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THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN ACHIEVING UNITED NATION'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs):

LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE 37TH IAHR WORLD CONGRESS

BY CHEE HUI LAI, CHUN KIAT CHANG, HUI WENG GOH, & NOR AZAZI

According to a report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), there are about 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 globally. This is the largest youth population ever, with a large part of this population living in developing countries.

As Goal 17 of the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "Partner for the Goals", emphasizes the importance of partnership with multi-stakeholders, youth must be engaged in achieving the SDGs. For SDG 6- "Water and Sanitation", youth plays a vital role in achieving water sustainability. For instance, Goal 6.1 and 6.2 emphasize the accessibility to safe drinking water and sanitation services. According to UNPF's statistic, in the world's 48 least developed countries, children or adolescents make up a majority of the population, many of whom can not satisfy their water and sanitation needs. For Goal 6.B which emphasizes the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management, youth have been claimed to be important voices influencing decision makers in planning water policy in cities.

Hence, if by 2030, children or adolescents are expected to have access to better water and sanitation services, the water policies and strategies that will be implemented by 2030 should take into account the ideas of youth and engage youth to be part of the solution.

IAHR efforts in youth engagement

IAHR has been very keen to engage young professionals in various IAHR activities. Referring to an article by Professor Silke Wieprecht published in *Hydrolink* number 2/2017, according to the database provided by IAHR head office (status 8/2016), out of 4108 IAHR members, 34 % of the members were aged under 35. Through IAHR the Young Professionals Networks (YPN), groups of young professionals and students, gather to share experiences, work on special projects and are given the chance to take part in IAHR activities such as the biennial World Congress, and are thereby able to learn from other IAHR members and create a useful network for their future careers.

Youth's contributions to the 37th IAHR world congress

The 37th IAHR World Congress was held on 14th to 18th August 2017 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This was the first time ever that the IAHR World Congress was held in South East Asia. The congress attracted more than 1,000 participants from 60 different countries to share the ideas and best practices in managing water for sustainable development.

During this congress, the IAHR Malaysian National Chapter organized various activities to foster communications and networking between students and young water professionals as well as to discuss solutions and ideas related to hydro-engineering research. The activities included a half-day technical tour to learn about Malaysian practices and experience in wetland management and conservation (Figure 1). In addition, a talk was given by the Editor of *Journal of Hydraulic Research IAHR*, which provided valuable information and tips for young researchers on how to write a journal paper (Figure 2). The room where this talk was given was packed by many young researchers



Figure 1. YPN Technical Tour



Figure 2. YPN Talk on "How to Write a Journal Paper"



Figure 4. A briefing conducted by 37th IAHR World Congress PCO representative on YPN volunteer's duties during the congress

who were looking forward to improving their publication skills.

As for the youth's contribution to the congress, among the 768 papers that were accepted for publication in the congress proceedings, 210 papers were submitted by students (Figure 3). Besides, during the Congress two students received the John F. Kennedy Student Paper Competition Award, an award given to students who contribute the most outstanding papers to the IAHR World Congress. Apart from contributing papers, through the IAHR (YPN), students were the major force in assisting the Local Organizing Committee in various Congress events. In the 37th IAHR World Congress, 47 students from different Malaysian universities were chosen to be YPN volunteers. YPN volunteers were everywhere in the congress, ranging from being a receptionist at the registration counter to being a youth rapporteur in producing the daily congress

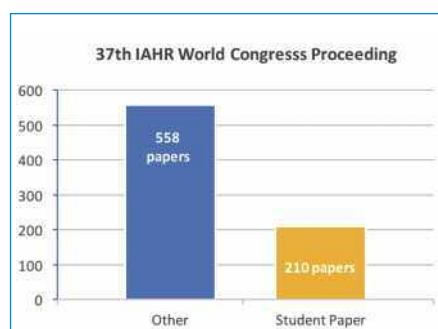


Figure 3. Comparison of congress proceedings submitted by student author and others (non-student author)

newsletter. These valuable young volunteers instilled a new energy to the congress (Figure 4 & 5).

Lessons learnt and the way forward

Youth will certainly be a key to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but only if their voices are heard and counted as part of the solution to the issues that the world is facing today. Today, young people are eager to take more responsibility in making the world better. In this congress, it was proven that youth can play a vital role in major academic events, not only via presenting articles, but also by providing creative ideas to make the congress events more innovative and attractive. Based on the observations, and discussions with the young researchers and volunteers during the congress, there are more activities that can be organised in future IAHR World Congresses to better engage youth in being part of the solution to hydro-environmental-related issues. One suggestion is to organise a forum for young people that would bring diverse young voices and ideas to discuss solutions for the water and hydro-environmental challenges we are facing today. During the forum, many of the youth-concerned topics such as the challenges and opportunities of young researchers in hydro-environmental research, the role of young people in achieving water sustainability, and the contributions of IAHR YPN in SDGs can be discussed. With the networking and resources of IAHR such a forum can contribute to achieving the UN SDGs. ■



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Chun Kiat Chang started working at the River Engineering and Urban Drainage Research Centre (REDAC) in 2002. He has wide experience in various research and consultancy projects related to Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) and Bio-Ecological Drainage System (BIOECODS). He is a Certified Professional in Erosion and Sediment Control (CPESC), corporate member of Institute of Engineer Malaysia (IEM), and the Assistant Secretary for the IAHR Malaysia Chapter.



Hui Weng Goh is currently a lecturer at the River Engineering and Urban Drainage Research Centre (REDAC) as well as the Congress Manager for the 37th IAHR World Congress. She received her Bachelor of Engineering (Civil Engineering) from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Master of Environmental Engineer from National University of Singapore (NUS), and PhD in the field of Stormwater and River Management from Universiti Sains Malaysia.



Nor Azazi Zakaria has served in Universiti Sains Malaysia since 1994. He established the River Engineering and Urban Drainage Research Centre (REDAC) in 2001 and has since remained as the Director. His main research interests are Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems and River Management. Prof. Azazi is the leading researcher in the innovation of Bio-ecological Drainage System, and is now an established figure in the field of stormwater management at national and international levels. He sits in the Executive Committee for Malaysian National Committee on Irrigation and Drainage (MANCID) and Malaysia Stormwater Organization (MSO), as well as IAHR APD. He is a council member of IAHR.



Figure 5. YPN volunteers working with the congress PCO in the 37th IAHR World Congress