Allowing youth to tuk-tuk or not tuk-tuk: SHOULD ACCESS TO THREE-WHEELER MARKET BE REGULATED IN SRI LANKA?

BY THIJS DE SILVA WITH NISHA ARUNATILAKE

The blue, green, red and yellow three-wheeler navigators in traffic or parked along the roadside, compared to other jobs, has become a common sight in any part of Sri Lanka. The large number of youth employed as three-wheeler drivers has concerned policymakers, especially given the widespread labor shortages in a wide range of industries in the country.

The government has tried to intervene in the three-wheeler market by imposing an age restriction on three-wheeler operators. The proponents of the age restriction argue that it would reduce the number of road accidents and road congestion caused by the large number of three-wheelers, as well as the main reasons for such a restriction.

The lack of interest among youth to take up employment in sectors with labor shortages is also a concern.

This article attempts to clarify some myths about the three-wheeler market, while also weighing in on the debate on whether youth should be employed in the three-wheeler market.

One argument for regulating the three-wheeler market is its size. Many newspaper articles in the past few months have made reference to more than one million three-wheelers on the road.

But, careful examination of data shows that the number of three-wheelers on the roads has actually increased over the years. The number of registered three-wheelers has increased from 372,700 in 2012 to 375,000 in 2013, to 376,000 in 2014, and to 378,000 in 2015.

The 2013-14 Economic Census of the Census and Statistics Department estimates that only 47 percent of registered three-wheelers are used for taxis. On this basis, it can be estimated that there are only around half a million tuk-tuk drivers providing a taxi service in the country — much less than what is commonly suggested.

This indicates that around 6 percent of the national labor force is tuk-tuk taxi drivers. However, not all of them are full-time three-wheeler operators. In fact, full-time three-wheeler operators are among the top secondary occupations in Sri Lanka.

A qualitative analysis of taxi-tuk operators showed that many young school-leavers as well as middle-aged people in Sri Lanka are attracted to the three-wheeler market due to many reasons. Young individuals enter into this market because it yields quick returns without allocating years on training or education.

Middle-aged drivers seem to choose this occupation after quitting other formal jobs. Some stated that they prefer three-wheeler driving mainly due to the low responsibility involved, as compared to other jobs. Also, they enjoy having time for family commitments and not being confined to one place for long periods of time.

Another attraction of the three-wheeler market is the earnings. Three-wheeler driving was among the highest average hourly income occupations — only beaten by shop owners, sweeper and heavy vehicle drivers.

The above data shows that low-skilled youth are attracted to the three-wheeler market as it provides better earnings and attractive working conditions. The three-wheeler market also provides more job security and more income, which are important factors for youth seeking employment.

The three-wheeler market is more attractive to those with low levels of education. With female below 35 years of age with low skills, three-wheeler driving is in the top four occupations. Most three-wheeler drivers become taxi-tuk drivers. But these jobs are not attractive to those who work hard caring for low paying, high stress and at risk of meeting other problems.

Why are individuals attracted to the three-wheeler market?

A qualitative analysis of taxi-tuk operators showed that many young school-leavers as well as middle-aged people in Sri Lanka are attracted to the three-wheeler market due to many reasons. Young individuals enter into this market because it yields quick returns without allocating years on training or education.

Middle-aged drivers seem to choose this occupation after quitting other formal jobs. Some stated that they prefer three-wheeler driving mainly due to the low responsibility involved, as compared to other jobs. Also, they enjoy having time for family commitments and not being confined to one place for long periods of time.

Another attraction of the three-wheeler market is the earnings. Three-wheeler driving was among the highest average hourly income occupations — only beaten by shop owners, sweeper and heavy vehicle drivers.

The above data shows that low-skilled youth are attracted to the three-wheeler market as it provides better earnings and attractive working conditions. The three-wheeler market also provides more job security and more income, which are important factors for youth seeking employment.

The three-wheeler market is more attractive to those with low levels of education. With female below 35 years of age with low skills, three-wheeler driving is in the top four occupations. Most three-wheeler drivers become taxi-tuk drivers. But these jobs are not attractive to those who work hard caring for low paying, high stress and at risk of meeting other problems.

Chinas de Silva, Project Initiated at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) was the recipient of the Suman Kigecya Memorial Research Grant 2018. This project is part of her research work carried out with the grant under the supervision of Nishan Arunatilake, Director Research, IPS (recipient). To view this article online and in