

FIRST SOUTHEAST ASIA CHILDREN'S CONFERENCE DECLARATION

“Towards One Caring and Sharing Community for Children”

We, the children of the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-- Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam—gather together for the First Southeast Asian Children's Conference in the Antipolo City, Philippines from December 10 to 14, 2006, to discuss themes of importance to children and youth, and review progress towards achieving the World Fit for Children and Millennium Development Goals.

We discussed different issues affecting children and young people, such as poverty, disasters and emergencies, education, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, maternal health, child mortality, gender equality, environmental sustainability, children's participation and child trafficking. In each of these issues, we discussed the situation, actions taken to address the situation, and what else can be done, especially on the part of young people.

On Poverty

It is very sad for us to note that many children in our region are victims of extreme poverty and hunger. We cannot buy what we need and our necessities are not fulfilled. Our rights are often overshadowed by poverty. Many children engage in hazardous work and dangerous activities just to earn money. Our development has been distorted and poverty has been a hindrance in achieving our dreams.

We are happy to know that the governments of our nations are also trying to reduce poverty. They find alternatives like programs for marginalized families, vocational trainings, financial assistance and other initiatives to reduce poverty. We express our gratitude to their efforts of reducing poverty in Southeast Asia. We know very much that these problems left children deprived of their rights and more vulnerable. We hope that more efforts shall be done in the future and that people and government shall join hands to overcome poverty.

On Disasters and Emergencies

We identified common disasters and emergencies affecting countries in the region. These include natural disasters such as tsunamis, typhoons, flashfloods, drought and landslides, as well as human-made disasters such as wars, fires, terrorism, and unexploded ordnance (UXO) from past wars. These disasters and emergencies render children helpless and vulnerable. They destroy our homes, schools and roads, thus disrupting our development. They claim lives and properties. In the chaos, we become vulnerable to exploitation. We suffer from psychological and emotional trauma.

We recognize the actions taken in response to disasters and emergencies. Victims of disasters and emergencies receive support from government and non-government organizations, including food, clothes, safe drinking water, medicines, shelter, and financial aid. Creative trauma debriefing activities were conducted for children. Alarm systems have been installed to warn calamity-prone areas of imminent disasters.

We believe that disasters and emergencies can be reduced if we declare certain forest areas protected. We should plant more and more trees to replace the ones we cut down. We must intensify awareness-raising campaigns about disasters and emergencies, including what to do when disaster strikes.

Young people can take part in this campaign by creating means of coordination between ASEAN children, such as websites and regional children's councils. We can initiate our own disaster-awareness activities. We can give our support to affected children through creative and socialization activities. We can encourage other children and young people to serve as volunteers in providing relief to disaster areas and advocates in preserving and protecting the environment. We can work hand in hand with adults in identifying appropriate interventions to help children affected by disasters and emergencies.

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On education

Currently, most children in the region are able to attend school due to compulsory education programs in their countries. However, there are children who are not able to attend school due to limited access to education and the lack of awareness towards the importance of education. As children, we would take part in advocacy with the government to increase access to quality education. We can build networks to increase community awareness so that by 2015, all children in ASEAN countries would be able to have access to education of better quality.

On maternal health

We express our sincere gratitude to the governments of different ASEAN nations for giving care and programs for mothers and unborn children. The continuous education on maternal health provides poor families with basic knowledge on correct ways to raise children. We look forward to the reduction of maternal deaths by improving the health of mothers and their unborn children. We want affordable and more accessible health services for mothers and children. Let advocacy, public awareness and information dissemination be intensified. Let us work hand in hand to achieve our goal of a three-quarter reduction of maternal mortality by 2015.

On gender equality

Gender equality and women/girl-children empowerment have made benchmarks as most of the ASEAN countries achieved equal treatment and non-discrimination. In most ASEAN countries, women/girl-children are given equal access to needs like education, health care and employment opportunities. Besides that, there is an increase in women participation in government's socio-economic development. There are also laws allocating seats for women in the government and provisions supporting this issue. Even in schools and NGOs, women/girl-children are given space to develop their talents which eventually open opportunities for them.

We, the children of the ASEAN, realize that gender inequality still exists in some countries in the region. In some cultures, men/boys are preferred over women/girl-children and in some rural areas women/girl-children are not given proper education, especially in the minority groups. Besides that, women/girl-children still face discrimination at home.

As children of the ASEAN, we need to raise awareness on gender equality and gender sensitivity through peer education. Existing laws need to be reviewed, so do issues related to family planning and gender equality in governance and politics. Meritocracy needs to be promoted. More child participation and CRC programmes need to be carried out by youth for youth, so as to allow women to voice out and participate actively. Career counseling in school needs to be expanded and there should be clubs to organize training on gender issues. As a tool for prevention, more centers and hotlines need to be formed so that victims of discrimination can seek help.

On child mortality

Some children in the region are in poor health and high risk of dying. This is true specially when children live in the following conditions: being orphaned and having no family; malnutrition and hunger; poverty; unemployment among parents; pollution; accidents and violence; lack of access to vaccination, clean water and toilets; bad habits during pregnancy (e.g., smoking); lack of materials to stimulate mental growth (e.g., toys).

Other children in our region enjoy good health. They are loved and cared for by their families and communities.

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We do recognize the progress being made in the area of children's health such as: developing integrated health programs that ensure good health services of children including free vaccinations, medicines, vitamins, health information and regular health check-ups; providing trainings to health workers and social workers; information campaigns to raise public awareness; shelter programs for the poor and homeless; promotion of breast feeding; increasing access to clean water and toilets; ensuring a good and clean environment.

Children and young people can advocate to governments to make children's health a priority and to create health referral system;

We can be peer health educators. We can volunteer in community and school health programs. We can help promote healthy pregnancy and breastfeeding among women and mothers. We can promote the value of family care and love. We can encourage family talks about health concerns.

On child participation

Through interaction with different children's organizations in the Philippines, we see a high level of child participation among countries in the region, reaffirming our conviction that children cannot be underestimated. We are actively involved in advocating the different issues of children. We organize children's groups and initiate activities that help other children in our countries. We do these activities not only in the local community level, but in provincial, national and regional levels as well. We work hand in hand with our communities, governments and non-government organizations. We maximize our participation by initiating, planning, implementing, and evaluating our own activities. In all these efforts, we sense the strong commitment of the ASEAN children to participation.

We believe that our governments must recognize the merits of child participation in nation-building by giving us venues to take part in policy and decision-making. Child participation must be extended to every child, and not only limited to a fortunate few. They must create forums where we can freely discuss our concerns and initiate our own solutions. Children must be consistently educated about issues that affect us. On the practical side, children must be supported financially in our efforts to participate.

As young people of the ASEAN, we can further advance our right to participation by forming a South East Asian children's council that will allow us to coordinate effectively with other children in the region.

On child trafficking

We understand that trafficking happens largely to both women and children. They are often trafficked for sex slavery, others for cheap labor, still others for dangerous work in factories, and in some countries, deep-sea fishing. Most victims are street children and young children from rural areas. They are transported to tourist areas cheap labor sites. Our countries become the source, transit point, and receivers of trafficked children, hence supporting the practice on the global level.

Child trafficking is caused by poverty and the need for employment, too large families, the influence of foreign culture and values, and lack of awareness and information about the issue, worsened by illiteracy.

Trafficking usually happens in the guise of adoption, false promises of employment and economic gain. Trafficking subjects children to different kinds of abuses. We suffer from physical disabilities caused by hard labor and maltreatment. We experience emotional, psychological and spiritual problems such as hopelessness, depression, fear and nervousness. We become vulnerable to high-risk pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection. Our families are broken. In confusion, we resort to lawlessness and criminal action. Our lives are endangered and our futures are shattered.

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We recognize the actions taken to combat child trafficking. Awareness campaigns maximized the use of different media to inform about child trafficking, violence against women and children, and the child's right to protection. We created national policies, regulations and plans of action focusing on child and women trafficking, such as strict immigration checks of minors. We implemented support programs for victims, such as temporary shelters, child-friendly counseling, reporting hotlines and capacity-building for women and children, as well as organizations providing services. We began firming up cooperation with other countries in the region, including child trafficking case referrals and documentation of cases, forging Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and monitoring movements at borders. We carried out programs on family and community reintegration.

As young people of the ASEAN, we can join campaigns to stop child trafficking by being instruments of informing other young people on how they can protect themselves. We can support child victims by promoting non-discrimination and socialization activities. We can participate in the monitoring of cases. We can create a regional children's network in cooperation with government and non-government organizations.

Way forward

We strongly recommend the formation of the Southeast Asia Children's Forum that will be the regional voice of children.

This body will work to address children's concerns with a regional perspective.

It will also link up with other children's forum in different regions of the world.

The SEA Children's Forum will also encourage governments to develop national frameworks on children's participation and create policies that promote children's rights.

We recommend that the forum to have regular annual meetings.

The forum will also seek ways how children in the region will be represented in ASEAN meeting in December 2007 in Singapore.

In order to realize this, we commit ourselves to do advocacy work to our leaders to support this cause.

We will explore various creative ways such the media and internet to convince leaders in supporting children's participation in the region.

We recommend a preparatory meeting with the following agenda: to formally form the Forum; to prepare for the 2nd SEA Children's Conference; and to review progress on action plan developed in this conference.