

# MFAT Young Leaders Programmes Evaluation Report

Authors of report: Jack Britton, David Hale  
– Alinea International

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## Further details about author

Alinea International (Alinea) was commissioned by Aotearoa New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) to undertake an evaluation of MFAT's Young Leaders Programme. Alinea is a dedicated international development consultancy providing high-quality technical, strategic, and operational expertise to development programmes and organisations across the Asia-Pacific region.

## Evaluation team

**Evaluation Lead:** David Hale is monitoring and evaluation specialist, supporting community development with a focus on systemic change and societal and cultural regeneration. David leads Alinea's Asia-Pacific MEL Portfolio.

**GEDSI and Consultation Lead:** Jack Britton is GEDSI inclusion specialist with experience working across Indonesia, including with the World Bank's social development team. Jack led consultations in Mindanao and Indonesia for this evaluation.

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## Contents

Abstract	4
Executive Summary	5
Background	8
<b>THE ACTIVITY</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>EVALUATION PURPOSE AND SCOPE</b>	<b>8</b>
KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS	8
DESIGN	9
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	12
Overarching Findings	13
Evaluation Conclusions	26
Evaluation Recommendations	27
Annex 1: Key findings	30
Annex 2: Young leaders program comparison	33

# 1

## Abstract

This Evaluation Report details an assessment of the effectiveness, objectives, and delivery model of the Young Leaders Programmes in Indonesia (IYLP) and Mindanao (MINYLP). Commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), the evaluation was independently led by Alinea International.

MFAT has partnered with the Unions Aotearoa International Development Trust (UnionAID) since 2009 to deliver the Young Leaders Programmes (YLPs). The YLPs target emerging civil society leaders aged 20-30, who work and/or volunteer for NGOs, trade unions or labour rights organisations, social enterprises, or educational organisations. The overall objective of the programmes is to contribute to sustainable development and good governance in participating countries through a stronger and more connected civil society.

The evaluation is a summative review which includes recommendations for improvement. In light of the relatively recent independent evaluation of the Myanmar Programme, the evaluation did not focus on this YLP. The evaluation was informed by a desk review of nearly 90 documents, extensive consultations with nearly 50 YLP alumni, programme staff and MFAT.

The evaluation reveals that the Young Leaders Programmes (YLPs) in Indonesia and the Philippines have provided transformative opportunities for young local leaders in civil society. Stakeholders praised the programmes' ability to reach and engage young people from marginalised communities and provide a comprehensive and immersive training experience grounded in good-practice locally-led development practice.

However, the growth of the programme's model has outpaced available resourcing. Lead implementing partner, UnionAID, has heavily relied on the experience and expertise of individual programme managers to effectively deliver its YLPs. This approach is not sustainable. There is a clear need to harmonise and institutionalise monitoring and evaluation process, risk and safeguarding approaches and programme approaches to better ensure programmes can be delivered safely and effectively.

Despite these operational challenges, the evaluation reaffirms the ongoing relevance of the programme's objectives and its strategic value in supporting young leaders and strengthening regional connections. The report recommends consolidating the YLPs under a single, cohesive funding and delivery arrangement, expanding core funding to enable strengthened MEL, GEDSI, and safeguarding functions, and undertaking an organisational review with UnionAID to identify key priorities for internal capacity strengthening.

An overview of key findings and recommendations are contained in the Executive Summary.



# 2

## Executive Summary

The Young Leaders Programme (YLP) Evaluation Report presents a comprehensive assessment of the programme's effectiveness, relevance, and delivery model. The evaluation, highlights key findings regarding the effectiveness and unique opportunity for young people in Mindanao and Eastern Indonesia, while emphasising important gaps in MEL data and critical areas to strengthen in UnionAID's systems and processes.

### Effectiveness

The YLPs have consistently delivered high-quality outcomes on time and within MFAT-approved budgets, with the sole exception being INSPIRASI Year 6 (Indonesia 2023), which slightly overspent due to post-COVID adjustments. Tracking collective impact was challenging – with most alumni still in the formative stages of their work, and the absence of a unified MEL framework across programmes. However, available evidence points to meaningful outcomes across the portfolio—from strengthened alumni capacities to tangible community-level changes in Indonesia, Mindanao, and Myanmar.

Robust and active alumni peer networks have emerged and access to new funding pathways opportunities identified at times. GEDSI principles are well embedded across the programmes, though the development of an overarching GEDSI strategy would enhance coherence and measurement. Conversely, some negative unintended outcomes—such as workload-related stress, job insecurity, and psychosocial challenges linked to re-entry—have also surfaced. Longitudinal MEL tracking will be important to better understand impact, but early signs of improved civil-society capability and governance norms suggest promising directions for future investment and evaluation.

### Relevance

The YLPs continue to align with New Zealand's regional priorities, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines, where ASEAN investment remains important. However, the appropriateness of ongoing programming in Myanmar is increasingly uncertain due to political instability and security risks, which has constrained YLP in its original form. While expansion to Timor-Leste or Viet Nam would support MFAT's strategic interests—especially leveraging existing partnerships in Timor-Leste—the immediate priority should be consolidating current programmes before considering geographic growth.

The YLP curriculum is broadly fit for purpose, effectively blending New Zealand and local expertise, and embedding cultural content such as Māori values and Mindanao's peace process. The integration of English language training within the development curriculum stands out as a particular strength. Nonetheless, concerns have been raised about the intensity of coursework, with some alumni experiencing burnout, highlighting the need for curriculum pacing and resourcing for support mechanisms.

### Delivery model

UnionAID has rapidly scaled its delivery of YLPs across Indonesia and Mindanao, achieving strong outcomes. However, its institutional capacity is stretched, with critical gaps in safeguarding, staff welfare, and MEL resourcing. Much of the programme's success relies on individual commitment rather than sustainable structures. While the partnership between UnionAID and MFAT is viewed positively, the absence of a formal governance mechanism limits opportunities for shared learning and accountability. There is an



opportunity to draw on elements of a negotiated partnership model when consolidating delivery of YLPs, in particular the informed by due diligence checks, an organisational capability assessment and appropriate resourcing for locally-led implementation.

The hybrid delivery model—combining online learning, in-country residential workshops, and New Zealand immersion—has proven highly effective, with strong participant satisfaction and contextual relevance. The curriculum reflects best practice in adult learning, integrating cultural content, alumni-led facilitation, and tailored English-for-

Development components. While the post-covid hybrid model has added complexity to the programme, visa restrictions will continue to constrain options for more immersive implementation. However, the development of action projects has placed undue pressure on some participants, suggesting a need for more flexible implementation. Locally led development is a core strength, with alumni driving community-responsive projects and partnering with respected local organisations. While participant outcomes demonstrate strong sustainability, UnionAID’s ability to maintain delivery at scale has faced challenges due to growing expectations and current resource constraints.

A summary of recommendations is included in Table 1. A full overview of recommendations is included in Section 6 (Evaluation Recommendations)

**Table 1: Summary of evaluation recommendations**

#	RECOMMENDATION
1	Develop medium-term funding agreement to extend YLPs in Mindanao and Indonesia.
2	Funding to be informed by an independent review of UnionAID’s systems and process within 12 months to identify opportunities to strengthen and enhance YLP implementation.
3	Lift core resourcing for management per priorities identified in next programme design. Fund adequately staffed management and administrative positions in each country team and appoint a portfolio manager to oversee governance, budget and risk.
4	Enhance coherence across YLPs through an integrated MEL framework and consistent programming approaches.
5	Establish a more formal governance arrangement between MFAT and UnionAID (and, if appropriate, local partners). This could include an annual reflections workshop.
6	Consider opportunities to embed comprehensive psychosocial support within YLP, including a specialist service to deliver pre-departure briefings, in-programme counselling and on-call assistance (with a capped session allowance) for participants and alumni.
7	Resource a central MEL function. Fund a MERLA adviser embedded within UnionAID or other implementing partners to design and maintain a unified results framework, quality-assure data, and coordinate periodic impact evaluations.
8	Establish a dedicated system to monitor and evaluate action projects. Issue clear guidance on theory-of-change, safeguarding and community feedback; track outputs, outcomes and any unintended effects; and commission light-touch evaluations of a sample of projects each year to verify benefits and mitigate risks.
9	Develop a GEDSI strategy to guide its GEDSI programming, complete with indicators in the MEL framework to measure progress on GEDSI.



- 10** | Establish and integrate an independent SEAH and complaints reporting mechanism
- 11** | Strengthen safeguarding and risk management, with a specific focus on action-project delivery and child-protection standards. Introduce portfolio-wide protocols for “do-no-harm” checks, child protection, PSEAH, and protection of vulnerable groups. Resource safeguards & risk officer to verify sufficient risk management assessments and compliance in each setting.
- 12** | Develop cohesive policy for making action projects more flexible; including opt-out options or group activities to better respond to personal circumstances.
- 13** | Consider introducing a livelihood-protection mechanism or flexible fund for participants who lose work and face financial hardships because of YLP commitments.  
  
Offer stipends or per-diems for alumni leading action projects. Stipends offset income loss that currently stalls some initiatives and improve sustainability, particularly when projects extend beyond the predetermined period. Per-diems could be made available specifically for alumni who are unemployed or underemployed.
- 14** | Consider longitudinal alumni tracer study. Survey each cohort at 2-, 5- and 10-year intervals to track career pathways, community engagement and sustained project outcomes. This provides hard evidence of medium- and long-term change.
- 15** | Consider drawing on elements of a negotiated partnership model when consolidating delivery of YLPs, in particular due diligence checks and an organisational capability assessment and appropriate resourcing for locally-led implementation.
- 16** | Consider offering YLP Alumni the opportunity to connect with Manaaki New Zealand Scholarship Programme alumni networks (facilitated by MFAT posts), ensuring expectations and potential sensitivities are clearly communicated
- 17** | The next design should consider how to manage an ever-growing alumni network and whether annual conferences will be feasible in future years.



# 3

## Background

### THE ACTIVITY

The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) has partnered with the Unions Aotearoa International Development Trust (UnionAID) since 2009 to deliver the Young Leaders Programmes (YLPs).

The YLP targets emerging civil society leaders aged 20-30, who work and/or volunteer for NGOs, trade unions or labour rights organisations, social enterprises, or educational organisations.

The YLPs are intensive cohort-based study and mentoring programmes which aim to enhance the knowledge, skills, networks, and leadership competencies of emerging civil society leaders. Participants are supported to apply their learning throughout the Young Leaders Programmes, including through the design and implementation of Action projects in their communities.

The overall objective of the programmes is to contribute to sustainable development and good governance in participating countries through a stronger and more connected civil society. The YLPs have become a long-standing and valuable component of New Zealand’s International Development Cooperation (IDC) Programme in the Southeast Asia region.

Beginning with the Myanmar Young Leaders Programme in 2009, programmes were subsequently introduced for Eastern Indonesia in 2018 (the Indonesia Young Leaders Programme), and the Mindanao region of the Philippines in 2019 (the Mindanao Young Leaders Programme). A combined programme for Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is around halfway through a two-year pilot phase. The current phases of the Indonesia and Mindanao YLPs are due to end in 2026 and 2025 respectively.

### EVALUATION PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The evaluation is a summative evaluation (evaluating impact) which includes recommendations for improvement. The evaluation will cover all phases of IYLP and MINYLP. In light of the relatively recent independent evaluation of the Myanmar programme, this evaluation focussed primarily on Mindanao and Eastern Indonesia. Activities in the Cambodia-Lao PDR YLP were also not considered given these remain in the early stages of implementation.

### KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The key evaluation questions (KEQs) for this review are detailed in Table 2. The evaluation report is structured to address each KEQ in the key findings section.

*Table 2: Key Evaluation Questions*

<b>Objective 1: To examine the progress being made in achieving outputs and outcomes, as well as the impact the programme has had on wider beneficiaries such as the communities and</b>	Have programme outputs been delivered to time, to the expected quality and within budget?
	What evidence is available to demonstrate progress towards intended short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes?
	What, if any, have been the unintended outcomes? (Positive or negative)
	What, if any, are the outcomes for the communities involved?
	To what extent and in what ways have these programmes changed civil society and governance practices, leadership and systems in the participating countries?



<b>the participants' organisations (Effectiveness, Impact).</b>	
<b>Objective 2: To assess the extent to which the YLP remain relevant to the needs of participating countries and the priorities of New Zealand's IDC Programme (Relevance, Coherence).</b>	<p>Are these programmes still appropriate for New Zealand's strategies and participating countries' (Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines) contexts?</p> <p>Are there any other countries in the region where there is a case for inclusion in the programme? (E.g. Timor-Leste, Viet Nam)</p> <p>To what extent is the curriculum and programme content fit for purpose, culturally appropriate, and context appropriate? Has it evolved to meet changing context or needs in the countries in which the activity is delivered?</p>
<b>Objective 3: To assess the delivery model of the Young Leaders Programmes (Efficiency, Effectiveness, Sustainability).</b>	<p>How well does UnionAID's systems and processes, and governance and management arrangements, to support delivery and achieve outcomes?</p> <p>What and how have partnerships been developed and maintained? How effective is the partnership between MFAT and UnionAID?</p> <p>Are there opportunities and benefits for consolidation of the delivery of these activities by UnionAID, and management of funding by MFAT?</p> <p>To what extent does the delivery modality (online vs in country/region vs in New Zealand) contribute to the effectiveness of the activity?</p> <p>To what extent does the delivery modality make use of best practice and innovations in pedagogy and adult learning?</p> <p>To what extent are these programmes supporting locally led development? What options exist to strengthen this?</p> <p>What factors are enhancing or constraining sustainability of these programmes? Will the benefits last?</p>
<b>Objective 4: To identify lessons and good practices to increase the positive impact of the Young Leaders Programmes in the future.</b>	<p>What are the strengths and challenges of YLP? What are the gaps and opportunities?</p> <p>What recommendations can be made to shape the future design and delivery of these programmes?</p> <p>What lessons can be learned from similar programmes operating in the region, including the US Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative; and The Asia Foundation's Development Fellows?</p> <p>What recommendations can be made on how UnionAID and MFAT can better evaluate and report the achievements of these programmes at an aggregated level?</p>

## DESIGN

### Methodology

After inception meetings between the evaluation team, MFAT, and UnionAID, a detailed evaluation plan was developed, leading into the desk review and consultation process, as detailed below.

#### Desk

The evaluation was informed by an intensive review of a broad array of documents provided by both UnionAID and MFAT via SharePoint and email. Over 86 documents were reviewed, including Activity Design Documents, Annual Progress Reports, Independent Evaluations, financial records, and materials relating to curriculum and participant selection processes.

#### review

#### Consultation

An Alinea consultant conducted consecutive in-country missions in Mindanao and then Manado, Indonesia, to coincide with the YLP alumni conferences ("hui") held over a two-week period in May

#### process



2025. These forums brought together alumni in each country and provided the evaluation team with opportunities to conduct interviews, observe alumni activities, and engage in extensive discussions with participants, UnionAID programme managers, and local implementing partner staff.

A total of 20 INSPIRASI alumni were interviewed across cohorts from 2018 to 2024, with many others engaged in informal conversations. Documented consultations included 9 male and 11 female participants. The Indonesian participants identified with various religions: 9 Muslim, 10 Christian (including Catholic), and 1 not stated.

Participants were drawn from a broad geographic spread across Indonesian provinces. The largest group was from South Sulawesi (7 participants), followed by Papua (4), East Nusa Tenggara (3), North Sulawesi (2), West Nusa Tenggara (2), Southeast Sulawesi (1), and South Papua (1). Cohorts were well represented over time, with participation from: 2018 (3), 2019 (1), 2020 (2), 2022 (5), 2023 (2), and 2024 (7).

For the Mindanao Young Leaders Programme (MINYLP), a total of 27 alumni were interviewed across all cohorts. The group included 12 female, 7 male, 1 transwoman, 3 participants identifying as non-binary, and 2 participants who chose not to state their gender identity.

Religious affiliation among MINYLP alumni also varied: 12 participants identified as Christian (including Catholic and Roman Catholic), 8 as Muslim, 4 reported no religion, 1 participant identified with an Indigenous belief system, and 2 did not state a religion.

MINYLP alumni represented a wide range of ethno-linguistic groups, including Sinama-Tausug, Maranao, Manobo, Ilonggo-Ilocano, Tausug, Meranaw, Maguindanaon, Surigaonon, Sama-Zamboangeña, Talaandig, Teduray, Bagobo-Klata, Tagakaolo, Agusanon Manobo, Bisaya, Ilonggo, Matigsalug, Pulangiyen Kirintakan, Manobo-B'laan, "Ajusan" Manobo, and Subanen. Several participants reported mixed or compound heritage.

In summary (see Table 3), a total of 47 participants were consulted across both programmes, with 48.9% identifying as female, 34.0% as male, and 8.5% identifying as either non-binary or transwoman. In terms of religion, 46.8% identified as Christian, 36.2% as Muslim, 10.6% reported no religion or identified with an Indigenous belief system, and 6.4% did not state their religion.

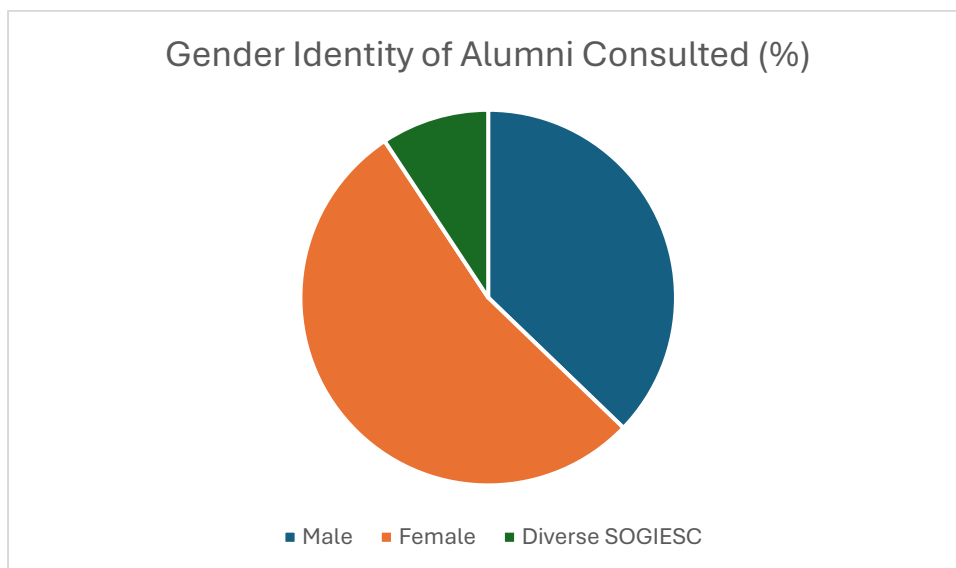
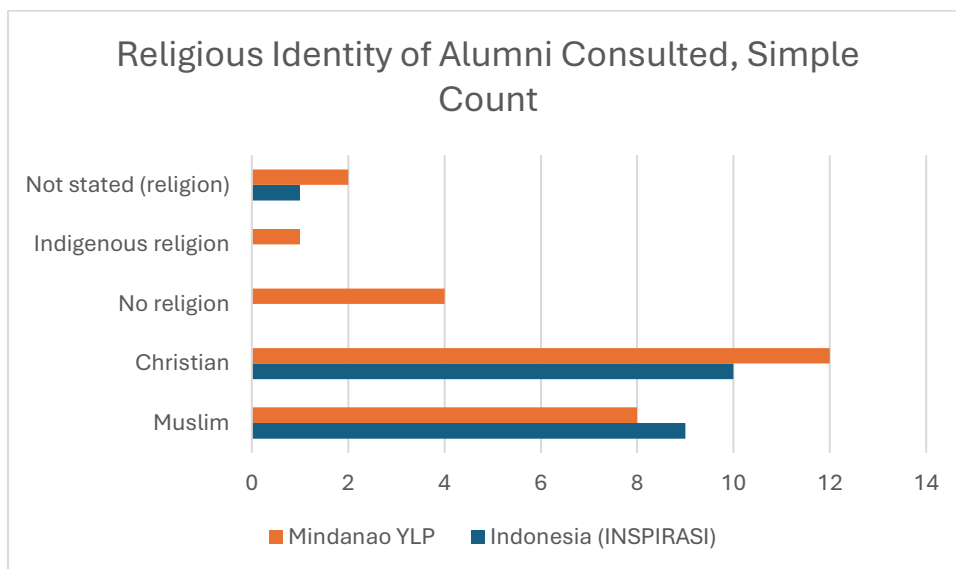
<b>Category</b>	<b>Indonesia (INSPIRASI)</b>	<b>Mindanao YLP</b>	<b>% of Total (Both Programmes)</b>
<b>Total Participants</b>	20	27	100
<b>Male</b>	9	7	34
<b>Female</b>	11	12	48.9
<b>Diverse SOGIESC or not stated</b>	0	6	<b>12.8</b>
<b>Muslim</b>	9	8	36.2
<b>Christian</b>	10	12	46.8
<b>No religion</b>	0	4	8.5
<b>Indigenous religion</b>	0	1	2.1
<b>Not stated (religion)</b>	1	2	6.4



In both Makassar and Mindanao, Alinea sub-contracted local female researchers who were recommended by UnionAID and local implementing partners (IDIS and BaKTI, respectively). This approach was designed to accommodate cultural sensitivities and enable participants to choose the researcher with whom they felt most comfortable.

Consultations were conducted using a semi-structured but organic interview approach—designed to be open-ended and participant-driven, while remaining aligned with the key evaluation questions. The timing of the consultations was flexible to ensure they did not disrupt scheduled workshop activities, which led to slightly different response rates across Indonesia and Mindanao.

All consultations were voluntary. Participants were informed that they could choose whether to answer any question, end the interview at any time, and that their responses would remain confidential. They were also briefed on the purpose of the evaluation and invited to ask questions. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of alumni responses from both Indonesia and Mindanao forms a key component of this evaluation.



The consultation process also included remote interviews with 5 local implementing partner representatives, 8 UnionAID staff and board members, 7 MFAT officials (from Desk and Post), and 1



Government of Indonesia official from the Ministry of Youth and Sports—totalling 68 in-depth interviews.

Following completion of the consultations, the evaluation team developed and presented preliminary findings in a sensemaking workshop with key UnionAID and MFAT stakeholders on 17 July 2025.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In line with the evaluation principles of the New Zealand International Development Cooperation Programme, the evaluation aimed to deliver useful and credible findings relevant to its purpose. Recommendations were designed to be pragmatic, actionable, and future-focused, presented in a manner to promote learning.

The ethical considerations for this evaluation included a commitment to respect and protect the rights, welfare, and confidentiality of all participants. Adherence to relevant policies and good practices, including child protection standards, was paramount to ensuring the dignity, safety, and protection of all individuals involved in the evaluation process.



# 4

## Overarching Findings

Objective 1: To examine the progress being made in achieving outputs and short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, as well as the impact the programme has had on wider beneficiaries such as the communities and the participants' organisations

**Have programme outputs been delivered to time, to the expected quality and within budget?**

**KEY FINDING 1.1:** The YLPs have been delivered on time and to the expected quality within, or under, the MFAT-approved budget for every year for which financial data are available.

The documented exception is INSPIRASI Year 6 (Indonesia 2023), which met quality and timing targets but slightly overspent due to post-COVID budget forecasting difficulties and running three catch-up cohorts post-pandemic.

**The consolidated evidence base from annual progress reports and the independent evaluation of the Myanmar programme confirms that MFAT's Young Leaders investment is reliably delivering outputs on time, to specification, and within budget.** In Indonesia, the programme's first two years finished well under budget while meeting all planned outputs. Year 1 closed NZD \$57,696 under the work plan allocation, and Year 2 underspent by a further NZD \$109,645—savings driven by volunteer inputs and lean logistics. Mindanao shows a similar fiscal performance: the inaugural 2019 cohort underspent by NZD \$38,803 while completing planned activities. Years 5 and 6 again came in below forecast after partner costs fell and Action Project grants were phased, with Year 6 recording underspends across selection and delivery lines, although detailed financial reporting was not included in recent years' progress reports. In all cases, narrative and survey data in the reports point to strong participant engagement and high satisfaction with programme quality and relevance, demonstrating the quality of the outputs.

**An independent evaluation confirmed the Myanmar stream's equivalent performance.** The review verified that all core outputs had been achieved. The evaluators judged programme management as "efficient", noting that intended outcomes were being delivered "with minimum cost for human resources" due to extensive volunteer support. Of 47 alumni interviewed, while most raised some challenges, all praised the overall quality of the programme and experience. Further enhancing MEL frameworks and resourcing would allow for better interrogation of output delivery and quality across the YLP portfolio.

## What evidence is available to demonstrate progress towards intended short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes?

**KEY FINDING 2.1:** As three Young Leaders investments lack a shared, consolidated MEL framework and limited MEL resourcing, portfolio-wide outcome data is fragmented and difficult to measure definitively. However, the available evidence shows clear and collective impact from alumni capacity gains to instances of community-level policy and behaviour change in Indonesia, Mindanao and Myanmar.

**The lack of a uniform theory of change or programme logic, and limited MEL resourcing, makes portfolio-level analysis of impact difficult.** Measuring the impact of the Action Projects—a sizeable part of the programme—is similarly difficult; however, the available data paint an emerging picture of tangible progress, from immediate capacity building to medium-term organisational leadership and emerging longer-term societal impact.

**Short-term outcomes are tracked most systematically.** INSPIRASI and MinYLP progress reports show every cohort lifting English proficiency and reporting sharp gains in confidence and critical thinking. For example, the 2018 Indonesian group improved their IELTS scores by up to 1.5 bands and unanimously self-reported developing stronger presentation and research skills. Myanmar’s independent evaluation corroborates this pattern, recording a  $\geq 0.5$ -band gain for 96 per cent of MYLP participants between 2014–2016, and identifying English, leadership, and analytical skills as the most frequently cited personal changes. Alumni consultations undertaken as part of this evaluation echo these findings: 38% of alumni respondents across Indonesia and Mindanao explicitly highlighted major confidence gains in English and public speaking.

**By the medium term, alumni are applying these skills in their organisations.** Consultations revealed examples of promotions, improvements in proposal writing, research, and leadership skills—though collective impact is harder to measure. While the YLP investment is still relatively new, and the majority of participants are in their 20s and 30s, long-term effects are beginning to surface at community and policy levels. Action Project data from Indonesia and Mindanao demonstrates that some projects are already influencing policy or behaviour. However, the sustainable or long-term impact of these projects is not yet being measured systematically.

Myanmar, as the longest-standing YLP, provides longer-term but largely qualitative and fragmented insights:

*“Overall, improved leadership, knowledge, and changed values and attributes (Medium Term Outcome 1) contribute strongly to the peaceful development of Myanmar (Long Term Outcome 1), and a strong alumni network of skilled leaders in Myanmar (Long Term Outcome 2).” – MYLP Evaluation.<sup>1</sup>*

## What, if any, have been the unintended outcomes? (Positive or negative)

**KEY FINDING 3.1:** Positive unexpected outcomes—such as the strength of the alumni peer networks and alumni accessing new funding pathways—are evident across the Young Leaders portfolio.

**KEY FINDING 3.2:** Gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) has been well integrated into the YLP programmes, though the programme could benefit from an overarching GEDSI strategy to guide and measure its GEDSI programming

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<sup>1</sup> Cahn, Miranda & Myint, Win Win. 2020. Evaluation of the Burma Young Community Leaders Programme (BYCLP) and Myanmar Young Leaders Programme (MYLP).



**Good practices of GEDSI integration are evident throughout the programme.** These include the high representation of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in the Mindanao programme - Alumni with diverse SOGIESC referred to the alumni network as their “safe space.”

*“As a queer person living in a conservative area fighting for women’s rights, it can be a lonely journey. YLP gives me assurance I’m not alone and I have a support system... I feel safer in the Mindanao YLP network – I get to express who I am without fearing judgement or homophobia.” – MINYLP alumni consultation*

Gender equity is also prominent, with a good gender balance of alumni and participants across both Mindanao and Indonesia, and dedicated modules on women’s rights and gender equality, and GEDSI more broadly, included in the curriculum. There is no strategy to target recruitment of people with disability, though examples of disability equity and rights efforts are evident—such as the programme assisting with procurement of a prosthetic leg for an alumni in Indonesia, and the Mindanao project team tailoring high-definition PowerPoint slides for a participant with low vision. Programmes have encouraged and supported participants with disabilities.

**KEY FINDING 3.3:** A set of negative unexpected outcomes have also emerged, including instances of course workload-related stress, income and job insecurity, and experiences of psychosocial stress linked in part to home country re-entry

**Heavy timetables and overlapping commitments during the YLP in-country component have generated recurring reports of fatigue and emotional strain, as evident from both annual evaluations and consultation feedback.** Nearly 40% of alumni in the 2024 cross-country consultation identified excessive workload, burnout, or time management as their main difficulty, speaking of “deadlines impossible to meet”. Alumni also face workload challenges upon re-entry, and the IYLP 2021 risk register flagged “mental burnout from workload on top of regular jobs”. Mindanao’s 2024 cohort prompted the introduction of structured mental health workshops after earlier graduates struggled to readjust at home—a measure designed to ease reverse culture shock and support sustained wellbeing. Nonetheless, strengthened psychosocial support is essential for ongoing programme sustainability and alumni wellbeing.

**Income and organisational disruptions have also emerged as unintended outcomes for alumni.** Several reported losing their jobs during or after the in-country component and/or facing financial hardship due to implementing Action Projects without financial compensation or per diems. Consultations with project staff revealed widespread financial hardship among alumni—though not necessarily as a result of the programme—particularly in Indonesia and Mindanao.

*“The main challenge I went through was that I needed to step back from my job... but still had bills to pay. I thought after YLP it would be easy to get a job, but in the Philippines opportunities are scarce. I was unemployed for 3–4 months.” – MinYLP alumni*

### **What, if any, are the outcomes for the communities involved?**

**KEY FINDING 4.1:** It is difficult to measure the collective impact of YLP for communities in the three countries, in part due to the lack of project level and longitudinal monitoring and evaluation. But some shifts in civil-society capability, governance norms and positive impacts for communities are evident. Further monitoring and evaluation of projects and longitudinal studies are required.

**Evidence of community-level impact remains fragmented; however, there are emerging examples of institutional change and positive outcomes for communities.** Most alumni from



programmes in Indonesia and Mindano are still in the early stages of their careers, while many alumni from Myanmar (the longest running YLP) have been personally affected and/or displaced since Myanmar's military coup in 2021. Tracking and understanding individual careers and contributions over years is essential to unpacking community outcomes. Action projects are an opportunity to apply knowledge and skills learned in the programme, and are not intended as sustainable development projects in themselves.

**However, examples of community contributions are evident.** In Indonesia, a 2019 IYLP alumni founded a university-based association for students with disabilities—an initiative born from the YLP that is now influencing institutional practice in Makassar. Prior to the project's commencement, only three universities in Makassar admitted students with disabilities. Advocacy efforts by the student network have since doubled this figure, with six universities now offering places and enrolments increasing from 22 in 2019 to 74 in 2024. Additional improvements include a more streamlined registration process, increased discourse on disability inclusion, and the development of more accessible campus facilities. Notably, 45 of the 74 students with disabilities currently enrolled in Makassar universities are active members of the student disability network established by the YLP graduate.

**Beyond Indonesia, Mindanao alumni have introduced new approaches to municipal governance and Indigenous Peoples legislation,** including drafting parliamentary bills and representing barangays in food security agreements. In Myanmar, the evaluation noted the adoption of New Zealand-style civic education workshops, gender equity dialogues, and strengthened civil society engagement—signalling an early but meaningful shift in leadership norms and systems.

Measuring the cumulative or collective impact of YLP across the three countries remains difficult, largely due to the absence of systematic project-level and longitudinal monitoring. However, while still a relatively new investment, there is emerging evidence of shifts in civil society capability, governance practices, and leadership norms across all three contexts.

The INSPIRASI Action Projects Report<sup>2</sup> offers additional examples of tangible community impact, including:

An early marriage prevention project successfully influenced local policy development:

*"We are now working with the village government to draft a Perdes [village regulation] that includes our recommendations. The head of the village asked me to speak at the next Musrenbang."*

A waste education project prompted community-led change:

*"Before, no one in my community sorted their rubbish. Now, they're demanding the village head invest in composting bins."*

Alumni created safe, inclusive spaces for marginalised youth:

*"This was the first time we had an open forum on disability and SOGIESC. Young people from different backgrounds shared their stories—and listened. That had never happened before."*

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<sup>2</sup> 2025. Union Aid. Indonesia Young Leaders Programme, Action Projects Report.



## Objective 2: To assess the extent to which the YLP remain relevant to the needs of participating countries and the priorities of New Zealand's IDC Programme

### Are these programmes still appropriate for New Zealand's strategies and participating countries' (Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines) contexts?

**KEY FINDING 5.1:** Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines remain priority countries as part of NZ's ASEAN engagement, albeit secondary priorities under the International Development Cooperation (IDC) Programme

**The YLPs support a locally led development delivery approach, and reflect MFAT's commitment to strengthening civil society.** YLP programming in Indonesia and the Philippines are particularly relevant, recognising the strategic importance of the region to New Zealand's security, prosperity, and regional stability. While the Pacific remains the primary geographic focus under the IDC programme, Southeast Asia is a key secondary focus, with Indonesia and the Philippines identified as priority bilateral partners. Funding to the ASEAN region is MFAT's largest outside of the Pacific. MFAT's investments in these countries are guided by principles of effective, inclusive, resilient, and sustained development, with a focus on economic and climate resilience, peace and security, and knowledge and skills. Engagement is framed by long-standing diplomatic relationships, shared regional interests, and opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation, particularly in areas such as education, renewable energy, and capacity building.

**New Zealand is lifting its development cooperation with ASEAN.** MFAT's ASEAN IDC programme operates at a regional, multi-country and bilateral level. In response to current challenges, MFAT is focused on three priority areas:

1. Climate and economic resilience: renewable energy, climate smart agriculture, environmental management and disaster resilience;
2. Knowledge and skills: scholarships, professional development and civil society leadership training;
3. Peace and security: good governance and leadership; social cohesion; Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE); and mine action.

New Zealand's ASEAN IDC programme maintains a balance between those least-developed countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar) and middle-income countries of Indonesia, Philippines and Viet Nam, where there is focus on the most marginalised communities. Our commitment to the region's less developed countries contributes to ASEAN's key objective of closing the development gap between and within member states. In addition to these countries, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei also benefit from the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarship Programme.

**KEY FINDING 5.2:** The appropriateness of YLP programming in Myanmar is less certain. Ongoing political and security upheavals significantly increases the risk profile of the traditional YLP approach in Myanmar. Ongoing support for alumni to deliver local projects is likely to be the only young leaders programming possible in the near term.

**While YLP in Myanmar is a foundational and highly successful programme, UnionAID's ability to operate in the country has been severely curtailed since the military coup in 2021.** Ongoing support to YLP alumni networks provides a useful entry-point for continued engagement – particularly in facilitating humanitarian support. However, most NGOs supporting civil society now operate outside of Myanmar to minimise the escalating risks of active conflict,



surveillance and detention.<sup>3</sup> Opportunities remain to re-orientate programming to support Thai-based Myanmar young leaders, consistent with MFAT's ongoing commitment to provide humanitarian and development assistance through non-state actors and civil society. However, programming will need to be highly responsive to the risks and sensitivities of working with often traumatised and vulnerable Myanmar diaspora. UnionAID has not operated the conventional YLP model in Myanmar since the military coup, and the likelihood this will be possible in the near-term is considered low. Ongoing programming through UnionAID in Myanmar should therefore continue to be an alumni-centered approach, with appropriately scaled risk management essential given the context.

### **Are there any other countries in the region where there is a case for inclusion in the programme? (E.g. Timor-Leste, Viet Nam)**

**KEY FINDING 6.1:** Supporting young leaders in Timor-Leste or Viet Nam would align with MFAT regional priorities and (in the case of Timor-Leste) build on established bilateral partnerships. However, the pressing priority should be to consolidate the current YLPs before any geographic expansion.

**The unique potential of the YLP model merits consideration for long-term expansion, particularly as a complementary programme to bilateral partnerships.** Given its location, need profile and impending ASEAN ascension, Timor-Leste would be the most sensible location for future expansion. Timor-Leste is one of the least developed countries in Southeast Asia, with a youthful population, high unemployment, and limited formal leadership pathways for young people. The country's emerging institutions, post-conflict history, and decentralising governance reforms make it a context where investments in youth leadership could have outsized impact on peacebuilding, civic engagement, and inclusive governance. While Vietnam has a large and dynamic youth population, the regulatory and political environment is more challenging for leadership programmes, especially those with a rights-based or participatory focus.

**In the near term however, YLP must be consolidated.** The model in its current form requires significantly higher resourcing and greater coherence across its country programmes. UnionAID has foundational work to do to strengthen its management and governance systems to ensure current YLPs are safe, sustainable and effective (see findings under Objectives 3 & 4). While this consolidation of existing programmes is underway, it is unlikely that expansion would be feasible.

### **To what extent is the curriculum and programme content fit for purpose, culturally appropriate, and context appropriate? Has it evolved to meet changing context or needs in the countries in which the activity is delivered?**

**KEY FINDING 7.1:** The YLP curriculum evaluated is broadly fit for purpose and relevant, blending New Zealand and local expertise, and deliberately embedding cultural content—from Māori culture to Mindanao's peace process. The integration of English language components within the development curriculum was a particular strength

**KEY FINDING 7.2:** Some concerns have been raised regarding overburdening alumni with excessive coursework demands, leading to burnout among some alumni

**Across all three Young Leaders streams the curriculum is broadly fit for purpose and relevant, blending New Zealand and local expertise, and deliberately embedding cultural content—from Māori culture to Mindanao's peace process.** Adaptation is essential as country

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<sup>3</sup> See Wells, T. & Maung, P.P. (2024) [Amid revolution, Myanmar's NGOs face a deficit of donor solidarity](#), New Mandala



contexts evolve, as is a reduction in overburdening alumni with excessive coursework demands, which has been a common factor leading to burnout.

**Curricula are – appropriately - routinely re-worked rather than repeated.** YLP has progressively added volunteer mentors, special-interest topics and project-proposal coaching, integrating research, proposal writing and other topics based on progressive alumni feedback. English courses are now built around development topics rather than not standard and stand-alone language course. This has allowed for more relevant engagement with language development, and according to most interviewees, been a helpful evolution of the programme.

**Cultural tailoring is a deliberate and effective feature of the programme.** YLP gives participants first-hand insight into Māori development models and indigenous leadership. Another example of cultural relevance is Mindanao modules drawing on local experts to unpack the Bangsamoro peace process, and according to interviewees, alumni are already applying Indigenous research methods and culturally sensitive facilitation in their own training work.

As previously mentioned, many alumni (19 of 47 interviewed in Mindanao and Indonesia) pointed to the heavy, sometimes overwhelming, workload as being one of the biggest challenges faced through their YLP experience. This is reflected in annual evaluations conducted across countries and cohorts as a common challenge.

“The packed schedule negatively impacted my mental well-being... deadlines impossible to meet.”  
– 2024 Mindanao alumni

## Objective 3: To assess the delivery model of the Young Leaders Programmes

### How well does UnionAID’s systems and processes, and governance and management arrangements, to support delivery and achieve outcomes?

**KEY FINDING 8.1:** UnionAID has grown quickly to deliver effective programmes in Myanmar, Indonesia, Mindanao Lao PDR and Cambodia. However, much of the program’s success relies on individuals, rather than institutional capacity. UnionAID’s systems, governance and management arrangements are broadly under-developed to sustainably and safely deliver the YLP in compliance with MFAT standards. Particular resourcing gaps remain in safeguarding, staff welfare and MEL.

**UnionAID’s systems and processes have developed markedly according to interviewees, but gaps remain.** YLP’s duty of care approaches were regarded by one observer as “gold standard”<sup>4</sup>, a tribute to the commitment of programme managers to provide comprehensive wrap-around support to young leaders and alumni.

*“Its not mechanical. They have support systems, group chats, inter-cohort coordination. The big sister / big brother model is so effective. You can’t manufacture this” – MFAT, Manila*

**Internally, some stakeholders noted opportunities to strengthen pastoral care within the organisation,** suggesting that additional expertise in this area could enhance support for partners and staff. A few interviewees also expressed concern that current safeguarding processes may benefit from further development. In some cases, the delegation of implementation responsibilities was perceived as creating distance between UnionAID’s leadership and on-the-ground delivery, which may impact how support and engagement are experienced.

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<sup>4</sup> KII 007



**While programmes have been effectively delivered to date, there is a clear and urgent need to formalise and institutionalise UnionAID’s systems and processes** across YLPs and across the organisation more broadly. While UnionAID has evolved from its volunteer-run beginnings much of the core implementation of YLPs responsibility is still concentrated on individuals rather than organisational processes.

**The strengthening of UnionAID’s governance arrangements has evolved over the years with the increase in the YLP programmes and there has been a particular focus on formalising those arrangements.** UnionAID has established a new Board Charter, and is developing an organisational Operating Model, Accountability Model, Table of Authority and associated policies and controls. Improving governance remains a continuous process for the Board and Board Audit Risk and Finance Committee (ARFC). Prioritising ongoing strengthening in these areas will be essential to continue to support the YLPs.

**Management arrangements and organisational culture have not always enabled the smooth implementation of the program.** While programming has been highly localised, internal management has been more hierarchical and distant – potentially compounded by the hybrid model. Interviewee feedback on these dynamics was mixed; however, there was a consistent view that staff face high expectations and would benefit from additional support. Some interviewees also noted a perceived disconnect between UnionAID’s two core areas of work—workers’ rights and the Young Leaders Program—with limited communication products and public-facing materials highlighting the contributions of young leaders. Strengthening internal workplace culture and ensuring staff are appropriately supported, recognised, and empowered in line with their responsibilities could help foster a more cohesive and enabling environment for the continued success of the YLP.

#### How effective is the partnership between MFAT and UnionAID?

**KEY FINDING 9.1:** UnionAID and MFAT both regard their partnership as constructive and effective. However, no formal governance mechanism has been established, reducing opportunities for collective learning and accountability.

**The partnership between MFAT and UnionAID has clearly been founded on respect, and developed organically over the course of the YLP.** Workplans are routinely submitted and coordination meetings are periodically held between MFAT and UnionAID’s Executive Director. Interviewees from both UnionAID and MFAT spoke of the comfort and confidence each held in the partnership, and overall appreciation for how the relationship has been managed. However, the strategic importance of the partnership and complexities of the programme almost certainly merit the establishment of a more formal governance structure.

**There has been limited interaction between YLPs and the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarship Programme to date.** Within MFAT, it is appropriate that YLP is managed as a development programme that transcends individual training through an established partnership with UnionAID. This is consistent with MFAT partnership principles and helps to ensure alignment with regional and bilateral development priorities. On the ground, facilitating alumni connections have been seen as potentially risky. Many young leaders work in social and political activism spaces that can be sensitive at times. However, opportunities to explore opportunities connections should be considered in open consultation with alumni.

#### Are there opportunities and benefits for consolidation of the delivery of these activities by UnionAID, and management of funding by MFAT?

**KEY FINDING 10.1:** There are clear benefits in consolidating the delivery of YLPs and drawing from elements of the negotiated partnership model through MFAT. Enhanced efficiencies in administration,



finance, MEL, risk management, safeguarding and reporting would be likely for both MFAT and UnionAID

**While the YLPs have developed gradually and in close alignment with local contexts, their organic growth has occurred in the absence of a unified, programme framework.** This decentralised approach has enabled responsiveness to partner needs and country-specific nuances, but it has also introduced challenges in implementation. Several interviewees highlighted that the lack of a coherent structure has made coordination more complex, particularly in areas such as budgeting and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), where greater consistency and alignment would enhance overall programme effectiveness.

**Consolidating the YLPs under a single, integrated programme structure could offer several benefits.** It would provide UnionAID with a clearer delivery model, strengthen internal planning processes, and enable partners to design activities against a shared programme logic and set of outcomes. This would not only streamline implementation but also support more strategic resource allocation and accountability. UnionAID staff have pointed to the more simplified, consolidated model used in Laos and Cambodia as a preferred structure—one that could inform future design and delivery of YLPs across all contexts.

### **To what extent does the delivery modality (online vs in country/region vs in New Zealand) contribute to the effectiveness of the activity?**

**KEY FINDING 11.1:** The hybrid delivery model—online preparatory learning, a home-country residential workshop, and the New Zealand immersion component—has proven an effective modality resulting in deepened contextual relevance and sustaining high participant satisfaction. The residential component, in particular, now equips participants with the knowledge, networks and skills they need before the NZ phase.

**While delivery modalities vary across programmes, the hybrid model adopted by MinYLP and INSPIRASI—particularly as it has evolved during and after COVID-19—has proven effective.** Online modules help maintain programme momentum and expand access. The post-COVID redesign now delivers Sustainable Development Course (SDC) Part 1 and English for Development remotely, providing participants with foundational learning prior to in-person engagement. End-of-course surveys in 2022 recorded 94 per cent overall satisfaction, with participants describing the flipped-classroom approach as “very effective”. During consultations, three alumni flagged internet connectivity during online classes as presenting a challenge.

**The residential workshop, introduced in the later years of YLP, now serves as a key bridge between the virtual and in-country components and the New Zealand phase.** INSPIRASI’s 2023 Bali residential was “highly evaluated” for its participatory facilitation, self-care modules, and locally focused sustainability field trips, which participants reported as confidence-building for their action projects. The previous year’s Lombok residential (2022) was repeatedly described as “outstanding”, offering hands-on leadership practice and real-time feedback. Alumni did, however, recommend shorter workshop days and more outdoor sessions to manage fatigue.

SDC Parts 1 and 2—including the full-immersion New Zealand component—continue to foster language gains, cross-cultural learning, strategic networking, and practical knowledge across a broad range of sustainable development issues. While this hybrid approach has added complexity to the YLP model, the effectiveness of the approach and more place-based orientation has been appreciated. Visa constraints also mean a hybrid approach is now unavoidable. Due to Immigration New Zealand’s settings, the maximum visa length that can be issued to YLP participants is 12-weeks. Appropriate resourcing is however required to ensure the sustainability of this more complex model.



## To what extent does the delivery modality make use of best practice and innovations in pedagogy and adult learning?

**KEY FINDING 12.1:** The Young Leaders portfolio consistently applies recognised adult-learning practice—experiential, participatory and learner-centred—by partnering with university specialists, embedding alumni as co-facilitators and refreshing content each year in response to feedback and context change. These design choices, including a tailored English-for-Development syllabus and alumni-led “learning advisor” roles, show a strong uptake of pedagogical innovation across all delivery modalities.

**Collaboration with universities in New Zealand gives participants access to university teaching methods and resources, while allowing UnionAID and local implementing partners to tailor content for the Sustainable Development modules.** Partnering with tertiary providers anchors the programmes in current educational research and TESOL best practice. Peer-to-peer and alumni-led learning also reflects good practice in adult education. In Mindanao, alumni have been introduced as “Learning Advisors” and subject experts during online delivery, offering cohort-specific mentoring and drawing on alumni networks to provide real-world case studies—an approach credited by participants with making abstract concepts more tangible. Alumni now help facilitate provincial selection workshops and classroom sessions, extending the learning community and modelling leadership for new participants.

**The curriculum has been continuously refined to incorporate emerging pedagogies.** During COVID-19, programme managers from Indonesia and Mindanao jointly redesigned the Sustainable Development Course into a flipped-classroom format that combined synchronous discussions with self-paced research, supported by tailored academic reading sessions. Participants described the revised structure as “very effective” for adult learners balancing work and study. Residential workshops now incorporate participatory techniques, such as Indigenous research methods, which alumni have gone on to use in their own organisations.

**YLP has also increasingly incorporated peer learning approaches to shape delivery modalities.** Peer learning advisors were introduced to IYLP and MYLP during the covid-adjustments, while alumni have also been involved in IYLP and MYLP selection workshops and selection panel. The annual hui’s are coordinated by alumni’s – empowering young leaders to set agendas for programme reflections and improvements.

**UnionAID has noted that the integrated model of English language delivery has undoubtedly been a success** and TESOL colleagues have also commended this approach. However, a longer period of immersion in an English-speaking environment is highly beneficial for participants with lower English levels at selection. It is important to maintain options for those with weaker English to receive additional training in-country before travel to NZ.

**KEY FINDING 12.2:** The appropriateness of the action project component in its current form is less certain. Its perception as a mandatory requirement leaves little room to discretely consider individual and organisational capacity and has caused undue pressures on some participants

**Alumni consultations revealed that alumni overwhelmingly value and feel proud of their action projects. But the current resourcing profile of the YLP is not adequate to ensure that these action projects are implemented in a safe and sustainable way,** for young leaders and their communities. Action projects place large time burdens on alumni, who, if are not supported by their employers, can face financial hardships and burnout due to juggling action project work with paid work.



It is important to not understate that many of these action projects are admirably ambitious in scale. YLP project teams are not adequately resourced or experienced to conduct monitoring and safeguard checks of the action projects, thus the impacts and outcomes of the projects – both intended and unintended – are not clear. Many alumni engage in projects that see them working directly with vulnerable children and other vulnerable communities thus adequate safeguarding and monitoring is crucial. Comprehensive risk management is lacking, consultations revealed that in Indonesia at least three instances of misuse of project funds or fraud have occurred. The local implementing partner also highlighted the need for YLP participants to be increasingly equipped with financial reporting capacity prior to commencing the projects.

### **To what extent are these programmes supporting locally led development? What options exist to strengthen this?**

**KEY FINDING 13.1:** These programmes have embedded strong locally led development features: alumni design and run action projects that respond to community-defined issues, mobilising local partners and empowering in country decision-making. In Indonesia and Mindanao, this approach is strengthened through coordination and partnerships with local implementing organisations, BaKTI and IDIS respectively – two well respected and established local development actors.

**The localisation of YLPs have been a particular strength of the programmes.** YLP alumni drive the agenda of hui's, or alumni conferences, using contextual knowledge and draw on YLP networks for technical support, small-grant funding opportunities and knowledge sharing. Local learning advisers, who in both programmes are also alumni, shape much of the topics for learning. Consultations with all project staff revealed a strong dedication to localisation and sustainable, contextual community development based on local needs.

### **What factors are enhancing or constraining sustainability of these programmes? Will the benefits last?**

**KEY FINDING 14.1:** Sustainability of outcomes among YLP participants is strong – built on the pillars of individual empowerment and alumni networks

**Interviewees consistently highlighted the transformative impact on individual participants of YLPs.** Participants are able to apply learning in real-world contexts, adapt through feedback, and cultivate habits of leadership that are embedded, rather than superficial. As a result, the programme leaves a lasting impact not just on professional trajectories, but on how participants engage with their communities, make decisions, and contribute to social change in the long term. The YLP will need to continue managing expectations around the purpose and sustainability of action projects, particularly in light of shifting funding landscapes. The recent withdrawal of USAID support has significantly reduced the resources available for community initiatives in both Indonesia and the Philippines. As a result, YLP-supported projects will need to be carefully calibrated to deliver meaningful impact in the short term, with a strong emphasis on low-cost or self-sustaining approaches that can be maintained by communities without ongoing external funding.

**KEY FINDING 14.2:** However, the sustainability of UnionAID's capacity to deliver these programmes is less clear. UnionAID is under-resourced to sustainably implement the YLPs in their current form – relying on goodwill and an over-stretched workforce.

**UnionAID staff interviewed consistently highlighted how 'lean' the programmes have been in their current iterations.** Despite budget increases and the addition of programme officers in-country to support implementation, the risk key staff burning out is considered extremely high. Since 2023, programme managers have been assisted by two part-time Programme Coordinators and managed by an Executive Officer, but pressures remain. Programme managers are in large part



responsible for young leader selection, sourcing mentors, leading delivery of in-country curriculum, coordinating homestays in New Zealand, managing staff recruitment and HR, financial management, reporting, pastoral care support and risk management. Interviewees broadly concurred that YLP in Indonesia and Mindanao had evolved markedly since their inception to better integrate good practice development practices – localising more content and significantly strengthening the participatory nature of action projects. These changes have been labour intensive, requiring more time and coordination from UnionAID staff. Coupled with increased pastoral care responsibilities (particularly post-Covid), it is almost certain that resourcing YLP at its current levels are not sustainable.

**Objective 4: To identify lessons and good practices to increase the positive impact of the Young Leaders Programmes in the future.**

### **What are the strengths and challenges of YLP? What are the gaps and opportunities?**

**KEY FINDING 15:** YLP is clearly a unique model and transformative opportunity for many young, often marginalised, leaders. But gaps remain, particularly in the sustainability of the current model.

**YLP provides a foundational experience for future civil society leaders.** According to interviewees, the strength of YLP is threefold. First, the programme is often reaching individuals who would not have access or be eligible for most other scholarship or international training experiences. Second, the immersive model of the programme – particularly its focus on sustainable and participatory development – is comprehensive and transformative for individual participants. Third, YLP is an effective public diplomacy programme, fostering lasting personal connections and catalysing government engagement in both Indonesia and the Philippines.

**The commitment and personal investment of individual UnionAID programme managers in supporting YLP cohorts and alumni is a clear strength of the programme.** However, as outlined under Objective 3, the current implementation model presents significant sustainability risks. The organisation’s light structural footprint places a disproportionate burden on individual staff members, with programme managers often responsible for a wide range of functions—including monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), safeguarding, and partner support. This concentration of responsibilities is not only unsustainable in the long term but may also impact program quality and staff wellbeing.

### **What lessons can be learned from similar programmes operating in the region, including the US Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative; and The Asia Foundation’s Development Fellows?**

**Key finding 16.1:** YLP operates through a unique and much needed approach, targeting often marginalised young leaders that are working in grass-roots NGOs rather than established, well resourced NGOs that often gain access to similar programmes.

Consultations with alumni that had taken part in other scholarship type experience uniformly identified YLP as the best experience. MFAT staff also highlighted that YLP provides support to alumni that goes beyond other scholarship initiatives, though this is largely due to though this has been largely due to the discretionary effort of UnionAid staff and volunteers.

#### **Text box 1: Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative**

The Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) was established by the US Department of State in 2013, and operates in all 10 ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste. The regional scope reflects YSEALI’s mission to foster cross-border collaboration and leadership development



among young changemakers across Southeast Asia. YSEALI functions largely as a diplomatic initiative, fostering pro-democratic values, regional cooperation, and people-to-people ties. Its focus on civic engagement, sustainable development, economic innovation, and governance aligns with U.S. foreign policy priorities in Southeast Asia. Like YLP, YSEALI incorporates an academic residency (five weeks), structured workshops and seed funding. Fellows are generally young professionals or recent graduates – spanning future leaders from across civil society, private and public sectors.

### **Text box 2: Development Fellows**

The Asia Foundation Development Fellows Program is a year-long, fully funded leadership development initiative designed for emerging leaders under 40 from across Asia and the Pacific. Established in 2014, it reflects The Asia Foundation’s commitment to nurturing regional talent to address pressing development challenges. The program involves two in-person learning intensives, study tours, virtual engagement, development immersion and mentoring. Applications are eligible for young leaders across Asia, with around 12 successful candidates annually.

A high-level comparison of programs is included in Annex 2.

### **What recommendations can be made on how UnionAID and MFAT can better evaluate and report the achievements of these programmes at an aggregated level?**

**Key finding 17.1:** UnionAID and MFAT need a portfolio-level MEL architecture—backed by dedicated budget and staff—to move beyond case studies and report aggregate results and collective impact. A common theory of change, core indicator set, and longitudinal tracer study of alumni would allow credible, comparable evidence and sharper communication of impact across all three country streams.

As noted across this evaluation, gaps in MEL resourcing and coherent frameworks have undermined UnionAID’s ability to monitor and understand the impact of its work, and systematically apply learnings. MEL frameworks were established and reported against but remain under-utilised as learning and adaptive management tools. Despite good intentions, interviewees noted an absence of an organisation-wide commitment and resourcing of MEL.



# 5

## Evaluation Conclusions

The Young Leaders Programmes (YLPs) in Indonesia and the Philippines have demonstrated formative impact, offering meaningful pathways for young leaders from marginalised backgrounds to build skills, confidence, and community leadership capacity. Stakeholders emphasised the depth and quality of the learning experience, noting its grounding in principles of locally led development and its ability to engage participants in a way that is both inclusive and transformative. However, the absence of resourced MEL systems has limited the ability to more fully understand and unpack higher-order outcome pathways resulting from YLP.

As the programme has expanded, however, its delivery has increasingly relied on the dedication and capabilities of a small number of UnionAID programme staff. While this has enabled flexibility and responsiveness, it has also exposed sustainability risks, particularly in areas such as monitoring and evaluation, safeguarding, and coordination. The current delivery model would clearly benefit from more formalised systems and resourcing to reduce dependency on individuals and ensure consistent standards across contexts.

The evaluation underscores the enduring relevance of the YLP's mission and highlights its role in fostering regional solidarity and leadership for social change. To support continued effectiveness, the report calls for a consolidated programme structure, increased core funding to reinforce essential support functions, and a review of UnionAID's internal systems to identify areas for strategic organisational development.

# 6

## Evaluation Recommendations

#	RECOMMENDATION	LEAD	PRIORITY	SEE FINDINGS
1	Develop medium-term funding agreement to extend YLPs in Mindanao and Indonesia.	UnionAID	High	1.1, 3.1, 3.2, 8.1, 10.1, 14.2
2	Funding to be informed by an independent review of UnionAID's systems and process within 12 months to identify opportunities to strengthen and enhance YLP implementation	MFAT	High	8.1, 10.1, 14.2
3	Lift core resourcing for management per priorities identified in next programme design. Fund adequately staffed management and administrative positions in each country team and appoint a portfolio manager to oversee governance, budget and risk.	UnionAID & MFAT	High	8.1, 14.2
4	Enhance coherence across YLPs through an integrated MEL framework and consistent programming approaches	UnionAID	High	2.1
5	Establish a more formal governance arrangement between MFAT and UnionAID (and, if appropriate, local partners). This could include an annual reflections workshop	MFAT	High	9.1
6	Consider opportunities to embed comprehensive psychosocial support within YLP, including a specialist service to deliver pre-departure briefings, in-programme counselling and on-call assistance (with a capped session allowance) for participants and alumni.	UnionAID	High	3.3, 7.2

<b>7</b>	Resource a central MEL function. Fund a MERLA adviser embedded within UnionAID or other implementing partners to design and maintain a unified results framework, quality-assure data, and coordinate periodic impact evaluations.	UnionAID	High	16.1
<b>8</b>	Establish a dedicated system to monitor and evaluate action projects. Issue clear guidance on theory-of-change, safeguarding and community feedback; track outputs, outcomes and any unintended effects; and commission light-touch evaluations of a sample of projects each year to verify benefits and mitigate risks.	UnionAID	High	16.1
<b>9</b>	Develop a GEDSI strategy to guide its GEDSI programming, complete with indicators in the MEL framework to measure progress on GEDSI.	UnionAID	High	3.2
<b>10</b>	Establish and integrate an independent SEAH and complaints reporting mechanism	UnionAID	High	3.3, 8.1
<b>11</b>	Strengthen safeguarding and risk management, with a specific focus on action-project delivery and child-protection standards. Introduce portfolio-wide protocols for "do-no-harm" checks, child protection, PSEAH, and protection of vulnerable groups. Resource safeguards & risk officer to verify sufficient risk management assessments and compliance in each setting.	UnionAID	High	3.3, 7.2
<b>12</b>	Develop cohesive policy for making action projects more flexible; including opt-out options or group activities to better respond to personal circumstances	UnionAID	High	3.3
<b>13</b>	Consider introducing a livelihood-protection mechanism or flexible fund for participants who lose work and face financial hardships because of YLP commitments.	UnionAID	Medium	3.3, 7.2
	Offer stipends or per-diems for alumni leading action projects. Stipends offset income loss that	UnionAID	Medium	3.3, 7.2



	currently stalls some initiatives and improve sustainability, particularly when projects extend beyond the predetermined period. Per-diems could be made available specifically for alumni who are unemployed or underemployed.			
<b>14</b>	Consider longitudinal alumni tracer study. Survey each cohort at 2-, 5- and 10-year intervals to track career pathways, community engagement and sustained project outcomes. This provides hard evidence of medium- and long-term change.	UnionAID	Medium	2.1, 16.1
<b>15</b>	Consider drawing on elements of a negotiated partnership model when consolidating delivery of YLPs, in particular due diligence checks and an organisational capability assessment and appropriate resourcing for locally-led implementation.	MFAT	Medium	8.1, 9.1
<b>16</b>	Consider offering YLP Alumni the opportunity to connect with Manaaki New Zealand Scholarship Programme alumni networks (facilitated by MFAT posts), ensuring expectations and potential sensitivities are clearly communicated	MFAT	Medium	2.1, 9.1
<b>17</b>	The next design should consider how to manage an ever-growing alumni network and whether annual conferences will be feasible in future years.	MFAT	Low	2.1



## Annex 1: Key findings

**Objective 1: To examine the progress being made in achieving outputs and short-, medium- and long-term outcomes, as well as the impact the programme has had on wider beneficiaries such as the communities and the participants' organisations**

### **KEQ 1: Have programme outputs been delivered to time, to the expected quality and within budget?**

**KEY FINDING 1.1:** The YLPs have been delivered on time and to the expected quality within, or under, the MFAT-approved budget for every year for which financial data are available.

The documented exception is INSPIRASI Year 6 (Indonesia 2023), which met quality and timing targets but slightly overspent due to post-COVID budget forecasting difficulties and running three catch-up cohorts post-pandemic.

### **KEQ 2: What evidence is available to demonstrate progress towards intended short-medium-, and long-term outcomes?**

**KEY FINDING 2.1:** As three Young Leaders investments lack a shared, consolidated MEL framework and limited MEL resourcing, portfolio-wide outcome data is fragmented and difficult to measure definitively. However, the available evidence shows clear and collective impact from alumni capacity gains to instances of community-level policy and behaviour change in Indonesia, Mindanao and Myanmar.

### **KEQ 3: What, if any, have been the unintended outcomes? (Positive or negative)**

**KEY FINDING 3.1:** Positive unexpected outcomes—such as the strength of the alumni peer networks and alumni accessing new funding pathways—are evident across the Young Leaders portfolio.

**KEY FINDING 3.2:** Gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) has been well integrated into the YLP programmes, though the program could benefit from an overarching GEDSI strategy to guide and measure its GEDSI programming

**KEY FINDING 3.3:** A set of negative unexpected outcomes have also emerged, including instances of course workload-related stress, income and job insecurity, and experiences of psychosocial stress linked in part to home country re-entry

### **KEQ 4: What, if any, are the outcomes for the communities involved?**

**KEY FINDING 4.1:** It is difficult to measure the collective impact of YLP for communities in the three countries, in part due to the lack of project level and longitudinal monitoring and evaluation.

But some shifts in civil-society capability, governance norms and positive impacts for communities are evident. Further monitoring and evaluation of projects and longitudinal studies are required.

**Objective 2: To assess the extent to which the YLP remain relevant to the needs of participating countries and the priorities of New Zealand's IDC Programme**

### **KEQ 5: Are these programmes still appropriate for New Zealand's strategies and participating countries' (Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines) contexts?**

**KEY FINDING 5.1:** Indonesia and the Philippines remain priority countries as part of NZ’s ASEAN engagement, albeit secondary priorities under the International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable Development (ICESD).

**KEY FINDING 5.2:** The appropriateness of ongoing YLP programming in Myanmar is less certain. Ongoing political and security upheavals significantly increases the risk profile of this work in Myanmar, and reduces the capacity for meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

**KEQ 6: Are there any other countries in the region where there is a case for inclusion in the programme? (E.g. Timor-Leste, Viet Nam)**

**KEY FINDING 6.1:** Supporting young leaders in Timor-Leste or Viet Nam would align with MFAT regional priorities and (in the case of Timor-Leste) build on established bilateral partnerships. However, the pressing priority should be to consolidate the current YLPs before any geographic expansion.

**KEQ 7: To what extent is the curriculum and programme content fit for purpose, culturally appropriate, and context appropriate? Has it evolved to meet changing context or needs in the countries in which the activity is delivered?**

**KEY FINDING 7.1:** The YLP curriculum evaluated is broadly fit for purpose and relevant, blending New Zealand and local expertise, and deliberately embedding cultural content—from Māori culture to Mindanao’s peace process. The integration of English language components within the development curriculum was a particular strength

**KEY FINDING 7.2:** Some concerns have been raised regarding overburdening alumni with excessive coursework demands, leading to burnout among some alumni

**Objective 3: To assess the delivery model of the Young Leaders Programmes**

**KEQ 8: How well does UnionAID’s systems and processes, and governance and management arrangements, to support delivery and achieve outcomes?**

**KEY FINDING 8.1:** UnionAID has grown quickly to deliver effective programmes in Myanmar, Indonesia and Mindanao. However, much of the program’s success relies on individuals, rather than institutional capacity. UnionAID’s systems, governance and management arrangements are broadly under-developed to sustainably and safely deliver the YLP in compliance with MFAT standards. Particular resourcing gaps remain in safeguarding, staff welfare and MEL.

**KEQ 9: How effective is the partnership between MFAT and UnionAID?**

**KEY FINDING 9.1:** UnionAID and MFAT both regard their partnership as constructive and effective. However, no formal governance mechanism has been established, reducing opportunities for collective learning and accountability.

**KEQ 10: Are there opportunities and benefits for consolidation of the delivery of these activities by UnionAID, and management of funding by MFAT?**

**KEY FINDING 10.1:** There are clear benefits in consolidating the delivery of YLPs and drawing from elements of the negotiated partnership model through MFAT. Enhanced efficiencies in administration, finance, MEL, risk management, safeguarding and reporting would be likely for both MFAT and UnionAID

**KEQ 11: To what extent does the delivery modality (online vs in country/region vs in New Zealand) contribute to the effectiveness of the activity?**

**KEY FINDING 11.1:** The hybrid delivery model—online preparatory learning, a home-country residential workshop, and the New Zealand immersion component—has proven an effective modality resulting in deepened contextual relevance and sustaining high participant satisfaction. The



residential component, in particular, now equips participants with the knowledge, networks and skills they need before the NZ phase.

### **KEQ 12: To what extent does the delivery modality make use of best practice and innovations in pedagogy and adult learning?**

**KEY FINDING 12.1:** The Young Leaders portfolio consistently applies recognised adult-learning practice—experiential, participatory and learner-centred—by partnering with university specialists, embedding alumni as co-facilitators and refreshing content each year in response to feedback and context change. These design choices, including a tailored English-for-Development syllabus and alumni-led “learning advisor” roles, show a strong uptake of pedagogical innovation across all delivery modalities.

**KEY FINDING 12.2:** The appropriateness of the action projects in its current form is less certain. Its perception as a mandatory requirement leaves little room to discretely consider individual and organisational capacity and has caused undue pressures on some participants

### **KEQ 13: To what extent are these programmes supporting locally led development? What options exist to strengthen this?**

**KEY FINDING 13.1:** These programmes have embedded strong locally led development features: alumni design and run action projects that respond to community-defined issues, mobilising local partners and empowering in country decision-making. In Indonesia and Mindanao, this approach is strengthened through coordination and partnerships with local implementing organisations, BaKTI and IDIS respectively – two well respected and established local development actors.

### **KEQ 14: What factors are enhancing or constraining sustainability of these programmes? Will the benefits last?**

**KEY FINDING 14.1:** Sustainability of outcomes among YLP participants is strong – built on the pillars of individual empowerment and alumni networks

**KEY FINDING 14.2:** However, the sustainability of UnionAID’s capacity to deliver these programmes is less clear. UnionAID is under-resourced to sustainably implement the YLPs in their current form – relying on goodwill and an over-stretched workforce.

**Objective 4: To identify lessons and good practices to increase the positive impact of the Young Leaders Programmes in the future.**

### **KEQ 15: What lessons can be learned from similar programmes operating in the region, including the US Young Southeast Asia Leaders Initiative; and The Asia Foundation’s Development Fellows?**

**Key finding 15.1:** YLP operates through a unique and much needed approach, targeting often marginalised young leaders that are working in grass-roots NGOs rather than established, well resourced NGOs that often gain access to similar programmes.

### **KEQ 16: What recommendations can be made on how UnionAID and MFAT can better evaluate and report the achievements of these programmes at an aggregated level?**

**Key finding 16.1:** UnionAID and MFAT need a portfolio-level MEL architecture—backed by dedicated budget and staff—to move beyond case studies and report aggregate results and collective impact. A common theory of change, core indicator set, and longitudinal tracer study of alumni would allow credible, comparable evidence and sharper communication of impact across all three country streams.



## Annex 2: Young leaders program comparison

	MFAT Young Leaders Programme	Asia Foundation Development Fellows	YSEALI
<b>Duration</b>	1 year (incl. 12 weeks in NZ)	1 year (virtual + 2 in-person modules)	1 year (including 5 week fellowships or short-term workshops)
<b>Focus</b>	Civil society leadership	Regional development leadership	Regional youth leadership & diplomacy
<b>Scale</b>	~12 participants/year per country	~12–13 participants/year (total)	~250 fellows/year
<b>Geographic scope</b>	Indonesia, Philippines (Mindanao), Lao DR, Cambodia, Myanmar	Asia-Pacific	ASEAN + Timor-Leste
<b>Training themes</b>	Sustainable development, English, governance, proposal writing	Climate action, leadership, development	Civic engagement, sustainability, entrepreneurship
<b>Post-program impact</b>	Alumni-led projects	Professional development grants	Alumni network & seed grants

