

## OPENING REMARKS

**H.E. DATO LIM JOCK HOI  
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF  
THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
AT THE  
DIALOGUE ON SDGs WITH ASEM YOUTH**

**4<sup>TH</sup> ASEF YOUNG LEADERS SUMMIT (ASEFYLS4)**

***“Youth in Human Resource Development and  
the Digitalisation of Education”***

*13<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit (ASEM13)  
Sustainable Development in a Post-COVID-19 World*

*20 September 2021 | Videoconference*

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Thank you for your remarks.

*Excellencies,  
Representatives of the Asia-Europe Foundation,  
Youth Delegates,*

Good morning and good afternoon to our friends and partners across Asia, Europe and ASEAN. I am pleased to join you at this dialogue, as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEF Young Leaders Summit.

I wish to congratulate the Asia-Europe Foundation for organising this, as it is an important platform that connects young people with leaders and decision makers, as well as in strengthening the network and bonds of friendship amongst Asian and European youth.

This is also a key event in the run-up to the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit which will be held in November in Cambodia this year, with the theme of “*Strengthening Multilateralism for Shared Growth*”. The choice of the theme is timely as ASEM Partners have been calling for both of our regions to remain alert and pull our efforts together to reinvigorate multilateralism amidst the rise of protectionism, political populism, and the sweeping impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I commend ASEM's commitment to engaging the youth so that they can also contribute their views and ideas to address such challenges. For instance, ASEM Leaders will also have a session with stakeholders, including a representative from ASEF Young Leaders' Summit, at the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit. I encourage your representative to voice your views and ideas during the session.

*Distinguished Delegates,*

ASEAN has made notable degree of progress in achieving the SDGs as reported in the Sustainable Development Report 2020. Six ASEAN Member States were listed among the top 100 best performing countries in the SDG Index, with Thailand and Viet Nam ranked among the top 50.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our work towards achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and ASEAN development initiatives.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on inequalities and underlined the need for inclusive action. It has also laid bare the risks that have plagued us for many years, such as inadequate health coverage and services, gaps in social protection, structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and the climate crisis.

Although ASEAN has experienced some setbacks in our SDG and Community-building efforts, we are poised for a strong rebound as guided by *ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) and Its Implementation Plan*. The ACRF functions as our exit strategy from the COVID-19 pandemic, while also paving the way for ASEAN to recalibrate and retool our political, economic and socio-cultural efforts to build back better using a whole of ASEAN Community approach.

Digitalisation is a crucial part of the recovery process, as it accounts for 30 out of the 185 initiatives and programmes under the ACRF Implementation Plan. These efforts are also complemented by ongoing work under the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025.

No doubt, the emergence of the Delta variant has dampened our recovery efforts. However, I am confident of ASEAN's resilience and continued success. The reason for my optimism lies in the fortitude and resourcefulness of our youth. This dynamic group which constitutes 34 per cent of our population in 2020 is the engine that drives ASEAN's growth and prosperity.

*Distinguished Delegates,*

The COVID-19 pandemic has given us three important lessons on education and human resource management. First, virtual learning and digital tools had proven their effectiveness in overcoming physical distance when in-person interactions were all but impossible.

Second, the pandemic has forced the mass scale introduction of digital content at all levels of education, starting an irreversible trend toward the digitalisation of pedagogy, as well as learning and teaching materials.

Third, the successful transition to “work from home” made possible by the widespread use of digital technologies have redefined the workplace, and work itself. The ASEAN Labour Ministers had led this discussion through their *Statement on the Future of Work: Embracing Technology for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth*.

While it is premature to fully grasp the impact of these lessons, we are certain that the youth will be at the forefront in the changing face of education and will also feature prominently in the development of a new work paradigm. As the generation in our Community that is most comfortable, attuned and savvy with digital resources and technologies, the youth is poised to take a leading role in redefining and shaping the modalities in how we learn, work, communicate and manage our tangible and intangible resources.

*Distinguished Delegates,*

The coming ASEAN success story would not be written in terms of the abundance of low-skilled labour force and natural resources. The emerging storyline would be crafted by young and transformative entrepreneurs such as Anthony Tan of Grab, Nadiem Makarim of Gojek and Truong Manh Quan of Beeketing, as well as by the contributions from countless of young business persons, technocrats, artists, social workers, civil society leaders and educators who would be leading the charge to diversify ASEAN’s economic and socio-cultural landscape by tapping into the Fourth Industrial Revolution and transforming our business models through disruptive innovation.

We will leverage on our youth’s creative energies, inquisitive minds and out-of-the box thinking to propel the region into the digital age as we move to expand and upscale our economies.

These agents of change play an indispensable role in the pursuit of post-pandemic recovery, sustainable development, and ASEAN Community building efforts. In order to harness and realise their potential, we need to ensure that our youth is healthy, educated, skilled, and future ready.

In addition, the important participation of the youth in combating climate change cannot be overstated. According to the *2021 Southeast Asia Climate Outlook* released last week, 70 per cent of respondents consider climate change as a serious and immediate threat, “reflecting the region's vulnerability to the growing impacts of stronger storms, floods, droughts and rising sea levels.”

Among other measures, we have established the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative (ACCI) to strengthen regional coordination and cooperation addressing climate change. Work is also on-going to finalise a *Framework for Circular Economy for the ASEAN Economic Community* which would go a long way toward a resilient, sustainable and green ASEAN Community.

The youth could also make an impactful contribution to our climate change mitigation efforts by supporting existing regional efforts, as well as participating in their respective national and community initiatives. Given their vast power of consumption and ability to galvanise public action through social media platforms, the youth could be a strong advocate to changing mindsets and raising awareness on the climate crisis, as well as to promoting green consumerism and environment friendly lifestyles.

#### *Distinguished Delegates,*

As you are well aware, ASEAN is a strong advocate of openness and inclusiveness, which are part of our guiding principles. The *Asia-Europe Meeting* and in particular the *ASEM Youth Dialogue*, are manifestations of this tradition of engagement. I trust that the youth leaders of Asia and Europe present here today will build on the strong bond of friendship nurtured through long-standing diplomatic, economic and people-to-people ties.

I would like to single out one particular engagement that truly embodies this spirit of friendship for special mention. I am, of course, referring to the “Erasmus Plus” programme which through the International Credit Mobility (ICM) scheme had provided support for over “5,500 students and academic staff from ASEAN universities to pursue short-term studies and teaching in European universities”, and conversely supported nearly 3,000 European students and academic staff to undertake short-term studies and teaching stints in ASEAN.

The unique and commendable feature of the ICM scheme lies in its emphasis on two-way exchanges and interaction between ASEAN and European counterparts. It is important to remind ourselves that ASEAN has much to learn from Europe, just as ASEAN has a lot to offer and share with our European friends.

In the same spirit of broadening the lines of communication and empowering all segments of society to engage in the community, ASEAN is expanding opportunities for our youths to participate and contribute to policy-making and community development. Our long-standing support is not only manifested in today's Young Leaders Summit but also in various other modalities, such as the *ASEAN Leaders' Interface with Representatives of ASEAN Youth* at the sidelines of the *36<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit* in 2020 and the *ASEAN Youth Forum* in 2021.

I am also happy to share that the ASEAN Regional Forum has adopted the *Joint Statement on Promoting the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at the ASEAN Regional Forum* at the 28<sup>th</sup> ARF in August 2021 to "increase inclusive representation of youth, including youth-led organisations, in the prevention and resolution of conflict, as well as in peacebuilding and sustaining peace." These sentiments were similarly echoed in one of the key recommendations of the *ASEAN Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security* report which drew attention to "youth engaged in digital peace."

The inclusion and acceptance of women in politics and security has indeed broken the gender barrier. The next transformative change that we should work towards is to break the generational barrier by facilitating the youth to play a larger role in all matters, including peace and security. Indeed, the youth who are our future leaders should be recognised as partners in the discussion to build the future which they will soon inherit and lead.

On that note, I would like to conclude by adding my voice to the chorus of support for the youth to play a larger and more meaningful role in building a more equitable, digitally inclusive, just, resilient, sustainable and green society and global community. I thank you for your attention.

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