



Asia Europe People's Forum

Briefing Paper for the ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting) Public Conference on EU-Asia Inter-Regional Relations – July 2010

The Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF) was launched in 1996 in Bangkok alongside the first ASEM summit. AEPF is a network of people's organisations, coalitions, NGOs, academics and trade unions representing citizens and parliamentarians, who are working in different ways for social, economic, environmental and political justice across, and within Asia and Europe. Since it began, AEPF has created new political spaces for dialogue, solidarity, action and has developed creative and realistic recommendations and strategies to address the challenges emerging from both regions.

As this critical conference reflects and takes stock of current and future ASEM processes, this briefing sets out some of AEPF's recommendations and ideas for future ASEM's to become more accountable, transparent, relevant and influential in meeting the needs and aspirations of the people of Asia and Europe.

We are here to understand how global current crises can lead to opportunities with the renewal and regeneration of demands for social justice.

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1. An Accountable ASEM

Although ASEM is focussed on informal dialogue, the elected Heads of State and Ministers who participate in ASEM are still accountable to those they represent. As very little is known at the national level about the nature of ASEM discussions, the agenda or outcomes, even amongst parliamentarians and MPs (including the European Parliament), it is difficult to ensure accountability. ASEM needs to democratise its process, policy and practice.

- > Initiate a public consultation based on meetings at various levels and online facilities for civil society voices to influence the process.
- > Establish mechanisms to report back to national governments, MEPs, MPs and relevant parliamentary committees, before and after each ASEM.
- > Establish parliamentary review mechanisms for monitoring and assessing any outcomes, at both national and regional level.
- > Establish a 'reporting back to the public' culture supported by adequate mechanisms.

2. A Transparent ASEM

Alongside enhancing co-operation frameworks, ASEM has the potential to become an important

catalyst for joint planning and actions together with other international forums such as the UN and WTO. However, if decision making and discussions at ASEM remain opaque, then any outcomes or discussions will lack credibility and legitimacy. ASEM needs to put accountability to people at the core of its activities and make the process more transparent and therefore more accessible to citizens.

- > Publicly disclose the responsibilities and details of ASEM national level officials. Ensure they are responsible for holding pre and prior ASEM public briefings and consultations with representatives from civil society, NGOs and the private sector.
- > Establish mechanisms/tools online to encourage and enable public scrutiny of ASEM processes
- > Produce public briefings to co-ordinate and facilitate information sharing, analysis of ASEM's outcomes and discussions particularly relating to concrete national or international policies, action plans and funding. An ASEM page on appropriate Foreign Ministry websites could simply and cheaply be used to facilitate this process.

3. A Relevant and Influential ASEM

While countries that comprise ASEM make up well over 60% of the world's population, to date the agenda has been dominated by interests based on narrow discussions and pre-determined debates around security, economic and financial policies. There is a strong consensus growing across Asia and Europe that the dominant neo-liberal approach of the last decades – based on deregulation of markets, trade liberalisation, increasing the power of multinational corporations and opening up public services to the private sector – has failed to meet the basic needs and rights of all citizens. The EU's 2006 'Global Europe' trade strategy exemplifies this approach and similar policies of many Asian governments. National debts are unsustainable, public services are being undermined, companies are being given huge concessions to access raw materials and new markets, while workers rights continue to be eroded. In both Europe and Asia the political and social consequences have been clearly documented – an increase in social exclusion and marginalisation of women, environmental devastation and a hollowing out of democratic accountability as elites make decisions and implement policies with little or no scrutiny from citizens. At worst, the current economic development model further embeds authoritarian regimes that treat citizens' rights with impunity. This democratic deficit, combined

with increasing poverty and inequality is creating the conditions for growing social unrest and resistance.

- > Deepen ASEM's agenda, going beyond responses that focus solely on short term measures which only benefit a few individuals, financial institutions or companies. Ensure critical analysis and reflection of the social and environmental impacts of current security, trade, financial and economic policies and agendas – particularly in their relation to agriculture, food security, employment/ decent work, natural resources, public services, arms proliferation, conflict resolution and whether or not they are creating an environment conducive to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.
- > Broaden the ASEM agenda to include human rights, basic needs (e.g. water and sanitation), climate justice, gender equality, migration and social protection.
- > Address security threats through the United Nations.

4. An Ambitious ASEM

2010 is a year of historical importance, bringing into sharp focus the severe poverty, inequalities and injustice experienced by people of both regions. Regional architectures, political relations and trading patterns are being reshaped, national elections are taking place in many member countries and multi-lateral strategies are needed to mitigate the overlapping and prolonged social, economic and environmental crises. These crises have illustrated the deep links, connections and inter-dependence between Asia and Europe. ASEM8 is a unique opportunity to initiate dialogue for change based on an honest assessment of these crises, and for developing creative and bold solutions that can transform our social, economic and political futures.

- > Ensure wider participation from civil society organisations, academics and active citizens who can support in the development of new approaches and policies. AEPF is uniquely positioned to facilitate this, and should be recognised as a critical stakeholder, and should be provided with the same status and access within ASEM as the Business Forum.
- > Encourage and support ASEM members to develop and implement people-centred responses and new financial systems and architecture to respond to the current crises, in an effective and responsible manner by setting concrete goals to support and protect the millions of poor, excluded and marginalised women, men and children who are living below the poverty line and struggling to survive in both regions.

5. An Equal ASEM

Participation and involvement of some of the newer members and/or poorer countries is limited due to a lack of resources, technical expertise and institutional knowledge amongst members. There are 28 European members and 17 Asian members of ASEM and therefore equality between Asian and European members in agenda setting, participation, and follow up between summits becomes even more essential. ASEM should ensure it facilitates full involvement of all member countries.

- > Establish a fund and technical resource centre jointly managed by the European Commission and ASEAN Sec. to facilitate a capacity building process – funded through a contribution from all members. This fund would also allocate resources for capacity building and dialogue activities by and with civil society.
- > Ensure that ASEM delegations are gender balanced and that members reflect social, political and economic interests.

6. A Challenging ASEM

Some members of ASEM are governed by authoritarian regimes or are countries in which there are widespread and documented human rights violations. Despite the potential tensions and sensitivities, ASEM needs to find mechanisms within its informal approach in which difficult issues can be raised and countries can be both challenged and supported, to introduce democratic and accountable reforms inline with agreed international agreements and legislation – otherwise it risks becoming complicit in abuses and failing the women and men in those countries who remain voiceless and unrepresented.

In summary, to ensure a more equal and just Asia and Europe, future ASEM's need to:

- > Create greater economic and social equity and justice, between and within Europe and Asia
- > Promote economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights as agreed in international human rights and humanitarian law
- > Promote environmentally, socially and economically sustainable patterns of development based on fairer economic principles/systems.

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For ongoing updates and further information please see the AEPF Website – www.aepf.info