

Strengthening Asia’s Future: Cross-Border Youth Initiatives for Lasting Resilience

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Abstract

Youth participation and empowerment are intrinsically linked, serving as vital components in addressing the multifaceted challenges facing Asia today. The continent presents a striking dichotomy: while some countries grapple with severe aging populations, others are characterized by vibrant, youthful demographics. This juxtaposition embodies both challenges and opportunities, highlighting the necessity of innovative solutions to tackle transnational issues that affect the region as a whole. In this context, this paper discusses youth-led initiatives aimed at addressing both national and transnational challenges, examining the obstacles encountered by these young leaders. It argues for the urgent need to empower youth, positioning them as crucial agents in bridging the significant gaps that exist in confronting these challenges. By exploring various case studies and successful youth-led initiatives across Asia, this paper highlights effective strategies for fostering empowerment and participation. It advocates for policies that support youth engagement in decision-making processes and emphasizes the essential role of education and mentorship in cultivating the next generation of leaders.

Keywords: *TAEF, New Southbound Policy, the SEASAT Youth Camp, NSP Youth Corridor.*

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1. Introduction

Geopolitical uncertainty continues to cast a widening shadow over Asia, a conflict hotspot with the involvement of several great powers competing for influence, such as the United States (U.S.), China, Russia, Australia, the European Union, and India (Tien & Nguyen, 2023). The ongoing human rights crisis in Myanmar, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and shifting alliances in Southeast Asia further complicate the region's fragile stability. These challenges extend beyond geopolitical concerns, impacting security, economic growth, and social cohesion. The stakes are high, and the repercussions of instability ripple across borders.

Adding to this complexity, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed vulnerabilities in governance, public health systems, and economies, especially in lower-income countries, exacerbating inequality (Jurzyk et al., 2020). Rapid technological advances- from AI to automation- are also reshaping industries and societies at an unprecedented pace. In this volatile landscape, one certainty remains: the future will bring unforeseen challenges that demand resilience, adaptability, and a collective response involving governments, civil society and individuals.

The interconnected nature of these issues underscores that no country can tackle them in isolation. Cross-border collaboration is essential to respond to these shared challenges effectively. However, intensifying great power competition in Asia has led countries tread cautiously, hindering genuine regional cooperation. Taiwan, in particular, faces a unique set of challenges, being excluded from major international platforms like the United Nations (UN) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), despite its strategic importance and capacity to contribute.

To breakdown silos and harness the synergy between countries in addressing the region's common challenges, young people could be the key. As Kofi Annan (2013), seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, put it, "any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind." Throughout Asia, youth have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to bring about meaningful changes, tackling complex challenges from bolstering democratic stability to combating climate change. For instance, youth-led movements in countries such as India and the Philippines have made significant strides in climate justice and environmental protection, achieving notable outcomes such as banning single-use plastics (United Nations Environment Programme,

2021), controlling plastic pollution and ocean pollution, and advocating for renewable energy policies (World Economic Forum, 2023). In Hong Kong, youth activism focused on democracy has garnered global attention (Ku, 2020). In Southeast Asia, young people in Thailand have been instrumental in pushing for social and political reform (Panarat & Sawaros, 2023). In Taiwan, youth have played a crucial role in championing human rights and democracy, particularly during the Sunflower Movement in 2014. This pivotal movement, saw students and young activists successfully oppose a controversial trade agreement with China, igniting broader discussions on transparency, sovereignty, and the nation's future (Rowen, 2015).

This paper argues that youth must be placed in the driver's seat to foster the regional resilience regional resilience, citing notable examples of youth-led efforts in addressing climate change, digital transformation challenges, employment issues, and human rights development mainly in the Asian context. It then discusses the challenges that youth commonly face, including a lack of structural support, civic engagement, and inclusivity. Additionally, it presents a case study of a Taiwan-based think tank- Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) and its initiatives to foster cross-border and regional youth collaboration in response to these gaps, and offer policy recommendations for empowering youth in Asia as a key player in regional development.

2. The Role of Youth in Asian Regional Development

According to the United Nations' World Youth Report, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 constitute 16% of the world's population, with more than 50% living in Asia-Pacific. A figure like this can be viewed either as a huge logistical liability or an enormous opportunity. However, either way, their influence on regional development is too immense to be ignored. In addition, cross-national surveys over the decades show that younger people are generally more internationally oriented, with more positive views on international organizations, and more likely to prioritize international cooperation compared to older adults (Pew Research, 2023).

In the face of mounting challenges, youth have emerged as a vital force in shaping the future of Asia. Issues such as climate change, digital transformation, employment and human rights are complex and interconnected, demanding solutions that extend beyond national borders. Youth with their adaptability, innovation, and technological expertise, are uniquely positioned to foster regional resilience through collaborative efforts.

Rather than viewing these challenges in isolation, it is crucial to underscore the transformative role that young people play in creating impactful solutions across borders. The following examples showcase some of the most influential youth-led movements that have driven meaningful changes on a regional scale.

2.1 *Climate Change*

Youth worldwide have been at the forefront of climate advocacy, driving movements that transcend national boundaries. As they participate more in transnational debates, they are also more engaged in policy networks (Ball 2012; Ball & Junemann 2012). For instance, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) which gathered the world's decision-makers for climate change negotiations saw the highest youth participation and the launch of a global initiative, the International Youth Climate Delegate Program, by the COP28 Presidency (Institute for Policy Research, 2023). In Asia, movements like the ASEAN Youth Climate Action Network (AYCAN) have mobilized and united young people across Southeast Asia in demanding stronger climate policies from their governments. Indian youth have also spearheaded several initiatives, including the Indian Youth Climate Network and Young India, We Can, We Will. Notable grassroots movements in India include the Save Mollem campaign and the 2021 Chipko movement, both of which exemplify the power of youth engagement in environmental protection. These youth-driven initiatives emphasize grassroots efforts to enhance local climate resilience, introducing innovative solutions such as the green technology adoption and sustainable practices. The need for collaboration is urgent, as climate change poses profound risks to communities across Asia, especially for coastal countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which face existential threats from rising sea levels. Through efforts like AYCAN, youth amplify their voices in regional climate diplomacy, creating platforms for collaboration and ideas exchange between all stakeholders, which is crucial to the development of innovations at the regional level (Arino et al., 2021).

2.2 *Digital Transformation and Misinformation*

Youth generally have greater access to digital technologies and skills than other age groups, with higher internet usage (Park, 2022). The pandemic

has exacerbated this situation to an unprecedented degree through social media, particularly among youth (Pérez-Escoda, 2021). While social media offers significant benefits, they are often misused to undermine democracies and sway public opinion. Disinformation and misinformation have become pervasive, creating an urgent need to counter these challenges. As rapid digital transformation exposes new vulnerabilities, youth have risen to address the surge of misinformation threatening political stability and social cohesion. With billions of internet users across the region, discerning fact from fiction is now an essential skill. Youth are not only early adopters of digital tools but also leaders in combating misinformation through media literacy programs and technological innovation. Initiatives like the Digital Grassroots Youth Network bring together young digital advocates across Asia to bridge the digital divide and promote responsible online engagement. By emphasizing digital literacy, these initiatives empower youth to counter misinformation and build more resilient digital communities. In countries like the Philippines and India, young advocates are spearheading fact-checking efforts and educating their peers on navigating online spaces safely. With over 900 million active internet users, India has witnessed a significant increase in individual fact-checkers and online portals dedicated to combatting misinformation. The Indian government and several major media organizations have also launched initiatives to fact-check misleading information. India is particularly vulnerable to disinformation, which can spread rapidly through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter (now called as X), leading many to fall prey to propaganda without verifying the information. A similar situation exists in Taiwan, which has become home to several youth-led digital organizations, such as Digital Diplomacy and IORG, that are actively working to address these challenges. These initiatives emerging from different Asian countries are playing an instrumental role in strengthening digital resilience across the region, ensuring that youth are both safeguarded against misinformation and empowered to lead in the digital age. However, it is also important to note that a significant number of young people in developing countries still lack digital access and digital literacy, and could fall through the cracks if such inequality is overlooked in the issue.

2.3 Youth-Led Employment Initiatives and Economic Participation

Employment remains a significant challenge across Asia, with youth facing high rates of unemployment and underemployment. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, with young people disproportionately affected by job losses and economic instability (International Labor Organization, 2020). However, youth are not waiting for solutions to come from governments alone. Instead of confining themselves to looking for a job in the labour market, young people are increasingly seeking careers with positive social and environmental impacts joining or establishing social enterprises. Youth-led social enterprises address critical issues while creating valuable job opportunities for young people (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2022). Grassroots entrepreneurship initiatives have gained momentum, with young leaders creating opportunities that transcend borders. Programs like Tatler Gen T's Leaders of Tomorrow showcase youth entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific region, where young innovators are establishing projects focused on social causes like literacy improvement and waste recycling, while simultaneously helping generate transnational job opportunities (Tatler Asia, n.d.).

At the policy level, regional frameworks like the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021-2025 and Quad Infrastructure Fellowships aim to tackle youth employment challenges by promoting skills development, leadership, entrepreneurship, and labour market access. Youth leaders from ASEAN-affiliated organizations contributed to the Work Plan by sharing insights from their communities, advocating for human rights components, and suggesting capacity-building activities to enhance meaningful youth participation in ASEAN Community-building (ASEAN, 2022). Meanwhile, the Quad Infrastructure Fellowship, which aims to enhance capacity and professional networks in the region for designing, managing, and attracting investment in infrastructure projects, has grown to over 2,200 experts and has offered more than 1,300 fellowships in the past year (The White House, 2024). These frameworks provide the structural support necessary to foster collaboration across borders, ensuring that youth acquire the skills needed for a rapidly changing job market. Nonetheless, the role of youth in driving these initiatives cannot be overstated. By establishing regional collaborations and creating new industries, Asian youth are not only addressing their own employment challenges but also contributing to the region's economic resilience.

2.4 Human Rights Advocacy and Cross-Border Movements

Youth-led movements in Asia have brought the fight for human rights into sharp focus, exemplifying cross-border collaboration at its most impactful. Amidst repression, young activists have united across national lines to advocate for democratic freedom and social justice. A powerful example is the Milk Tea Alliance, a transnational youth movement born out of solidarity and resistance to pro-democracy crackdowns in Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Myanmar. The Milk Tea Alliance, draws its name from a cultural and culinary bond—the popularity of milk tea in countries such as Taiwan (bubble tea), India (spiced milk tea), Hong Kong (milk tea), and Thailand (Thai iced tea), contrasting with China's traditional preference for tea without milk (The Economist, 2021).

Amid the 2020 Galwan clashes between India and China and China's escalating military intimidation and economic coercion, Taiwanese civil society and Indian internet users discovered common ground by embracing a shared "milk tea heritage" as a symbol of solidarity against Chinese aggression. Bubble tea in Taiwan and spiced tea in India became unifying symbols, embodying both cultural similarities and mutual resilience (Hsu, 2020). This movement gained significant attention, with a viral meme of former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi toasting with tea further amplifying the camaraderie between Taiwan and India and fostering deeper familiarity and connection between the two societies.

Using social media as a powerful tool, these young activists exchanged strategies, amplified awareness, and fostered mutual support in their shared pursuit of freedom and human rights. As online communities are borderless by nature, the Milk Tea Alliance example also suggested that when regimes employ online repression due to local protests, there will be a backlash that will facilitate the emergence of transnational social movements (Kreutz & Makrogiann, 2024). Despite being excluded from formal international platforms like the UN or ASEAN, the Milk Tea Alliance was able to successfully divert global attention on Taiwan, illustrating the power of cross-border solidarity in countering authoritarianism.

Youth-led social movements and political activism are gradually emerging in Asian countries, fuelled by the global rise of democracy and human rights. There is even a trend of mutual learning and connection among these movements. For instance, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement has

had a profound impact on Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution, as well as on student-led movements and organizations in countries like Thailand and Indonesia (Yang & Hsiao, 2024). This interaction has not only deepened their collective understanding and imagination of democratic politics and governance but also facilitated learning among student activists and fostered transnational democratic solidarity. These examples highlight how Asian youth are using their ideas and actions to enlighten social changes and facilitate political reform among Asian countries.

These youth-led movements transcend mere resistance and they are actively shaping a more inclusive and equitable future for Asia. Through cross-border collaboration, young people can build networks to challenge existing regimes and advocate for regional reforms (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2016). In politically sensitive areas where governments may be fall short in safeguarding civil liberties, such collaboration becomes essential, creating a counterbalance that keeps human rights firmly on the regional agenda.

The challenges posed by climate change, digital transformation, employment, and human rights are not isolated. They are intricately interconnected and demand comprehensive, cross-border solutions. Asian youth, with their adaptability, innovation, and collaborative spirit, are pivotal in addressing these challenges and enhancing regional resilience. Time and again, they have demonstrated their capacity to lead, whether through environmental activism, combating misinformation, driving entrepreneurship, or advocating for human rights. As governments and international organizations grapple with these complex issues, it is essential to acknowledge the vital role of youth in advancing regional development. Cross-border youth collaboration is not only necessary and it represents the most dynamic and forward-thinking approach to building a resilient Asia.

3. Challenges

3.1 Lack of Representation and Access

Despite the initiatives taken, willingness to contribute and take charge and successes, significant barriers continue to limit youth participation and expression. In East and Southeast Asia, youth remain underrepresented in political processes and do not fully realize their potential as democratic citizens (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). For instance,

despite half the world's population being under 30, only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians globally- and just 1.84 percent in Asia- are from this age group (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Only 5 percent of the countries worldwide have national level quotas with youth representation, with the Philippines being the sole Asia-Pacific country among them (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Youth representation in parliaments across Asian countries remains relatively low. An article titled "Young India, Ageing Parliament" (Patel & Sekher, 2024) aptly describes India's limited youth presence in its legislative body. Following the 2024 elections for the 18th Lower House (Lok Sabha), the average age of a Member of Parliament (MP) in India stands at 55.6 years, with only 10.6 percent of MPs falling within the 25-40 age group. This reflects a stark generational gap, despite India having one of the world's youngest populations. Another piece labels India "a young country with old leaders," noting that while politics engages large numbers of youth, the system often overlooks their specific interests and priorities (Kumar, 2019). Taiwan also demonstrates low participation in its parliament, with only about 22 percent of legislators under the age of 40 (Chen, 2024). This lack of youth representation is particularly striking amid discussions on engaging the new generation of voters in Taiwan, especially in the context of evolving national identity. In contrast, the Philippines is making strides in youth representation, with 31.5 percent of parliamentarians under the age of 45 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, n.d.).

3.2 The Overlooked Generation: Young Voices in the Shadow

Contemporary problems demand innovative solutions from those directly impacted. However, in Asia, many young people are excluded from national and international dialogues, restricting their ability to influence critical decision-making processes that affect their future and from serving as productive members of the society (Do et al., 2024). There is a significant gap between the challenges they face and the solutions generated. Without the voices of young people, existing future systems and frameworks are unlikely to reflect their political priorities and perspectives, leading to a diminished focus on pressing issues such as education, unemployment, and climate change. Additionally, structural barriers- like visa restrictions, limited funding, and inadequate institutional support- further hinder young people's access high-level forums and collaborations (United Nations, 2021). It is essential to go beyond tokenism and create genuine space for youth at the

decision-making table, ensuring their voices are heard. However, the ongoing neglect of their opinions and participation continues to pose a significant challenge to both national welfare and regional development.

3.3 Lack of Social and Digital Cohesion and Collaboration

The imbalance of socioeconomic development, unique cultural contexts, and varying political sentiments across Asia also presents a complicated set of hurdles to bridging young people for collaboration. For instance, despite a shared concern for climate change, children and youth in developing countries are especially vulnerable to climate change due to their disproportionate exposure to extreme weather events and limited access to social safety nets, healthcare, and robust governmental support (Hanna & Oliva, 2016). While young people in the Philippines need to deal with serious vulnerability to online manipulation, millions of Indian youths in rural regions remain disconnected from online spaces as they lack internet access.

Whereas in employment, while Indian youth face additional hurdles to obtain education due to social structures like the caste system in India (Lalitha et al., 2023), young people in Japan and South Korea are facing immense academic pressure and intense competition for jobs in a shrinking economy (Kotoky, 2021). In terms of human rights, such as gender equality in LGBTIQ+ awareness, data on LGBTQIA+ policies, such as decriminalization of same-sex relations, marriage equality, hate crime protections, and gender marker changes, indicate that New Zealand, Australia, Thailand, Taiwan, and Nepal are the most progressive in the Asia-Pacific region. Conversely, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Maldives, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan are noted for their more restrictive LGBTQIA+ policies (Kenny, 2023).

Additionally, despite being a leader among Asian nations in civic participation, whose youth are leading significant social change, Taiwan is regularly excluded from meaningful participation in key international discussions and groupings (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This limits on a global scale. These factors ultimately limit opportunities for Taiwanese youth to connect and collaborate with their peers across borders. However, Taiwanese youth have much to contribute, and their active participation is crucial for fostering regional collaboration. More importantly, it would be counter-intuitive to strive for resilient region by isolating any country, as the challenges faced by youth across Asia are deeply interconnected.

In this context, the authors highlight the efforts of the Taipei-based think tank, Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, which is dedicated to fostering cross-border youth collaboration. Through its innovative cross-sectoral approach, the foundation has successfully expanded the boundaries of traditional diplomacy and promoted inclusive youth participation in tackling some of Asia's most pressing challenges.

As part of Taiwan's efforts to expand its presence across the Indo-Pacific region, its former President Tsai Ing-wen introduced the New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016. The NSP aimed to strengthen Taiwan's ties with ten ASEAN countries, six countries in South Asia, and Australia and New Zealand. Recognized as a signature foreign policy, Tsai described the NSP as "Taiwan's regional strategy for Asia" and "at the centre of its own Indo-Pacific strategy (Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), 2023)." While various countries and regional groupings have proposed their Indo-Pacific policies, visions and strategies, the NSP distinguishes itself through its unique cross-sectoral configuration. This approach emphasizes coordination among the public sector (government), the private sector (businesses and enterprises), and the people sector (NGOs and civil society) in the policy implementation, collectively referred to as the P-P-P Practice or P-P-P-P (Hsiao and Yang, 2022).

In particular, the NSP underscores the vital role of NGOs and civil society in supporting its outreach efforts. Such civil society stakeholders have been contributing to the international community since a time when Taiwan's international presence was much more limited than it is today. For instance, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation, which started by a group of homemakers in rural Taiwan in 1966, rapidly expanded its involvement in major international disaster relief efforts in the early 1990s, and is now active across 68 countries across regions (Tzu Chi USA, n.d.). Over the years, NGO and civil society organizations in Taiwan have evolved from focusing primarily on developmental assistance to engaging in a diverse range of areas, including democracy and human rights, gender equality, environmental sustainability, humanitarian assistance, public health, and the art and athletics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2020). Today, there are approximately 4,000 NGOs in Taiwan, with one in four linked to international organizations or having global presence (International Cooperation and Development Fund, 2002). These NGOs work closely with the local counterparts, even in countries where Taiwan

does not have diplomatic ties (Hsiao and Yang, 2022).

This highlights the crucial role of civil society actors in forging connections beyond political realms. A fundamental issue regarding youth empowerment is their limited participation in traditional mechanisms, which hinders their contributions. The successful approaches and experiences of Taiwanese NGOs and civil society actors in overcoming these obstacles and collaborating for the common goods serve a model for youth, empowering them to realize their potential and address pressing challenges in the region. Additionally, NGOs and civil society actors advocate for a diverse array of causes, many of which intersect with the concerns of young people.

3.4 Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation's Young Leaders Engagement Program

Taiwan presents a unique case study, as the nature of diplomacy here differs significantly. Due to the lack of direct contacts between the government and several countries, along with hesitance to engage directly with government entities, civil society and NGOs play a vital role. Recognizing the importance NGO as intermediaries between the government, private sector, and civil society in implementing the NSP, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) was established in 2018 as a civil think tank/NGO aimed at filling the void and strengthening areas of collaboration and cooperation between Taiwan and the NSP countries. The foundation focuses on five main pillars of work—or its Five Flagship Programs—including young leaders' engagement, think tank collaboration, regional disaster resilience, civil society connectivity, and cultural exchanges. These areas have been carefully chosen for their potential to foster a strong social connection between Taiwan and the targeted countries, facilitating government's collaboration with NSP countries in sectors such as economy, education, healthcare, and agriculture, while also enhancing private sector business engagement. In essence, young people are identified as key actors in cultivating the social connectivity essential for effective implementation of Taiwan's foreign policy objectives.

Among its five flagship programs, the TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program has been in place since the foundation's inception, aiming to cultivate talents in social innovation and public governance from Taiwan, the NSP countries, and other like-minded nations. While numerous youth capacity-building initiatives run by governmental agencies and NGOs, the TAEF occupies a unique position at the intersection of NGOs, academia, and the government, creating an additional complementary space

for youth programs that address two key goals: First, TAEF has been able to effectively address the gaps left by governmental institutions, which frequently struggle with resource limitations, political constraints, and bureaucratic inefficiencies that impede their ability to meet the diverse needs of youth. TAEF possesses the flexibility to create tailored programs that empower young people with essential skills and capabilities, while also leveraging resources from various stakeholders within the cross-sectoral partnership.

One notable example is the 2018 event titled “Asian Dialogues: Transformative Leadership in Action”, jointly organized by the TAEF, the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation in the Philippines (often referred to as Asia’s Nobel Prize), and the American Institute in Taiwan (de facto US embassy in Taiwan). The event convened leaders from the public sector, academia, and NGOs to discuss three critical themes: democratic deficit, development deficit, and trust deficit. Among the distinguished participants were Audrey Tang, former Minister without Portfolio of Taiwan; Cielito Habito, former secretary (minister) of Socioeconomic Planning of the Philippines; Lee Khai Loon, Assemblyman of Penang, Malaysia; Rakshita Swamy, Honorary Member of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, India; and Ketty Chen, Vice-President of Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, alongside numerous young leaders dedicated to in open government and socio-economic development. The event showcased a unique blend of politicians and NGO leaders from various countries, facilitating a public exchange on these three pivotal themes from both systemic and grassroots perspectives. The discussants reached a consensus on the importance of youth civic participation for fostering effective democracy, holding the media accountable, reducing distrust, and ensuring that socio-economic development is inclusive, leaving no one behind. Moreover, by holding the event publicly, young people from diverse fields and countries had the opportunity to engage directly with these influential figures, promoting meaningful discussions. This open interaction is essential for inspiring and encouraging civic participation among young people.

Another key initiative was the “Future of Work (FOW) for Asian Youth” research project, a collaborative effort by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Japan’s Social and Economic Governance in Asia (SOPAS) and the TAEF. Launched in August 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project introduced a timely webinar series that brought together experts

from government, academia, think tanks, and civil society to discuss how emerging trends are transforming employment and quality of life for young people across region. The research began by profiling four countries- Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam and has since continued, tracking the evolving employment landscapes for youth in Asia from the early post-pandemic period to the present.

The study now includes new influences such as shifting geopolitics, demographic challenges, and technological advancements, with insights examined both at the country-specific and regional levels. Findings over the years highlight that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for addressing employment issues across diverse countries. However, both policymakers and scholars agree on the importance of policies focused on migration and regional cooperation to help balance workforce disparities between countries with demographic dividends and those facing demographic deficits. Additionally, regional solutions to address educational inequality, particularly in the digital economy era, will be essential for the future.

Secondly, TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program provides neutral and inclusive platforms for collaboration that go beyond national or political agendas. This is especially important in Asia, where differences in foreign policy and issue sensitivities around key issues often hinder cross-border cooperation. The TAEF's Southeast Asia-South Asia-Taiwan (SEASAT) Youth Camp exemplifies its approach to fostering collaboration. Held annually, the SEASAT Youth Camp brings together 40 to 60 young leaders aged between 18 to 27 from across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Taiwan, and like-minded countries, encouraging them to exchange ideas, build mutual understanding, and work together on shared issues. Over the six editions from 2019 to 2024, participants have shown consistent enthusiasm for key themes, especially gender. Discussions in this theme went into complex issues like gender-based violence, LGBTIQ marginalization, and the intersectionality of age, gender, and social norms. These sessions encouraged participants from various countries to engage in open conversations, gaining insights into the nuanced ways these issues manifest across different context. For example, during the "gender workshop" in the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp, participants shared that in the Philippines and Vietnam, traditional gender concepts remain deeply ingrained, with some viewing alternative perspectives as Western ideologies influence. In contrast, while Thailand is relatively accepting of gender diversity, societal attitudes

often reflected indifferent 'none of my business' stance rather than active support for LGBTIQ rights. Taiwan, as the only Asian country to have legalized same sex marriage at that time, contributed its experience to the discussion while gaining a deeper understanding of regional sentiments. This exchange enabled young people to reflect on how best to advocate for gender rights, considering the diverse political and cultural landscapes across Asia.

Another example is the 2024 "Human Rights in Asia: A Multigenerational Dialogue" co-organized by the TAEF and Taiwan's National Human Rights Commission. This dialogue sought to foster inclusive discussions across generations, borders, and cultures, particularly among Asian societies that often occupy diverse positions on the human rights spectrum. Senior and emerging human rights advocates from Taiwan, Myanmar, and Vietnam shared their experiences on issues such as youth participation, LGBTIQ+ rights, and the rights of migrants and refugees across Asia. The successful forum not only created a platform for meaningful exchanges among young people from different Asian countries but also established a strong foundation for future cross-border and intergenerational human rights cooperation. In a post-event survey, participants highlighted their appreciation for the diverse lineup of speakers and panellists from various countries and fields, as well as the chance to engage with advocates who brought practical, hands-on experience to human rights rather than mere token support. Above all, insights from the various initiatives within TAEF's Young Leaders Engagement Program highlight a common conclusion: to genuinely empower young people to tackle challenges that threaten regional resilience, their civic participation must be substantially strengthened.

To truly strengthen youth civic participation, ensuring information integrity becomes a crucial priority. With over 2.5 billion internet users in Asia-many of them young people-this generation is highly connected and digitally adept yet also vulnerable to misinformation. The widespread use of social media across Asia magnifies the reach of disinformation, posing risks to informed decision-making, political stability, and youth engagement in civic life.

In light of these challenges, the 2024 SEASAT Youth Camp hosted a session on "Understanding and Countering Information Manipulation and Influence Operations." Ketty Chen, Taiwan Representative of National Democratic Institute (NDI), highlighted how authoritarian states often wielded sharp power, such as censorship and manipulation- to exert

influence. She emphasized the crucial role that civil society can play in countering these operations. For example, fact-check organizations in Taiwan have become so robust that even the Ministry of National Defence sometimes relies on their insights. However, delegates expressed concerns about the true influence of youth countering large-scale issues like compromised education systems and echo chambers that amplify influence operations. They cited an example from the Philippines, where disinformation campaigns significantly impacted election outcomes by exploiting these vulnerabilities. In response, Penghsuan Lee, program manager from NDI, pointed out that in an interconnected world, local issues often have global implication. She emphasized that through cross-border collaboration, civil society organizations can more effectively connect people with the resources needed to address these challenges.

Beyond joining civil society organizations, one of the most impactful and direct forms of civic participation is voting. In 2024, Asia is undergoing a wave of elections, with countries such as Taiwan, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Bangladesh, and Pakistan all heading to the polls, bringing millions of young and even first-time voters into the electorate (Khaliq, 2024). Yet, Taiwan remains one of the only 12 countries globally that has not yet lowered its voting age to 18, limiting full youth participation in shaping the nation's future. At the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp, a session titled "Youth in Action – Democratic Participation," featured two young leaders who spearheaded efforts to lower the voting age in Malaysia and Taiwan. The first panellist, Tharma Pillai, founder of UNDI18, discussed how his organization successfully pushed for a bill to lower Malaysia's voting age to 18. UNDI 18 began a how young people can leverage technology to empower themselves in civic participation.

The second panellist, Chang Yu-meng, President of Taiwan Youth Association for Democracy (TYAD), highlighted TYAD's efforts in securing a referendum on lowering Taiwan's voting age. The referendum, however, ultimately failed due to a high voter turnout threshold. Both panellists pointed to similar obstacles in their advocacy journeys, including limited resources and the challenges posed by navigating partisan divides. The discussion and sharing of knowledge underscored the importance of cross-border experience sharing, as many countries face similar barriers. It also highlighted that Taiwan has made noticeable strides in human rights and civic participation, there is equally valuable learning to be gained from the

experiences of other Asian countries. The interconnected nature of these challenges makes cross-border youth collaboration not only beneficial but essential.

In addition to fostering civic participation through voting, it is equally crucial to nurture young people into effective leaders. The discussion of leadership is particularly relevant this year which is marked by significant leadership transitions in many Asian countries, from a new government in Malaysia and Taiwan, to the return of government in India and familiar faces returning to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia. Such leadership transition and continuity are expected to reshape the national and global political landscapes, creating new opportunities and connections between countries (World Economic Forum, 2024). Leadership plays a pivotal role in determining the future direction of policies and governance, making it essential to invest in developing the next generation of visionary leaders. Acknowledging the importance of youth leadership, TAEF consistently invites delegates from its Young Leaders Engagement Program to join the Yushan Forum. This regional dialogue initiated by Taiwan, gathers high-level officials and inspirational leaders from across the Asia-Pacific for forward-looking discussions on regional challenges and cooperation prospects under the NSP.

For instance, young leaders from Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States participated in the 2019 Yushan Forum, contributing to comprehensive discussions that enriched the diversity of perspectives on Taiwan's engagement with their countries. Their initiatives included establishing a healthcare model between Taiwan and Cambodia, creating two-way medical internships between Taiwan and Myanmar, and providing training for over 700,000 Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan. These collaborations illustrate many avenues for cross-border partnership (Baral, 2019). More importantly, they showcased those matured insights of young people into regional development, demonstrating their leadership capabilities to the international audience of the forum.

Above all, it is crucial to empower young people in a manner that fosters self-sufficiency and sustainability in their efforts. In line with this vision, the TAEF Young Leaders Engagement Program launched the SEASAT Alumni Network in 2024. This network connects alumni- now active in various fields and regions- to maximize opportunities for youth across Taiwan and Asia by

leveraging their unique strengths (Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, 2024). By fostering connections among alumni, the program aims to break down silos and encourage resource-sharing, enabling young leaders to amplify their impact and drive positive changes. This initiative lays the groundwork for the vision of the next phase of the NSP, known as NSP+: the creation of an NSP Youth Corridor, which will further empower youth to play a central role in strengthening regional resilience.

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1 NSP Youth Corridor: Taiwan Could Lead

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan exemplified its capacity to lead through humanitarian aid, providing masks and essential supplies worldwide. Taiwan's youth activism has also become a defining force, shaping the nation's future through movements like the 2014 Sunflower Movement and, more recently, through electoral engagement. The NSP has served as a vital policy framework, where innovative diplomacy has fostered meaningful connections across Asia. A key focus has been youth engagement, leading to initiatives such as the NSP Elite Study Program, the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation's (TAEF) SEASAT Youth Camp, and the Young Leaders' Engagement Program.

However, there remains a pressing need for a dedicated NSP Youth Corridor with targeted policy initiatives to foster cross-border collaboration. This Youth Corridor could align Taiwan's youth activism with similar movements in other Asian nations, creating a stronger, united front for regional progress.

4.2 Fellowships and Scholarships for Imparting Knowledge and Experience

It is essential to learn from each other's best practices and to invest in training the next generation of leaders. For instance, India's Legislative Assistants to Members of Parliament (LAMP) Fellowship offers young Indians a unique opportunity to gain firsthand experience in law-making and public policy. Through this program, young graduates work directly with parliamentarians, gaining valuable insights into parliamentary processes. Think tanks can also play a crucial role in this effort. For example, India's Raisina Dialogue includes the Young Raisina Fellows program, and TAEF's offers the Yushan Forum's Young Fellows program. A similar model could

be adopted across other Asian countries, potentially leading to cross-country fellowships that enable regional youth to learn from one another's democratic practices.

4.3 Shifting Mindsets for Strong Leadership and a Better Future

Tokenism is insufficient and true progress demands equal representation. Statistics show a lack of youth presence in mainstream politics, highlighting the need for youth-led initiatives and a shift in mindset. Integrating young people into politics and activism is essential, and this requires a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach. For the current leadership of international organizations and individual countries, viewing youth as a solution rather than a challenge could address half the problem. Youth activism, especially in areas like climate change and human rights, often surpasses government efforts that remain heavily focused on security issues. Shifting this mindset would not only empower young people but also strengthen nations as a whole.

5. Conclusion

“Catch them young” underscores the importance of youth participation in addressing critical issues. Youth are powerful drivers of change, emerging as the leaders of today and tomorrow. They have shown that small steps and grassroots activism can tackle even the most significant challenges. The national and transnational issues we face today demand that youth be at the forefront, and it is essential to create and expand spaces for young people to lead.

At this pivotal moment, Asian solidarity is crucial, with government actions focusing on empowering youth and amplifying their voices and initiatives. Across much of Asia, civil society and think tanks are working closely with governments, serving as a bridge to connect them with young people. This collaboration is vital for developing solutions to transnational issues and positioning youth at the centre of progress.

There are numerous foundations and civil society organizations across the Indo-Pacific region that have long been committed to youth-related issues, inclusive of various Youth engagement and empowerment initiatives. In 2022, the Tokyo-based Nippon Foundation (TNF) launched the Asian Philanthropy Congress (APHIC), leading more than twenty major

foundations and Philanthropy organizations in Asia to explore the role and capacity of philanthropy in promoting sustainable and inclusive growth for societies, as well as for a more resilient Asian region and regional states. The annually held congress aims to foster collaboration among regional partners in realizing a vision for a more equal and inclusive society. Since 2022, TAEF has been joining this network, where it shares Taiwan's lessons in youth empowerment efforts and aims at collaborating with TNF and like-minded Aphic organizations to advance collective efforts, promote youth exchanges, and empower them to become change makers for Asia's future through meaningful initiatives and programs.

Youth-led initiatives have already proven successful in tackling challenges from climate change to human rights. Learning from these examples and amplifying youth voices can help make Asia a region of growth. Success stories from countries like India, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam provide evidence of the impact of youth-driven efforts on national issues. While forging cross-border collaboration among countries with diverse approaches is challenging, there is a silver lining: by learning from each other's successes, challenges, and setbacks, Asian countries can find solutions to shared concerns and transnational challenges.

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