



## Policy Brief

# Towards a Framework for Analysing Human Rights Awareness among Undergraduate Students in Southeast Asia/ASEAN

This policy brief is based on a research project funded by SHAPE SEA and carried out by Collin Jerome, Kriangkrai Vathanalaoha, Zaimuariffudin Shukri Nordin, Damien Mikeng and Ting Su Hie.



### 1. Introduction

Promoting human rights in Southeast Asia/ASEAN still remains a problem and a pressing challenge of the new millennium. There are many reasons for this; chief among them are the different human rights issues across Southeast Asia/ASEAN that have resulted in the different positions and approaches taken to address these issues both on local and regional levels. While it is important to acknowledge the diversity within the region as another key contributing reason to this conundrum, the core of the above mentioned problems is “not just the state of rights, but the fact that the very concept of human rights remains foreign to most states in the region” (Chachavalpongpun, paragraph XVI, 2018). This raises the pertinent question of whether people of the region with diverse backgrounds and needs are aware of such concept, and *if* they do, to what extent and degree.

While there have been studies of human rights awareness among undergraduates, there is no single approach or framework that can be used to examine such awareness that is shaped by students' diverse backgrounds and needs. More importantly, human rights awareness among undergraduates (and even the people of the region) is molded by the specificities and commonalities of their everyday lived experiences and material conditions. This is a gap in research and important to be addressed, given that existing approaches or frameworks for examining people’s awareness of human rights have yet to capture the above mentioned specificities and commonalities. Thus, a new approach or framework would address this conundrum and is important to assist initiatives focusing on human rights promotion in Southeast Asia/ASEAN.

### 2. Why is the framework important?

The framework, called **Human-Rights-Awareness-Among-Undergraduates (HRAAU)** is developed based on the above mentioned study supported by the SHAPE-SEA Research Grants Programme (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A Framework for analyzing human rights awareness among undergraduates

The framework can be used to help identify entry points for policies and measures to promote human rights awareness among undergraduates in ASEAN as it takes into consideration the key domains (e.g. *perceptions and knowledge*) and contributing factors (e.g. *personal, experiential, contextual*) in understanding such awareness. Following the line of argument why institutions or organizations use awareness and needs assessments as tools to gather information required to understand a specific problem and develop an appropriate problem-solving policy, the same can be said of the proposed framework that aims to understand the complex nature of human rights awareness among undergraduate students with diverse backgrounds, knowledge, attitudes and needs. The framework, along with the investigative tools it uses (e.g. surveys and interviews), help provide a comprehensive pool of information to academicians, university administrators, and even policy makers who can then formulate better policies and curricula for the promotion of human rights among undergraduates.

### 3. Conclusion

The study undertaken aimed at investigating human rights awareness among university students at two ASEAN universities (i.e. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Srinakharinwirot University). The results show that undergraduates in both countries (particularly at the universities where this study was conducted) showed a relatively high level of awareness about human rights due to a variety of reasons, including their involvement in subjects, courses and activities within and outside the university that either integrated or focused on human rights issues.

A majority of undergraduates defined human rights as basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world and are based on respect, equality, dignity and independence. In addition, many participants were aware of the *5W1H* (what, who, where, why, when, how) of human rights awareness and demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as human rights in the constitution of their respective countries. Such knowledge, in addition to the undergraduates’ personal involvement with human rights work or activities, influenced the way human rights awareness among university students had been commonly perceived. Students acknowledged their lack of knowledge regarding human rights, and asked for more programs to deepen their understanding. Hence, human rights awareness appears to be positive among the people of the region as further evidenced in their reported perceptions about human rights (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Undergraduates’ perceptions of human rights

#### 4. Policy recommendations

The proposed framework is meant to be a neutral apparatus, which does not prescribe to specific human rights standards or agendas. It serves as an instrument, which on the one hand provides a reference point for human rights awareness among undergraduates in ASEAN; on the other hand, it responds to the ASEAN context in a flexible manner. Such flexibility is important especially in countries with diverse understanding, knowledge and experience of human rights, different needs, capacities and even policies of/for human rights development

It is recommended that policy makers to utilize (*adopt and adapt it depending on context*) the proposed framework as

- *the first crucial step* prior to the formulation of policies and curricula that focus on the promotion of human rights among undergraduates;
- *an alternative information gathering and decision making tool* to (re)assess current curricula, materials and programs that may have been formulated with little or any information at the initial stage of conception. Such (re)assessment is also important for developing a more responsive curriculum that meets the needs of undergraduates in specific countries of the region;
- *as an alternative framework and an investigative tool* in future-related studies/research in the field of human rights promotion and education.

### Relevant publications

Chachavalpongpun, P. (2018, January 19). Is promoting human rights in ASEAN an impossible task? *The Diplomat*. Available at: <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/is-promoting-human-rights-in-asean-an-impossible-task/>>.

Shamasundari, R. (2017, August 15). ASEAN needs to cultivate deeper human rights awareness. *The Asean Post*. Available at: <<https://theaseanpost.com/article/asean-needs-cultivate-deeper-human-rights-awareness>>.

Victor, P. (2018, January 29). The struggle for human rights in ASEAN. *The Asean Post*. Available at: <<https://theaseanpost.com/article/struggle-human-rights-asean>>.