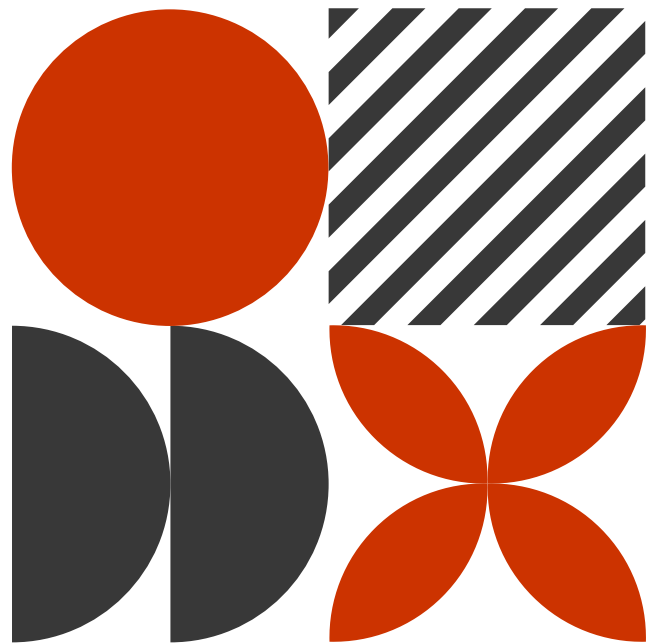




Youth  LEAD

YOUTH LEAD

2025 Report



Youth LEAD Annual Report 2025

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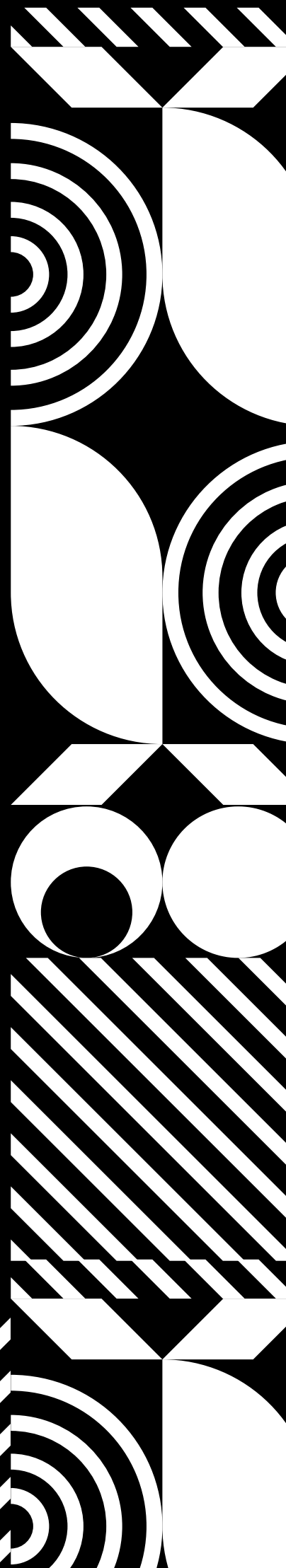
Youth LEAD is the regional network of young key populations (YKPs) that works with young people at high risk of HIV exposure and young people living with HIV in the Asia Pacific region. Youth LEAD aims to empower young key populations and ensure more meaningful engagement of YKPs in all levels of decision-making that impact their lives.

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Foreword

The past year has been one of both significant challenges and meaningful connections for our organisation and the communities we serve.

Our vision remains clear: to build an inclusive region where the human rights of young key affected people are respected, and where the impact of HIV and AIDS is mitigated through their meaningful involvement. We continue to advocate for equal and equitable access to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support, while advancing LGBTQ+ rights and youth empowerment across our region.

However, this year has been particularly difficult for those working in our field. Funding cuts resulting from policy shifts, most notably the Trump administration Executive Order, have had far-reaching consequences. These reductions have affected not only our organisation's capacity, but also the broader ecosystem of partners and, most importantly, the young key populations at the heart of our work. Our programmes and activities were constrained, and difficult decisions had to be made, including budget adjustments and the departure of valued team members.

Yet, in the face of these constraints, our community demonstrated remarkable resilience and solidarity.

One of the most significant moments of the year was the opportunity to come together in person in Bangkok. We convened our newly elected Board members, including myself, alongside our Secretariat team and valued partners from Youth Voices Count and Y-PEER Asia-Pacific to launch our joint YKP Regional Strategic Plan for 2025–2030. This allowed us to align priorities and respond more effectively to the evolving needs of young key populations amid shrinking space for engagement and limited resources. Joined by civil society organisations and UN agencies, the gathering reaffirmed our shared purpose and collective direction.

We also collaborated across a range of initiatives with partners including UNESCO Bangkok, ReBit (Japan), Babaylanes in the Philippines, UNAIDS Asia-Pacific, and Pelangi Nusantara in Indonesia, further expanding the reach and impact of our network.

As this was my first year serving both as a Board member and as Chairperson of Youth LEAD's Board, I am deeply proud that the organisation has continued to centre the voices, leadership, and lived experiences of young key affected populations. Even with limited resources, our network has remained committed to ensuring that young people are not only included but empowered as agents of change within the HIV response and broader human rights landscape.

This report reflects both the realities we have faced and the progress we have made together. It stands as a testament to the strength of our partnerships, the dedication of our members, and the importance of our mission.

As we look ahead, we remain focused on advancing equity, dignity, and access for young key populations. Together, we will continue to advocate, mobilise, and create spaces where every young person can thrive.

On behalf of our organisation, I extend my deepest gratitude to our partner organisations, supporters, and community members for standing with us throughout this year.

On a personal note, as this has been my first year serving both as a Board member and as Chairperson, I would like to sincerely thank my fellow current and former Board members for their shared vision, strength, passion, and leadership. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to our Secretariat team—Ikka, Jeremy, Leo, and Agatha—for their tireless work in ensuring that our network remains strong and effective, as well as for their unwavering support and guidance.

Despite the challenges brought by funding shifts and the departure of valued team members, including Leo and Ikka, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for their dedication and contributions, which remain an integral part of our journey. I am confident that our connections will endure, and they will always remain part of our community.

Even in the most difficult moments, I am grateful for the strong sense of community and friendship within this network. We move forward with resolve. We will continue to grow, support one another, and advance our shared vision together.



Riddy Sonsomsuk (he/him)
Chair of The International Board of Youth LEAD

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Introduction

The mission towards catalyzing change and empowering young key populations in the Asia-Pacific is full of challenges. With the fast-paced and ever-changing landscape of HIV around the world, Youth LEAD had a busy year this 2025. Despite challenges, Youth LEAD made significant achievements including conducting Board Meeting, publishing a guideline, and participating in multiple regional and global advocacy spaces.

Building the capacity of young key populations to engage and advocate for themselves in HIV spaces has always been at the core of Youth LEAD's work. This year, Youth LEAD conducted the Board Meeting with our International Board Members. Youth LEAD also still supports Youth Lead Mongolia to implement the long-term technical assistance with the Global Fund support through the Y2Y (Youth 2 (to) Youth Consortium) with Y+ Global & YODA. Through the same consortium, Youth LEAD held the first consortium webinar on Youth as Key Partners in Global Fund Processes.

Advocacy is another of the core work pillars of Youth LEAD. This year is no different, as Youth LEAD engaged in youth and HIV advocacy in spaces including the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development Youth Forum, UNAIDS PCB, and the Asia-Pacific AIDS & Co-Infections Conference (APACC) 2025, among many others. Youth LEAD also continues its support for young key populations who are also part of the LGBTQI+ community through managing the Project Reference Group (PRG) for Youth Leadership for LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Learning Spaces project with UNESCO Bangkok Office. Responding to the funding crisis, Youth LEAD published the survey on The Impact of US Government Policy of Withdrawing PEPFAR from Intervening Countries for Youth-Led Organizations in Asia & the Pacific Survey. Throughout all this, Youth LEAD continues to value partnership and collaboration. Youth LEAD continued its strategic partnerships with UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, IATT on YKP, and the Seven Alliance; while also building new partnerships with the likes of WHO, AHF, and World Vision. Youth LEAD finished 2025 tired (an acknowledgement with respect to our mental health!) but also motivated and hopeful to secure more funding to continue dedicated support for youth-led networks in the Asia-Pacific region.

Activities and Results

The Y2Y Consortium Implementation in Mongolia

In 2025, Youth Lead Mongolia (YLM) strengthened meaningful youth engagement in national and international decision-making spaces through the long-term TA support from the Global Fund. Youth representation within the CCM successfully advocated for the elimination of derogatory terms (“TG” to “Trans people”, “Prostitute” to “Sex worker”) in official documentation, demonstrating direct influence on policy language and institutional accountability.

Youth advocates contributed to Mongolia’s UPR process by submitting a stakeholder report in collaboration with the Human Rights Forum, drawing on findings from YLM’s 2024 desk review of HIV service policies. This ensured youth-specific HIV and human rights priorities were formally integrated into international review mechanisms.

Twenty young leaders trained in 2024 continued their engagement by forming a Youth Committee Against HIV, overseeing prevention, rights-based awareness, and CCM engagement, with future plans to participate in GC8 processes. Youth participation was also elevated internationally through representation at the World Health Summit.

Despite political instability and increased anti-gender backlash, youth advocacy spaces have been sustained and expanded.

Last year also reflects significant and measurable progress in youth participation and influence, while recognizing that institutionalization of youth leadership within national systems is still evolving. Youth voices were not only present but demonstrably influential, as evidenced by successful language reform within CCM documentation and formal contribution to the UPR process. The establishment of the Youth Committee Against HIV further institutionalizes youth engagement beyond ad-hoc consultation. However, structural integration of youth leadership within long-term national HIV governance frameworks, including GC8 processes, remains ongoing. Therefore, while influence has been achieved in specific decision-making moments, full systemic embedding of youth priorities is still in progress.

In 2025, increased anti-gender and anti-LGBT movements intensified public hostility, negatively affecting the wellbeing and safety of young key populations. The public narrative promoted by the Minister of Health and amplified by Eagle TV triggered widespread stigma and online hate, requiring rapid response advocacy to protect community safety and uphold Global Fund principles. Working in grassroots HIV and SOGI advocacy under such conditions exposes staff and volunteers to harassment, reputational attacks, and psychological stress.

Additionally, 2025 marked a leadership transition within YLM, as the Executive Director changed. While necessary and strategically managed, this transition required internal restructuring, relationship rebuilding with partners, and continuity planning. Leadership change inevitably slowed certain external engagements while new roles and systems stabilized.

Political instability and youth-led demonstrations also resulted in leadership changes within government institutions, requiring renewed relationship-building with newly appointed officials. This delayed planned collaboration and required additional strategic engagement efforts.

Grassroots advocacy in high-stigma environments carries inherent burnout risks. Sustaining youth motivation while ensuring safety, psychological support, and organizational resilience remains a priority.

Lessons learned include:

- The importance of leadership succession planning and institutional memory systems.
- Strengthening collective advocacy to distribute risk.
- Investing in staff wellbeing and burnout prevention.
- Developing proactive crisis communication and risk mitigation protocols.

Additional support in risk mitigation strategies, leadership development, media engagement training, and regional solidarity mechanisms would strengthen long-term sustainability.

However, in 2025, YLM successfully advocated within the CCM to eliminate derogatory terminology used in official documents referring to trans people and sex workers. While seemingly a linguistic adjustment, this change marked a structural shift toward dignity-based recognition of key populations within national HIV governance systems.

This achievement was made possible through sustained youth representation, data-informed advocacy, and strategic engagement within decision-making platforms.

At a time when public discourse increasingly stigmatized key populations, this institutional language reform demonstrated that youth voices can influence systems from within. It strengthened the legitimacy of young key population advocacy and reinforced rights-based standards aligned with Global Fund commitments.

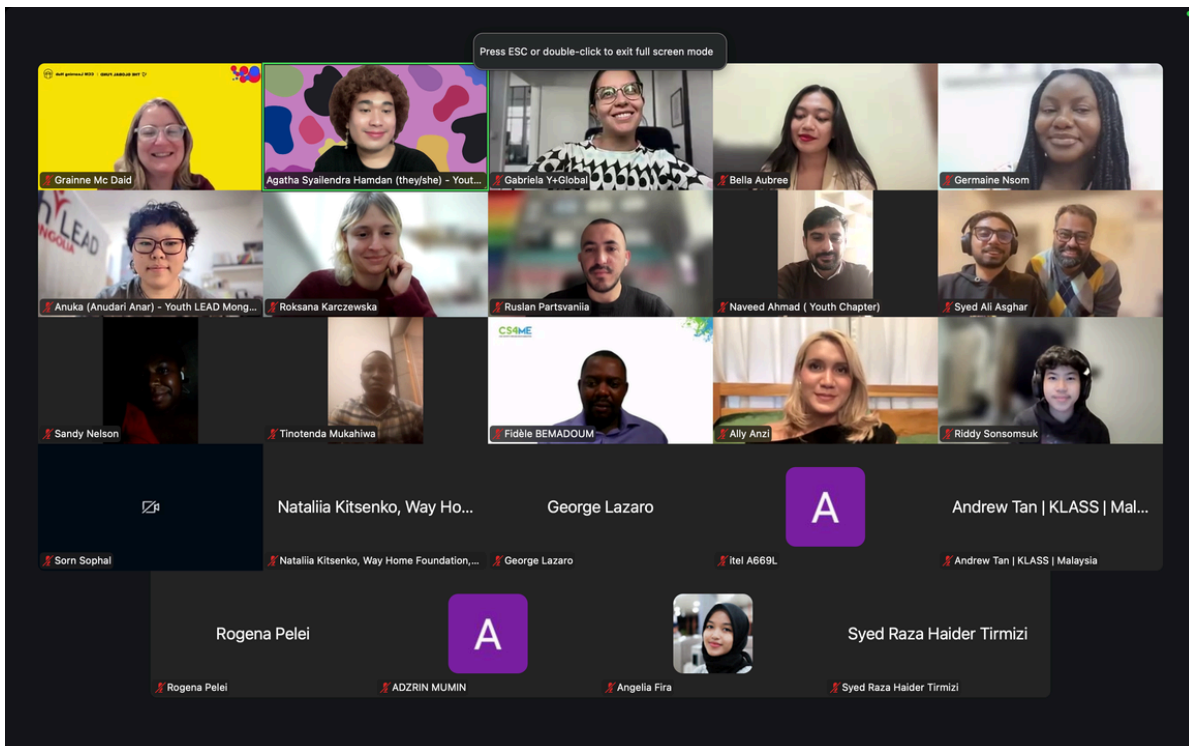
This milestone reflects the growing maturity and strategic capacity of youth-led advocacy in Mongolia.





The Y2Y Joint-Webinar with the Asia Pacific Regional Learning Hub

The Y2Y (Youth 2 (to) Youth) Consortium (Youth LEAD, YODA, and Y+ Global) held its first webinar on 18 November 2025, named “Building a Sustainable Future: Youth as Key Partners in Global Fund Processes” and attended by 70 young people globally. The webinar focused on youth engagement in Global Fund governance and implementation processes, featuring success stories and challenges from various countries. A panel discussion with youth leaders from different regions highlighted their experiences in global health governance and advocacy efforts, including participation in Country Coordinating Mechanisms and program implementation. The conversation ended with discussions on enhancing youth engagement in CCMs through technical assistance initiatives and strategies for sustainable youth participation in global health processes. Through this webinar, Y2Y developed a road map on GC8, “YOUTH & GC8: From Consultation to Co-Ownership”.



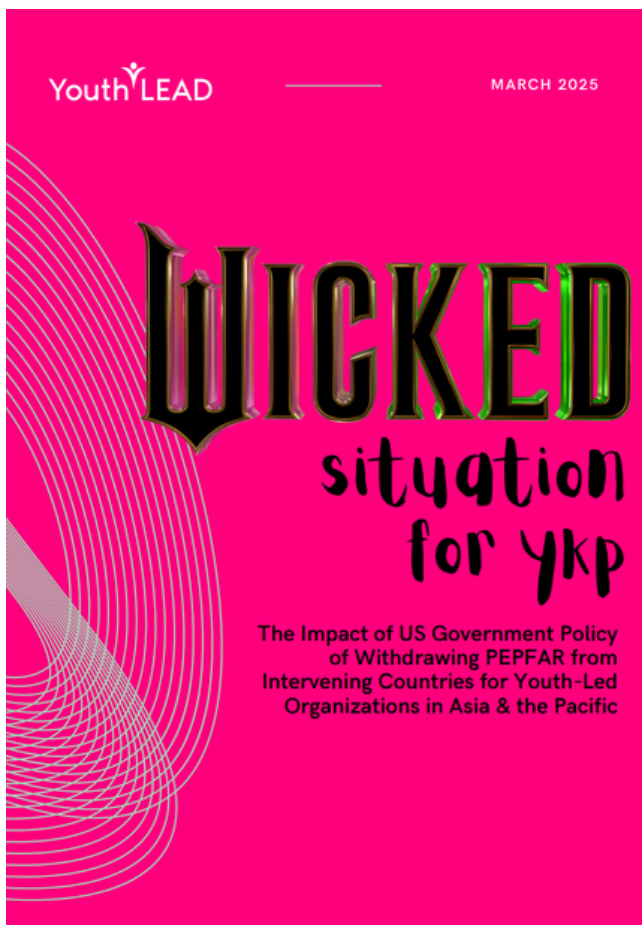
The Development of Grant Cycle 8 Youth Engagement Guideline for Youth-Led Organizations in Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Eastern Europe

As The Global Fund Grant Cycle 7 concludes in 2026, Youth LEAD, in collaboration with YODA and Y+ Global within the Y2Y consortium, is developing a Grant Cycle 8 Youth Engagement Guideline for Youth-Led Organizations in Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Eastern Europe to ensure that young people organizations globally are aware of the processes involved in developing national proposals for Grant Cycle 8 of the Global Fund. This guide discusses preparation strategies for young key population organizations and summarizes Global Fund technical documents to help young key population organizations navigate the country proposal development process. It also provides recommendations for identifying the actors involved and working as allies to help young key population voices be recognized in these processes. This document will be published via webinar in April 2026.





Wicked Situation for YKP: The Impact of US Government Policy of Withdrawing PEPFAR from Intervening Countries for Youth-Led Organizations in Asia & the Pacific Survey



On 24 January 2025, stop-work orders were issued to all US foreign assistance awards followed by an end to 90% of USAID contracts and the withdrawal of US\$60 billion overall in US foreign aid.

This decision sent waves around the world, particularly affecting HIV programs for young key populations.

Youth LEAD surveyed youth-led organizations in the Asia-Pacific to find out the extent of this impact.

YKP organizations in Asia and the Pacific are facing unique challenges amidst the current funding crisis and require multi-faceted support to ensure the sustainability of our HIV response, mental health initiatives, and harm reduction programs. The sudden halt in U.S. foreign funding has not only disrupted critical services for key populations but has also put youth leadership, innovation, and advocacy at risk. Access the full report [here](#).

The APFSD (Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development) Youth Forum 2025

The APFSD Youth Forum 2025 convened young leaders from across Asia and the Pacific to advance a shared vision for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the face of intersecting crises from climate change to shrinking civic space the forum served as a critical platform to strengthen collaboration across youth-led movements, civil society, and policymakers.

As a key regional youth-led network, Youth LEAD played an active role in amplifying the voices and priorities of young key populations, ensuring that issues of health, rights, and equity remained central in the discussions. Through its engagement, Youth LEAD contributed to shaping advocacy spaces, fostering cross-movement solidarity, and pushing for more inclusive and accountable decision-making processes. Participants across the forum called for urgent action to address persistent barriers to meaningful youth engagement, including limited access to decision-making spaces and inadequate resourcing for youth-led initiatives. The forum also underscored the importance of translating youth leadership into concrete influence, particularly through the development of a Regional Youth Call to Action to inform regional and global policy processes. At its core, the message was clear: young people are not just participants, but leaders. Without sustained investment, political will, and accountability to youth voices, progress toward inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development in the region will fall short.



Youth LEAD International Board Meeting

In February 2026, Youth LEAD held a virtual Board Member Meeting to update members on important changes within the Secretariat. During this meeting, the Board was informed that Ikka would be leaving Youth LEAD to join another organization, and Jeremy would be taking on the role of Regional Coordinator. With the reduction in Secretariat size, the Board discussed how the organization could continue operating in a more cost-effective and sustainable manner while maintaining the quality and impact of our work. The Chair also proposed expanding Youth LEAD's social media engagement in 2026, including organizing three webinars focused on different youth issues. The idea is to collaborate with various youth-led organizations across the region to highlight their experiences, create a safe space for young people to share their views, using data from FGDs to develop research and reports for new grants, and support joint advocacy planning.

In July 2025, Youth LEAD convened an in-person Board Member Meeting to reflect more broadly on our work and plan for the next phase of the organization. The meeting provided space for board members and the Secretariat to review achievements under the 2022–2024 Strategic Plan, discuss challenges, and agree on priorities moving forward.



One key message from the discussion was that our work must go beyond HIV prevention alone. We need to look at the full picture of young people's lives. This includes sexual and reproductive health and rights, access to treatment and care, mental health, and the growing impact of anti-gender and anti-rights movements in the region. The Board emphasized the importance of equipping young people with knowledge and leadership skills, while also engaging parents, healthcare providers, and policymakers in open and constructive dialogue.

The Board also discussed the increasing volatility in the broader environment, including shifting donor priorities, funding uncertainties, and political changes across the region. We acknowledged that these factors directly affect Youth LEAD's sustainability and our ability to deliver long-term impact. To respond to this, the Board discussed mitigation strategies such as strengthening resource mobilization, expanding fundraising efforts beyond traditional donors, and increasing our presence on digital platforms to improve visibility, engagement, and outreach.

Youth LEAD's role in the coming years was further clarified. This includes strengthening our technical support to partners, expanding advocacy on human rights and new HIV prevention options, creating space for young people with disabilities to be heard, and promoting stronger collaboration across countries in Asia and the Pacific. There was agreement that Youth LEAD should expand its reach to more low- and middle-income countries while continuing to invest in organisational capacity.

The meeting also highlighted the need to update our Governance Handbook to better define board roles, decision-making processes, and accountability. As Youth LEAD continues to grow, strengthening our internal systems is important to ensure transparency and meaningful youth participation.

These discussions, both virtual and in person, marked important steps in preparing for the launch of our new strategic plan and reaffirmed our commitment to remain a strong, youth-led regional network that works to ensure no young key population is left behind.

Convene and Co-chair a regional Project Reference Group (PRG) for the Youth Leadership for LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Learning Spaces Project with UNESCO Bangkok Office

Started in 2025, Youth LEAD is working with UNESCO Bangkok Office to Convene and to Co-chair a regional Project Reference Group for 'Youth Leadership for LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Learning Spaces. In this project, Youth LEAD is managing the PRG members (consisting of young people from Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, Viet Nam, India, and Cambodia)' schedules for reviewing documents related to national project implementation in the Philippines and Japan, conducted by Babaylanes and ReBit, respectively. This process is carried out to ensure that project implementation at the national level is aligned with the situation and patterns of larger youth social movements at the regional level (Asia Pacific). Furthermore, Youth LEAD also ensures that project implementation is publicized through a Communication Plan, in the form of social media posts, short videos, and webinars, all of which will be conducted in 2026.





UNAIDS PCB: Community Leadership at the Heart of the Global AIDS Strategy

In 2025, Youth LEAD continued to represent young key populations from Asia and the Pacific at the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) as part of the NGO Delegation. The PCB is the governing body of UNAIDS, where Member States, UN Cosponsors, and civil society come together to guide the global HIV response. Serving as the Asia and the Pacific NGO Delegate for 2025-2026, we brought forward the voices and concerns of young people from our region at a critical time for the Joint Programme.

The 56th PCB meeting in Geneva took place during one of the most difficult periods in UNAIDS' history. Major funding cuts, including a significant reduction in support from the United States, led to a sharp budget decrease and a restructuring process that reduced Secretariat staff by more than half. Discussions focused on the revised operating model of the Joint Programme, the development of the next Global AIDS Strategy 2026–2031, and the future sustainability of the HIV response. Throughout the meeting, we emphasized that cost-cutting measures must not weaken community engagement, human rights protections, and support for key populations, especially young people.

At the 57th PCB meeting in Brasília, the Board formally adopted the Global AIDS Strategy 2026–2031. At the same time, there were serious discussions about the possible transition or even closure of UNAIDS by the end of 2026 as part of wider UN reform conversations. As part of the NGO Delegation, we strongly raised concerns about rushing such decisions without a clear and evidence-based transition plan. We highlighted that weakening UNAIDS at this stage could reverse progress, particularly for communities that already face stigma, discrimination, and shrinking civic space.

Asia-Pacific AIDS & Co-Infections Conference (APACC) 2025

From 12–14 June 2025, the 10th Asia Pacific AIDS & Co-Infections Conference (APACC) and the Community Summit in Tokyo convened leaders across sectors to address the growing challenges of HIV, TB, and malaria in the region. Representing Youth LEAD and the Seven Alliance, Ikka Noviyanti brought forward a strong call to action: in the face of shrinking global health funding and civic space, we must urgently strengthen collaboration across youth-led movements, civil society, and policymakers.

During her time in Tokyo, Ikka also connected with a group of young advocates working on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Japan, exchanging insights on barriers to access and exploring opportunities to build stronger regional youth-led collaboration.



Alongside these engagements, APACC sessions highlighted the promise of long-acting injectable HIV prevention and treatment as a game-changer offering more discreet, convenient options that could improve adherence and expand choice for key populations. However, concerns around equitable access, affordability, and the need for community-led delivery remain critical. The broader dialogue underscored the urgency of diversifying funding sources and strengthening engagement with decision-makers including parliamentarians to secure sustained, community-led responses. Ikka also highlighted Japan's critical role as a global health leader, not only in financing but in shaping regional momentum toward Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals.

At the heart of it all was a clear message young people are not just participants, but leaders, and without meaningful youth engagement and decision-making power, efforts to end these epidemics will fall short.



The ASEAN for the Peoples Conference 2025



Youth LEAD was invited to participate in the ASEAN for the Peoples Conference held in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 4–5 October 2025. As a civil society representative, Youth LEAD contributed to the panel discussion on “Cohesive ASEAN: Strengthening Social Resilience and People-to-People Connection for a More People-Centered ASEAN.” During this engagement, people-centered highlighted the importance of meaningfully including marginalized youth, particularly young key populations and sexual minorities, within ASEAN’s development agenda and regional cooperation efforts.

Under the theme #ASEANforthePeoples, Youth LEAD also hosted an interactive booth (Booth B2) to engage participants and the broader public. The booth featured a solidarity banner signing, interactive activities, and a photo storytelling project, creating space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives. Through these engagements, Youth LEAD advocated for increased youth endorsement in key priority areas, including diversified and sustainable funding, digital health advocacy, enabling policy environments, strengthened youth leadership, improved access to health and HIV services, and enhanced organizational capacity.

The booth was implemented in collaboration with Youth LEAD’s country partner in Indonesia, Inti Muda, demonstrating strong regional partnership and collective action. This engagement not only amplified youth voices within a key regional platform but also strengthened connections with civil society actors across ASEAN, reinforcing Youth LEAD’s commitment to building a more inclusive, people-centered regional community.





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