



Forging and Fostering Peace  
**ASEAN Institute for  
Peace and Reconciliation**

# YOUTH PEACE ESSAY

ASEAN-IPR



## **Unity in Diversity: Impact of The Youth Factor**

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by Aisya Noorhadiva Tirtosudiro

# Unity in Diversity: Impact of The Youth Factor

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A key principle of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is rooted in a mutual understanding of multiple identities and their non-hegemonic multilateralism; it provides an entry point into the intersectional peacebuilding framework, forging ahead a people-oriented ASEAN where young generations will hold intergenerational relations to protect this principle. Establishing this principle among youths requires a productive ecosystem in which they can expand their efforts through international relationships and solidarity built with global youth movements, peer networking, digital platforms, and forums. However, there is limited public awareness of youth's peacebuilding efforts among ASEAN matters<sup>1</sup>, and its aspiration—one vision, one community, one identity—may only stand among the frequent gathering of the region's policy elites (Murti, 2016). There has to be a significant attempt to fight beyond youth tokenism and lay out the essentials for shifting from tokenistic to meaningful engagement among ASEAN youths.

Governments have long ignored the opinions and perspectives of young people<sup>2</sup> but overemphasised youth violence. Young people in fragile and conflict-affected nations were frequently seen as either perpetrators or victims of violence; however, the structural disparities and exclusions that might contribute to youth poverty and impotence were downplayed. Furthermore, until recently, youth were not regarded as a resource of peacebuilding, only as a formality in most forums. The three pillars of ASEAN—the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)—must listen and heed the voices of Southeast Asian youths as they are the starting point where major shifts in behaviour and mindset are required to break or avoid cycle of violence and the misery it entails. ASEAN Youth Forums have voiced that youth's exclusion from peace processes as structural and psychological violence is inextricably linked to their political, social, and cultural disempowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> Zakir Hussain, "Time to Have Deeper ASEAN Identity," The Straits Times, November 11, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/time-to-have-deeper-asean-identity>. (Accessed 8 November 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Robins, "Youth Peacebuilding Programs in Post-Conflict Societies: An Interpretivist Study" (dissertation, 2020), 39. (Accessed 9 November 2022)



Essentially, the link between violence and extremism must be understood by youths to foster the ASEAN principle and forge intersectional peacebuilding within the community. In the past, a significant factor that has facilitated mass violence in Southeast Asia is youth participation.<sup>3</sup> In Indonesia, members of Muslim youth organisations expressed ethnic dissatisfaction and were responsible for most prominent deaths in Indonesia during the Communist witch-hunt in the 60s. In Cambodia, during the Khmer Rouge regime's reign of terror, these indoctrinated and generally fanatical young cadres—who were recruited in large numbers from poor rural areas—were the ones whom almost everyone feared the most (Pran, 1997). Ultimately, violence should not only be understood in terms of exogenous factors—economic issues, social injustice, foreign involvement—but should also be seen as a crucial element in forming potential violent identities, motivations, and methods (Grabowsky et al., 2020). In this regard, violence or trauma is a potent generational marker as it can shape the identity of ASEAN by young generations. Nevertheless, youths must realise that the ability of violence to shape identities and incite further violence is not inherent.

The aforementioned history should be acknowledged by Southeast Asian youths to understand further the impact of the youth factor on a nation, both positively and negatively. Consequently, to shed the general mistrust of youths within a community and view them as positive and constructive agents of peace, youth-led peacebuilding organisations must seek to restore or maintain social cohesiveness within divided communities (Robins, 2020). They ought to understand that youths hold the power to shake fixed ideas and prejudice of past generations through unconventional means. The engagement of youth in combating violent or peace-disruptive movements is imperative, as these movements are increasingly threatening and impacting vulnerable youths in areas that are stricken with poverty. Therefore, the involvement of youth in countering peace-disruptive matters is an important topic for promoting ASEAN stability. It is recommended to strengthen the partnerships and collaborations involving the five important stakeholders, including 1) Educational Institutions; 2) Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs); 3) Media; 4) Civil Society; and 5) Government to achieve unity and solidarity through youth movements using the framework to counter relevant violent movements; highlighting government and non-governmental institutions for advocacy beyond tokenism, such as but not limited to the three pillars of ASEAN and the ASEAN Youth Organization.

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<sup>3</sup> Volker Grabowsky, Jayeel Cornelio, and Medelina Hendytio, "Shaping Alternative Identities in Southeast Asia: Youth, Violence, and Transnationalism," HAL, 21. (Accessed 9 November 2022)



Youth's dynamic approach with technology, such as digital platforms, separates their peacebuilding efforts from past conservative methods. For instance, Muslim and Buddhist youths in Myanmar promote cross-cultural friendship through social media at the height of religious intolerance. Such openness to knowledge and ideas makes youths bring distinctive qualities to the development of peacebuilding, connecting a scope of other youths from various areas and economic backgrounds. Hence, it shows a spectrum of circumstances to the issues they faced, varying from activism and cooperation, albeit in the face of intimidation and violence. Acknowledging said methods elevate youth-led movements to seize opportunities through peacetech<sup>4</sup> and education so youths can harness educational, cultural, and livelihood initiatives to encourage social cohesiveness and resilience<sup>5</sup> within their community.

Southeast Asian youth-led organisations must creatively bridge literacy, educational entertainment and advocate for peace education.<sup>6</sup> Similar to the methods youths use in Myanmar, the ASEAN Youth Organizations' Digital Forum (AYDF) aims to tackle arising peacebuilding challenges through the digital tools. They recognise the importance of what youths can do to contribute to peacebuilding by maximising opportunities in the digital community, as youths make up most social media users. ASEAN youths are now aware of their role as future leaders in establishing the relevance of digital literacy and peace education by implementing accessible learning platforms with ASEAN-related stakeholders through formal and informal education. While formal education remains an important means of providing basic peace education programs, informal education can reach learners who do not have access to formal peace education or are unable to finish a full cycle of basic education—further reaching other youths from different backgrounds and educating them on not only ASEAN matters but other peacebuilding agendas.

The embodiment of youth's ability, value, and spirit to involve themselves in uniting differences to fight towards a common goal is perfectly illustrated by Indonesia's Youth Pledge and the Pancasila philosophy: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or Unity in diversity. Formal governmental institutions or organisations, such as ASEAN, must further believe in youths and their ability to establish peace

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<sup>4</sup> This involves strategic use of cinema, photography, radio, and multimedia in peacebuilding and app-based platforms and associated mediums.

<sup>5</sup> Robins, "Peacetech Technology Education in Post-Conflict Youth Peacebuilding Programs," 4. Accessed on 11 November 2022

<sup>6</sup> Imparting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values required to change behaviour; to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully, and to create the conditions conducive to peace at many levels of society.

through unconventional means; pay attention to their aspiration and dedication vis-à-vis their goal, not sideline them with the negative perceptions of their behaviour. Henceforth, understanding the history and impact of the youth factor and their involvement in peacebuilding may help them reform the field by creating sustainable methods to eradicate intolerance and violence for the betterment of ASEAN and the world.

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