

**ASEF Policy Dialogue with Youth**  
**Higher Education Policies Working towards the SDGs in Asia and Europe**  
2 November 2023 | Jakarta, Indonesia

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**NARRATIVE REPORT**

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### Background and Rationale

ASEF, in partnership with the [ASEAN Youth Organisation \(AYO\)](#), organised the **ASEF Policy Dialogue with Youth** as a side event to AYO's flagship annual event, the [ASEAN Youth Conference](#) which were held back-to-back in Jakarta, Indonesia. The policy dialogue was held on 2 November 2023 at the ASEAN Secretariat and Verse Luxe Hotel Wahid Hasyim. It gathered 15 remarkable delegates from student and youth organisations in Asia and Europe to talk about the findings of the [9<sup>th</sup> ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC9\)](#) project's report titled "[Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs.](#)"

Check out the [participants' booklet](#) here to see the full list of young leaders who joined the event.

This event is part of a series of policy dialogues slated for this year under ARC9, through which ASEF is engaging a diverse group of stakeholders and build a better collective understanding of how higher education policy and practice may be aligned across various levels and geographies to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

Through the ASEF Policy Dialogue with Youth, we aimed to:

- Conduct an Asia-Europe policy dialogue based on the findings of the ARC9 Report, and draft recommendations for the upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> [ASEM Education Ministers Meeting](#), the official dialogue partner of ARC9; and
- Facilitate exchange of good practices and networking among youth and student organisations in Asia and Europe

After the workshops, our participants proceeded to join 100+ other delegates in the ASEAN Youth Conference held on 3-5 November 2023. This year, guided by the theme "Guardians of the Sustainable Future for a Resilient ASEAN," AYC gathered over 200 young leaders and changemakers to develop and implement international projects to promote the SDGs. Thereby, AYC contributes to implementing the agenda for peace, stability, solidarity, unity, prosperity, and sustainability.

This narrative report focuses on the content of the ASEF Policy Dialogue with Youth to support the recommendations that will be submitted to the upcoming 9<sup>th</sup> ASEM Education Ministers Meeting (ASEMME9).

### Opening Session: Education and Youth towards a Sustainable Future

The policy dialogue participants were warmly welcomed by representatives of partner organisations who delivered inspiring messages focused on the role of young people in achieving a sustainable future. These speakers were:

- **Mr Lukas GAJDOS**, Acting Head of Delegation/Chargé d'Affaires a.i., Delegation of the European Union to ASEAN. He talked about the EU's multiple platforms and initiatives for youth in Europe and ASEAN such as the EU-SHARE Programme and other efforts for regional harmonisation in higher education.
- **Ms Rodora BABARAN**, Director of Human Development, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department, ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC). Her message focused on various initiatives that reinforce how higher education enables ASEAN countries to move forward and achieve sustainable development.
- **Mr Michael Nugraha BUDIARTO**, Managing Director, ASEAN Youth Organisation (AYO). Representing our co-organising partner, reiterated AYO's commitment to promote cultural exchange, empower youth, and better understand what each region has to offer and how we can tackle global challenges together.
- **Ms Reka TOZSA**, Director of the Education Department, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). She thanked the ASEAN Secretariat for hosting the event and AYO for their partnership in building

synergies and supporting each other in building impactful peer-to-peer networks across Asia and Europe to address the SDGs.

### **Keynote Message: Dream Big, Make It Happen**

Dr Roger CHAO, Head of the Education, Youth, and Sports Division, Human Development Directorate, ASEAN Secretariat

Dr Chao delivered a keynote message that highlighted the importance of building inclusive partnerships, evidence-based policymaking, building supportive networks and pursuing sustainable initiatives as part of a global community. Other key points in his sharing included:

- We must build an understanding of factors and contexts that relate to the achievements of the SDGs. Pursuing evidence-based actions, initiatives, and programmes that reflect with clarity the way forward should be a priority.
- We need the support of like-minded peers in building inclusive partnerships that make the world better. It is our responsibility as part of a global community to ensure that we contribute to a sustainable future.
- Various initiatives in ASEAN, chief among them the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education, reinforce the role of higher education and how it contributes to community-building and the pursuit of the SDGs. Other efforts in the region focus on the harmonisation of the Southeast Asian higher education space, digital transformation in education, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), and micro-credentials.
- There must always be a strong focus on impact and results if we are to make things happen beyond dialogues and plans.

### **Setting the Stage: The ARC9 Report on Higher Education Mapping for the SDGs**

Ms Reka TOZSA, Director, Education Department, Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)

Ms Tozsa introduced the key findings of the ARC9 Report titled report titled [“Asia-Europe Higher Education Mapping: Working Towards the SDGs.”](#) These findings provided the basis of discussions during the Policy Dialogue event. The findings of the research shed light on several points for deliberation at the policy and institutional levels.

At the policy level the following key takeaways emerged from the research:

- Governments play a key role in SDG implementation
- Government’s top role: provide a common vision
- SDGs 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 are top priorities
- Most respondents have an existing government document for SDGs implementation
- HEIs are involved in SDG implementation at the national level
- Education and training and research are focus areas
- Incentives in the form of financial support are the most commonly employed policy tools

Taking on the perspective of universities, below are the highlights of the ARC9 report’s findings made possible by the International Association of Universities’ (IAU) 3<sup>rd</sup> Higher Education and Sustainable Development (HESD) Survey:

- SD is well integrated across all areas in ASEM HEIs
- SD cuts across all levels of implementation
- There are different units managing SD at ASEM HEIs
- Students and academics are most involved in SD
- Funding is the major challenge for SD implementation
- HEIs want more engaging initiatives, training and leadership support
- HEIs prioritise SDGs 3, 4, 5, 10, and 13

## Dialogue Workshops: Exploring the Youth's Voice in the SDGs

The presentations were followed by a full day of group workshops, session debriefs, and presentation of recommendations. The following sections give the highlights of these enlightening discussions.

### On Youth Engagement

Participants believe that youth and student groups have the task of raising awareness and advocating towards effective policymaking for the SDGs, bearing in mind young people's point of view. In reality, there are limitations to the level and depth of youth engagement in policymaking, with token representation being a prevailing problem. While student and youth bodies may be informed and consulted as part of the policymaking process, this level of involvement decreases further into the process with fewer youth stakeholders being given opportunities to participate in co-creation and implementation.

One of the good practices discussed on fostering engagement with ministries was exploring unique: value-added propositions that align with their priorities at the national and international levels. As for community engagement, it was noted that the presence of local issues that take precedence over concepts such as the SDGs limits people's participation in sustainable development initiatives. However, it was also pointed out that in most cases, people actively participate in sustainable efforts—it's just that they may not associate it with the SDGs as localisation is done in different ways in various contexts. It was also discussed that non-government organisations, despite their limited resources, have become strong partners for youth groups.

Youth play an important role in bridging different actors, such as government bodies, non-government groups, and communities, at various levels. Participants also reiterated the importance of moving towards concrete actions after engaging in dialogues. Youth organisations were also reminded to be mindful of ending up in competition when it comes to participating in policy spaces for the SDGs.

### On How Asia and Europe Approach the SDGs

There were varying observations on how Asia and Europe approach the pursuit of SDGs. While there were noted differences in terms of strategising and actual implementation, the group also recognised that differences exist and that both macro-regions are too complex and diverse to be compared.

National and regional contexts produce approaches to the SDGs that are unique in each Asian and European country. Participants shared some thoughts on how their respective countries contribute to the pursuit of the SDGs: Vietnam has a more top-down approach, Australia and India have community-based means of localising the Goals primarily through green actions, and the Thai and Indonesian governments have integrated the SDGs into their priorities.

### Discussion on Challenges and Opportunities

Funding was a key point of discussion among the participants. For some, this may not be the core problem that should be focused on—the reality that resources are scarce might be something that we must always work around. However, based on the experience of most youth organisations such as the Global Student Forum, underfunding is a real issue that affects the level of presence these groups have in the policy space. For large networks such as the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Youth, international youth events hosted by other organisations are the main platforms where they can work together in person, and funding is needed to make these opportunities happen.

Another funding-related challenge is having complicated funding arrangements that put a huge amount of liability and heavy responsibilities on youth and student organisations. This discourages these groups from accessing such sources. Availability of funding may also vary depending on the nature and priorities of the organisation. For example, in certain countries it might be difficult to secure government funding for a youth organisation whose views and priorities are not aligned with those of the government.

The groups mentioned several other issues worth looking into:

- Difficulties in securing ministry support at local and national levels as they usually have their own priorities of which youth engagement is often not a part
- Lack of reliable data and measurement tools that hamper evidence-based policymaking

- Rise of strong conservative opinions that challenge values supportive of the SDGs
- Finding common ground in intercultural spaces for dialogue
- Lack of opportunities to be recognised as official stakeholders in policymaking which greatly affect engagement

Moving on to opportunities, the participants shared ideas on possible areas for cooperation and ways to support SDG-related work in the future.

Productive use of social media was discussed as something policymakers and universities can explore to support the SDGs. This can be helpful in implementing awareness-building activities to help people have better access to information and facilitate their participation in sustainable development initiatives. Young people also bear part of the responsibility in spreading awareness.

It was also noted that in terms of policymaking, ministries tend to listen to universities' recommendations. Working together with these universities and having them help carry the priorities and proposals of young people is another opportunity to be explored.

Better implementation of overarching education policies, more education and training, and stronger systems for youth involvement should also be pursued.

## Recommendations

These recommendations were written, presented, and improved on by our young participants. These policy recommendations are made for ministers and policymakers to consider, and focus on addressing various opportunities and challenges that the groups discussed. Some of them aim to improve funding systems for better buy-in from young people, strengthen youth involvement at all levels of the policymaking process, support stronger multi-level collaboration between Asia and Europe and within these macro-regions, streamline processes, and pursue a wider range of incentives and capacity-building initiatives.

*We, the youth leaders from various European and Asian countries have come together for the ASEF Policy Dialogue with Youth 'Higher Education Policies Working Towards the SDGs in Asia and Europe' on 2 November 2023 and have drafted the following policy recommendations:*

1. *We recommend that the Ministers of Education allocate an earmarked budget for youth and student initiatives regarding sustainable development in higher education, insofar as such budgets are not yet implemented.*

*Explanation:* For sustainable development to take root in higher education institutions it is important to allocate enough money to this objective. To get buy-in from the youth and encourage their contributions to sustainable development it is essential to provide budget specifically for youth initiatives. Various European and Asian countries already have such budgets in place. We encourage other countries to follow their example.

2. *We recommend the Ministers of Education to meaningfully include youth and student voices in making and implementing higher education policies.*

*Explanation:* Whenever a piece of legislation related to higher education is introduced, we recommend that youth and student representatives should be consulted throughout the whole process, from the start of the drafting of the legislation to the implementation and monitoring. This youth and student representation should be more than mere token representation; young people and students should not only have a seat at the table, but also have a meaningful say in the policy discussion and implementation.

3. *We recommend that the Ministers of Education enhance collaboration between European and Asian higher education institutions, by expanding existing exchange programs to enhance sustainable development awareness and capacity among students and staff.*

*Explanation:* Exchange programs are a good way to facilitate closer cooperation between peoples in Europe and Asia and build capacity and awareness regarding sustainable development among

students and staff. Such programs can be expanded. For these programs to be effective in contributing to sustainable development, the curricula and research conducted must take a holistic approach to sustainable development. To encourage greater student/staff mobility, the process of credit transfers among European and Asian institutions should be eased. We also recommend that the more affluent countries consider providing financial assistance to students and staff from less affluent countries where necessary, to ensure such exchange programs are socioeconomically inclusive.

4. *We recommend the government to proactively collaborate with higher education stakeholders (students, higher education institutions, youth organisations, non-governmental organisations, etc.) in ways including but not limited to:*
  - a. *Strengthening the link between local, national, and international policymakers through active dialogue and participation in raising awareness towards Sustainable Development (SD); and*
  - b. *Providing capacity building programmes on education for SD at the and in the context of local level developed and delivered by local practitioners.*

*Explanation:* Nowadays, each country is focused on their individual specific goals and priorities. Ideally, this context is localised in communities so that all stakeholders can move towards the same direction. The term "stakeholders" is not limited to students and HEI staff, but also includes relevant industries, global partners, and local communities that foster the harmonisation of higher education development. The capacity building can be in terms of workshops, training classes, or designated modules in university curricula, global networking spaces and forums that can help in fostering education for SD in the local context.

5. *We recommend the government to foster and facilitate interregional education between Europe and Asia through ways including but not limited to:*
  - a. *Agreeing upon a system between Europe and Asia higher education institutions to achieve a balance in the proportion of degrees recognition;*
  - b. *Aligning, annually, the existing national accreditation systems with advices derived from a forum of subject matter experts (SME) representing each of the ASEM countries; and*
  - c. *Empowering and supporting a virtual discussion platform for active engagement in the promotion and creation of Asia-Europe SD joint research projects.*

*Explanation:* Currently, there is an inequality in degree and learning recognition depending on where credits have been obtained: commonly, degrees obtained in Europe are more likely to be recognised in Asia than vice versa. If we want to encourage mobility (SDG4) and reduce inequalities (SDG10), it is important for ministries to look into the possibility of having a common recognition system or at least conduct an audit to investigate underlying reasons for the aforementioned imbalance.

6. *We recommend the government to have students be actively, with no external constraints, involved in all levels of policymaking arena through ways including but not limited to:*
  - a. *Involving student representatives in meetings on the university level to discuss the needs of students;*
  - b. *Initiating the student parliament and adopting the input from students given in these meetings; and*
  - c. *Recruiting students for expert panels that bring about decisions that directly affect them and lowering the barriers for students' participation in such panels.*

*Explanation:* Even if most HEIs have student representation in their bodies, it's important to underline that it's often dissatisfactory. Furthermore, student representation on levels other than the university level often does not involve as much student representation in the decision making. Finally, student representation sometimes takes the form of "token representation". Therefore, it must be guaranteed that input from the student side is fully recorded and adequately included in any final output/document. Additionally, the recommended student parliament would be useful at both institutional (university) and national (government) levels as it will serve as a space for comprehensive student-led discussions and recommendations.