste" (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 36).

New employment is concentrated in the Western Province (including and surrounding the administrative and commercial hub of Colombo); which generates almost half of economic output. Therefore, young people in other provinces are compelled to migrate to the Western Province, especially Colombo and Gampaha districts, to find work which is unavailable nearer their homes. Youth unemployment is particularly high in the Northern Tamil-speaking districts of Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi, the Southern Sinhala-speaking districts of Moneragala and Hambantota, as well as mixed districts in the Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces (where Plantation Tamils reside). Only 10 percent of estate youth polled in the 2013 national youth survey believed their English speaking skills to be good (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 19).

Young people of all ethnicities and in all regions believe the possession of English-speaking ability and Information Technology proficiency to be the ticket to good jobs, especially outside of the public sector. However, in a vernacular Sinhala or Tamil medium education system, where the teaching of English is limited to a couple of hours a week, and where teachers of English are of dubious ability themselves, in a home and community environment where English is hardly used or heard, there is little prospect of children acquiring competence and confidence in the language. Meanwhile 60 percent of respondents in the 2013 national youth survey had never or rarely used a computer for education or learning (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 44).

2.3 Vocational and Technical Education

Based upon evidence of a mismatch between the employment opportunities that exist and the skills that are lacking among job-seekers, there has been some interest among state and non-state agencies in the provision of vocational and technical education to school-leavers. There were 291 state-funded

institutes, 898 private institutes, and 240 non-governmental providers, offering between them 711 accredited courses (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 25).

However, there are low levels of interest in VTE among school-leavers. This is also true among the Plantation Tamil youth as discussed below. One reason is suggested to be the aspiration of youth for white-collar, office-based jobs and not manual occupations that are perceived to be of lower status (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 39). However, those who do complete their VTE courses receive nationally accredited certification (National Vocational Qualifications or NVQs) that can lead to skilled and semi-skilled employment abroad, which is lucrative in comparison to public sector pay-scales and even formal private-sector pay for non-executive staff in Sri Lanka.

There is also concern that despite the heavy investment in facilities, staff and maintenance, the quality and relevance of VTE leaves much to be desired. Chandrasiri (2014: 87) draws attention to complaints of, "... outdated study programmes, inadequate facilities (teaching aids), irrelevant industrial training, insufficient practical work, poor communication between employer and the apprentice and inadequate interaction with the private sector...". Further, private sector employers also highlight "[in]ability to communicate in both local and English languages, and the lack of soft skills, i.e. creativity, problem solving, social habits, decision-making and risk-taking" (2014: 95), as shortcomings in the education system.

3.0 PLANTATION INDUSTRY

Of the three major tree crops in Sri Lanka (that is, including coconut), it is tea and rubber that have been of greatest importance to the export economy and where the plantation community are a resident labour-force.

At time of establishment, the plantations were privately owned either by proprietary planters or by companies of British origin. By the end of the 19th century, the incipient indigenous capitalist class began acquiring plantations, mainly at this stage for purposes of social status as their sources of capital accumulation were elsewhere (including arrack renting; graphite mines; and land). After independence, British owned interests began withdrawing from the plantations as well as mercantile sectors, and locals (individuals and companies) acquired their properties. However, there was nationalist sentiment that the economically strategic plantation industry be domestically controlled leading to the 1975 land reforms where all estates over 50 acres in extent were taken over by the state. Two state plantation corporations managed all these estates. Then, as the second wave of economic liberalisation began at the end of the 1980s, the state divested itself of all estates in 1992, excepting those which were loss-making and unattractive to private investors. Therefore, at present, the estate sector consists of 23 privately owned Regional Plantation Companies and the two State Corporations (Janatha Estates Development Board and Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation).

3.1 Tea Industry

Tea is grown mainly in the Central, Southern, Sabaragamuwa and Uva provinces, in decreasing order of cultivated lands. The extent of land under tea cultivation has been gradually decreasing over decades. It was around 203,000 hectares in 2011, having declined from almost 212,000 in 2005 (Ministry of Plantation Industries 2013: 3).

However, this has not resulted in a drop in tea production, as yields are higher than they were ten years ago. In 2012, for instance, Sri Lanka produced over 328 million kilograms and accounted for over 17 percent of total world tea exports; making it the fourth largest exporter after China, India and Kenya (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014a: 175).

Neither has it been adverse to foreign revenue earnings, which rose to USD1.5 billion in 2013 (Central Bank 2014b: 131). The Middle East and the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union) are now the main markets for Ceylon Tea, with a share of around 70 percent of total exports.

The government directly derives revenue from a cess or tax on tea and rubber revenues. In 1977, almost 18 percent of all receipts from taxation came from this sector [cited in Henegedara 2014: 294]. Since then it has declined. However, plantation companies and trade unions both allege that the burden of taxation imposed by the government is too high; and blame it for squeezing profit margins and by implication the commercial viability of the sector.

The ownership structure of tea cultivation has changed, as smallholders have become much more significant than company-owned estates in their respective share of landholdings as well as of production. Thus, almost 121,000 hectares are owned by smallholders; whereas around 82,000 hectares are considered to be estates.

There are 286 private estates and 35 state-owned estates (defined as holdings above 20 hectares), which are mostly located in the Central and Uva provinces. The plantation community (synonymous in Sri Lanka with Tamils of recent Indian origin) live within the boundaries of estates. In the plantation system of production, free housing is provided to workers and their households; while wages are repressed and substantially lower than the daily wage rate for labourers outside the estates.

There are around 400,000 smallholdings (defined as holdings under 20 hectares in extent), which are mostly in the Southern and Sabaragamuwa provinces, and overwhelmingly owned and operated by the Sinhala community. These are cultivated by family labour and non-resident labour from surrounding villages and estates. The non-resident labour has been of Sinhala ethnicity living in villages, as well as Tamils settled on estates in those areas but who lack land rights.

3.2 Rubber Industry

Rubber is cultivated on a smaller scale than tea in Sri Lanka, but as it is grown at low elevation is more widespread. Almost 131,000 hectares of land were under rubber cultivation in 2012 (Ministry of Plantation Industries 2013: 73). Mostly rubber is now produced for industries within Sri Lanka that manufacture rubber goods (for instance surgical and other gloves and tyres). Export earnings from rubber-based products increased to USD888 million in 2013 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014b: 129).

However, foreign earnings from raw rubber slumped to USD71 million in 2013, from the previous high of USD206 million in 2011 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014b: Table 69). Revenues from rubber production and export have been more volatile, in comparison to tea, which has affected household incomes of rubber plantation workers and increased out-migration among them for employment and their livelihoods.

Similarly to tea, it is the smallholdings that accounts for the largest share of land under cultivation (63 percent) in comparison to the estates (37 percent). There were around 127, 000 smallholdings (defined as under 20 hectares in extant) as of 2012; in comparison to 135 private estates and 9 state-owned estates (Ministry of Plantation Industries 2013: 75). The main rubber-producing districts are

Kegalle and Ratnapura (in the Sabaragamuwa province) and Kalutara (in the Western province); and there are ongoing attempts to grow it in non-traditional areas such as Hambantota and Ampara districts, as well as in the Vanni (Killinochchi, Mullaithivu and Vavuniya districts).

3.3 Oil Palm Industry

There has been some interest in diversifying into oil palm in low-country estates. Currently, around 7,780 hectares are under cultivation (Ministry of Plantation Industries 2013: 168). The government has been encouraging oil palm cultivation in order to meet consumer demand for edible oils and therefore substitute for imports. Therefore, this crop, like coconut, is primarily produced for the home market.

3.4 Cost of Production

From an employer perspective, the main threat to the viability of the tea and rubber company-owned estates is the high cost of production relative competitor countries (Henegedera 2014: 304-305). The main component of the cost of production is labour costs, followed by that of fertilisers. According to plantation companies, the labour costs are too high in relation to the productivity of the workers. However, daily wages in the tea and rubber sectors can be almost half that of daily labour charges in the rural sector (in paddy cultivation) and in the urban sector (manual jobs); which is reflected in the significantly lower household income of estate sector workers in comparison to other sectors, and even lower where the household solely depends on estate work for its income.

3.5 Extracting Profits sans Investment

As mentioned above, the company owned estates or plantations account for a declining share of the tea yields despite their acreage, in comparison to the smallholder sector. The underlying reason is that the companies are unwilling to plough back profits into the estates. Their perspective is to extract as much as revenue as possible in the lease period remaining to them; without any long-term interest in the sustenance of the plantations or its resident population. Some manifestations of this strategy with direct consequences for productivity of the plantations are as follows (Kelegama 2012).

There is inadequate replanting on utilised estate lands. The Regional Plantation Companies were expected to replant at least 2 percent of tea lands annually (which is less than the recommended 3 percent of the Tea Research Institute). However, this obligation arising from the lease agreement at time of privatisation is honoured only in its breach. There is no interest in expansion of the acreage under cultivation, only the intensified exploitation of existing tea bushes.

There is inadequate application of fertilisers to replenish nutrients in the soil because of the high cost and the absence of government subsidies unlike in the paddy sector. As the estates have been in existence for over 150 years in many cases, the soil is now depleted and unable to nourish the tea bushes on them. In the smallholder sector however, there is greater application of fertilisers and in any case, their cultivation for tea is comparatively recent and therefore the soil is of good quality.

A staggering 91 percent of all tea bushes in the company-owned estates are over 60 years old and it is not unusual to find bushes that are over a century in age. Once again, it is the cost of removing old tea bushes and planting new ones; and the lag between their planting and first harvest which disinterests the management from investing as it should.

3.6 Employment

The crisis of the plantation system itself, has intensified the ongoing problems of a marginalised and discriminated group. There has been a sharp drop in the size of the estate sector labour-force – which is now under half of what it had been before privatisation in the early 1990s – estimated to be around 205,000 directly employed workers as of 2012 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014a: 53). Therefore, the traditional source of employment within the Plantation Tamil community is drying up. While the economic structure has changed, access to new forms of employment has been limited to tiny numbers of Plantation Tamils.

Critics of the plantation companies argue that despite the employers' bemoaning the problem of labour supply, there are no incentives to encourage plantation residents to remain in estate production. There has been negligible technical improvements and therefore skilling of workers in the plucking of tea. There has been some progress in providing women workers with protective clothing (raincoats, boots etc.) as well as light-weight baskets for collection of tea leaf. However, this is not the norm everywhere as yet.

4.0 PLANTATION TAMIL YOUTH ASPIRATIONS & CHALLENGES

Plantation Tamil youth find themselves in a situation where the traditional sources of on-estate employment are diminishing and in any case unattractive to them, while the level of formal education and skills that they have is inadequate for the higher status and better remunerated employment in the public and formal private sector.

It is an in-between condition of being over-qualified for estate labour, but under-skilled for better jobs off-estate. This section draws on focus group discussions with estate youth as well as key informant interviews to understand some of the aspirations and challenges of Plantation youth.

What is common to Plantation youth of both genders and irrespective of the industry and their district or region of habitation, is an aversion to estate employment, particularly tea picking and rubber tapping.

This kind of employment, which was the staple occupation of plantation workers and their children for generations, is perceived as undesirable and even shameful among the current generation. The only on-estate employment that the focus group participants would consider, is non-field based work in the estate stores or the estate factory; both associated with higher levels of education, skill and therefore social status within the estate.

Young people on the plantations are acutely aware of the stigma attached to plantation workers in society at large; and themselves subscribe to that point of view. Plantation production is regarded as menial, unskilled, low-waged work and those who toil in the plantations are perceived as uneducated, ignorant, poorly paid, and living in conditions of squalor, poor sanitation and hygiene and in an environment of alcoholism, domestic violence, and sexual abuse.

While plantation salaries are poor in comparison to most of the formal private sector, it has been observed that Plantation youth are willing to take up jobs in non-estate work that are paid the same or even less; and where their expenditure is higher than it would be on the estate because of rent, transport costs, and buying their meals. Estate superintendents who despair of renewing the plantation labour force remark that if two members of the same household are employed on the estate and work the days that are offered to them, their combined income can reach almost Rs40,000; whereas the average individual income off-estate would be around Rs15,000.

Therefore, the urge for off-estate employment, regardless of the terms and conditions and remuneration it offers, is far more powerful than monetary considerations. The youth are driven by the desire to escape from the 'total institution' of the plantation. The world outside the estate, represents independence from the plantation and promises personal freedoms and experiences that are unknown to young people within its boundaries.

During the discussions with Plantation Youth, when asked to name the positive aspects of life on the estate, none of the participants responded affirmatively. When pressed, one young woman mentioned that the estate school was about to begin offering Advanced Level instruction. This was hopeful for the future of the resident community, as more children might continue their education beyond the Ordinary Level as they wouldn't have to travel to schools outside the estate.

4.1 Young Women's Aspirations

The aspirations of young women in the focus groups in both districts were similar. The preferred occupations were in teaching and in office jobs. Their knowledge of possible occupations was based upon jobs associated with women; and which received the social approval of their parents and community: public sector employment i.e. clerical and administrative posts or nursing; garment and other off-estate factory work.

These gendered aspirations were also influenced and informed by their role models on the estate, who are usually school-teachers from outside of the Plantation community. Their other role models are university students or graduates from within the Plantation community; who are few in number and respected for their ability for breaking through the barriers of their environment.

They were aware that information about the labour market was available online (through the internet), but when asked none were aware of the names of relevant jobsites where vacancies are advertised.

Those who were older, with children, and who had left school after their Ordinary Levels, were more open to estate employment but even then, in non-field related work such as working in the cooperative society store; in the store-room; and in the estate factory.

What was striking across the discussions was that many of the participants evinced no sense of direction or purpose. Those who were still in school remarked: "I can't say what I will do in the future". Even Advanced-Level students weren't clear about their employment aspirations, leaving it to the chance or fate of their examination results. Clearly, there is urgent need for career guidance to be provided within the estate schools; and not at best on the eve of their departure from the school system.

4.2 Young Men's Aspirations

The aspirations of young men are shaped by their social networks, particularly older male siblings, relatives and friends. These individuals who return from the city to the estate on special occasions or for festival holidays or in between employment, carry with them stories of their exploits, of sights

and sounds, and the contacts to help others find similar employment in the unorganised private sector: ranging from car wash attendants to retail supermarket assistants to helpers in eating establishments, and the like.

One of the participants was a young man who was waiting to leave for Qatar. An older relative had found him a job there, washing cars. Out-country migration has become possible for Plantation youth since the end of statelessness of the community, which allowed them to receive official documentation such as national identity cards and passports which are required by employers.

Another participant was a 21-year old factory worker in a packing establishment north of Colombo. He had been introduced to that line of work by a friend. He had no interest in studies beyond Ordinary Levels. When he as younger he had been interested in computing, but the fees would have had to come from his parents, so gave up the idea; and now had no plan of pursuing his earlier ambition.

One Advanced Level student aspired to enter university. He wished to follow a management degree and identified banking as a possible career. This was an exceptional response among the focus group participants. It was very rare to come across someone who aspired to continue their education after leaving school. It was even more unusual to meet someone with a career path mapped out.

Among the focus group participants, it was not surprising that one of the more articulate and better informed among them, was a young man who had left the plantation in his teens to live with an aunt in Colombo, where he was able to also study. His exposure to the education system outside of the plantation, and to life in the city, had given him greater familiarity with the urban labour market and opportunities.

4.3 Obstacles for Plantation Youth

Based on the discussions with Plantation youth, a number of issues surfaced which are obstacles in expanding their aspirations as well as in realising them.

The educational foundation and experience is lacking in equipping them for the contemporary labour market. Estate schools have historically been of poor standard. The proprietors of plantations were under legal compulsion to provide elementary education to the children of their workers. They fulfilled this obligation only in the most minimal of senses through provision of a basic building, and hiring of a few teachers. Up to the present day, many estate schools lack a regular water supply, and sufficient or even operational toilet facilities especially for girl children.

Only after the nationalisation of the plantations in the mid-1970s, and through the agitation of the Plantation community were estate schools progressively incorporated in the national education system. Since there has been investment by the state as well as non-state agencies in the school infrastructure. Even then, estate schools rank among the most backward. As the Plantation youth

themselves complained, their Tamil-medium schools are unable to offer mathematics, science and information technology subjects, while the teaching of English and Sinhala leave much to be desired. Where science is on the curriculum, laboratory and related facilities are often non-existent. This does not help students to understand and become excited in the subject. One of the estate schools in a field site had only offering Ordinary Level classes as recently as 2008. Prior to that, the children of the estate would have had to find admission in schools outside the estate and many would have dropped out in consequence.

A major problem is the lack of teachers in these subjects; and their unwillingness to teach in the estate schools. Teachers with families of their own prefer to be based in or near urban areas where their own children can be enrolled in better and more prestigious government schools. As some estates are remote from the main roads, public transport is poor and also time consuming. This is also discouraging to teachers, who live off-estate and travel in and out daily. Their hours at the school revolve around the bus timetable rather than the normal working day.

A second factor is the home environment and exposure that the youth receive through their parents and their attitudes and aspirations for their children, to inform and influence employment and livelihood choices.

One participant remarked: "There is no one to show us the way". While this was not specific to their parents alone, it reflected the challenges where the parents have limited knowledge and understanding of employment opportunities outside the estate. Their own lives have been bounded by the estate as were those of the generations before them. The parents themselves would have lacked the citizenship and national identity documents to enable them to venture outside of the estate and look for stable or regular employment in the public and formal private sector. So, their capacity to advise their children on career pathways, subject selection, and to supervise and motivate their children in their studies is absent. The Plantation youth who were interviewed did not mention their parents as role models or mentors in influencing their aspirations.

Young women, in particular, expressed the difficulties they face from their parents and older male siblings in pursuing their education outside of the estate. While there were Tamil medium schools of good reputation offering Advanced Level classes in major towns, there is resistance from parents to their daughters travelling those distances and spending much of the day far away from the estate. These gendered concerns revolve around physical safety of their daughters, as well as moral panic over the potential for them to have relationships with men that are unknown and unsanctioned by the family.

Obstacles and challenges in multiple senses are presented by the isolation of the Plantations as well as of those resident on them. Some estates are adjacent to main roads that connect nearby towns; while most others are several kilometres in the interior and serviced by poor quality roads with irregular public transport. One young woman noted that the daily transport cost to and from the estate to reach the nearest town where vocational education is available would be Rs100. This is a

large amount of money considering that the average daily wage of a plantation worker in 2013 was estimated to be Rs565 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2014b: 111).

The Plantation community is also isolated from the state administrative system. As the estates have been private for most of their existence, state officials did not venture onto estates nor service the needs of plantation residents as they did residents of nearby villagers. There is also the perception among Plantation Tamils that the ethnic Sinhala government officials were disinterested or even hostile to providing them with public services, because of the depth of anti-Indian immigrant sentiment in sections of Sinhala society.

The youth who were interviewed complained that they had no interaction with local officers of the government such as the Youth Services Officer, the Women's Development Officer, the Economic Development Officer and so on. At best, they knew of the Grama Niladhari (Village Officer). These officials are the link between the central government and local communities and supposed to communicate information on government programmes, development projects and schemes etc. to the community. They are also very influential because they determine the selection of beneficiaries for these schemes, despite the nominal existence of objective criteria.

These government officers are generally Sinhala-speaking which creates an immediate barrier for communication with the largely mono-lingual Tamil-speaking Plantation community (Tamils in urban areas will often have some bilingual proficiency through living and working in a Sinhala-speaking environment). These officers have a closer relationship with the management of the estate than the community. So, for example, electoral registration forms are distributed to residents through the estate manager's office; when in fact, the Grama Niladhari should personally deliver them and collect them from each household.

The Plantations have also been historically excluded from the services of elected local government authorities (Pradeshiya Sabhas). The irony is that since the restoration of franchise at local government to Plantation residents, they can participate in the election of their local representatives, but find themselves excluded from the development projects and services of local bodies which claim that they are statutorily barred from allocating public funds to the privately owned plantations.

As mentioned on several occasions, the linguistic isolation of the Plantation Tamil youth is another obstacle. The youth themselves identify that their choices and options are limited by being mono-lingual Tamil-speakers. They identify proficiency in Sinhala as necessary for public sector employment as well as any other livelihood activity outside of the estate. Further, there is also recognition of the importance of English-speaking, reading and writing ability in securing mid-level jobs in the formal private sector as well as international non-governmental agencies. In one estate visited, it is reported that 1 in 4 of school-going children have been enrolled by their parents in Sinhala-medium schools outside of the estate: both because the quality of education is perceived as superior to the Tamil medium estate school and because they wish their children to be fluent in Sinhala and therefore eligible for the jobs and opportunities available to Sinhala-speakers.

4.4 Vocational and Technical Education

As the prospects of admission to state universities for large numbers of school-leavers is so remote; and recognising the skills gap that exists between those who leave school and the demand in the labour market; there has been some recognition of the importance of increasing access and participation of Plantation Tamil youth in the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) sector (International Labour Organisation 2012?). One young woman focus group participant herself commented: "to find work, we need training or qualifications to obtain that job".

However, it was glaringly obvious that there is almost total ignorance of VTE among Plantation youth. While, there is better awareness of VTE among urban and rural sector youth; it is well known that there is poor interest or enthusiasm for this form of education and skilling among youth of all ethnicities and regions. According to the 2013 National Youth Survey, "many young people consider vocational education unattractive" (United Nations Development Programme 2014: 38). Their aspiration is for professional, higher skilled employment, though the sad reality is that these jobs are out of their reach because their education and qualifications do not equip them to be even considered for these jobs.

The VTE centres have not done out-reach to Plantation communities to inform them of their courses and benefits for skilled and higher paid employment. Within the estate there is no source of information either: neither employers nor trade unions would see it in their self-interest to encourage Plantation youth to receive training for employment outside of the estate. One VTE officer admitted that after a visit to an estate school in 2011, there had been a number of applications to the centre in the following year. However, there had been no follow-up or further visits to the school, and no applications were forthcoming thereafter.

In discussions with Plantation youth, the few who were aware of the existence of VTE opportunities had learned of them through friends and not from their school or community leaders. Many don't consider VTE because they haven't completed their Ordinary Level education (for e.g. dropped out before the examination or having failed the examination). This is the basic qualification for the government VTE programmes.

The issues they identified in availing themselves of VTE included the shortage of courses in the Tamil medium. Most VTE courses, even in districts with large Tamil-speaking populations (outside of the North and East), are only available in Sinhala. According to the administration, their difficulty is in finding qualified Tamil-speakers to employ. They also note that Plantation youth are disinterested in training as masons, plumbers, electricians (for which there is significant demand both within Sri Lanka and in labour-importing countries); and prefer IT and secretarial courses. Young women's VTE interests are gendered too: as there is enthusiasm for beauty culture and tailoring courses but not engineering and technical ones.

There are also practical and motivational issues for Plantation youth. They pointed out that the nearest VTE centres can be between 20 and 40 kilometres from their estates, which makes travel both time consuming and expensive. Some feel insecure and anxious to travel by themselves to unfamiliar towns, because of their ethnic minority identity and linguistic difficulties in Sinhala. According to VTE officials, the Plantation youth are unwilling to commit themselves to the full-time demands of the curriculum. They perceive the youth of the plantations as lethargic, listless and of low intellectual ability. In the opinion of one officer: the Plantation community in general, "live for today, with no thought of tomorrow".

Young women on the plantations who have completed their Advanced Levels and could register for Technical education courses, prefer to 'queue' for white-collar jobs in government offices or non-governmental organisations. They are less enthusiastic about public sector jobs that might transfer them to other districts.

One of the many tragedies is that Plantation youth end up being swindled by unscrupulous private sector providers who market their courses on the estates. These private institutions, which may or may not be accredited, charge exorbitant fees (for instance Rs25,000 for a 6 month basic computing course). The young people who complete the course receive a certificate, but it is of dubious value because their course has not been audited for quality, there is no recognised qualification that they receive, and it is unclear whether the instruction is relevant to the needs of employers. The parents of the young people fork out for these expenses from their meagre earnings, without knowing of the alternatives in the state-funded education sector as well as the relevance and utility of the fee-charging programmes.

4.5 Self-Employment

It has been observed, and the focus group discussions confirmed, that there is little interest among Plantation youth in self-employment, particularly within the estate. A number of participants insisted, "There is nothing much one can do here", referring to the lack of opportunities for income generation within their communities.

Nevertheless, there are some residents who engage in goat-keeping, poultry farming and even dairy milk production. The government has a poverty alleviation programme (Samurdhi or 'Prosperity'), where some beneficiaries are given chickens to rear for eggs and meat. However, despite the overall high levels of poverty in the estate sector, only a small number of those eligible are Samurdhi recipients.

According to the Youth Services Officers, there are small loans at below market rates of interest for young people to invest in income-generating projects. However, the focus group participants were unaware of this facility. Their knowledge of credit sources was confined to the formal banking sector and some non-governmental schemes. However, their lack of assets or collateral, makes them

unattractive to banks; while the high interest rates of certain private and non-governmental providers is prohibitive and has plunged households into severe debt.

The young men and women identified on-estate opportunities as starting a 'communication centre' (telephone, fax, internet, photocopying facilities provider); in tailoring; a barber salon; and in the 'out-growing' of tea (that is, own cultivation of a portion of the tea estate with own labour and investment, which the estate buys from the out-grower). As for off-estate opportunities, the most common were in driving (three-wheelers; buses; vans); garment industry; hotel (cooking/catering); vegetable sale; automobile service centre/garage/workshop. This employment is often precarious and lacks protection for the worker.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Plantation Tamil youth occupy a unique location within the larger youth population of Sri Lanka. Their generational identity marks them out from within the Plantation Tamil community; but as residents of the Plantations, they also share certain features of the wider estate population that are unknown to young people in other rural as well as in urban sectors.

Fundamentally, it is the structure of the Plantation as a 'total institution' which fuses work, residence, services and recreation in one demarcated and closed space; that has influenced but also limited the aspirations of Tamil youth in terms of their livelihoods. These aspirations are also gendered reflecting the structural discrimination in society against girl children and women.

Leaving school early, in many cases even without Ordinary Level passes, and without other skills and training within the education system or from the community, the Plantation Tamil youth gravitate towards the only forms of employment available to them. These are low-paid, low-skilled jobs that are usually in the unorganised sector and therefore lacking in job security, labour rights, and social protection.

The estate education system is simply incapable of providing Plantation youth the foundation to progress further in their education; or to orient them towards better employment opportunities, because of their chronic under-resourcing and inequalities in outcomes for students in estate schools.

While the parents recognise that the traditional sources of employment on the estates are unsatisfactory and undesirable to their children; their limited formal education, life experiences, and awareness of further education as well as the contemporary diversity of employment and the requisite qualifications, is itself a key limitation in informing and influencing the livelihood aspirations of Plantation youth.

The gross neglect and indifference of government towards the Plantation community in general is obvious from the social and development indicators as well as the crisis of the industry itself. There is accumulated prejudice and stereotyping of the Plantation community by other ethnic groups. These attitudes are also shared by government officials and local politicians who believe the Plantation community to be mired in ignorance, social evils, and poverty. These opinions colour their interactions with Plantation youth, which are in any case few and far between.

Nothing less than the structural reform of the plantation system can transform the current condition of Plantation youth. The massive investment in social and physical infrastructure that was promised in the 2006-2015 National Plan of Action never materialised. In addition to improvements in

housing, water and sanitation, the state must now decisively recognise the rights of Plantation Tamils to the accommodation they have occupied for generations and grant them the land rights that were assured at time of privatisation of the estates in the early 1990s. New villages must be developed, separating residential areas from production, and assuring residents the same services that are provided to rural communities off the estates.

Having taken over estate schools, the hospitals and medical centres must likewise be fully absorbed into the national health system to raise the quality and standard of care. Nutritional programmes must address the high incidence of anaemia and low birth weight in the Plantations. These are the initial factors that affect the mental development of Plantation youth and their capacity to partake in school and extra-curricular activities that are formative in their personalities and hopes and dreams.

Some specific recommendations are as follows:

* *Zonal education authorities and Provincial Councils must ensure that all estate schools provide high quality education in mathematics, science, information-technology, Sinhala and English and with appropriate teaching aids and methodologies, at least up to Ordinary Level;*

* *The school curriculum should introduce vocational and technical subjects to reduce the bias towards non-vocational courses and higher education programmes; as well as teach basic skills to school-leavers after Ordinary Level; while also providing good quality career guidance and counselling from Grade 6 onwards to orient students and their parents for the subject choices in the years ahead;*

* *Vocational and Technical Education centres in plantation areas must boost their Tamil-speaking cadre, while introducing intensive courses in Sinhala and English so that Plantation Tamil youth have the linguistic skills to be attractive to potential employers, and ensure that soft skills become part of their curriculum;*

* *Self-employment loans and suitable training in financial management, business development, and related skills must be targeted at Plantation youth, with adequate infrastructural support in quality standards, marketing and distribution;*

* *Public education programmes within the plantation community must tackle the prevalent social attitudes, particularly towards girl-children and women, that inhibit greater independence and freedom in life-choices.*

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