OPENING AND PLENARY SESSION
THE ASEAN PLUS THREE YOUTH ENVIRONMENT FORUM (AYEF) 2018: "*IMAGINE. CREATE. CHANGE.*"

Welcome Remarks

by H.E. Vongthep Arthakaivalvatee
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- Day 1, Saturday, 30 June 2018
- Venue: Orchard Hotel, Singapore
- Time: 0945-0955 hrs

Her Excellency Madam Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore,

His Excellency Masagos Zulkifli, Minister for the Environment and Water Resources,

Ambassadors, Distinguished guests, youth leaders,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

Introduction

1. It is my great honour and privilege to be given an opportunity to stand amongst such distinguished guests and passionate young leaders, and address you at the Opening and Plenary Session of the ASEAN Plus Three Youth Environment Forum.

2. On behalf of the Secretary-General of ASEAN, His Excellency Dato Lim Jock Hoi, I wish to express my profound gratitude to the Government of Singapore, in particular to the National Environment Agency of the Ministry for the Environment and Water Resources of Singapore for, once again, organising the ASEAN Plus Three Youth Environment Forum (AYEF).

3. Since its first event held in 2007 in Brunei Darussalam, the AYEF has been an important event that aims toward promoting awareness and

enhancing the participation and cooperation of youths in environmental protection in ASEAN. Therefore, I would like to give recognition to both Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, for leading this noble initiative.

Setting the Stage: Population, Climate Change, and Cities

Excellencies, youth leaders, ladies, and gentlemen,

4. Climate change is a defining and most challenging sustainable development issue of our time. The Southeast Asian region is one of the world's most vulnerable regions to the impacts of climate change. Among the ten most climate-affected countries in the world, four are the ASEAN Member States, namely Myanmar, Philippines, Viet Nam, and Thailand. Some of the adverse impacts we are experiencing include rising sea levels, prolonged droughts, and flash floods caused by intense rainfall. These have caused declining freshwater and crop yields, affecting food security, increasing loss of forests and farmlands, threatening island dwellers and coastal communities, and a surge in infectious diseases such as dengue and malaria. These challenges are compounded by the growing population that increasingly requires more necessities from Mother Nature such as food, water, land, and energy.

5. ASEAN boasts a total population of 630 million people. Of this total population, about 50% live in cities or urban areas, also expected to increase to 75% by the year 2050 due to rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration. With such high population density, cities could be seen as a major contributor to the environmental challenges that we face today. At the same time, cities could also be seen as part of a solution. They have the potential to drive the transformative change needed to achieve low carbon and climate resilient ASEAN through greener buildings and infrastructures, green spaces, more efficient mass transportation, reduced and better waste and wastewater management, efficient use of energy and cleaner fuels including renewable energy, and clean water supply. Given the importance of cities to the future growth of the ASEAN Community and the welfare of its people, their role in contributing to environmental protection and climate change mitigation should be fully exerted. Against the backdrop of the World Cities Summit during Urban Sustainability Week taking place in just a few weeks here and under the theme: *'Imagine. Create. Change'*, this Forum will highlight how the youth can take a major role in the future direction of creating environmentally sustainable cities in ASEAN.

The Role of Youth and AYEF

Excellencies, youth leaders, ladies, and gentlemen,

6. Youth is our vital asset. Nearly one-third of ASEAN's population is made up of the youth. They are also key engines and torch bearers of the new development agenda in the region. Coupled with their natural skills in digital technology, the youth of ASEAN have open access to extensive information and connectivity that can offer alternative solutions to the global environmental crisis we are facing now. Therefore, we must generate a global conversation on environmental sustainability among our next generations.

7. It is in this context that the Forum, in pursuit of ASEAN ideals, aims to embrace the youths in promoting and ensuring sustainable development. Moreover, the Forum is taking place at a critically important juncture. This year, Singapore as Chair of ASEAN underscores its bold determinations to work toward a more resilient and innovative ASEAN which encapsulates the vision for us to be united, adaptable and forward looking in the face of growing uncertainties in the global strategic landscape. In addition to that, on 5th June, we just celebrated the World Environment Day 2018, which marks the culmination of a worldwide campaign to raise awareness and inspire action to beat plastic pollution.

8. To the youth leaders in the audience, let me speak directly to you. This Forum is an auspicious opportunity for you to inculcate the spirit of protecting the environment, to challenge yourselves as active and informed citizens and to participate in the development of an ecologically sustainable and socially-just society. And to this end, I urge you to transform the way you think and act by joining the movement of *"Imagine. Create. Change"*.

9. First, let us take a few moments and imagine. What does an ideal environment look like? What crosses your mind when you think about an environmentally-friendly world? A world without air pollution? An ocean without plastics – those found inside the stomachs of marine animals? Or perhaps a world with less depressing news about natural disasters caused by climate change? It is precisely your imagination that will become a powerful source of inspiration. So please, start imagining today; start imagining now!

10. Second, let us create. Take advantage of your intelligent minds. Think of what you can do to bring about transformational ways to collaborate and innovate so as to achieve the ideal environment that you have been imagining. Do your research, offer fresh, science-based perspectives, create new initiatives and innovative solutions and set clear directions on how they can consistently be implemented.

11. Third, make a change. We all know that a brilliant idea means nothing without action. It is time to use your knowledge and resources to work in tandem with other youths to actualise your plans. Make use of technology, to communicate with other stakeholders, exchange ideas and best practices through active networking and advocacy campaigns; and establish collaboration. As the future leaders of our region, ask yourself: how will you, and like-minded youths, personally participate and contribute in shaping ASEAN regional cooperation in the years ahead – for a better ASEAN.

ASEAN Vision 2025 and Future Direction

Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen,

12. ASEAN Leaders have pledged their commitments to achieve an ASEAN Community that is politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible. Specifically, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) envisions the achievement of sustainable development to promote and ensure balanced social development and sustainable environment that meet the needs of the peoples. This year Singapore as the Chair of ASEAN inaugurates 2018 as the Year of Climate Action, and also initiated the ASEAN Smart Cities Network. This is a positive step toward building an innovative and resilient ASEAN.

13. I take this opportunity to highlight here the ASEAN Declaration on Culture of Prevention for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Resilient, Healthy and Harmonious Society, which was adopted by the ASEAN Leaders at the 31st Summit in Manila on 13 November 2017. The Culture of Prevention, CoP for short, represents a paradigm shift in the way we respond to challenges by promoting upstream, preventive measures. Instead of reacting to challenges, we seek to address their underlying root causes. One of the CoP thrusts, ‘promoting a culture of resilience and care for the environment, aims to prevent risks of natural, human-induced disasters and environmental degradation from occurring in the first place through upstream initiatives. All these are clearly linked to the United

Nation's Agenda on Sustainable Development, a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that no one is left behind!

Closing

14. It is my firm belief that youth plays a critical role in achieving these visions and aspirations. I do hope that the discussions during the next three days will stimulate creative thinking and generate bold ideas in order to move us closer to our common goals of environmental sustainability. One clear message that I want to emphasize is that everyone must be engaged because we are in this together. I look forward to extensive contributions from each of us to create a lively, robust, clean and green ASEAN.

15. In closing, I am reminded of the renowned quote from Mahatma Gandhi: "*Be the change you want to see in the world*!" for the sake of our healthy planet.

16. Thank you.

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