

ASEAN'S YOUTH

The Driving Force Towards a Stronger Future

AT the 12th ASEAN Summit held in Cebu, the leaders of ASEAN agreed, among others, to accelerate the establishment of an ASEAN Community from 2020 to 2015. To achieve this target, within the next 8 years, the peoples of ASEAN have to work together to first create an ASEAN identity as a foundation for instilling a sense of ASEAN citizenry.

This is the way ahead for ASEAN as it celebrates its 40th anniversary. In the recommendations for the ASEAN Charter submitted by the Eminent Persons' Group it is suggested that this ASEAN identity can be created through greater awareness of ASEAN's cultural heritage, investment in learning, empowering the lives of the people and communities and engagement with civil society. Should this suggestion be eventually accepted and included in the Charter, it is up to national governments and their people to translate it into action. Key to this is the involvement of ASEAN's youth.

According to the ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2005, young people aged between 15-29 years old constitute 60% of the population in ASEAN. This is a number too high to dismiss especially when the future of ASEAN lies in their hands. They will be the movers, shakers and drivers in helping to create a unified and therefore stronger ASEAN in the years to come.

Unfortunately, there is still very little awareness of ASEAN among the youth of ASEAN, much less a sense of shared interests and common destiny.

Speaking at the 2nd ASEAN Student Leaders' Summit and Cultural Festival recently Ms. Eunice Olsen (28), an avid volunteer and a Nominated Member of Parliament in Singapore, observed that "there is no obvious uniting factor in ASEAN." She added that the countries of ASEAN remain very diverse and at some distance from each other, if not physically, historically and mentally. Hence, on a people-to-people level, and among the youth, the people of ASEAN

do not know each other very well and there is no realization that what occurs in one ASEAN country affects others in the Association. This is compounded by the disparities in the levels of understanding among the people of ASEAN partly due to different levels of access to information and resources.

This is the reality which the ASEAN Foundation wants to address and to change. Hence, with the support of the Japan-ASEAN Solidarity Fund, the ASEAN Foundation and the Angeles University Foundation of the Philippines organized the 2nd ASEAN Student Leaders' Summit, bringing together 133 student leaders from 47 universities from the region for three days of intensive discussions on issues relevant to today's youth such as the question of ASEAN awareness, civic responsibility and community service, values, entrepreneurship and volunteerism.

Not only did these students have the opportunity to exchange views and ideas with their peers from different ASEAN countries as well as others from the East Asia, but they also had the opportunity to listen to young people tell the story of how they have made their mark in society. One of them was Douglas Foo, founder of Apex-Pal Int'l Ltd., an innovative Singapore-based food retailer with outlets around ASEAN, inspired the participants of the Summit and proved to them that with courage and hard work it is possible to succeed as a young entrepreneur. Promoting entrepreneurship among the young is one solution to the problem of increasing youth unemployment.

The outcome of the Summit is a Declaration affirming the need to "Joining Heads, Hearts and Hands" in building one community. A creative yet workable Action Plan complemented the Declaration and included in the Action Plan is the creation of "ASEAN Link", a networking strategy for youth initiatives; a quarterly ASEAN Youth talk show on television held in different ASEAN countries; an ASEAN Festival to increase youth's knowledge of ASEAN values and culture; an entrepreneurship

program; and "ASEAN Logics", a forum to facilitate direction interaction among ASEAN youth to highlight regional issues and spirit of cooperation in localized contexts at the grassroots level in local communities.

Apichai Sunchindah, Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation, underlines the fact that despite the diversity of peoples and resources, ASEAN shares geo-political and economic interests as well as socio-cultural norms and heritage. It is in ASEAN's interest to unite thereby increasing the chances of survival of individual countries in the face of globalization. For ASEAN to realise its dream of becoming a community it must rise above individual and communal interest and think as one. "By instilling the awareness of ASEAN at an early age, we will be able to produce future leaders who can think in terms of ASEAN as one community," he comments.

ASEAN's commitment to the empowerment of youth is reflected in the various programs organised under the auspices of ASEAN, such as the ASEAN Youth Camp, ASEAN Youth Voluntary Program, ASEAN-China Youth Exchange, and the like. The ASEAN Foundation has also supported training programs on self-employment for out of school youth, seminars on the problems facing urban youth, and student exchange programs. Programs involving campus visits will be developed and special emphasis will also be given to youth in rural areas.

In his speech at the Summit, Douglas Foo supports casting a wider net in promoting the ASEAN identity by reaching out beyond the select few youth leaders to those who would otherwise not have the opportunity to be exposed to other communities and cultures in the region, so that many more are aware of what is going on in other countries and the cross-border challenges that youth face. In order to nurture young people who can "Think, Feel, and Act ASEAN", it is vital that they are empowered and involved in the growth and development of ASEAN as it enters a new chapter in its history.