

COUNTRY YOUTH

CALL TO ACTION 2025

APFSD Youth Forum | Feb 19-21, 2025

Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science and evidence based solutions for the 2030 agenda and its SDGs for leaving no young person behind in Asia and the Pacific



MALAYSIA

Situational Analysis

As we approach the final stretch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Malaysia stands at a pivotal crossroads. The nation has made significant strides in navigating complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. However, as the realities of climate change intensify and rapid urbanisation reshapes communities, there is an urgent need for proactive engagement to safeguard the well-being of the Rakyat and ensure that no one is left behind. The MADANI Economy Framework reflects a bold, human-centric approach to balance economic competitiveness (“Raising the Ceiling”) with inclusive societal growth (“Raising the Floor”). Yet, this vision must be brought to life through targeted, localised action for the Goals. National roadmaps such as the National Energy Transition Roadmap (NETR) and the New Industrial Master Plan (NIMP) 2030 offer vital blueprints, but their success hinges on prioritising implementation and alignment with the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to accelerate Malaysia’s progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

In alignment with the priorities of the 12th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) and the upcoming 2025 High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), Malaysia must renew its commitment to transformative, evidence-based action. This requires focused efforts on critical areas related to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Malaysia’s healthcare system faces several pressing challenges. The shrinking governmental healthcare workforce strains services, while the mental health crisis

worsens, with suicide cases rising by 81% in 2021 and 500,000 adults experiencing depression. Despite 76% universal health coverage (UHC), rural and indigenous communities still lack adequate access. Though HIV incidence has declined, stigma and limited sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education hinder progress in addressing adolescent pregnancies and STIs. Additionally, the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among adults and youth imposes a significant economic burden of RM64 billion.

Malaysia ranks 114 out of 146 in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report. Women and girls in Malaysia face significant challenges in political and economic participation. Women hold only 13.5% of parliamentary seats, reflecting low political representation. Workplace disparities persist, with women’s labour force participation at 56.2% compared to men’s 82.3%, and a wage gap where women earn RM93.80 for every RM100 men earn. Gender-based violence (GBV) protections remain inadequate, failing to fully address domestic violence, sexual harassment, and workplace discrimination. Additionally, intimate partner violence (IPV) and safety risks are evident in cases of school kidnappings and young girls using school as a cover to leave, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Harmful gender stereotypes are normalised at the level of culture, and are taught not only through informal education but also in school textbooks. Furthermore, care responsibilities disproportionately burden women, limiting their workforce participation and financial independence. Inadequate childcare support and parental leave further restrict their economic opportunities, especially for low-income groups.

Co-convended by:



Youth LEAD



In collaboration:



In partnership:



Youth unemployment and job mismatch in Malaysia's labour market leave many unemployed and underemployed due to an education-job market disconnect. Gig economy workers, including migrants, face exploitation, poor conditions, and lack of legal protection. The transition to green jobs remains slow, with renewables making up just 5.8% of the energy mix. Low wages and poor salary progression further strain workers, while contract-based jobs lack essential benefits, causing job insecurity. Additionally, the formal integration of refugees, stateless individuals, and undocumented migrants into the workforce remains a pressing concern.

As a maritime nation, Malaysia's marine ecosystems face growing threats. Over 2 million tonnes of plastic waste are generated annually, much of it ending up in the ocean. Overfishing has depleted 23.3% of fish stocks, endangering biodiversity and fishing communities' livelihoods. Coral reefs suffer from bleaching and habitat loss due to rising sea temperatures and coastal development. Losses in mangrove forest cover are also among the highest in the region. Coastal erosion and rising sea levels put communities in Sabah and Sarawak at risk of land loss and displacement. Despite 19.7% of marine areas being designated as protected, weak enforcement allows illegal fishing and habitat destruction to continue.

While strong policies exist to complement sustainability efforts in Malaysia, limited private sector collaboration and regional cooperation hamper progress. Untapped potential collaboration between the public, private and third sectors remains. Insufficient financing for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is evident, with health and education spending at just 6% of GDP—below regional benchmarks. Additionally, data gaps and the lack of real-time, publicly accessible SDG tracking make it difficult to assess policy effectiveness.

Recommendations

Our recommendations for Malaysia on selected SDGs to achieve optimum target are as follows-

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

- Improve the healthcare workforce by incentivising career progression for healthcare workers with pay increments and creating meritocratic, concrete and obvious qualifying criteria for training and research.
- Expand and integrate mental health services by increasing funding for programs, engaging trained professionals in crisis management, strengthening helplines, and reducing stigma through workplace and nationwide awareness campaigns.

- Improve healthcare access for underserved communities by expanding telemedicine, mobile clinics, and healthcare subsidies for low-income groups while also advocating preventive medicine.
- Enhance SRH education and HIV prevention through Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in schools, and increased access to HIV testing, PrEP, and STI awareness programs.
- Prioritise NCD prevention with a lifelong preventive healthcare approach, multisectoral collaboration, and community programs promoting healthy eating habits & proper nutrition.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

- Invest in “Back to Work Policies for Women” and parental support by providing tax incentives for employers supporting women returning to employment, allowing flexible working arrangements and phased return programmes. This should also be supported by the establishment of on-site childcare facilities at the workplace and financial support for childcare costs.
- Strengthen GBV protection and workplace rights with stricter anti-harassment laws, GBV courts, and improved parental leave policies.
- Eliminate harmful gender stereotypes in education by critically reviewing and critically revising school syllabi.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

- Reduce Youth Unemployment and Job Mismatch by strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs through collaboration with the industry to meet current and future market demands.
- Introduce incentive schemes for the employment of young NEET ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEET) persons by providing subsidies for both employers and employees.
- Strengthening and building a comprehensive social protection floor using a life-cycle approach addressing the vulnerabilities throughout, covering pregnant women, children, persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and informal workers. Extending Employment Insurance Schemes to informal economy workers.
- Establish upskilling, reskilling, and cross-skilling programs for existing workforce in sectors aligned with the NETR and NIMP 2030 to accelerate green jobs and sustainable economic growth.



SDG 14: Life Below Water

- Reduce Marine Pollution and Strengthen Waste Management by enforcing a nationwide ban on single-use plastics, and promoting circular economy practices in waste management, particularly in coastal areas and marine industries.
- Stronger enforcement of microplastic particles used in cosmetic and skin care products, implementation of a nationwide deposit refund system for plastic waste, and increased penalties for industries dumping plastic waste into rivers and oceans.
- Strengthen marine protected areas (MPAs) to cover at least 30% of territorial waters in Malaysia and introduce marine conservation efforts such as fishing quotas, gear restrictions, and no-take zones to prevent overfishing and biodiversity loss.
- Enhance Climate Resilience for Coastal Communities by implementing mitigation and adaptation measures, including mangrove restoration and building climate-resilient infrastructures. This should include livelihood transition programs for fishing communities affected by climate change.

SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

- Establish a centralised platform or network for collaborative planning, information-sharing, and joint initiatives involving multiple stakeholders to identify priority areas for resource allocation and to prevent duplication of efforts.

- Strengthen Public-Private-People Partnerships for the SDGs through the adoption of a “Whole-of-Nation” Approach and the promotion of funding & incentives for SDG-related initiatives
- Collaborate with regional partners in ASEAN to establish a framework for resource mobilisation that promotes cross-border collaboration and addresses regional disparities.
- Increase SDG Financing by expanding SDG-aligned financial instruments to fund sustainability projects via Financial Institutions.
- Develop a comprehensive approach for resource mobilisation to align SDG with the national planning process and annual budget cycles. Potential savings from the rationalisation of fossil fuel subsidies should be redirected towards action for the Goals which include climate adaptation strategies, nature-based solutions and conservation efforts.

The APFSD country and sub-regional briefs were developed through collective discussions and engagements between youth advocates at the APFSD Youth Forum in Bangkok on 19-21 February, 2025. The Malaysia Call to Action drafting team consisted of Cathryn Anila, Ellern Eng Hui, Peter J. Tan, Toh Jia Yee, Wong Whui Dhong, Yovindra Kanezin, and Zairin Adam Abdul Aziz. Overall supervision was provided by the ARROW Call To Action team.

