

Asean Youth Fellowship offers 35-year-old long-time youth volunteer...

Chance to learn, skills to lead

By KAREYST LIN

“There is a lot of diversity within the Asean region, and in the way social impact work is carried out in each country. This means there is a lot that we can learn from each other.”

— Mr Yuwan Mohan, one of the 40 delegates from Asean Youth Fellowship 2023

It is a life that keeps on lifting. A decade of volunteering with the National Youth Council (NYC) has seen Mr Yuwan Mohan shape countless young lives.

But the 35-year-old's journey hasn't been a one-way street, he says. Mr Yuwan has also reaped the rewards of mentorship, finding guidance from other young leaders who have helped shape his path.

And now, at an age when most of his peers are pre-occupied with building a career and raising a family, he wants to pay it forward and continue his relentless pursuit of purposeful social change.

And the reason? “I want to empower the next generation of youth leaders in widening their scope of impact,” he says. This chapter of his youth leadership journey is one that Mr Yuwan finds the most meaningful.

“I have identified some leaders that I not only want to mentor, but also partner with as they embark on their own transformative journeys.”

His journey as a volunteer with NYC began in 2013, after graduating from the Singapore Management University with a bachelor's degree in political science. Mr Yuwan now works as a corporate affairs manager for Singapore at a tech logistics company.

Initially, “it was about discovering who I am – not just as an individual but as a leader,” he explains.

“I was also figuring out which issues resonate with me most, and how I can contribute to and impact society.”

Mr Yuwan's volunteer work led to leadership roles, including chairing the Singapore Indian Development Association Youth Club, serving as a staff and advisory committee member at Youth Corps Singapore, and becoming a NYC Council Member.

For his efforts, Mr Yuwan was awarded the President's Volunteerism and Philanthropy Award (PVPA) in the Leaders of Good (Youth) category by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam. Organised by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, PVPA recognises individuals, organisations and leaders who have made lasting contributions to their communities.

Expanding horizons

What will the next phase of Mr Yuwan's social impact journey entail? To find out, he signed up for this year's Asean Youth Fellowship (AYF).

Surrounded by other young leaders, Mr Yuwan hoped to find not just inspiration – but also a roadmap for the years ahead, he says.

AYF was an opportunity for Mr Yuwan to take stock of his two-decade journey as an advocate for youth and better understand how he can continue his social impact work even as he sheds the “youth” label.

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth defines Singapore youth as those aged between 15 and 35.

AYF 2023, co-organised by NYC and Singapore International Foundation (SIF), was held in Singapore and Hanoi from Oct 28 to Nov 4. For Mr Yuwan, one of the biggest draws of AYF was the opportunity to learn from thought leaders and industry visits.

The AYF opened doors for Mr Yuwan; he engaged in dialogues with leaders from the public, private and people sectors, and was immersed in learning journeys at key institutions.

One example is Know One Teach One, a hospitality training centre in Hanoi that gives at-risk and disadvantaged youth the opportunity to break the poverty cycle and forge a better future.

The participants also toured ComCrop, a commercial rooftop farming company in Singapore, to learn how the country is leveraging innovative farming methods to safeguard food security and remain resilient in times of supply and price disruptions.

Clarity from diversity

What else was Mr Yuwan hoping to gain? Fresh approaches, he says. “Having been in this space for so long, you tend to feel that there's only one way of doing social impact. You meet with the same group of individuals with more or less the same mindset.”

This is why AYF – with its diverse cohort of young leaders from across Asean – was a breath of fresh air. It showed him how other Asean youth leaders are shaping change in their countries.

One example is using social media to amplify the impact of their work and build cross-sector partnerships. “It's not just about how you play the social media game, but also how you play the long game,” he notes. Driving social change, he emphasises, takes time, discipline and commitment.



(Above) At 35, Mr Yuwan Mohan, is embarking on the “most meaningful” chapter of his youth leadership journey, to mentor the next generation of volunteer leaders.

Key topics discussed:



Sustainability



Regional cooperation



Digital transformation



Entrepreneurship



Youth empowerment and leadership



Bilateral relations



(Left) Mr Yuwan Mohan (first from right) and fellow AYF delegates on their learning journey to ComCrop, a commercial rooftop farming company in Singapore, where they learned how innovative farming methods can help safeguard food security and resilience.

PHOTOS: NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL, COURTESY OF YUWAN MOHAN

“So how can we instil this discipline and resilience among our youth? How can we work on our processes so social impact initiatives don't die off after one or two years, but can evolve with changing needs?” These are lessons Mr Yuwan is now applying within his own organisations.

He believes there needs to be a greater appetite for regional social impact exposure. “There is a lot of diversity within the Asean region, and in the way social impact work is carried out in each country. This means there is a lot that we can learn from each other.”

It's not just about bringing other models of social impact work to Singapore, “it's also important to explore ways in which Singapore-based models can be referenced overseas”.

Mr David Chua, chief executive officer of NYC, says: “As the apex youth leadership programme in the region, the AYF has been instrumental in promoting cross-border collaboration and growth opportunities among youth leaders.”

“With growing global uncertainties and tensions, it is critical that our youths understand the importance of and work towards maintaining peace and stability, so that we can grow and thrive as a region.”

Ms Jean Tan, vice-chairman of SIF, agrees. She adds: “In an increasingly fractious world, trust becomes the bridge that connects divided shores and mends the bonds of humanity. Programmes like the AYF are vital because they bring our youths from different nationalities together to connect and share their cultures, ideas and experiences.”

“This promotes cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for diversity, strengthening relationships across borders that make it easier for us to collaborate on common challenges.”

AYF at a glance

The Asean Youth Fellowship (AYF) provides leadership development, networking and learning opportunities for young leaders aged 27 to 35. There were 40 participants this year.

Youth leaders can join the programme by either applying online or being nominated by organisations they are involved with. They are selected based on their leadership records, relevant expertise, and involvement in or awareness of Asean developments.

Interest in the AYF has grown since its launch in 2018, from over 90 applications then to more than 1,000 this year.

Fostering friendships



AYF alumni Marcus Li (left) welcomes delegates from AYF 2023 to his home, a Peranakan shophouse off Emerald Hill. PHOTO: NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL

Asean Youth Fellowship (AYF) alumni Michelle Leong and her husband Marcus Li, both 34, may have completed the programme years ago, but they continue to contribute – one meal at a time.

Ms Leong, who calls herself a serial entrepreneur, was from the inaugural batch of AYF delegates back in 2018. She then persuaded Mr Li to join the programme in 2021.

“We wanted to give back to the AYF community, and decided to throw a dinner for the incoming group so they can feel more welcomed,” says Mr Li, a lawyer.

They cooked up a feast in their home to welcome the 2023 batch of 40 AYF delegates, together with 30 AYF alumni.

The menu? Flavours from across South-east Asia – a reflection of the diversity of the AYF programme.

Their home, a Peranakan shophouse off Emerald Hill which they are renting, became an informal clubhouse for AYF alumni from Singapore and across Asean.

Mr Li says the community often “happily invite themselves over”, bonding over shared meals. It is also a safe space for them to freely share their ideas with each other and receive constructive feedback.

For both Mr Li and Ms Leong, the most precious takeaway from their AYF experiences was the cross-border friendships. “That, to me, was very meaningful,” she says.

After her AYF experience, Ms Leong founded the Asean Living Room in 2019. The ground-up initiative provides a space for passionate individuals to connect, collaborate, and drive impactful social change across Asean.

“Asean Living Room revolves around the idea that in Asean communities, homes are sacred spaces,” explains Ms Leong. “If I invite you to my house and into my living room, then we're not just colleagues or acquaintances – we are friends and we are family.”

Some successful projects include a retreat for regional social entrepreneurs in Iloilo, Philippines, and the inaugural business forum for the heads of Myanmar ethnic states held in the warring state of Kachin, Myanmar.