



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES  
SRI LANKA



GENERATION  
NEVER GIVE UP

STRENGTHENING  
THE EMPLOYABILITY OF  
**YOUTH LEAVING CARE**  
IN SRI LANKA





## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth unemployment is a pervasive problem in present Sri Lanka, with the unemployment rate among youth aged 15-24 years being the highest among all age groups. Further, there is a large population of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEETs), which is reported to be higher than the global average for this age group. Sri Lankan youth are challenged in their transition from school to work due to multiple factors, including the lack of required skills, lack of available opportunities, and lack of guidance in finding available job opportunities. The biggest bottleneck however is the disconnect among 3 key stakeholders:

educational and vocational training institutions, employers and the youth, resulting in skills, information and aspirational gaps. Youth who have grown up in alternative care - particularly those in institutional care - are doubly disadvantaged due to the unique circumstances and challenges they face while in care and when transitioning into independent life. Constrained by an identity which often renders them vulnerable to stigma and discrimination, youth leaving care homes (i.e. 'care leavers') in Sri Lanka struggle to enter and navigate the exigencies of the world of work. Their prospects of gaining educational qualifications, vocational training, entrepreneurship opportunities or decent employment are generally at a low level. Furthermore, demotivated and disempowered owing to repeated injustice and callous treatment by the system and society, they tend to forsake their aspirations of engaging in gainful and meaningful employment. Consequently, this group of young people is often left to fend for themselves in extremely vulnerable situations upon leaving care, including exploitation in the labour market. Recommendations are made to the key duty-bearers, i.e. policy makers, educational and vocational training institutions, employers and caregivers, in order to strengthen the employability of youth leaving care, while bridging the gap among these stakeholders and youth.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN SRI LANK - THE 'DISCONNECT'

Sri Lanka currently has 3,177,132 young people between ages of 15-24 of years, constituting 15.5 percent of the population<sup>1</sup>. Though the country has made steady progress reaching lower middle-income country status, it continues to face a number of challenges, with the young being one of the most affected groups, contending with issues in the areas of education, employment, health, post-war reconciliation and social integration, and civic engagement and political participation<sup>2</sup>.

The transition into the labour market poses a significant challenge to the youth of Sri Lanka, while youth unemployment rates remain at a high level. According to the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey in 2018, youth unemployment rate (age 15-24 years) is 21.9 percent, which is the highest reported unemployment rate among all age groups. This is evidence of poor school-to-work transition in the country. Further, the unemployment rates for males and females are 18.1 and 28.7 percent respectively for the age group 15-24 while the unemployment among females is higher than that of males, in all age groups. Youth and female unemployment contribute more to the overall unemployment situation of the country<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, the presence of a large population of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) is a major cause for concern. NEETs consist of both the unemployed – those without work but actively looking for work – and inactive youth outside the labour force, who are not engaged in any educational or training activity. Sri Lanka recorded a NEET rate of 22.7 percent in 2017<sup>4</sup>, above the ILO global average estimate of 22.1 percent<sup>5</sup>. NEETs are significantly higher among females than males (30.2 percent and 14.8 percent respectively) while they are considerably higher among the older youth group aged 20-24 years. According to a recent

<sup>1</sup> *Census of Population and Housing (2012). Department of Census and Statistics.*

<sup>2</sup> *Sri Lanka National Human Development Report (2014). United Nations Development Programme.*

<sup>3</sup> *Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, 4th Quarter (2018). Department of Census and Statistics.*

analysis done by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), while 74 percent of the 6,656 15-19-year-olds were engaged in education in 2016, less than half of this number, or only 42 percent, were employed in the 20-24 age group. This suggests that young Sri Lankans face challenges in making the transition from education to employment, thereby making them more vulnerable to fall into NEET status after completing school education. School-to-work transitions can be challenging due to multiple factors including the lack of required skills, lack of available opportunities, or lack of guidance and direction in finding available job opportunities<sup>6</sup>.

As research establishes, the unemployment of Sri Lankan youth has a strong correlation with the **disconnect among 3 key stakeholders: educational and vocational training institutions, employers and the youth.** This is illustrated by the Youth Labour

Market Assessment 2017, which explains the paradox of high youth unemployment and the large number of employment opportunities available in the country using three gaps or mismatches<sup>7</sup> :

1. **The Skills Gap** - The skills gap refers to the disparity between the skills demanded by employers and the skills that are available among current and potential employees; this gap indicates that educational institutions are not equipping students with market-oriented skills.
2. **The Aspirational Gap** - The aspirational gap occurs as young people aspire to hold jobs with high security, social status, better pay and benefits; however, when the labour market cannot provide such employment opportunities, there is a dearth in labour for the opportunities that do exist.

3. **The Information Gap** - The information gap occurs when there is an inadequate flow of information from employers to the youth and the labour market about job requisite skills and employment opportunities. As a result, youth tend to crowd into selected industries and occupations, which result in a labour shortage in several fast-growing industries such as tourism and construction.

The bottleneck in large part, is the lack of engagement among the above-mentioned stakeholders. While this situation affects the youth population of the country in general, marginalized and vulnerable groups of youth such as those without parental care or those who have grown up in alternative care are more deeply affected and often fall through the proverbial cracks in the system.

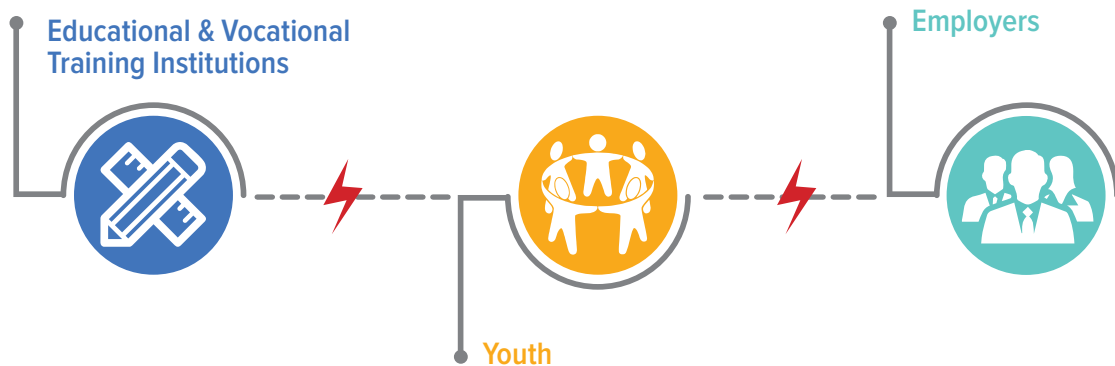


Illustration 1: The Disconnect

<sup>4</sup>Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report (2017). Department of Census and Statistics.

<sup>5</sup>Global Employment Trends for Youth 2017. 'Weak recovery in youth labour markets demands a sweeping response'. ILO News. 20 November 2017. [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_597065/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_597065/lang-en/index.htm)

<sup>6</sup>Lowering Sri Lanka's NEETs: Need for Smoother School-to-Work Transitions'. 'Talking Economics', the blog of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). 24 January 2019. <http://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2019/01/24/lowering-sri-lankas-neets-need-for-smoother-school-to-work-transitions/>

<sup>7</sup>Youth Labour Market Assessment Sri Lanka (2018). YouLead, Verite Research & USAID.

### 3. THE EMPLOYABILITY OF YOUTH LEAVING CARE IN SRI LANKA

The challenges of the labour market and the risk of social exclusion and poverty are especially high for children and young people who have lost parental care. Many of them grow up in family-like care such as SOS Children's Villages, or in residential and institutional care (often referred to as 'children's homes', 'orphanages' and 'child development centres' in the local context). Youth leaving such care placements, i.e. 'care leavers', are often forced to become independent much earlier than their peers. Young people who have spent time living without parental care, whether in alternative care facilities, on the street or in otherwise precarious situations, often do not have the continuing source of emotional, social and financial support that are available to many young people as they transit early adulthood. Therefore, finding employment is more essential to young care leavers. However, the transition to economic independence is a much bigger challenge for them due to poor education, lack of social support networks, career counselling and skills training, positive role models and work experience. They feel disconnected from the job market and job opportunities, and request mentorship, guidance, skill development and coaching for this new critical phase in their lives. Care leavers with disabilities find themselves doubly disadvantaged, when searching for employment.

There are currently 13,055 children in 405 child care facilities in Sri Lanka<sup>8</sup>

- However, there is no proper data on the number of care leavers as a systematic process to capture this information, which has not yet been developed. Given below are some of the key issues that affect the employability of youth leaving care, substantiated through consultations conducted with care leavers of both SOS Children's Villages and child care institutions. It should be noted that some of these issues affect the youth at a much deeper level than is apparent, or can be conveyed through a document of this nature. At the core of it is an undeniable issue of identity and belonging.
- The absence of proper legal documents including the Birth Certificate and the National Identity Card (NIC) is a prominent issue. Research has also demonstrated that 'less than the 60 percent of voluntary homes declare that they possess the Birth Certificate of every child hosted<sup>9</sup>. Issues related to the Birth Certificate include incomplete information, such as the father's name and the marital status of the parents, which induce stigma, and the lack of recognition and awareness of the Probable Birth Certificate among service providers including government officials. Such issues often lead to the denial of attaining school or higher education and skill development opportunities, discrimination in job recruitments and marginalization at the workplace. The appearance of the name and address of the child care institution in the NIC also has similar effects of stigmatization, discrimination and challenges in accessing facilities such as loans.
- Multiple transfers or movement across child care institutions, which is a common practice, leads to instability, educational disruption and ultimately the loss of motivation. Change of care environment is often the solution adopted by concerned officials in response to behavioural issues of children, which are caused by the trauma that these children are subjected to during the journey of their lives. However, caregivers of care institutions are often not equipped to manage such issues with sensitivity and patience. Schools and other educational institutions also do not have programmes in place to support these young people and facilitate their (re)integration into educational settings.
- Some child care institutions compel children to engage in strenuous activities such as farm cultivation, on a daily basis, which leaves them with little time and energy to study. This hampers their educational progress and inevitably, their employability. Furthermore, youth aging out of care are absorbed to the staff of the care institution, where they continue to work despite other aspirations or greater potential, due to a sense of obligation, the need of accommodation and/or a lack of better options and opportunities.
- Mimicking the 'information gap' mentioned above, there is a lack of access to information on existing jobs that match the skills and aspirations of youth as well as the educational

<sup>8</sup>Annual Statistical Report (2017). Department of Probation and Child Care Services.

<sup>9</sup>Out of Sight, Out of Mind: A Report on Voluntary Residential Institutions for Children in Sri Lanka: Statistical Analysis (2007). UNICEF.

and vocational qualifications required in order to access these jobs. This is exacerbated by the fact that children and young people in care often live in enclosed environments with little exposure and social interaction and the absence of knowledgeable caregivers.

- Although vocational training is offered by some child care institutions, the quality and the effectiveness of these programmes in strengthening the employability of youth leaving care are not always ensured. The vocational training courses offered to them are often not ones that match their skills or aspirations but are more dependent on the availability of a particular course or financial resources.
- Although vocational education is generally perceived to be a way of increasing youth employability, some consultations with care leavers revealed that vocational training is not always considered as an attractive path to skills and career development. There is at times a reluctance to seek such training with a view that it is of a 'lower' grade as compared with other forms of higher education.
- The lack of soft skills and the lack of applicants with job specific technical skills are two main recruitment-related challenges faced by employers. One of the largest skills gap is in English language skills, and as research suggests, an individual who is proficient

in English faces a 9% lower risk of becoming NEET compared to a similar individual who is illiterate in English<sup>10</sup>

- The lack of competency in English language is a common issue faced by the largest majority of care leavers, which places them in a very disadvantaged position. Many good educational and employment opportunities are lost owing to this barrier. In addition, youth leaving care feel the need for soft skills, such as training to face interviews, developing a CV, leadership skills, goal setting, etc.
- The prospects of starting one's own venture for a care leaver is limited not only by the lack of start-up capital or skills but also by the need for supporting documents to prove permanent residence, e.g. electricity bills, etc. Since some of the youth still live in the care home or at a temporary address, they are unable to provide this documentation.
- Care leavers are often stigmatized and discriminated against in job recruitment processes as well as in work places, due to being identified as an 'orphan', an 'outcast' and 'not being from a good family'. The focus is given to one aspect of their identity instead of recognizing their skills, qualifications and contributions. Further, employers assume that youth from care facilities do not possess the required skills or aptitudes, a bias that results in qualified young people losing valuable opportunities without even being given a chance to prove her/himself. Such perceptions and attitudes of employers and co-workers compel these youth to hide their identity in fear of being branded, degraded and denied opportunities.
- Research has proven that parental guidance plays an important role in keeping youth engaged and helping in school-to-work transitions. Living in a household where at least one adult has passed the O-Levels, as opposed to a household with no well-educated adults, lowers the chances of being NEET. Regrettably though, only 44 percent of staff in childcare institutions in Sri Lanka is professionally trained while 46 percent of the staff has studied only up to grade 11 or below<sup>11</sup>. Hence most often they do not have the capacity, knowledge or understanding to motivate, guide or support youth leaving care, to gain employability skills or access gainful employment.
- Contributing to gender inequality in labour participation, girls leaving care tend to get married early, or leave jobs once they get married. Given the lack of social support and safety networks, the tendency and the likelihood of these young girls entering (or being lured) into marriage is at a high level, with the expectation/promise of love and security. However, many such girls are rendered vulnerable in the absence of employability skills and economic security, in the event the marriage fails or she becomes a single mother with several children – which is unfortunately a common occurrence as per anecdotal evidence.

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<sup>10</sup> Lowering Sri Lanka's NEETs: Need for Smoother School-to-Work Transitions'. 'Talking Economics', the blog of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). 24 January 2019. <http://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2019/01/24/lowering-sri-lankas-neets-need-for-smoother-school-to-work-transitions/>

<sup>11</sup> Current Status of Child Care Institutions and Institutionalized Children in Sri Lanka: a Situational Analysis (2013). Department of Probation and Child Care Services.

*Children in alternative care often grow up with many psycho-emotional issues due to childhood experiences of poverty, neglect, abandonment or abuse. Their experience within the care system play a pivotal role in either healing or deepening these wounds, and moulding the child's sense of being and identity. Sadly, many children and young people in care continue to experience deprivation and injustice within the system as well. At times it is due to the unsympathetic and insensitive manner in which they are treated by those who are responsible for them, whether it be their institutional caregivers, the Police/Probation Officer or the judge hearing her/his case; at other times it is due to the constant stigma and discrimination they are made to endure, whether it be at school or society; or else they become the victims of governance issues such as the lack of coordination and understanding among authorities related to childcare. Negative experience of this nature, when continued in the absence of any emotional support, and compounded by issues outlined above, can become extremely detrimental to the child's wellbeing. In such circumstances, children tend to lose all hope and motivation. These experiences tend to haunt them even after leaving care and entering into the world of work, with a constant apprehension that their history might repeat. This manifests in a deep lack of confidence in self and society, and a sense of disempowerment that are often witnessed in children in care as well as care leavers. Consequently, they are unable to raise their voice or claim their rights, which they are most often not even aware of. These are the deeper humane issues that lie beneath the challenge of employability and employment of youth leaving care, which need to be highlighted and addressed, in order to find meaningful solutions.*

## MY IDENTITY : MY TRUTH OR MY SHAME ?



***"Though I want to get another job, I do not have the confidence to do so as my self-confidence was completely shattered in my childhood. The Courts, Probation and Police is responsible for my situation. Now I lie to people about myself and my background. Yes, I lie even in the Temple ...."***

"Initially I grew up in one Children's Home was later transferred to another Home, due to the unavailability of matrons in the first one. After sometime, I was again transferred to a Christian Home in Negombo. There I started schooling based on a court order. I had neither a Birth Certificate nor a National Identity Card (NIC). I had only one name and no surname. I was in the O/L class then and was eagerly looking forward to sit the examination. One day, the principal came and asked the names of my parents. I replied that I had no one. The principal asked, "then how did you grow up like this without parents?" That was the day I stopped schooling. When the magistrate questioned me, I explained what happened and stressed that I would never go to school again, requesting her to find me some other place to study. Then I was sent to Youth Corps where I happily completed one course. In the end, when I was preparing for the NVQ level 1 examination, again my identity issue came up. One of the lecturers inquired about 'someone without a surname'. It was not anyone. That was me. However, I sat the examination, but a certificate was not given, as I did not have a NIC. Was it my fault? I have presented my grievance to Probation Officers, Matrons, and even to persons who were on duty in the prison bus, which transported us, to and from Courts. No one wanted to listen to me. By that time, I was sick and tired of my life. I aspired to become a nurse, and that was my dream. I had all attributes to be a nurse. Since I had no O/L qualifications, I could only follow a course on care giving in Kurunegala. I applied for a nursing job at a reputed hospital in Colombo. I told them that I did not pass O/Ls. They still wanted to recruit me, as I was talented. I lost that opportunity too as I did not have a NIC card. In 2015, I came to another Children's Home where I am still staying. There, I finally felt that I was living again, as they supported me to have a Probable Birth Certificate and NIC. At present, I am following a beauty culture course. At the interview, the owner of the salon who had never seen a Probable Birth Certificate asked me "what on earth is that?" While following the course, I work at the Nutrition Centre of the Children's Home where I am currently staying. Though I want to get another job, I do not have the confidence to do so as my self-confidence was completely shattered in my childhood. The Courts, Probation and Police are responsible for my situation. Now I lie to people about myself and my background. Yes, I lie even in the Temple ...."

- Anusha <sup>12</sup>, a care leaver (24 years)

<sup>12</sup> This is a pseudonym, used to protect the identity of the young person.



## 4. CURRENT LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

When youth in child care institutions in Sri Lanka reach the age of 18, they are required by the country's law to part with their care homes and live independently as an adult. Although both the **Orphanages Ordinance, No. 22 of 1941 (as amended by No. 45 of 1946)**, the **Children and Young Persons Ordinance, No. 48 of 1939** and the **Houses of Detention Ordinance, No. 5 of 1907 (as amended by Act No. 26 of 1955)** provide for vulnerable children and young persons until they fall outside the prescribed age determined by each of these instruments, no corresponding legal framework addresses the transition to independence or aftercare of youth leaving care. **Section 15(b) of the Orphanages Ordinance** which governs all voluntary child care institutions limits protection of children 'until such times as [they] attain the age of eighteen years'. Therefore, child care institutions and State officers are compelled to remove eighteen-year-olds by necessity of law. Although the Ordinance considers 'the circumstances in which orphans and deserted children may be admitted into the Children's Home accommodation and maintenance therein and their discharge therefrom' (emphasis added), there seems to be no effective basis on which the wellbeing or transition of care leavers is ensured<sup>13</sup>.

Further, **Section 88 of the Children and Young Persons Ordinance** which governs State-run Certified Schools, Approved Schools and Remand Homes defines a 'child' as a person under 14 years and 'young person' as a person between the ages of 14 and 16. Although it states that Certified Schools can accommodate children in conflict with the law and those in need of care and protection

between the ages of 12 and 16 for a period of 3 years, the Ordinance does not specify the means of social reintegration of these children upon the completion of the 3 year 'rehabilitation' process. The State Detention Home which has been established with the objective of housing and rehabilitating orphaned, abandoned and destitute children (both boys and girls) between ages 5 and 15 is governed by the **Houses of Detention Act**, yet once again the law does not provide for the transition or aftercare of these children<sup>14</sup>.

Being compelled by law to leave care at age 18 or earlier places these young people at risk of engaging in illegal, indecent and risky work, due to having no other option. They are also at a much higher risk of being exploited. For they are often not sufficiently skilled, qualified or experienced at this age to access suitable employment, especially without adult guidance and support, which this group of youth does not often receive. Neither do they have adequate knowledge of labour laws or a safety net to fall back on. Not having access to proper accommodation after leaving care at 18 years or sooner is another major factor that propels these youth to accept any livelihood that comes their way regardless of its suitability, with the hope of finding shelter. Being forced to adapt to circumstances at such a young age and thereby to prioritize survival over development also means that there is a greater likelihood of losing further opportunities to enhance skills that would support them in accessing decent and more fulfilling employment.

The only references to the employability and employment of youth leaving care are made in the **National Alternative Care Policy (2019)** and in the **NCPA (draft) Guidelines and Standards for Child Care Institutions in Sri Lanka (2013)**.

In the **National Alternative Care Policy**, it is considered important to,

"Ensure that 18-year-olds are prepared for leaving a care setting with an aftercare plan and are allowed access to a network of peers, caregivers, and service providers in both the State and non-State sectors for additional support including provision of education and **vocational training, job placement**, housing and access to psychosocial, legal and health services, together with appropriate financial and emotional support during integration with special services for those with disabilities and special needs." (Section 6.5.12.)

However, an implementation plan to put the policy into action is yet to be developed.

Under the **Section 3.17. 'Promotion of Independence and Leaving Care' of the (draft) NCPA Guidelines** it is stated that when children leave care institutions, they should be afforded opportunities for education and **fruitful employment**; instructs the institution management committee to assist care leavers with accommodation and **employment**; prescribes a duty of childcare institutions to provide care leavers with **relevant documents**, e.g. birth certificate, medical records, education related certificates; dictates that the child should be

<sup>13</sup> Policy Brief. 18+: Building Support Systems for Youth Leaving Care (2017). SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka.

<sup>14</sup> Policy Brief. 18+: Building Support Systems for Youth Leaving Care (2017). SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka.

provided necessary guidance and support regarding leaving the facility; and advices for arrangements to be made to safeguard the future of care leavers without parents or relatives and a monitoring process to be established by the Department of Probation and Child Care Services until at least 1 year after the child has left the care institution. However, these guidelines are still in draft form and are not well known, referred or adhered to by child care institutions or relevant government officers. Further, guidelines are insufficient in the absence of good policy and practical measures of implementation including resources to remedy the issue.

During 2017-2019, the Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on Women and Gender debated at length about the issues faced by care leavers due to the absence of a proper Birth Certificate. After much deliberation and multi-stakeholder consultation including

with the Registrar General's Department and the National Department of Probation and Childcare Services (DPCCS), it was proposed by the Committee in August 2018 to issue an 'extract' of the birth certificate with only the name of the child, gender, date of birth and the name of the mother, for daily transactions. The longer version was proposed to be made available upon request. This was expected to preserve the dignity of children in care and care leavers, and prevent discrimination and stigmatization. The changes were being considered to be implemented from 2019, for all newborn babies. However, ambiguities started to materialize once again in mid-2019, due to objections made by some State authorities. Nonetheless, the Committee, taking into consideration appeals made by the proponents of changes including the Generation Never Give-up (GNG) Network of care leavers in Sri Lanka, has agreed to pursue efforts to find a solution once again. Further, a progressive step has been

taken by the government as a result of the Committee's work, by removing the 'marital status' column in the Birth Certificate.

In addition, the DPCCS has recently taken a progressive step in partnership with the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), to offer National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certified courses to children and young people in several government-run child care institutions, i.e. Certified Schools. This initiative is expected to be implemented in future, with the financial support of the government.

Overall though, care leavers are invisible in the numerous national laws, policies and programmes that have been formulated to promote the rights and wellbeing of youth in Sri Lanka as well as those promoting skills and employment.

## 5. EFFORTS OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES TO STRENGTHEN THE EMPLOYABILITY OF ITS YOUTH

### 5.1. Organizational Overview

SOS Children's Villages is a global federation and the world's largest non-governmental organization focused on protecting and caring for children who have lost parental care, or who stand at risk of losing it. We work with communities, partners and States in 136 countries and territories, to ensure that children grow up in a loving family environment and the rights of all children, in every society, are fulfilled. We work in the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), guided by the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009), while contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

An estimated 220 million of the world's children are growing up without adequate parental care. To support them we provide holistic support and high quality services since 1949. We provide children a loving home through a range of quality alternative care options including **family-like care** offered through Children's Villages, and **family-based care** offered through kinship care and foster care; **strengthen families and communities** as a preventive measure in the fight against abandonment and social neglect; **advocate** with governments and communities to fulfill their commitments towards children without or at risk of losing parental care; and protect children in **emergencies**. Over the last 70 years, SOS Children's Villages has supported 4 million children globally through alternative care and family strengthening.

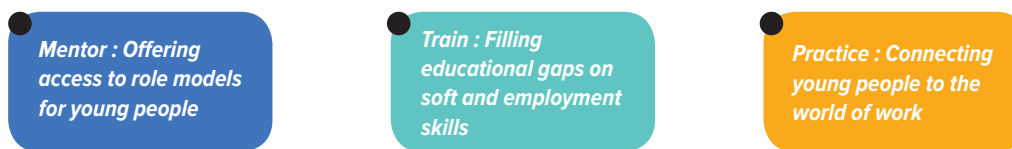
*In Sri Lanka, over 41,000 children, youth and families have benefitted from the services provided by SOS Children's Villages Sri Lanka since its establishment in 1981. This includes family-like care, emergency care, temporary care, family strengthening, vocational training for youth and a range of ancillary services such as pre-schools and medical centres.*

## 5.2. SOS Approach to Promoting Youth Employability

Taking into account the global trends and the needs of its increasing population of programme participants aged 15+, SOS Children's Villages has developed a strategic initiative around youth empowerment, in line with **Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth**.

Youth employability is anchored within an overall youth programme that considers education, housing and employability. The preparation for leaving care and finding a decent job starts at an early stage of the young person's care history. In a **future-oriented, holistic and participatory child and youth development planning process**, the individual abilities, skills, needs and interests are identified and developed, with particular attention to empowering young girls and young people with special needs. **A Theory of Change on Youth Employability** sets the framework for key interventions as well as desired outputs, outcomes and impact in the youth employability area.

There are 3 pillars in the SOS global framework for youth employability:



The factors that help us achieve our goal include a strong focus on youth employability within member associations; partnerships; and innovation through information technology.

*In Sri Lanka, SOS Children's Villages run 4 Vocational Training Centres that are situated in Anuradhapura, Malpotha, Monaragala and Jaffna, and offer free National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level courses to youth in vulnerable communities, SOS youth as well as those leaving childcare institutions. Currently there is a high success rate, with 98 percent of youth receiving jobs upon the completion of the training and 100 per cent of them receiving a monthly salary of LKR 30,000 or above.*



Supporting young people in their development to become self-reliant and contributing members of their societies is the ultimate goal of all SOS programmes. YouthCan! is one of several initiatives that strive towards this goal, working with corporate and supporting partners in order to strengthen young people's employability. However, a sustainable impact of the programme can only be achieved by providing individual support and follow-up to the young programme participants. This is done through the SOS youth care professionals in regular individual development planning sessions.

The YouthCan! programme is embedded in SOS Children's Villages' mission to provide holistic support to children and young people on their journey to self-reliance from an early age. It is linked to Strategic Initiatives in the **Strategy 2030** ("Empower young people") and to two of the commitments in the **SOS Care Promise**<sup>15</sup> ("We promote education, participation and steps to independent life" and "We partner for supporting services and advocate for quality care"). Finally, YouthCan! contributes to SDGs 1, 4, 8, 10, and 17.

<sup>15</sup> SOS Care Promise is the policy that articulates both what we do and how we do it via the principles and values that form the foundation of our work, the care solutions through which we implement our mission, and our commitments to quality care.



YouthCan! is guided by 5 programme principles:

1. YouthCan! offers a multi-dimensional approach
2. YouthCan! builds safe and strong relationships
3. YouthCan! offers individual solutions
4. YouthCan! is locally owned
5. YouthCan! builds on sustainable partnerships

*In Sri Lanka, the YouthCan! initiative comprises of several successful corporate partnerships which provided various training opportunities to youth from SOS Children's Villages and SOS Family Strengthening Programme, in 2018:*

1. Under the partnership of DPDHL, a series of 4-day trainings were conducted on job orientation, social skills, personal maturity and job hunting skills.
2. A one-year training was provided to youth by the Food and Beverages department of Hotel Galadari.
3. 5 internships were offered by Seylan Bank.
4. Leadership training programme conducted by McQuire Rens & Jones.
5. 6 month industrial training in hospitality was given by Hotel Taj Samudra and Hilton Colombo Residencies.
6. Herbert Stephan has provided SOS youth with internship.
7. Youth Career Initiative (YCI) who is a supportive partner of YouthCan! provided training opportunities in leading hotels in Sri Lanka.

*A total of 156 youth (94 females and 62 males) aged 15-25 have benefited from the programme by the end of 2018. It is expected to extend these opportunities to care leavers from child care institutions in the near future.*

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

“Ongoing educational and vocational training opportunities should be imparted as part of life skills education to young people leaving care in order to help them to become financially independent and generate their own income”

- UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children 2009 (Section 135)

The following are recommendations made to the key duty-bearers in order to strengthen the employability of youth leaving care, while bridging the gap among these stakeholders and the youth. These include the recommendations given by care leavers of SOS and a few childcare institutions (including members of the Generation Never Give-up Network of care leavers in Sri Lanka) during a consultation conducted by SOS Children's Villages in August 2019.

### 6.1. Recommendations to Policy Makers

We call upon the government, especially the following authorities, to take the legal and policy directives recommended below:

- ◆ Ministry of Women and Child Affairs
  - Department of Probation and Child Care Services (DPCCS)
  - National Child Protection Authority (NCPA)
- ◆ Ministry of Skill Development and Vocational Training
  - National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA)
  - Vocational Training Authority (VTA)
- ◆ Ministry of Youth Affairs
- ◆ Ministry of Education
- ◆ Ministry of Justice
- ◆ Ministry of Finance and Planning
- ◆ Registrar General's Department

1. Enforce regulations and procedures that enable care leavers to be legally entitled to all essential documents (National Identity Card, Birth Certificate, medical records, etc.) required for the use of essential services, upon leaving their care institution. In regard to the Birth Certificate, i) issue an extract with only the name, gender, date and place of birth and the mother's name to all citizens for daily transactions, with the option of obtaining the longer version upon request for specific purposes; ii) issue a Probable Birth Certificate for children whose parents' details are unknown or cannot be traced at all. The format of this certificate however should be changed to give it a more professional, authoritative look, with a date of birth (e.g. 1st of January/1st of July) and without blank spaces; iii) widely disseminate information about these documents including their legal validity among all stakeholders including government officials, service providers, corporates and the general public.

*SOS Care Promise is the policy that articulates both what we do and how we do it via the principles and values that form the foundation of our work, the care solutions through which we implement our mission, and our commitments to quality care.*

2. Develop and implement a comprehensive and effective strategy to facilitate close engagement, communication and collaboration among educational and vocational training institutions, employers and youth, including those from alternative care facilities.
3. The leaving care process should ensure that higher educational, vocational and employment opportunities are afforded to all care leavers inclusive of those with disabilities, regardless of the type of care placements they are in or the age at which they leave care. In this regard, formulate policies and programmes that support care leavers in enhancing their employability skills and accessing decent employment. This should be incorporated into the implementation plan of the National Alternative Care Policy 2019 as well. Consult this group of youth and consider their specific circumstances and requirements when formulating youth and employment-related policies and programmes, including public-private partnerships.
4. Forge partnerships with Civil Society Organizations and corporates to provide vocational training and educational qualifications as well as entrepreneurship opportunities of their choice to youth leaving care. Ensure the quality of skill development programmes and entrepreneurship interventions by putting in place a quality assurance system.
5. Incorporate the development of soft skills into education curricula, starting from early childhood education itself, as strong human capital foundations are key to building such skills. These include advanced cognitive skills such as complex problem-solving, socio-behavioral skills such as teamwork, and skills that facilitate adaptability such as

reasoning and self-efficacy. In addition, support alternative care providers to instill essential life skills in children and youth, so that upon leaving care, they can thrive in both vocational pursuits and independent living. It is also critical that English language and ICT skills are imparted to children and young people in alternative care, through specialized programmes. Resources for such programmes should be allocated by the government.

6. In terms of financial support, provide assistance for further education and start-up capital for care leavers going into business in partnership with private companies and Civil Society Organizations. Establish a fund specifically for this purpose.
7. Ensure stability of care by refraining from transferring children from one childcare institution to the other, especially for behavioural issues. Instead, support care institutions to provide better psychosocial and rehabilitative support to children through training and better access to public, private and voluntary service providers. This also requires a comprehensive database of service providers and an efficient referral mechanism.
8. Sensitize relevant State authorities, e.g. judges, police and probation officers, school authorities and childcare institutions, as well as public and private service providers, employers and the general public on treating children and youth in/leaving alternative care with empathy, sensitivity, compassion, patience and respect – without judgement and discrimination. Incorporate this aspect into training curricula of government officials including judges and develop capacity building programmes for

managers, caregivers and staff of child care institutions that are offered free of charge or for a nominal fee. Exposing them to such programmes on a regular basis, monitoring their conduct towards children/youth and holding them accountable are essential for good practices to be established. A strong monitoring mechanism is required for this purpose.

## 6.2. Recommendations to Educational and Vocational Training Institutions

1. Initiate government-led career guidance programmes at the school-level, for advising and directing youth to available education, training, and job opportunities. Such initiatives are particularly important in circumstances where caregivers are not well-educated and hence not in a position to guide the children under their care themselves. In addition, organize periodic career guidance camps for children in alternative care, targeting especially children from 14-18 years.
2. Engage with alternative care providers on a regular basis and share information about the courses, facilities and opportunities available.
3. Offer subsidized placements, quotas and scholarships, with inclusive programmes and facilities for care leavers with disabilities. However, steps should be taken to ensure that this does not propagate discriminatory practices against these youth by either the staff or the students, by ensuring confidentiality and promoting equality as well as ethical conduct within the institution. The staff should be sensitized not to humiliate these youth if any irregular behaviour is observed in them owing to long-term institutionalization.
4. Provide courses in the vernaculars as well as English, giving youth the freedom to select the medium of their choice.

5. Develop a process through which care leavers are provided with on the job training at reputed agencies with safe working environments, following the training period.

### 6.3. Recommendations to

#### Employers

1. Focus on the educational/professional qualifications, skills and capacities of the youth during job recruitment processes and refrain from asking personal questions that attack her/his dignity, alluding to her/his identity as an 'orphan', family status and institutional experience. Similarly, protect the identity of the youth during job placements.
2. Provide a fair remuneration based on the skills and educational qualifications of the youth. Put in place systems to prevent them from being exploited and being taken advantage of their vulnerable situation and the absence of a responsible adult to protect or guide them. Educate them about their labour rights as well. Provide a safe work environment and some extra attention and guidance where needed, to support their career growth.
3. Promote a culture of equality at the workplace where all employees are treated equally regardless of their identity, family background, social status, etc. Educate employees about the principle of equality and encourage them to treat co-workers from different backgrounds with respect.
4. Provide internships, training and job shadowing opportunities to youth in order build their capacity, identify their strengths, gain insights into the vocation and make informed decisions about their careers.

Offer mentorship programmes to young people leaving care, to support them in finding and navigating education and vocational training opportunities. Many

have no connections to a committed adult in their lives who can provide social support. Mentorship programmes are therefore key to helping these young people develop trusting relationships, build confidence and social capital, facilitate learning and support their journey into independence.

### 6.4. Recommendations to Care

#### Providers

1. Build self-confidence and resilience in children while developing a range of life-skills, to instill in them the strength to face the challenges of leading an independent life outside of the care facility, including in the world of work. Keep motivating them and providing them with opportunities to build their confidence, as this is a cornerstone of strengthening the employability of youth leaving care.
2. Support the youth to develop skills that are demanded by employers at an early age, including soft skills, and thereby increase their employability when they enter the labour force. Therefore, the skill development process should start at an early age, as a part of the leaving care process. This should be based on a 'child development plan' developed through a comprehensive analysis of the child, in consultation with the child.
3. Provide the right guidance to the youth in terms of providing correct and sufficient information on educational and

vocational training opportunities and facilitating access to gainful employment. This also includes career guidance and assistance in finding a job that matches the skills, qualifications and aspirations of the youth. This process would also help to ensure that these youth do not take low-paying jobs or continually re-enroll in educational programmes to avoid homelessness.

4. Provide comprehensive and continuous training to caregivers to build their capacity for supporting children and youth, including in their skill development and transition from school to work. Most importantly, provide them with encouragement and incentive to be a 'mother' to the children in their care and treat them with compassion, understanding, sensitivity, patience and respect.
5. Educate the employer about the background of the youth who is being referred to them, in order to avoid placing the youth in a vulnerable position during the interview as well as at the place of work. Engage and follow up with the employer continuously at least for a period of time till the young person becomes settled at the workplace, to ensure her/his safety, wellbeing and progress.



Illustration 2: The Connect



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