

STRENGTHENING THE ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL PILLAR THROUGH YOUTH DIPLOMACY

by Lloyd Alexander M. Adducul

The youth comprise a major part of the world's population today, with an approximate total of 1.2 billion.¹ In Southeast Asia, the youth make up the largest population with a total of 213 million and is forecasted to reach 220 million by 2038.²

While there is no agreed international definition of the youth, the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division defines it as those persons between 15 to 24 years of age, while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Youth Development Index include them in the age bracket of 15 to 35 years old.³

With their entrepreneurial, digital, and critical skills, the youth serve as the backbone of economic development, trailblazers for social change, and future leaders of the region. This brings into paramount consideration the protection of the young people's welfare and the promotion of their perspectives.

There has been a growing consensus that the youth play increasing roles in the development of society. They have been vital in elevating pressing concerns to the global discussion table, such that the UN acknowledged their importance in the promotion of global strategies for sustainable development. ASEAN has also recognized the youth sector's relevance in the creation of a sustainable, resilient, dynamic, and an inclusive regional community, as reflected in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint.

Engaging the ASEAN Youth

Politically empowered and socially active, the youth have been provided with numerous platforms to share their innovative ideas, advocacies, and promote cross-cultural understanding on a regional level. An example of these youth platforms are the ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) and the Ship for Southeast Asia and Japanese Youth Program (SSEAYP).

The AYF has been the core of the youth's policy engagement in ASEAN since 2009. Its annual meetings of youth organizations in Southeast Asia are held in parallel with the ASEAN People's Forum (APF)/ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC), the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Youth, and the ASEAN Summit. The AYF allows youth leaders across member states to discuss and identify solutions to a myriad of issues, including unemployment, education, migration, health, and climate change. The discussions are translated into ASEAN Youth Joint Statements that are presented before the ASEAN leaders and adopted during ASEAN Summits.

The AYF, for example, has helped push for the realization of the ASEAN Youth Development Index that serves as a basis of the formulation of responsive and relevant policies and programmes that will address youth issues and concerns in the region.

SSEAYP is a youth program annually organized by Japan and supported by the governments of Southeast Asia. Since its inception in 1974, SSEAYP has provided tremendous support to regional community-building. It has also been nurturing a breed of young, tolerant leaders who make positive impacts in their communities. For about two months, the delegates of SSEAYP sail on a cruise ship to Japan and different ASEAN countries to immerse with the locals, interact with foreign dignitaries, showcase their own culture, and discuss social issues. They commit themselves to implement civic engagement programs in their respective countries upon their return from the trip. Through its cultural exchanges, the SSEAYP has been aiding in socializing values and norms, thus strengthening ASEAN identity, culture, and heritage—the key elements of regional integration as reflected in the ASCC Blueprint.⁴

AYF and SSEAYP, among other regional programs, allow the ASEAN youth to engage in cultural activities that increase ASEAN awareness and strengthen cooperation. They provide the youth a chance to represent their countries and act as youth ambassadors, enabling them to develop alternative perspectives in viewing the world through their interactions and learning of other's cultures.

These regional youth platforms underscore the youth's role as state's harbinger of soft power. Through these exchanges, the youth can help form public policies, promote country programs, influence public thoughts, shape the country's image, and craft ways to advance national interests at the ASEAN level. The opportunity to speak and act on behalf of the country, and to some extent influence high-level decision makers in ASEAN, breeds the modern concept of youth diplomacy.

Forging ASEAN Community through Youth Diplomacy

A more engaging form of diplomacy at the grassroots level has emerged to strengthen the ASEAN Socio-cultural pillar. Complementing the role of traditional state actors, the youth has been involved in a kind of diplomacy that cultivates mutual respect and trust through an exchange of ideas, beliefs, values, norms, and customs. This people-to-people diplomacy is not specifically aimed at resolving regional conflicts by bringing state parties to the negotiating table, but it centers on people dynamics and interaction models that will gradually shape interstate relations.

The nature of interaction in youth diplomacy may bring a fundamental shift towards a more cohesive ASEAN. The youth ambassadors' reflection of their country may result in the celebration of their similarities and a better understanding of each other's differences.⁵ This may strengthen mutual confidence and the deepening of overall bilateral and multilateral relations.

Youth diplomacy allows the future generation of ASEAN leaders to set ideals for the ASEAN Community while they are still forming the image of it. The youth can promote ASEAN awareness, elaborate country viewpoints, and encourage dialogue on the most challenging issues. It does not only contribute to breaking culture typecasts, but also ensures that the younger generation's voice is considered in the greater ASEAN discourse and decision-making. The youth's involvement in people-to-people diplomacy thus assures an inclusive platform that supports ASEAN youth initiatives.

Philippine Youth Diplomacy

In 1994, the Philippines enacted the Youth in Nation Building Act, or Republic Act 8044, that mandated the creation of the National Youth Commission (NYC) to oversee youth affairs. Acknowledging the relevance of the youth in nation-building and external relations, the NYC has been sending youth representatives to ASEAN-wide programs. RA 8044 specifically empowers the NYC to administer, monitor, coordinate, and participate in the SSEAYP and the AYF, among other similar exchanges, goodwill missions, and international fora.⁶

The engagements of the Filipino youth at the ASEAN level demonstrates the Philippine government's commitment to regional community-building and the use of soft power to advance national interests. Filipino citizens acting as goodwill ambassadors complement Track 1 diplomacy as it veers away from traditional state-centric diplomacy. Through established people-to-people interactions, the Philippine government creates a strong base for which strong bilateral and multilateral relations with its neighbors may be anchored on.

Moreover, the Philippine youth ambassadors have become one of the driving forces of increasing volunteerism and ASEAN awareness in the country. They tackle social concerns and respond to pressing needs in their respective communities. SSEAYP Philippine participants, for instance, are committed to at least three years of civic service upon return from the program. With their expanded networks, they bring more people, including their counterparts from other countries, to join their advocacies in the Philippines. Exposed to ASEAN culture and society, they also introduce ASEAN to Filipino communities through songs, dances, lectures, and stories of their experiences in Southeast Asia and Japan, among others. Equally important, they stimulate other nationals' interest to visit the Philippines through cultural exhibits and performances during their cruise.

Meanwhile, the Philippine youth representatives' meeting with leaders in the ASEAN Summit through the AYF underscores the Filipino youth's role as active agents of policy and decision-making. Their participation in ASEAN highlights the younger Filipinos' skills and capabilities in identifying issues and developing strategies based on their unique experiences. This opportunity to become youth ambassadors and influencers of policy-making create more prospects for the Filipino youth's sociocultural engagement in the ASEAN.

Towards a true ASEAN Community

The underpinning principle of ASEAN Community is the aspiration to form a community that exceeds political and economic integration. A true ASEAN Community, hence, brings people together to establish a shared identity that is built on mutual trust and respect. Unless ASEAN people are culturally and socially integrated, ASEAN will not be able to create a sense of belongingness—the very thrust of the ASCC where the youth play a crucial role.

Endnotes

1. UN Population Facts 2015. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/YouthPOP.pdf> (accessed 05 November 2019)
2. ASEAN Youth Development Index 2019. https://asean.org/storage/2017/10/ASEAN-UNFPA_report_web-final-05sep.pdf (accessed 02 September 2019)
3. Ibid.
4. ASEAN Socio-cultural Community Blueprint 2025, <https://asean.org/storage/2016/01/ASCC-Blueprint-2025.pdf> (accessed on 08 November 2019)
5. Constructivism in International Relations presupposes that identity and interests are constructed through shared ideas, and that the adoption of a foreign policy is based on the countries' perception of each other.
6. Section 10 (g), (n) of Republic Act 8044 or The Youth in Nation Building Act, <http://nyc.gov.ph/republic-act-8044/> (accessed 08 November 2019)

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