

# Envisioning the Roadmap for Meaningful Youth Participation in **Southeast Asia**

Generated from the Regional Consultative Space  
Organized in hybrid format in four countries:  
Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore

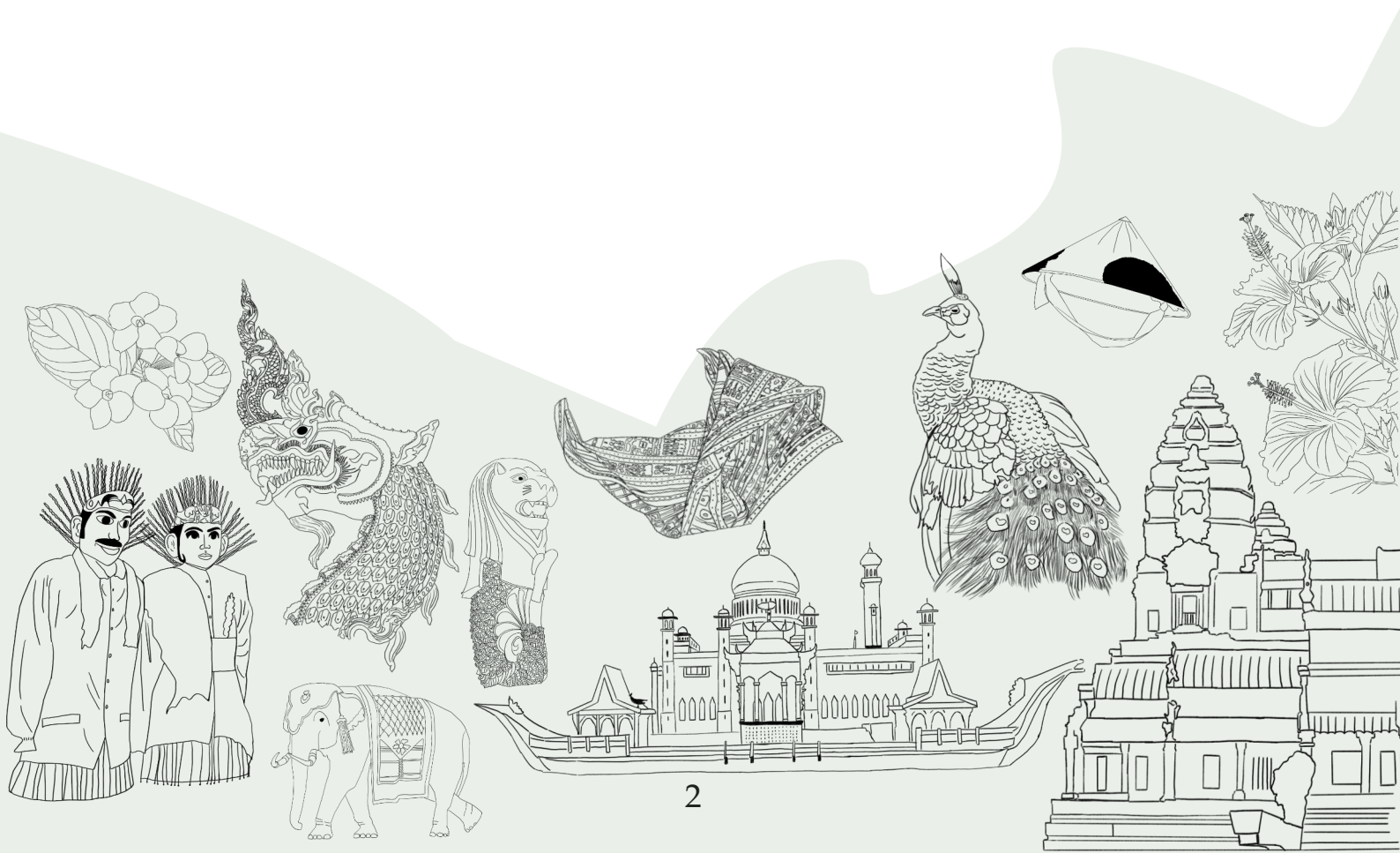
## Context

**A**s a region with one in three of its population being youth, Southeast Asia, now the largest youth cohort in ASEAN's history, holds remarkable potential not only for its own progress but also for the world's. Although young people may seem primarily focused on bread-and-butter issues, they are keenly aware of the global challenges affecting their lives and possess an inherent desire to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Even against the backdrop of growing individualism, competition, consumerism, and social disconnection, youth still aspire to excellence and meaningful progress. Youth are an integral part of society, whose development and involvement as members of society are shaped by the multitude of interactions they have with the family, peers, the school, the workplace, the media, and the community.

From liberating countries from colonial rule to driving peace, young people have historically been a driving force for change in Southeast Asia. The Regional Study on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) by the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) stated that, beyond a demographic dividend, youth in this region are also a peace dividend at the forefront of peace movements. However, this peace dividend is at risk of waning amid the growing social, political, and economic anxieties among young people. In particular, youth unemployment has emerged as a critical challenge across the region. *'Left unaddressed, youth unemployment threatens to dampen confidence in the region's economy, deepen inequality, and strain public finances further. The demographic dividend can quickly become a liability'*.

Nevertheless, this should not obscure the fact that in youth lies a reservoir of intellect, creative energies, resilience, and moral conviction ready to be tapped on, yet those capacities cannot develop in isolation. In places where the potential of youth has been recognized and the necessary conditions have been created for these capacities, new patterns of interaction have begun to emerge across generations. When youth come together and undertake a

constructive community development project, they begin connecting with people of diverse backgrounds. In many instances, youth become the glue that holds the community together. As collaborative projects continue to unfold among youth, community, and institutions at the local level, trust among them is strengthened, heightening intergenerational commitment to collective action.



## The Youth Agenda

**T**he YPS agenda is vital now more than ever. The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) was the first formal recognition of the important and positive contributions of youth in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. As a global agenda, it serves as an enabling factor, catalyzing the process and promoting a unified vision for collective action among stakeholders at all levels. At the regional level, the AIPR YPS Regional Study highlights the need for institutional support, capacity building, and meaningful mechanisms that allow youth to shape decisions at every level. It also reflects a growing recognition that young people are not merely beneficiaries of development but active agents of peacebuilding, cohesion, and social progress. Not only is this moment significant, as 2025 marked the 10th anniversary of Security Council

Resolution 2250, but it also marked the conclusion of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, paving the way for the newly articulated ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

The ASEAN Vision 2045 envisions a future in which youth can meaningfully participate and contribute towards political security, sociocultural, and economic pillars to achieve a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centred ASEAN Community. Such participation requires recognising that youth are equipped with capacity and endowed with values to be protagonists in the process of social cohesion and transformation. If we truly wish to tap into youth's energy in devising solutions to humanity's most pressing challenges: economic inequality, polarization, conflict and disunity, environmental degradation, ethical use of digital technologies, health and

climate change, we need to rethink the perspectives associated with the period of youth collectively.

The following sections present reflections from a consultative space on envisioning the roadmap for meaningful youth participation in Southeast Asia. As BIC Jakarta's first

initiative, this document aims to capture the shared aspirations and concerns from national consultations in four countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore.



Indonesia



Malaysia



The Philippines



Singapore

## Youth Realities, Narratives and Aspirations

**D**espite the general counterproductive perceptions of youth, there is substantial evidence that youth are cognisant of the needs of society and are eager not only to voice their concerns but also to act on them. The consultation highlighted the importance of recognizing the narratives influencing youth participation in society, as they strongly shape the broader advocacy programme. This imperative requires a shift in conviction, not only in the policy area but also at the level of culture, recognizing that youth are positive agents of social transformation.

The discussion in Indonesia explored how tokenism not only hinders youth's personal development but also prevents them from building healthy intergenerational collaboration, essential for addressing the intersectional challenges

prevalent today. Patriarchal cultures and common stereotypes of young people as rude, too critical, or rebellious continue to reinforce age-based power imbalance, resulting in the views and contributions of young individuals being disregarded and deemed less significant. In contrast, the seemingly positive assumption that young people are inherently 'tech-savvy' unintentionally widens the generational gap, placing the technical burden on young people. At the same time, the substance and direction of decisions continue to be shaped by adults. This limited narrative reduces young people's capacity to be merely technical, rather than strategic. The financial constraint on young people is also seen as a key factor contributing to low youth participation and the sustainability of action. The participants also

highlighted the importance of understanding the diverse context in which youth are trying to contribute, especially for youth from rural areas, who are usually under-represented and whose voices and aspirations are overlooked.

This topic was also raised in the discussion in Malaysia, where they identified delicate issues on youth access to education in rural areas. While adequate educational facilities remain a challenge, schools' attention to the quality of education is also very limited. Pertaining to that, there is a lack of interest in attending classes, as well as a limited understanding among parents of the importance of education. In the case of Indigenous communities, this situation is usually prolonged for political benefit. This issue can be seen as a causal relationship, but also as evidence of the importance of

collaboration among different stakeholders. In this regard, top-down institutional support and policy backing should be complemented by an increase in bottom-up initiatives. As much as policy can impact social progress, sustainable transformation will require everyone's participation. In fact, the institution of the family plays an important role in shaping youth's attitudes toward their friends, community, and society at large. A family is a nation in miniature. In the family unit, the parents' decisions and actions, which are themselves strongly shaped by their political, cultural, or religious beliefs, also strongly influence the youth's perspective and outlook on life and society.

At the local level, youth address community needs by helping younger peers through literacy classes, promoting the arts, culture,

and sports, and contributing to the peacebuilding and development agenda. In the Philippines, youth are actively engaged in peace and development work, particularly at the barangay and grassroots level. However, the participants observed how conducive environments are important for youth participation. In one instance where the struggle for survival dominates one's daily life, young people are compelled to prioritize meeting immediate needs: finding work, securing food, and supporting their families, leaving little space to reflect on or actively pursue broader aspirations for community development, peacebuilding, or civic engagement. This reality raises a fundamental question: how can young people be expected to meaningfully participate in shaping a better community when their thoughts and actions are consumed by the basic necessity to survive? In other instances, youth

contribute to social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, disaster response, digital citizenship, and community resilience even in conditions marked by social fragmentation, economic inequality, and structural challenges. The latter experiences suggest that youth participation rooted in shared values such as justice, unity, and respect for human dignity can serve as a preventive force against conflict while simultaneously advancing inclusive development.

In Singapore, while there is evidence that youth care deeply about societal issues and public policies, with some demonstrating an orientation toward diplomatic or international roles, a significant segment of the youth population remains under-engaged. This gap highlights the need for more deliberate efforts to understand the diverse lived experiences of youth, to empower

them, and to facilitate opportunities to include their voices in nation-building. Beyond academic pressures and employment needs, the discussion also highlighted a lack of conviction among young people about the relevance and urgency of volunteerism and civic engagement, given that most were born into relatively peaceful environments and rely heavily on governmental and institutional initiatives. While structures and mechanisms for youth participation in the social and political sphere readily exist, young people note that entry points for civic engagement remain insufficient in reflecting local concerns and lean more towards formal, curated forms of participation, such as policy dialogue forums. This, coupled with gaps in socio-economic support, prevents young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from participating

meaningfully.

Recognizing less formal efforts as legitimate entry points for civic engagement, such as youth's passion in the arts and the valuable contributions rooted in their day-to-day conversations and interactions within the family, social spaces, and communities, would enable more youth participation. Otherwise, youth participation will remain limited to the privileged few, as many youth have multiple roles and responsibilities, such as pursuing higher education and being the breadwinner of the family. These findings suggest the need to contextualize the youth development agenda in light of the diversity and complexity of the realities experienced by the youth across Southeast Asian countries.

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## Conditions for Meaningful Youth Participation

**T**he discussions explored how the various degrees of youth participation often depend on conditions that enable and shape how youth engagement is recognised, sustained, and translated into impactful action. The following sections outline three interrelated enabling conditions identified through the consultation as essential for advancing meaningful youth participation.

### Shifting the Language and Narratives around Youth

**C**entral to meaningful youth participation is the conviction that youth are endowed with capacities to contribute to the betterment of society. This requires the whole of society – the individual, community, and institutions – to shift the narratives of youth from mere

beneficiaries of the development agenda to essential contributors to collective progress. As much as society needs to embrace this understanding, youth must themselves be confident that they are imbued with the values, talents, and capacities necessary for social progress.

The YPS agenda advances through institutional mechanisms and agenda-setting work at all levels. The framework of UNSCR 2250 (2015) should not be seen as an endorsement of youth participation; rather, it institutionalizes youth engagement that has long taken place at the grassroots level. Ten years after the resolution was adopted, we still see a gap in understanding between the agenda as a framework and public awareness of the agenda itself. Beyond the formal definition, we can see that many of the efforts of young people who may not necessarily be familiar with the YPS agenda are actually contributing directly to it and

forming part of its pillars. This realization prompts deeper reflection about the challenges in advancing meaningful youth participation:

- Ensuring that youth participation at every level is recognized, supported, and connected with the existing framework.
- Measuring youth participation to capture the full range of youth engagement, especially when it is more informal, community-based, and issue-driven. These could be useful additions to areas not covered by formally organised platforms.

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## Youth, Communities, and Institutions - Relationships Characterized by Trust

**T**rust is a critical factor for intergenerational partnerships among youth and various stakeholders in society. Where trust is present, youth engagement tends to be sustained and impactful; where it is absent, participation risks becoming symbolic or transactional. When communities and institutions actively provide encouragement, support, and enabling structures such as safe spaces for consultation, access to resources, and opportunities for shared decision-making, they reinforce young people's confidence and sense of belonging. This ensures that youth

participation is sustained and translates into lasting contributions to peace and social progress.

In this regard, trust does not grow in a vacuum. An environment characterized by loving and supportive accompaniment is necessary for young people to build their capacity over time. This capacity building necessitates a mechanism that genuinely engages young people from community-level engagements to policy-making processes. At the community level, the youth need to feel encouraged and trusted to take on responsibility within their capacities, understand the channels through which they can

voice their ideas and concerns, and have access to spaces where they can improve their skills and knowledge. More formally, there is a need to ensure that youth contributions in councils, committees, and consultative bodies extend beyond fulfilling ad hoc tasks or validating predetermined outcomes to enriching

strategic discussions on addressing cross-cutting issues. In this regard, they need to be assisted with clear mandates, timely and relevant access to information and resources, a clear structure for teamwork and coordination, and equal opportunities in decision-making.

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## Collaboration Between Youth Networks, Communities, and Institutions

**T**ranslating the YPS framework into sustainable and impactful processes will require strengthened collaboration among youth networks, communities, and institutions. The consultation emphasized the need for a genuine intergenerational and inter-agency collaboration rooted in

empathy, cross-sectional or identity solidarity, and a non-self-centered approach. An essential component of this is the creation of ongoing spaces for consultation at different levels to enable genuine exchanges of knowledge and wisdom embedded in action.

Experience has shown that the absence of these spaces has widened the intergenerational communication gap, in turn weakening the sense of collective responsibility and solidarity. These spaces are necessary not only for the youth but also for the adults. This suggests that the youth development agenda should be seen as everyone's agenda, through which all members of the community can collectively thrive and flourish. The creation of such spaces at all levels will encourage more meaningful youth participation. The consultation also suggested that youth should be enabled to contribute more formally and substantially through

existing consultative spaces and mechanisms, to foster mutual support and to cultivate alliances for collaboration with networks of youth organizations and relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, this should be embedded in a continuous policy cycle where consultative processes are rooted in grassroots initiatives, knowledge consolidation, and capacity building. This process will then enrich decision-making with lived strategies from grassroots experience, strengthen intergenerational collaboration, and break the silo mode of operation at different levels.

"These mechanisms should facilitate genuine consultation, foster mutual support, and cultivate alliances between youth organizations and stakeholders, thus informing policymakers with grassroots initiatives, strengthening intergenerational collaboration, and breaking siloed operations across levels."

## Way Forward

**T**he discussion revealed unique realities of youth as they try to contribute to community building, peacebuilding, and decision-making processes. Despite various cultural, social, and economic barriers affecting youth participation, there is evidence that youth contributions are deeply rooted in shared values such as respect for human dignity, justice, and unity.

Shifting tokenistic participation will require a long-term vision for meaningful youth participation. Understanding the interconnectedness of social issues is crucial to channeling and leveraging youth's innate passion in arts, sports, health, culture, environment, technology, politics, religion, and security. This calls for moving from siloed approaches to collaboration and coordinated action among governments, civil society, faith groups, the corporate sector, media,

educators, families, and youth-led initiatives. By advancing a common understanding of the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda as an open and collective process, ASEAN can create enabling environments in which young people are empowered to contribute to peaceful and sustainable social transformation. Drawing on the consultation, the following are some considerations for ways forward:

1. Shifting outdated narratives about youth to more empowering, positive ones is essential. This perspective can be more systematically promoted through educational materials in various forms, such as syllabi, modules, social media, the arts, and cultural projects, thereby shaping the role of youth in society.
2. Narrowing the gap of understanding between the agenda as a formal document and public awareness about the agenda itself. The

consultation revealed that many youth are still unaware of the YPS agenda despite their long-standing contributions to advancing the youth agenda across the intersections of education, social cohesion, women and sustainable development. Therefore, there is a need to foster collective awareness of what peace and security mean beyond understanding peace as the absence of war and security as the absence of violence, to encompass the vast realities and aspirations of youth in various aspects of their lives.

3. There is a strong need to consolidate knowledge. The YPS agenda, as a guiding framework, should be enriched by grassroots initiatives. Southeast Asia's diverse backgrounds influence youth civic engagement. Consolidating knowledge at all levels is essential to establishing mechanisms, support,

and capacity-building for meaningful youth participation.

4. One essential support needed by the youth is access to spaces where they can express their talents and aspirations, exchange ideas and experiences, contribute to consultations, and be more connected with national, regional, and global agendas.

5. Clear mechanisms for youth engagement, such as structures or regulations, can enable youth participation—but they must be carefully designed to avoid being restrictive. These mechanisms should facilitate genuine consultation, foster mutual support, and cultivate alliances between youth organizations and stakeholders, thus informing policymakers with grassroots initiatives, strengthening intergenerational collaboration, and breaking siloed operations across levels.

Bahá'i  
International  
Community

Jakarta Office

'Envisioning the Roadmap for  
Meaningful Youth Participation in  
Southeast Asia'

Outcome Document of the Regional Consultative Space organized in hybrid format in four countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore on 13th December 2025.

Attended by Representative of Youth Organizations at National and Regional levels, Faith Based Organizations, Government Representative, UN Women, UN Lead Author for the Second Independent Progress Study on Youth Peace and Security, Academia and youth across Southeast Asia.

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