YOUTH IN THE SRI LANKAN POPULATION: EXPANSION OF THEIR SIZE, ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The main objective of the paper is to investigate the population dynamics of present and future decades with special reference to the youth population, and emerging challenges of youth with special reference to their education. Apart from the population projection information, data was collected from various publications of the Ministry of Education and the Department of Census and Statistics. The youth (age 15-29 years) bulge will be at its peak during the period of 2030s and 2040s. The data indicates a significant increase of school dropouts in Sri Lanka – compared to 2018 by 2020 the student population declined by about 151,000. Although, during the period 2016 to 2018 there was an increase of students in the Collegiate cycle (Grade 12/13), during 2018 to 2020 the student population declined by 146,000 – 'Lost Generation'. The COVID-19 impact on school education could be attributed to this drop and economic recession and escalation of inflation have further discouraged students to move into Grade 11 and above levels. In this present serious economic recession and inflation, those who left schools would be pushed into vulnerable employment categories, including the sex industry. Thus, appropriate policy reform is an immediate need, to capitalize on the full potential of the Sri Lankan youth for the development of the nation.

Keywords: Population Projection, Youth, Elderly, Education, Dropouts

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Introduction

The growth of the population of Sri Lanka during its known history of nearly two millenniums is evidenced by the enumeration and or estimation of the population. During the periods under the Sinhalese Kings too, there had been data about the population. Partial assessment of the coastal population in the country which commenced during the colonial period ended with the British starting to conduct census enumerations of the population (United Nations, 1976). In the modern period, Sri Lanka has gone through a demographic transition at a pace that demographers point has no precedent and further, at a level of development that was quite different from that of other countries that went through a similar experience (De Silva, 2015; Wesley and Peterson, 2017).

Sri Lanka's first national census was conducted in 1871, which reported a population of 2.4 million. The latest national census was in 2012 and the population was 20.4 million. Thus, over the period of 1871 and 2012, the countries' population reported an almost nine-fold increase. The total population of the country is expected to increase in the coming decades (De Silva and de Silva, 2015). The pattern of changes in demographic components (fertility, mortality, and international migration) has caused irreversible changes to the age-sex structure in Sri Lanka - sex structure is changing with more females in the population compared to their male counterparts. Visualized outlook of the youth population, based on population projections, shows a significant increase in their volume in the coming decades (De Silva, 2016a). Youth are key to achieve the development of any country provided that they are motivated and equipped with sound education (Morris, 2019; De Silva, 2014). Against this backdrop, the main objective of the paper is to investigate the population dynamics of present and future decades with special reference to total and youth populations, and emerging challenges of youth with special reference to their education.

Data and methods

Future trends in total and youth populations were examined through the projected data obtained from the population projection made by De Silva & de Silva (2015) "Sri Lanka: 25 million people and implications - population and housing projections 2012-2062." The projection was based on the 2012 mid-year population which were the observed numbers from the Population and Housing Census in 2012. A brief explanation of the methodological approach used for the projection purpose is presented below.

A variety of methods are available for projecting national or sub-national populations. They can be classified into two broad categories: mathematical methods and cohort component methods. Mathematical methods directly project the total population, when the initial size of the population and assumptions on future rates of population growth are given. The cohort component method, project population by age and sex, employing the age and sex structure of the initial population together with assumptions on the future components of population change, such as fertility, mortality, and migration (Nanboordiri, 1996).

Different sets of assumptions are utilized to ascertain the future course of the three components (fertility, mortality, and migration) of population growth. The most plausible set of assumptions for future rates of fertility, mortality, and international

migration will yield the most credible estimate of the future population, which will be referred to as the standard population projection.

A combination of alternative trends in fertility, mortality, and international migration favoring high growth yields a high population projection, and another combination leading to low growth yielding a low population projection has been used to make allowances for deviations that may occur with reference to the assumed most plausible path. Detailed results of the standard projection by age and sex are presented in Annexure A. To this end, the plausibility of the three sets of assumptions, which in turn, lead to a standard population projection, and high and low projections, were analysed.

For comparison purposes, total and age-specific population data in previous censuses were taken from the sources of the Department of Census and Statistics. Apart from the population projection information, data was collected from various publications of the Ministry of Education on school-going children, and youth participating in university education from the University Grants Commission, and youth engagement in labour force from the Department of Census and Statistics.

Growth of population up to 2012

From a historical point of view, Sri Lanka provides a tempting ground for a vigorous demographic investigation. There is a significant amount and details of demographic and related data that are available for many centuries in Sri Lanka. Although the quality, reliability, and coverage of such data are not perfect, it is much superior to those available in many other Asian countries.

A scientific approach to enumerating the country's population was laid down in 1869 with the passing of the Census Ordinance which allowed the Governor to hold the census whenever deemed necessary. The first national census of 1871, despite its defects, paved the way for subsequent censuses. Since 1871, censuses were held during the British period at regular intervals of 10 years until 1931. The census that was scheduled for 1941 was not undertaken because of the involvement of the British in World War II. However, the different census was held in 1946 at which the population was noted to have increased to 6.7 million (Table 1).

After obtaining independence from the British, the first census of Sri Lanka was carried out in 1953, which recorded a population of 8.1 million. Since then censuses were conducted in 1963, 1971, and 1981, and the enumerated population of the country in 1981 was reported as 14.8 million (Department of Census and Statistics, 1986). The census scheduled for 1991 was not undertaken primarily due to financial difficulties and civil disturbances, which prevailed in the country during 1987-1989 (Table 1).

The 2001 census, which was conducted after 20 years since 1981, covered only 18 out of 25 districts in Sri Lanka. The size of the population of the 18 districts in which the complete enumeration was done was 16.8 million only. Of the remaining seven districts the size of the population was estimated by using enumerated headcount and other information – 1.9 million. By equating these two components the size of the total population of Sri Lanka in 2001 was reported as 18.7 million (Department of Census and Statistics, 2006).

Table 1: Population enumerated at the census and growth rate, 1871-2012

Census Date	Enumerated Population	Inter-Censual Growth		Average annual growth rate (%)
		Number	%	
1871 March 27	2,400,380	-	-	-
1881 February 17	2,759,738	359,358	15.0	1.41
1891 February 26	3,007,789	248,051	9.0	0.86
1901 March 01	3,565,954	558,165	18.6	1.70
1911 March 10	4,106,350	540,396	15.2	1.41
1921 March 18	4,498,605	392,255	9.6	0.91
1931 February 26	5,306,871	808,266	18.0	1.67
1946 March 19	6,657,339	1,350,468	25.4	1.51
1953 March 20	8,097,895	1,440,556	21.6	2.84
1963 July 08	10,582,064	2,484,169	30.7	2.63
1971 October 09	12,689,897	2,107,833	19.9	2.22
1981 March 17	14,846,750	2,156,853	17.0	1.67
2001 July 17	18,797,257	3,950,507	26.6	1.16
2012 March 20	20,359,439	1,562,182	8.3	0.74

Source: Various reports of the Department of Census and Statistics

A population census with national coverage was carried out in 2012 which was 31 years after the previous such census in 1981. The census of 2012 was the 14th census conducted in Sri Lanka and enumeration was based on the place of usual residence (*de jure*) method and the population was 20.4 million (Table 1). Although the latest census was held in 2012, it was originally planned for the year 2011, following the United Nations' general guidelines, the next census was planned for the year 2021. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession, this is projected not to happen even in the year 2023. Thus, the available population projection results will be extremely useful for various socio-economic planning and monitoring activities in Sri Lanka.

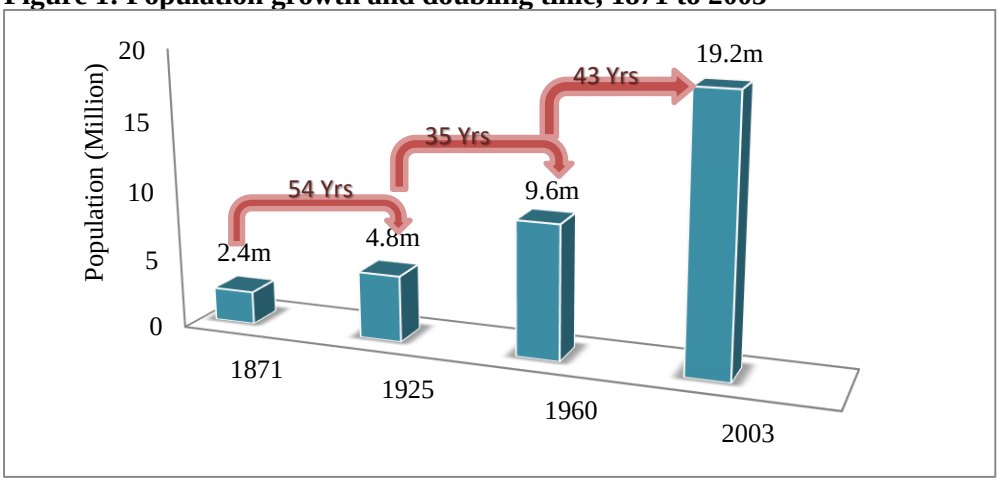
During the intercensal period of 1981-2001 or 20.3 years the number of people added to the Sri Lankan population was almost 4 million. However, during the latest intercensal period of 2001-2012 (10.7 years), the number added was only 1.6 million (Table 1). This average trend indicates that the number added to the population each year has declined significantly over the past few decades (Table 1).

The growth of the Sri Lankan population during the 20th century has not been uniform. Until 1946 the average annual intercensal rate of growth never exceeded 2% (Table 1). However, there was a growth spurt in the post-war years. The rate shot up to 2.84% in the period 1946-53 and remained more or less the same during the period 1953-63. During this period the mortality rate had come down, while the birth rate remained high. As a reaction to the potential problems caused by such rapid growth, policies, and programmes to reduce fertility was initiated in late 1950. Consequent to such activities, after 1963 there was a clear decline in the rate of growth while at present it stands at below one per cent. The average annual growth rate between 1981 and 2001 was 1.16%, while during 2001 and 2012, it was 0.74% (last column of Table 1). The reader may wish to consider the point about the effect of programs to reduce fertility compared to the effect of higher child survival, improved female education, and the impact of welfare programs and the inevitable adjustment of fertility rates.

The often-mentioned issue is the lagged reduction of birth rates following death rates as a multi-factor development phenomenon.

Sri Lanka's population has grown eight times since the first national census of 1871, which recorded only 2.4 million people. The population grew to 20.4 million by 2012, an almost nine-fold increase since the census of 1871. The first doubling of the population took place in 54 years between 1871 and 1925 (Figure 1). It doubled again in 35 years between 1925 and 1960. This doubling within a short period indicates a relatively high rate of population growth. By which year did the country achieve a population of 19.2 million, that is, exactly double the size reported in 1960? Demographic estimates suggest that the size of the population would have reached 19.2 million by the year 2003, a third doubling in 43 years (Figure 1). A pertinent question that could be raised at this juncture is 'how many years would it take for the fourth doubling of the Sri Lankan population?' The answer to this question could only be obtained from examining the population projection results.

Figure 1: Population growth and doubling time, 1871 to 2003



Source: De Silva (2015)

Projection of total population

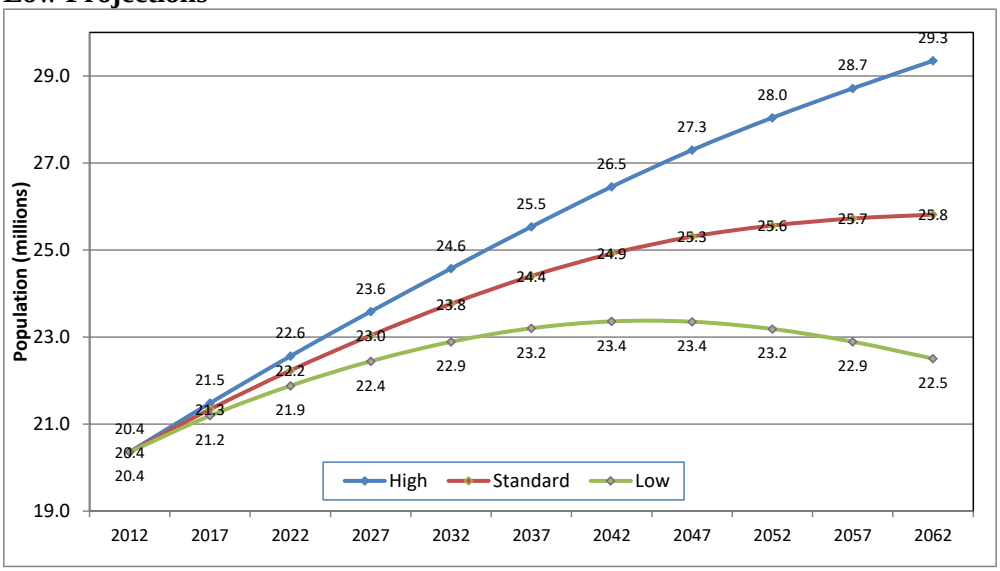
The projections are purely based on the assumptions made on future demographic conditions to update the age and sex structure of the population. It helps to derive various indicators of the future population size, growth, and changes in age-sex structures. Population projection done by De Silva & de Silva (2015) were used here to examine the future growth and structural changes for the next fifty years (2012 to 2062).

All three projections, comprising the standard, high, and low, computed in this exercise show that the population growth in numbers will continue for the next 25 years – 2022 to 2047 (Figure 2). Although at the latter part of the standard projection, i.e. between 2052 and 2062, the size of the population continues to grow, a pattern indicates a stability of the population shown between 25-26 million levels.

Thus, compared to the observed population of 20.4 million in 2012, the country's population expects an addition of another 4-5 million[2] (Figure 2 and Annexure 1).

In the high trajectory projection, the Sri Lankan population would reach 22.6 million by 2022 and demonstrate a rapid increase throughout the projection period. By the end of the projection period, the size is expected to reach the 29.3 million mark, which is significantly higher than the corresponding value reported in the standard trajectory of 25.8 million. In the low trajectory, the size of the population in 2022 would reach 21.9 million and the highest total of 23.4 million by 2042. Since then the size of the population is expected to decline under the low trajectory. In the low trajectory, the size of the population would be stable at 23.4 million level during the period 2042-2047 and after that it would decline gradually (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Projected population of Sri Lanka, 2012 to 2062: High, Standard and Low Projections



Source: De Silva and de Silva (2015)

[2] The expected population increase, for the next five decades from 2012, is primarily due to the increase of fertility, from below replacement to well above replacement level (De Silva, 2015; 2016b). Due to number of reasons, the level of fertility of the country has increased significantly during the past 10-15 years. Although in the standard projection, it is assumed that the total fertility rate would decline gradually since 2012, the absolute additions to the present population, during the next 25-30 years are noted to be very significant. Apart from fertility, the expected increase in life expectancy of the Sri Lankans, particularly the improved male survival will also contribute to the increase in the projected population. The latest life tables of Sri Lanka, constructed for the period 2010-2013, indicate that the life expectancy at birth is 72.4 years and 78.0 years for males and females respectively[2] (Department of Census and Statistics, 2016).

Projection of the youth population

Defining adolescence and youth by a particular age range may defy standardization since different terms and age ranges are commonly used in the literature. Sociologically or biologically, there is no universally accepted beginning or end of adolescence. Experience in many countries also indicates that age definition should be culture-specific. Sri Lanka in its youth policy defines youth as persons between the ages 15-29 years (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development, 2014).

In absolute numbers, the Sri Lankan youth population was 2.7 million in 1963 however by 2001 it had almost doubled to 5.1 million. Over the period from 1946 to 2012, the peak volume of youth (age 15-29 years) in Sri Lanka was observed in the year 2001 (Figure 3). However, between 2001 and 2012 the size of the youth population declined by almost half a million or by 11 per cent.

From 2017 the size of the 15-29 youth population started to increase numerically and by 2032 it would reach 5.2 million, and that large volume would remain the same until the year 2042. As of the standard projection results, the size of the youth population during 2030s and 2040s would be even higher than the level reported in the year 2001. In fact, the size of the youth population by 2032, by about another 9 years' time, would be half a million higher than the figure enumerated in 2012 (Figure 3). Consequent to this, the increase of the youth population during the period 2017-2032 and 2017-2042 would be as high as 10 and 11 per cent respectively.

When the alternative definition of youth, i.e. age 15-24 years, is taken, the largest youth cohort in the history of enumerated Sri Lankan population was experienced in 2001 with 3.6 million (Figure 3). During the period of 2001 and 2012 the youth population had declined from 3.6 to 3.2 million. Although by 2012 the size of the youth population declined to 3.2 million, the same size would remain until 2017. Interestingly, the youth population of age 15-24 years, started to increase again from 2017. By 2030s their size would increase to 3.5 million. Compared to the enumerated youth population of 3.2 million in 2012, over 9 per cent increase would occur by 2032. However, beyond 2032 their size would decline marginally. As of both the definitions of youth (age 15-29 and 15-24) their population size is expected to increase significantly in 2020s and 2030s (Figure 3). This is primarily due to the significant increase observed in fertility during early part of the present century - from below to above replacement (De Silva et al., 2010; De Silva 2015; Perera, 2018).

Figure 3: Growth of youth population (age 15-24 & 15-29 years), 1971 to 2047

Source: De Silva and de Silva (2015)

Apart from the volume of the youth population, its' sex structure also would change significantly in the coming years. Interestingly, after the end of the civil strife in mid-2009, male mortality and out-migration, particularly irregular migration reduced significantly (De Silva 2015; De Silva and de Silva 2015). Although in 2012, for every 100 female youth, there was only 95 male youth, since then the ratio is gradually improving towards males, and by 2032 among the Sri Lankan youth population there would be more-or-less the same volume of male and female youth in the society. As of projection results, male youth favoured sex ratio would continue to rise in Sri Lanka and sex ratio in 2042 would be 102; for every 100 female youth there would be 102 male youth.

It is important to note that although sex ratio of youth population has been increasing after 2012, the opposite would appears to occur within the total population of Sri Lanka. In 2012 for every 100 females there were 94 men, and in the coming years, the shortage of men in the total population would aggravate further. The higher volume of females in the total population compared to the males, is primarily due to the higher life expectancy the females enjoyed since early 1960s and that pattern would remain more-or-less the same in the succeeding years. As of projected life expectancy values of male and female at birth for the year 2022 would be 75 and 80 years respectively (De Silva and de Silva 2015).

Table 2: Distribution of youth population by sex, 1981-2042

Year	Male ('000) (15-29 yrs.)	Female ('000) (15-29 yrs.)	Total ('000) (15-29 yrs.)	Sex Ratio* of youth
1981	2,211	2,183	4,394	101.3
2001	2,538	2,528	5,066	100.4
2012	2,305	2,424	4,729	95.1
2017	2,308	2,386	4,694	96.7
2022	2,413	2,441	4,854	98.9
2027	2,462	2,472	4,934	99.6
2032	2,580	2,577	5,157	100.1
2037	2,609	2,587	5,196	100.8
2042	2,624	2,574	5,198	101.9

Note: Sex Ratio – Number of males per 100 females
Source: 1981 to 2012 figures from the Department of Census and Statistics (2014), and the rest from De Silva and de Silva (2015)

Language competency among youth

In Sri Lanka, the program of teaching Tamil language to Sinhala students, and Sinhala language to Tamil students as a compulsory second language, has been implemented in state schools since early 2000s (Karunaratne, 2009). Additionally, English as a link language is taught to all students from lower grades of school education.

In the 2012 population census, a special attempt was made to collect data on three main language skills – reading, writing, and speaking. The data presented here capture only one aspect of these three, namely speaking only, which is the most vital skill for ethnic harmony and good governance. Although policies and programmes were implemented to improve language competency, the 2012 census data raised concerns about the effectiveness of second language teaching in state schools in Sri Lanka.

When taken separately youths' (age 15-19 years) ability to speak in Sinhala is impressive across all ethnic groups. As reported in Table 3 even 87 per cent of the Indian Tamil youth of age 15-19 could speak Sinhala. Since almost 75 per cent of the total population belongs to the Sinhala ethnic group this language is widely used in all spectrums of the Sri Lankan Society. Thus 99 per cent of the youth in age 15-19 in the country could speak Sinhala.

Of all the four key ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, the speaking ability of English is noted to be highest among the Sri Lanka Moor whilst the lowest among the Indian Tamils (Table 3). Among the smaller ethnic groups such as Burgher, Malay, etc. a strong English language capacity is demonstrated. However, only one-third (32 per cent) of the total youth of age 15-19 group in Sri Lanka is still capable of speaking English. Of the total youth of the same age category, only 16 per cent is capable of speaking Tamil. Of the age 15-19 total youth in the country, only 8.6 per cent is capable of speaking all three languages of Sinhala, Tamil, and English.

When the capacity to speak all three languages, viz Sinhala, Tamil, and English, is considered, the Moor again report as the highest among the key ethnic

groups in Sri Lanka to have speaking ability (Table 3). This capacity is significantly lower among the youth of Sinhala (4.6 per cent) and Sri Lanka Tamil (10.3 per cent) than the Moor. However, Sri Lankan English is a new phenomenon that has developed over past many decades. This language stems from the combined use of both Sinhala and English or Tamil and English words and is often spoken colloquially.

Table 3: Percentage of youth (aged 15-19 years) with multi-language speaking ability by ethnic group, 2012

Ethnicity	Sinhala	Tamil	English	All three languages
Sinhalese	99.8	5.8	32.6	4.6
Sri Lanka Tamil	91.1	90.5	22.9	10.3
Indian Tamil	86.9	97.6	19.4	14.3
Sri Lanka Moor	88.9	97.3	38.1	29.1
Burgher	97.5	25.0	70.6	16.5
Malay	98.7	72.8	70.3	49.2
All	99.0	16.0	32.0	8.6

Source: LankaSIS, 2012 Census data

Educational engagement of the youth

In 2012 9,905 state schools provided formal education in Sri Lanka and by 2016 the number increased to 10,162 (Ministry of Education, 2016). Throughout 2018 to 2020 the number of State schools remained more-or-less the same (10,175 and 10,155). There were 4,004,086 students in state schools in 2012 and by 2016 the volume increased to 4,143,330 (Table 4). Although the number of State schools remains at more-or-less the same, during the period of 2018 and 2020, the volume of student population declined from 4,213,772 to 4,063,685 respectively- the decline was marked by 151,087 students or by 4% (Table 4). Although information is not available for the years 2021 and 2022, presumably the declining trend would have continued.

However, a pertinent question could be raised in this background - Is there a gender issue related to this decline? As noted in Table 4, slightly more females than males were enrolled in the State schools in Sri Lanka, and even in 2020 the pattern has not changed. However, throughout 2018 and 2020 the decline of female students was around 87,000, while the corresponding decline of males was around 65,000.

Table 4: Number of students enrolled in school education by gender, 2016-2020

Sex	2016		2018		2020	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Male	2,052,188	49.5	2,082,696	49.4	2,018,151	49.7
Female	2,091,142	50.5	2,132,076	50.6	2,045,534	50.3
Total	4,143,330	100.0	4,214,772	100.0	4,063,685	100.0

Source: Ministry of Education (2016, 2018 & 2020)

Among the educational cycles during 2018 and 2020, a marked decline was noted in the collegiate cycle (grade 12 and 13) – in terms of absolute numbers, the decline is equated to 145,909 students or 26% (Table 5). It is clear that an overwhelmingly large proportion of decline noticed in the collegiate cycle during 2018 and 2020, has contributed to the rise in the overall decline to 151,087 students. Although there was a significant decline in the collegiate cycle in the latest period, in the period of 2016 and 2018, there was a significant increase observed (Table 5). It is interesting to note from table 5 that during the latest period, in percentage points, except the collegiate level, all other educational levels of school education demonstrate an increase.

Table 5: Number of students and their share in different education cycles, 2016 - 2020

Education cycle	2016		2018		2020	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Primary education (Gr 1-5)	1,717,092	41.4	1,672,350	39.7	1,640,647	40.4
Junior secondary (Gr 6-9)	1,314,381	31.8	1,346,046	31.9	1,357,437	33.3
Senior secondary (Gr 10-11)	619,105	14.9	622,565	14.8	636,985	15.7
Collegiate cycle (Gr 12-13)	492,752	11.9	567,023	13.6	421,114	10.4
Special educational unit	NA	-	6,788	0.2	7,502	0.2
Total	4,143,330	100.0	4,214,772	100.0	4,063,685	100.0

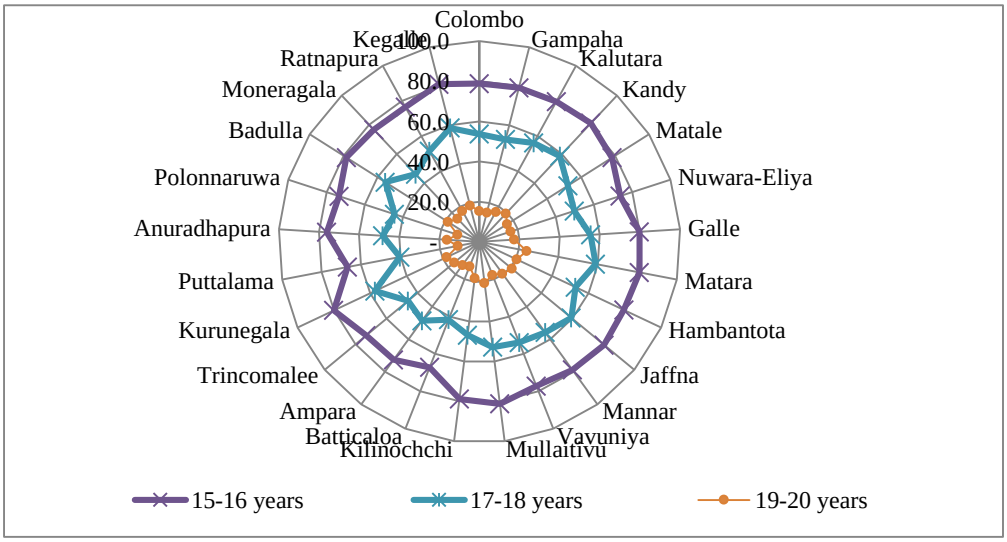
Source: Ministry of Education (2016, 2018 & 2020)

Proportion of children attending school

The 2012 population census gathered information about education engagement from the people who are 3 years and above of the Sri Lankan population. The following graph summarizes the proportion of the population who obtain education according to the age groups and the districts in Sri Lanka. However, school attending proportions in age 6-10 and 11-14 years are not shown because such rates do not deviate much at the district level (Figure 4).

Changes in the age group 15-16 years are visible in Batticaloa and Puttalam districts; compared to the rest of the districts, a lesser proportion attend school in these two districts. Higher rates of school attendance can be identified in Kurunegala, Kegalle, Kandy, and Matara, while the lowest can be identified in Batticaloa and Puttalam in 17-18 year age group. Matara district indicates a significantly higher percentage than all the other districts for the age group 19-20 years.

Figure 4: Proportion of children attending school, 2012



Source: Department of Census and Statistics (2014)

Higher education

Enrolments to each higher educational institute depend on its capacity to provide facilities to candidates, the availability of the academic staff, and the infrastructure of the area (Lakshman, 2016). The maintenance of the institutions also plays a key role in the enrolments. The completion of the degree programme on time is another factor. In the Sri Lankan state university system, the completion of the academic year has been disrupted at times due to the activities of the student movements and particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following table highlights the number of students qualified for university admission, the number admitted to the universities, admission as the percentage qualified, and the university enrollment ratio of the youth population aged 19-23 years in the country (Table 6).

Table 6: Number of students qualified and admitted to State universities, 2018/19 to 2020/21

Indicator	2018 Year of admission 2018/19	Year of A/L 2019 2019/20	2020 Admission 2020/21
Number qualified	167,992	181,206	194,366
Number admitted	31,881	41,641	43,882
Number admitted as the percentage qualified	18.98	22.98	22.58
Enrolment ratio among 19-23 Yr. population	7.4	7.8	8.2

Source: Various reports of the University Grants Commission

It is evident that the number of qualified and admitted to the State universities in Sri Lanka has increased significantly during the recent past. The number qualified increased from 167,992 to 194,366 over the period of 2018 to 2020 a 16% increase was noted. Whereas the number admitted increased by over 38% or from 32,000 to 44,000 over the admission years of 2018/19 to 2020/21. In the same direction, the number admitted to universities as the percentage qualified has increased significantly from 19% to 23% over the period of 2018/19 to 2020/21.

On a positive note, there is an increase in age-specific enrolment along with the percentage qualified for university admission. Even though the age-specific enrollment ratio was only 4.3 in 2009/10, it has increased to 7.4 by the 2018/19 academic year. Highlighting the increased volume of admissions to the universities and other higher educational institutes, established under the University Act, the enrollment ratio has increased further to 8.2 level by 2020/21 academic year. In other words, although out of 100 only 4 youth of age 19-23 years were admitted to the State universities/institutes in 2009/10, the figure increased to 8.2 by 2020/21 doubling the enrollment. Here, the enrolment is defined as those admitted as internal students of 15 universities and 20 institutes. However, a large number of students are registered as external students of the State universities, and another large number is with Open university and private universities in Sri Lanka. Also, as indicated by some researchers, every year, 10,000 to 15,000 students leave the country to follow various degree programmes in foreign countries. If all these groups were considered together the present enrollment ratio would increase further. However, the pertinent question would be along with the increased enrollment, the volume of outputs (graduates) will also increase significantly. Thus, the demand for employment will increase significantly in the coming era. However, the demand for graduate-level employment opportunities will be significantly lower in the State and private sectors. In such a situation, a significant number will opt to migrate to foreign labour markets in search of employment.

Discussion and Conclusion

Substantial changes in the demographic profile of the country are important in preparing the future and for the development of the country as well. As per the past census conducted, the population of Sri Lanka was on the rise. The population reported in 1981 was 14.8 million and it increased to 20.4 million by 2012. Although the 1990s population growth was 1.5 per cent per year, between the last two censuses (2001 and 2012) the population grew by only 0.74 per cent per year. The fertility rate (TFR) reached the replacement level of 2.1 live births per woman in 1994 and then it dipped to 1.9 by 2000 (De Silva et al., 2010). However, since then the fertility rate was observed to have increased to 2.3 in 2003-06, and 2.4 in 2011 (De Silva, 2016b). This trend results in an increase in population growth rate during the period 2012-17 when compared to the past intercensal period (2001-2012) growth. As a result of this fertility increase, the volume of the youth population (age 15-29 years) was increasing since 2017. The youth bulge will be at its peak during the period of 2030s and 2040s – it would reach 5.2 million by 2032 and that large volume would remain the same until the year 2042. Thus, the expected youth bulge has the propensity to incite several critical demands on the health and education sectors and the labour market.

The foundation for the youth to engage in education and employment is primarily laid down during their early childhood. Unlike in many other South Asian countries, Sri Lankan children enter into formal education at very young ages. Sri Lanka has the highest proportion of children enrolled in secondary schools in South Asia - close to 100 per cent were enrolled in secondary education in 2010 (Dunbar et al., 2017). As of UNDP (2014) in State schools, dropouts peak at the end of GCE (O/L) and GCE (A/L) examinations, and apart from these peaks, there is a consistent dropout of students starting from the late primary stages. More specifically, out of 100 students who enter into Grade One only 81 students complete Grade 11, and only 39 complete Grade 13.

Latest data from the Ministry of Education indicates an increase in school dropouts in Sri Lanka – compared to 2018 by 2020 the student population declined by about 151,000. Although there was a significant decline in student population in State schools during the period of 2018 to 2020, there was an increase in student population by over 71,000, during the period 2016 to 2018.

A pertinent question at this juncture is 'Why did the student population in State schools decline significantly over the period 2018 to 2020?" Although, during the period 2016 to 2018 there was an increase of students in the Collegiate cycle (Grade 12/13), during 2018 to 2020 the student population declined by 146,000. The COVID-19 impact on school education could be attributed to this drop and economic recession and escalation of inflation have further discouraged students to move into Grade 11 and above levels. Although during 2020 and 2021 virtual education platforms were provided to school children, there were significant problems for the children particularly those residing in rural areas of the country – devices, signals, connection charges, teachers' and students' motivation/involvement/capacity, etc. Apart from COVID-19-related vulnerabilities, those difficulties presented above also would have discouraged the continuation of education among a significant proportion of school students in O/L and A/L classes.

Although there is no latest official data available for 2021 and 2022, annotated information from many schools indicates a continuation of the decline of both male and female students from the State Schools in Sri Lanka. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, now three years has been completed. During this period, a significant number of students dropped out and another proportion attended a few days of school education. Once we consider this entire group (dropout and low attendance), a significant proportion of them would have already left/leaving without obtaining minimum educational capabilities from the school system. Among some of them, their literacy levels were at a low level, and did not receive a reasonable level of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health from school education, thus vulnerable at their young ages. UNESCO and UNICEF identified this vulnerable group of students with the special term 'Lost Generation' (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). As highlighted by UNFPA (2020) during the COVID-19 lockdown periods and aftermath in developing countries, many vulnerable young people, such as young migrants, homeless young people, those in detention, and young people living in crowded areas such as townships or slums, live in conditions are having restricted access to alternate forms of education and information.

In this present serious economic recession and inflation, those who left schools would be pushed into vulnerable employment categories. Although no latest data is available from Sri Lanka, a study conducted in 2018/19 indicated that among unmarried youth of age 15-24 years, 25% of males and 13% of females already have experience in sexual intercourse (De Silva et al., 2020; Malith et al., 2022). In the present environment a sizable proportion of youth in schools and other education institutes, and idling ones would be pushed to various vulnerable employment categories including child labour and the sex industry.

It is clear that the increase in the youth population until year 2042 would create significant pressure on the labour force. In other words, there will be a large volume of youth of age 15-29 years demanding employment opportunities, particularly from the State sector. Will it be possible to accommodate them in the State sector? Primarily due to the problems encountered by the Sri Lankan economy at present, it would be a difficult task to provide suitable employment opportunities to the youth in the State or in the Private sector. Unless a significant proportion of youth enters into foreign labour markets, the unemployment rates of the Sri Lankan labour force would be expected to rise.

Although in 2018 the overall unemployment rate in Sri Lanka was only 4 per cent of the labour force, by 2021 it increased to over 5 per cent. There is a strong age pattern to unemployment rates observed in Sri Lanka, as in most countries. Similar with the overall unemployment rate in the country a significant increase in youth (15-29 years) unemployment was also noted during the same period. Over the period of 2018 and 2021, the unemployment rate of the male youth rose from 11.5% to 14.5%, while the female figures from 25.2% to 27.1%.

A corollary of the higher unemployment rates among young people in Sri Lanka is that they constitute a very high proportion of the total unemployed – in 2021 the figure stood at 74 per cent of the total unemployed (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022). Although figures are not available for the year 2022, the figures may either remain at more or less the same level or rise due to an increasingly large volume of Sri Lankans including youth, leaving for employment in foreign labour markets. As of the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau, close to 300,000 Sri Lankans departed in the year 2022 and a sizable proportion of them would be the youth – less than 30 years of age. However, at the same time due to the present serious economic recession, a sizable proportion of workers in the informal and formal private sectors became underemployed rather than unemployed.

The youth bulge which is already emerging will continue for the next 15-20 years and it would further aggravate the unemployment problem among youth in Sri Lanka. In other words, there will be a sizable number of youth, without reasonable education and employment or they will engage in unproductive employment. Thus, the country will have to face a greater challenge in generating more employment opportunities in order to absorb the increasing amount of potential workforce. This situation may lead to aggravation of frustrations among youth, with the likelihood of culmination in insurrections, as noted in the 1987-89 era. The civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, which aimed to establish an autonomous state in the North and East of the country, raged for about three decades (De Silva, 2016b; Sanderatne and de Alwis, 2017; Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019).

Due to these two events socio-economic development of the country have been affected badly, and the present serious economic recession is partly a by-product of those events. On the negative side, as a response to the present economic recession, high inflation, and taxation policies, a large volume of professionals and technicians, including youth are leaving/planning to leave the country in significant numbers. At the same time, an increasing number of youth is also leaving Sri Lanka to enroll in various academic programmes with the intention of settling in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the US, Canada, etc. in the Western world. This trend would create an impact on the quality of the local labour force of the country and eventually the country's economic progress.

In this backdrop policy reform is an immediate need, to capitalize on the full potential of the remaining Sri Lankan youth for the development of the nation. However, the expected emergence of the youth bulge should not be identified as a barrier in development, but as an opportunity to enhance the labour force and trigger the development process of the country. Appreciation of this phenomenon, while addressing the relevant challenges would prove beneficial to Sri Lanka, not just in economic terms, but also socially as a means for peace and reconciliation.

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Annexure A

Projected population by age & sex 2012 to 2042 (Standard projection)

Table 1: Single-year population (million) by sex: 2012 to 2042 (Standard projection)

Year	Male	Female	Total
2012	9.9	10.5	20.4
2013	9.9	10.6	20.5
2014	10.0	10.7	20.7
2015	10.1	10.8	20.9
2016	10.2	10.9	21.1
2017	10.3	11.1	21.4
2018	10.4	11.2	21.6
2019	10.5	11.3	21.8
2020	10.5	11.4	21.9
2021	10.6	11.5	22.1
2022	10.7	11.5	22.2
2023	10.8	11.6	22.4
2024	10.8	11.7	22.5
2025	10.9	11.8	22.7
2026	11.0	11.9	22.9
2027	11.1	12.0	23.1
2028	11.1	12.1	23.2
2029	11.2	12.1	23.3
2030	11.3	12.2	23.5
2031	11.3	12.3	23.6
2032	11.4	12.4	23.8
2033	11.5	12.4	23.9
2034	11.5	12.5	24.0
2035	11.6	12.6	24.2
2036	11.7	12.6	24.3
2037	11.7	12.7	24.4
2038	11.8	12.7	24.5
2039	11.8	12.8	24.6
2040	11.9	12.8	24.7
2041	11.9	12.9	24.8
2042	12.0	12.9	24.9

Source: De Silva & de Silva (2015)

Table 2: Population by age and sex, 2012 to 2042: Standard Projection (in thousands)

	2012			2017			2022			2027			2032			2037			2042		
Age group	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**	**Male**	**Female**	**Total**
00-04	879	865	1,744	939	914	1,853	893	866	1,760	863	835	1,698	849	820	1,669	839	810	1,649	821	791	1,612
05-09	882	866	1,748	865	857	1,722	927	907	1,834	884	861	1,745	857	831	1,688	845	817	1,662	836	808	1,644
10-14	829	811	1,640	874	861	1,735	858	853	1,712	922	903	1,825	881	858	1,739	854	829	1,683	843	816	1,659
15-19	820	824	1,644	818	806	1,624	865	857	1,722	852	849	1,701	917	900	1,817	877	856	1,733	852	828	1,680
20-24	742	791	1,533	791	810	1,601	794	793	1,587	846	846	1,692	838	842	1,680	908	896	1,804	872	854	1,726
25-29	744	809	1,553	699	770	1,468	754	791	1,544	765	777	1,542	825	835	1,660	824	835	1,659	900	892	1,792
30-34	797	843	1,640	711	793	1,503	671	755	1,425	732	778	1,510	749	768	1,517	814	829	1,643	818	832	1,650
35-39	686	723	1,409	778	833	1,612	695	784	1,480	659	748	1,407	723	773	1,496	743	764	1,507	810	826	1,636
40-44	662	698	1,360	674	716	1,390	768	827	1,595	688	779	1,467	653	744	1,397	718	769	1,487	739	762	1,500
45-49	618	668	1,286	654	693	1,346	667	712	1,379	761	822	1,584	682	775	1,457	648	740	1,388	713	766	1,478
50-54	581	638	1,219	607	661	1,268	644	687	1,331	659	707	1,365	752	817	1,568	674	770	1,444	640	735	1,375
55-59	501	563	1,064	560	626	1,185	588	651	1,238	626	677	1,303	642	698	1,340	733	807	1,540	658	761	1,419
60-64	425	492	917	468	545	1,012	527	609	1,136	557	636	1,193	596	664	1,260	614	685	1,299	703	792	1,495
65-69	284	350	634	377	464	841	420	519	939	479	584	1,063	512	612	1,125	552	641	1,194	571	663	1,234
70-74	182	231	413	233	316	549	316	425	741	358	481	839	415	546	961	449	575	1,024	488	603	1,091
75-79	116	167	283	133	193	326	175	271	447	243	372	615	283	426	708	333	486	819	364	513	877
80 & Over	108	166	274	109	195	303	123	239	363	160	328	488	224	460	683	285	580	865	351	698	1,049
All	**9,856**	**10,505**	**20,361**	**10,290**	**11,051**	**21,341**	**10,687**	**11,545**	**22,232**	**11,053**	**11,983**	**23,036**	**11,398**	**12,367**	**23,765**	**11,712**	**12,690**	**24,401**	**11,979**	**12,939**	**24,918**
Median Age	30.2	31.7	31.0	31.1	33.2	32.2	31.9	34.7	33.4	32.7	36.0	34.4	33.6	37.1	35.4	34.3	38.1	36.2	35.3	38.9	37.1
Summary																					
Under 15	2,590	2,542	5,132	2,678	2,632	5,311	2,679	2,626	5,305	2,670	2,599	5,269	2,587	2,509	5,096	2,538	2,456	4,994	2,501	2,416	4,916
15-49	5,069	5,356	10,425	5,125	5,420	10,545	5,214	5,518	10,732	5,301	5,600	10,901	5,387	5,637	11,024	5,532	5,690	11,222	5,703	5,760	11,463
50-59	1,082	1,201	2,283	1,167	1,287	2,454	1,232	1,337	2,569	1,284	1,384	2,668	1,394	1,514	2,908	1,407	1,577	2,984	1,298	1,495	2,794
60+	1,115	1,406	2,521	1,320	1,712	3,032	1,562	2,063	3,625	1,798	2,401	4,199	2,030	2,707	4,738	2,234	2,968	5,201	2,477	3,269	5,746

Source: 2012 figures from the Department of Census and Statistics and rest from De Silva and de Silva (2015)