

Invest In Youth



With the mission of ‘delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe and every young person’s potential is fulfilled’, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) works with the government as well as other organizations to bolster the youth population of the country, especially women. As Sri Lanka goes through a ‘demographic dividend’, Alain Sibenaler, Representative Sri Lanka and Country Director Maldives relates the importance of this phenomenon and the UNFPA’s role in furthering the benefits that could be derived as well as their part in empowering the youth of the country.

By Krishani Peiris
Photography Damith Wickramasinghe

Can you describe the primary role of UNFPA and the focus areas of the organisation?

UNFPA was first established in 1969 to address global population and development issues. However, the most important year for the organisation globally is 1994, in which year the International Conference on Population and Development was held in Cairo. The Conference really brought the human being to the centre of development and by doing so, the attention of the UNFPA and the world community were drawn to several challenges. They were related to maternal health and the reduction of maternal mortality, which directly influences the wellbeing of families, countries and communities.

Evidence has shown that the more women are educated, the more they will exercise their reproductive rights and smaller the family units will be. Hence a woman's body can be given more time to re-generate after giving birth while a mother can devote more time for each child. When one looks at the structure of a family with three or four children to that of seven or more, parents will also have more savings to invest in good education for each child. I am mentioning all these because, in many countries especially in some African countries, they have very large family sizes and have seen the effects. I am not at all questioning or criticising this, but I do believe it is very important as women most of the time do not have a choice either because they do not know or are forced to have many children.

The conference held in 1994 recognised that women should have universal access to reproductive health and rights. It also put population issues at the centre of economic and social development by analysing the demographic dimensions of how many people are aware of these issues and what is the growth rate of a nation's population compared to the economic growth rate. What are some of the issues visible? Issues related to youth, senior citizens, fertility, mortality and the composition of the age pyramid-particularly how that evolves in a country. Further emerging issues such as urbanisation, migration and the relationship between humans and the environment in terms of climate change, deforestation, land

degradation, bio diversity and so forth were also looked into as well. Therefore, these are the demographic dimensions that we believe are extremely important to be aware of and to include in a nation's development planning and budgeting.

Globally, UNFPA focuses on maternal mortality, which is to prevent complications leading to the death of a woman when she is pregnant or at childbirth. In that context, we are doing everything, from family planning to developing the skilled medical work force-midwives, surgeons, gynaecologists, general pediatricians-to ensure a safe pregnancy and motherhood and that the pregnancy is safe and wanted.

In Sri Lanka we are focusing on four areas. The first one is to ensure that women are in good maternal and reproductive health. The second is to protect the rights of women and to address issues such as what violates women's rights be it gender based violence or domestic violence. The third is to empower young people, to enable them to fulfill their potential while the fourth focus area is to provide analysis of demographic data to point out the demographic dimensions that directly influence the social and economic development of this country.

However in Sri Lanka, as issues related to maternal mortality are less prominent, we focus less of our resources and efforts on that aspect. The country has a very good maternal mortality ratio where only 38 women, according to the latest estimates by the Family Health Bureau, die per 100,000 live births. This is very low when compared to some countries in Africa where the figures could reach 500 to 700 while in Afghanistan it is 1,200.

Currently Sri Lanka is in a period of growth where the country is going through a 'demographic dividend' as identified by UNFPA. Can you elaborate on this aspect and also the factors necessary to gain the maximum benefit of this phenomenon?

The phenomenon of 'demographic dividend' is very important. Not only was it the topic of the World Population Day, it is not limited to Sri Lanka, and every country goes through a concept called 'a demographic transition'.

At some point in a country's evolution, people become older and live longer because they live healthier. At the same time, the fertility or the number of children that a woman who is in the appropriate age to bear children declines.

However In Sri Lanka, As Issues Related To Maternal Mortality Are Less Prominent, We Focus Less Of Our Resources And Efforts On That Aspect. The Country Has A Very Good Maternal Mortality Ratio Where Only 38 Women, According To The Latest Estimates By The Family Health Bureau, Die Per 100,000 Life Births.

For example, in Sri Lanka, during the 1940s and 50s, a woman may have had four children or more on average. This was also the case in Europe. But over time as people became healthier and more educated, fertility has declined leading to fewer people dying as well. This happens in every single country and is taking place in Sri Lanka now. As the mortality drops and people live longer, and new generations such as ours decide to have fewer children leading to lower levels of fertility, at that point at around 30 or 40 years, there is still a generation of young people, which is relatively large. In Sri Lanka as of now, 40 percent of the population is below the age of 25 years. This means that there is still a young population while people are becoming older at the same time. This is what we define as a 'dividend', 'an opportunity' or 'bonus'. Because the country still has a large young population and a relatively small old population, that is getting more important by the day, it needs to invest in those young people, so that they can not only be healthy, wealthy and decide on their own size of families, they can also fund the needs of the old people such as pension schemes, social security, health insurance and many more. That is the demographic transition, which right now in Sri Lanka is turning into a demographic dividend.

However, if the country does not address the issues of the demographic dividend now, look after its young people, and invest properly in its education, vocational training, healthcare, employment and so forth, this 'dividend' will become a fatality. This is what has happened in many countries where the youth population is important in its numbers. For example in several African countries, the youth population is around 50 to 60 percent of the total population and has a large rate of unemployment and frustrations. Hence those countries find themselves in a situation of possible civil or political unrest. The whole scenario of the Arab Spring uprising, for instance, was exactly brought on because of the above reasons. For all

of a sudden there was a large generation of young people who were wondering, 'what is going to happen with us', 'why we are here and are getting more numerous by the day', 'what is the government doing for us?' and 'how can we sustain our own future acknowledging that our parents and grandparents live longer'.

Therefore, to take the maximum benefit from the 'demographic dividend', political stability, sound governance and a strong vision for good public policies are needed. Further investment in the country's young people, specifically in young women, health, education and employment, which is vocational training so that when a young person leaves school he/she is employable, are necessary factors as well.

This Is What Has Happened In Many Countries Where The Youth Population Is Important In Its Numbers. For Example In Several African Countries, The Youth Population Is Around 50 To 60 Percent Of The Total Population And Has A Large Rate Of Unemployment And Frustrations. Hence Those Countries Find Themselves In A Situation Of Possible Civil Or Political Unrest.

What are the steps taken by UNFPA to empower the youth of Sri Lanka and in the areas of health, education and progress of women?

Firstly, there is not a single activity done by the UNFPA that is not countersigned and jointly agreed by the Government-meaning The National Planning Department. Therefore, our general plan for the next five years is signed by the Secretary of The Treasury, setting the stage or the framework for the UNFPA in Sri Lanka, where the government observes that we should work together on certain areas.

Currently we are working with the government on two levels. One is directly with the Ministry of Youth and Skills Development to ensure that young people are involved in the decision-making process, policy formulation and implementation, budgeting, public financing, health and education-especially in circumstances that directly concern them. The best example happened during the World Conference on Youth, which was held in Sri Lanka, where around 2,000 participants from all over the world engaged in adopting The Colombo Declaration on Youth. In this Declaration they presented various issues and said 'we believe that these are the important issues that should be addressed by politicians and decision makers'. Further, the National Youth Policy, launched by the President at the beginning of

this year, we try to get young people involved in its implementation.

Further, we are working strongly with the Ministry of Health by focusing on improving the health needs. The health of young people, particularly the health needs of adolescence, is very important, because as a child enters puberty, he/she starts witnessing changes not only in the body, but also in the mind as well. Therefore, it is vital, that there are structures, policies, and regulations to enable that crucial shift called adolescence in a child's life. For example, The National Youth Services Council working with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Youth and Skills Development, is fully empowered and equipped to address those specific health issues. And through peer education-young people talking to other young-people about their health, reproductive health, how to prevent infections related to communicable diseases and how to control or lower the usage of drugs, tobacco and alcohol, health related problems related to adolescence can be countered.

I Always Emphasize On The Importance Of Providing A Proper Education For Women Because You Have A Very Interesting Situation In Sri Lanka. There Are 650,000 More Sri Lankan Women Than Men, Which Is A Very Strange Phenomenon.

The second major role that the UNFPA plays in Sri Lanka is that we work with the Ministry of Finance and Planning, specifically The National Planning Department and the Department of Census and Statistics to gather data, which helps us to understand the demographic dividend. For instance in our publication 'Investing in the Demographic Dividend', we show why Sri Lanka invests in this phenomenon and what these investments mean. If one looks at the population evolution of the country, the population in 1971 had a very large youth population with a very small old population. However, now the portion of the young population is getting smaller, though still big, while the other portion is getting larger. Therefore, according to the projections, by 2026 Sri Lanka's population will be similar to that of Europe, where you have more people living to reach a very old age. Further, we look at some of the underlining issues that need to be addressed such as the contraceptive rate, use of telephones and computers, nutritional status of young women in their reproductive ages, education, employability, cost of labour participation, sanitation, housing and any other aspect that directly impacts the well-being of young people. Why do we do so? Because this data will help us, the policy makers and the government to understand in order to plan and project that the country needs more

investments-social investments, say for example in education, especially in the education of women or in other required areas of interest.

I always emphasise on the importance of providing a proper education for women because you have a very interesting situation in Sri Lanka. There are 650,000 more Sri Lankan women than men, which is a very strange phenomenon. At the same time, the participation of women in the Sri Lankan labour force is very low-35 percent women and 75 percent men. But, there are more girls enrolled in universities than boys. How do you explain that? For us, it is not to explain, but to draw attention to such issues, so that phenomena like these are taken into account. That is why we stress on investing in young people, their equality, good education, health and vocational training or systems that will allow them to be competitive in the job market.

These are the demographic dimensions that will immediately strike an accord with the decision makers where they are made aware of the demographic trends and the issues that come out of these trends, so that investments are made in line. One thing mentioned by the Minister of Finance and Planning is that Sri Lanka will have increasing difficulties funding the country's pension scheme for retirees. That is why Sri Lanka needs to invest in its young people as they make up the productive work force that constitute the national savings for pension schemes and social security, especially in a country that has free healthcare and education.

What are some of the other programmes carried out by the UNFPA?

We have separate work plans with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Youth and Skills Development, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Department of Census and Statistics and the Department of National Planning and accordingly we make funding available. This is on top of what the government spends. Often they will advise us that 'we need assistance or expertise on very specific areas such as enhancing the curriculum of public mid wives or strengthening the National Youth Services Council in their outreach of addressing adolescence health'. With the Ministry of Women and Child Development, we specifically work on the issues of violence and discrimination against women, by strengthening the Ministry's women and children units and the role of Women Development Officers (WDO). We are doing so that national structures are in place when a woman is a victim of sexual or domestic violence. We try to ensure that the women have access to medical, social,

and psychological care as well as legal aid. Last but not least, UNFPA also partners with community organisations. With our support they operate women's centres, awareness raising programmes, specifically on gender equality and respect for women and education.

As the Country Head, what are your thoughts on the youth of Sri Lanka and their contribution towards the development of the country and what more could be done to enhance their contribution?

Every single day I see young people coming forward and I have a tremendous fascination, admiration and respect for young people, who are skilled, talented, competent and especially who are confident to embrace the new challenges of the world. And I find it absolutely amazing that most young people opt to stay here, in Sri Lanka and do something for the country. However, I believe that three things need to be looked into and changed. The first is the strengthening of the literacy level of English or any other foreign language, so that one can become more competitive in the job market.

The second is that young women should be treated with equal respect or more to that of men. There should be no compromise or tolerance for any form of violence or discrimination against women. I am very much insistant on this fact and it should be started at a young age, within families, communities and schools. The fundamental respect that a woman or a girl is given the same opportunities as that of your male counterparts should be built into the curriculum and one's upbringing. I am not saying that is not happening now, but we must ensure that as women become beautiful ladies in their reproductive age, that there is no sexual harassment, rape, bullying, mobbing at work and violence within their families or from partners and there is full respect of a woman's reproductive health and rights.

Some Are Celebrities While Others Are Those Who Are Extremely Successful In Their Own Fields, Be It Agriculture, Health, Entrepreneurship, Education And So Forth. They Are Successful Because Of Who They Are, And Because The Country Gives Them The Necessary Support And That Is The Message That Should Be Given Out In Today's Context.

The third one is entrepreneurship. What do you want to become successful in and

what makes you successful? What are the factors required? What is your potential, talent, passion, and motivation? Do you have an enabling environment that feeds or nurtures your potential? It can be your family or partner. What we have done in the publication called 'Generation Youth Yielding The Returns On Investment'. is that we have shown successful Sri Lankans. Some are celebrities while others are those who are extremely successful in their own fields, be it agriculture, health, entrepreneurship, education and so forth. They are successful because of who they are, and because the country gives them the necessary support and that is the message that should be given out in today's context. Invest in your people because Sri Lanka has done it in the past-Sri Lanka has invested for decades, in education, health, young people and women. Continue and strengthen those. Also make sure that the tertiary education is followed by business, financial or any other essential literacy levels, so that people are competitive and employable and so that Sri Lanka can make leaders out of young people.

Final thoughts.

Sri Lanka has a tremendous success story and I would say that the country has successfully managed to capture the potential of its young people. And as Sri Lanka evolves as a middle income country, continuing to invest in young people and their potential will make Sri Lanka very successful.



