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Feature Choice

Reimaging the Future of Work: Intergenerational Dialogues on Youth's Aspirations and Dreams Beyond Covid-19

This article unpacks the experience of using an Appreciative Inquiry approach to gain an understanding of priorities and challenges related to youth economic empowerment in the 'new normal' impacted by coronavirus, and to establish a diverse network willing to work together to create change. Organized jointly by the Asian **Development Bank through its** youth initiative, Youth for Asia, the Asian Development Bank Institute and Plan International, young people aged 18–29 from across Asia and the Pacific took part in a six-week process during the Asia Pacific Youth Symposium in August and September 2020.

rganized jointly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) through its youth initiative, Youth for Asia (YfA), the Asian Development Bank Institute (ADBI), and Plan International, hundreds of young people aged 18–29 from across Asia and the Pacific took part in the Asia Pacific Youth Symposium (APYS) from August to September 2020. This included partaking in capacity-building workshops, interviews, networking events and online consultations.

Context of the Asia Pacific Youth Symposium

The Asia and the Pacific region finds itself in an interesting demographic transition; on one hand, younger countries can leverage their youthful populations to advance socioeconomic development, with nearly 60% of the global youth population living in the region.¹ On the other, the elderly population will balloon to 870 million by 2050, representing 18.1% of the region (from 330 million and 8.1% in 2016).² The co-existence of younger and older societies in the Asia-Pacific reveals the importance of diverse, mutually beneficial and

2 Park, D., Lee, S-H. & Mason, A. (2011). *Aging, Economic Growth, and Old-Age Security in Asia*. Manila: ADB / Cheltenham, United Kingdom; and Northampton, Massachusetts, United States: Edward Elgar Publishing.

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2018). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. New York.

Young people's contributions as workers, social innovators, entrepreneurs, employers and volunteers directly contribute to the development of community solutions.

Youth employment and entrepreneurship programs need to adapt to support initiatives that are meant to help young people overcome challenges caused by the crisis. intergenerational partnerships that play a key role in ensuring the region ages towards a more inclusive "society for all".³

The Covid-19 pandemic is forcing us to reimagine development practice in the region, including recognizing youth as active partners in building back better. Young people's contributions as workers, social innovators, entrepreneurs, employers and volunteers directly contribute to the development of community solutions and, over the longer-term, to a demand-led recovery. However, this is only true when young people are productive and economically empowered.⁴

Covid-19 exacerbates youth's already disadvantaged labor market position

Half of young workers in the region are employed in the four sectors hardest hit by Covid-19 (i.e., wholesale and retail trade and repair, manufacturing, rental and business services, and accommodation and food services) signaling tougher times ahead for youth.⁵ The impact of the crisis is felt by youth through three main transmission channels: job disruptions, including significant reductions in working hours; drastic changes to education and training, for example distance learning; and increased difficulties in school-to-work transition.

In this respect, current and future youth employment and entrepreneurship programs need to quickly adapt to support initiatives that are meant to help young people overcome challenges caused by Covid-19. We must work to catalyze intergenerational partnerships and action planning with young people to inform response and recovery initiatives. Meaningfully engaging youth in these spaces facilitates the design of credible, effective and well-contextualized solutions.⁶

Choosing Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an organizational development approach that engages stakeholders in self-determined change by encouraging positive critical thinking to transform human systems.⁷ AI responds to a perceived overuse of "problem

4 Ibid.

³ Asian Development Bank. (2018). Strategy 2030: Achieving a Prosperous, Inclusive, Resilient, and Sustainable Asia and the Pacific. Manila.

⁵ International Labour Organization, Bangkok (Thailand), and Asian Development Bank, Manila. (2020). *Tackling the COVID-19 youth employment crisis in Asia and the Pacific*. Manila.

⁶ International Labour Organization. (2020). *Policy Brief: The need for social dialogue in addressing the COVID-19 crisis.* Geneva.

⁷ Cooperrider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (1999). Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change. San Francisco, CA.

Al has proven valuable for working with migrant and marginalized youth, its participatory approach arguably developing a sense of community connectedness

solving" which hampers any kind of social improvement, recognizing instead that we must excel by amplifying strengths, never by simply fixing weaknesses.⁸

AI-focused research exists across a range of organizations in more than 100 countries around the world,⁹ from a small village in rural Nepal where it was used to inspire locally-led community development projects¹⁰, to the United Nations where it was used to co-create the UN Global Compact in 2000.¹¹ In terms of meaningful youth engagement (MYE), AI has proven valuable for working with migrant and marginalized youth, its participatory approach arguably developing a sense of community connectedness¹², an improved sense of empowerment and wellbeing, and skills development including teamwork, leadership and communications.¹³

We struggled to find case studies that illustrated the effectiveness of AI applied entirely online. This did not however dissuade the organizing team from choosing AI as our large-group method, acknowledging the successful implementation of hundreds of AI summits around the world¹⁴, and that an inherently participatory and positivist approach like AI would be essential if we were to successfully generate the requisite energy and enthusiasm across hundreds of diverse stakeholders to find coherent system-wide solutions during the conference, and to take collective action towards their realization long after its closure.

Our approach

While the format and scale of AI approaches can vary greatly, they typically follow what is known as a 5D cycle:

- Definition of a positive topic.
- Discovery of the strengths in the system or the best of what is.

10 Lustig, P. & Hazell, M. (2017, April 27). Appreciative Inquiry – Putting people at the heart of the future. *Open Democracy*. London.

11 Cooperrider, & McQuaid, The positive arc of systemic strengths.

12 Morsillo, J., & Fisher, A. (2007). Appreciative inquiry with youth to create meaningful community projects. *Journal of the Australian Psychological Society*, 19(1), 47-61.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

⁸ Cooperrider, D. L., & McQuaid, M. (2012). The positive arc of systemic strengths: How appreciative inquiry and sustainable designing can bring out the best in human systems. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, (46), 71-102.

⁹ Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D. K., & Stavros, J. M. (2003). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The first in a series of AI workbooks for leaders of change* (vol. 1). San Francisco, CA.

There was a desire to create a change agenda that these stakeholders would commit to and carry forward beyond APYS.

- Dream of what the perfect achievement of the topic could be.
- Design of options to make the dream a reality that build off existing strengths.
- Destiny or action planning to sustain what will be.¹⁵

Define

The Define stage clarifies the topic we wish to work on, an affirmative topic positively stating what you want that is within the power of the people in the room to achieve. The objective of the consultations in this case was firstly for intergenerational participants of the APYS program to co-create credible, well-contextualized recommendations for YEE that would be valuable for a range of stakeholders including governments, NGOs, the private sector, civil society groups, and young people themselves.

Secondly, the desire was to create a change agenda that these stakeholders would commit to and carry forward beyond APYS, making AI an appropriate framework to adapt in our context.

To achieve these objectives, we recognized the need to capture insights, dreams and recommendations not just about economic empowerment itself, but the requisite conditions to achieve it, namely skills-building, intergenerational collaboration and the future of work. We also sought to inform policy recommendations for youth economic empowerment in the green, informal and digital economies, in line with ADB's operational priorities.

Process

The process began with a training session for the organizing team on AI, led by a consultant, exploring definitions, previous large-group applications and potential integrations within the broader APYS program. An AI core team of eight young people aged 18-30 was established and tasked with selecting affirmative topics, co-creating the interview guides, determining the interview strategy and conducting their own Discovery interviews.

The AI program kicked off with an invitation-only online launch event introducing AI, the journey ahead, and a short capacity-building training on how

¹⁵ D. Cooperrider, D. Whitney, &J. Stavros. (2003). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook The first in a series of AI workbooks for leaders of change* (Vol. 1). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

to conduct AI interviews. The launch was to be followed by a three-to-five-day Discovery stage process featuring one-on-one online interviews. This prepared participants for the Dream and Design stages, which would both take place during three online, 180-minute consultations with each focusing on either the green economy in the first, the informal economy in the second and the digital economy in the third. The final Delivery stage was held place ten days later during a public live-streamed closing session for the entire APYS program.

In total, 150 participants from youth organizations, private sector, civil society organizations, governments and development institutions were invited to join the process. Purposive sampling was used to engage respondents, ensuring that participants could provide "thick descriptions"¹⁶ of their experiences relevant to this study's research objectives.¹⁷ In addition, to ensure that the sample was diverse and representative, key partnerships were leveraged with community "gatekeepers"¹⁸, allowing the AI team to engage hard-to-reach youth (e.g., Plan International, Special Olympics) from different sectors. These organizations also provided critical inputs on the policies and the parameters that APYS set to ensure that all participants' rights were protected through the entire process.

All participants received a comprehensive consultation package for each of the three themed consultations. The brief includes: a background to APYS and the consultation sessions, safeguarding guidelines, and technical briefs prepared in close collaboration with sector experts in the green, informal, and digital economies.

Results of the consultation sessions

Discovery

The Discovery stage is a search for the positive exceptions, successes and most vital "alive" moments, where we recognize those things that are worth valuing.

The Discovery stage is a search for the positive exceptions, successes and most vital "alive" moments, where we recognize those things that are worth valuing.¹⁹ This process of dialogue and meaning-making was conducted using online interviews lasting up to an hour each, covering twelve questions around five key thematic areas: the future of work, economic empowerment, skills-building, intergenerational collaboration and the informal/green/digital economies.

¹⁶ Li, D. (2004). Trustworthiness of think-aloud protocols in the study of translation processes. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14(3), 301-313.

¹⁷ Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13(6), 522-526.

¹⁸ Abrams, L. S. (2010). Sampling 'hard to reach' populations in qualitative research: The case of incarcerated youth. *Qualitative Social Work*, 9(4), 536-550.

¹⁹ Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros. (2003). Appreciative Inquiry Handbook.

All APYS participants were asked to interview between one and three individuals from their personal network who shows interest in the particular economy in question.

Themes were chosen based on emerging operational priorities of ADB's Strategy 2030 and consultations with key stakeholders across the organizing team. Questions were designed to bring out the best in participants, and to amplify and magnify the most positive life-giving possibilities for the future.

To understand their best experiences of work to inform the future of work, we asked: "Tell me about the most challenging and exciting working environment you have experienced. Why was it so exciting? What made it challenging?" To understand their best experiences of economic empowerment, we asked: "Recall a time when you felt you were in control of your economic life. Describe the situation. Who was there to guide you? How did they support you? What else enabled you to feel in control?" To understand skill-building best practice, we asked: "Tell me about a time when you successfully learned a high-value skill. Why was your learning successful? What was it about the skill that made it high value for you? What effect did this have on you?" The complete list of questions is given in Annex 1.

All APYS participants (not only those who were invited to join consultations) were asked to interview between one and three individuals from their personal network – a friend, colleague, or someone they considered a mentor – who shows interest in the particular economy in question. Respondents had to be above 18 years of age and be from the Asia-Pacific region. For safeguarding purposes, participants were prohibited from interviewing those they were not already acquainted with. Interviewees were provided an information sheet outlining their rights and were required to fill in an online consent form.

The positive core

From the Discovery interviews, a positive core emerged, capturing the highpoints and best experiences within each theme. The key quotes and stories, summarized below, were illustrated by our partners Tofu Creatives (see Figure 1 on page 133):

For the digital economy, participants shared compelling stories about essential technology during quarantine and lockdown restrictions; how robust data protection policies of their employers had made them feel safe online; and how technology made learning vital new skills affordable and accessible, mostly online.

For the informal economy, participants emphasized their love of flexible working hours; the importance of short-term contracts within a variety of organizations and roles to maximize their learning and development; and how vital strong relationships with employers, particularly within part-time working

The stability of a fulltime salary changed everything. Male participant

contexts, had given them much-needed confidence to meet uncertainty with full productivity.

For the green economy, participants shared stories of how empowered they feel whenever they make sustainable consumption decisions, such as carrying a reusable bag or using a metal straw; how excited they are by circular economy models; and how sustainable tourism experiences make them feel enlivened.

The transformational impact of secure full-time work

With the rise in informal work across the region and around the world, some young people who had successfully found secure full-time employment felt transformed. One interviewee shared:

Once I became a full-time teacher in my late 20s, having a salary meant I could get a housing loan, purchase equipment I needed and contribute to the family home expenses. I had a data connection, I could purchase a top quality smart phone for my work. The stability of a full-time salary changed everything. Male, 31

For interviewers, the experience of learning in relationship to another person could be a key part of their own transformative process. One interviewer shared the experience of their partner:

The pay for the first month has helped the interviewee get control over his own economic life. For a fresh graduate, the teacher's help with the interview to get the job and get economic control were his biggest guidance. The fact that the job is meaningful and he is finding a future in the job makes the interviewee feel in control. The company's environment has also enabled the interviewee feel in control and safe. (Edited quote) Male, 21

The impact of working in intergenerational partnership

It became clear through the Discovery process that some young people had benefited greatly from mentorship, leadership and guidance:

In 2009, working as a second-year undergrad, I didn't think I belonged anywhere in the senior sector. Running a conference, we connected with the spokesperson of the embassy; he started mentoring me. I did not realize how vital this relationship would be.

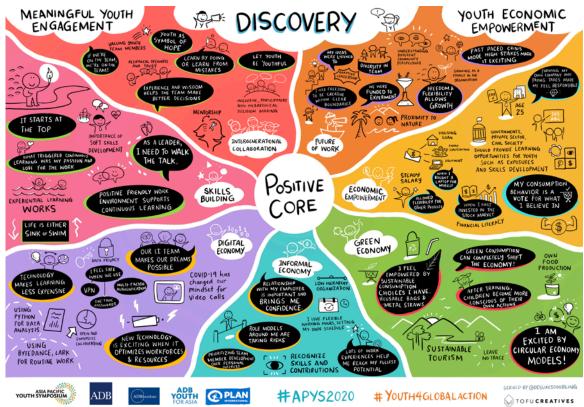
It became clear through the Discovery process that some young people had benefited greatly from mentorship, leadership and guidance.

I think the younger generation are always more proactive, want to change social norms. Female participant He invited me to dinner, we built a relationship. His wife gave me a gift. This taught me that the linearity of knowing someone from work can be much more pleasant, that work itself can become a minor connection, that relationships with adults is key. That was fascinating for me. I had no awareness around it. It enabled me to reflect more recently about a very deep intergenerational relationship that really empowered me to do what I do now, an environment of acceptance and encouragement. Now I always seek an intergenerational engagement. Male, 30

Adult participants, similarly, found working with young people transformative in their careers:

I think the younger generation are always more proactive, they want to change social norms, which my generation was not always used to. It helped me learn so much! I think the younger generation gives me a lot of joy and enthusiasm which can be intoxicating for the work environment. It acts as a motivation. Female, 39

Figure 1: The Positive Core is summarized during Discovery Process Summarized and illustrated by event partners Tofu Creatives



Key AI principles realized

Recognizing that many participants had shared positive intergenerational experiences gave the AI core team hope and confidence as they moved through the AI process, since the process hinged on intergenerational collaboration. It speaks to some of the key principles of AI, namely the constructionist principle, that language and discourse has power to create our sense of reality, our sense of what is true, good and possible; and the simultaneity principle, that that inquiry and change are not separate moments, but are simultaneous. The seeds of change are implicit in the very first questions we ask.²⁰

Other highlights from remaining themes include:

- The positive impact of experiential learning wherein one is given the freedom to learn as one goes
- Positive and friendly working environments
- Being treated as equals in intergenerational settings
- Taking part in inclusive, participatory decision-making models
- Being given responsibility and freedom within clearly defined parameters; and
- Earning enough money to meaningfully contribute to their families and to society.

Dream

The Dream stage provides an opportunity for the collective to envision a shared dream for the future. This is a future that is bold, embraces novelty and excites participants. By co-creating the perfect achievement of the topic, participants find commonality with one another, generating social bonding and shared purpose that drives the AI process forward.

Participants were grouped in five or six diverse groups of participants (i.e., a maximum of fifteen participants each) paired with facilitators and asked to review the positive core in preparation for a visioning exercise. All participants

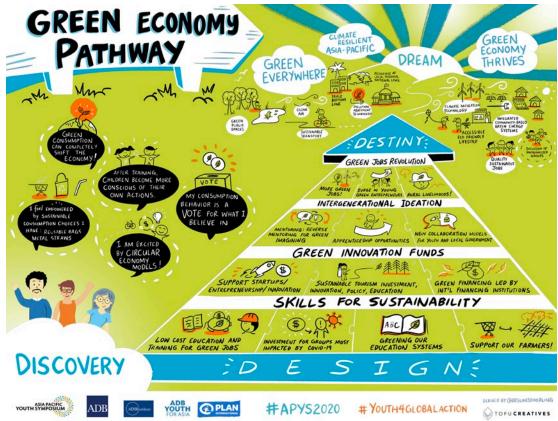
This is a future that is bold, embraces novelty and excites participants.

²⁰ Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros. (2003). Appreciative Inquiry Handbook

Groups envisaged a tech sector that puts citizens first by making technology equitable, accessible and safety-centered; that values data rights as human rights. were asked to close their eyes for three minutes to envision the ideal future for their consultation topic. Participants slowly went through a visioning script, inviting them to imagine a day in the life of their ideal future. Once the visioning was completed, breakout rooms were established and participants shared their visions in a pre-designed online collaborative board using visual images first followed by headlines. After twenty minutes of visioning, participants were invited to share their insights with the entire group.

- Green futures were a recurring theme across all consultations, with participants visioning a future where climate mitigation and pollution abatement technologies are abundant; and integrated community-based green energy systems, sustainable transportation and green public spaces are everywhere.
- Groups also envisaged a tech sector that puts citizens first by making technology equitable, accessible and safety-centered; that values data rights as human rights.

Figure 2: Green Economy pathway digital recording Tofu Creatives



• Finally, many participants imagined the future of work being entirely purpose-driven, sustainable and accessible, where rapid skill-building is the norm, and youth skills such as flexibility, creativity and rapid onboarding are in demand.

These visions were captured in the Tofu Creatives' illustrations.

Design

A green jobs revolution;

Having envisioned a shared dream for the future, participants were invited in their breakout rooms to design pathways towards that future, as well as tangible recommendations for multiple stakeholders, including government, private sector, civil society, NGOs, and youth-led and focused organizations. Groups had 45 minutes to brainstorm around these pathways with the support of a facilitator and collaborative online boards to help guide the process. To narrow the scope, they were encouraged to focus their discussions on stepping-stones identified prior to the consultation by ADB.

Green Pathways focused on four key areas (see Figure 2 on page 136):

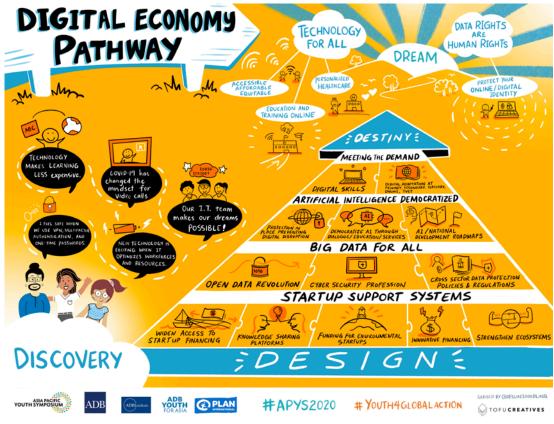


Figure 3: Digital Economy pathway digital recording Tofu Creatives

- More opportunities for intergenerational ideation;
- A considerable increase in green innovation funds;
- And skills-building for sustainability.

Each key area included tangible recommendations to drive the agenda forward.

Digital Pathways focused primarily on skills-building to help labor market supply meet emerging demand (see Figure 3 on page 136). The democratization and safety of artificial intelligence was also emphasized, along with progressive policies around big-data systems and technology as well as considerable increases in support systems for digital startups to empower a new, diverse generation of young entrepreneurs.

Informal Economy pathways build the resilience and the prospects of young people and focus on giving all young people a fair shot through:

Inclusive recruitment drives to give rural and vulnerable youth a chance;

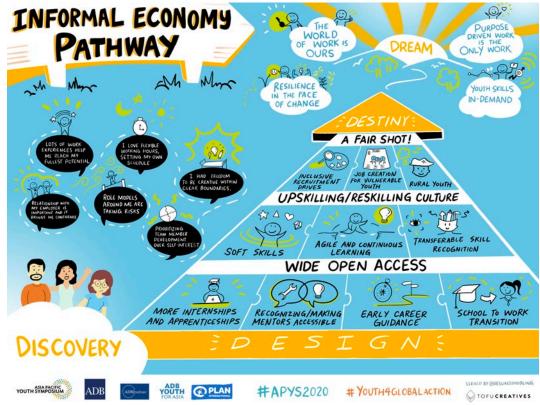


Figure 4: Informal Economy pathways digital recording Tofu Creatives

- The creation of an upskilling and reskilling culture across society, as well as the development of clearer pathways into the formal sector through internships; and
- Mentorship, and school-to-work transition programs.

Delivery

With ten days between the final consultation and the closing event, all APYS participants were given ample opportunity to bring the pathways and recommendations back to their organizations to explore how they could take this YEE agenda forward. The resulting commitments would then be shared at the closing event through video testimonials and youth statements, as can be seen in <u>this video</u>.



The sixth 'D': Dilemmas

The AI process was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants. Knowing that the youth participants would be a fundamental part of the consultation process by conducting their own AI interviews was voted one of



Figure 5: Positive vision to positive action final digital recording captures dream on the horizon and the design pathways to help us get there Tofu Creatives

the most enjoyable components of the AI launch session. Areas of improvement for the consultation sessions were dominated by calls for more time in breakout sessions so that conversations could continue, and the participation of more stakeholders to capture even more diverse worldviews. The use of Miro online whiteboarding software as a tool for brainstorming and sharing ideas was also widely praised.

As for AI itself, many participants saw potential application of the method in their lives "as an alternative problem-solving mechanism", as a way of "answering problems in society", as a much better way of "creating pathways to development" and as an effective approach to make "cross-generational talk possible [as] everyone was willing to listen to me..."

One 21-year-old working in education proclaimed: "This dialogue can actually lead to substantial change", while another 21-year-old working for a civil society organization shared: "I loved the ideation portion of this consultation. It opened my eyes to the responsibilities different sectors will have in order to achieve a green economy."

Across the three consultations however, there were a number of groups that were comparatively unproductive and challenging to facilitate. Ensuring "stickiness" between each step in the process is a critical success factor of AI and a large number of consultation participants had not taken part in Discovery, a critical, energy-building and transformative step in the process. While the AI core team anticipated this and ensured the data captured from Discovery was included in the consultation opening remarks, group introductions, and visually within the online collaborative boards, this was not enough to make sure positive core analysis over problem analysis was at the heart of the consultation, to build buy-in, and to capture the energy for change.

The online format was also a considerable hurdle. The use of Miro as a tool for brainstorming and sharing ideas was widely praised, but some participants struggled to get to grips with the Miro online whiteboarding technology, discouraging their active participation rather than encouraging it as it was designed to do. Crucially, many consultation participants were reluctant to turn their videos on: a positive in terms of safe-guarding, but a negative in terms of relationship building, communication, and possibly concentration. Those who had enjoyed a sense of togetherness or connection during the Discovery process may have felt disappointed by a comparatively cold and faceless interaction of the consultations. Conducting an effective AI process with young people in an online environment safely is a challenge we feel remains to be solved.

Ensuring 'stickiness' between each step in the process is a critical success factor of Al. Finally, having completed Discovery and collected a considerable amount of data, the AI Core team realized the scale of the challenge ahead. By including so many sub-themes to both gain an in-depth understanding of youth economic empowerment and capture data relevant to institutional policy priorities, we ensured that relatively short consultation discussions remained at surface level, unable to probe into the kind of depth required. Areas of improvement for the consultation sessions were dominated by calls for more time so that conversations could continue.

Conclusion

As the dust settled, it was clear to YfA and the AI core team that, while the AI process had been challenging to implement, the program had been a big success. It had embraced meaningful youth engagement principles from the outset, captured a considerable amount of valuable and unique qualitative data set, established a more ambitious research agenda to unpack how youth can be more meaningfully engaged within YEE projects, and launched a diverse consultative group to take the findings forward. With a series of intergenerational discussions on YEE planned for the coming months, and the opportunity to reconvene at future annual APYS events, YfA saw the fruits of this particular AI process as just the beginning.

All too often, when governmental and non-governmental organisations engage young people in policy processes or development programs, they train them to be more like adults. Young people learn how to understand complexity, navigate bureaucracy and build influence. But organisations forget that for their policies or programs to succeed, they must be relevant to young people's needs, reflective of their diverse lived experiences and understood in their language.

AI provides the participatory process and the energy for young people to be themselves. It says to young people "we value you" - we value your experience and how you see the world. Meaningful youth engagement like this can increase self-esteem, build new relationships, promote personal growth and identity development, while empowering youth to reach their fullest potential and to maximise their contribution to a better future for everyone.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their gratitude to Christopher Morris, Head of the Asian Development Bank's NGO and Civil Society Center and Youth for Asia initiative, for his insights that helped bring out youth's voice in our article. We are also grateful for the Youth For Asia team, including Iris Caluag, Samantha Javier, and Helen Osborne for their guidance throughout the research process.

Annex 1. Consultation session questions	
A. Future of work	i. Tell me about the most challenging and exciting working environment you have experienced. Why was it so exciting? What made it challenging?
	ii. Tell me about a work experience in which you learned the most. Tell me about the situation. If you had to single out one thing, what do you think was most significant to making the learning experience so rich? Who else was involved and what did they do? What did you do to foster your own development?
B. Economic empowerment	i. Recall a time when you felt you were in control of your economic life. Describe the situation. Who was there to guide you? How did they support you? What else enabled you to feel in control?
	ii. Tell me about a time when you first felt empowered to make your own economic decisions. What happened? How did it feel?
	iii. What 2–3 things can we do (as individuals, communities, employers, governments) to ensure young people are fully economically empowered?
C. Skills-building	i. Tell me about a time when you successfully learned a high-value skill. Why was your learning successful? What was it about the skill that made it high value for you? What effect did this have on you?
	ii. What was it about your workplace or academic environment that triggered your continuous learning? What made you want to learn? What were the main barriers you faced / what helped most to access the opportunity?
D. Intergenerational collaboration	 i. What was the most memorable life-giving experience you have had working in an intergenerational group or team, personal or professional? Why was this experience memorable for you? What was it about the group that brought energy and joy? ii. What is the best advice given to you by a mentor? How did that advice impact you? What was it about that mentor that you valued most? What did you value most about yourself? iii. When have you been involved in an effective, inclusive decision-making process? What have you valued most about that process? How did participation improve decisions made?
E. Informal economy / Green economy / Digital Economy	Informal economy i. Describe an experience where you felt confident and secure about your job or livelihood. What was it that gave you confidence? Where did that sense of security come from?
	ii. Tell me about the ideal working environment that gets the very best out of you. What about it helps you reach your fullest potential?
	Digital economy i. What was a time when you felt most excited using technology for work? What were the factors in your environment that made this experience possible for you? Who were you working with or for? ii. Tell me about a time where you felt your data was safe. What kind of platform or technology gave you that feeling of trust? How was that trust built?

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