

The APFSD Youth Constituency Input/Statement addressing questions that will go into different parts of the Chairs' Summary

By the Co-convenors of the APFSD Youth Forum- ARROW, YouthLEAD , YPEER, and the Right Here Right Now youth partnership in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal and Pakistan and youth networks in the region

The Asia Pacific region is home to the largest number of young people globally, about 670 million, who face intersecting challenges and marginalisations. According to recent estimates, extreme poverty in the region has decreased. However, more than 900 million people in the region are still impoverished when seen through multidimensional poverty measures, and the majority of them are young, living in rural areas, and engaged in low income agriculture-related workforce.

The effects of climate related crises and disasters are experienced by everyone, including the young people. Furthermore, the region has been experiencing religious extremism and fundamentalism, right-wing conservatism and populism, conflict and natural disasters, and aggressive trade policies. The region also continues to have a poor record on gender equality, which is rooted in systemic and structural inequalities, unequal power relations, and the control of sexuality impacting young women and girls disproportionately.

Majority of the countries do not recognise the rights of persons with diverse sexual orientations and same-sex marriage and relationships are criminalised in most countries in the region. Gender-based violence and violence against people with non-binary gender identities is alarmingly high. Young people in these situations are especially affected.

Intersecting challenges faced by young people hinder livelihoods and access to affordable and quality medicines, health services including HIV and AIDS, contraception and safe abortion, education, nutrition, and healthy food systems.

We, young people from across the region, share our thoughts on the following questions to be included in the APFSD 2020 Chairs' Summary

1. Where have we progressed the most?

The importance of sustained and meaningful involvement of young people in all their diversities are increasingly recognised especially in the regional processes particularly at the APFSD which has a dedicated **APFSD Youth Forum** for the young people instituted. Developments of more youth focused policies, formation of councils to address young people's issues and introduction of national mechanisms to gather inputs from the youth group for country VNRs are some of the examples from this region.

Young people have participated in the regional APFSD Process every year since 2017 through the APFSD Youth Forum and APFSD intergovernmental processes. The presence of this civic space dedicated to young people has enabled relatively meaningful youth participation. The

APRCEM dedicated youth constituency space has emerged as an important platform for youth engagement, providing a voice for youth partners from countries in the region.

At the national level, in some countries, young people are involved in the SDG localisation and information dissemination at all levels of government.

With some countries in the region officially recognising trans persons, this has opened up space for young gender diverse people to voice their rights on gender inclusivity.

Some Governments have involved young people in the VNR processes. Moving forward the consistent involvement of youth led and youth serving CSOs, annually beyond VNR consultations should be institutionalised, and interlinkages with other UN processes such as CSW, CPD, should be fostered. Young people are concerned around the sustainability of meaningful youth engagement in the long term at national and regional level.

2. What are the most important challenges in seeking to accelerate transformations?

Lack of inclusivity across all genders, sexual orientation, age groups, and marginalised communities remains as one of the most important challenges in accelerating transformations in this region.

The structural dimensions of marginalisation faced by young people has resulted in wider inequalities in relation to healthcare access, education, and employment, leaving young people at the margins. Young people residing in rural areas continue to face inequalities of opportunities. Majority of the migrants in the region are of younger working age, and 13 percent of all migrants in the region are younger than 20.

Lack of disaster prevention, mitigation and adaptation strategies, continue to pervade, aggravating crises and disaster situations such as the current COVID19 pandemic.

Environment and climate issues are less prioritised by government and stakeholders and young people are not involved in decision making spaces. Many cities in the region are highly polluted and impact the health and wellbeing of young persons.

Young people do not have any capital or financial resources and as a result of that they are not being able to build bigger and sustainable networks or forums.

Lack of gender equality, prevalence of discriminatory and harmful practices such as child early forced marriages and Female Genital Mutilation/ cutting practices affect young women and girls. There is an alarming rise in gender-based violence against people from gender diverse communities and minorities. Challenges further persist around gender equality, gender identity, misconception around SRHR, and menstruation. Patriarchal norms continue to discriminate against young women and girls.

Lack of political will remains a key challenge.

3. On each entry point, what are the actions that can be taken to address challenges and accelerate implementation of the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific?

Human well-being and capabilities: Health, Education and a life free from deprivations is not an issue just for our specific region however with 60% of the population, and 60% of young people residing in the Asia Pacific, a lack of this affects this region the most.

There is a need for systemic and structural changes within countries to address wellbeing and capabilities acknowledging realities faced by young people by prioritising human rights across all divisions. There is a need to address gaps in gender and social inclusion especially LGBTIQ+ community.

Young people focused gender friendly and anti-discriminatory laws and policies need to be implemented. Local level youth advocates are building movements in their communities on gender equality, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and they need to be supported with resources, capacities and knowledge building opportunities.

Universal access to well-being and capabilities including social protection, access to food and optimal nutrition, universal access to education, water and sanitation, health including sexual and reproductive health in a just and gender equal world is our call.

Sustainable and just economies: Young people are left behind when it comes to sustainable and just economies. Youth in the Asia Pacific region remain unemployed, and lack access to decent work in large numbers. There is a need to encourage entrepreneurship and the use of technology to absorb this influx of unemployment that perpetuates unjust economies.

Food systems and nutrition patterns: There is a need to place importance on healthy and sustainable diet quality and nutrition, address under nutrition and micronutrient deficiency especially among adolescents, in a way that the governments are able to build and provide sustainable food systems while ensuring food sovereignty. The discrimination needs to be tackled by using the equality and equity-based approaches. Implementing the existing food safety related laws and policies could be the entry points.

Energy decarbonisation and universal access: There is a dire need to explore cleaner options for energy. The region is disproportionate in this aspect whereby some countries have discovered options to reduce gas emissions and provide universal access for their countries however most of the region still relies on fossil fuel energy. There is a need for stricter laws and heavier penalisation for not working towards decarbonisation and innovative approaches to tackle the issue. Additionally, a need to collaborate with the government to create evidence-based awareness materials and young people need to be included in all these initiatives.

Urban and peri-urban development: There is a need to work on sustainable solutions for urban and peri urban development. Again, the use of technology and giving young people the platform to contribute to solutions towards urban and peri urban development is key. Equal access to information and services need to be ensured.

Global environmental commons: There is a need for greater international pressure to ensure accountability in the region in this area. Creating knowledge-based platforms to build knowledge and capacity of the CSOs and youths' groups who are working in local communities and local government authorities remains key. Involving the young religious leaders, youth scholars for advocacy on gender issues and climate related issues will have more impact.

4. What are effective approaches to enable transformation?

Dedicated mechanism to ensure inclusive young people's meaningful engagement such as national and regional youth planning commissions including for gathering inputs, young people's involvement in the decision-making process and monitoring of proper and full implementation of SDGs are crucial. More field level capacity building workshops in the local and national levels reaching out to a larger youth group is key. Universities are a good place to start capacity building activities for young people.

Discussions around policy formulation and implementation at all levels **must** involve young people. SDGs must be made a national agenda and young people should be engaged in all action plans and programmes developed by the government and other stakeholders. Awareness building of stakeholders to understand and acknowledge the importance of diversity and meaningful engagement of young people will enable transformation. National consultations building from the APFSD Youth Forum needs to be integrated into the formal system at the national level to further ensure young people's involvement.

A sharper focus on SDG17 is required to strengthen regional partnership and collaboration among countries to accelerate transformation, to ensure no country in the region is left behind in the process.

Expanding civic space for meaningful youth participation, translation of SDGs into local language, effective use of social media is crucial for transformation.

Data systems, including SDG indicators data collected across all disaggregation including age is an effective approach to enable transformation. Citizen generated data, CSOs researches, independent reports by researchers and experts should be considered by governments. The active involvement of the youth ministry by introducing a youth engagement cell or department will be a good way forward. Systematic and continued involvement of Young People in National Level VNR and other processes has to be institutionalised.

5. What are some of the most inspiring examples of action by Governments and other stakeholders in advancing people-centred, environmentally sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific?

The annual APFSD Youth Forum convened by ARROW, YouthLead, and YPEER prior to the APFSD as part of the official ESCAP process is exemplary in crafting a unique, meaningful opportunity for greater involvement of the youth in the monitoring and review process of SDGs at the regional level. It is a regional space created to acknowledge the key role young people play in shaping a holistic response and solutions to the SDGs.

At the national level, it is crucial for governments to not only adopt the SDGs as its national agenda but it is equally important to ensure there are follow up mechanisms at all departments and at all levels to effectively plan and implement the 2030 agenda with involvement of young people.

Some Country level examples:

Pakistan is the first country in the region to adopt the 2030 Agenda as its national agenda in the National Assembly.

Nepal is the first country in the region to sign up for voluntary national review (VNR) for the second time. The National Planning Commission (NPC) takes the lead in VNR ensuring the involvement of CSOs through the NGO Federation in the VNR processes from the early stage. CSOs are engaged in the data and information collection process by the NPC.

In Bangladesh, BRAC's initiative in engaging men in combating violence against women and girls is a good example. As a result, positive changes were seen in the areas of interventions. Men are sensitised, and this happened because it was a holistic approach, where the faith leaders (i.e. *Imams*) were also involved in the awareness raising in the process.

6. What have been important benefits of the VNR processes, in particular for second time presenters?

The VNR process is one of the most powerful and transparent monitoring and accountability mechanisms to remind member states of their global commitments. It gives all stakeholders an opportunity to reflect on a nation's progress, gaps and challenges and further strategise to respond to the gaps. The VNR is also an important advocacy space for CSOs in the light of shrinking CSO spaces in this region.

The VNR follow up and review process provides opportunities for all stakeholders to come together at the national consultations and also at the regional and global platforms to critically work towards the Agenda 2030 implementation. For the 2nd time VNR countries, this provides an opportunity for follow-up progress from the last VNR and prepares the next action plan. This process creates a sense of accountability and transparency.

7. What are best practices and examples of peer support from member countries in the VNR preparatory process?

Some best practices include the South Asian Forum for SDG in Nepal and the coming together of ASEAN countries to strengthen their position in the VNR preparation is another good example.

8. How can different stakeholders contribute to strengthening local, national, global and regional follow up and review (including VLR and VNR, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and High-level Political forum on Sustainable Development)?

The government, the civil society, the political representation, the youth and the general public have a major role to play in the review and follow up process. The global commitments serve as progressive norms and standards which CSOs including youth led and youth serving organisations can utilise to advocate for institutionalisation at the national level, and demand accountability from the government.

CSOs and Youth networks can formally provide inputs in the reporting, VNR consultations and enable engagement with the government to improve the SDG implementation at the national level.

Regional bodies such as the UN can support the development of open and common platforms where the progress and initiatives of each government are listed and reviewed to enable learning exchanges.

9. What are the transboundary issues on which more regional action is needed?

Collaboration at the transboundary level, on all entry points, is crucial cutting across economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields including migration, financing flows, communicable diseases, crime, and conflicts. In the current times, climate change and for issues like Covid-19 there should be a system for regional collaboration, budget and a systematic approach in combating common issues in a common transboundary platform. Trade, agriculture, learning exchanges on the entry points and the levers will also be crucial. Transboundary issues also cut across fostering peace and stability in the region and addressing conflict in the region.

10. What are some of the most important “trends to watch” as governments shape their policy response?

Youth bulge and demographic dividend impact in the region.

Current rise in epidemics and pandemics resulting in a significant economic and social fall out among young people.

Climate impact on the environment, people and planet.

Mostly the commitments especially in the area of SRHR are diluted to suit the local contexts which results in many different compromises. Similar is the situation of certain human rights issues, increasing fundamentalism, and ethno-religious nationalism is further impeding access to gender and SRHR progress in the region.

Working towards universal health coverage offers an opportunity to address gaps in the HIV response, such as people living with HIV in TB clinics, in sexual reproductive health services, in antenatal care and within services for noncommunicable diseases.

11. What specific actions could governments and other stakeholders put forward in support of a global decade of action?

Key actions include a collaboration at the regional level of developing countries to learn from their experiences and develop a global conscience and collective action mechanism.

Collaborations are also crucial among government and CSOs and other stakeholders towards implementation and monitoring of SDGs.

Ensure meaningful and inclusive youth participation at all levels of decision making at national, regional and global levels in a safe and respectful environment. Enable access of young people to government initiatives.

Capacity strengthening of youth, and involving young people in decision making structures and enabling opportunities in policy formulation and implementation including research and evidence-based advocacy, including utilising the full potential of youths who are in the grassroots level. Youth led and youth serving CSOs and other stakeholders need to have capacities to input into reporting mechanisms and develop alternative reports with clear evidence-based data.

Building sustainable knowledge and technology-based platforms for youths. Disseminate best practices and stories that are working effectively to amplify the impact. Intersectionality based approach should be harnessed to define and implement effective strategies.

Transparency in work plans, in order for young people to be able to see where their strengths can lead to accelerated action.

Develop people-centred community delivery models. Community health workers, peer networks and other community-led service delivery should make use of the experience of networks of people living with HIV and other civil society organisations in ensuring that services reach the people who need them.