

A qualitative Minor Field Study and C-level essay

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Voices of Sri Lanka's Youth

Aspirations and Perceptions of Freedom and Possibilities



Abstract

During November and December 2007 a Minor Field Study was conducted in the southwest of Sri Lanka with the aim of exploring the aspirations and perceptions of freedom and possibilities among a sample of Sri Lankan youth and also how their situation is viewed upon by people in their close surroundings. The aim was also try to discern the main concerns and indicators of unfreedom that in the eye of the informants are viewed as obstacles to development, to personal human development as well as to the development of Sri Lanka as a nation. The theoretical framework that was used as inspirational ground and basis for the formulation of the project, was Amartya Sen's concept of "development as freedom" and his "capability approach" which focuses on the human potential and what freedom an individual enjoys to convert capabilities into desired functionings or the realization of aspirations. This modern economic theory was tested in this context to find out if it is applicable and relevant in ethnographic development studies. Despite its lack of numerical metrics, the "capability approach" seems very relevant to describe the reality of at least the Lankese youth in this study. As methodology for the qualitative field work, Hadley Cantril's "aspiration-model" and his "self-anchoring striving scale" was used which provides a simple, easily applicable interview technique for exploring the unique reality of an individual and what it shares or don't shares with that of others. The results show that there are many strong aspirations among the Sri Lankan youth; aspirations of being a good person that achieve something in life, aspirations of being able to take the best care of the family, to go through a qualitative education and to get a good job with a good salary. Many youth want to go abroad. Of course there are aspirations of peace in the war-torn country. There are concerns and feelings of unfreedom that relate to the unemployment situation, a very difficult economic situation in the country, underdevelopment and inadequate facilities, the ongoing war, and political unfreedom.

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If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility!

- Søren Kierkegaard¹

¹ Kierkegaard, 1843

Map of Sri Lanka²



Abbreviations

AL	Advanced Level (Education)
GDP/GNP	Gross Domestic Product/Gross National Product
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WDR	World Development Report

² <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/sri-lanka/>

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem area

Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies.

- Kofi Annan³

1.5 billion people of today are between 12 and 24 years old and 1.3 billion of these live in developing countries, the most ever in history according to the World Development Report (WDR) of 2007, a report focusing on “Development and the Next Generation”. The World Bank, which is behind the report, expresses two attitudes to these large numbers. On the one hand this can be an economic risk concerning too high costs for secondary school students in relation to primary school pupils, costs of addressing infectious diseases like AIDS, and above all, the serious global extension of youth unemployment which not only wastes human resources but also creates misaligned expectations and social frustration that could have further consequences like weakened investment climate and growth. On the other hand this can be a positive opportunity. The fertility rates are steadily declining and many developing countries are entering a phase where a larger share of people of working age has less economic expenditures supporting children and elders. A phase which The World Bank describes as “a window of opportunity to spend on other things, such as building human capital”.⁴

The fact that The World Bank highlights youth concerns, especially in the developing world, points in the direction that this field of development research is starting to be taken seriously and approached by the powerful international institutions. This is also a pointer on the shift recently in the way that youth concerns are conceptualized. From being mostly viewed as problem troubled individuals that require “assistance, advice and guidance”, we can now see how youth increasingly are looked upon as a “constituency with their own perspectives on society”, youth as social critics and society reformers.⁵ The hopes expressed in WDR are that policies and institutions will be set up or strengthened in the developing world “that broaden the opportunities for young people to develop their human capital and use

³ Annan, 2001

⁴ World Bank, 2007, p. 4

⁵ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 60, 62

it productively in work”.⁶ Addressing important youth concerns today has much to offer in form of future payoffs as the youth of today have the world of tomorrow in their hands and will form the next generation of household heads who impacts on their own children.

Formulating policies and setting up institutions for appropriate addressing youth concerns must, however, have its starting-point in the youth’s own aspirations and as I will develop later, their own perceptions of freedom and the possibilities that are available. In the words of Professor S. T. Hettige there has been a lack of in-depth understanding of the youth’s “aspirations, and grievances, their ideas, values and attitudes, and their main experiences within the social, economic and political realm”. His point is that many youth-oriented interventions have been based on common assumptions, a negligence among development workers which has led to a defective and irrelevant account of the felt experiences of youth. Further, Hettige also mentions the importance of addressing youth concerns to facilitate their “soci(et)al integration” into their communities which means to create space for youth and youth activities in community development. It is maintained that “the status of youth itself and members of the youth population are sanctioned as contributing to the overall well-being of a particular community”.⁷

It is in this light of new internationally spread consideration of youth concerns that this study is carried out and formulated with focus on Sri Lanka in South Asia. To find out and describe youth aspirations, concerns and perceptions about the current existence among the Sri Lankan youth as such and among people in their surroundings, offers a useful insight into the perceived realities of possibilities and opportunities of youth in a war-torn developing country. This is further outlined in “1.3 Aim of the study”.

⁶ World Bank, 2007, p. 5

⁷ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 18

Sri Lanka is per definition a poor and indebted developing country but still the Lankese as people (this means the whole population of Sri Lanka) are in a less exposed position than one could expect if the civil war⁸ is left outside the picture for a moment. Successful welfare policies and social security measures provided by the state have raised the life expectancy at birth to 74.3 years which is very high compared to the average of other developing countries. Fertility decline through family planning and a low infant mortality is also signs of progress. According to the Human Development Report (HDR) of 2006, the country has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, 90.7 per cent (2004), which even may rise as access to free education in recent years has increased numbers in all levels of education.⁹ These high levels of human development indicators¹⁰ give Sri Lanka a potential to be a prosperous country economically if it was not for the civil war which is a major item of expenditure. Military costs constituted as much as one fifth of the states total expenditures in 2001 and since the government propagated for 40 per cent raisings of the military budget in 2006 these amount is now considerably higher.¹¹ But still GDP per capita in Sri Lanka is about 60 per cent higher than in neighboring India and periods of lower intensity of the civil war and temporary cease-fires have shown quick economic recovery and growth which once again indicates that the war is the main obstacle for durable economic development.¹²

Even if Sri Lanka has a relatively high level of human development and the potential of considerable future economic growth in the eventual, much desirable, absence of war, it seems to have some major important development obstacles of which much concerns the country's youth which leads us closer to the aim of this study. Since it is not the intention of this essay to primarily reproduce and refer to earlier writings or empirical facts about the

⁸ The civil war has been going on since 1983 between mainly the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war, which has claimed over 64,000 lives and made close to one million people refugees, is mostly carried out in the north and east but scattered attacks by LTTE terrorists hit also other parts of the country while Tamil civilians are regularly violated and discriminated nationwide with some exceptions. A Norwegian facilitated peace process resulted in ceasefire agreement in 2002 but is currently stalemated and while existing merely as a paper product for the last two years, the ceasefire ended officially in January 2008. For more information about the war, the ethnic-cultural dimension and the peace attempts, I refer to my B-level essay *Den etnisk-kulturella dimensionen av Sri Lankas väpnade konflikt och fredsprocessen* (2007. Växjö Universitet). The civil war is not of primary interest in this study except for its occurrence in the informants interview responses.

⁹ Hettige, Mayer & Salih, 2004, p. v, 11, Landguiden, 2007, *Sri Lanka: "Ekonomi"*, UNDP, 2006, p. 284

¹⁰ Human Development Index (HDI) is a model for aggregate measures that, in Amartya Sen's words, attempts "to combat the overconcentration on the simple measure of GNP per head" (Sen, 1999, p. 318). The HDI takes into account life expectancy, adult literacy rate and GDP per capita. HDI was introduced in the first Human Development Report (HDR) that was published by UNDP in 1990.

¹¹ Landguiden, 2007, *Sri Lanka: "Ekonomi"*, "Utrikespolitik och försvar"

¹² Landguiden, 2007, *Sri Lanka: "Ekonomi"*

youth situation in Sri Lanka, but instead take some people's own unique perceptions as point of departure, here only some brief examples of common youth concerns will be depicted.¹³

Liberal economic policies and market-oriented development strategies have in the recent decades significantly changed the economic and social structures of Sri Lanka with both positive and negative consequences. While periodically resulting in economic growth and creation of new income opportunities, these changes have also lead to greater economic inequalities between different stratum and social backgrounds, especially among young people. The transformation of significance of income sources from rural agriculture to urban industry and the service sector is in Sri Lanka a relatively new phenomenon compared to other developing countries (since rural-urban migration remained marginal for three decades after independence because of pro-rural socio-economic policies) but currently it is a rapid process. Rural youth coming to the urban areas have found themselves competing with more privileged urban youth for jobs and mostly this competition is an unfair game with different rules for different people.¹⁴

Some of the achievements of the welfare model in Sri Lanka is paradoxically creating problems affecting youth. The relatively high levels of education among youth may have created gaps between aspirations and available economic and social opportunities which could be a cause of youth unrest and relative deprivation. In the words of Anders Nilsson, relative deprivation refers to a

dissonance in our perception; a gap between on the one hand, what we consider as our right to have, to do, or to be, and, on the other hand, our perception of what other people, groups of people or institutions allow us in terms of resources and capacity to satisfy our perceived 'rightful' needs.¹⁵

While education is presumed as the main road to upward social mobility and the education system seems to prepare for higher status jobs within administrative structures there is a huge mismatch between educational and employment opportunities since the real job opportunities that youth face in the expanding urban areas are, if any at all (every fifth Lankese at the age of 20 is unemployed), casual lower status jobs in construction sites, Free Trade Zones, and last but not least the informal sector.¹⁶

¹³ This/The following section was formulated previous to the field study and is therefore independent from the research data.

¹⁴ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 12-13

¹⁵ Nilsson, 1999, p. 161

¹⁶ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 12-13, Hettige, Mayer & Salih, 2004, p. v, 11-12, Landguiden, 2007, *Sri Lanka: "Arbetsmarknad"*

1.2 Theoretical framework

1.2.1 Introduction of the approach

In his respected and celebrated work *Development as Freedom* (1999), Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen presents an approach to development economics which in contrast to traditional economic theory focuses on the human capabilities and the freedoms people enjoy to realize their perceptions of a dignified life, their aspirations, instead of the more narrow identification of development with growth of GNP, rise in personal incomes, industrialization or social modernization.¹⁷

The relation between individual freedom and the achievement of social development goes well beyond the constitutive connection – important as it is. What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. The institutional arrangements for these opportunities are also influenced by the exercise of people’s freedoms, through the liberty to participate in social choice and in the making of public decisions that impel the progress of these opportunities.¹⁸

Sen views expansion of freedom as both development’s primary end and principal means and therefore the removal of substantial unfreedoms is argued to be “constitutive of development”. He also concludes that linkages between different freedom factors are “empirical and causal”, effectiveness of certain freedoms promote other freedoms. Because of this interrelation between different freedoms, one can talk about the instrumental role of freedom which concerns the way opportunities “contribute to the expansion of human freedoms in general, and thus to promoting development”.¹⁹

1.2.2 The capability approach

Since Sen’s analysis treats freedoms of individuals (in this study context, freedoms of Sri Lankan youth) as building blocks, attention is on the capabilities of persons “to lead the kind of lives they value”, thence the common appellation of Sen’s work as the “capability approach”.²⁰ The capability of a person is defined in this context as “the alternative combinations of [life] functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” or “the freedom to achieve various lifestyles”.²¹ Greater freedom to do the things one has reason to value, to fulfill aspirations, “enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the

¹⁷ Sen, 1999, p. 3, 285

¹⁸ Sen, 1999, p. 4-5

¹⁹ Sen, 1999, p. xii, 36-37

²⁰ Sen, 1999, p. 18

²¹ Sen, 1999, p. 75

world”. From this follows the concern of the “agency aspect” of the individual. Sen’s definition of an “agent” is “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well”. Sen is concerned with “the agency role of the individual as a participant in economic, social and political actions”.²² Individual freedom can be seen as a social product. The approach deals with both the social arrangements to expand individual freedoms and the individuals use of them to improve their own lives and in the extension “make the social arrangements more appropriate and effective”.²³ The approach claims no “complete ordering” of all states or alternative scenarios but provides a theoretical instrument that avoids the neglect of some relevant concerns just because of lack of interest in people’s freedoms and what they personally really think matters.²⁴

Even though this outline may sound very convincing (and as noticed, has been celebrated and rewarded) it has been met by criticism from some directions. Economist T. N. Srinivasan’s response to Amartya Sen’s and his colleagues’ import of the “human development paradigm” was forceful criticism, especially when it came to Sen’s capability approach. First, Srinivasan rejected the aforementioned paradigm’s claim of bringing new insights into economic theory. According to Srinivasan, careful considerations of human development aspects could be found in the economic literature long before the first HDR (which Sen was one of the main contributors to) was published in 1990 and therefore he viewed the UNDP project (including the HDI) as “reinvention of the wheel”.²⁵ Second, turning to the capability approach, he questioned whether an approach to economic development without any kind of numerical measuring tool (“operational metric”) would be relevant and useful at all.²⁶ This places Srinivasan in the company of people that hanker after some “obviously correct formula to which reasonable cannot object”.²⁷ To express his thoughts about the capability approach, Srinivasan quotes another critic, Robert Sugden:

Given the rich array of functionings that Sen takes to be relevant, given the extent of disagreement among reasonable people about the nature of the good life, and given the unresolved problem of how to value sets, it is natural to ask how far Sen’s framework is

²² Sen, 1999, p. 18-19

²³ Sen, 1999, p. 31

²⁴ Sen, 1999, p. 33-34

²⁵ Srinivasan, 1994, p. 238-39

²⁶ Srinivasan, 1994, p. 239-40

²⁷ Sen, 1999, p. 79

operational. Is it a realistic alternative to the methods on which economists typically rely – measurements of real income [and] practical cost-benefit analysis?²⁸

Srinivasan and Sugden strongly advocate the maintenance of the real-income framework which “includes an operational metric for weighting commodities – the metric of exchange value”.²⁹ However, Sugden’s misbelief in Sen’s approach is softer than Srinivasan make pretence of. As Sugden puts it, it “remains to be seen whether analogous metrics can be developed for the capability approach”, skeptic but not too rejectful.³⁰ Sen’s own response to the hunt for “operational metrics” in development economics is the simple question of what metrics in income and market valuations really tell us about the actual realities of individuals.³¹ Finally, Srinivasan’s thought of and argumentation about the “reinvention of the wheel” seems pointless since the absolute majority of economic development thinkers of today argue that the classic economic theories and focus on growth, incomes and modernization have overlooked many areas of human development during the years.

1.2.3 Freedom and responsibility

The question of expanding people’s freedoms has some connection to the discussion of responsibility. Lies the burden of expanding freedoms of individuals on other persons and institutions? Isn’t a person a person herself responsible for what happens in her life? “Why should others take responsibility for influencing her life?” Sen puts it like this:

[S]ome argue that dependence on others is not only ethically problematic, it is also practically defeatist in sapping individual initiative and effort, and even self-respect. [...] The concerns that give force of this line of reasoning can indeed be very important. A division of responsibility that places the burden of looking after a person’s interest on another person can lead to the loss of many important things in the form of motivation, involvement and self-knowledge that the person herself may be in a unique position to have. Any affirmation of social responsibility that *replaces* individual responsibility cannot but be, to varying extents, counterproductive.³²

However, Sen follows up, the possibility to exercise our responsibilities is very much dependent upon the personal, social, and environmental circumstances that constitutes the amount of substantive freedoms we enjoy. Therefore Sen sees the argument for social support in expanding freedoms as an argument for responsibility and not against it.³³

Without the substantive freedom and capability to do something, a person cannot be responsible for doing it. But actually having the freedom and capability to do something does impose on the

²⁸ Srinivasan, 1994, p. 239

²⁹ Srinivasan, 1994, p. 239

³⁰ Srinivasan, 1994, p. 240

³¹ Sen, 1999, p. 79

³² Sen, 1999, p. 283

³³ Sen, 1999, p. 283-284

person the duty to consider whether to do it or not, and this does involve individual responsibility. In this sense, freedom is both necessary and sufficient for responsibility.³⁴

Addressing the responsibility of the institutions in power positions and the state and society as a whole, the approach calls for liability to secure social arrangements that create or empower real functional capabilities within persons in order for themselves to live out their freedoms instead of merely theoretically enjoying them. There is one example of this concept that feeds back to the introduction chapter of this essay: Sen claims social responsibility of economic policies to provide widespread employment opportunities because of the fact that people's social and economic viability depend on these. But still it lies upon the individual to decide how to use the opportunities of employment and choose work options.³⁵

1.2.4 Concluding remarks

Freedom as Sen conceptualizes it in his development approach, involves both the processes that allow freedom to be outlived and the actual opportunities that people have.³⁶ Concluding the presentation of the approach, Sen's own vocabulary seems most appropriate to use:

The ends and means of development call for placing the perspective of freedom at the center stage. The people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs. The state and the society have extensive roles in strengthening and safeguarding human capabilities. This is a supporting role, rather than one of ready-made delivery.³⁷

Further, placing the approach in a classic economic-philosophical context, Sen's perspective is argued to take note of, among other things, the interest of human well-being in utilitarianism, the process of choice and freedom to act in libertarianism, and John Rawls focus on “individual liberty and on the resources needed for substantive freedoms” (“Rawlsianism”).³⁸

[T]he capability approach has a breadth and sensitivity that give it a very extensive reach, allowing evaluative attention to be paid to a variety of important concerns, some of which are ignored, one way or another, in the alternative approaches.³⁹

The concept of “development as freedom” constitutes the theoretical framework for this study and also represents the pre-understanding of what a desirable approach to development, that

³⁴ Sen, 1999, p. 284

³⁵ Sen, 1999, p. 288

³⁶ Sen, 1999, p. 17

³⁷ Sen, 1999, p. 53

³⁸ Sen, 1999, p. 85-86

³⁹ Sen, 1999, p. 86

promotes people's real aspirations, could possibly look like. As a theoretical framework Amartya Sen's work is well suitable with the aim of the study and its methodological design. However, previous to the field study it can far from be granted that Sen's concept will be proven relevant from the field objective's point of view and therefore it is also interesting to test his theories in the Sri Lankan youth context.

1.3 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to find out and describe aspirations and perceptions of freedom and possibilities among a sample of Sri Lankan youth and also how their situation is viewed upon by people in their close surroundings or on important positions related to the problem area. From this the aim is to try to discern the main concerns and indicators of unfreedom that in the eye of the informants are viewed as obstacles to development, as well to personal human development as to the development of Sri Lanka as a nation.

1.4 Previous research on the topic

During 1999-2002 a joint study effort involving United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and six Sri Lankan and German institutions (among these the Centre for Anthropological and Sociological Studies of the University of Colombo, the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) was carried out island-wide to "collect up to-date and reliable information about opinions, values, perceptions, concerns, grievances and aspirations of the young generation in Sri Lanka". The study was initiated during 1999-2000 by the so called "National Youth Survey" which covered nearly 3000 households and resulted in the book *Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses* (2002, edited by S. T. Hettige, Senior Professor of Sociology, and Markus Mayer, Coordinator of the Improving Capacities for Poverty Research Program). That book covers much of the underlying foundations of this particular minor field study and provides good empirical references because of the work's institutional composition (with the backup of UNDP and none less than nine academic contributors).⁴⁰ Though some of the issues in the book is very similar to the aim of this study, it is worth mentioning that it is a much broader piece of work covering a larger spectrum of ages and demographic affiliations and that the survey was carried out seven years ago. It had also a more quantitative design with extensive use of statistics. This qualitative study seeks to discover the perceptions of a more demarcated

⁴⁰ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 5, 9

sample of Sri Lankan youth in 2007 against the theoretical background of Sen and to present the outcome of ethnographic interaction.

1.5 Disposition

Chapter 2 presents the methodology of the study including the study design, information about the interview process, setting and informant sampling, and a short consideration of the ethical aspects of the field study. This chapter also describes the coding of the empirical data, the coded categories are thereafter presented in chapter 3. In chapter 4 follows an analytical discussion of the theoretical framework's relevance to the data collected. Then chapter 5 continues with the main results of the study with discussions of the illustrated concerns. Finally, chapter 6 deals with the conclusions drawn from the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study design

This study takes a qualitative and abductive approach and was mainly carried out ethnographically with semi-structured interviews, thematically open interviews, and field observations as the primary sources of empirical data. The ethnographic method, which takes its point of departure in the informants' perspectives and the social interaction between the researcher and the field, is an expression of subjectivism in qualitative research. In qualitative subjectivism the participants' views are crucial to understand their world, their acts and activities and the structures of meaning they share or don't share. An important point here is that the researcher can't leave the research field unaffected or without having affected other people in it.⁴¹ The abductive profile of the study is based on Berth Danermark's and his colleagues' definition of the concept which deals with understanding and contemplating different phenomena as parts of comprehensive contexts, structures and patterns. An abductive approach means that the research has anchorage in a set of rules and patterns of thoughts which tries to explain different contexts. In this case these rules are the theoretical framework and pre-understanding of "development as freedom". Abductive inference can give new insight about the phenomena because it allows for new interpretations, descriptions, and recontextualization of them.⁴²

2.2 The method used

In 1965 Hadley Cantril tried to find a solution to the methodological problem of how to get a reliable picture of the reality worlds in which people live and discover their aspirations expressed in the individuals own terms; and in a way that "without sacrificing authenticity or prescribing any boundaries or fixed categories it would still be possible to make meaningful comparisons between different individuals".⁴³ The quality of an individual's perception about, and relationship to, his society is determined by her definition about "the degree and nature of [her] satisfactions or dissatisfactions with that [...] society".⁴⁴ Cantril asserted that "an accurate appraisal of an individual's reality world can never be obtained if he is forced to make choices or selections between categories, alternatives, symbols, or situations as these are posed in the usual type of questionnaire".⁴⁵

⁴¹ Aspers, 2007, p. 26-27, 30, 33

⁴² Danermark, 2003, p. 179-181, 183-84

⁴³ Cantril, 1965, p. 21

⁴⁴ Cantril, 1965, p. 21

⁴⁵ Cantril, 1965, p. 21-22

Cantril's solution was to invent the device of the "self-anchoring striving scale" which provides a simple, easily applicable interview technique for exploring the unique reality of an individual and what it shares or doesn't share with that of others. On the basis of her own perceptions, goals and values, a person is asked to define the two anchoring points of the symbolic "ladder of life" of which the top describes her wishes and hopes of the best possible life and the bottom describes her worries and fears, "the preoccupations and frustration, embodied in [her] conception of the worst possible life". Then a picture of a ladder device with eleven stages (0-10) is utilized to make the person place herself in one of the stages depending on where she feels that she stands today. She is then asked where she feels she stood in the past and where she believes she will stand in the future. Finally the same procedure is repeated with focus on the person's country so her "aspirations and fears on the national level can be learned".⁴⁶

Using semi-structured interviews with the "aspiration-model" of Cantril as guideline, and the theoretical framework and pre-understanding of "development as freedom" of Amartya Sen as foundation for further dialogue, it was hoped that a sample of Sri Lankan youth's aspirations and perceptions of freedoms and possibilities would be discovered. When interviewing people outside the main target group, a more thematically open structure of interviewing (TOI in the category table, p. 26-27) was used since it was then no longer about the youth's own perspectives. A short methodological description of the structures of interviews will be given in "2.5 The interview process".

Field observations (FO in the category table) have also been used in this study but merely as a complement to the interviews. To the extent they were used, these were participatory observations as they are defined by Asbjørn Johannessen and Per Arne Tufte.⁴⁷ According to this definition the researcher doesn't necessarily have to take active part in the field but can engage in the field through being close to it, observe it and informally converse with the people in the field.⁴⁸

Finally, something has to be mentioned about the use of the ladder device in the "aspiration-model" to facilitate the conversation. This is an example of what Patrik Aspers calls "visual elicitation". Elicitation means to "bring forth" the respondent's answer to a specific question and using pictures can be excellent means of assistance in the interview

⁴⁶ Cantril, 1965, p. 22

⁴⁷ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 95

⁴⁸ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 95

process.⁴⁹ Using the symbolic “ladder of life” is a very simple practice of visual elicitation and was very useful throughout the interviews in this study. The picture can be found in the annex (8.3)

In addition to the primary empirical material generated by the field work (the interviews and the field observations), some secondary material about the youth concerns was collected which supports the research’s findings. This material is mainly scientific articles or reports. The approach to primary and secondary material that underlies this way of working was provided by Patrik Aspers.⁵⁰

2.3 Criticism of the method

The self-anchoring striving scale that Cantril invented has been both celebrated and criticized during the years but looking at the method in the light of the time it was formulated, Cantril must be given credit for its pioneering and long-lived way of cross-culturally discovering people’s aspirations in their own terms. The method does not risk that people’s aspirations are preconceived. It has, however, been argued that the method has too little consideration of the role-play between the researcher and the informants. S. D. Zubaida expresses that Cantril never “reflect on how the local populations *perceived* an educated urban man asking questions”. Zubaida’s point is that many people around the world are, understandably, suspicious of these kind of research and interviews.⁵¹ This one can’t deal summarily with and already it has been emphasized in this essay that there is an interrelation between the researcher and the field that affects both parts in some way. Sceptics like the former have, however, asserted that people cannot be expected to give honest answers but in some cases “falsify, idealize to their own advantage and glorification, talk in terms high-sounding abstractions or the like”. Cantril, referring to his study, and I to this, belie this on the grounds that the field observations and other forms of empirical evidence support the reasonableness of the data collected and that the informants appeared throughout to be honest and sincere expressing their perceptions.⁵²

It should be emphasized, simple as it is, that every response during the interviews are subjective and when it comes to the ratings of themselves or their nation in the ladder device, the same ratings (stages) by different people may mean entirely different things. In the words

⁴⁹ Aspers, 2007, p. 146

⁵⁰ Aspers, 2007, p. 159

⁵¹ Zubaida, 1967, p. 212

⁵² Cantril, 1965, p. 25

of Cantril himself: “All ratings are anchored within an individual’s own reality world.”⁵³ For this particular study this is important because young people from different ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic contexts are participating on the same conditions but will have different valuations of what constitutes the best or worst possible life.

2.4 Setting and informants

The study was conducted in the south-western part of Sri Lanka with its base in Negombo (where the researcher stayed during the study) and Katana, both in the Colombo Province, Gampaha District. In addition to Negombo and Katana, two interviews were also done in Kattuwa. Some of the informants had personally moved to this part of the country from other places (due to different reasons) or had their origin elsewhere. Negombo as a good point of departure is justified due to its broad mixture of ethnic groups and with the security situation in the country (an on-going civil war) in mind it seemed like a safe place to conduct the nearly two months long field study (2007-11-08 – 2007-12-28). Because Negombo has been spared from the armed conflict and is a place where there is a remarkable peace and co-existence between different ethnic groups, many people have searched a safe-haven there, escaping from regions with direct fighting or ethnic tension. This includes some of the informants in this study.

The “target group interviews” (youth sample) with the male informants were all performed at the Don Bosco Technical Center which is an internationally funded private school that provides education for young people from mainly poor backgrounds. Most importantly the school is open for all ethnicities and the informants were from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, this goes also for the female youth informants. The latter were interviewed at four different locations: two at Don Bosco, two in a private home in Kattuwa, two in a private home in Kochchikade and four at the construction site of the Swelogent International Center (SIC, a girls’ home and education center that opens officially in February 2008). The youth sample interviews began 2007-11-19 and finished 2007-12-08.

The sample of youth interviewed formally for this study consisted of ten boys and ten girls. In addition to this, several persons within the same age limits as the interviewees (see below) were faced and conversed with in the field observations. The youth informants were between 15 and 24 years old. This demarcation is based on the definition of “youth” that the UN use in their World Program of Action for Youth. The majority of the informants were studying at the

⁵³ Cantril, 1965, p. 25

time of the interviews, either in the Advanced level or as the 15 year-olds, still in the Ordinary level. Two persons were at the moment employed and four persons were unemployed – looking for jobs or hoping to afford going to higher studies.

This study covers the two main ethnic groups, that is, Sinhalese and Tamil, and also several ethnic-cultural affiliations like for example different religions. Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim are all represented in the study although no comparison between these specifications are presented since there were no characteristic difference in their interview responses. When it comes to socio-economic situations of the informants the study covers the “classic” division of upper class, middle class and lower class but of course these strata are very wide and some specific “class affiliations” were not represented. For example, a couple of young persons from really rich families could unfortunately not be found during this field study. Some persons from really poor backgrounds were however included which was given much importance previous to the field study since it was sanctioned within the academic frame of development studies.

2.5 The interview process

2.5.1 Methodological structure

The qualitative interviews carried out for this field study were primarily semi-structured. The definition of “semi-structured” differs between different literature of social science methodology concerning whether fixed questionnaires are used or not.⁵⁴ The approach chosen here are situated somewhere in between with use of both fixed questions (the aspiration-model) and attempts of more open dialogue about freedoms and possibilities. An interview guide was formulated (see Annex 8.2) which covers this approach and has plain bearing on the themes of the study. The structure was partially purposed to encourage the informants to bring deepened information.⁵⁵ As explained earlier in this methodology chapter (see p. 19), the use of the ladder device and the questions about “self-anchoring points” and ratings on the ladder according to a historic, current and future perspective, establishes ground for completely subjective responses. The anchoring points were self-defined by each informant respectively and therefore the changing over time of the ratings on the personal and national development scale provides an overall picture of how individuals feel that their lives or the state of the nation have developed and further how optimistic or pessimistic the individuals are about the fulfilment of their personal and national aspirations. The exact questions can

⁵⁴ Cf. Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 68, 98 and Aspens, 2007, p. 137

⁵⁵ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 98

once again be found in the interview guide in Annex 8.2. Since the ladder device was used first-hand as an elicitation help during the interviews no deeper investigation of its outcome was made for this essay. However, for those interested, the “ladder responses” are shown in six diagrams in the Annex 8.4.

When interviewing people in the youth’s close surroundings or on important positions related to the problem area, thematically open interviews (TOI) were practised. These were interviews that followed the “logic of the conversation” and were open in so far that the aim was to develop and deepen talks around the study’s themes but without following an interview guide.⁵⁶

2.5.2 Accomplishment

The interviews were performed in a way that ensured the privacy and confidentiality of the informants. All interviews were conducted by the researcher and author of this essay. Four out of the twenty interviews needed the participation of a translator but otherwise the spoken language was English. All informants were given an information letter in English (see Annex 8.1) before the interview and if they could not understand it, the information was given orally by the translator. A recording device was used during all the formal interviews with permission from the informants. Shortly after the interviews, the recordings were transcribed. The interview guide that was used can be found in the annex.

2.5.3 Ethical considerations

Conducting a field study of this kind calls for careful considerations of the ethical aspect of ethnographic research. Ethics concerns the relationship between people.⁵⁷ The social interaction between the researcher and the persons met in the field is not free from role barriers that to a certain extent may affect the outcome of the research in a direction away from the actual reality. This was earlier mentioned in some of the criticism towards the use of the aspiration-model (see p. 20). This phenomenon is hardly completely avoidable and is of course more or less intense depending on how sensitive the issues that the study touches are. However, this particular study’s topic had some advantage in this matter since it is relatively easily accessible compared to many other to think of. Even if one side of the interview model, to find out youth’s worries and fears, may be subject to some individual restraints, the experience during this study was that the informants opened up and honestly expressed their concerns. Further, the inventor of the method used (Cantril) never claimed that his model gets

⁵⁶ Aspers, 2007, p. 137-38

⁵⁷ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 59

at everything about an individual. “A person is not going to talk about [...] many things that are highly personal or socially unacceptable”.⁵⁸ This has been considered during the study and is also to be kept in mind by the reader.

When collecting the field data for this essay, the ethical guidelines and principles set up by the Swedish Council of Science (Vetenskapsrådet) were followed. The informants were informed about the projects purpose and on which conditions they voluntarily participated (see Annex 8.1). The informants gave their consent to their participation. In two cases however, consent was also needed to be obtained by the informants’ parents. The informants were free to withdraw from the interview without consequences or pressure. As mentioned earlier, the study research was carried out in a way that ensured the informants confidentiality. After been transcribed, the recorded interviews were deleted and after the completion of the result chapter, the transcriptions were also deleted. No names of the youth informants or persons conversed informally with in the field has been used in this essay and it is impossible to identify them. The collected data has only been used for the purpose of this study.⁵⁹

2.6 Coding and categorizing

The research data was object to a process of careful qualitative “meaning content” analysis as the method is explained by Johannessen and Tufte.⁶⁰ Because the study’s aim was to let the youths own perspective come to expression there was no need to follow the first steps of that mentioned method; to summarize the overall impression of the main themes in the study material and distinguish relevant themes before going into the coding process. All themes were relevant and constitute “meaning elements”.⁶¹ The coding and categorizing done and presented next, thence cover the data as whole. One can question why some specific aspirations or concerns that only were expressed once during the field study has been given as much attention as something expressed repeatedly. It is my opinion that a minor field study of this relatively small size, should not exclude an interesting view, especially not since the study’s title includes “Voices of...”. The categorizing was done in order to make the research data more lucid and easier to handle in terms of condensation and abstraction of the material. Because of the all-embracing coverage of the presented coding vis-à-vis the field study, there was no need to separate the condensation/abstraction of the codes from the re-

⁵⁸ Cantril, 1965, p. 25

⁵⁹ Vetenskapsrådet, 2007, Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 59-63

⁶⁰ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 109ff

⁶¹ Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 110-112

contextualisation (presented results).⁶² These different stages of the method are here interlaced and constitute the production factors of the study's results chapter.

⁶² Johannessen & Tufte, 2003, p. 114-115

3. Categories and sub-categories

Here follows two coding schemes for perceived aspirations and concerns respectively. An explanation is provided under table 1. The division of these perspectives in personal and national comes from Cantril's way of handling it in his method and is also a reflection of the interview guide that was used in the fieldwork. It is important to mention that when it comes to the thematically open interviews (TOI) or field conversations (observations, FO) with people outside the demarcated youth sample it is of course how they perceive the aspirations and concerns among the Lankese youth to be, that comes to expression.

Table 1. Aspirations	Categories	Sub-categories	Occurrence with field method
Personal	Moral		I-9, TOI-1
	Family-related issues	Family's wellbeing	I-10
		Parents wants	I-3
	Higher studies	In Sri Lanka	I-8
		Abroad	I-7, TOI-3, FO-1
	Good job	In Sri Lanka	I-17, TOI-3, FO-2
		Abroad	I-6, TOI-4, FO-3
	Join the army		I-1
National	Moral of the people		I-2, FO-2
	Peace		I-15, TOI-2, FO-4
	Development	Economic dev.	I-11, TOI-1, FO-3
		Modernization	I-10, TOI-1, FO-1

Explanation: I = Interviews with target group

TOI = Thematically Open Interviews

FO = Field Observations (informal conversations)

Example: "I-7" means that this code occurred seven times in the target group interviews.

Table 2. Concerns	Categories	Sub-categories	Occurrence with field method	
Personal	Family-related issues	Family's wellbeing	I-7, TOI-1, FO-2	
		Family's economy	I-6, TOI-1, FO-1	
		Parents wants	I-1	
	Education	Own performance	I-2	
	Work	Employment	I-5, TOI-1, FO-2	
		Low salary	I-4, TOI-3, FO-2	
	Lack of guidance		TOI-2, FO-1	
	Security		I-7, TOI-3, FO-2	
	National	Moral of the people	Ethnic conflict	I-7, TOI-2, FO-4
			Selfishness	I-1
Low working moral			I-1, TOI-3, FO-1	
Drug abuse			I-1, TOI-1, FO-1	
Politics/Politicians/ People in power positions		Bad management	I-12, TOI-1, FO-4	
		Corruption	I-7, TOI-1, FO-4	
		Nepotism	I-3, TOI-1, FO-2	
		Unfreedom	I-11, TOI-1, FO-2	
The war/Terrorism			I-14, TOI-1, FO-4	
Economy		Poor country	I-14, TOI-2, FO-2	
		Unemployment	I-12, TOI-1, FO-2	
		Low salaries	I-7, TOI-2, FO-3	
		Increasing prices	I-13, TOI-3, FO-3	
		War costs	I-4, TOI-1, FO-2	
Education		Quality of education	I-6, TOI-2	
Underdevelopment		Inadequate facilities	I-7, TOI-3, FO-1	
Brain-drain			I-2, TOI-3, FO-1	
Cultural hollowing			I-1	

For explanation see table 1.

4. Analysis and relevance of theoretical framework

The process of analysis can be viewed as the point of academic writing where the theoretical framework is evaluated in relation to the empirical material. Patrik Aspers suggests that the stage of analysis can support, criticize, or change the theory on which the study is based.⁶³ Here, analysis serves the purpose of evaluating the theoretical framework of Amartya Sen's relevance in relation to the above presented categories. Those themes to which a clear connection to the theory of Sen can be motivated, are briefly touched before moving to the main results chapter where the same themes will be developed among other subjects. It is noteworthy here that none of the "first order constructions" which constitutes the empirical evidence show any sign of being incompatible with the theory of Sen. This means that there is no evidence that the theory stands in contradiction to the actual findings of the study. Nevertheless, it is also clear that not every single data category generated by the field study is directly relevant in relation to the core of Sen's approach. This, however, does not make it necessary to modify the theoretical framework before entering the presentation of the results.⁶⁴ Once again, it should be emphasized that this section is just an analytical discussion of the theory's relevance.

There are several themes in the expressed aspirations and concerns that can be discussed in terms of the theoretical framework and its foundations. The themes as they are brought up here and later in the results, are derived and summed from both the aspirations and concerns and are meant to reflect the importance youth give these different subjects in a future perspective. Individuals' freedom to convert capabilities into actual living the kind of life they value (see p. 12) refers to people's aspirations and how they feel the opportunities to realize them are.

4.1 Economic freedom and capability

The first theme that can be derived from the above presented categories and has bearing on the theory is economic freedom. This covers youth aspirations of finding good jobs with a good salary, either in Sri Lanka or abroad, to satisfy the economic needs of the future life. In an earlier perspective this has also to do with the aspirations of going for higher studies because this is perceived as the road to getting a satisfying job. For most, having a job and a

⁶³ Aspers, 2007, p. 181

⁶⁴ Aspers, 2007, p. 182-83

sufficient income is a necessity, not only to survive the day but also to have the chance to realize some of the dreams and aspirations one may have. Many aspirations are economic or material and so has it always been, even if there are also, of course, aspirations that are free from the material world and relates to other things in life. But through addressing for example the aspirations of a person's family's future wellbeing it is obvious that economy can not be left out of the picture. Aspirations of good jobs must however, in the approach of Amartya Sen, also be connected to the question of responsibility of the individual to evaluate the real opportunities of employment and choose work options thereafter (see p. 15). This will be returned to in the results and the discussion about them.

On the national level, economic freedom deals with the common aspirations of economic development and growth in Sri Lanka. Many of the informants, from different socio-economic backgrounds, emphasized the fact that their country is a poor developing country and that the future must hold economic development in its hand if the hope of a good life for each and everyone would be kept alive. That may sound dramatic but the fact is that a very pessimistic view on the economic situation in the country was depicted during the field study and the interviews. Economic freedom on both the personal and national level is widely aspired. When it comes to the national economy many of the informants also linked it to the development of the country in terms that are not directly economic, for example modernization and technical progress in different areas. Such linking talks about the freedom or "unfreedom" of the national economy to convert its intrinsic capability into valued outcomes, like for example industrial modernization or infrastructural progress.

4.2 The war, terrorism, ethnic conflict and insecurity

One obstacle which may constitute "unfreedom" in the economic perspective, and also was perceived as such by many of the informants, is the civil war prevailing in the country. Public spending on the military and current warfare is incredibly high and trying to bring about economic development and modernization in the light of such expenditures is not an easy project. The civil war is an "unfreedom" factor that prevents the economy from bearing the fruits that its true capability would allow.

Speaking about the economic aspects of the war takes us into the war as such and how the situation in Sri Lanka is characterized by a widespread feeling of insecurity among the Lankese population as whole. The civil war continuously creates and re-creates a security crisis in Sri Lanka. Government offensives and LTTE terrorist strikes not only claim many civil deaths and creates huge human displacement, but also create suffering, both physical and

psychological. To wake up every morning frightened of the possibility that the fighting will affect you this day is a serious factor of unfreedom to use your real human capabilities the way you have reason to value according to your lifestyle. The war, the terrorism, and the political polemic that is underlying it since decades back⁶⁵ has also kindled ethnic divide and mistrust between the different sections of the population like Sinhalese, Tamils and Moors (muslims). Ethnic tensions and feelings of injustice and unfreedom among different groups vis-à-vis the other group or ruling elites whoever they may be, are clear disruptive elements when it comes to seizing the opportunities that may exist to convert capabilities into desired functionings.

4.3 Political freedom and political credence

The Lankese youth's negative view on politics and politicians is striking, all across the ethnic spectrum. Taking the two main ethnic groups Sinhalese and Tamil as example, their representatives among this study's youth sample, are very consensual in their mistrust against politicians and their management of the country. Many different things were brought up to surface in the field research that painted a picture of youth frustration over the political situation and feelings of political unfreedom. Bad overall management, especially economically, institutionalized corruption and nepotism, and last but not least bad handling of the civil war, are examples. Of course there were some discrepancy in the ways different individuals approached the subject and it was not without ethnic colouring that the perspectives were expressed. The common view seems, however, to be that the political arena's representative function vis-à-vis the people, and especially the youth, is highly questionable. The room of manoeuvre for political incentives among the youth was not given much appreciation and there were even statements of serious fear of brutal repressive measures from the state if political views would be expressed openly. This is clearly an example of a situation where a sample of the population feel that their agency role as participants in economic, social and political actions (see p. 13) are oppressed.

There are many more parallels to draw between the research data and the theoretical framework but those above are especially motivating when it comes to proving the theory's relevance.

⁶⁵ Lundell, 2007

5. Aspirations and concerns

As was explained earlier, the results of the study will here be presented as themes with suitable headings; themes derived from both the aspirations' and concerns' sets of categories and sub-categories. The aim is to present the overall picture of the youth sample's aspirations and perceptions of freedom and possibilities that were produced during the field work prior to the writing of this essay. The following pages are the intended fulfilment of the aim of the study which in addition to present the youth's perspectives also is to examine the views on the study topic among people in youth's surrounding and some views that come to expression in reliable secondary empirical sources. The picture that will be drawn here is of course subjective and represents the view of the informants participating in this particular study and the experiences from the social interaction between the researcher and the field.

5.1 To be a good person – Lankese youth, achievements and personal moral

“I want to be a good person in the future and do something good with my life so that my family can be proud of me”. Such expressions are not rare among the Lankese youth. Many young men and women value a high personal moral and feel a responsibility for their way of living. Many youth have aspirations of being good persons morally, not only on the family level but also as Sri Lankan citizens. Some informants talked about a desire to do something good for their country in the future even if the ways of doing it varied from becoming a doctor and work in poor rural areas to joining the army.

My hopes are to be a good citizen actually. I can help my country by joining the army and the forces. I want to take care of my parents. I want to have some work in engineering and help build up my country in that area.⁶⁶

But “being a good person” in Sri Lanka has not only to do with the moral aspects, something that the researcher learned during the field work. The aspiration that lies behind such expression is also to succeed in achieving higher levels of life or satisfying the perceived needs according to the socio-economic stratum different individuals exist in.⁶⁷ Trying to achieve higher levels of life could refer to the pursuit of material things and economic wealth, upward social mobility through education and job, or it could refer to personal development in terms of morality and spirituality. And these different subjective meanings can also be interlaced. The achievement of some targets may demand some variations of lifestyle that

⁶⁶ Interview with informant 5, Singalese male, 19, 2007-11-19

⁶⁷ Interview with Kate Lowe 2007-12-14

could be labelled as more moral than others. One of the informants put this connection like this:

My hope is that I can develop my life into higher levels the proper way. Through first education then different kinds of work. Not only to think about earning money but to touch some higher levels of life in other things also. Many young people and many of my friends waste time by drinking and smoking and just caring about earning fast money. But that is not the right way.⁶⁸

Principal Kate Lowe emphasizes that being a good person in Sri Lankan youth terminology may not exactly have to do with morality but she also sees the connection to a “moral way of living” when it comes to achieving in life.

If they have some targets to achieve, then they would not go for drinking and smoking and would of course keep away from drugs. [...] They would also keep away from serious diseases like AIDS. And they would be keeping away from bad company. This is what they mean by being a good person. It could also be somewhat religious, if they come from a religious background.⁶⁹

5.2 The value of family

The family is of great importance among the Sri Lankan youth and much circled around family issues during the field interviews. To be able to give something back to the parents for everything they have done for them during the adolescence is a very common youth aspiration. By getting a good job with a satisfying salary many hope to contribute to the economy of the family and give some relief to the parents’ burden of maintenance. The majority of the youth sample included in this study had at least two brothers and sisters and when those were younger than the informant, the latter often felt responsible for them.

I have worries about my family. I want to look after all of the members. Because in my childhood they took care of me and they gave me lots of things in my life. I want to do something for them but if I don’t find a job I can’t help them. So I think that is the thing I fear.⁷⁰

I worry about my family. I have three younger brothers to look after and in this country’s situation I have fears about not being able to do this in the future. I am also worrying about what will happen if I can’t find a job near my family, maybe I will have to go somewhere else and then I can’t be there with them.⁷¹

I am now living with my younger brother and my mother and I am worried that some day when I get married I can no longer look after them because maybe my husband don’t want to help them.⁷²

⁶⁸ Interview with informant 9, Singalese male, 24, 2007-11-20

⁶⁹ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

⁷⁰ Interview with informant 3, Singalese female, 20, 2007-11-19

⁷¹ Interview with informant 4, Singalese male, 21, 2007-11-19

⁷² Interview with informant 17, Tamil female, 20, 2007-12-08

There exists understandably also a widespread concern for the wellbeing of the family. Not only are youth concerned about the economic wellbeing but also the security situation for their loved ones. The current situation of escalating military violence and terrorist attacks has made the security concerns much worse, for everyone. Some of the Tamils, however, had some experiences that differed from the Sinhalese faced. To the area in which the study was conducted, many Tamils have moved from other parts of the country in seek of a safer environment as a result of the civil war and everything that comes with that. This has splintered families and while some members have settled down in safer places, others are still struggling the everyday life in the original home town or village. Therefore some of the young Tamils had serious worries about their family members or relatives living in troubled areas of the country.

*I am from Trincomalee in the eastern province and there are problems now with this situation. Now me and my sister lives in Negombo. Before when we were in Trinco we had security problems with the war going on there. I studied up to A-level in Trinco but then we had to go here. We still have relatives there and I fear that something bad will happen to them.*⁷³

*I am originally from Jaffna and we had to escape from there because of the war. But still I have relatives living there and I am worrying about their safety.*⁷⁴

Another family issue that the informants expressed was the common dream of making their parents proud of them. This is not only about achieving set targets in life but also just being that kind of person in the future that the parents would want them to. This is a pointer at the fact that most youth have much respect for their parents and their wants.

*I want to help my parents in the future and I hope I will not have reason to give them any worries. I love my parents and I will do whatever they want. It is important that they support me in my dreams for the future.*⁷⁵

But the high respect for parents wants can also produce concerns in the heads of the youth. It is far from granted that the person's aspirations and dreams are in line with what the parents expect of their child. There can be feelings of unfreedom to choose certain paths of life when parents want to impose restrictions on the individual's future agenda.

*I also worry about my family, my parents. Sometimes it is a problem that they want me to go in a certain direction. I respect my parents decision but I worry that they will stop me from choosing the direction I think will be good for my dream.*⁷⁶

⁷³ Interview with informant 10, Tamil male, 22, 2007-11-20

⁷⁴ Interview with informant 16, Tamil female, 18, 2007-12-08

⁷⁵ Interview with informant 15, Singalese female, 15, 2007-12-08

⁷⁶ Interview with informant 12, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

5.3 Views on education

5.3.1 Aspirations

Almost everyone in the youth sample were either aiming on higher studies than the Advanced level (AL) or had already gone through a higher education than that. A few of the informants however, came from such poor conditions that they had not had the opportunity to enter the Advanced level but they had high aspirations of doing so somehow in the near future. As is mentioned by S. T. Hettige, education “has long been a major avenue of socio-economic advancement for Sri Lankan youth”⁷⁷, and that was confirmed also by the experiences in this field study. The will to invest both time and money in education are widespread and by this is meant both the young individuals’ will and their parents’ will. In the climate of large youth unemployment numbers in the country (which we will return to), some kind of higher education is mostly perceived as a must. And there are many different alternatives when it comes to “higher education”. After the AL there are not only universities available but also a wide range of shorter diploma courses in many different areas. Such education are often provided by private schools or education centers which often means that there are tuition fees to be paid. The difference between some alternatives will be discussed later. Anyhow, Sri Lankan youth’s aspirations are much aimed at education and its very much hoped for outcome, a good job.

An important issue when it comes to education is whether the youth want to conduct higher studies in Sri Lanka or abroad. In the interview responses explicit aspirations of higher studies within the country were expressed eight times while for studies abroad, the number was seven. There could be several reasons for such large numbers on the “abroad-side” but the most common one that was expressed by this particular youth sample is that the quality of education is much better in other countries than in Sri Lanka and that degrees attained abroad are of higher status.

5.3.2 Quality of education in Sri Lanka

Despite the high literacy rate of Sri Lanka and the relatively high level of education compared to many other developing countries, there are concerns among the country’s youth about the real quality of the education system. It was the researcher’s experience that the youth sample had high demands on the education system just because education is perceived to be so important for the future opportunities in life. And these demands are far from met by the

⁷⁷ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 26

system as such according to some of the informants. The demands relate to the structure of the education system, the quality of the tuition, which means both the knowledge and the pedagogic competence of the teachers, and last but not least, the education system's functioning in relation to the job market.

*I want to be a doctor. For this I want to go abroad for my higher education because it is not good here in Sri Lanka. Now the school which I am in, can't provide good education even at the O-level so I want to go abroad as soon as I can to get better education. The problem is with the teachers. They simply can't teach us anything. We are taking extra classes everyday after the ordinary school to actually learn something.*⁷⁸

*I want to go abroad for my higher studies. I want to go already after my O-level. In Sri Lanka we don't have good teachers for these subjects in the higher levels of education.*⁷⁹

When it comes to the teachers, one reason that there may be some lack of competence could be that the teacher profession is very popular and that it is an easy way to get a job without too much effort of studies in other subjects than the one they will actually be teaching later.⁸⁰

There has been much frustration among youth when it comes to the lack of practical education in the schools and that the education system seems not to be providing them with the competence that the job market demands. This is not a new phenomenon however. A historical review could show at least two decades with this problems and how there has been a mismatch between education and work.

5.3.3 School-to-work transition

Principal Kate Lowe, who have been working in the education system for a long time and have much experiences of youth concerns, gives a good picture of the problems that have been surrounding the "school-to-work transition" in Sri Lanka.

If I begin with the situation ten years back. With the system we had in Sri Lanka, the youth who finished their high school and went to universities were kind of book worms. They only concerned about the books and had no practical knowledge. When they got graduated and out from the universities, they were looking for, basically, government jobs. Where they would have an easy work. And then they were not able to expose themselves into other areas because they didn't have the knowledge for that. The next reason was that at the end of the job career they were expecting an retirement after they had finished their job and still have a monthly income until they die. This was the reason why they got into university and wanted to find government jobs. They had that opportunity and it was catered by any government that came because they did not have any alternatives. If they did not find the right job to suit their education knowledge,

⁷⁸ Interview with informant 15, Singalese female, 15, 2007-12-08

⁷⁹ Interview with informant 19, Moor female, 15, 2007-12-11

⁸⁰ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 115

*then you found ten thousands of graduates who went rioting and demonstrating due to the fact that they did not have jobs. They were saying: We are graduates and we don't have enough jobs in Sri Lanka.*⁸¹

Lowe touches some important aspects here that also were confirmed by the youth informants. One example is the design of the country's education system which is perceived as forcing the students to go in one line only. This means that there are, or were, not many alternative paths to take in the higher education. There were a fixed set of education programmes in different disciplines but they were not very broad in their design and did not give a good all-round education or practical knowledge. Such a simple thing that they did not have obligatory of studies in English or other foreign languages seriously restricted the future movability on the job market and then there were not much options left than seeking jobs in the public sector as a specialist on his or her own education area and work there for a very long time, public sector employment are relatively stable in a longer perspective of time. One of the contributors to the book *Sri Lankan Youth: Challenges and Responses*, W. D. Lakshman, explains the popularity of public sector employment like this:

The public sector in Sri Lanka, following the practices, which the British colonial system had left behind, operates on tenets of permanent or lifetime employment. Jobs in the public sector have come to be considered more secure and permanent than those in the private sector. There are also perceptions about public sector jobs being on average more paying than non-public-sector jobs. The formal system of education has tended to implant attitudes favouring the public sector.⁸²

This system remains to much extent today even if it has been some small changes the recent years as Lowe explains further.

That was ten or fifteen years back... Then, gradually, what happened was, that foreign universities were introduced to Sri Lanka. And international schools were introduced to Sri Lanka. And then, the government also let people who had...or rather investors who were able to invest in schools, or getting private universities into Sri Lanka, they allowed them to open. For some reason or the other, they allowed it. And then, gradually privatization came into Sri Lanka. Some of the private companies started opening up. Firms started opening up. Schools started opening up. And then, those who were able to finance those kind of education for their children, they started sending them to these private schools. And in the private schools they found that the children were not going in one line only and that the schools tried to produce a whole person, at least they were trying to. By "a whole person" I mean that the education did not limited a person to one area of studies. If I can not become a computer operator, then I have another option, I can become a sales person. This was introduced now. One person had other areas

⁸¹ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

⁸² Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 87-88

where he could find jobs. It is yet not hundred per cent practical in Sri Lanka but the job opportunities are there. So now the job market is open, you can find jobs if you are educated enough. Now, again, this is limited to a certain group of people who can afford to go for such higher studies. Or sometimes people send their children out of the country for studies. The group of people who are not able to support themselves financially on education are still struggling their way. But within the last five or six years I also have seen that the public universities, government universities, are opening this way to a certain extent. It is not, again, as practical as the private schools, but they are opening it. Now we see that youth are aiming at going for higher studies, aiming at finding other jobs, not just sitting as a clerk in an office, government office. And they find that the private sector has better opportunities for them than in the public sector, the government sector. Youth are finding their jobs more comfortable this way.

What I am now seeing is that the schools are more and more adopting ways of teaching that are influenced by foreign universities and private schools. Before they had only one way of teaching. It was all about the books and the lectures but no practical education. What we are seeing now is that many of the companies hire young people from the international schools because of their somewhat different way of education. It has to do with the language of course but also because they focus more on wide practical knowledge so the graduates have more alternatives when they enter the job market.⁸³

However, one of the informants expressed himself in a way that shows that the recent change to a more open education system, even in the public schools, are not experienced by everyone even if it is a fact that there are now more options.

We have to change something in the education system. In other countries the high level students can choose what they will do in the future but here in Sri Lanka we don't have that chance. We have to go everyone in one line. Everyone have to go to the O-level and if some fail the O-level they will have nothing to do. Then to have some chance to get a job you will have to go to at least A-level and then probably to university. If you don't go that way you will have nothing to do. But even if you go to university and get a good degree it is still difficult to find a good job. If we change the system somehow so the young people can choose different ways to go, then I believe we can build up the country, and also build up the economy. We need the choice of plans, now we don't have a plan, everyone just go in one line.⁸⁴

Lakshman agrees with Lowe about the recent change but he argues also that the change of the mentality among the educated youth has changed rather slowly and that could be the reason why frustration over the actual job market situation is still widespread among youth.

It appears that on the part of the educated job aspirants, particularly of rural origin and those without adequate "accumulated social capital" to help them in life or ancestral resources to

⁸³ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

⁸⁴ Interview with informant 4, Singalese male, 21, 2007-11-19

succeed in self-employment, there is still a greater desire to seek public sector jobs, in preference to private sector jobs.⁸⁵

5.4 Work

5.4.1 Aspirations

Aspirations of a good job were of course expressed by the great majority of the informants in the youth sample. What kind of job they looked for varied but a pattern of traditionally gendered based choice of profession could still be discerned. Boys were to a large extent aiming at the technical sector and wanted to become engineers and computer professionals while among the girls there were greater variety with for example some wanting to become doctors, one scientist, some clerks or accountants, some business managers and one beauty specialist.

*I want to be an electric engineer or a/c engineer. I want to be a good student and learn much so I can get a good job in that area. I also want to go to other countries and learn about new machines there and take that knowledge back to my country.*⁸⁶

*I like to get a job working with computers. I hope to work with design on computers, like web design, Photoshop and those things. I would like to have a job so I can take care of my family economically.*⁸⁷

*I want to go to the top level in every area of my life including especially my job situation. I want to be at the top and whenever I am working under someone my aim is to get to this top position myself. I want to be a manager. If I have my own business I want it to be successful and at the top in that branch. I hope to work in the computer section.*⁸⁸

*I want to be a doctor. For this I want to go abroad for my higher education because it is not good here in Sri Lanka. [...] Then I want to come back to Sri Lanka and do something for my country, I want to work as a doctor in poor rural areas.*⁸⁹

5.4.2 Youth employment situation

While having very clear and defined aspirations of getting good jobs in certain areas of work, the youth are also much concerned about the employment situation. Many fear that the job market can not provide the jobs they are aiming at. These concerns exist with good reason. The youth unemployment in Sri Lanka is very high and “have remained several times that of the average rate of unemployment for the country”.⁹⁰ Concerns about the unemployment

⁸⁵ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 88

⁸⁶ Interview with informant 2, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-19

⁸⁷ Interview with informant 11, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

⁸⁸ Interview with informant 14, Singalese female, 23, 2007-12-01

⁸⁹ Interview with informant 15, Singalese female, 15, 2007-12-08

⁹⁰ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 68

situation are also connected to the questions about “nepotism” or “corruption” in the job market which refers to the widespread opinion that many jobs go unrighteously to persons just because their relation or support to politicians or other people in power positions.

*Most young people in Sri Lanka have a good knowledge but they can't find jobs for their knowledge. So lots of students and other people go abroad. If the government get jobs for most of the students I think Sri Lanka will build up in the future. But unfortunately the government don't consider about this. There is also a problem with finding jobs for many students because the jobs actually go to some children, relatives or neighbours of the politician's instead.*⁹¹

*The employment situation and economic freedom for young people are very bad. We have good education and if I get a good degree and apply for a job it always goes to another person who has some relationship to politicians or other important persons. But these persons do not need any qualifications, degrees or have to make any applications.*⁹²

S. T. Hettige gives impression of being well aware of this phenomenon and argues that bribery and political favouritism is a big issue when it comes to employment in at least the public sector.⁹³ Kate Lowe also recognize this problem but puts in a more time bound perspective and relates it to the design of the education system and sees how the recent changes could counteract this kind of nepotism.

This was a reality some time back and was widely practiced in our country. This group who was on one track and had no other exposure for other study areas, they had no computer knowledge, English knowledge, basically the most important, or any other knowledge. Suppose they were studying art subjects, that is agriculture, geography, history, all those subjects, the only option was to find clerical jobs or becoming a teacher and that was it. But now the universities are paving the way for different areas or tracks. So if they can not find jobs as clerks in the government sector, at least they can find a computer or sales job. That is the opportunity now. But back then there was only one option. Because they had only one option to find employment, they always went behind a minister or a government official and then the ministers would keep their position or the goodwill among the people. So whether the persons were educated and qualified enough or not, anybody who supported them, the ministers went ahead and helped them by giving them jobs. Politics played a big role in the life of youth. If they were supporting the politicians, they were able to find a job. That was all because they did not have another option. But now they do have. Youth do not have to go behind a politician to find jobs. The job market is there. The only thing is that you have to educate yourself to get the right job. That means that you have to be an all-rounder. If you can not do one thing, you should be able to do

⁹¹ Interview with informant 3, Singalese female, 20, 2007-11-19

⁹² Interview with informant 5, Singalese male, 19, 2007-11-19

⁹³ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 94

*another thing. Many young people are aiming in only one direction, to get a certain job. They have to broaden their aims.*⁹⁴

Some of the informants were also well aware that there have been mismatches between the education system and the demands from the job market which makes them criticize the politicians for not dealing seriously with this matter.

*My worries are about the employment situation because what we study in the advanced levels, that is not what the job market really needs. If the government would tell us what to study to get the jobs then it would be better but now they don't have any plans and just want everyone to go in one line. The government asks us to study some things but the job market does not ask for the same things.*⁹⁵

The education system has created a pattern of job preferences that are not in line with the economy's creation of jobs. According to Hettige "there is an over-supply of labour for professional and white collar type of jobs and under-supply for manual and elementary jobs in sectors like agriculture and fishing, crafts, services etc".⁹⁶ This points in the direction that the actual youth unemployment situation in Sri Lanka may be more complex than at first sight. Many of the country's youth are simply just waiting for their preferred job while there are other jobs to take if willing.

The country's labour market – as anywhere else in the world – is segmented. Jobs in certain sectors and, even in the same sector, certain types of occupations, are not preferred by large numbers of jobless persons, particularly the more educated segments of the labour force.⁹⁷

Several of the informants gave impression of expecting the government to provide them with jobs and that it is the responsibility of the politicians and official agencies to secure employment for youth.

*In Sri Lanka most of the graduates have no job and the government can't give the people jobs and that is really difficult for young people. There are some jobs to find but the salary is then not enough in this tough times. The government should work harder on creating more jobs.*⁹⁸

This feeds back to Amartya Sen's discussion about freedom and responsibility. Even if employment and job creation of course is a major political issue and a task for politicians to handle, there must also be a responsibility of the individual to try to evaluate the real work

⁹⁴ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

⁹⁵ Interview with informant 4, Singalese male, 21, 2007-11-19

⁹⁶ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 80

⁹⁷ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 76, 78

⁹⁸ Interview with informant 1, Tamil male, 20, 2007-11-19

opportunities and then use them wisely. As Hettige puts it, “those who are looking for jobs, particularly the educated youth, must be aware of where they could find work for a living”.⁹⁹

5.4.3 Unemployment and youth frustration

Unemployment is much perceived as a major unfreedom factor that makes youth see obstacles in their personal development and creates serious concern about the future. Youth unemployment is not only affecting the jobless and their families but also destabilises the society at large when the frustration it creates among youth comes to expression of dissatisfaction in demonstrations and riots.¹⁰⁰ Such frustration also radicalises youth and makes them more open to extremist influences. S. T. Hettige concludes that “extensive conditions of unemployment and widespread sense of despair among the youth [have] led to erosion of their confidence in established socio-political and economic systems and processes” and have created a “desire among the radicalised youth to build up alternative systems”.¹⁰¹

5.4.4 Salaries

*I am also worrying about the job situation because if I would start looking for a job after this computer course I would not find any or get bad salary. I have to take several more courses and diplomas to have a chance to get a good job. The situation in Sri Lanka is not easy. Everything has gone up in prices so you have to get a good salary to afford living.*¹⁰²

*In Sri Lanka salaries are not good. In many other countries like Saudi, England, America, salary is good. The government has not done a good budget so economics are bad and salaries are low.*¹⁰³

These are only two examples but concerns about low salaries were almost as frequent in the interview responses as unemployment. Many of the informants feared that they would not get enough salary if they, at all, could find a job. Was it not concern about the own future salary, it was about the salaries of the parents. Worrying about a low future salary is a very common and understandable concern but the question is what could be done about it. And the question is also how bad the average salaries in Sri Lanka really are and what makes many young people perceive the wage level to be so bad. Kate Lowe has interesting opinions about the matter that also touch other issues.

⁹⁹ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 86

¹⁰⁰ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 83

¹⁰¹ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 84

¹⁰² Interview with informant 11, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

¹⁰³ Interview with informant 2, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-19

In most local companies or small firms, the labour cost is very cheap. That is according to the owner of the company. They do not have a set standard of wage scales. There are no set rules or regulations on minimum wage for different jobs. Therefore salary depends on who you are working for and the strength of the company. In the free trade zones there are set minimums, at about 5000 rupees per month, but there you can also increase your wage by working more. You can put in an extra effort and then increase your income. Sometimes a girl working there can get 12-13000 rupees. The more you work the more you earn. To earn it you can't sit on a chair and wait for money to fall in your lap, you have to earn it. What we can see often in Sri Lanka is that workers always work the exact number of hours they are expected but nothing more. 8 hours is the standard working time here. For example in a construction site the workers come at nine o'clock and leave at five o'clock, exactly, whether the work is finished or not. So the cement they have mixed...sharp at five o'clock they stop and the cement is wasted. If they would work that extra hour to get good use of the cement and finish the job, the employer would be happy because he is also concerned about the material expenditures, and then the worker earns extra money. If the same person goes abroad, for example to the middle-east countries, he would be forced to work maybe 13-15 hours per day or even more. He would earn 30 000-40 000 rupees per month but then the effort and the energy he has put into that are of course much more. But many people do not think of this. They just compare the salaries and not the needed work effort. If they would work as much in Sri Lanka as they are forced to abroad, they would earn the same money for sure.¹⁰⁴

There is a possibility that the notion of bad salaries among youth in Sri Lanka could be based on misassumptions about the salaries abroad. The whole issue of the world outside Sri Lanka and the aspirations of leaving the country, whatever it implies, will soon be returned to. There is also a possibility that bad salaries really have to do with the overall economic situation in the country. The feelings of low salaries are probably much connected to the steadily increasing prices of everyday consuming goods like for example bread. The wages are set per year or maybe sometimes per six months and of course the companies don't increase the wages just because the prices go up over night on consuming goods.

5.5 Views on the Sri Lankan economy

As mentioned above, increasing prices were of much concern for the youth sample in this study and most probably also in a larger context.

In Sri Lanka we have no chance to improve our life because we have not enough money. There are big economic problems in Sri Lanka with increasing prices. Things cost too much. So my ambition is to go abroad and find a job there.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

¹⁰⁵ Interview with informant 1, Tamil male, 20, 2007-11-19

*The young generation can't even fulfil their basic needs with the economic situation that prevails now. Even if you have studied at the university, most likely you can't find a job and have to stay at home.*¹⁰⁶

*The economic situation is very difficult for us as poor people. The rich people in Sri Lanka can manage the higher prices that we have now but the poor people have to struggle hard these days. We can't even afford to drink a cup of milk tea because it is so expensive now.*¹⁰⁷

The overall perception of the economic situation in the country is very negative. And it is of course motivated by different opinions on what lays ground for the economic crisis. For example, bad political management on the economic side and the huge war costs were taken up during the interviews. Nearly all of the informants emphasized that Sri Lanka is a poor developing country and that they had aspirations of economic development for the nation.

*I think that today Sri Lanka is a poor country but we can build it up our through our work and other things. But because of politicians most of the people has not the right opportunities to build up the country. I think politicians in Sri Lanka are bad. Personally I think that maybe I can first help my family and then my village and then maybe help my country.*¹⁰⁸

*There is no proper management of this country. The economy is bad and they politicians are not handling the situation well. Now we have to depend on other countries.*¹⁰⁹

*Sri Lanka loses much money on the war. If we stop the war we can build up Sri Lanka more, especially economically.*¹¹⁰

5.6 Dreams of development

Economic development is not the only kind of development the youth expressed dreams and aspirations of. Technical progress, modernization and development of the overall infrastructure are also some things they wanted to see in the future.

*Sri Lanka is a developing country so I hope it will be more developed in all areas in the future. In Sri Lanka there are many people who have good knowledge in technology but they don't stay in the country. They can't get a good salary here so they go to other countries. There are also much more facilities abroad for the young people to develop their life and their work. My hope is that salary will go up in Sri Lanka and that the facilities will be developed.*¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Interview with informant 13, Singalese female, 24, 2007-12-01

¹⁰⁷ Interview with informant 17, Tamil female, 20, 2007-12-08

¹⁰⁸ Interview with informant 3, Singalese female, 20, 2007-11-19

¹⁰⁹ Interview with informant 19, Moor female, 15, 2007-12-11

¹¹⁰ Interview with informant 4, Singalese male, 21, 2007-11-19

¹¹¹ Interview with Informant 11, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

*I want Sri Lanka to be a better target for electric engineering. Today it is technologically very backward. Hopefully many student study hard and can improve the situation for Sri Lanka.*¹¹²

The lack of adequate facilities for youth to fulfil their aspirations of work in the future were brought up to surface several times and concerning different types of job sectors, for example the medical sector and the computer sector. Boys and girls expressed that they “must go abroad” because Sri Lanka simply can not provide the facilities for their aspired future occupation. But this does not stand uncontradicted. Kate Lowe for example, argues that the assumptions of inadequate facilities in Sri Lanka are false. The facilities are there but the most of the youth don’t see this and benefit from this.¹¹³

5.7 “I want to go abroad” – Lankese youth and migration

5.7.1 *The fashion of going abroad*

“I want to go abroad” was repeated over and over again during the field interviews for this study. There seems to be some kind of “mass psychology” of going abroad among Sri Lankan youth these days. Or at least it is a “big fashion” as Lowe puts it. England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Gulf countries are the most popular destinations to leave Sri Lanka for. The given reasons varied between education and job aspirations and of course also the security situation with the civil war in mind, but anyhow, it must be emphasized again and again that this was one of the most lasting impressions from the whole research process prior to this essay.

5.7.2 *Education and job migration*

*Education is high in Sri Lanka. Education is higher than in India and other countries. But we have no chance to get jobs for that education. That is the main problem for Sri Lanka. That is why lots of people go abroad to study there. I know people who are living and studying in London and I also want to go there.*¹¹⁴

As has already been mentioned, many young people want to go abroad for higher studies. Either because they feel that the education offered abroad is of higher quality than the one offered within Sri Lanka, or because they feel that a degree from a foreign university is of higher status and would give better chances of a good salary. But such reasoning may be in the perspective that they have plans of returning to Sri Lanka after the education. That was the case for some of the informants. But some of them had no plans of returning. Concerns about the unemployment situation (as the quote above expresses), the poor economic conditions of

¹¹² Interview with informant 2, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-19

¹¹³ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

¹¹⁴ Interview with informant 1, Tamil male, 20, 2007-11-19

the country, and the civil war and terrorist problems, have made many among the youth loose hope about their home country's future development. As an example, high school teacher Anton Jayaweera went himself to Italy in 1997 as a student on a scholarship together with three other persons. He was the only one who returned Sri Lanka and the other three persons had back then no understanding of why he would like to return to such a "hopeless place" and called him "crazy".¹¹⁵

If not aiming for higher studies abroad, many wants to leave Sri Lanka for work. Salaries abroad are perceived as much higher. This may be true when it comes to some occupations, and not true when it comes to other (as was maintained by Lowe in the previous discussion of salaries).

*The problem is also with the good students going abroad, maybe to the gulf countries and others. If someone is educated in computer technology they will get much more salary abroad. It is the same knowledge and the same work but completely different income. But this is also a question about what different people want in their life. Some want to be rich, others just want safety savings, others just care about surviving the week.*¹¹⁶

Then there was the notion of facilities. Some persons wanted to find a job abroad because they felt that Sri Lanka can not provide the modern technology or other facilities that their aspired occupation demands.

There could also be intended or unintended combinations of education and work that comes to question in this subject. It is a fact that many students who go abroad for studies, soon drop out from the education and start working illegally on student visas. To study in another country is not easy and demands a lot of effort that makes many students get tired of it and drop out. They will get some extra money from their job abroad but it is certainly not question of good or fancy jobs, it is mostly odd jobs.¹¹⁷ Dropping out from studies after attaining a student visa could, as hinted above, also be planned and a systematic way of getting out of Sri Lanka which is otherwise very difficult today. It is very difficult to get a visa on the whole but the relatively easiest way is a student visa. However there are some countries to which especially working visas are given much easier. That is the Gulf countries. For many years Sri Lankans have migrated to those countries to work and earn money to send home to their families in Sri Lanka. In an interview with youth worker Senpathi Weerage he expressed

¹¹⁵ Interview with Anton Jayaweera, 2007-11-21

¹¹⁶ Interview with informant 9, Singalese male, 24, 2007-11-20

¹¹⁷ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

thoughts that the job migration could be systematized by the politicians because it is a very easy way to secure that big amounts of money are being sent into the country every month (in foreign exchange). In almost every case there is one of the parents in a family that is working abroad and earning relatively much money which is being sent home to the other parent to administer.¹¹⁸

5.7.3 Brain drain

The negative effects of the “fashion of going abroad” are that many good students or well educated and skilled labour leave the country and can not contribute to the development in different areas. The concept of “brain-drain” is well recognized worldwide and is a reality in Sri Lanka. Kate Lowe thinks that the brain drain problem has mostly arisen from the security situation. People simply do not feel safe in Sri Lanka and even if they would like to work in their home country and contribute to its development, the unstable security situation makes them leave for other countries where they can concentrate more on their profession instead of worrying about security problems.¹¹⁹

5.8 The war, terrorism, and the dreams of peace

If the youth sample included in this study represents all of the Sri Lankan youth, they all dream of peace in the country. The war and the terrorism and its effects is of much concern and may be the most serious unfreedom factor that in the perspectives of the youth, stands in the way of as well personal as national development. When it came to the civil war and its different aspects including the terrorism problem some differences appeared in the answers from Sinhalese and Tamil informants. Tamils tended to give the war an ethnical label more often than Sinhalese who talked about the war in more general terms.

*I hope that the war ends because it is creating many problems in our country. My worries are about the possibility of everything turning upside down. The war escalates and there are more terror attacks. And the different groups of people start fighting in the whole country and not just in a few regions.*¹²⁰

*Earlier I had lot of hope for my country but now I have no hopes for Sri Lanka. Especially Tamil people have no hopes in Sri Lanka. As a Tamil, basically I can't get a good life here so my hope is to go abroad. If some day peace will come then maybe I could answer the question about what my hopes and dreams are but now I don't have no hope for this country.*¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Interview with Senpathi Weerage 2007-11-26

¹¹⁹ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

¹²⁰ Interview with informant 15, Singalese female, 15, 2007-12-08

¹²¹ Interview with informant 1, Tamil male, 20, 2007-11-19

*Sri Lanka is a small but good country you know. But now we have war. That is sad for us. People are dying and children are suffering. So my wishes are that the war stops. I want peace and that the people will live together as friends.*¹²²

Several times the informants talked about how they believed that politicians and other powerful people somehow earn a lot of money on the civil war and therefore actively are keeping it alive at the expense of the suffering people and the country's economy. Even if the concerns about the war are widespread and commonly outspoken they were not often developed in a deeper sense during the conversations. The reasons behind this could be many. My personal theory is that the civil war in Sri Lanka has been such a day-to-day reality for close to 25 years and that the strive for peace has gone through so many disappointments that the discussions about it is exhausted among the people. Therefore the responses to the subject sometimes seemed very simple to be coming from the target group but with further consideration it there may be much more underlying views and opinions about it to explore.

5.9 “The closed wall surrounding us” – Views on politics

The Sri Lankan youth's mistrust against politicians pretty much speaks for itself through the following commentaries expressed in the field interviews.

*We don't have enough political freedom in Sri Lanka. The politicians are like a closed wall surrounding the young people and preventing them to live out their aspired life. Politicians are only concerned about their own wants.*¹²³

*Political freedom in Sri Lanka is very bad. [...] Many people in the government want war because somehow that gets them more money, they want money. They develop the war to get money themselves instead of developing the country to give the people money.*¹²⁴

*Sometimes during the election periods some parties force people to vote for them, otherwise they say they will kill them. Politicians are also a problem because they take very much money that otherwise could go to the development of the country.*¹²⁵

*There is no political freedom in this country because the politicians fight in the parliament just to get power and money and not because they really want to serve the people. And while political parties fight and the rulers keep the war going, the people suffer a lot.*¹²⁶

¹²² Interview with informant 5, Singalese male, 19, 2007-11-19

¹²³ Interview with informant 12, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

¹²⁴ Interview with informant 5, Singalese male, 19, 2007-11-19

¹²⁵ Interview with informant 11, Singalese male, 20, 2007-11-21

¹²⁶ Interview with informant 15, Singalese female, 15, 2007-12-08

*Politically there is no unity. Everyone just want to go their own way. The politicians have to come together and discuss what to do. Now they are all very selfish and think only about themselves. They are not thinking about the country, only themselves. We can choose whoever we want for the politics but the problem is that we can't trust anybody. Before the elections they say one thing and then afterwards they do another.*¹²⁷

*Political freedom in Sri Lanka is so bad. Tamils have no freedom in Sri Lanka. The government has also cancelled some TV channels broadcasting because they don't like them. In Sri Lanka there is not so much freedom.*¹²⁸

*There is political freedom in the constitution but it can't be used or utilized because the politicians, once in power, just serve their own interest. Sometimes when young people express some concerns or demonstrate they will be met by reactions like punishment. Politicians are a big problem because they are in the frontline when it comes to selfishness and serving their own purposes.*¹²⁹

There is no doubt that the political institutions of Sri Lanka have a lot of work to do to gain future trust among the youth of the country, at least if the sample in this study are viewed as representative. Corruption and nepotism were issues that the informants expressed big frustration over. One should have in mind however, that the kind of frustration that is expressed when touching the subject of politics, could also possibly be emanating from the unsatisfying socio-economic conditions that the individuals may perceive themselves to be in and the politicians are then the easiest to blame for it. This is not underlined in order to deny the politicians responsibility but to give some more nuance to the picture.¹³⁰

5.10 The moral of the people

5.10.1 Ethnic conflict and egoism

Sri Lankan youth have not only aspirations of peace but as far as this particular youth sample represents they were also longing for a better climate between ethnic groups and hoping that one day all Lankese people could live side by side without tensions. Utopian as it may sound it is something good and hopeful to keep holding on to. Some youth were also expressing concerns about the overall moral and mentality of the Sri Lankan people.

I am worrying about the conflict climate of the country and not only when it comes to the ethnic conflict but also between people in the same ethnic group. People have to live in peace together. Today many people just think about themselves and getting more money and power instead of taking care of each

¹²⁷ Interview with informant 4, Singalese male, 21, 2007-11-19

¹²⁸ Interview with informant 1, Tamil male, 20, 2007-11-19

¹²⁹ Interview with informant 18, Singalese female, 19, 2007-12-08

¹³⁰ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 148-49

*other. I hope that the whole people of Sri Lanka start taking care of their spirit and start taking care of each other instead of just thinking about themselves.*¹³¹

5.10.2 Working moral

Another issue that was brought up by some youth informants, but also in the interviews with persons around them, was the working moral which often can be lacking in the Lankese society according to the informants. An example of that was given by Kate Lowe when she talked about the construction site and the wasted cement. And this phenomenon was also somewhat experienced by the researcher during the field study.

5.10.3 Drug abuse

Drug abuse was taken up to discussion earlier but is also of concern in this section. Even if the youth sample for this study did not talk so much about drugs (only one person) the researcher experienced the problems with drugs in the field observations. The reasons lying behind it was not explored but some young individuals that were met and socialized with in the field had serious problems with alcohol addictions and it came to knowledge that there were often drugs like marihuana figuring in youth groups during late evenings.

5.10.4 Cultural hollowing

A last subject that is of particular interest is the question of cultural hollowing that was mentioned by one informant who was concerned that too much influences from other parts of the world are changing the mentality of the Sri Lankan youth in a negative direction.

*My hope for Sri Lanka is that our country should be more independent when it comes to the youth culture. Now Sri Lankan people take everything from other countries. Like England. They copy everything. I hope that we instead should take the good things but not the bad. And the other countries like England push everything to us. Sri Lankan people first take everything and then think about what is good or bad. I hope we could first think about this and then take what is good. I fear that our young generation is getting brainwashed by the western influences and the media. The television and the newspapers have sometimes bad influence. And the ideals they push to us, we have not the money to live that kind of life. I hope that young people will have their focus on the education and reaching higher levels of their life and don't get so much affected by the bad influences around them.*¹³²

5.11 Lack of youth guidance

Something that covers several of the above presented results of this study, is the conclusion that there has been a lack of youth guidance in many areas. When it comes to education and jobs, youth have not had the adequate support of and guidance from the grown up society

¹³¹ Interview with informant 18, Singalese female, 19, 2007-12-08

¹³² Interview with informant 9, Singalese male, 24, 2007-11-20

which has led to a situation where preferences towards, for example, jobs are not in line with what is really reasonable to expect from the job market. H. T. Hettige argues that the current situation of youth disorientation in this matter “highlights the need for strengthening policies to bring job aspirations of the youth more in line with what the economy can offer” and that “strengthening of information flows among different actors and agents in the labour market and more focused manpower planning policies are called for”.¹³³ There should also be better guidance in the early stages of education so that students can make better choices of careers to aim at. This is also a responsibility of the parents. But in these tough times when the economy in the country is so bad and a civil war is escalating, it is understandable that many parents have much of other things to concern about than really taking the time to sit down with their children and look over the paths of education and jobs to take in the future.¹³⁴ To really strengthen the agency role of the young man and woman and create opportunities for them to use their capabilities freely is a tough mission for Sri Lanka in the future but with more focus on the youth’s real aspirations and concerns and what have created them, maybe some brighter days for the youth of the country will come. Because the dreams of peace, freedom and development will never come to an end. Wars usually do, sooner or later.

¹³³ Hettige & Mayer, 2002, p. 92

¹³⁴ Interview with Kate Lowe, 2007-12-14

6. Conclusions

The Sri Lankan youth have a lot of different aspirations in life and in this field study the aim was to find out and describe some of these in order to gain a deeper understanding in to what really matters for them. What are their hopes and dreams about the future? What are their fears? Which are the main concerns they struggle with in their day-to-day life? And evaluating the theoretical framework of Amartya Sen, is its concept of “development as freedom” supported by the empirical findings of a study of this kind?

Starting with the last question one can first of all conclude that notions of perceived individual freedoms are of much importance among Sri Lankan youth and it is more of a rule than an exception that youth connect freedoms of individual development with the development of society at large. It was the researcher’s experience that freedoms and unfreedoms to fulfill personal aspirations are commonly occupying the thoughts of the study’s target group. This gives a hint that Amartya Sen were on the right track declaring that “the relation between individual freedom and the achievement of social development goes well beyond the constitutive connection – important as it is”. Informants in the study easily pointed out obstacles or unfreedom factors to their personal development as well as the country’s development. Sri Lankan youth clearly shows aspirations of being actively involved in shaping their own destiny which, as Sen suggests, calls for placing the perspective of freedom and possibilities at the center stage.

Aspirations can take many different forms and that is also what the expressed aspirations of the youth sample in this study did. They can take the form of hopes about being a good person morally or a good person in terms of becoming someone, to achieve something, to reach that level of quality of life that is expected in a certain socio-economic stratum. Many Sri Lankan youth want to do something for their family, especially their parents, and for the country in which they are born. They want someone to be proud of who they are. To fulfill such aspirations, many youth think about their way of living and try to keep away from things that could have a negative impact on the achievements aimed at, for example drugs and bad company. Youth respect their parents but sometimes they can also feel a pressure from them to choose another path in life than they want themselves. Youth have strong aspirations of being able to take care of their family. In such difficult times like these prevailing in the

country now, many youth are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their families and relatives and that is a restriction in the amount of freedom they feel they enjoy.

Education has for a long time been perceived as the way to, in a future perspective, fulfill dreams and aspirations. Youth want to learn and educate themselves to the level from which they can enter the job market on a good position and with a good salary. But sometimes they feel that the education system of the country has quality problems which makes many of them want to go abroad for studies instead. There seems to have been a lack of practical education and that there is a mismatch between education and the job market. This mismatch may have sprung out of the maintenance of a traditional education system which is perceived as only aiming at providing the basic competence needed for easy clerk functionings in the public sector. However, there have been some changes in this system the recent years as a result of the import and influence of international schools and privatization. But even if there have been changes, the mentality and preferences among the youth about employment have not changed that fast which makes many young students and graduates walking around with much frustration, jobless, and waiting for the government to create the right type of jobs for them.

The job aspirations vary of course among the youth but all want “good jobs with good salaries”. When facing the reality of widespread youth unemployment the young men and women express frustration and bring up discussions of much nepotism in the job market. Many jobs are perceived to be reserved for people with connections or close relations to politicians. Insights about the mismatch between education and jobs make some of the youth demand better guidance from the government when it comes to which jobs to educate themselves for. Unemployment can be seen as a major unfreedom factor that makes youth see obstacles in their personal development and creates concern about the future. The youth unemployment destabilises the society at large when the frustration it creates among youth comes to expression of dissatisfaction in demonstrations and riots. It can also radicalise youth and make them more open to extremist influences.

Youth are much concerned about the economic situation in Sri Lanka which affects especially the poorest of them. Prices have increased steadily the recent years while salaries have not gone up so there are many complaints about low salaries. If the salaries are that bad or not was not upon this study to go deeper into but some suggestions were made by an informant that there could also be some misassumptions about the actual effective salaries abroad that made people perceive the Sri Lankan salaries as very low. Usually, not much consideration is

taken to the demands of work effort that could differ between for example jobs in the Gulf countries and in Sri Lanka. The bad economic situation is to a large extent blamed on the politicians and the civil war as such. Youth aspire development in Sri Lanka. Economic development, technical progress and modernization, better facilities. The lack of adequate facilities in the eyes of the youth informants, makes some of them state that they must go abroad to find that.

Going abroad is a very popular thing and one can even talk about a “mass psychology” or fashion of leaving Sri Lanka for different reasons and for different destinations. It could be because some have aspirations of working abroad permanently, studying abroad to get a better education and then return to Sri Lanka, or leaving the country because of the security situation and fear of the war or terrorism. When so many young people leave the countries there are also much good knowledge and potential leaving the borders with them. The brain drain makes the chances of future development and progress in many sectors smaller when a lot of the good students and labour have left the country. They may contribute to the economy by sending large amounts of money to their families and relatives in Sri Lanka but the question is if that compensates for the human capital gone lost.

The dreams and aspirations of peace may be the most obvious previous to a study of this kind but still it must be underlined. The war is troubling the youth as it is troubling the whole population and the country’s economy. The youth have much to say about the politicians who they believe “keep the war running” so to speak. They believe that some politicians earn a lot of money on the war and therefore do not want to see the end of it. Politicians are not so popular in the eyes of the youth sample in this study. The political freedom in the country was questioned several times and the people in charge were perceived as power-oriented egoists who just want to put money in their own pockets.

There are also aspirations of a more peaceful ethnic climate in the country with the possibility of different ethnic groups living side by side in harmony. The moral and mentality of the population as whole are also hoped to become more caring, understanding and health oriented with less selfishness, better working moral, less drug abuse and finally better preservation of the Lankese cultural vis-à-vis western influences.

From all above it can be concluded that different freedom factors are causal and that they often promote each other. Sri Lankan youth generally to some extent experience economic, political and technical unfreedoms that all interrelate. If the opportunities for youth to fulfil their aspirations in one area are broadened they will contribute to the expansion of human freedoms in general and in the longer run promote development. Sen was concerned with “the agency role of the individual as a participant in economic, social and political actions”. In this essay I tried to give these agents a voice. For the future development of Sri Lanka it lies upon its rulers to listen to it. Not that the youth have all the answers to what’s wrong with state of things but at least their aspirations and concerns should be respected and be met with edifying action.

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Kate Lowe, Principal/Matron, Swelogent International Center. Katana 2007-12-14

Senpathi Weerage, Youth and Recreation Worker. Negombo 2007-11-26

8. Annex

8.1 Information letter

Dear informant,

My name is Andreas Lundell and I am a student from Växjö University in Sweden. I am conducting a minor field study in Sri Lanka and my research is about how Sri Lankan youth feels about their life situation and the situation of their country. I am interested in your wishes and hope for the future but also your fears and worries. Therefore I am hoping that you can help me by letting me interview you on this topic. This is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time if you don't want to answer my questions or take part in the study.

I am not able to give you any money or gifts, but I will be deeply thankful for your time and willingness to participate! Your help is very valuable for my research project.

I don't speak Sinhalese or Tamil so in case you can't speak English I will need the help of a translator. I will be recording the interview by using a small recording device. The recordings will not be given to anyone and I promise you that it will not be possible to identify you. When I am finished with my study and the report is written, the recordings will be deleted. I will not use your name or identity in the final report.

If you have any questions before or after the interview please feel free to ask me directly or contact me on telephone number: 00 94 77 454 48 04 or by e-mail: aluiv05@student.vxu.se

Thank you for reading this letter!

Yours Sincerely,

Andreas Lundell

8.2 Interview guide

- 1. (A) When you think about what really matters in your life, what are your *wishes and hopes/dreams/desires* for the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the *best possible* light, what would your life look like then? Please take your time in answering... Anything else?
- (B) What are your *fears and worries* about the future? In other words, if you imagine your future in the *worst possible* light, what would your life look like then? Again, take your time... Anything else?

Here is a picture of a ladder. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder (**pointing**) represents the best possible life for you and the bottom (**pointing**) represents the worst possible life for you.

- (C) Where on the ladder (**moving finger up and down ladder**) do you feel you personally stand *today/at the present time*? Step number.....
- (D) Where on the ladder would you say you stood *five years ago*?.....
- (E) And where do you think you will be on the ladder *five years from now*?.....

- 2. (A) Now, what are your *wishes and hopes* for the future of your country Sri Lanka? If you imagine the future of Sri Lanka in the *best possible* light, how would things look about ten years from now? ...Anything else?
- (B) And what are your *fears and worries* for the future of your country? If you imagine the future of Sri Lanka in the *worst possible* light, how would things look about ten years from now? ...Anything else?

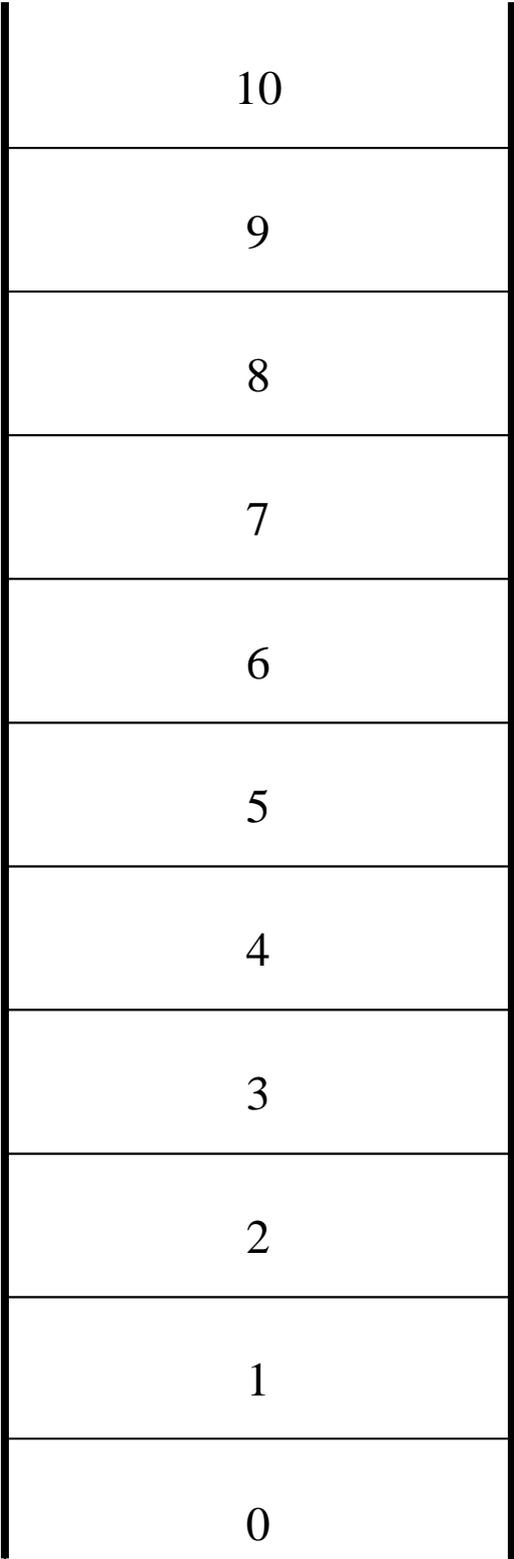
Now (**using the ladder again**) suppose that the top of the ladder (**pointing**) represents the best possible future of your country and the bottom (**pointing**) represents the worst possible future.

- (C) Where would you put Sri Lanka on the ladder *today/at the present time*?.....
- (D) Where did Sri Lanka stand *five years ago*?.....
- (E) Where do you really think Sri Lanka will stand *five years from now*?.....

- 3. Further dialogue about freedoms and possibilities as theorized by Amartya Sen.

4. Personal details:
- Age.....
 - Ethnicity.....
 - Occupation.....
 - Education.....
 - Socio-economic status.....

8.3 Ladder device



8.4 The ladder responses

The interview questions that lay ground for the following six diagrams can be found above in “8.2 Interview guide”.

