Technical Education and Vocational Training in Sri Lanka
- Present Situation and Challenges

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1. Economic Environment of TEVT:

The structure of the Sri Lanka economy, the economic environment of TEVT, underwent considerable changes since the introduction of liberal economic policies in 1977. By 2000, Sri Lanka’s per capita GNP had reached US $ 865 and the country had moved out of the category of low-income countries. Population growth rates have been below 1.5 per cent per annum since 1983 and were down to 1.2 per cent in the nineties due to rapid decline in fertility and high out-migration. The economic policy framework, over the past twenty-five years, have been pro-market, export-oriented and private sector-driven. The country has experienced a major process of structural change and diversification during the last five decades. Economic policy reforms and progress have been uneven during 1982-1989 and again in 1999-2000, especially in the face of civil disturbances and resultant defense expenditure and budget deficits. The unevenness in the economic progress notwithstanding, the structure of the economy and the labour market have undergone changes in responding to the shift in macro-economic policy framework.

The share of Agriculture in GDP has declined from 28% in 1970 to 20.7% in 2000. Manufacturing, especially for exports, dramatically increased from 2% in 1970 to 16% in 2000. The private sector’s share in Manufacturing has increased from 41% in 1981 to 90% in 1998. The share of Services sector in GDP has increased to 60% in 2000. These structural changes have paved the way towards a private sector-led and Services Sector-oriented economy. The Services are now broad-based and banking, financial, transport and communication sectors are competing globally. While the structural changes of the economy were taking place the absolute poverty increased in the eighties and was back down to 19% of the population in 2000.

Investment in human capital, mainly through health and education, has been a high priority over five decades. This has contributed to the achievement of good human development indicators (life expectancy 72.2, adult literacy 90.1, combined enrollment ratio of 66%) and shaping the country’s demographic profile towards that of a developed country.

Of an estimated population of 18.9 million, the economically active population consisted of about 6.6 million in 1999. Of this number, 91.2% were employed and 8.8% were unemployed. The overall labour force participation was 51.5% in 1999. Male and female participation rates were 67% and 36% respectively.

The structure of the employed population had undergone changes in corresponding to the structural changes experienced in the economy. Over the last two decades, labour has moved from agriculture to manufacturing, construction and services. Manufacturing accounts for about 14.8% of employment and the share of agriculture in employment...
was 36.2% in 1999. Construction sector had 12.1% of the employed population. However, there was no particular spurt in manufacturing employment corresponding to the growth in manufacturing output and this is due to increasing capital intensiveness and labour productivity.

The distribution of employed population by status of employment (i.e. regular, casual, contractual, employer, self-employed and unpaid family worker) shows that bulk of the employment is in the informal sector. The Consumer Finances and Socio-economic Survey 1996-97 of the Central Bank revealed that only 23% were regular employees. The casual, self-employed and unpaid family worker categories accounted for 35%, 30% and 11% of the employed population respectively. These figures proxy for a large informal sector in the economy.

2. General Education:
Sri Lanka has performed well, by regional standards, in providing access to general educational opportunities. The extensive public school network of the country provides a primary school and secondary school within 2 kilometres and 5 kilometres from home, respectively for every body. Literacy rate was 90% and overall teacher-pupil ratio was 23.

However, regional disparities exist and the decline in student success rates in English, Science and Mathematics and the overall quality and relevance of general education have become a concern of policy makers and planners. Low rates of technical literacy and digital literacy have prompted the policy makers to improve access to ICT education and give more practical bias to education. Accordingly, reforms in the areas of (a) extending educational opportunities, (b) improving quality, (c) developing practical and technical skills, (d) teacher training, and (e) improving management and resource provision are now underway.

3. TEVT System:

3.1 Evolution of the TEVT System:
Sri Lanka’s TEVT system has evolved over a period of 100 years, registering rapid expansion after her independence in 1950s and thereafter during 1970–1990. The expansion was largely driven by the concerns of the successive Governments to find solutions for unemployment in TEVT and it was supported by donors. During 1970-1990 several training agencies and institutions were established under different Ministries. These includes the introduction of state-sponsored and publicly-managed national apprenticeship scheme, National Youth Services Council, increase of Technical Colleges to 33 and establishment of training centres under line Ministries.

The proliferation of TEVT institutions and programmes and resultant duplications, waste and confusions were much of the debate in the latter part of 1980s and this led to the creation of agencies such as Human Resource Development Council and Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission for planning and co-ordination and National Institute
3.1 Of Technical Education (NITE) for specialist services such as curriculum development and technical teacher training.

3.2 Training Providers:

In Sri Lanka, skills training is provided by industry/employers, public, private and NGO sector training institutes, the state-sponsored formal apprenticeship scheme and informal apprentice arrangements.

3.3 Training by Industry/Employers:

Studies have revealed that over 51% of Sri Lankan workers acquire skills in the industry. Training in the industry is mainly through in-house training units and on-the-job training. For example, over 95% of the operational category workers in the Garments industry acquire skills through in-house training units in the firms. In industries such as Food & Beverages, Plastics and Rubber, Ceramics and Leather & Footwear, much of the training is on-the-job. Similarly, in the services sector the dominant mode is on-the-job training supported by in-house-training. Employers prefer in-house training. For example, a survey conducted in 1999 among 75 firms in the Board of Investment Area, that are mainly engaged in goods and services for exports, revealed that 93% of the employers prefer in-house training and 41% of them have in-house-training units.

3.4 Informal Apprenticeships:

Traditional apprenticeship method of learning skills under experienced workers still continues and this is the most popular mode in the informal sector. It continues to be the dominant mode of skills acquisition in the construction industry. About 75% of the carpenters, masons, plumbers and painters in the Construction industry acquire skills by working under experienced craftsmen (Vocational Education and Training Plan for Construction Industry 1998, TEVC).

3.5 Formal Apprenticeship Scheme:

The National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) the successor of National Apprentice Board established in 1971, organizes the following apprenticeship schemes:

(i) Enterprise-based apprenticeships, and
(ii) Institute-based apprenticeships with a workplace-based training component.

3.5.1 Enterprise-Based Apprenticeships:

Under this scheme, about 20,000 youths are placed in industry, annually, to undergo formal contractual apprenticeships in about 140 vocational trades. The training is structured to acquire the competencies given in the training order of NAITA and is supervised by its inspectorate.
3.5.2 Institute-Based Apprenticeships with a Workplace-Based Training Component:

Institute-based apprenticeships are provided by the three national level institutes of NAITA, i.e. Technician Training Institute, Apprenticeship Training Institute and Automobile Engineering Training Institute, that adopt the dual training mode. Under this scheme, trainees are admitted to the institute for theoretical and workshop training and this institutional training is supplemented by workplace-based training provided at industrial establishments in between the institutional training components. Annually, about 700 youths get apprenticeship placements under these three institutes.

3.6. Institutional Training by Private Proprietary Training and NGOs:

There are about 150 private proprietary training institutes, mainly engaged in training in computer and commerce and business studies. About 50 NGOs are engaged in skills training, predominantly short term training for entry level jobs, mainly for the disadvantaged groups.

3.7 Institutional Training by Public Sector:

Public sector is the largest provider of institutional training. Public policies on education & training, employment, human resource development and poverty alleviation and underpinning equity concerns have created an expanded network of training institutions in the public sector spreading across a number of Ministries. There are two types of agencies undertaking training in the public sector. They are:

(i) Agencies whose primary responsibility is training, and
(ii) Agencies that undertake training as a subsidiary function.

3.7.1 Agencies Whose Primary Responsibility is Training:

The following agencies fall under this category:

(i) Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technical Education (SLIATE)

SLIATE has a network of 12 colleges offering National Diploma courses in technical and commerce subjects.

(ii) Department of Technical education and Training (DTET)

DTET manages 33 technical colleges located in the city centers of the districts. Annually, about 12000 youths are admitted to the technical and craft level courses of technical colleges.
(iii) Vocational Training Authority of Sri Lanka (VTA)

The focus of the VTA is on training for rural youths. For this purpose, it maintains a network of 218 Rural Vocational Training Centres (RVTCs), 13 District Vocational Training Centres (DVTCs) and three national level training centres. The courses at RVTCs are of 6 months duration catering to entry level jobs and self-employment.

3.7.2 Agencies that Undertake Training as a Subsidiary Function:

Sectoral Ministries and their major departments and statutory bodies maintain training centres mainly to provide training for new entrants and skills upgrading for existing employees in support of their specialized technical functions. Departments of Agriculture, Fisheries, Posts, Health, Railways, Social Service, Co-operatives are major examples here. The National Youth Services Council also has a network of training centres providing skills training. Provincial Departments of Industries, Textiles etc. have small training centres to provide skills training in their respective fields. There has been a tendency to offer pre-employment training by these agencies as well.

3.8 Ministry of Tertiary Education and Training:

13 universities and 13 higher education institutions affiliated to the universities come under the purview of the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Training along with lead public sector agencies in TEVT. The latter include the following:

- Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TEVC)
- National Institute of Technical Education (NITE)
- Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technical Education (SLIATE)
- Department of Technical Education and Training (DOET)
- National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA)
- Vocational Training Authority of Sri Lanka (VTA)
- Clothing Industry Training Institute (CITI)
- Ingrin Institute of Printing and Graphics

The above agencies account for over 90% of training in the public sector. This arrangement has given the much needed foundation for nationalization and to develop symbiotic relationships between university education system and TEVT system.

3.9 Policy and Planning:

The Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TEVC) which functions under the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Training is the national level apex body responsible for policy formulation, planning, quality assurance, co-ordination and development of tertiary and vocational education in the country.
The major programmes of the TYEC are:

• Vocational Education and Training Plans (VET Plans)
• Quality Assurance Programme
• Labour Market Information Service System
• Systems Development

VET Plans have been prepared for selected growing industry sectors. A VET Plan for a particular industry identifies the manpower and training needs, assess the existing training supply, analyses the gaps and surpluses between the demand and supply of skills and introduce interventions to provide required human resources to the industry sector. These VET plans are regularly updated in consultation with the industry and the training providers are advised to be guided by the targets of the plans.

TYEC’s quality assurance responsibilities are performed through a programme of registration of institutes and accreditation of courses. About 1000 training institutions have been registered with the TYEC and National Training Standards have been prepared for 60 training courses. The accreditation programme is now underway.

Labour Market Information System provides a series of Labour Market Information Bulletins which provide signals to the training providers on trends in the job market on a regular basis.

Systems Development is mainly through new projects and development work for the benefit of the TEVT system. The national skills profile of Sri Lanka is the recent system development project accomplished. It is available in the website: www.tvec.gov lk. The national skills profile provides data on the educated skill base and the output of the TEVT system. This information is valuable for prospective investors and employers. A study is also underway to analyse the profile of the technical teachers in the TEVT system. The findings of this study are expected to be used in preparing HRD plan for the TEVT system.

3.10 Technical Teacher Training and Curriculum Development:
National Institute of Technical Education (NITE) is responsible for technical teacher training and curriculum development. NITE is now involved in preparing Competency-Based Training curricula and upgrading of teacher skills to deliver the CBT curricula with the assistance of the ADB-funded Skills Development Project.

4. Issues and Challenges:
Globalization, rapid advances in technology including mainly ICT and the changes in organisation and management driven by the continuous need to maintain competitiveness and higher level of productivity are the major challenges faced by the economy and society at large. In the face of these challenges, the development of human capital has become increasingly important. Quality and flexibility of the labour force and underpinning lifelong learning are the key to success in a uncertain and fast changing
environment. The challenges for human capital, according to the draft national employment policy of the Government include:

- To develop expertise, innovation and entrepreneurial capabilities that will enhance the competitiveness and ability to stay ahead in the rapidly changing global economic environment,
- To support industries and service sectors with the appropriate quality and quantity of labour,
- To enable Sri Lanka to continuously feed the global market with highly competitive skilled resources, and
- To ensure that Sri Lankans are engaged in meaningful jobs which allow them to realize and develop their capabilities to the fullest, and uplift their quality of life.

The TEVT system, along with education, is considered a key player in developing globally employable competitive human capital. The current TEVT system needs to undergo changes and reforms and should be strengthened by addressing a number of issues. The following are the major issues to be addressed:

4.1 Low Internal Efficiency:
The efficiency of the public training institutions and programmes are generally found to be low. This is reflected in high drop-out rates, low success ratios, and poor level of resource utilization. These inefficiencies are attributed to inherent weaknesses of bureaucratic systems, weak management, lack of competitive and performance-based fund allocation systems, lack of autonomy and flexibility, and financial constraints.

4.2 Low External Effectiveness:
Employability of graduates is the central issue here. Employability depends on the quality and relevance of training provided. The low level of external effectiveness is mainly attributed to poor linkages with the industry, inadequacies in updating and upgrading of curricula in consultation with the industry, poor quality equipment and lack of emphasis on evaluation of impact and outcomes of training. This, in turn, is attributed to weak management.

4.3 Financial Constraints:
The financial allocations for public TVET system are low compared to other sectors, viz. general education, despite its need for upgraded curricula and equipment. Out of these allocations, nearly 80% of the expenditure is on personnel remuneration. The balance goes for student stipends and administrative overheads leaving very little or no money for quality improvement. It is very difficult to recruit and retain quality teachers at prevailing salary scales. Therefore, in TEVT, the management has to do a lot with limited funds. This calls for innovative schemes for diversification of financial sources and mechanisms such as criteria-based funding to promote efficient utilization of funds.
4.4 Lack of Coherence and Co-ordination:
There is a multiplicity of training agencies offering a vide array of certificates. Articulation between the courses of different agencies is almost non-existent. This situation leads to confusions in the minds of both employers and the trainees as to the skill levels acquired through different courses. The Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TEVC) has launched a quality assurance programme to register training institutes and accredit their training programmes on the basis of National Training Standards. While this programme is expected to address this issue, a total solution can be found only with the establishment of a National Vocational Qualifications System. The other strategy identified to address this issue is rationalization of institutes and training programmes. Rationalisation needs a multi-prong strategy including performance-based funding, national qualifications framework, quality assurance framework through accreditation of courses and improved management. The TEVC took an initiative to move towards rationalization through consensus building among lead training providers. On this initiative, the lead public sector agencies have jointly identified an Integrated TEVT Programme that strengthens specialization and avoid duplication of training efforts.

4.5 Low Social Image of Vocational Trades/ Occupations:
Culturally, education is more valued than vocational training and accordingly parents tend to invest on education at the expense of training. Vocational training becomes a second choice when children become unsuccessful in education. Even at TEVT institutions certain craft trades such as Masonry and Carpentry are perceived to be infra-dig. The attitudinal and value changes due to higher earnings are visible but slow. Active policies and interventions are necessary to promote equal esteem for education and vocational training through change of job titles, change of course titles, formation of professional and trade associations and alumni, national awards for outstanding craftsmen etc.

4.6 Lack of Focus on Training for the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Informal Sector:
As explained in section 1, SMEs and informal sector is the largest employment provider. Survival and development of this sector in the face of global competition depends on the ability to improve productivity, product quality and efficiency through improved technology and management. Entrepreneurial skills are of paramount importance here. Unfortunately, the TEVT system is not geared to serve this sector. It is therefore necessary that appropriate policies are introduced and incentives provided to re-orient the training system to meet the manpower and training needs of the SME and Informal Sector.

Poverty is widespread in rural areas and in both urban and rural areas, majority are ‘working poor’. TEVT has therefore an important role to play in poverty alleviation. Poor has no access to institutional training for a variety of factors including opportunity cost of training, distance and institutional culture. The TEVT system therefore should introduce poor-friendly training, delivered at their doorsteps at times convenient to them through
appropriate modes of training. It may take the form of mobile training, distance learning, strengthening training by master craftsmen and such other innovative modes of training delivery.

4.7 Lack of Emphasis on Skills Upgrading Among Existing Employees and Training for Foreign Employment:

Institutional training is pre-occupied with pre-employment training for new entrants with out much concern for the skills upgrading needs of existing workers. The majority of existing workers in craft and related categories need skills upgrading if they are to improve labour productivity and flexibility. They are trapped in low skill jobs for want of advanced knowledge, skills and certificates. Lack of skills upgrading prevents their occupational mobility and in turn hinders the creation of job openings for new entrants. Preparation of existing workers for foreign employment also calls for special skills upgrading programmes. Appropriate policies and incentives are therefore necessary for the TEVT system to serve the needs of existing employees and promote foreign employment through training.

4.8 The Need for Strengthening and Recognition of Workplace-Based Training:

As explained ion section 3.3, over 51 % of the workers acquire skills in the industry through in-house training or on- the- job training. Except for in a handful of companies, such training is limited only to company requirements. The employees, very often, do not receive adequate training in the trade areas with required amount of theory and practice. Systems to recognize workplace-based training through proper certification is limited to the national trade testing scheme of the NAITA. This scheme has not been able to benefit the vast majority of existing workers who have acquired skills outside the training institutions. Measures such as Structured O-J-T and Employer Organisation-Managed Training Programmes are introduced in countries such as Japan and Singapore to improve the coverage and quality of workplace-based learning and to recognize the skill levels of those who have acquired skills in the industry. Sri Lanka needs to learn from these developments and promote public-private partnerships to strengthen training by the industry.

4.9 Training for Re-integration of Ex-combatants:
Sri Lanka has been witnessing an armed conflict in the North and East for over 20 years. Soldiers leaving the forces after 12 years and those who desert during the training period, in general, possess few employable skills since they do not receive market-oriented training. There are determined efforts to realize peace. With the achievement of peace a large number of soldiers would require training to re-integrate into society and enter into decent livelihoods. This will pose a major challenge to the Government, business community and to the general public as well. Long term and well thought out strategies, instead of ad-hoc action, are necessary to address this need. A multi-prong strategy with supportive policies is a must here. It should include institutional capability development, strengthening guidance and placement service centres, special training centers etc. to effectively meet this challenge.
5. Regional Cooperation in Meeting the Challenges in TEVT:

South-south dialogue and co-operation at regional and sub-regional level are important for the member countries for sharing information, knowledge management, developing common as well as country-specific strategies and solidarity building for international support, financial and technical, for addressing regional issues in TEVT. The major areas for regional co-operation are:

5.1 to undertake comparative research studies on common policy issues such as social image for TEVT, training for the poor, training for SMEs and informal sector.

5.2 to share of information on research findings, innovative approaches, best practices etc. for TEVT policy and strategy development in member countries through learning lessons from successes and failures in innovations and reforms in the region.

5.3 to share the national expertise and experience in TEVT through exchanges, networking and twinning arrangements between specialized agencies in the region.

5.4 to maintain a regional policy dialogue and capacity building through regional and sub-regional training workshops for policy makers and policy planners in TEVT.

5.5 to develop and share regional occupational and training standards for the promotion of labour mobility in the region.

5.6 to promote mutual understanding between the countries in the region on TEVT systems and qualifications in the region.