

The Future of Asia We Want: Ideas for the CICA Region

Have you ever wondered how much of our beliefs and aspirations are shaped by socialization and the environment rather than our personal experiences and critical thinking? It is undeniably easier to adopt existing ideas than to develop new ones ourselves. Interestingly, there is biological evidence that supports this notion. Despite constituting only 2% of the total body weight, the human brain consumes a remarkable 20-25% of the body's total energy intake (1). In terms of calories, thinking is an expensive process.

Consequently, in a world where our beliefs and aspirations are often shaped by our socialization and environment, it becomes crucial to question our assumptions, especially when we engage with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

This essay presents a vision for the future of Asia, based on the principles of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) (2), a platform for dialogue and cooperation among 28 diverse Asian countries. This vision, in turn, will be harmoniously aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (3).

To lend structure to this essay, I will organize my ideas into four pillars: economic development, social well-being, environmental sustainability, and good governance. For each pillar, I will identify some of the key challenges and opportunities facing the CICA region and propose some policy recommendations for The CICA Youth Council to address them. I will argue that these pillars are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and that they require collective action and multilateral cooperation among the CICA nations and beyond.

Economic development refers to the improvement of the economic well-being and quality of life. Some of the key aspects of economic development are economic connectivity, innovation-driven growth, cross-border investment, and trade and investment framework.

One of the main challenges for the CICA region is economic connectivity. This includes physical, digital, and institutional aspects that facilitate trade, investment, tourism, and regional cooperation. However, the region faces uneven infrastructure development, lack of coordination and harmonization of standards and regulations, and geopolitical tensions (4). To address this challenge, CICA Youth Council can create youth-led innovation hubs to foster entrepreneurship and innovation, digital skills training programs to prepare youth for the digital economy and cross-border youth exchanges like internships and volunteer

opportunities to foster relationships between future leaders.

Another challenge for the CICA region is innovation-driven growth, which is essential for productivity, competitiveness, and resilience. However, the region faces low research and development spending and digital divide (5). CICA Youth Council could create youth-led research commons to study economic development challenges in the CICA region and share their findings and recommendations, sources of economic synergies and collaboration among the CICA members and beyond and advocating for evidence-based policy changes and innovation promotion in the region.

Cross-border investment and collaboration are crucial for economic growth and regional integration in the CICA region, but they face high risks and costs of infrastructure projects, lack of bankable

projects, and regulatory barriers (6) (7). To address these challenges, CICA Youth Council and CICA Business Council can create a framework like the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), which uses public funds to attract private investors for risky but beneficial projects. For example, a financing agreement for SMEs, supported by EFSI in 2017, created credit lines of 246 million euros for over 4300 small and medium-sized enterprises in Romania (8) (9).

A fourth challenge for the CICA region is trade and investment, which is vital for economic development. However, the region faces rising protectionism, trade disputes, and non-tariff barriers (10). CICA could address this by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in regional and global value chains. SMEs make up more than 90% of all businesses in Asia (11), but face challenges such as lack of access to finance, technology, markets, and skills. CICA can support

SMEs by providing financial and technical assistance, facilitating their participation in value chains, and promoting their innovation and competitiveness through CICA Business Council and CICA Youth Council in partnership with local business incubators and accelerators to strengthen the regional and global supply chain.

Social well-being refers to the quality of life and relationships of individuals and communities. I will discuss some of the key aspects of social well-being, such as sustainable tourism and cultural exchange, social and cultural capital.

Firstly, promoting sustainable tourism and cultural exchange can enhance mutual understanding and social, economic well-being. However, the region faces environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and health risks (12). CICA Youth Council is capable of creating youth-led sustainable tourism initiatives

to encourage young people to develop and lead sustainable tourism projects that promote responsible travel, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation. These initiatives could include models like asset-based community development (ABCD) and community-based tourism (CBT) to create a future where tourism contributes to mutual understanding, economic development, and the preservation of our shared heritage and realizing economic and social development (13).

Secondly, Social and cultural capital play a crucial role in connecting diverse groups. Social capital encompasses personal, professional, associative, and institutional networks that cultivate trust, cooperation, and shared values. Cultural capital embodies regional traditions, heritage, languages, and artistic expressions. Together, these assets bolster social cohesion, nurturing cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. By preserving and promoting cultural heritage, CICA can foster a

shared identity among diverse groups, strengthening social cohesion and deepening connections among people from various countries and communities. The CICA Youth Council, established in 2014, seeks to boost young people's involvement in the CICA process, enhancing social capital through international social networks. However, realizing its full potential requires a strategic approach, expanding youth networks in each country and initiating projects on critical youth issues, such as economic empowerment and leadership skills to cultivate social capital, and create events to celebrate our heritage and culture to strengthen cultural capital will have a positive impact in reinforcing social and cultural capital as well as helping CICA Youth Council to realize its goals.

Environmental sustainability is a challenge and an opportunity for the CICA region. We face environmental problems such as climate change,

natural disasters, deforestation, desertification, and water scarcity (14). These threaten economic development, social well-being, and security. However, the region can enhance its environmental sustainability by investing in quality infrastructure that is resilient, low-carbon, and resource-efficient. This can mitigate the environmental impacts, promote green transformation, and foster regional cooperation. The CICA region should support quality infrastructure development (15) by harmonizing standards and regulations, facilitating financing and investment, sharing best practices and information, and strengthening coordination and dialogue. The CICA Youth Council has the capacity to support the Paris Agreement by showcasing social innovations that tackle environmental issues in a forum.

Good governance is a challenge for the CICA region, as it faces issues such as corruption, lack of transparency, weak institutions, and political

instability (16) (17). The CICA Youth Council can contribute to this goal by hosting a youth anti-corruption hackathon, which aims to harness the creativity and potential of youth to design and implement technological solutions for corruption-related problems that impact their communities.

In conclusion, the future of Asia we want hinges upon our ability to cooperate constructively. We should eye development, innovation, sustainability, and social and cultural capital. By addressing economic, environmental, social, and governance challenges while leveraging the diversity and strengths of the youth, CICA can lead the way towards a prosperous and harmonious future for Asia.


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Alignment of Essay Ideas with CICA Principles and SDGs:

This essay presents a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to CICA principles and UN’s SDGs.

Idea	CICA Principle(s)	Reasoning	SDGs
Fostering entrepreneurship and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty b. II. Refraining from the threat or use of force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fostering entrepreneurship and innovation respects each member state's right to develop its economic systems and promote economic growth. b. Entrepreneurship and innovation reduce conflicts by fostering economic cooperation. 	

Digital skills training programs

a. I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty

a. Providing digital skills training programs respects each member state's right to choose and develop its own educational and technological systems.






Advocating for evidence-based policy changes




a. I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty

a. Advocating for evidence-based policy changes respects each member state's right to define and implement its own policies and regulations.



Promoting sustainable tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. II. Refraining from the threat or use of force b. V. Non-interference in internal affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Sustainable tourism fosters cultural interactions, understanding and peace. b. Sustainable tourism respects each state's cultural and environmental choices. 	
Quality infrastructure development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. III. Territorial integrity of the member-state b. IV. Peaceful settlement of disputes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Quality infrastructure connects regions and preserves integrity. b. Quality infrastructure helps resolve conflicts and enhance cooperation. 	

Social and cultural capital enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. V. Non-interference in internal affairs b. VII. Economic, social and cultural cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Social and cultural capital respects each state's cultural sovereignty. b. Social and cultural capital fosters mutual understanding and cooperation among states. 	 
Youth anti-corruption hackathon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. V. Non-interference in internal affairs b. VI. Disarmament and Arms Control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Youth anti-corruption hackathon respects internal solutions to corruption. b. Youth anti-corruption hackathon tackles corruption and security issues. 	

Youth-led research commons	a. VI. Disarmament and Arms Control	a. Youth-led research commons advocate for evidence-based policies and peaceful solutions, enhancing security.	
Cross-border youth exchanges	a. VIII. Human rights and fundamental freedoms	a. Cross-border youth exchanges respect young people's rights to interact freely.	 
Supporting SMEs in regional and global value chains	a. VIII. Human rights and fundamental freedoms	a. Supports economic growth and human rights.	