



Children and Youth must be at the Centre of the Policy-Making Process for COVID-19 Response in ASEAN

(Bangkok/Jakarta/Manila, 29 April 2020) – ASEAN Governments have yet to demonstrate a strong commitment towards protecting children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, experts say.

As the most vulnerable groups, they may be often missed as countries struggle to deal with an unprecedented pandemic the current generation has seen, concluded speakers of a webinar, 'Children and Youth during COVID-19: Their Rights and as Human Rights Defenders' held today.

The webinar further shed light on the experiences of children and youth in the face of the pandemic, as well as adult human rights defenders who work with them in adapting their activism work to current challenges.

The webinar was co-organised by the ASEAN Youth Forum, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia).

'The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the vulnerability of children and youth in various aspects and disproportionately impacts the learning process of children, adolescents and youth, their means of communication to develop social network, as well as access to basic services,' Roshni Basu, the Regional Advisor on Adolescent Development and Participation of the UNICEF, told the webinar.

Documentation and analyses by FORUM-ASIA show that a key challenge that the ASEAN region faces in the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms during the COVID-19 pandemic stems from the blanket approach ASEAN Member States have adopted – the intention to criminalise the spread of misinformation and fake-news in offline and online platforms.

As a result, children and youth are less likely to voice their concerns or seek reliable pandemic-related information.

'Adolescents and youth need a safe and inclusive space to express their views and engage with duty bearers, so that their opinions are considered in decision making processes,' Roshni Basu added. The COVID-19 crisis also impacts the economic vulnerabilities youth in the region face.

'The economic depression caused by COVID-19 is expected to cause a surge in youth unemployment, particularly among those who work in the informal sector and those facing additional challenges including legal status issues, those in geographically remote communities, children and youth with physical and mental or psychosocial disabilities, and those with limited access to digital facilities,' said Ruthra Mary Ramachandran, scholar and activist from the University of Malaya. 'It is vital for Governments to put in place policies and relief measures to support youth in building resilience and

preparing themselves with the new normal. Young people are both beneficiaries and partners in the journey towards building a better world post-pandemic.’

While young people’s risk of being subjected to gender-based violence perpetrated by family members as well as abuse by domestic and intimate partners rise in the face of strict quarantine measures, their access to health and violence intervention services are disrupted.

‘The situation is particularly concerning for youth and children of sexual minorities and vocal youth activists, as violence and repression appears to be on the rise,’ said Astried Permata, General Coordinator of Pamflet, a youth organisation in Indonesia.

Experts are deeply concerned with the impact of the COVID-19 on the stateless, refugees, irregular migrants, and internally displaced youth and children in ASEAN.

‘Youth that are stateless, refugees, or homeless become more vulnerable because they are unable to access state welfare. As dependants, they are also deeply impacted by their parents’ loss of jobs and income,’ said Mueda Nawanat, a youth activist from Thailand.

‘ASEAN Member States have an obligation to provide welfare for stateless people, migrants, refugees, and homeless so as to protect and support these vulnerable groups,’ Mueda Nawanat added.

The ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) is expected to convene a meeting at the end of April 2020. Experts are urging the body to call on ASEAN Member States to engage with youth and children to understand their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

‘Despite the absence of a commitment to protect vulnerable groups in the ASEAN Joint Declaration on COVID-19, ASEAN and its bodies are determined to continue encouraging its Member States to develop national level protocols for the protection of youth and children, as well as other vulnerable groups including women, people with disabilities, and indigenous people,’ said Yuyum Fhahni Paryani, Indonesia’s Representative on Children’s Rights to the ACWC.

Fatimah Zahrah, the coordinator of ASEAN Youth Forum added: ‘It is the time for regional solidarity and the time to act locally. As important as it is to advocate issues at the regional level, we are reminded to reach out to those at the grassroots and to create impact in our local communities. It is important to call for initiatives that directly address the challenges and impacts at the local level.’

Participants of the webinar called for the ACWC to establish a safe and open platform for children and youth to meaningfully participate in the policy-making process in determining inclusive measures that combat the pandemic without leaving any one behind.

COVID-19 has spurred an unprecedented global crisis. It is a crucial time for actors across local, regional and international level to cooperate in developing a response inclusive of young people, and building resilience for all.

Reiterating civil society's calls from the previous webinars in a series organised by FORUM-ASIA and its partners, it is imperative for ASEAN Governments to hear and prioritise the most vulnerable, and ensure civic participation in the decision-making processes of the pandemic response in order to be held accountable.

This webinar was the fourth in a six-part webinar series which aims to analyse the human rights dimensions of COVID-19 responses in ASEAN countries. The webinar provides a platform to discuss the implications of COVID-19 responses towards human rights and fundamental freedoms in Southeast Asia, and to strategise human rights based approaches in ASEAN Member States' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For an overview of the webinar series, please visit: <http://l.forum-asia.org/COVID19WebinarSeries>

About the organisers:

- **The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)** is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org
- **The Child Rights Coalition Asia (CRC Asia)** is a network of child rights organisations working together to be a strong voice for and with children in the region. <https://www.crcasia.org/>
- **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. <https://aseanyouthforum.org/>

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