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THE 5TH ASEAN-CHINA-UNDP SYMPOSIUM: ENHANCING THE ROLES OF YOUTH IN ACHIEVING THE SDGS

8 April 2021 at 09:00 – 14:30 (GMT+7)

Video Conference

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

1. World leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015 which includes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. This year marks the sixth year of SDGs implementation and the start of the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs by 2030.
2. Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, promising progress has been seen in the region. According to *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*¹, with the current pace of progress, South-East Asia is on track on quality education (Goal 4), and industry, innovation and infrastructure (Goal 9). The region is also making good progress on several other goals, such as zero hunger (Goal 2) and good health and well-being (Goal 3). The progress report suggested the need for strengthening efforts for the remaining goals to accelerate progress, with a focus on reducing inequalities (Goal 10), and promoting peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16), which had negative trends.
3. *Sustainable Development Report 2020*², which tracks countries' progress towards achieving the SDGs, found that most ASEAN Member States have made good progress with index scores ranging from 62 to 75, with 100 being the highest and 0 the lowest. Rank-wise, six ASEAN Member States are among the top 100 best performing countries, with two Member States, namely Thailand and Viet Nam among the top 50 countries.
4. COVID-19 pandemic undermines this progress and exacerbates the challenges in implementing the SDGs. The United Nations earlier suggested that the pandemic will negatively affect almost all the Goals. More importantly, vulnerable groups, including the young generation working in informal economy, are hit hardest. Poverty and inequality are expected to rise. UN

¹ UN ESCAP, *Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020*, available at <https://www.unescap.org/publications/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2020>

² Available at <https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2020/>

“The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today’s younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations...” (the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Para.53)

forecasts indicate that COVID-19 will push 71 million people globally back into extreme poverty in 2020, an increase in poverty for the first time since 1998.³

5. Partnership and cooperation are more important than ever if the region is to make more progress and recover better from the pandemic. In this regard, there is a need to strengthen stakeholder engagement including with youth.

6. Youth are a critical stakeholder with at least five roles that can be played in achieving sustainable development⁴. First, youth as **critical thinkers**. Being young involves making sense of personal experiences and asking questions. Second, youth as **change-makers**. Young people have the power to act and mobilise others. Youth activism and volunteerism is on the rise, bolstered by broader connectivity and access to social media. Third, youth as **innovators**. Youth have the capacity to bring fresh ideas and offer alternative solutions, which in many cases are supported by their ability to leverage the use of technology. We have witnessed youth social entrepreneurship which offers innovative solutions and employment opportunities. In the context of ASEAN, the 4th ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium on SDGs held in 2019, underlined the critical roles of innovation in achieving the SDGs, showcased promising initiatives led by youth to support their communities. Fourth, youth as **communicators**. The 3rd ASEAN-China-UNDP Symposium on SDGs held in 2018 noted the importance of localizing the SDGs. The participants observed the need for awareness raising. To do so, young people can be partners in communicating the development agenda to their peers and communities at the local level, as well as across countries and regions. Fifth, youth as **leaders**: When young people are empowered with the knowledge of their rights and equipped with leadership skills, they can drive change in their communities and countries. Apart from these roles, youth have been directly involved by sitting in the national agencies coordinating SDGs implementation, supporting data collection, or taking part in voluntary national review (VNR) of their respective country and volunteering on SDGs related issues.

7. Based on UN’s definition of youth (persons between the ages of 15 – 24 years), this segment accounts for 15.5 percent of the world’s population in 2020. The number of youth of 15 – 24 years in ASEAN is 109.5 million out of the total population of 667.3 million in 2020. Thus, the share of youth in ASEAN is 16.4 percent, slightly higher than the global average. However, the share of youth varies widely across the ASEAN member states ranging from 11.3 percent in Singapore to 19.3 percent in Lao PDR.⁵ ASEAN defines youth as persons at the age of 15 – 35 years old. According to latest figures of the ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2020, the youth population accounts for 34% of ASEAN’s 654 million total population⁶. ASEAN fully understands

³ United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/>

⁴ United Nations, available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/youth/>

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). *World Population Prospects 2019*, Online Edition. Rev. 1.

⁶ Generated from the data submitted by ASEAN Member States to the Statistics Division of the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Community Statistical System (ACSS)

that this can be more than just a demographic dividend and that youth can actively participate in the pursuit of sustainable development and ASEAN Community building efforts. It can be seen, for example, in the *ASEAN Declaration on the Adoption of the ASEAN Youth in Climate Action and Disaster Resilience Day* where ASEAN Leaders recognize the potential from youth skills and talents in climate change adaptation and mitigation, and disaster resilience activities.

8. While the important role of youth in achieving the SDGs are clear, it is important to note that the SDGs and youth development efforts are mutually reinforcing. While youth are often seen as the beneficiaries of sustainable development, at the same time youth are increasingly playing an active role in achieving the SDGs. More than one third of SDGs targets reference young people explicitly or implicitly, with a focus on empowerment, participation and / or well-being. There are 20 youth-specific targets spread over six key SDGs: Goal 2 (hunger), Goal 4 (education), Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (decent work), Goal 10 (inequality) and Goal 13 (climate change).⁷

9. The fact the SDGs incorporate youth interests is not enough. More concrete action needs to be in place to ensure that youth can benefit from and take part in shaping the next development agendas. Data show that youth around the world face various challenges and development problems that hinder them to develop their potential. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, one in four young workers in the Asia and Pacific region was living in conditions of extreme or moderate poverty (below US\$ 3.20 a day). The COVID-19 crisis has negatively impacted youth employment through (1) job disruptions from reduced working hours and layoffs, (2) disruptions in education and training, and (3) difficulties transitioning from school to work and moving between jobs.⁸ Targeted and smart investments in decent jobs for young people, including through coordinated multi-stakeholder partnerships such as the UN Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth⁹, are needed to support the socio-economic recovery and improve the labour market prospects of youth.

10. Indeed COVID-19 brings more risk for youth unemployment. In addition to employment and opportunities, youth often face other development challenges such as barriers to participate in public life and lack of access to quality and affordable public services such as health and education. The situation can be even more difficult and complex for some youth. Young people from indigenous, ethnic and minority groups, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and young people living with HIV, sometimes face stigmatization, exclusion and disempowerment.

11. ASEAN has demonstrated a strong commitment on youth empowerment and has adopted declarations including *Bangkok Declaration on Advancing Partnership in Education for 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in ASEAN*, *ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY)*, *Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on Youth*

⁷ UNDP, *Youth as Partners for the Implementation of the SDGs*, available at https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/results/fast_facts/fast-facts--youth-as-partners-for-the-implementation-of-the-sdgs.html

⁸ ILO and ADB (2020) *Tackling the COVID-19 youth employment crisis in Asia and the Pacific*, available at https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_753369/lang--en/index.htm

⁹ Decent Jobs for Youth is the global initiative to scale up action and impact on youth employment in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. More information available at <https://www.decentjobsforyouth.org/>

Entrepreneurship and Employment. In 2020, ASEAN Youth Ministers issued a *Joint Statement on Enhancing Youth Cooperation for a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community*. Various initiatives such as youth forums, exchange, and volunteerism have been implemented to turn these commitments into actions. Moreover, an attempt was made in 2017 to measure youth development progress through the First ASEAN Youth Development Index (YDI) focusing on four domains¹⁰ namely education, health and wellbeing, employment and opportunity, and participation and engagement. It was found that health and wellbeing had the highest regional average domain score in 2015, suggesting it as a strength in the region.¹¹ It was followed closely by education, with employment and opportunity, and participation and engagement lagging.

12. It is important to note that the youth unemployment ratio of the region was the only indicator of the YDI to decline over the 2011 to 2015 period. Youth labour market participation and employment challenges can be even more complex due to the impacts of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). According to an estimate, 56% of jobs in five ASEAN Member States (Cambodia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Thailand and the Philippines) are at high risk of automation in the next few decades¹². At the same time as jobs being at risk due to automation, the workforce in ASEAN is forecast to grow by 11,000 new workers every day for the next 15 years.¹³ According to a World Economic Forum survey on ASEAN youth, technology, skills and future of work, ASEAN youth are highly aware of potential disruptions and challenges that the Fourth Industrial Revolution may bring to their employment prospects.¹⁴ They also realise the need to have a “growth mindset” and embrace lifelong learning. 9.2% of youth believe their current skills are outdated. A further 52.4% believe they must upgrade their skills constantly.¹⁵

13. ASEAN Youth Ministers have agreed on the Post-2020 direction of youth development in ASEAN: (i) Future-ready ASEAN youth through digital skills development; and (ii) institutionalised youth engagement mechanism, including in policy discourse. The state of youth employment in ASEAN, impacts of COVID-19 on youth, and ASEAN’s priorities in youth development indicate that employment and opportunities for youth’s livelihood and enabling youth’s active participation in achieving the SDGs are among the most important issues that need to be addressed.

14. With this background, the 5th ASEAN-China-UNDP symposium on SDGs is proposed to center on the reinforcing relationship between SDGs and youth, taking into account the impacts of COVID-19.

¹⁰ A study on the fifth domain: ASEAN Awareness, Values and Identity is being conducted

¹¹ ASEAN, *First ASEAN Development Index*, available at https://asean.org/storage/2017/10/ASEAN-UNFPA_report_web-final-05sep.pdf

¹² World Economic Forum and Asian Development Bank, *ASEAN 4.0: What Does the Fourth Industrial Revolution Mean for Regional Economic Integration?*, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS179126-2>

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ World Economic Forum, *ASEAN Youth Technology, Skills and the Future of Work*, available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_ASEAN_Youth_Survey_2019_Report.pdf

¹⁵ *Ibid*

Rationale and Objectives

15. ASEAN, China and UNDP have been partnering since 2016 to conduct symposiums on the SDGs where policy makers from ASEAN Member States and China, experts, international organisations and other stakeholders discuss, and exchange views and experiences on SDGs implementation. The last four symposiums focused on leave no one behind (2016), financing SDGs (2017), SDGs localization (2018), and the role of innovation (2019).

16. For the 5th symposium, the reinforcing relationship between SDGs and youth has been proposed as the focus. The symposium aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a. Provide a platform for policy makers and stakeholders to share experiences, and exchange views and strategies on enhancing the roles of youth in SDGs implementation and addressing priority areas such as youth and young female skills development for employment and entrepreneurship in a post COVID-19 world.
- b. Empower youth to participate in policy discourse on the sustainable development agenda and to listen and recognise their perspective.
- c. Provide recommendations on how to create a framework to utilize and strengthen the reinforcing relationship between the SDGs and youth empowerment, taking into account the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thematic Areas

17. Roles of the youth in the following:
- a. Collaboration with youth in addressing areas where the region is lagging in SDGs implementation (reducing inequalities, ending hunger and all forms of poverty, promoting education, ensuring access to decent work, promoting peace, justice and strong institutions, and climate action) and in building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - b. Engaging vulnerable and marginalised youth – ethnic minorities, out-of-school youth, migrant youth, youth living with HIV, and others.
 - c. Harnessing youth's creativity and innovative mindsets in the digital age and IR 4.0.
 - d. Youth volunteerism for sustainable development and ASEAN Community building.
 - e. Establishing and strengthening platforms for engaging the youth in policy-making processes.
 - f. Ensuring youth's health and wellbeing and harnessing the demographic dividends through addressing youth unemployment and skills development to ensure the readiness of youth for the labour market and the future of work.

Expected Outcomes

18. The symposium is expected to produce a set of recommendations to inform ways forward to engage youth in ASEAN Community building efforts as well as to accelerate SDG implementation, and to ensure that they can benefit from development progress.

Target Participants

19. Among other, the following will be invited to the symposium:
- a. Relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies
 - b. Mission of China to ASEAN and policy makers from China
 - c. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
 - d. Youth leaders from ASEAN Member States and China
 - e. Other international / regional organisations
 - f. NGOs, private sector, and ASEAN entities
 - g. ASEAN Secretariat

Additional Resources

20. The following are the additional resources on youth and the SDGs and youth and economic empowerment:
- a. *Youth Solutions Report 2020 (SDSN) [Download full report](#)*
 - b. *Tackling the COVID-19 Youth Employment Crisis in Asia and the Pacific (ILO and ADB, 2020) [Download the report](#)*
 - c. *Youth Entrepreneurs Engaging in the Digital Economy: The Next Generation (UNDP and UNCDF 2020) [Download full report](#)*
 - d. *Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia (UNDP and UNWOMEN 2020) [Download full report](#)*
 - e. *Business Integrity Toolkit For Young Entrepreneurs (UNDP, 2020) [Download the toolkit](#)*
 - f. *Youth Entrepreneurship in Asia and Pacific 2019 (UNDP) [Download the report](#)*
 - g. *COVID-19 – The True Test of ASEAN Youth's Resilience and Adaptability (World Economic Forum, 2020) [Download the report](#)*
