

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

**Challenges and Opportunities of ASEAN Community Building:
Perspectives for the Youth**

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H.E. Khairy Jamaluddin Abu Bakar, Minister of Youth and Sports, Malaysia;
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State Department;
Distinguished Guests, Youth Leaders from ASEAN,
Mentors, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

A very good evening! The ASEAN Secretary-General, H.E. Le Luong Minh conveys his commendations for this excellent initiative. Due to prior commitment, the Secretary-General is unable to be here. In his stead, it is my honor to meet the cream of ASEAN youth leaders represented by the admirable young men and women gathered in this hall. I take this opportunity to congratulate each of you for making it here.

One of the purposes of ASEAN as stipulated in Article 1.13 of the ASEAN Charter is “*to promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building*”. This highlights a very strong societal focus on ASEAN development, underlining the intent to raise the quality of life of its peoples through participatory approach. The call for participation applies also for the youth, which is one of the most valuable assets we have.

ASEAN has been hard at work to realize its common aspirations and dreams. The ASEAN Community journey started more than 45 years ago, when the ASEAN Founding Fathers signed the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967. By virtue of that document, ASEAN was born and the Members bound themselves together in friendship, cooperation, and shared commitment and vision to bring lasting peace, stability, and prosperity to our region.

With persistence, patience, and confidence, ASEAN is seeing its dreams come true. Come 31st December 2015, the economies of the 10 ASEAN Member States will be integrated. The ASEAN Economic Community will transform ASEAN into a single market, single production-base. There will be free movement of goods, services, and investments, as well as freer flow of capital and labor. Southeast Asia will be an

economically competitive region brought about by harmonized standards and regulations in industry, education, commerce, aviation, technology, science, health, and other fields. Overall, we can expect a truly connected Southeast Asia: physically, institutionally, and among the peoples.

The way to our dream ASEAN community is laden with challenges but also opportunities, however. Let me highlight some of the key challenges:

1. *Cascading Down Regional Commitment*

As spokes in a wheel, the entire ASEAN machinery will be handicapped if one or more Member States fail to translate their commitments into national legislation, policies and activities. Member States need to expedite ratification of the various ASEAN agreements, and transpose regional commitments into their respective national plans and actions. This may entail modifying domestic laws to align national political interests to long-term ASEAN objectives.

2. *Strengthening Inter-pillar Coordination*

ASEAN coordination on cross-cutting issues needs to be enhanced. For example, climate change and food security issues call for an integrated and multi-sectoral approach. The cross-cutting concerns of poverty eradication, social protection, gender equality, and vulnerable groups should be seen from a more holistic perspective. Likewise, mainstreaming human rights unto all the three pillars has been a challenge.

3. *Raising Awareness about ASEAN*

Surveys on ASEAN Community Building Efforts conducted in the capital cities of Member States in 2012 showed a mixed result. While 81% of those surveyed have heard about ASEAN, 76% do not have clear understanding of what ASEAN does, nor its implications to their lives. There is a need to foster greater awareness of ASEAN to all segments of our citizens so they may be better informed and more involved in the community-building process.

4. *Intensifying Engagement with Civil Societies*

While ASEAN has made efforts to reach out to NGOs and the broader civil society, ASEAN is still largely perceived as government-driven. ASEAN's vision for a people-centered ASEAN calls for more inclusive approach, embracing and involving all sectors of society to participate in, and benefit from, the processes of ASEAN integration and community building, including the youth.

5. *Narrowing the development gap*

ASEAN is diverse, not only in the political, cultural and social landscapes of its Member States but also in economic realm. Significant gaps exist between the advanced and developing Members, as well as within individual countries. We have many people living in first world standards while many others barely get by. This is true in terms of mobility as well as access to education, health care, and livelihood.

As such, narrowing the development gap remains as one of ASEAN's fundamental reasons for existence and a challenge that must be addressed with urgency.

Amidst these challenges, what are the opportunities for the youth to contribute to the ASEAN community building processes? I will dwell on some key opportunities, as follow:

1. *Youth Leadership Development:*

Our community building process is like a marathon without a finish line: we simply must endure and continue to push forward. In the years to come, we continue to require a pool of strong, forward-looking ASEAN leaders who will be the next torch bearers and sustain our gains for the future. Now is the time to engage youth groups, harnessing their leadership skills and enabling them to become champions for a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible ASEAN Community. By training a generation of competent youth leaders now, we are ensuring that the implementation of ASEAN Community at the regional and national levels will be in good hands. For this reason, I wish to express our appreciation to the Governments of Malaysia and US for taking the initiative to promote youth leadership in ASEAN through this workshop.

2. *Youth-led ASEAN Awareness Promotion:*

Around 60% of ASEAN populations today are under 35 years old. We know that many in this age bracket rely on their peers for information and this makes our young people a potent force for promoting awareness about ASEAN. With the new generation of young people being more educated and technologically savvy, the youth of today are in a vantage position when it comes to stimulating strong commitment of their fellow youth in ASEAN's community-building efforts. I therefore urge the youth leaders in this room to take an active role in raising awareness about ASEAN and to encourage others to participate in our community building efforts. This is something you can start through social media or through interpersonal communication platforms.

3. *Youth Volunteerism and Participation:*

The ASEAN Community building would benefit from broader participation by all stakeholders, including the young generation. ASEAN youths, therefore, must be bold and seize the opportunity to make greater and visible contribution to the ASEAN Community building process. Volunteerism and community participation are potential avenues to realize this. For example, youth volunteers can initiate or take part in community-based projects related to humanitarian work in disasters, sports events, cultural revival projects, home-care for the elderly, or educational campaigns. This way, the young people can nurture a sense of truly caring and sharing community which is the bedrock on which ASEAN stands. The ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme based at the National University of Malaysia is a solid example of this initiative and again I convey our appreciation to the Governments of Malaysia and US for promoting youth volunteerism in ASEAN.

4. *Youth Entrepreneurship:*

Entrepreneurship is a source of job creation and economic empowerment that will help narrow the development gap within and between countries. In this regard, exploring the promise of entrepreneurship as a career option for youth should be considered in earnest. The ASEAN Leaders have expressed their commitment in this area through the Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment, adopted during the 23rd ASEAN Summit in October 2013. In the spirit of mutual cooperation and partnership, the private sector, too, will have a wide ranging role to play which may include the provision of mentor support and business expertise as well as programme sponsorships. However, as the philosopher Rabindranath Tagore said, “You cannot cross the sea merely by staring at the water.” It is up to the youth themselves to seize this opportunity – with their fresh, innovative ideas.

In conclusion, the ASEAN youths are the region’s greatest assets. I look forward for this Workshop to come up with ideas for innovative, dynamic approach to broaden and deepen ASEAN’s engagement with the youth.

Let me end my talk with the story of a little boy who was sobbing away in darkness, holding a tiny oil lamp.

“What’s the matter?” a passerby asked.

“I have to cross the forest to reach my village on the other side, but I am scared of the dark,” said the boy.

“But you have a lamp to show you the path,” the man suggested.

“Yes I do, but it can show me only a few feet ahead of me and the village is three miles away!” complained the boy.

“Just take one step at a time in light as shown by the lamp,” said the man. “And you will reach home!”

The boy took every step in light and soon reached his village without fear.

Yes, there may be some unfamiliar, uncertain areas in the horizon as we journey towards the ASEAN Community. But let us remember that what we have with us can take us as far as we want. Together, we can reach our destiny – one step at a time.

Thank you very much.
