

The Civic Canvas : Highlighting Youth Perspectives

|| Selected Essays from the

2023 SEASAT Youth Camp ||





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Introduction

The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS) and the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF) are delighted to present "**The Civic Canvas: Highlighting Youth Perspectives**", a series composed of half a dozen essays written by emerging young leaders who participated in this year's Southeast Asia-South Asia-Taiwan (SEASAT) Youth Camp. In our journey to explore the New Southbound Policy and perspectives on democracy, these essays highlight the significance of collaboration, inclusion, and innovation in shaping the future of leadership and cross-border relationships in the globalized world.

Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) and its role in strengthening regional ties are explored in essays by Kha (Khanh Ha) Le, Huynh Ngoc Thanh Tam, and Hree Dharma Santhi Putri Samudra. Le argues that the NSP's unconventional diplomacy, a strategy that relies more on soft power and cultural exchange, can be supplemented by strengthening economic ties. Tam and Samudra on the other hand, explores new avenues and teases out possibilities where the NSP can play a significant role in rules-making and conflict resolution.

The next set of essays by Gerald John Guillermo, Ellya Rizki Handayani, and Ariella (Ari) Osmeña looks at the importance of democracy and the role it plays in shaping societies and nations. Guillermo examines the state of democracy and the youth's contribution to sustaining meaningful participation. Handayani explores the limits of democratic participation by discussing how policy making can be subjected to populist sentiments. Meanwhile, Osmeña emphasizes the importance of inclusion and representation in keeping democracy vibrant.

These essays provide an introduction into the perspectives of young people on how collaboration can bridge boundaries and foster international relations, which also reflect the core issues concerning the youth in Asia. They serve as specific examples of youth-led initiatives promoting collaboration in the context of the New Southbound Policy and youth-led movements advocating for democratic values and inclusive governance. We hope that these essays will give fresh insights into the New Southbound Policy and democracy and promote the inclusion of youth voices and actions in national and regional development.

Taiwan's New Southbound Policy: Unconventional Diplomacy As A Bridge And Hard Power As A Base

Le Khanh Ha (Kha Le) (Vietnam)
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The Southeast Asia-South Asia-Taiwan (SEASAT) Youth Camp 2023 which took place last July in Taipei with the theme "Bridging Boundaries" has brought Asia-wide youth closer across borders, literally and figuratively.

The invisible but not-absent boundaries in thoughts, cultures, realities, and humanities have been thoroughly discussed. Throughout the three-day camp, critical questions concerning democratic movements, the future of work, youth engagement, inclusivity, and peacebuilding have been raised by delegates from all over Asia. Particularly discussed was Taiwan (Republic of China)'s innovative New Southbound Policy (hereinafter referred to as NSP). The SEASAT Youth Camp emphasized the significance of unconventional diplomacy, whose practice revolves around the public-private-people partnership (hereinafter referred to as P-P-P-P) model and prioritizes 5 Ms, which are: (1) to make profit together; (2) to make jobs; (3) to make friends; (4) to make families; (5) to make values^[1]. As far as the NSP is put into action, Taiwan's image together with its diplomatic direction has been reimagined as a beneficial looking-for-long-term friend whose heart is filled with transparency and integrity. Put under an analytical scope, the SEASAT Youth Camp itself acts as an example of the NSP as well as an embodiment of its core agenda which is to encourage educational cooperation (人才交流) or cultural diplomacy besides diversifying economic ties and seeking to provide public goods (資源共享)^[2]. This can also be considered as a positive indicator for the NSP's implementation thanks to the inclusion of diverse nationalities, expertise, and socio-political backgrounds. This signifies a shift in the mentality - from Taiwanese Asia (臺灣的亞洲) to "Asian Taiwan" (亞洲的臺灣) (Yang, 2018).

Although there have been signals for the effectiveness of Taiwan's NSP under President Tsai Ing-wen's leadership, especially seen in the areas of international trade, educational exchange, culture, technology, and society (Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, 2019), critiques have been raised towards the NSP concerning its potential lack of public understanding both domestically and overseas. This is in addition to countering China's hard power and political influence in Asia. Along with establishing sustainable and comprehensive partnerships, moderating China's economic influence is one of the key purposes of NSP. This involves diversifying economic ties among nations, thereby decreasing countries' dependency on China (Black, 2019). Despite this attempt's failure on some occasions, economic relations based on multilateral partnerships with economic and logical links have been proven to be feasible (Black, 2019). Moreover, as an informal yet effective alternative, two pillars in the P-P-P-P have been utilized to circumvent the hard power enforced by China - which are people-to-people partnerships that sometimes show even higher impacts than the official economic relations (Perkuhn, 2018).

Whilst China's opposition to Taiwan's NSP appears to be highly likely inept, the lack of public understanding, therefore, poses a more visible threat to the long-term implementation of the NSP. On one hand, there is a general understanding of the necessity for economic diversification and the overall benefits of the NSP (Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation, 2019). On the other hand, public perceptions of partner countries often lean towards viewing them as less developed and offering fewer opportunities compared to China. This perception is compounded by the notion that these nations

are primarily seen as sources of inexpensive, low-skilled labor and potential marriage partners for older, low-income Taiwanese. From the Taiwanese people's point of view, a lack of domestic public understanding regarding the NSP might cause confusion as, for a long time, Taiwan has focused its foreign policy on America and the Global North (Hashmi, 2021) as well as a scarcity in guiding policies (New Southbound Policy Portal, 2023). Additionally, the economic benefits derived from trade and investment through the NSP tend to directly benefit businesses and their shareholders, rather than directly and significantly impacting wages and prospects within Taiwan. In contrast to the extensively scrutinized issues with China, partnerships within the NSP can sometimes be marginalized in Taiwan's priorities (Chong, 2019), which might be due to the lack of domestic public understanding as mentioned above. In other words, the problems boil down to one question: "How can humanity actually see others' boundaries and then see each other beyond those boundaries?"

Realizing the borders, visualizing their undersurface implications, then either fighting against or bridging them; it occurs that humans at their very basis of nature are somehow always able to hold on to their boundaries and/or borders. Consequently, the journey towards harmonious co-existence might find its compass in the delicate equilibrium of perceiving boundaries with acute insight and simultaneously envisioning the uncharted horizons that lie beyond. Put differently, might the path to harmonious co-existence lie in the balance of seeing (not just acknowledging) and seeing beyond?

To partly reciprocate this inquiry, first and foremost, the process involves recognizing these demarcations, both physical and conceptual, and acknowledging the diversity they encapsulate. This initial step sets the foundation for the next phase: looking beyond these borders. Here, the core tenet of integrity emerges, acting as the compass guiding intercultural interactions. Upholding honesty, respect, and authenticity enables individuals to navigate the delicate terrain of cross-cultural engagement. Furthermore, using the SEASAT Youth Camp as a bright example, the solution shall highlight

the remarkable potential of using soft power i.e., unconventional diplomacy as a bridge and hard power as a base. Soft power, emanating from cultural exchange and shared values, acts as the conduit for building connections that extend beyond borders. Meanwhile, hard power, represented by infrastructure and economic stability, provides the stable platform upon which these connections can be established and flourish. In this manner, the SEASAT Youth Camp serves as a vivid illustration of how humanity can come to perceive and ultimately transcend boundaries, fostering a global community founded on mutual understanding, integrity, and a strategic blend of both soft and hard power dynamics. Such a nuanced perspective encourages humanity to not only respect boundaries but also to foster connections that extend beyond them, cultivating a tapestry of shared understanding and cooperation.

Regardless of the answer, the SEASAT Youth Camp has unveiled a dynamic, transparent, and self-reliant Taiwan to the young across Asia, which is one step closer to Asian Taiwan on its voyage towards the South. Ultimately, the New Southbound Policy in particular and unconventional diplomacy in general illuminate the path towards a more interconnected and harmonious future for both Taiwan and the diverse tapestry of Asian nations.

[1] TAEF Chairman H.H. Michael Hsiao. (2019, October). Presentation at the 2019 Yushan Forum.

[2] Sana Hashmi. (2023, July). Presentation at the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp.

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Heading to the South, What's Next? – Blue Diplomacy Comprehensive Cooperation: The Role of the Blue Economy Development In Taiwan's New Southbound Policy

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Introduction

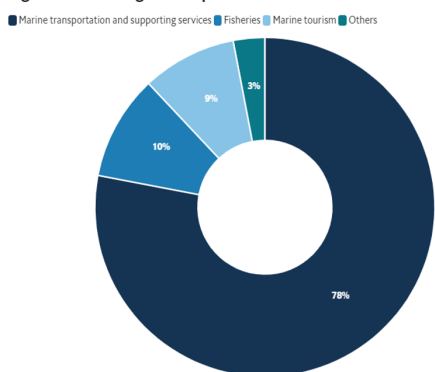
The New Southbound Policy of Taiwan (often referred to as the NSP) is a political effort put out by Taiwan in 2016 with the goal of fostering closer connections between Taiwan and 18 nations in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australasia (Hsiao & Yang, 2022). The goal of the program is to expand Taiwan's diplomatic and economic ties beyond its current set of allies. All countries targeted by the NSP, except for Laos, have sea economic areas, which are a crucial part of economic development and national sovereignty or independence. In addition, Taiwan is geographically surrounded by the sea; hence, its traditional economy is also based on its waters (Ocean Affairs Council, 2021). Meanwhile, many conflicts involve sea borders, such as the controversial map of China which covers all the Vietnamese and Philippines seas. Apparently, keeping the sea prosperous is a way to keep the country's sovereignty and autonomy, which can be achieved through blue economy cooperation. Blue economy cooperation can tackle regional mutual challenges through more job creation, better sustainable resource sharing and exploitation, food security, marine education and science innovation knowledge exchange, disaster resilience, and preparedness (URIC, 2022). In addition, the development of the blue economy will be able to harmonize the four pillars of the NSP, namely (1) promoting economic cooperation, (2) conducting talent exchanges, (3) sharing resources, and (4) establishing regional connections (Executive Yuan, 2019). Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the role of blue economy cooperation in the NSP of Taiwan and the implications for implementing regional blue cooperation.

Definition and the importance of the blue economy in Taiwan

Some academic definitions of the blue economy should be clarified. According to the World Bank (2017), the blue economy refers to using maritime resources for economic growth, improved lifestyles, and job creation while safeguarding the marine environment. According to the European Commission, it includes "all economic activity involving oceans, seas, and coastlines (United Nations, 2019). It includes a huge variety of interconnected existing and growing sectors. The Commonwealth of Nations defines the blue economy as "an emerging concept which encourages better stewardship of our ocean or 'blue' resources". For Conservation International, the "blue economy also includes economic benefits that may not be marketed, such as carbon storage, coastal protection, cultural values, and biodiversity." (The Commonwealth, n.d.). The United Nations (2019) also stated that the blue economy will support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically goal 14, which is "Life Below Water".

The blue economy in Taiwan contributes significantly to its GDP. It has also accounted for nearly 80 % of the share gross value of the marine economic value in Taiwan (see Figure 1). Specifically, statistics have shown that Taiwan has 4 out of 30 world-leading shipping companies, such as Evergreen Marine Corporation, Yang Ming Marine Transport Corporation, Wan Hai Lines, and TS Lines (Alphaliner, 2023). This indicates the potential for further cooperation with Taiwan in marine transportation and supporting services as well as in technology transfer, marine environment conservation, and marine economic workforce training and education.

Figure 1: Share of gross output value of marine industries in Taiwan



Source: Ocean Affairs Council

▲ Figure [1] Share of gross output value of marine industries in Taiwan in 2019 / Retrieved from Ocean Affairs Council data (2021)

Implications

Implementing the blue economy cooperation in the orientation of the New Southbound Policy can include fostering collaboration in the maritime and marine-related fields between Taiwan and the 18 partner countries. Taiwan can collaborate with the 18 partner countries' governments to form a regional framework for the blue economy similar to the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive. This can be customized for the region, and applicable to different partner countries' contexts. Some first steps can be considered to focus on potential key partner countries such as Vietnam and Australia before implementing it in the rest of the partner countries.

In terms of the Taiwan and Vietnam cooperation relationship, Taiwan has become one of the key economic partners of Vietnam on foreign direct investment, tourism, and workforce exchange cooperation (Taiwan Economic and Culture Office In Vietnam, 2022). According to the Vietnam Ministry of Planning and Investment, Taiwan ranked fourth in foreign investment categorized by counterpart accumulating by June 2023. In addition, trade barriers with Vietnam have been removed thanks to free trade agreements. These figures have pointed out that Vietnam can become one of the key partners in implementing the first steps of the New Southbound Policy in economic investment, tourism, and talent workforce exchange. Taiwan can increase investment and trade promotion by encouraging Taiwanese companies to invest in the blue economy sectors of Vietnam and facilitate bilateral trade in marine products and services. In addition, Taiwan can engage in

joint research projects with Vietnam to address shared challenges and explore new opportunities in the blue economy. Taiwan can also cooperate with Vietnam to promote marine conservation and environmental protection measures to ensure the sustainability of marine resources and ecosystems. Finally, tourism, which is known as the “smokeless industry”, has the potential to be developed. For instance, statistics showed that 926,744 Taiwanese visited Vietnam and 405,396 Vietnamese visited Taiwan while mutual visits reached more than 130 million in 2019 (Taiwan Economic and Culture Office In Vietnam, 2022). Taiwan and Vietnam can develop sustainable and responsible tourism initiatives that highlight the unique marine biodiversity and mutual cultural heritage of both nations while promoting sustainable tourism.

The implementation of the New Southbound Policy with a focus on Australia has the potential to enhance sustainable marine resource conservation and economic growth. Broadly speaking, it can also offer stability for the Indo-Pacific region in the long run. Although Taiwan and Australia have not established an official diplomatic relationship (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.), economic cooperation continues to develop since both are members of the APEC, the World Trade Organization, the Asian Development Bank, and a number of fisheries conventions (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). The mutual services and trade between Taiwan and Australia are valued at US\$811 million. Taiwan is one of the largest tourism and education markets for Australia as well as working and holiday workforce even during the COVID-19 period (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). As both nations are members of a number of fisheries conventions, there is a bright potential to enhance cooperation in this field. Specifically, Taiwan can collaborate and harmonize the fisheries regulation with practical applications based on its long-established fisheries industry. Taiwan can also organize the exchange of knowledge in the fisheries technology field for more efficient fisheries management by offering scholarships for short and long-term intensive courses for professionals, practitioners, and students in

the fisheries industry. In addition, Taiwan and Australia can conduct technology transfer by sharing the expertise and technology in marine-related industries to enhance their capabilities in sustainable resource management and utilization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the New Southbound Policy's take on blue economy cooperation has the potential to promote sustainable development, environmental stewardship, and global cooperation between Taiwan and its 18 partner nations. This strategy intends to take advantage of the enormous potential of our oceans while protecting the long-term health of marine ecosystems by giving priority to responsible practices in industries such as fisheries, aquaculture, renewable energy, and tourism. The member nations may work together to address common issues including resource management, climate change, and maritime security through information exchange, technology transfer, and collaborative research projects. The New Southbound Policy provides a dynamic framework for establishing long-lasting alliances, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and furthering the shared interests of countries in the Indo-Pacific region as the blue economy develops into a cornerstone of regional prosperity. Nations can usher in a new age of sustainable prosperity while protecting the essential resources that our linked blue world provides by adopting this comprehensive strategy. Once again, it is essential to establish a mutual framework toward the blue economy in the region by initiating the first step in enhancing the comprehensive cooperation in the blue economy with potential key partners such as Vietnam and Australia before launching the whole implementation with the rest of the partners. This initial move heading to the South can enhance the comprehensive and evolving ideas of the New Southbound Policy and cooperation in the blue economy can continue to grab new opportunities and tackle emerging challenges.

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Myanmar's Unraveling: Could Taiwan's New Southbound Policy be the Game Changer?

Hree Dharma Santhi Putri Samudra (Indonesia)

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The echoes of Myanmar's unfolding political saga have reverberated across the globe since February 2021, capturing headlines and drawing sharp international critique. The sight of a nation, on the “cusp of a burgeoning democracy,” being thrust back into the shadows of military rule has been both tragic and unsettling. It's no longer just about the ousting of an elected government but the haunting visuals of streets ablaze, bravehearted protestors, and the heart-wrenching tales of families torn apart. The world can't just be a passive observer; it beckons a call to action.

Introduction

Enter the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the regional bloc that has always been seen as the big brother of Southeast Asian nations. With Myanmar as one of its members, the onus on ASEAN is tremendous. But alas, the very fabric of ASEAN, built on the principle of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty, seems to be its Achilles' heel in the face of the Myanmar crisis. The bloc's internal tug-of-war between upholding these principles and mounting a collective response is glaring.

But all hope isn't lost. As we scour the horizon for solutions, Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP) gleams with potential. Initiated in 2016, this policy wasn't just Taiwan reaching out, but it was an invitation for nations in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australasia to collaborate and forge ties that go beyond trade. It was a vision of shared growth and mutual respect.

Imagine the possibilities if Myanmar, a nation rich in resources but torn by strife, could harness Taiwan's technological prowess. Envision a scenario where through this policy, bridges of trust are built between the diverse communities

of Myanmar, paving the way for reconciliation. Taiwan's emphasis on people-to-people interactions can be the very balm that soothes Myanmar's deep-seated ethnic and political divides.

To put it succinctly, the Myanmar conundrum isn't just ASEAN's to solve. It's an appeal to the collective conscience of the region. By marrying the strengths of ASEAN's diplomatic might with the visionary approach of Taiwan's NSP, we might just find the salvation to heal Myanmar. After all, in unity, lies unparalleled strength.

Taiwan's geopolitical pivot:

Unpacking the NSP

Taiwan's regional dance has taken a fascinating twist in recent years, and it's all thanks to its visionary NSP. Launched with much fanfare by President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016, this policy isn't just a testament to Taiwan's geopolitical foresight, but also a manifestation of its desire to diversify and deepen its ties in the neighborhood.

Picture this: a vibrant tapestry of 18 nations, each unique in its cultural and economic tapestry, stretching across Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australasia. This is Taiwan's new playing field, and the game? Building bridges of commerce, innovation, education, and even tourism. In a world where power equations are rapidly changing, Taiwan's pitch is clear - let's grow together.

The figures themselves are nothing short of astounding. Taiwan's economic ties with its southern neighbors surged in 2021, reaching a record-breaking US\$70.24 billion in exports to the ASEAN countries. This impressive growth represented a remarkable 32 percent increase compared to the previous year.^[1] In 2021, Taiwan's dynamic foray into Southeast Asia

witnessed a remarkable surge in foreign direct investments (FDI), soaring to a substantial US\$5.5 billion. These investments extended their reach across critical domains, encompassing sustainable energy, environmental conservation, and cutting-edge smart transportation. Notably, a significant 37% of Taiwan's FDI, channeled during the first 11 months of 2021, flowed into Southeast Asia.^[2] This trend underscores the pivotal role of Taiwan's NSP in fortifying the nation's regional presence.

As astutely noted by Ratih Kabinawa, a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Australia, the NSP serves as a tangible avenue for Taiwan to elevate its identity and values within the region and diversify its societal and market composition. These investments are not mere financial transactions; they epitomize a resolute commitment to a shared, borderless future, symbolizing Taiwan's unwavering dedication to global prominence.

Yet, for Taiwan, this isn't just about dollars and cents. At the core of Taiwan's NSP resides a captivating soft power appeal that transcends mere economic considerations. Notably, Taiwan's endearing labor collaboration, particularly with Indonesia, illuminates a path forward in a world grappling with intricate issues surrounding migration and labor rights. Going beyond the confines of international human rights checkboxes, Taiwan's Warm Home' program stands as a resounding testament to its unwavering commitment to safeguarding the welfare and rights of Indonesian migrant workers. Taiwan's profound dedication to nurturing enduring trust dovetails seamlessly with its overarching ambition to ensure that its Asian neighbors tangibly experience the benevolence and warmth of its government and people, as it metamorphoses into a culturally rich, inclusive society.

Taiwan's NSP, encompassing innovative industry, talent cultivation, social engagement, medical collaboration, agricultural advancement, and cultural exchange, underscores Taiwan's mission to invigorate Asia through cooperative ventures. Beyond regional boundaries, Taiwan's endeavors position it as a solution, rather than a quandary, for bolstering regional stability and propelling national growth. Taiwan's stellar ascent on the

Global Muslim Travel Index and its introduction of the region to its distinctive lifestyle, fashion, culture, alongside its quality goods and commodities, are all hallmarks of its steadfast commitment to regional prosperity and global eminence.

And speaking of trust, no analysis of this policy is complete without a nod to the ASEAN bloc. As a geopolitical writer, it's evident that Taiwan's heartbeat resonates with the ASEAN nations. Their shared history, geographical ties, and mutual interests make them natural allies. The essence isn't just diplomatic niceties but real, tangible mutual growth. In the grand theatre of geopolitics, Taiwan's NSP isn't just a move; it's a masterstroke. One that promises shared destinies and brighter futures.

**Bridging Myanmar's gap:
Could Taiwan's youth-focused Southbound Policy be the answer?**

As Myanmar grapples with its multifaceted political quandaries, a pivotal aspect remains largely overlooked: the role of its youth in fostering regional connectivity and resilience. As the world watches and waits, there's an intriguing actor on the horizon with the potential to play a transformative role in this narrative—Taiwan, armed with its ambitious NSP.

The success stories of post-conflict nations often hinge on youth engagement, a demographic that holds the power to influence the trajectory of a nation's future. Taking cues from the success of the European Union's Erasmus program, which championed the exchange of ideas and nurtured future leaders, Taiwan's NSP can zero in on similar youth-centric regional building initiatives in Myanmar.

Imagine, for instance, Myanmar's youth being offered scholarships to study in Taiwan's esteemed institutions, akin to the Fulbright Program, that fostered goodwill between the U.S. and countries recovering from World War II. Such programs not only provide quality education but also cultivate ambassadors of peace, understanding, and cooperation. These young individuals return with not just degrees but with shared experiences, stories, and an enhanced perspective on regional connectivity.

Furthermore, Taiwan can facilitate youth-

led entrepreneurial exchanges, mirroring the successes of ASEAN's Young Entrepreneurs Association. By sponsoring startup incubators that encourage collaboration between Taiwanese and Myanmar's youth, we could witness innovations that cater to regional challenges, be it in tech, agriculture, or sustainable development.

Beyond mere academia and entrepreneurial ventures, Taiwan's potential in cultural diplomacy is substantial. By taking a leaf out of Japan's playbook with the JENESYS initiative, Taiwan can set the stage for immersive experiences that bridge the gap between its youth and their Myanmar peers.

In fact, Taiwan has already begun to flaunt its soft power capabilities. Take, for instance, the SEASAT Youth Camp. This innovative program, with participating youth from Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Taiwan, does more than just showcase Taipei's bustling streets. It delves deep, unraveling the intricacies of Taiwan's political machinery, its democratic ethos, and its rich tapestry of cultural heritage - from the rhythms of traditional Hakka songs to the poetic beauty of its age-old temples. Programs like SEASAT are not just diplomatic tools but a testament to Taiwan's commitment to fostering regional understanding and collaboration. They encapsulate the island nation's vision for a more interconnected, empathetic Asia.

Indeed, Taiwan's engagement with Myanmar isn't a one-way street of benefaction. The intricacies of Myanmar, with its rich tapestry of cultures, traditions, and historical narratives, offer Taiwanese youth a lens into the soul of Southeast Asia, an understanding far deeper than what textbooks and lectures impart. It reminds me of a stroll I once took in Taipei, down a lane christened "Myanmar Street." Nestled amidst the bustling city, this enclave captures the essence of Myanmar, from vibrant pagodas to aromatic Myanmarese curries wafting through the air, echoing the tales of generations of Myanmarese who've made Taiwan their home. It stands as a testament to the shared history and the promise of mutual growth, a microcosm of the larger symbiotic relationship that Taiwan and Myanmar can cultivate.

Regional building, as history underscores, is not just about top-tier diplomacy and trade pacts. It's about the grassroots connections, the shared dreams of young minds, and the collaborative ventures that seed the future. The youth, with their adaptability, optimism, and digital nativeness, are poised to be the vanguard of change.

To some, this might sound like an idealistic vision. But remember, all transformative movements in history, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the Arab Spring, were powered by the aspirations and energies of the youth. Taiwan, with its NSP, has the blueprint. By focusing on youth-driven regional building, it could lead the charge in not just aiding Myanmar's recovery but in sculpting a brighter future for the entire region.

Can Taiwan and ASEAN craft a winning strategy?

In the complex web of Southeast Asian geopolitics, where internal strife often spills over borders, ASEAN stands as a sentinel, steering the region towards stability. Yet, as the Myanmar quagmire deepens, there's a silent, yet potent player that could prove instrumental: Taiwan and its NSP.

At first glance, this may raise eyebrows. Why would a non-ASEAN member state be of any relevance? But delve deeper, and the synergy is palpable. Much like how the Marshall Plan and the United Nations' coordinated efforts were pivotal in post-WWII Europe, the combined prowess of ASEAN's diplomatic heft and Taiwan's NSP could be the panacea Myanmar needs.

The ASEAN approach, often shrouded in its sacrosanct principle of non-interference, has its merits. But as the Myanmar situation evolves, it's akin to the EU grappling with the Yugoslav crisis in the '90s - internal dynamics can ripple across a region. Here, Taiwan, with its policy centered around socio-economic collaboration, can operate in tandem with ASEAN's larger geopolitical framework.

Historical precedents abound. Take Indonesia's adept diplomacy during Cambodia's political quagmire, orchestrating peace through ASEAN. In a similar vein, Taiwan's role could be akin to the Nordic countries' grassroots interventions in

the Balkans, focusing on rejuvenating the socio-economic fabric while ASEAN navigates the political minefields.

A two-pronged approach emerges. While ASEAN, with its seasoned diplomatic machinery, can facilitate top-tier dialogues, Taiwan could ignite Myanmar's grassroots. Much like Germany's instrumental role in bolstering Eastern Europe's economies post the Cold War, Taiwan's economic prowess could be Myanmar's springboard for revival.

And then there's Taiwan's unique geopolitical position. In the Southeast Asian mosaic, where nations swing between democracy and autocracy, Taiwan stands as a beacon of balanced governance. Drawing parallels with Switzerland's neutral stance in the EU, Taiwan can serve as an even-handed mediator, bridging divides within ASEAN's multifaceted bloc.

In essence, the Taiwan-ASEAN synergy isn't just a proposition; it's a blueprint for Myanmar's resurgence. By dovetailing political dialogues with on-ground economic rejuvenation, Myanmar can be steered from the precipice. And as history has shown when regional forces collaborate with a shared vision, monumental shifts are not just possible; they're inevitable.

In the backdrop of Myanmar's crisis, a fresh narrative is emerging, one that sees Taiwan's NSP not merely as an outreach, but as a tangible lifeline, reminiscent of Germany's pivotal role during the Balkan upheaval. ASEAN's legacy of diplomacy combined with Taiwan's invigorating approach offers a blueprint that's both audacious and strategic. This isn't just geopolitics—it's a masterclass in transformative regional collaboration. As we reflect on Southeast Asia's changing landscape, let this potential partnership be a beacon, showing that in the face of adversity, innovation and collaboration can indeed chart a new course.

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Is Democracy a Noun or a Verb: Breathing in Renewed Purpose or its Continued Demise?

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Democracy is dead. Or at least it's dying.

The past few years have been challenging for many democratic countries worldwide. Since 2017, democratic resilience has been characterized as fragile due to the rise of populism, corruption, inequality, and erosion of political participation and civil liberties (Community of Democracies, 2018; de Haan, Finnegan, Sanzarello, and Were, 2021). According to the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020 marked the most challenging period since 2006, primarily attributed to the pandemic-induced regression observed in 80 nations. The subsequent years, 2021 and 2022, have yet to witness a complete rebound; the trajectory has plateaued, showing signs of stagnation. Moreover, despite easing pandemic restrictions, state actors have continued to consolidate and abuse their power, thereby co-opting democratic and civic spaces. The convergence of these factors has resulted in the decline of opportunities for citizens to exercise their rights and a weakening of the institutions that uphold democratic principles and those that serve as watchdogs against abuses within democratic systems.

A particular trend in the erosion of democracy involves the supposed youth's increasing distrust and disengagement from democratic governance and its processes. (Community of Democracies, 2018; de Haan et al., 2021). In the middle of the apparent erosion of democracy and its values, especially as perceived by the youth, we grapple with a critical question: Can we rekindle its fire, or are we witnessing the countdown to its irreversible decline?

Distrust, but not disengaged

To understand the impact of the youth on the

future of democracy, we must first situate the youth in today's context. According to the United Nations (n.d.), there are 1.2 billion people between the ages of 15 and 24, accounting for 16% of the world population. In Asia, the youth constitute a more significant number of its population, i.e., around 25 percent (Smith and Yamakawa, 2020). However, despite this demographic weight, a study by the Centre for the Future of Democracy (2020) reveals a paradoxical situation; that the youth's confidence in democratic politics is notably lower than in any other age group. This sentiment stems from the perceived failure of democracy to uphold its promises of citizen representation toward delivering effective solutions to complex societal issues.

However, we should not equate this distrust with the youth's apathy toward societal issues. Many social movements advocating for progressive policies have risen in response to repressive societal actors in Asia. For instance, Myanmar's ongoing Civil Disobedience Movement not only opposes the 2021 coup but also advocates for women's and LGBTQ+ rights, along with addressing inadequacies in handling the Rohingya crisis (Anand, 2022). Although a certain level of distrust prevails among youth concerning the current state of co-opted democratic governance, this skepticism does not automatically result in youth disengagement when confronted with oppression and coercion. Instead, what becomes evident is the youth's proactive involvement in diverse social movements, employing strategies to rally support and solidarity in confronting various issues amidst suppressive state elements (de Haan et al., 2021; Horton and de Haan, 2019; Berthin, 2023; Council of Europe, n.d.; Mims, 2021; Booth, Medina, Siegel-Stechler, & Kiesa, 2023).

In my recent participation in the Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF)’s annual Southeast Asia-South Asia-Taiwan (SEASAT) Youth Camp in Taipei, Taiwan, last 26-28 July 2023, I saw that there is a healthy distrust among youth not with democracy per se, but rather how repressive and authoritarian actors co-opt democratic spaces and institutions. Many of my conversations with fellow delegates revealed similar and shared sentiments of how democracy has been rebranded to serve political and self-serving purposes rather than be a vehicle for inclusion, progress, and representation.

This shared sentiment concerning democracy bears both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the discussions have shown that my fellow youth approach the current state of democracy with a discerning eye, aiming to critically evaluate rather than outright condemn it. However, the flip side unveils a disheartening reality—numerous actors within democratic systems, particularly those in positions of authority, have turned a blind eye to an unsettling truth: democracy has fallen victim to hijacking and manipulation by vested interests. This collective perspective resonates as a broader consensus transcending geographical boundaries and borders. It underscores a pivotal distinction, that the youth’s skepticism does not fundamentally question democracy as a construct but instead directs its focus toward the integrity of its undertaking. In fact, the youth still consider democracy and its fundamental principles as instruments for positive change, but at the same time, raises concerns about how such principles are eroded and exploited.

Reclaim; if not, create spaces

One of the insidious consequences stemming from the waning strength of democracy, or its perceived inability to uphold its lofty promises of prosperity for all, is the subtle confiscation of spaces where people can engage in dialogues about democracy and its core values. The everyday concerns of survival, grappling with putting food on the table, or pursuing education often force individuals to prioritize immediate needs, sometimes at the cost of compromising their principles, dignity, and self-worth. An illustration of this distressing phenomenon was vividly presented by a group of participants in the

SEASAT Youth Camp, revealing the stark reality of college students entering the illicit sex trade to fund their education—a stark embodiment of how necessities clash with human dignity. These harsh realities have become the backdrop against which the youth are navigating or have already begun to navigate. This constricted space is what they are increasingly being constrained to occupy, a space molded by the very limitations and compromises that the current eroding and assimilated state of democracy seems to impose.

In response, social media has emerged as a quasi-remedy—a makeshift platform, at the very least—affording a semblance of unity for the youth. It becomes the conduit for collective conversations, a gathering point to dissect shared experiences of a system that appears to have fallen short of its commitments. A case in point is the Milk Tea Alliance, an online coalition rallying the youth from Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Myanmar, standing united to challenge authoritarian regimes (Potkin and Tanakasempipat, 2021). Through this virtual solidarity, the alliance symbolizes the power of shared concerns and the strength derived from a united voice, even spilling over from the online realm to physical spaces.

In the realm of democracy, the role of physical spaces is essential. These spaces serve as vital conduits for democratic spirit, playing a fundamental part in fostering an environment where the exchange of ideas can flourish. Neglecting their significance can be detrimental, potentially yielding deleterious effects on democratic frameworks (Parkinson, 2009). Such spaces not only facilitate discourse but also hold the crucial function of nurturing the marketplace of ideas among actors within the democratic space. Within such spaces, individuals can engage in healthy discussions, openly embracing the concept of “agreeing to disagree.”

One of the hallmark actions driven by the younger generation involves mainstreaming issues that have long been brushed aside or quietly endured by previous generations. Empowered by the generational strength to communicate, coupled with the facilitative role of social media, the youth are now championing dialogues that have historically been

suppressed, such as issues about gender, work and labor, and corruption, as highlighted during the SEASAT Youth Camp. As former Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Teodor Meleșcanu underscored in a speech during the 73rd United Nations General Assembly, the youth’s capacity for curiosity, tolerance, and embracing diversity is paramount and that it is within the availability of such spaces and enabling environment that the youth advocate for their own rights while simultaneously upholding respect for the rights of others.

According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the success of the New Southbound Policy (NSP) lies in leveraging Taiwan’s advantages in soft power, i.e., actively promoting its unique identity as the world’s only culturally Chinese democracy and the promotion of three-way exchanges between think tanks, the youth, and academics (Glaser, Kennedy, Mitchell, and Funaiolo, 2018). In this context, platforms like the SEASAT Youth Camp offer invaluable possibilities and potential for the flourishing of democracy, particularly from Taiwan’s best practices and expertise in democratization. These avenues create a safe haven where youth can engage with diverse perspectives and stakeholders such as government officials, think tanks, non-government organizations, and academics on various issues, each informed by unique perspectives. Through this kind of initiative, we are not only stuck at acknowledging the imperfections of our democratic realities, but we also take this as an opportunity to take a proactive stance in nurturing the seeds of progress, collaboration, and the sustained vitality of democracy itself.

In the modern age, physical and online spaces are crucial in reclaiming and creating environments where democracy can thrive. While physical spaces remain vital for fostering direct and organic interpersonal dialogues, online platforms amplify the reach and accessibility of these conversations, especially given geographic considerations and limitations of large-scale gatherings, as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interplay between the physical and virtual realms is a testament to the multifaceted nature of democratic engagement, highlighting the importance of embracing both arenas to ensure a comprehensive and

robust democratic discourse that resonates with all segments of society, particularly for the marginalized, underrepresented, and underprivileged.

The significance of conferences such as the SEASAT youth camp goes beyond their immediate impact; their continued conduct is paramount for fostering a robust democratic narrative across generations. The mutual respect and acknowledgment of participants’ diverse cultures and viewpoints weave a narrative that transcends geographical boundaries. It shows that the issues, intertwined with democracy’s challenges are not confined to a specific location; instead, they serve as common ground for collective engagement. Recently, I attended an online meeting with fellow delegates from Indonesia and Thailand, wherein we discussed ways of crafting spaces where youth can interact with policymakers, contributing to the formulation of policies that genuinely address the needs of our respective communities. This highlights the expansive potential of sustained engagement through youth-oriented endeavors, demonstrating how the seeds sown in spaces such as SEASAT Youth Camp can bear transformative fruits across diverse settings.

To this end, I have recently founded “Keep the Change: Youth Policy Lab”, a collaborative space where Filipino youth and other stakeholders can go together and understand and participate in the Philippine policy environment and develop innovative solutions to solve complex public issues. As changemakers, it provides avenues for Filipino youth to learn practical skills related to policymaking, lobbying, monitoring, and evaluation through innovative and engaging initiatives, ultimately contributing to developing more genuine civic spaces and deepening democratic institutions. In the upcoming months, I aim to collaborate with my fellow delegates from SEASAT Youth Camp and invite them to share their experiences in engaging policymakers in making policies work for our communities.

So, is democracy a noun or a verb?

In an interview concerning the contemporary state and future trajectory of democracy, American historian Timothy Snyder (2022) highlighted the initial step in addressing the

challenges inherent in democracy: reevaluating our perception of the term “democracy.” Rather than perceiving democracy solely as a static noun or an entity apart from us, Snyder advocated for a paradigm shift. He suggested that viewing democracy as an active verb, a collective action, transforms our engagement. Embracing democracy as a process we participate in translates into shared responsibility, allowing us to shed the notion that democracy is solely an outcome governed by uncontrollable external forces.

Therefore, democracy might be dying, but as long as there are spaces wherein, we can do democracy, such as SEASAT Youth Camp, its fire and spirit continue to be alive. As tomorrow’s leaders, these conversations and mutual understanding significantly imply what we aspire to achieve. Therefore, it is a demand to our existing leaders and democratic institutions to collectively address our calls, thereby reestablishing our faith in the democratic process by aligning their actions with the values they profess to uphold. The essence of this demand lies in their capacity to not merely hear but to actively respond; rekindling the dwindling flames of trust in democracy. Through dialogue, education, and proactive reform, an opportunity exists to co-create and reshape the narrative, allowing democracy to fulfill its promise as a force for progress, inclusion, and development for everyone.

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Mission Possible: Balancing “Vox Populi Vox Dei” through Collaborative and Inclusive Policymaking

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Democracy is a fundamental principle that I have been exposed to since elementary school. Born and raised in a democratic country after the political reformation, I have had the privilege of witnessing the practical implementation of democracy in my everyday life. However, this privilege has somewhat confined me to my own perspective, as I have not had the opportunity to experience democracy in other nations. My horizon broadened significantly when I had the chance to interact with 40 young leaders from Asia during the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp. This experience not only provided me with new insights into the concept of democracy but also deepened my understanding and empathy regarding how democracy should function effectively.

Freedom of speech among the populace stands as a pivotal gauge of the successful execution of a democracy. While the roots of democracy extend back many centuries, the practical realization of this concept has exhibited slow progress and remains notably distant from perfection. Democracy is essential to achieve good governance that ensures people’s voices are heard and accommodated. Notably in several preeminent nations, democracy has emerged as the bedrock upon which governance is founded. Nonetheless, the unbridled and formless expression of public sentiment carries the potential to give rise to exclusionary and unsustainable policy formation. In this essay, I aim to uncover how to balance people’s aspirations and accommodate them through collaborative and inclusive policymaking.

Vox Populi, Vox Dei: The louder the voice, the more it is heard.

“Vox populi, vox dei” is the Latin phrase meaning

“The voice of the people is the voice of God” (Webster, 2023). It is a democratic foundational principle that hinges on the participation and collective will of the citizens. This phrase can be seen as the antithesis of the dictatorship regime that suppresses the people’s voices. While this maxim underscores the importance of public opinion in shaping governance, it also raises concerns about potential pitfalls associated with unchecked majoritarianism.

Meanwhile, the emergence of social media and technology creates new dimensions and challenges to “vox populi, vox dei”. The rise of social media platforms provides unprecedented opportunities for people to voice their aspirations or even be involved in uncontrollable mass “online war”. In addition, the advancement of technology and social media could help rising populist leaders achieve their agenda. Populism is a political approach that emphasizes the desires of the majority against certain elites. Populist movements tend to oversimplify complex issues, foster division, and overlook minority rights. Social media helps spread the populist agenda by amplifying these people’s voices.

There is a widely-known phenomenon in Indonesia where the government takes action on certain issues after they have gone viral on social media. For instance, there is a young Indonesian diaspora named Bima that used social media to criticize the corruption, lack of high-quality education, and underdeveloped infrastructure in the local government of Lampung, Indonesia. Bima’s voice went viral and received a lot of support and echo from the people. It received massive attention even from President Joko Widodo (Tempo, 2023). Another case occurred when Jakarta experienced severe

air pollution for several weeks. There was no significant and immediate response made by the government in addressing this issue until people on social media started buzzing and made it viral. On February 14th, 2023, President Joko Widodo conducted a meeting with relevant ministers to tackle this issue, which resulted in immediate responses (Kompas, 2023). This virality in social media brought rapid response and governance reform that people could never have imagined before.

**A Temporary Win:
when quantity wins over quality**

“Vox populi, vox dei” has been shown to be a catalyst for democratic and policy reform. However, this concept also created other challenges, such as unsustainable policy, tokenism, and neglect of the vulnerable groups’ voices in policymaking. Here are a few examples from Indonesia and Thailand of ineffective policy implementation.

There is a long discourse about the reclamation of the Jakarta Bay coast. The Jakarta Bay Reclamation Project is a large-scale development project that involves reclaiming land from the sea along the coast of Jakarta. The project aims to create new land for commercial, residential, and infrastructure development. However, this project has been a topic of controversy due to its potential environmental and social impacts. Several protests occurred, all of which were led by environmental and social activists who were concerned about the livelihood and well-being of the people living in the area. This issue became political during the 2017 Gubernatorial Elections, where the incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, planned to continue the coastal reclamation. However, the plan was opposed by his opponent, Anies Baswedan, who perceived a demand from the public to halt this initiative. Nevertheless, after being elected, he proceeded to continue the policy, citing economic reasons (CNBC Indonesia, 2023).

A similar case happened in Thailand. The Chana Industrial Project is a large-scale industrial initiative located in the Chana District of Songkhla Province in Thailand. This project is part of the Belt and Road Initiative by China (ANI News, 2020). It also sparked concerns among the people due to its environmental and

social impacts, leading to a five-day protest in Bangkok. To handle the massive protest, the government agreed to postpone the development and established an ad-hoc team to investigate this issue (ASEAN Today, 2020). However, the actions taken by the government were merely symbolic gestures to involve people’s voices in the policymaking process. Ultimately, the government decided to resume the Chana project development (Bangkok Post, 2022).

These examples in Indonesia and Thailand show that accommodating the voices of the majority is not sufficient to ensure democracy and inclusive policymaking. What they illustrate is that when quantity wins over quality, it will result in nothing but a mere temporary win.

**Making voices meaningful through
collaborative and inclusive policymaking**

Democracy should create a fair, inclusive, and safe space for all entities within it to allow for the effective functioning of governance. In this case, freedom of speech as one of the elements of democracy should be carefully regulated. Collaborative and inclusive policymaking is believed to be the ideal way to harness people’s voices to create sustainable and effective policies. This goal could be achieved through “collaborative governance”. Collaborative governance is initiated by public agencies to set up a collective process involving public, private, and community stakeholders to form and implement public policy, programs, or projects (Ansell, 2008).

The values of collaborative governance are deeply rooted in some Southeast Asian countries, such as “Gotong Royong” from Indonesia, “Bayanihan” from the Philippines, “Chun-Tian” from Thailand, and “Gotong Jaya” from Malaysia—which emphasize collective and inclusive approaches to tackle common issues. In regards to that, instead of creating an unfamiliar framework that may lead to confusion and new complexities, this approach tries to solve the problem by highlighting the modality that is deeply rooted within the people.

At Pijar Foundation, we interpret collaborative governance as the framework that emphasizes the importance of empathy, inclusivity, and consensus-oriented approaches in achieving

common goals. The collaborative governance framework has been successfully implemented in Pijar Foundation's Global Future Fellows (GFF) program in 2022 and 2023, resulting in five collaboration areas in safeguarding the energy transition and 15 collaboration projects in achieving food security amid global tensions. The GFF program addresses these global issues by gathering 36-40 multi-sector decision-makers to be actively involved in a series of masterclasses in collaborative governance. During the masterclasses, fellows are able to convey their problems and ideas and are encouraged to develop collective solutions through three stages of collaborative governance, namely: 1) empathy and problem synthesizing, 2) solution sketching and mapping, and 3) transforming ideas into action.

Apart from accommodating multi-sector discussions, collaborative governance also highlights the importance of youth participation in policymaking. At Pijar Foundation, we have created a series of youth-led and youth-driven forums in several cities in Indonesia called Townhall Muda. One of the examples of Townhall Muda's impact is the creation of Townhall Muda Policy Taskforce in Sigi Regency, Central Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. We not only facilitated the discussions between youth and policymakers but also drafted policy recommendations that have been adopted by the Sigi Regency government in their long-term development projects.

These empirical examples of collaborative governance in Indonesia spark optimism to replicate the implementation of the framework on a broader scale. To harness people's voices and avoid populism bias, there are three stages in collaborative governance that can be implemented in building other collaborative and inclusive policymaking:

1. Empathy and problem synthesizing

First, to create an inclusive ecosystem, empathy should be the foundation for accommodating the community members' aspirations and ideas. Any personal/community biases, ego, and prejudices should be eliminated to leave no one behind. Through empathy, we will have clear eyes to synthesize the actual problems that may be overlooked when we only focus

on the majority's voices. At this stage, we are expected to meaningfully accommodate the voices of the vulnerable, such as ethnic/religion-based minority groups, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, and others. Instead of resorting to tokenism, we should give them the strategic position to be able to undertake meaningful action. This stage calls for the establishment of a sense of collectivism within the people. For example, in the Global Future Fellows program, fellows from diverse backgrounds are given the chance to describe problems from their perspectives; in Townhall Muda, young people are encouraged to express their ideas in front of policymakers. Throughout the processes, Pijar Foundation upholds merit-based participation and ignores other background traits such as gender, race, and religion that can provoke unnecessary bias.

2. Solution sketching and mapping

By having meaningful participation, receiving diverse perspectives, and fostering collectiveness, we can move to the solution sketching and mapping stage, where strategic stakeholders will be able to support our goals. At this stage, we will uncover our modality or potential and expect resource exchange within the group or support from the stakeholders outside the group who have like-minded principles. At this point, Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP), which emphasizes a people-centered approach and focuses on fostering public-private-people (civil society / NGO) partnership or P-P-P partnership, shares the same core values of collaborative governance in opting for inclusive policies and collaboration that benefits all. Therefore, a pragmatic suggestion would be to feature a session or a project on combining the NSP and the collaborative governance frameworks during the SEASAT Youth Camp, which could result in stakeholder mapping and policy recommendations.

3. Transforming ideas into action

A collective and empathetic group has crafted solutions and engaged stakeholders, culminating in the imperative stage of translating ideas into actions. The bedrock of this framework rests on collectiveness and consensus, underscoring the guiding principles for an inclusive policymaking

approach that serves all. For the realization of collaborative and inclusive policymaking, a strategic and like-minded partner is essential. The Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF), aligned with the NSP framework, is seen to be an apt collaborator. Their strong commitment to inclusivity, collaboration, and people-centric methodologies aligns seamlessly with the solutions proposed. Additionally, with the aligned values between TAEF and Pijar Foundation the successful collaborative governance implemented programs in Indonesia such as Global Future Fellows and Townhall Muda can be replicated in Taiwan to foster the collaboration between two countries.

Conclusion

Democracy's potency lies in its ability to channel the diverse voices of a populace towards effective governance. However, unchecked and unguided public sentiment can lead to exclusionary policies with limited sustainability. A transformational approach emphasizing collaboration and inclusivity can counterbalance the populism-based policy. By synthesizing the voices of vulnerable groups and echoing historical Southeast Asian values of collective problem-solving, collaborative governance emerges as an ideal model for a democracy that can truly benefit all. Collaborative governance becomes a pathway to meaningful, inclusive, and enduring policies. Partnering with like-minded entities, such as the TAEF, can further amplify the success of this approach.

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About the Author

Ellya is an accomplished program manager and a passionate advocate for inclusive policymaking, driven by a firm belief in shaping our sustainable, collective future. Ellya is particularly passionate about designing and executing events, dialogues, and forums that promote insightful exchanges of ideas. International politics, especially the Indo-Pacific dynamic and sustainability for social impact are the issues that she is most passionate about. Remarkably, at just 24, Ellya is entrusted to lead the prestigious Global Future Fellows (GFF) program, one of Pijar Foundation's flagship initiatives. Previously, she worked for BritCham Indonesia, an association that promotes business and trade relations between Indonesia and the UK. She has a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia.

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The Rainbow Renaissance

Ariella “Ari” Osmeña (*The Philippines*)

University of San Carlos

“The future is bleak, the future is bright.”

With many pressing issues all around Asia and the rest of the world, it is easy to feel isolated and helpless—especially as youth who are pulled back and forth between two different images of the world. Where one paints the world as unforgiving; described to outcast those who are different, building walls and creating boundaries through cruel beliefs and systems that prohibit development. While the other describes the world as beautiful; bearing a bounty of potential, forming bridges of unity between communities, and working together to thrive. Despite how vastly different the two worlds are, both are equally real.

Human beings are diverse, coming from different walks of life, expressing themselves in different ways, and loving others in different forms. Those ideas are seen as beautiful by some as they are heinous to others.

In recent years, the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights has gained unprecedented global momentum, fostering more inclusive societies and challenging long-standing prejudices. For instance, the Director of Asia Programs at Outright International, Jennifer Lu, highlighted in her gender, youth, and human rights workshop at the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp the normalization of queer existence in media campaigns. However, in many parts of Asia, the fight for LGBTQ+ rights remains an uphill battle. Going more in-depth into this social issue, I will be using the case of my home country—the Philippines— and its recent efforts with the SOGIE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression) Bill in the hopes of offering valuable insights into the importance of promoting LGBTQ+ rights in Asia, while examining the

broader regional context through other various examples.

The Philippine SOGIE Bill: A Catalyst for Change

The Philippine SOGIE Bill has garnered both local and international attention for its efforts to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. This bill seeks to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, while also providing mechanisms for legal recourse and the promotion of LGBTQ+ awareness. This proposed legislation acknowledges that equality is a fundamental human right, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The bill itself aims to protect Filipinos from forms of discrimination based on their SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics). Protecting them from media that incites violence against them and other establishments that deny them service as well as giving them the right not to be refused or expelled from the Philippine military or their place of work because of their SOGIESC.

However, the journey of the Philippine SOGIE Bill has been fraught with challenges. Conservative cultural values, religious beliefs, and societal norms have contributed to the bill's prolonged struggle for enactment. Although the House of Representatives approved the bill last May 2023, the passing of the bill in the Philippine Senate remains sluggish. Once the Senate approves it, the SOGIE Bill still requires approval from the President. Concerned government agencies and institutions will also need to implement its provisions, and its enforcement monitored. Nevertheless, the tireless efforts of LGBTQ+ activists and allies have managed to keep the conversation alive, highlighting the need to confront discrimination and inequality head-on.

Broader Regional Perspective

To truly understand the significance of LGBTQ+ rights in Asia, it is imperative to consider the broader regional context. Across Asia, a patchwork of laws and cultural attitudes exists, ranging from countries with progressive policies to those where homosexuality remains criminalized. This diverse landscape highlights the urgent need for consistent advocacy and education.

One example of progress can be seen in Taiwan, where same-sex marriage was legalized in 2019, marking a historic milestone for LGBTQ+ rights in Asia. As shared by Jennifer Lu in her workshop, Taiwan's journey serves as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that societal change is possible even in traditionally conservative societies. Meanwhile, countries like India and Nepal have made strides in recognizing third-gender individuals and granting legal recognition to transgender people.

However, the unfortunate reality is that LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face challenges in many parts of Asia. In countries like Brunei and Malaysia, for instance, colonial-era anti-sodomy laws persist, leading to systemic discrimination and human rights abuses against LGBTQ+ individuals. The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in Asia is far from over, but the Philippine SOGIE Bill and other examples from the region showcase the importance of continued advocacy and dialogue. The Philippines' experience shows that despite resistance, social change is possible through persistent efforts and alliances between LGBTQ+ activists, civil society, and progressive lawmakers.

Many Asian countries lack clear legal mechanisms for changing one's gender marker on identification documents, making it challenging for transgender and nonbinary individuals to have their gender identity legally recognized. Additionally, most Asian countries have limited access to gender-affirming healthcare, including hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries. This lack creates significant issues in many Asian countries, leading to disparities in health outcomes and rising rates of suicide within the transgender population. Aside from the health and legal implications for the transgender community,

you can also highlight the need for a country's law to recognize same-sex partnerships legally. A country's civil laws should be able to accommodate LGBTQI rights when it comes to marriage, separation, adoption of children, succession, property rights, and others.

Regional coalition building among youth to face these pressing issues may sound daunting from macro lenses but I sincerely believe that if we take it one step at a time—starting from institutions such as our schools or areas like our own neighborhood, our collective action can snowball into the global change we need. By building communities and organizations, creating clubs among friends, or even using your sole voice, you are opening the gates to opportunities that will allow your advocacies to be heard. A great example of a start would be creating school organizations with the goal to create safe spaces for queer youth. The Supreme Student Council of the University of San Carlos (my current university) have developed the USC Supreme Student Council Special Committee on Gender and Development, an entire team that aims to create a safe and well-educated community within the campus through conferences and events.

With the 2023 SEASAT Youth Camp's theme being Bridging Boundaries: Harnessing Collaboration, Inclusion, and Innovation for Next Leadership, it gave me a lot of hope when my gender identity was recognized and respected by the staff and fellow delegates. Promoting LGBTQ+ rights in Asia is not merely a matter of principle; it reflects our commitment to human dignity, equality, and social justice. As the world moves forward, it is crucial for Asia to embrace its diverse LGBTQ+ population, fostering societies where everyone can live authentically and without fear of discrimination. By learning from each other's experiences and joining hands, Asia can become a beacon of LGBTQ+ rights progress, setting an example for the rest of the world to follow.

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About the Author

Ari Osmeña is a student at the University of San Carlos studying a Bachelor of Science degree in the field of Psychology where they have strived to create a safe space for fellow queer youth. They were a delegate in the National Youth Congress held by the University of the Philippines – Diliman, were the Editor-in-Chief of their high school's creative writing magazine and is currently the Head Illustrator of their university publication. They intend to create future projects for their student body's LGBTQ+ Community using their skills in the arts, literature, and public speaking.

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About the Publishers



Taiwan-Asia Exchange Foundation (TAEF)

Founded in 2018, TAEF is the first Taiwanese policy think tank with a focus on Southeast Asian and South Asian affairs. In the spirit of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy (NSP), the goal of TAEF is to help strengthen the comprehensive ties between Taiwan and the 10 ASEAN countries, India and other five South Asian countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand through collaboration and exchange among think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and young leaders. TAEF is devoted to consolidating a sense of regional community in Asia and establishing long-term cooperative partnerships among Asian societies. TAEF was selected as one of the world's best new think tanks for three years in a row by the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report.



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