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*ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary*

## **“Same Same but Different” ... and Better for It: A More Cohesive ASEAN Built on Youth Leadership**

*By Arizza Ann Nocum*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Cohesion across ASEAN is not removed from cohesion within specific countries, and youth are key actors in developing this. Future youth leadership programmes like ICCS' Young Leaders Programme (YLP) should continue reaching marginalized youth from conflict areas, especially those yet to understand the value of social cohesion.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Thirty-four per cent of the ASEAN population comprises of young people aged 15-34, representing the largest cohort of ASEAN youth in history. The future rests on their shoulders. Yet they have limited opportunities to lead, represent their interests, and inform policies at local and regional levels. In the first ASEAN Youth Development Index, the *participation and engagement* category received the lowest score compared to others such as *education and health*.

Youth across ASEAN continue to encounter multiple barriers in maximizing their potential, including lack of access to quality education and employment. Youth are also disproportionately affected by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns, climate change, and terrorism. In the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, the Philippines (#16), Thailand (#22), and Indonesia (#24) rank within the top 25 countries most affected by terrorism. Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand also rank low for “state of peace” according to the same index.

Youth development and societal cohesion are critical and interconnected areas that call for urgent policy attention and wider community action. While ASEAN countries

have been individually pushing for multi-stakeholder solutions to tackle challenges encountered, there are few efforts to create transnational bridges through which youth can share best practices and create meaningful connections.

### **The ICCS-YLP Experience**

I had the privilege of participating in one such initiative during the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS)' Young Leaders Programme (YLP) in Singapore, in both 2019 and 2022. The programme brought together young leaders representing different faiths, cultures, expertise, and advocacy groups from ASEAN and beyond. Mentoring YLP participants were speakers, facilitators, and thought leaders from Singapore and other parts of the world.

At the inaugural ICCS 2019, our cohort openly engaged and debated within an "UnConference" format, a refreshing departure from the rigid structure of typical forums and conferences. We made valuable connections, explored possible partnerships, gained a deeper understanding of best practices from different fields, and challenged ourselves to overcome internal biases. Outside our conference walls, we visited places of worship, sampled multicultural cuisines, and witnessed Singapore's unique social dynamics. Being in Singapore added an important immersive element to the conference that could not be replicated by a lecture or a panel discussion.

Yet months after ICCS 2019, ASEAN would lock down and cause a huge impact on the lives of millions of young people as COVID-19 began to spread. With YLP fresh on my mind, I knew that peace and youth development advocacy was crucial in this hour, and I wanted to bring my experience at YLP to young people across the Philippines.

### **Inspired and Unhindered**

Since 2008, I have been working with KRIS, a nonprofit organization in the Philippines that promotes peace through education and youth leadership particularly in areas affected by conflict. With the support of the European Union and in collaboration with the Kofi Annan Foundation, we launched a chapter of Extremely Together (ET) in the Philippines in 2020 and joined a growing global alliance of youth working to prevent and counter violent extremism. The heart of the programme lies in the desire to give young leaders the agency and freedom to develop and carry out their own peacebuilding initiatives.

The experiential element of YLP also provided us with ideas for immersion that would build networks and stronger bridges, wherein we brought together Filipino youth from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, and dialects across physical and virtual activities. Apart from training workshops, we also organized joint community outreach events held simultaneously across different cities, with ET participants showing solidarity and providing aid to diverse individuals and families affected by COVID-19. The culminating activity of our ET Philippines launch – the Panaghiusa Grand Conference – was also a creative and dynamic interpretation of our idea of social cohesion, complete with cultural dance performances, songs, and video presentations.

During the pandemic, we trained over 1,000 young Filipinos in peacebuilding and project management; provided seed grants to 20 youth organizations to implement peace projects in their communities; and reached millions through webinars, brand collaborations, and social media campaigns. Though there were many challenges in implementing a hybrid programme, we achieved milestones: 52 per cent of our trained leaders are female, and 50 per cent from minority groups.

Beyond the Philippines, our sights are set on expansion to more cities throughout Southeast Asia. We hope to explore partnerships with other youth-focused organizations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar who recognize the need to look outward and help other ASEAN countries victimized by conflict and terrorism.

### **Together for a Cohesive ASEAN**

The impoverished often bear the brunt of challenges, encapsulated by the sentiments of a participant in one of our ET trainings in Zamboanga City:

“When you are poor, you are never at peace. When you have no education, you have less opportunities, and you are never at peace. And when you taste discrimination upon birth on Earth, you are never at peace... At present [my Sama-Bajau tribe is] the most marginalized ethnic group and one of the poorest tribes in the Philippines, and that is never peace.”

As Professor Lily Kong shared at ICCS 2022, social fault-lines are not merely religious-cultural divides, but also economic. To mitigate that effect, I believe youth development, particularly the YLP journey, should be made available to marginalized young people from areas affected by conflict, and who have yet to understand the value of social cohesion. We can avoid “preaching to the converted” and inculcate a diverse pool of future leaders across ASEAN.

At ICCS 2022, I was proud to share the stage with Ms Farahnaz “Farah” Ali Ghodsinia, Peace Ambassador to the Office of the Philippine Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process. Ms Farah belongs to the Mindanao ethnic minority group who has become a strong voice for her people, encouraging national policy to be sensitive to the needs of minority women and children living in conflict areas. By representing the most marginalized members of society, Ms Farah has contributed to a healthier, more socially cohesive Philippines.

We can build up a united region that is *extremely together*. ICCS 2022 inspired us youth leaders to look beyond our borders to the challenges, best practices and questions posed by our friends and neighbours. They may not have all the answers, but their breakthroughs become an impetus for us to aspire for more.

### **Learning Experiences**

My experience at ICCS has taught me much: if Singapore, a country that thrives on a “same same but different” culture, can navigate the murky waters of social cohesion and emerge with a level of success that can be sustained, then the Philippines can do so as well. Like Minister Edwin Tong, Singapore’s Minister for Culture, Community and

Youth and Second Minister for Law, shared at the closing address of ICCS 2022: the camaraderie and mutual support we found in one another fuels our hope that social cohesion is a project we are all working on together, and is a project built on justice, fraternity, and solidarity.

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