



Awakening the ASEAN Youth:  
**Unveiling the Tapestry of Welfare  
and Rights**

ASEAN Youth Forum (Secretariat)  
October, 2023



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# Preface

We, as a vibrant and resilient youth-led organisation within the ASEAN region, are humbled to present this primer, “Awakening the ASEAN Youth: Unveiling the Tapestry of Welfare and Rights.” At its core, this primer is a conscious endeavor to scrutinize the intricate interplay between multifaceted challenges and opportunities related to welfare, human rights, and youth well-being in the ASEAN region.

It delves deep into the multifaceted complexities that define the lived realities of the ASEAN youth, unraveling the often overlooked nuances within the realms of education, healthcare, employment, social protection, and environmental degradation concerns. By scrutinizing these key dimensions, it not only exposes the existing challenges but also paves the way for exploring sustainable, just, and inclusive solutions. We embark on a journey that is not just about shedding light on the challenges faced by our generation but about advocating for a fundamental shift in the discourse surrounding our rights and well-being.

We aspire to this primer as a testament to the belief that progress must not be measured solely in economic terms but must encompass the profound essence of human dignity, agency, and well-being. May this primer ignite conversations, inspire collaboration, and be a hope for a future where youth welfare is synonymous with human rights to pursue a more just and inclusive ASEAN community.

In solidarity and determination,

**Fatimah Zahrah**  
**Regional Coordinator AYF Secretariat**

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# Foreword

Nestled within the vibrant tapestry of Southeast Asia lies the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organisation comprising ten member states. Bound together by geography and a shared vision of regional cooperation, ASEAN nations have undergone profound transformations in recent decades. Amidst this rapid development, the voices and concerns of the region's youth have emerged as a dynamic force that is actively shaping the future of ASEAN societies. This comprehensive research initiative embarks on a voyage of discovery, seeking to delve deeply into the multifaceted terrain of youth welfare and human rights within the ASEAN community.

The youth, according to the ASEAN Youth development index<sup>1</sup>, aged between 15 and 35 years old, represent a substantial segment of ASEAN's population, bringing energy, creativity, and diverse perspectives to the fore. However, they also encounter distinct challenges, and their lived experiences reveal both commonalities and unique features across the member states. This research, meticulously crafted through a series of focused and insightful activities, delves into the critical domains of education, healthcare, employment, social protection, and environmental issues.

This research employed a qualitative approach, primarily relying on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 13 diverse participants, aged between 20-32 years old, from various ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor Leste, The Philippines, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Myanmar. The majority of participants are AYF youth network who have concern on human rights issues related to youth's welfare or have experience on activism. From 13 participants, four of them are women, one non-binary, and the remaining are men.

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1. ASEAN Youth Development Index 2022, <https://asean.org/serial/144771/>

This aims to gather rich insights and perspectives on the complex issues of welfare, human rights, and youth well-being in the region. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns within the collected data.

While the FGDs provided valuable qualitative data, it is important to acknowledge that the findings may not be fully representative of the entire ASEAN region due to the small sample size. Additionally, the research's qualitative nature may limit the generalisability of the findings, and further quantitative studies may be needed to validate specific trends or relationships identified in this research.

The central research question of this study is to investigate the multifaceted challenges and opportunities related to welfare, human rights, and youth well-being in the ASEAN region. This research aims to explore these critical issues through a lens that incorporates the voices of diverse youth from different ASEAN countries. This research also aspires to be a guiding compass, not only for policymakers and stakeholders but also for the youth themselves. It recognises that meaningful change requires a collective commitment to bridge gaps, eliminate disparities, and ensure that the promise of welfare and human rights extends to every corner of ASEAN. With the ASEAN community standing at a pivotal juncture in its history, this research is a testament to the aspirations, resilience, and potential of its youth, who hold the key to a brighter and more equitable future.

As we embark on this illuminating journey through the ASEAN region, may the voices and insights of its youth inspire us to advocate for a tomorrow where welfare and human rights flourish in unity and diversity.

# About the Primer

The concept behind the three chapters revolves around a comprehensive examination of the interconnected components that shape the welfare and human rights landscape for youth in the ASEAN region.

**Chapter 1** scrutinizes the intricate interplay of youth welfare and human rights within ASEAN, setting the stage for the subsequent explorations. Drawing on the rich tapestry of insights gathered from the first-hand narratives of our participants, this chapter unravels the socio-cultural and political dimensions that shape the welfare landscape. It underscores the significance of understanding the diversity of experiences across the region and the pervasive impact of global and regional dynamics.

**Chapter 2** immerses us in the realms of education, healthcare, employment, social protection, and environmental issues. Through the lens of the ASEAN youth, this chapter unveils the disparities and opportunities that characterise these domains. It highlights the invaluable role of healthcare in safeguarding individual dignity and well-being, the transformative power of education, the complexities of navigating the employment landscape, the importance of robust social support structures, and the pressing environmental concerns that resonate across borders.

**Chapter 3** brings the youth to the forefront as active agents of change. It showcases their actionable recommendations for addressing the myriad challenges they have identified. With a keen focus on collaborative solutions and collective empowerment, this chapter lays out a roadmap for advancing youth welfare and human rights in the ASEAN context. From environmental sustainability to digital literacy, from labor rights to political participation, the youth voices echo with urgency and determination.

Chapter 1:  
**Childhood Experiences  
and Challenges in ASEAN**



## **Introduction**

The journey of childhood is a universal rite of passage, a phase that transcends borders and cultures while weaving a unique tapestry for each individual. In the diverse region of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the contours of childhood are painted with a vibrant palette, reflecting the myriad experiences and challenges faced by its youthful denizens. This chapter embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the childhood narratives within the ASEAN context, delving into the realms of education, healthcare, employment, social protection, and the environment. It endeavors to unravel the nuanced threads that shape the formative years of young lives, illuminating the shared aspirations and distinct tribulations that define childhood across this diverse landscape.

### **1.2 Education: A Quest for Enlightenment**

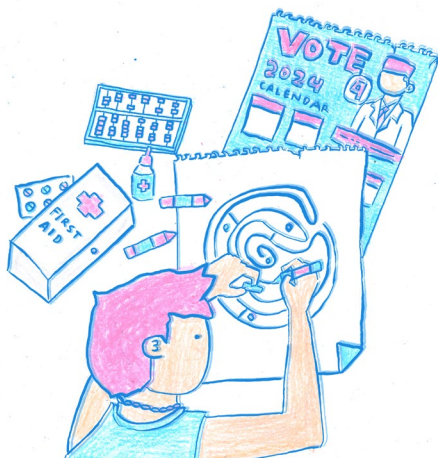
Education, a cornerstone of personal and societal development, emerges as a central theme in the narratives of ASEAN youth as they recount their educational journeys from childhood to early adulthood. Their stories encompass diverse experiences, challenges, and opportunities that reflect both regional commonalities and unique national contexts.

#### ***1.2.1 The Labyrinth of Educational Challenges***

##### ***Childhood Education: Nurturing the Foundations of Knowledge***

Childhood, often considered the formative years of education, sets the stage for a lifelong relationship with learning. The narratives from ASEAN participants during this phase reveal distinct experiences.

A participant from Singapore fondly remembered their early education, highlighting a positive environment characterised by a public



kindergarten school with a playground and amiable neighbours. This experience underscores the value of nurturing a supportive educational ecosystem during the early years.

In the Philippines, a participant's recollection of learning beginning at home reflects the adaptability and resilience ingrained in children, especially in settings with limited access to formal education. Their anecdote raises questions about the role of informal learning and the need for education policies that recognise diverse pathways to knowledge acquisition.

However, the challenges within ASEAN childhood education are also evident. A participant from Cambodia described the arduous journey to school, including navigating mountainous terrain with precarious staircases. Such obstacles underscore the need for improved infrastructure and accessibility, particularly in rural areas, to ensure equal access to quality education.

## **1.2.2 Disparities and Quality**

The discussions revealed several significant concerns related to education among ASEAN youth. Notably, there was a recurring theme of dissatisfaction with the quality and accessibility of education, particularly in public schools. Participants from various countries highlighted the challenges faced in public education, including insufficient qualified teachers, inadequate resources, and outdated curricula. As one participant from Timor Leste pointed out:

***“In rural areas, there are not enough qualified teachers for English, which puts students at a disadvantage.”***

Furthermore, the emergence of private and international schools offering higher quality education during adolescence and early adulthood has widened the gap between socioeconomic classes. This disparity between public and private education institutions has significant implications for youth, as access to quality education plays a pivotal role in shaping their future. This gap in educational quality and facilitation, represents a crucial challenge that ASEAN youth face, particularly when striving for equal opportunities.

On the other hand, the intersection between bullying related to gender norms and its impact on mental health emerged as an intriguing area of discussion. While the FGDs did not extensively delve into this intersection, it is essential to emphasise its significance. Participants acknowledged that gender discrimination and stereotyping persist in various aspects of their lives, including education and employment. These norms not only limit their choices but also perpetuate bullying and harassment.

The link between bullying, particularly gender-based bullying, and mental health is well-established in research. The FGDs touched upon the emotional toll that discrimination and bullying take on youth, often leading to anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation. Analytically, it is imperative to recognise that addressing the mental health needs of ASEAN youth must encompass strategies to combat the deeply ingrained gender norms that contribute to their vulnerability.

## ***Adolescent Education: Navigating Complexity and Diversity***

Adolescence represents a period of increased complexity in education, marked by diverse experiences and challenges. The narratives from ASEAN youth during this phase illuminate various dimensions of adolescent education.

Participants from Myanmar and Cambodia lamented the lack of academic freedom and restrictions on discussing politics within their respective countries' public school systems. This restriction raises questions about the role of education in nurturing critical thinking and civic engagement among youth.

In contrast, a participant from Vietnam highlighted their experience of studying in Europe, where open discussions about politics, law, and human rights were encouraged in the classroom. This exposure to diverse perspectives underscores the impact of educational environments on shaping individuals' worldviews.

Sex education emerged as a critical theme during adolescence. While participants in Lao and the Philippines shared the absence of comprehensive sex education in public schools, international schools in these countries introduced this crucial component of education. This discrepancy highlights the need for standardised, inclusive sex education curricula in all educational settings to ensure adolescents

are equipped with the knowledge necessary for their sexual and reproductive health.

## ***Early Adulthood: Aspirations and Challenges in Pursuit of Higher Education***

Early adulthood marks a pivotal phase where youth transition into higher education, forging their pathways to future roles and aspirations. The narratives of ASEAN youth during this phase offer insights into the challenges and opportunities they encounter.

In Vietnam, a participant described the privilege of attending an international liberal arts university, emphasizing the transformative potential of higher education in broadening perspectives and fostering a global outlook. This narrative reflects the role of higher education in nurturing future leaders and global citizens.

In addition, the same participant also highlighted disparities in education quality, inadequate infrastructure, and educational inequality for indigenous populations. In terms of education for indigenous population, there was also a discussion among participants that education inequality for indigenous people means there is a disparity between knowledge in formal education that is not applicable in daily practical life for indigenous community. This account underscores the need for equitable access to quality education and policies that address educational disparities within ASEAN nations.

Participants from Myanmar and the Philippines shed light on their experiences with advocacy and activism within the educational sphere. These narratives emphasise the role of education, especially in early adulthood, in shaping individuals' identities as advocates for various causes, including human rights, reproductive rights, and gender equality.

### **1.2.3 In a Nutshell**

In conclusion, the educational narratives of ASEAN youth offer a multifaceted perspective on the region's educational landscape. While there are shared aspirations for quality education and inclusivity, challenges persist, such as limitations on academic freedom, disparities in education quality, and the absence of comprehensive sex education. These narratives underscore the importance of fostering educational environments that prioritise critical thinking, civic engagement, utility for the community, and inclusivity, while addressing disparities to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities for all youth within the ASEAN region.

Furthermore, the infrastructure and accessibility of educational institutions in select regions bore the onus of formidable challenges. A participant from Cambodia, for instance, recounted the herculean journey to school—a daunting ascent up a mountainside via an intricate staircase. Such narratives spotlighted the precarious nature of school access and its impact on the academic odyssey of youth in certain locales.

## **1.3 Healthcare: Navigating the Corridors of Wellness**

Healthcare, an essential component of well-being, takes center stage in the narratives of youth across ASEAN countries. As these young individuals traverse the pivotal stages of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, their encounters with healthcare services offer profound insights into the region's healthcare landscape. This section delves into the multifaceted healthcare experiences shared by participants from different ASEAN nations, shedding light on both commonalities and unique national contours.

### ***1.3.1 Childhood Healthcare: Foundation for Well-being***

In childhood, healthcare forms a crucial pillar of development, providing the foundation upon which future well-being is built. The narratives of participants from ASEAN countries paint a complex picture of early healthcare experiences.

Participants from Malaysia, for instance, noted the availability of monthly nutrition sessions, vaccinations, and health services in public hospitals, highlighting the government's commitment to child health. In contrast, participants from Timor Leste recounted a starkly different reality, where access to quality healthcare remained a challenge. Traditional medicine, passed down through generations, played a vital role in filling the healthcare gap, reflecting the resilience and resourcefulness of communities in the face of limited resources.

A notable common thread across ASEAN countries during childhood is the importance of vaccinations. Participants from Vietnam and Indonesia underscored the significance of free vaccines from public hospitals, showcasing efforts to ensure disease prevention from an early age. This shared emphasis on vaccination as a public health measure reflects a collective commitment to safeguarding the health of children within the ASEAN region.

However, the childhood narratives also expose disparities in healthcare access. While participants from Malaysia and Indonesia mentioned the availability of affordable public health insurance, participants from Lao lamented the absence of such protection. The contrasting experiences within ASEAN nations underscore the need for continued efforts to bridge healthcare gaps and ensure equitable access for all children, regardless of their geographical location or socioeconomic status.

### **1.3.2 Adolescence: A Crucial Phase for Healthcare Awareness**

As participants transitioned into adolescence, their perspectives on healthcare expanded, revealing evolving challenges and opportunities. Mental health emerged as a poignant theme, echoing global concerns about the well-being of young people.

In the Philippines, a participant shared the absence of mental health care services in public hospitals, reflecting a broader gap in mental healthcare accessibility. This sentiment resonated with participants from Cambodia, Malaysia, Lao, and Timor Leste, where the unavailability of mental health services raised concerns about the well-being of adolescents facing the challenges of adolescence in the absence of essential support.

Conversely, participants from Myanmar highlighted the positive role played by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in delivering reproductive health care education and awareness. Such initiatives reflect the importance of community-based organisations in addressing gaps in healthcare provision, especially in the realm of sexual and reproductive health, during adolescence.

The need for comprehensive sex education in schools emerged as a common thread among participants. While international schools in Lao and the Philippines introduced sex education, public schools lagged behind in providing this vital knowledge. This discrepancy underscores the importance of standardised, evidence-based sexual education curricula to empower adolescents with the information needed to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

### **1.3.3 Early Adulthood: Challenges and Resilience in Healthcare**

Early adulthood marks a phase of increased autonomy and responsibility, where young people take charge of their health and well-being. Healthcare experiences during this period varied significantly across ASEAN countries.

In Malaysia, the participant mentioned the availability of private clinics and hospitals, highlighting the preference for private healthcare due to concerns about the quality of public healthcare facilities. However, this choice also raises questions about healthcare equity and accessibility, especially for those who cannot afford private care. The participant candidly shared their struggles with mental health and the daunting barriers to accessing care, stating:

***“I realised that if I go to a private hospital, it will be very expensive. If I go to a public hospital, it will be a very long process even if it is free. I am afraid to let my parents and others know because I am afraid that they might think that I am mad.”***

Participants from Myanmar and Lao shared their experiences of struggling with mental health issues, reflecting the broader socio-political challenges faced in their respective countries. The narratives underscored the critical need for accessible and stigma-free mental health services to support the well-being of young adults navigating tumultuous times.

The role of NGOs and community organisations emerged as a vital source of social support, bridging gaps in healthcare services and providing assistance to vulnerable populations. In Indonesia, participants described the efforts to raise public awareness about the importance of reducing plastic usage, illustrating the potential for grassroots initiatives to address environmental health concerns.

In conclusion, the healthcare narratives of ASEAN youth paint a complex picture of shared aspirations and disparities. While progress has been made in areas such as childhood vaccinations and reproductive health education, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to quality healthcare, particularly in mental health services. The role of NGOs and community organisations remains pivotal in filling gaps in healthcare provision, showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness of ASEAN communities. As these young people transition into adulthood, their experiences underscore the imperative for comprehensive healthcare policies and initiatives that prioritise mental health, equity, and community well-being within the ASEAN region.

### ***1.3.4 Disparities in Healthcare Access and Quality***

The disparities in healthcare access and quality emerged as a pressing concern among ASEAN youth during the Focus Group Discussions (FGD). A recurring theme, akin to the challenges in education, is the gap between public health services and private hospitals. The discussions shed light on the burden placed on young people who often find themselves having to pay extra costs to access adequate healthcare services.

In several ASEAN countries, the public health sector faces limitations, ranging from insufficient resources and outdated facilities to a shortage of medical staff. Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of care provided in public hospitals, which, in some instances,

was characterised as subpar. As one participant from Malaysia observed:

***“Public healthcare is cheap, but the quality of services is not always satisfactory.”***

Conversely, private hospitals and healthcare facilities are often perceived as offering higher quality services. However, they come at a significantly higher cost, placing a financial strain on youth seeking medical attention. This disparity in healthcare access and quality not only affects the affordability of services but also reinforces existing socioeconomic divides.

The implications of such disparities are far-reaching. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may find themselves grappling with limited access to essential healthcare services, potentially compromising their well-being. Additionally, the financial burden associated with private healthcare can lead to increased stress and instability, impacting overall welfare.

Analytically, this disparity underscores the need for comprehensive healthcare reform in ASEAN countries. Efforts should be directed toward bridging the quality gap between public and private healthcare services while ensuring that healthcare remains affordable and accessible to all youth. These disparities in healthcare access and quality are intricately linked to the broader issue of welfare, emphasizing the importance of equitable healthcare systems in promoting the well-being of ASEAN youth.

## **1.4 Employment: The Dawn of Work**

### ***1.4.1 The Anticipation of Employment***

Childhood for these participants was not characterised by direct employment experiences; nevertheless, there were glimpses of initial exposure to work environments through internships, volunteering, or nascent entrepreneurial endeavors. These early sojourns into the realm of work, though limited, played a seminal role in molding the participants' incipient perceptions of their role and responsibility for themselves, as well as for their community.

As one participant who has experienced volunteering in NGOs and successfully found their role in the community faces their own dilemma due to insufficient salaries in NGOs. She mentioned:

***“I need to support my family with my income but at the same time I would like to help others.”***

## **1.5 Social Protection: The Fabric of Connection**

### ***1.5.1 The Weave of Social Protection***

The tapestry of social protection during childhood was intricately woven with threads of family bonds, occasionally interspersed with the lifelines extended by NGOs and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). Families emerged as the primary bulwarks, offering emotional sustenance and financial stability. Nonetheless, participants underscored bureaucratic hurdles such as the costs entailed in procuring essential documentation, including birth certificates—a formidable barrier to accessing support networks.

## 1.6 Environment: The Canvas of Early Life

### 1.6.1 The Pervasive Environmental Canopy

Childhood memories were inexorably linked to the environmental backdrop in which participants' formative years were painted. Many mentioned the specter of environmental challenges looming large in their respective homelands. For instance, one participant from Indonesia recounted the environmental tribulations of pollution and deforestation, which wrought havoc upon air quality and precipitated recurrent floods in their region.

The environmental challenges highlighted during the FGDs extend beyond ecological concerns; they profoundly affect human rights. For instance, one participant in group two shared a poignant account:

***“I cannot go to school because there is a lot of smoke everywhere. Sometimes, if you open your door, you cannot see your front. It made me difficult to access education as well as some children got sick due to smoke (asthma).”***

*These stark realities illustrate how environmental crises can directly impede the basic human right to education, along with posing severe health risks.*

## **1.6.2 Navigating the Maelstrom of Environmental Issues**

The environmental issues that cast their shadows during childhood left an indelible imprint on the lives of participants. A participant from Myanmar emphasised the pivotal role of internet access in their journey of self-discovery:

***“After 2013 everyone can access the internet but before could not in Myanmar. Therefore, I started to feel and enjoy freedom. I felt the freedom of my life as an urban youth, even not fully at that time.”***



## **1.7 Conclusion: The Tapestry of Childhood in ASEAN - A Comprehensive Outlook**

The preceding exploration of childhood experiences and challenges among young individuals in ASEAN countries has unveiled a multifaceted tapestry that resonates with shared threads of universal aspirations, as well as nuanced patterns unique to each participant's narrative. This chapter has elucidated the formative years that sculpt the lives and perspectives of ASEAN's youth, anchored in the domains of education, healthcare, employment, social protection, and the environmental backdrop.

Education, as a pivotal cornerstone, has offered both a ladder to empowerment and a mirror reflecting disparities. Participants across nations have painted a vivid portrait of their early encounters with learning, shedding light on the availability and quality of education within their respective regions. From the joyous recollections of playgrounds and amiable neighbors in one country to the uphill climbs through mountainous terrain to reach school in another country, the spectrum of experiences echoes the profound significance of education in shaping their formative years.

Healthcare emerged as a beacon of hope, yet its radiance was often tempered by the looming shadow of unmet mental health needs. While public hospitals in some nations afforded accessibility and affordability for physical ailments, mental health care remained an elusive specter. The participant from Malaysia's poignant reflection on the stigma surrounding mental health serves as a sobering testament to the importance of holistic well-being, with the resonant message that adequate mental healthcare remains an unmet need among ASEAN's youth.

Though the chapter primarily explored the childhood terrain, nascent forays into work environments offered glimpses of spirits and commitments to have contribution to their community to social causes. These early ventures laid the foundation for budding role aspirations, marking the genesis of youthful ambitions for being impactful for the society.

In the realm of social protection, family bonds were hailed as paramount, offering both emotional buoyancy and financial stability. However, bureaucratic hurdles and documentation costs cast shadows on the process of accessing support networks, hinting at systemic challenges that deserve attention. The chapter underscored the importance of familial protection networks, even as it revealed the need for greater accessibility and inclusivity in support services.

Lastly, the environmental backdrop of participants' formative years painted a diverse canvas, punctuated by challenges such as pollution, deforestation, and floods. These environmental factors, etched into childhood memories, are indicative of the complex interplay between human lives and the natural world in ASEAN nations.

In conclusion, this chapter has unravelled the rich tapestry of childhood experiences and challenges in ASEAN countries, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of youth perspectives. As these young voices echo with aspirations, tribulations, and hopes, they provide a profound lens through which we can perceive the nuances of growing up in a region characterized by both unity and diversity. The journey of these youths through childhood serves as a precursor to their exploration of adolescence and early adulthood, providing a valuable foundation for understanding their evolving perceptions of welfare and fundamental rights.

Chapter 2:  
**Welfare Perspectives  
in ASEAN**



## Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the diverse welfare perspectives of young individuals across ASEAN. Building upon the five key components of education, healthcare, employment, environment, and social protection, we aim to shed light on the challenges and differences in welfare experiences within the region. Through personal stories and experiences shared by participants, we explore the nuanced issues affecting the well-being of ASEAN's youth across their lifespans.

### 2.1 Education: A Mosaic of Opportunities and Barriers

Education serves as the bedrock for personal growth and development, but across ASEAN countries, it reveals a mosaic of opportunities and barriers. In Vietnam, one participant noted that students must undergo military training to graduate, adding an additional layer of complexity to their educational journey. Furthermore, the scarcity of qualified teachers for English in rural areas creates disparities in language literacy. Similarly, Timor Leste experiences disparities with English literacy, and rural areas lack access to English teachers. Moreover, the absence of SOGIE-SC and gender perspective in the curriculum underscores the gaps in inclusive education.

In Indonesia, the mandate for Muslim girls to wear white hijabs in public schools raises concerns about freedom of expression and gender restrictions. Additionally, the education gap between rural and urban areas persists, particularly in English literacy. Malaysia, on the other hand, struggles with limited sex education in schools and inadequate mental health education. The reliance on NGOs and organisations for mental health support points to the gaps in government-provided education. In Myanmar, the aftermath of the military coup has disrupted education, with teachers and students boycotting government schools.

The shutdown of the internet further exacerbates the challenges of online learning.

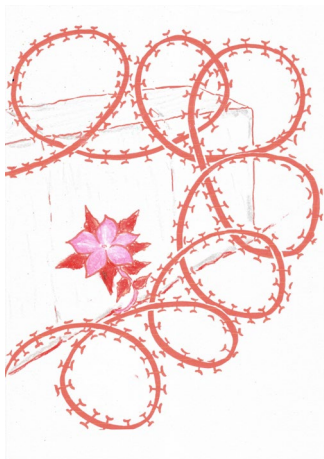
Lao grapples with disparities in education access, primarily between the middle- and higher-income classes. Civic spaces are limited, and freedom of speech, especially regarding politics, is restricted. Cambodia faces inequalities in education access between the rich and poor, with English proficiency acting as a significant barrier to scholarships for disadvantaged students. These stories underscore the complexity of education across ASEAN countries, highlighting the need for inclusive and equitable educational reforms.

### ***2.1.1 Economic Disparities A Barrier to Education***

Access to education remains an area of concern in the ASEAN region, particularly for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The notes provided by participants highlight the stark disparities in educational opportunities. For instance, in Lao, there exists a noticeable gap in accessing education between the middle-income and higher-income classes, with students attending international schools having a significant advantage. This reflects a global issue where the quality of education is often linked to economic status.

Additionally, some ASEAN countries face the pressing challenge of ensuring equitable access to education, where qualified teachers and resources are scarce. These disparities in educational opportunities perpetuate socio-economic inequalities and limit youth's chance to find their potency. The lack of comprehensive sex education in public schools further compounds these issues by leaving students ill-equipped to navigate critical aspects of their physical and emotional well-being.

## 2.2 Healthcare: The Struggle for Quality and Inclusivity



Healthcare is a fundamental aspect of welfare, and disparities within the region are striking. Access to healthcare varies considerably, with some countries struggling to provide quality services. In Vietnam, despite the existence of a treatment program, patients face issues like a lack of prescription requirements for medicines. However, in several countries, the quality of healthcare remains questionable, emphasizing the importance of improving the quality of accessible healthcare services.

Conversely, Timor Leste faces a shortage of medical staff and insufficient healthcare infrastructure, particularly for LGBTQ people who are rejected at public hospitals. Cambodia grapples with a poor healthcare system that has eroded public trust in its services. In contrast, Malaysia boasts affordable public healthcare, but the quality of services leaves much to be desired. The recent initiation of reproductive health programs demonstrates progress but is counteracted by religious beliefs and refusal of abortion by some doctors.

Myanmar, still reeling from the military coup, experiences a drastic decline in its healthcare system. Lack of medical staff, informal rescue teams, and the shutdown of the internet hinder healthcare accessibility. Meanwhile, Lao faces challenges in providing gender-affirming care and limited HIV and Sexual Transmitted Infection (STI) prevention resources for the LGBTQ community. Healthcare disparities across ASEAN countries are evident, emphasizing the need for improvements in quality and inclusivity.

### **2.2.1 Mental Health: A Silent Crisis**

Mental health is an often-overlooked facet of healthcare that warrants significant attention within the context of ASEAN countries. While access to mental health services is a concern in many regions, the challenges in ASEAN are exacerbated by the stigmatisation of mental health issues and unaffordable mental health services. As one participant from Myanmar pointed out:

***“Health care system is completely going down due to a military coup. Not enough medical staff for health care. Informal rescue teams are not enough and are only for emergencies.”***

This deteriorating healthcare infrastructure, further strained by political instability, results in a shortage of mental health professionals and resources, leaving the youth without adequate support for their psychological well-being.

The stigma surrounding mental health also manifests in education, where there is a glaring absence of mental health support in schools

across several ASEAN countries. This lack of support not only hampers students' access to crucial resources but also perpetuates a culture of silence around mental health issues. Without appropriate education and intervention, young people struggling with mental health challenges face isolation, compounding the already significant burden they carry.

## **2.3 Employment: Prioritise Labor Protection and Decent Work**

Employment prospects vary across ASEAN nations, and access to labor rights remains a challenge. Gender discrimination in the workplace is a recurring issue. In Vietnam, stereotypical career choices based on gender persist, leading to social movements advocating for gender equality. However, a lack of protective legislation hinders progress.

In Timor Leste, employment opportunities are limited for those without college degrees. Meanwhile, Malaysia grapples with underpaid workers, with no provisions for interns' salaries. The prevalence of labor exploitation due to the absence of proper contracts poses significant concerns. Lao faces labor exploitation as one participant mentioned that it is primarily from Chinese investors.

The stories shared by participants point to the complexities of employment across the ASEAN region, demanding government attention to labor rights, gender equality, fair job opportunities, and decent work.

## **2.4 Environment: Neglect and Consequences**

ASEAN countries collectively face a growing environmental crisis, characterised by high-risk environmental issues and a glaring lack of adequate government intervention. The repercussions of environmental neglect manifest in the form of air pollution, flooding, climate change, and natural disasters, with profound implications for the well-being of the region's youth.

### **2.4.1 Climate Change and Natural Disasters**

One of the most pressing environmental challenges across ASEAN nations is the increasing vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. This highlights a form of environmental exploitation that exacerbates vulnerabilities in the region. A participant from Cambodia stated:

***“Developed countries destroy the environment of developing countries due to private companies investing in other developing countries.”***

Inadequate government response to these challenges amplifies the risks. A participant from Myanmar described the dire situation in their country, citing *“Deforestation, mining for jade, gold, and rare earth.”*

This rampant resource extraction contributes to environmental degradation, including polluted water and air, as well as destructive landslides. Despite these clear indicators of impending environmental disasters, government and private sector efforts to mitigate the risks remain insufficient.

### **2.4.2 Air Pollution and Health Risks**

Air pollution is another pervasive concern, negatively affecting the health and well-being of ASEAN’s youth. While public healthcare services are available in many ASEAN countries, the quality often falls short. This paradoxical situation presents a challenge for those seeking medical attention in the face of health issues exacerbated by environmental factors. A participant from Malaysia noted:

***“Healthcare services are cheap in public hospitals, but the quality is bad.”***

### **2.4.3 Corruption and Environmental Damage**

The environment’s plight is further complicated by issues of corruption within some ASEAN governments. A participant from Myanmar pointed out:

***“Government officials are the key player[s] of damage to the environment such as mining and deforestation.”***

This collusion between officials and industries contributes to unchecked environmental exploitation, ultimately affecting the region’s natural resources and increasing the vulnerability of its population.

### **2.4.4 The Role of Youth in Environmental Advocacy**

In the face of these challenges, the youth in ASEAN countries are increasingly stepping up as environmental activists. However, their efforts often come at a cost, as Participant from Vietnam revealed:

***“Activists who protest for the environment are imprisoned.”***

This illustrates the tensions between grassroots advocacy for environmental change and government policies that prioritise economic interests over environmental protection.

## **2.5 Social Support: An Uneven Safety Net**

The landscape of social protection within ASEAN nations is marked by disparities, with a delicate balance between government-oriented initiatives and the contributions of NGOs and INGOs. The availability of social protection, particularly for marginalised groups, paints a picture of contrasting approaches to welfare.

### ***2.5.1 Limitation of Social Support***

In many ASEAN countries, public funds predominantly favor government-oriented social support programs. However, these initiatives often fall short of adequately addressing the needs of vulnerable populations due to their limited outreach. In several countries, social protection has been replaced by a social support program, which means only those who are categorised as disadvantaged communities are given social support from the government. As one participant stated:

***“You need to prove your social status (poor family and financial problem) for accessing health care services.”***

This limitation leads to exclusion of communities that face myriad discrimination such as the LGBTIQ community. Few social support programs are available for the binary family.

Last but not least, the social support programs that only cover several conditions and several categories of people are not able to provide a safety net for the society. The people can not rely on that uncertain support amid corruption and high inflation.

Finally, universal social protection has to be fulfilled as basic rights for people to access welfare. Universal does not only mean applicable for everyone without exceptions, but it also means the protection must provide high quality services and meet the needs of people from diverse backgrounds.

### **2.5.2 NGOs and INGOs: Filling the Gaps**

Amidst the limitation of social support, NGOs and INGOs play a crucial role in filling the gaps. A participant from Myanmar emphasised this, stating:

***“Very limited support for people with disabilities, and mostly support came from INGOs and NGOs.”***

Furthermore, the LGBTQ community often finds solace and assistance through NGOs and INGOs. In Timor Leste, for instance, LGBTQ individuals face rejection at public hospitals when seeking healthcare services. This gap in healthcare access is bridged, to some extent, by NGOs and INGOs.

## 2.6 Conclusion: Navigating Welfare Perspectives in ASEAN



Chapter 2 has provided a comprehensive exploration of the welfare perspectives across ASEAN countries through the lens of the region's youth. By employing a participatory approach, this chapter unearthed valuable insights and personal narratives that shed light on the complexities of welfare in a region characterised by cultural diversity and distinct socio-political contexts. Through the discussions on education, healthcare, labor rights, social protection, and the environment, several key themes have emerged

First and foremost, the youth of ASEAN countries face both common challenges and unique experiences within their respective nations. Across the board, there is a palpable undercurrent of discrimination based on gender, sexuality, and social class that permeates various aspects of life, from education to employment. The unequal access to quality education perpetuates disparities and hinders opportunities for youth.

In terms of healthcare, while public services are available, their quality varies widely depending on the economic status, leaving some youth to grapple with inadequate medical care. Discrimination within the healthcare system, particularly concerning the LGBTQ+ community, presents significant barriers to accessible, universal, and inclusive healthcare.

Employment, too, raises concerns, with issues such as labor exploitation, lack of proper contracts, and gender-based discrimination prevalent in the workplace. A critical finding is the pronounced influence of government policies around decent work and protection of workers.

Social protection networks, though varied across countries, play a pivotal role in the welfare of youth in ASEAN. The replacement of universal social protection with occasional and conditional social support programs has caused problems to enjoy basic rights.

Lastly, environmental concerns loom large in ASEAN, with climate crisis, natural disasters, and environmental degradation posing a direct threat to youth well-being. The region grapples with issues of exploitation of natural resources, overproduction and overconsumption, corruption, and weak rule of law, which are the intertwined issues that challenge youth in accessing their rights and welfare.

Despite the often-daunting landscape of welfare perspectives in ASEAN, the resilience and agency of the region's youth shine through. They are not mere victims of these challenges but are actively engaged in efforts to address them. The stories shared in this chapter underscore their determination to advocate for change, even in the face of adversity and the threat of imprisonment.

In light of these findings, it is evident that holistic approaches are needed to improve the welfare of youth in ASEAN. This involves reforms in education to bridge inequalities, enhanced healthcare services that are inclusive and non-discriminatory, protected workers and safe workplace, strengthened environmental regulations, and the promotion of universal social protection systems that genuinely cater to the diverse needs of the population.

Moreover, the role of governments in crafting and implementing policies that prioritise the welfare of youth is paramount. These policies must

be underpinned by principles of inclusivity, equality, and sustainability. International collaboration and regional cooperation within ASEAN are vital for addressing shared challenges such as climate crisis and labor exploitation.

In conclusion, this chapter underscores the multifaceted nature of welfare perspectives in ASEAN countries, revealing both systemic challenges and the indomitable spirit of the region's youth. By acknowledging these issues and leveraging the agency of the youth, ASEAN has the potential to pave the way for a brighter and more equitable future, where the welfare of its young population is safeguarded and thriving.

Chapter 3:  
**Youth Action  
Roadmap - Mapping**



# Recommendations

In this chapter, we delve into the invaluable recommendations put forth by ASEAN youth as part of the “Youth Action Roadmap: Mapping Recommendations” activity. These insightful suggestions emanate from the hearts and minds of young people representing various ASEAN countries and regions. These recommendations are carefully crafted responses to the myriad welfare and human rights challenges prevalent in their respective nations. The overarching objective is to forge a path towards a more equitable, rights-driven, and sustainable ASEAN region, with the youth at the forefront of change.

## 3.1 Environmental Stewardship: A Regional Imperative

One resounding challenge echoing throughout the region is environmental degradation, especially concerning mining activities. The youth from diverse ASEAN countries concur that this issue demands immediate attention at both regional and national levels. As one participant astutely observed,

*“Enforcing laws for mining and government bodies is essential, but different countries have different capacities for it.”*

Furthermore, environmental education and awareness emerge as pivotal tools for addressing environmental degradation. The youth advocate for comprehensive environmental education to sensitise communities to the urgency of preserving the planet. In addition, the

establishment of monitoring and governance mechanisms by civil society organisations is also needed. Finally, participants highlight the importance of reparation for the climate crisis highlighting that global north countries should take responsibility for the consequences of their investments activities that contribute to environmental damage in global south countries.

This concerted effort to address environmental issues reflects the deep concern among ASEAN youth for the long-term sustainability of their countries. By advocating for effective enforcement of laws, promoting environmental education, and pushing for international accountability, they underscore their commitment to mitigating environmental degradation.

## **3.2 Empowering Youth Through Cybersecurity Education and Labor Protection**

Nowadays, cybersecurity emerges as a prominent concern, with recommendations focused on the incorporation of media information literacy into educational curricula. By equipping youth with the skills to navigate the digital realm safely and responsibly, Government should protect their privacy and counteract hate speech and misinformation. In addition, youth urge executive government and legislation to create an enabling environment of safe internet and online activity by distinguishing between civil and penal law to combat online hate speech effectively.

On the employment front, there is a pressing need to address employment abuses and exploitation, including for the precarious youth workers in the gig economy. Youth participants stress the importance of providing a law that protects freelancers from overworkings required by their clients and guarantee their social safety net. In the realm of employment, participants advocate their rights through meaningful informed consent and contractual agreements. Strong reporting and

complaint mechanisms are crucial to ensuring the protection and well-being of young workers. Furthermore, the issue of work must be seen as more than just a job opportunity or a place where young people get paid by companies. This must be a platform that can accommodate the potential of the younger generation to make an impact on their community.

The cybersecurity education and labor protection recommendations underscore the need for an adaptable and responsive education system that equips youth with the skills necessary to thrive in the digital era. The focus on cybersecurity reflects the growing importance of digital safety and privacy in an increasingly protection for youth's lives and future.

### **3.3 Amplifying Youth Voices in Decision-Making**

#### ***3.3.1 Establishing a Youth-Led Organisation***

The suggestion to establish youth-led organisations resonates with the fundamental principle that young people should have the agency to influence and participate in shaping their nations' futures. These organisations would be the embodiment of youth empowerment, providing a dedicated space for young leaders to advocate for policies and reforms that directly affect their lives.

These entities can play multifaceted roles, including but not limited to advocacy for youth-centric policies, creating platforms for open political discourse, and contributing to the formulation of national budgets. By fostering youth-led organisations that operate independently, separate from the influence of NGOs or civil society organisations (CSOs), ASEAN nations would signal their commitment to promoting the genuine agency of their youth populations.



### ***3.3.2 Special Protection and Electoral Representation for Youth***

The roadmap recognises that youth representation in decision-making is not just about inclusion; it is about ensuring that young voices are both impactful and protected. To this end, the roadmap proposes the establishment of regional laws that offer special protection for youth representatives. These legal safeguards would help insulate young parliamentarians from undue influence, ensuring that their participation is meaningful and devoid of external coercion.

Moreover, the roadmap introduces an innovative approach by suggesting that only individuals under the age of 30 should be eligible to vote and to be voted in elections for youth representatives. This deliberate restriction in voting rights acknowledges the unique perspectives and aspirations of the youth demographic. It ensures that those who are most affected by policies have a say in crafting them, leading to a more focused representation of youth concerns in regional decision-making processes.

### ***3.4 Conclusion: Paving the Path to a Youth-Driven ASEAN***

As we conclude this chapter, it becomes evident that the youth of ASEAN are not mere spectators but active architects of change. Their recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by their countries and regions. It is crucial that these recommendations are heeded and acted upon, for they represent the collective wisdom of ASEAN's youth—a generation committed to fostering human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability. Through their actionable steps, they aim to propel ASEAN towards a future where the welfare and rights of all citizens, irrespective of age, are not just protected but cherished and celebrated.

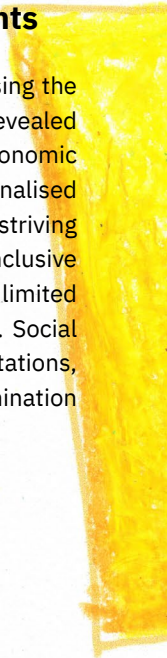
The recommendations provided by the youth are not only actionable but also reflective of their deep understanding of the challenges faced by their respective countries. By advocating for collaborative efforts, policy changes, and educational reforms, they demonstrate their commitment to driving positive change in ASEAN. The youth, with their innovative ideas and determination, stand ready to play a transformative role in shaping the future of their region. It is incumbent upon governments, civil society, and the international community to recognise and support these recommendations as a pivotal step toward a more equitable and inclusive ASEAN.

In this comprehensive exploration of welfare and human rights within the ASEAN region, we have delved into the diverse and complex landscape of challenges faced by its youth across three critical life stages: education, healthcare, and social protection. The voices of ASEAN's young population have resounded with clarity, offering profound insights into the multifaceted issues that shape their well-being and rights.

# Conclusion

## Chapter 1: Assessing Welfare and Human Rights

The first chapter laid the foundation for our research by assessing the welfare and human rights situation in ASEAN. The findings revealed a troubling paradox: while ASEAN boasts remarkable economic growth and progress, these benefits often fail to reach marginalised communities and vulnerable groups. Education systems, while striving for accessibility, frequently fall short in providing quality and inclusive learning experiences. Healthcare, too, presents disparities, with limited access and concerns for mental health care across the region. Social protection, primarily channeled through governmental orientations, remains insufficient, leaving gaps in addressing gender discrimination and environmental issues.





## **Chapter 2: Welfare Perspectives from ASEAN Youth**

Chapter 2 took a closer look at the qualitative dimensions of these challenges by presenting personal narratives and experiences from youth across ASEAN countries. Their stories illuminated the pervasive gender discrimination in employment, and the dire need for accessible healthcare services, particularly for the LGBTQ+ community. Environmental issues loom large. Educational disparities and the absence of comprehensive sex education continue to hinder social progress.

## **Chapter 3: Youth Action Roadmap: Mapping Recommendations**

In the third chapter, we transitioned from analysis to action by engaging directly with ASEAN's youth. Through a collaborative exercise, participants crafted actionable recommendations that can catalyse positive change in the region. These recommendations spanned diverse areas, including environmental governance, cyber security education, labor rights, and the amplification of youth voices in decision-making. By fostering youth-led organisations and instituting regional laws to protect youth representatives, these recommendations aim to empower young people to shape their destinies actively.



# A Call to Action for a More Just and Inclusive ASEAN

Collectively, these chapters present a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities that define welfare and human rights within the ASEAN region. It is evident that ASEAN's youth harbor immense potential and a burning desire for change. To harness this potential and fulfill the promises of inclusive welfare and human rights, the following steps must be taken:





**1. Policy Reform and Implementation:** ASEAN governments should work collaboratively to enact and implement policies that prioritise accessible, quality education; comprehensive healthcare; and inclusive and universal social protection. Such policies should consider the specific needs of marginalised communities and vulnerable groups.

**2. Environmental Stewardship:** Recognising the imminent environmental threats faced by the region, ASEAN nations should prioritise sustainable development, enforce environmental laws, and engage in international cooperation for climate action.

**3. Education for All:** ASEAN must ensure that education systems are not only accessible but also provide quality learning experiences for all, irrespective of background. Comprehensive sex education should be integrated into curricula to promote sexual and reproductive health.

**4. Healthcare and Mental Health:** Governments should provide affordable and high quality healthcare services, with a particular focus on addressing the unique needs of the marginalised communities such as indigenous people, People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLHIV), people who use drugs, LGBTQ+ community, precarious workers. Mental health support services must be made widely accessible.

**5. Youth Empowerment and Representation:** The establishment of youth-led organisations and special protections for youth representatives in decision-making bodies should be actively pursued. These measures will enable youth to influence policies that directly affect their lives.

As we conclude this research journey, it is essential to acknowledge that the path to inclusive and universal welfare and human rights is neither straightforward nor devoid of obstacles. Yet, the voices and recommendations of ASEAN's youth offer a beacon of hope and an undeniable call to action. The responsibility now lies with governments,

civil society, and international partners to embark on a collaborative journey, working tirelessly to transform these recommendations into tangible realities for the betterment of ASEAN's youth and, by extension, the region as a whole. In embracing this challenge, ASEAN can usher in a brighter, more equitable future where every youth voice is heard and every youth right is protected.

## **About AYF**

The ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) is a movement that represents and fights for the young people in ASEAN to voice out their concerns and strategies for ways to achieve a better ASEAN. AYF has been a platform of the youth in the ASEAN to raise their voice and claim for their rights for a sustainable, inclusive, people-centered, and youth-driven regional community. The network aims to institutionalise and establish its national chapters to focus the engagement on important and timely local issues affecting the youth, and consolidate policy proposals and agenda to put forward to the relevant ASEAN offices.





[www.aseanyouthforum.org](http://www.aseanyouthforum.org)