Empowering Women and Youths of the Northern Province by Reforming Skills Development: A Strategy Paper

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1. Introduction

There are numerous private, public, and non-governmental service providers of vocational education and training, both formal and informal, spread throughout the country that need to be optimised and rationalised. The strategy proposed herein is intended towards the optimisation and rationalisation of the delivery of skills training at provincial and district levels. This strategy envisions demand-driven training programmes through the optimal and rational use of human, material, and technological resources.

The Northern Province has undergone enormous economic, environmental, human, legal, physical, political, social, and technological destruction and displacement as a result of the protracted armed conflict over a period of quarter century. Whilst nationally the unemployment rate (e.g. 4.4% in 2013) and the headcount poverty ratio (e.g. 6.7% in 2012-13) have been at single digit levels in the post civil war period, the unemployment (e.g. unemployment rate among women in Kilinochchi district was 29% in 2012) and poverty ratios (e.g. the headcount poverty ratio in Mullaitivu district was 29% in 2012) have been at significantly higher double-digit levels, especially among women, in many of the conflict-affected districts in the country.

The fastest growing economic sub-sectors those made considerable contribution (over five percent) to the Provincial Gross Domestic Product (PGDP) in the Northern Province in the first three years after the civil war were the fisheries and ‘other food crops’ (green chilies and red onions) in the agriculture sector, construction in the industrial sector, and wholesale and retail trade, transport, and banking, insurance, and real estate in the services sector. The foregoing sub-sectors grew at high two-digit (over 50%) or three-digit rate (over 100%). Although the government services (that incorporates public administration, defence, and other government services) continued to make the single largest contribution to the Northern PGDP in 2011 (18%) and second largest in 2012 (16%), this sub-sector has had negative growth in 2011 (-47%) and positive growth in 2012 (13%). In a nutshell, the services sector is the economic driver of the Northern provincial economy and will continue to be so in the future as well. Therefore, the development of skills in the province also should prioritise the services sector.
Severe depletion of the quantity and quality of skilled and quasi-skilled human resources has posed critical challenges to the post civil war recovery. For example, according to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2009/10, only about 7% of the Jaffna district population had passed the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E) Advanced Level (A/L) (Grade 12) whereas nationally 11% had passed the G.C.E. A/L. Similarly, only 10% of the Jaffna district population had passed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) (Grade 10) while almost 15% of the national population had passed the G.C.E. O/L. Needless to say, even the national level of education is woefully inadequate for a lower middle income country such as Sri Lanka. Moreover, the stock of human capital in the Vanni districts is even worse than that in the Jaffna district to which the foregoing data pertain.

The unprecedented economic, physical, and social reconstruction efforts underway urgently require huge quantity and diverse quality of skilled personnel. The schools, universities, and vocational education and training institutions in the North lack adequately qualified and competent teachers, trainers, and evaluators to produce competitive and quality human capital due to the exodus of human capital to other parts of the country and abroad. Due to the lack of qualified and competent teachers, the schools, universities, and vocational institutions have been hiring under-qualified and incompetent teachers on ad hoc basis to keep these educational institutions running. Over a period of time such ad hoc teachers have been made permanent thereby downgrading the quality and standards of educational institutions permanently. Therefore, critical actions have to be taken to remedy this perpetuation of low quality of education and training in the Northern Province.

However, the relatively younger population, especially in the Vanni districts, the untapped reservoir of female labour, and the potential influence of the largest Diaspora population in the country offer windows of opportunities for the Northern Province and the country at large. The four Vanni districts (Kilinochchi, Mannar, Mullaithivu, and Vavuniya) have relatively younger population than all other provinces, barring the Eastern Province, which provides them a comparative advantage vis-à-vis other provinces in the labour market. The Northern Province has the second lowest, after the Eastern Province, female labour force participation rate in the country, which could be potentially increased in order to stimulate the post-civil war economy.

In spite of females (51.5%) outnumbering males (48.5%) in the overall population of the country, the majority of the students (over 50%) entering almost all Faculties (including Agriculture Sciences, Architecture, Law, Medicine, and Veterinary Sciences) of the fifteen
Universities in the country being females, the majority of students entering many vocational courses throughout the country being females, forty percent of the national public administration personnel and sixty percent of the provincial public administration personnel being populated with females, and overwhelming labour force in the three commanding heights of the economy (viz. apparel manufacturing, labour exports to the Middle Eastern countries, and tea cultivation) being female, Sri Lanka has the lowest female labor force participation rate among the South Asian countries. Moreover, Eastern and Northern Provinces have the lowest female labour force participation rate among the nine provinces in the country. There appears to be a striking mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market outcomes in Sri Lanka.

Almost half-a-million first generation Diaspora dispersed in affluent western countries has the potential to effect positive changes in the economy and society of Northern Province through financial investments, transfer of critical skills, and dissemination of up-to-date knowledge, *inter alia*. For example, skilled labour in the Sri Lankan Diaspora communities in various countries could be encouraged to transfer skills to the local youths by offering practical trainings in Sri Lanka. Similarly, skills trainees in Sri Lanka could be afforded apprenticeships and internships in the businesses owned by the Sri Lankan Diaspora abroad.

The welfare-state fostered by the successive post-independence governments has embedded a dependency culture on the people where goods (e.g. subsidised inputs like fertilizers to producers and subsidised consumption goods like rice and wheat to consumers) and services (e.g. universal free education and free health services) are demanded from the state as a RIGHT rather than inculcating a culture of RESPONSIBILITY (promoting a culture of work ethic) to incentivise citizens to earn to purchase consumption goods and services.

This welfare-state inspired development model has always promoted quantity over quality. That is, broadening accessibility is prioritised over deepening excellence. Every year the government strives to increase the total number of intake to public universities and professional and technical colleges; once in a way the government strives to increase the number of further or higher education institutions as well in order to facilitate the increase in the total number of intake. The foregoing is necessary but NOT AT ALL sufficient to enhance the competitiveness of the Sri Lankan economy. In spite of the emphasis on increasing the quantity of intake through universal free education from grade one to undergraduate degree level, the share of the population in the country with secondary or tertiary qualification is very low as noted above.
The cardinal principle on which the strategy herein is proposed is to foster QUALITY skills trainings and education. This quality is envisaged in terms of international benchmarks so that an internationally competitive labour force is created over time. The quality enhancement should take place both among the teachers as well as the students. Of course, quality improvements entail additional cost (and so does quantity increase). It would be ideal if the quality could be improved at the same time as the quantity is increased. If a critical choice has to be made between the two (for example, due to public resource constraints) then this author would choose quality improvement over quantity increase.

Since the services sector dominates the national and the Northern Provincial economy it is high time to promote the service culture which entails attitudinal changes among teachers and students alike. One advantage the vocational education sector has is that neither the students nor the teachers are organised or collectivised as in the case of the university education sector and therefore could be relatively better amenable for attitudinal changes. One of the most critical attitudinal changes required is to develop skilled entrepreneurs as opposed to skilled personnel as in the past.

The skilled personnel would know only the technical aspects of a particular skill. In contrast, a skilled entrepreneur would not only know the technical aspects of a particular skill but also know financial management, marketing, and continuous up-scaling of that skill in a competitive market place. Hence, an integrated curricula incorporating the technical and entrepreneurial skills need to be developed in each and every skills category in order to inculcate multi-skilling or multi-tasking to nourish skilled entrepreneurs.

Another advantage the skills development sector has is that it is by and large practical doing which requires minimal usage of language. Therefore, skills transfer could take place much more rapidly than knowledge transfer across cultures and countries. That is, language is a minimal barrier in the vocational education and training sector. Hence, the dearth of competent trainers of skills in the Northern Province could be offset by trainers from other parts of the country as well as from abroad. Besides, the trainers from outside the province also provide an opportunity for the re-building of the broken inter-communal relationships during the time of the civil war.

A huge number and variety of skills personnel are in demand in the Northern Province. In the short-term it would be near impossible to increase the capacity of existing public vocational education institutions to train the requisite skilled personnel. One way of overcoming the lack
of capacity is to outsource the training requirements to the private and non-governmental sector through a competitive, open, and transparent call for international tender.

2. National Situation

The data in this section is entirely drawn from a survey of enterprises undertaken by the World Bank in Sri Lanka.¹ There is a critical mismatch between supply of the (primary, secondary, and tertiary) education sector and demand of the labour market in Sri Lanka. In spite of significant expansion of and access to primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka since independence, poor quality and lagging relevance of such education has resulted in non-competitive cognitive skills of the labour force. Paradoxically and unfortunately high level of educated youth unemployment in Sri Lanka coexists with unmet demand for skilled labour in various fields and in various parts of the country. It is clearly evident that the education sector in Sri Lanka is supply-driven rather than demand-driven. Resources (financial, human, and material) are allocated based on inputs (e.g. number of students enrolled, variety of courses offered) rather than outputs/outcomes (number of pass-outs, employment after qualifying/training, salaries of passed-out pupils, etc).

Whilst 56% of employers expect high-skilled employees to have passed G.C.E. A/L, only 18% of the total population of Sri Lanka has passed A/Ls. In the same way, whilst 70% of employers expect low-skilled employees to have passed G.C.E. O/L, only 35% of low-skilled and 40% of self-employed workers have passed O/Ls. Similarly, while 60% of employers expect high-skilled employees should have completed Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and 24% of employers expect low-skilled employees should have completed TVET, in fact only 16% of the national labour force has acquired TVET. While only 20% of Sri Lankans are fluent in English, 80% of employers expect high-skilled employees and 40% of employers expect low-skilled employees to be fluent in English. In the same way, while only 15% of Sri Lankans are capable of using computers, 75% of employers expect high-skilled employees and 38% of employers expect low-skilled employees to be able to use computers. (World Bank, 2013: 20-23)

Only sixteen percent of the labour force in Sri Lanka has successfully acquired TVET which is lower than in many lower middle income countries of the world. Out of the foregoing, seventy three percent has only certificate level qualification with minimal skills and only one percent has vocational technology degree. Moreover, out of the fifteen percent that had

undergone apprenticeship, only thirty seven percent had done it in formal institutions and the rest sixty three percent had done it in informal institutions. (World Bank, 2013: 13) These national statistics, whilst disappointing, hide wide provincial variations.

3. **Overarching Goals and Recommendations**

The overarching goals and proposals outlined herein are based on the author’s knowledge of the macroeconomic development of the national economy in recent times, especially constantly declining share of the government revenue as a share of the GDP and the consequent ever shrinking fiscal space, and the government’s policy shift towards abandoning the monopoly of the state in the provision of higher (post secondary school) education and inculcating competitiveness into higher education.

The business of primary, secondary and tertiary education (further and higher education) and learning cannot and should not be business as usual in Sri Lanka. There is a long-felt need for complete overhaul of the metamorphosis of the education and learning sector. Quantity is priced over quality in primary, secondary, and tertiary education which has been the bane of education policy in Sri Lanka during the post-independence period, especially after 1956. Thus, the outreach of schools and further and higher educational institutions to the nooks and corners of the country has been the goal of successive government policies rather than enhancing the quality and relevance of schools and further and higher education institutions. Technical colleges and vocational training institutions, Law College, accountancy institutes, computer studies institutes, etc, are generally referred to as ‘further’ educational institutions and universities are generally referred to as ‘higher’ educational institutions.

It is high time to undertake a thorough audit of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions in Sri Lanka as has been done to the Universities by the Ministry of Higher Education. We are cognisance of the fact that audit of VET institutions is even more important in the Northern Province which has been physically cut-off from rest of the country for long and therefore inspection, monitoring, and evaluation of VET institutions and standards of courses have not taken place for decades.

The standards that the VET sector of the Northern Province should aspire are international standards. Thus, international benchmarks should steer the VET in the North. The Northern Province should aim for super quality, enduring, and inclusive multi-skilling and e-skilling of its labour force both young and old, females and males, and able and differently able. Efficiency, labour market relevance, and quality in knowledge and skills provision and
innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship in learning experience should be the guiding principles of the inclusive multi-skilling and e-skilling of the northern labour force. Vocational education and training should be modernised by way of promotion of work-based and lifelong learning and mobility of students and teachers through exchange programmes.

Work-based or experience-based individualised learning improves learning outcomes as a result of competence-based learning, assessments, and qualifications. Vocational education and training is indispensable for lifelong learning which could be termed Eternal Vocational Education and Training (EVET). As the Jaffna district population ages, resulting in rapid mid-career changes, it is imperative to update and upgrade skills continually and regularly. Similarly relatively younger population in the Vanni mainland requires inspirational multi-skilling and e-skilling of its labour force to cater not only to local and national demand but also to international demand. Moreover, as the Northern Province is home to extraordinarily large number of single/women-headed households and physically and psychologically challenged persons as a consequence of the long drawn-out civil war, flexible, home-based, irregular time-based training opportunities have to be made available in order for the disadvantaged population to reconcile family, learning, and work.

Inter-provincial and overseas (especially in South Asia) apprenticeship to vocational students and trainees and trainers should be facilitated. Such inter-provincial and overseas apprenticeship would on the one hand help overcome language and cultural barriers and on the other hand promote self-confidence, adaptability, sense of responsibility, employability, and cross-cultural communication, understanding, and competencies. Mobility of students and teachers of vocational education and training should be encouraged through parts of the study or training period to be spent in vocational education and training institutions outside the province or abroad (particularly in South Asia). The physical mobility of students and teachers inter-provincially or inter-country wise should be complemented by virtual mobility through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (e-learning).

Individual students should be empowered to develop their learning experience through innovative, creative, and tailor-made ICT tools, including e-learning, to enhance access to and flexibility of training programmes. Moreover, all students across the entire fields of study and curricula should be encouraged and have access to the ability to transform ideas into practice, creativity, and self-confidence that would result in ‘education for entrepreneurship’. Entrepreneurship should be embedded in the competence framework of teachers and trainers of VET.
Career guidance in VET should be transformed from ‘testing’ to ‘tasting’. That is, in lieu of testing potential students for suitability, potential students should be provided opportunity to taste different skills in order to make informed choice/s of their learning. VET should create and nurture awareness of self-employment as a career option and trainees should be encouraged to start their own business. VET should unearth critical thinking, curiosity, initiative, embed intrinsic motivation of individuals, and instill risk-taking culture.

The mismatch between the world of work and the training provided at technical colleges should be corrected. Therefore, a rolling labour market information system should be developed in order to constantly assess and estimate the demand for different types of skills in different industries and geographical areas in rapidly changing markets and world of jobs. The primary data collection should begin at the periphery (village) and move upwards to divisional, district, provincial, national, and international levels.

A research and development institute should be set-up as a public-private partnership to revise and update existing course curricula and develop new course curricula for emerging trades, constantly upgrade the knowledge and skills of the trainers, and develop digital multimedia packages for life-long learning. Skills trainings have little to do with text books and more to do with visual, graphic, and oral digital multimedia tools and resources. The development of digital multimedia tools and resources with sub-titles in all three languages (English, Sinhala, and Tamil) will be also cost-effective. The research undertaken in this institute should be on-the-job research into various aspects of vocational training, learning, monitoring, and evaluation in order to foster qualitative improvements in the same.

There are numerous public authorities (at national, provincial, district, and local government levels) running vocational training institutions under different Ministries. The Vocational Training Authority (VTA), National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), Industrial Development Board (IDB), Women’s Rural Development Society (WRDS), Municipal and Urban Councils and Pradesha Sabhas are all running vocational training programmes. IDB, NAITA, and VTA do come under different Ministries thereby resulting in fragmentation of institutional policies, quality assurance standards, and monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, there is a critical need for consolidation, rationalisation, and streamlining of VET policies, curriculum, and monitoring and evaluation criteria and standards by amalgamation of multitude of institutions to critical minimum. The funding of public VET institutions should be solely based on performance and outcomes, i.e. quality and quantity of input and output. Ideally public VET institutions should be divested to different private industrial stakeholders in the medium-term.
The government’s role (through the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission - TVEC) should be limited to policy development, institution of international standards, financing, monitoring, and evaluation. In all the foregoing functions (especially on policy development and institution of international standards), core stakeholders, namely employers and industrialists in the private sector and representatives of students, should play an active role. The provision of training should be subject to accountability, competition, and outcome/performance-based compensation to trainers and educators.

A critical lacuna in the VET system in Sri Lanka is the non-inclusion of critical stakeholders (particularly employers or industrialists) in the designing and implementation of the training programmes and running of the VET institutions. This lacuna should be rectified as a highest priority.

A thorough audit of all private (including non-governmental and informal) and public VET institutions should be undertaken to assess the existing physical, material, laboratory, machinery/equipment, teaching/learning resources, and human resources capacity by commissioning international auditors in order to facilitate international benchmarking of VET in Sri Lanka. Further, a rolling tracer survey (annual) should be permanently instituted at the provincial and national levels to track the job and career paths of students passing out of all the VET institutions. Moreover, a rolling survey (annual) of attitudes towards VET should be instituted in the NP for awareness raising about and marketing of VET and career guidance.

4. Meeting the Demand in the Short-Term

It is physically and practically impossible to increase and improve the capacity of the existing private and public vocational training institutions in the North to produce the speedily required number of additional skilled labour in the rapidly emerging Northern Province. Besides, the estimated high demand for skilled labour in the North is because of the pent-up demand and a consequence of the massive post-civil war reconstruction and resurrection work underway and therefore may not be enduring.

In the foregoing scenario it may not be prudent to increase and improve the capacity of the existing private and public institutions with public money. Instead short-term solutions have to be found to fill the critical skills gap facing the NP. There are quantitative and qualitative critical gaps in physical spaces, training equipments and machinery, and above all human teaching resources in the province. The vast pool of human teaching resources in Tamilnadu
State in India or in Malaysia could be potentially tapped to train the huge demand for skilled labour in Northern Sri Lanka in the short-run. The foregoing two countries are the only ones capable of providing Tamil medium human and physical teaching resources to the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The critical skills gap could also be filled (partially) by drawing-in skilled labour from other parts of Sri Lanka in the short-run subject to Tamil language proficiency. An alternative option is to promote and provide vocational education and training in English language that would have global recognition. Moreover, international development partners of Sri Lanka could be requested to provide scholarships for trainers and trainees of VET from Northern Sri Lanka, especially in South Asia.

The teachers of public VET institutions are paid paltry salary of Rs.15,000 per month (World Bank, 2013) which is anathema to decent work. Although university academics have increased their salaries significantly through direct trade union action in recent times, teachers in further education (including VET) institutions are languishing in non-competitive compensation regimes. This is a critical under-motivation factor in the TVET sector that should be addressed as a matter of urgency. However, any pay rise should be based on performance and output/outcomes as opposed to across-the-board raise. What we sow is what we could expect to reap.

5. Integrated Curricula

A key strategy proposed herein to increase the quantity and improve the quality and relevance of vocational education and training in Northern Sri Lanka is to develop integrated curricula encompassing soft and hard skills. Teaching and learning of hard skills alone is inadequate to compete and sustain in the world of vocations in the twenty-first century. All vocational courses must have soft skills modules such as cost accounting (beyond basic numeracy), customer care (time keeping, ethical codes, disclosure of requisite information to customers, etc), occupational safety, management, etc, as integral part of the curricula. Necessary trade-related attitudes, ethics/values, and norms should be inculcated on top of the hard skills. That is, the objective of different vocational courses should be to mould and create wholesome skilled entrepreneurs rather than just carpenters, plumbers, electricians, motor mechanics, tailors, cooks/chefs, et al (hard skilled personnel). Because, by and large, most skilled personnel tend to be self-employed in the case of Sri Lanka and beyond.

It is claimed that although the national government has assigned two career guidance officers to each divisional secretariat area in the country to visit local schools and create awareness of vocational education opportunities, a survey in selected villages of the
Eastern, Northern, and North Central provinces has indicated that over 90% of the schools interviewed have had no visits from these career guidance officers, and 78% of school leavers interviewed were unaware of any vocational education opportunities in their locality or the district. (De Mel, et al, 2013: 8)  

6. **Envisioned Medium to Long Term Strategy**

The tertiary and vocational education sector in Sri Lanka, including in the Northern Province, should be overhauled in the medium and long term. Given the ever shrinking fiscal space the state cannot continue to be the overwhelming provider of relevant and quality primary, secondary, and tertiary education (including TVET) in Sri Lanka. Swift promotion, incentivisation, and facilitation of the private sector to become the leading or primary provider of educational services are *sine qua non* for Sri Lanka to transition from a low-paid labour intensive, public sector led, patronage-based, and factor-driven economy into a higher-paid capital intensive, private sector led, merit-based, and efficiency-driven economy of the twenty-first century.

The decision-making powers of the Universities Grants Commission (UGC) and the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) should be swiftly transferred to individual universities and technical and vocational education and training institutions throughout the country. Devolution of administrative (selection of heads of technical colleges/institutes, hiring of teachers/trainers, etc), course/curriculum-development (courses/trainings offered and the contents of such courses/trainings), and financial (determination of salary for academic staff, course fees to be charged, etc) powers to the individual vocational and technical colleges and training centres would spur innovative demand-driven and outcomes-based vocational and technical education service provision in the country. Individual tertiary education institution should independently and autonomously decide on the criteria for selection of teaching staff and students, how much each staff should be paid (solely and strictly based on performance), and how much course fee to be levied.

As mentioned earlier, under-qualified and/or incompetent teachers have been hired throughout the time of the civil war in the Northern Province to keep the public education system (school as well as tertiary) running. These teachers have been made permanent public employees over time; which has become a vicious cycle of poor quality teachers producing poor quality students who in turn become teachers and produce poor quality

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students. It not only costs scarce public monetary resources to pay for these teachers but even more critically these teachers have caused poor outcomes of their students, which is a double jeopardy for the country. The under-qualified and/or incompetent teachers should be relieved of their teaching jobs or reassigned to other public sector jobs but the government should continue to pay their salaries until retirement in order to make the process politically acceptable and manageable; voluntary early retirement with lump sum compensation is another means of relieving such teachers of their jobs. By this way, at least the students would benefit from not being taught by under-qualified and/or incompetent teachers although public expenditure on such teachers may not be reduced.

The financing of the education sector, especially higher education and TVET, by the state should be market-driven as opposed to the current mandarin-driven process. In lieu of funding institutions (primary, secondary or tertiary education), the state should fund the students directly who (along with their parents) should decide what educational services (type of course/s) to buy and where (private or public). The state should make avail a set amount of money in the form of a promissory note to every school drop-out or pass-out at primary or secondary level which could be traded for buying tertiary educational services either at a private or public university, technical and vocational education and training institution, or any other professional educational institution such as the institute of chartered accountants, law college, ICT colleges, etc. This game-changing mechanism of tertiary education funding has the potential to greatly improve the standards and quality of tertiary educational institutions and teaching and learning outcomes of the courses on offer.

COMPETITION should replace MONOPOLY and MARKETS should replace MANDARINS!
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