

Asian Youth Leadership Academy (AYLA) 2026

“Leading Change for Justice and Solidarity in Asia.”

Date: 24 to 30 June 2026

International Youth Training Centre (IYTC)

1. Programme Overview

The inaugural Asian Youth Leadership Academy (AYLA) 2026 was held from 24 to 30 June 2026 at the International Youth Training Centre (IYTC) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The programme brought together young leaders and young professionals from Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam under the theme "Leading Change for Justice and Solidarity in Asia."

AYLA was organised by the International Youth Training Centre (IYTC) in collaboration with the North South Initiative (NSI), Pax Romana International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS-MIEC), the Communal Life of Love and Unity of the Mountain People (CLUMP) Foundation, and Life Skills Academy.

The programme brought together participants from different cultures, faiths and professional backgrounds, including journalists, educators, psychologists, researchers, development practitioners, community organisers, social workers, youth leaders and university students. Although they came from different countries and experiences, they found that many of the challenges they face are similar. Throughout the week, they explored issues such as human rights, migration, inequality, climate change, mental health, social inclusion and peacebuilding, while learning from one another's experiences.

The programme used a participatory learning approach. Through workshops, group discussions, social analysis, case studies, cultural exchange and reflection, participants shared their experiences, listened to one another, and discussed practical ways to respond to challenges in their communities.

The sessions were facilitated by **Adrian Anthony Pereira**, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the **North South Initiative (NSI)** and a **Diplomacy Training Program (DTP) alumnus**; **Ruki Fernando**, a human rights defender, researcher and civil society activist from Sri Lanka and a **DTP trainer**; and **Anne Beatrice**, Programme Director and Co-Founder of NSI and a **DTP alumna**. Together, they encouraged participants to understand leadership as a way of serving others, working together, and responding to social issues with justice and compassion.

Reflecting on the purpose of the academy, Adrian Anthony Pereira said:

“Leadership is not about power or position. It begins with listening, understanding different realities, and walking alongside people, especially those on the margins. Asia's challenges, whether migration, inequality, climate change or human rights, cannot be solved by one country or one organisation alone. They require dialogue, trust and solidarity across borders. I hope AYLA inspires young people to become compassionate leaders who work together to build more just, peaceful and inclusive societies.”

During the programme, participants were also visited by **Patrick Earle**, Executive Director of the **Diplomacy Training Program (DTP)** together with **Guangchunliu Gangmei**, who met with participants, shared their experiences, and encouraged them to continue promoting justice, human dignity, and solidarity in their own communities.

Patrick also met with the organising team, including William Nokrek, Course Coordinator of AYLA, Co-Chair of the International Youth Training Centre (IYTC) Steering Committee, and a Diplomacy Training Program (DTP) alumnus, to discuss opportunities for future collaboration among DTP, IYTC, and Pax Romana IMCS in youth leadership, human rights education, and regional networking. The meeting also provided an opportunity to explore how we can collectively support and accompany young leaders and young human rights defenders across Asia.

Learning also took place outside the training room. During a field visit around the IYTC campus, participants visited the centre's cocoa and coffee initiatives and learned about social enterprise, sustainable livelihoods, holistic living, and environmental stewardship. The visit helped participants see how community-based initiatives can support both people and the environment.

Throughout the week, participants built friendships across cultures, faiths, and national borders. Many shared that these conversations and relationships were among the most valuable parts of the programme. The academy created a space where participants could listen to different perspectives, learn from one another, and begin building a regional network committed to justice, solidarity, human dignity, and a sustainable future for all.

Participant Reflections

Participants shared how the academy influenced their perspectives, strengthened their commitment to their work, and inspired them to continue working for justice, solidarity and positive social change in their own communities.

Astha Barsagade

Deputy Director, SPARSH, India

For Astha, the people she met during AYLA made the biggest impact. She said the programme reminded her that many of the challenges facing Asia are shared and that leadership is about working together.

“The most meaningful part of AYLA has been the people. Coming from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds, we discovered that many of the challenges we face, whether related to inequality, climate change, gender, or social justice are deeply interconnected.

No country can solve today's challenges alone. Issues like climate change, migration, human rights, and inequality transcend borders, so our solutions must do the same. Cross-border solidarity allows us to learn from each other's experiences, challenge our assumptions, and build solutions that are more inclusive and sustainable.

AYLA also reminded me that leadership is not about the achievement of one person's goals, it is a collective effort.

When young people build trust across borders, they don't just exchange ideas; they build the foundation for a more peaceful, inclusive, and resilient Asia. And I believe that is exactly the kind of leadership our region needs today.”

Tuvini Nithsara

Social Services Professional and Crisis Supporter, Sri Lanka

Tuvini said AYLA encouraged her to think about how young people across Asia can work together to respond to growing mental health challenges.

“Young people in Asia are facing a growing mental health crisis due to academic pressure, economic uncertainty, and digital overload. High-pressure education systems and constant expectations can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout, which negatively affect their overall well-being. To address this challenge, young people need to collaborate across borders by organizing mental well-being activities in their communities and connecting through digital platforms to support one another. By sharing practical ways to cope with academic and workplace stress, they can learn from each other's experiences, build cross-border solidarity, and promote better mental well-being across Asia.”

Stephan Uttom Rozario

Freelance Journalist and Photographer, Bangladesh

Stephan said the sessions on human rights were among the most meaningful parts of the programme. He also believes the friendships formed during AYLA will help young people support one another across borders.

“I think the human rights sessions were one of the most important parts of the AYLA programme. As Asian minority Christians, many of us have experienced physical and psychological persecution. That is why we need to work on human rights. If I am aware of my rights as a human being, I can protect myself and also protect my neighbours.”

“I believe AYLA is important for Asia because, through this programme, participants learn about human rights, workers' rights, migration, cross-border solidarity, and many other important issues. The most important thing is that participants become friends across borders and build lasting relationships. If any of us or our communities face human rights violations, we can support one another and raise our voices together across our countries. These cross-border friendships are our strength, and together we can work for justice and human dignity.”

Kerry Gogelawanan

Youth Leader working with a civil society organisation supporting the rights of marginalised women workers, Malaysia

Kerry said the programme gave her practical ideas that she can use in her advocacy work and reminded her of the importance of working with other young leaders across Asia.

“AYLA will influence my work by strengthening my ability to deliver more effective advocacy and campaigning initiatives. One of the most valuable lessons I gained was learning how to develop clear campaign goals that communicate with the right audience. These skills will help me design future campaigns that are more targeted and able to create meaningful change.

Moreover, seeing so many like-minded young people from across Asia has also motivated me to continue working towards the advancement of human rights. The relationships and networks built through AYLA have shown me the importance of regional collaboration, where young leaders can learn from one another to address common challenges.”

She also hopes that more young people will learn about international human rights standards and use them in their advocacy.

“I hope to see greater awareness and understanding of international human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), across Asia. Although these frameworks have existed for decades and many governments have committed to them, many young people are still unfamiliar with the rights and protections they provide.

I believe young people should understand these frameworks and learn how to use them as tools for advocacy. By grounding their campaigns and initiatives in international human rights standards, they can more effectively engage with policymakers, hold governments accountable to their commitments, and push for meaningful social change.”

Andrea Vaz

South Asian Coordinator, Pax Romana IMCS-MIEC Asia-Pacific

Andrea said meeting participants from different countries and faiths reminded her that dialogue and solidarity are stronger than the differences that often divide people.

“Through my journey with AICUF at the national level and IMCS internationally, I have learned that true solidarity transcends borders and divisions. Interacting with participants in programs like AYLA powerfully brought the UN slogan 'Leave no one behind' to life for me. Despite representing different, sometimes conflicting neighbouring nations, we never let national differences come in the way of our shared commitment to action. Collaborating across these diverse backgrounds has allowed me to absorb the best practices, giving me a completely fresh perspective with problem-solving. Though our backgrounds vary, our dedication to human dignity and justice is universal.”

She added:

“Given our current global scenario, increased dialogue is essential to eradicate prejudices and reduce misunderstandings. We live in an era where differences are weaponized by powerful players, but through dialogue we can aim to reduce these differences and collaborate through our diverse faith and culture. Platforms like AYLA help us achieve it with resilience.”