

Policy Brief

ASEAN Biodiversity Policy Brief No. 2023-02



The Future is Young: Harnessing the power of youth to achieve biodiversity and climate goals

The ASEAN youth are particularly at risk of suffering the consequences of environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss and climate change. Defined as individuals aged 15–35 years, the youth comprises 30 per cent of the ASEAN's total population. As the consequences of biodiversity loss and climate change intensify, so does the importance of youth involvement in the decision-making processes that will impact their future.

Moreover, young people in the region are not mere beneficiaries of environmental interventions as they play a critical role in leading action and mobilising communities to address environmental issues and promote sustainable lifestyles. From these initiatives, young people possess a wealth of experience and knowledge about the challenges of and good practices for achieving a sustainable future.

Photo by Emman Foronda



However, many youth initiatives and groups are often not integrated in government processes and policies; lack sufficient support (institutional, financial, technical, and others); and may be fragmented. National youth engagement mechanisms, policies, and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), on the other hand, also inadequately integrate youth as a full partner in the decision-making processes and implementation of biodiversity policies. As a result, the energy, innovation, and potential of youth are not effectively harnessed in achieving shared biodiversity goals.



Existing Youth Engagement Mechanisms in ASEAN

The ASEAN supports youth development through skills training and capacity building, such as youth exchange, youth leadership programmes, and youth volunteerism opportunities within the ASEAN region and with ASEAN partners (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). The post-2020 vision of ASEAN youth development focuses on fostering 21st century skills and digital skills and on institutionalising youth engagement mechanisms, with guidance from the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025. The work plan encompasses five priority areas: education; health and well-being; employment and opportunity; participation and engagement; and ASEAN awareness, values, and identity. There have been interfaces between ASEAN Leaders and ASEAN youth, which often occur as part of ASEAN Summits. Moreover, ASEAN declared the year 2022 as the Year of ASEAN Youth to elevate the profile and role of youth in line with Cambodia's 2022 chairmanship theme, ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together.

The policies on youth engagement in the ASEAN Member States (AMS) include the following:

Cambodia

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) regards youth as a key resource for national economic, social, cultural, environmental, and development, and for peace. The RGC developed the National Policy on Cambodia Youth Development (NPCYD) to provide opportunities for enthusiasm and professionalism in their capacity development and to promote the rights and responsibilities of the youth as the nation's active force. The NPCYD was developed in line with the provisions of the Cambodian constitution, Law on Education, Labor Law, Rectangular Strategy - Phase II, Cambodian Millennium Development Goals, National Strategic Development Plan, and other relevant international instruments for youth development.

Some of the platforms to involve the youth in environment and biodiversity planning include the National Youth Development Council—a coordination and a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanism assisting the government with youth development processes. The Ministerial Youth Development Councils serve as a mechanism for the M&E of youth development. The Municipal and Provincial Youth Development Councils assist municipal and provincial governments with youth development actions. Youth development mechanisms were also created at the Krong district, Khan, and commune or Sangkat levels

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Particularly on the issue of the environment, the youth is one of target groups that will significantly contribute to solving environmental issues and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to identifying the direction of future country development (UNDP, 2019). Thus, the government has joined hands with development partners (e.g., ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity [ACB], Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific [RECOFTC], Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union, Lao Women's Union, and other organisations) to collaborate with and provide opportunities to the youth to discuss, share, and learn experiences in natural resource and environmental management to help achieve the SDGs (MOFA, 2020). Strategies, policies, and action plans (e.g., NBSAP 2016–2025, Lao PDR's country strategic plan 2022–2026, Lao Youth and Adolescent Development Strategy 2021–2030, and others) include aspects of youth engagement in sustainable biodiversity conservation and utilisation, disaster management, and climate change mitigation and adaptation (UNFPA, 2021).

Philippines

The Philippine government has laid down platforms for the Filipino youth to play as a decision maker and implementer in the programmes, policies, and activities that relate to environmental and biodiversity conservation. Establishing the National Youth Commission (RA 8044) and implementing the National Environmental Awareness and Education Act (RA 9152) paved the way for a collaborative approach between the youth and the national government. The presence of the Kabataan Party list in the Philippine House of Representatives enabled youth representatives to author and co-author bills related to environment and biodiversity conservation, including the Philippine Youth Development Plan (PYDP) 2017–2022. The PYDP aimed to further strengthen youth engagement by encouraging the active participation of the youth in the project management cycle—from planning, implementation, to monitoring and evaluation of child and youth-friendly programmes, policies, and activities on environmental protection.

To highlight the role of the youth as a decision maker, the Philippine Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (PBSAP) 2015–2028 was developed with the participation of the National Youth Commission and at least one youth non-governmental organisation. The PBSAP 2015–2028 also mainstreams youth participation, including the number of youth participants among the indicators of its programmes. As an implementer, the PYDP 2017–2022 acknowledged the contributions of youth organizations to biodiversity conservation programmes. For example, Kabataan Para sa Kalikasan (KALAKASAN), a government-initiated organisation, was organised to provide platforms for the Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council) and community-based organisations to lead environmental protection and conservation in their respective communities. Moreover, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, through the Environmental Management Bureau, implemented information campaigns and recognised

the Philippine Youth Environment Network, the umbrella network of youth environmental organisations in the Philippines.

ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme

The ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme (AYBP) stands as an example of successful youth engagement for biodiversity policy at the national, regional, and international levels. The ACB spearheads the AYBP to ensure youth involvement in the formulation and implementation of biodiversity policies in the ASEAN region. The programme is being implemented under the Biodiversity Conservation and Management of Protected Areas in ASEAN Project of the ACB, with the support of the European Union (EU), and in collaboration with the Global Youth Biodiversity Network, the official youth constituency to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Under the AYBP, the Youth Biodiversity Leaders (YBL) programme has been providing in-depth capacity building, institutional support, and other opportunities for young leaders to get involved in biodiversity policy processes at all levels. Nationally, YBLs in three AMS have been conducting series of youth consultations on biodiversity issues relating to the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework under the CBD, as well as on national biodiversity issues such as land development projects. The youth has also been providing their inputs to the country's new Biodiversity Act and in revising the Philippine NBSAP.



Regionally, ASEAN youths were supported to join the 6th ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference (AHP6) in October 2019 in Lao PDR to gain exposure to regional meetings and to speak at the sessions at the Conference, including at the EU-ASEAN policy dialogue on protected areas and wildlife. They were also involved in the AHP7 held in Indonesia in November 2022. Internationally, two YBLs represented the ASEAN youth's voices at a UN CBD meeting for the development of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework in Rome in February 2020. There, the youth specifically raised the importance of transformative education, which was supported by many Parties to be included in the following iterations of the post-2020 framework.

Through the work of the AYBP, many AMS support the participation of the youth at regional and international meetings. Moreover, at least five AMS have specifically recognised, supported, or consulted their respective YBLs as youth experts on biodiversity. The AYBP is particularly able to achieve meaningful youth participation in the ASEAN region because it leverages on the niche of the ACB to connect and cultivate meaningful relationships between the youth and their respective national biodiversity focal points.

Youth Engagement for Conservation at the Site Level

In 2021, Phu Xieng Thong National Protected Area (PXT-NPA) and Nam Pui National Protected Area (NP-NPA) in Lao PDR hosted youth interns under the Youth Internships in Protected Areas in ASEAN programme of the AYBP. The internship provided a valuable opportunity for the youth to improve their technical knowledge and skills through training on geographic information system (GIS). The youth interns actively participated in discussing environmental issues of the PAs. Highlights of the internship include:

- Key wildlife species of PXT NPA were surveyed, and the output contributed to the PXT NPA Collaborative Management Plan 2022–2026, one of the key outputs of BCAMP in Lao PDR. This was endorsed by the Department of Forestry in December 2021.
- Local youth applied their technical knowledge on and skills in mapping, translation of satellite image, and land use planning mapping gained from the GIS training to contribute to the forest and land use management and zoning plan in 2021–2025. This plan responds to the issues on deforestation, biodiversity loss, and land use planning in NP NPA.
- The patrolling and law enforcement plans for NP-NPA and PXT-NPA were developed to address illegal hunting of wildlife in the two protected areas. Hunting weapons, tools, and other gear were confiscated. At least 30 snares were removed, and community rangers were hired in NP-NPA to protect wildlife and forestry in the villages.

- Regulation on the management of non-timbre forest products (NTFPs), especially bamboo and rattan, was formulated to ensure that NTFPs in PXT-NPA are used and managed effectively to enable the local people to generate sustainable income and improve their livelihood.
- A forest fire prevention plan was developed in PXT-NPA, which significantly contributed to preventing and controlling forest fires.

Policy Recommendations

It is important to increase the level of meaningful youth participation in policy designs, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Allowing youth to participate and to become active members in developing biodiversity policies can help to ensure that policies are better aligned with the needs of future generations. Collaborating with youth translates their advocacy into action, thereby providing a more inclusive and sustainable approach in protecting the environment.

The recommendations to strengthen youth participation in environment and biodiversity conservation strategy planning include the following:

1. Institutionalise youth participation in ASEAN processes. Develop dedicated mechanisms to ensure that youth voices are heard in formal ASEAN meetings at varying levels and to support the sustainability of youth initiatives and ASEAN Interfaces. Highlight youth consultations on policies, particularly when ASEAN updates its plans on youth and the environment.
2. Create specific policies and strategies to develop and engage the youth in conservation work to raise the role of youth in society. Ensure dedicated support for long-term youth-led initiatives in conservation. Include and support youth representatives in development councils.
3. Enhance cross-sector collaboration among the youth sector and environmental sectors.
4. Enhance efforts to mainstream biodiversity in the education sector. Create a clear roadmap for reforming the educational curriculum to include enhancing environmental knowledge and developing environmental materials for different contexts and age groups.
5. Enhance communication, education, and public awareness campaigns on environment among the youth while taking into consideration their socioeconomic status and unequal access to information.
6. Mainstream involvement in community-based monitoring and evaluation.

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For more information please contact the author
Ms. Mika Mei Jia Tan
AYBP Coordinator, ACB
mmjtan@aseanbiodiversity.com

or:

Mr. Nheden Amiel D. Sarne,
BCAMP Project Coordinator, ACB
nadsarne@aseanbiodiversity.org