Attachment

APF Theme Meaning

The theme of the 21st ASEAN Civil Society Conference / ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF 2026) in Manila, Philippines, is: Resist Business-as-Usual – Disrupt, Reclaim, Rebuild

1. What does the theme mean?

The theme is a call for Southeast Asian civil society to challenge existing political and powerful economic interest that perpetuate inequality, human rights violations, environmental destruction and the exclusion of ordinary people from decision-making. Large-scale development, extractive industries, infrastructure projects and commercial agriculture can lead to land dispossession, environmental degradation and loss of livelihoods. Indigenous peoples, local communities and environmental defenders are particularly vulnerable when their rights conflict with commercial interests.

The challenge for APF is to move the regional debate beyond conventional economic growth and investment indicators towards a development model that incorporates human rights, environmental sustainability, community ownership and corporate accountability.

This requires challenging not only government policies but also the economic structures and business practices that contribute to inequality and environmental destruction.

It has three interconnected messages:

RESIST – Challenge the status quo

> Resist authoritarianism, shrinking democratic space and suppression of human rights.
>
> Challenge corporate influence over government policies and institutions.
>
> Oppose economic models that prioritise unlimited profit over people and the environment.

DISRUPT – Change the systems that perpetuate injustice

> Challenge conventional development models that concentrate wealth and power.
>
> Disrupt business practices that exploit workers, communities and natural resources.

RECLAIM AND REBUILD – Put people at the centre of development

> Reclaim democratic space, human rights and people's participation.
>
> Reclaim indigenous peoples' rights to land, resources and livelihoods.

Rebuild economic systems based on social solidarity, equality and environmental sustainability.

2. What is the main message to ASEAN governments?

The central message emerging from the 2026 regional consultations is:

ASEAN must move beyond business-as-usual diplomacy, economic growth and political declarations. It must take concrete action to protect people's rights, livelihoods, dignity and environment.

Their concerns included:

Shrinking democratic space and attacks on human rights defenders.

Continuing violence and political repression in Myanmar.

Corruption, oligarchic control and corporate capture of governance.

Climate change, environmental destruction and energy insecurity.

Labour exploitation, economic inequality and gender injustice.

Insufficient public participation in ASEAN decision-making.

3. The deeper message: People, not profit and power

An important dimension of this year's theme is its challenge to the dominant economic development model.

APF questions whether ASEAN's economic integration and investment-driven growth are genuinely improving people's lives when communities continue to experience land dispossession, labour exploitation, environmental destruction and widening inequality.

The forum advocates a different development direction based on:

Human rights and democratic accountability.

Climate and environmental justice.

Decent work and universal social protection.

Indigenous peoples' rights and community control over resources.

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

People's participation in regional governance.

The message is that economic development should serve society rather than society serving the interests of capital and political power.