

ASEAN told: Walk the talk, improve people's lives

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NEWS RELEASE

NETWORK FOR TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

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ASEAN told: Walk the talk, improve people's lives

CHA-AM, Thailand—In the run-up to the ASEAN Summit, grassroots peoples in the region are asking their governments to take action and improve the lives of people through what they called transformative social protection “crisis or no crisis, disaster or no disaster.”

The Network on Transformative Social Protection, a network of people's organizations and non-government organizations across Southeast Asia which is participating in the three-day ASEAN People's Forum here, welcomed the solidarity shown by their governments and the international community in the relief and rehabilitation of countries affected by earthquakes (Indonesia) and typhoons (Philippines and Vietnam).

However, the Network claimed that transformative social protection—a statutory right and not charity—must be the strategic response to the poverty and hunger, joblessness and homelessness, illiteracy and illness that most people in the region suffer with or without the natural and man-made calamities.

“Our call is for transformative social protection, which encompasses basic human rights so that people can live with dignity,” said Chalida Tajaroensuk, executive director of Peoples' Empowerment Foundation, which is part of the Network.

She enumerated these rights as the rights to guaranteed jobs and livelihood, adequate food, basic services like housing, education, health care services, electricity, as well as to clean air and water.

Swee Seng Yap, executive director of Forum Asia, said transformative social protection is the mechanism by which basic human rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in many constitutions of ASEAN member-countries can become real to the majority of ASEAN's half a billion people.

“Our governments must walk the talk. ASEAN governments cannot deprive their people of civil rights like free speech and free association to focus only on economic rights like right to food and housing, or vice versa. People need their freedoms as much as they need food,” Yap said.

Action Aid, another member of the Network, wants ASEAN to recognise these transformative social protection measures as “statutory rights.”

“This requires States and corporations to fulfill their roles both as duty bearer and facilitator to ensure that these very basic human rights are enjoyed by all,” it said.

Junya Yimprasert of the Thai Labour Campaign said the Network's call will make for healthy and productive ASEAN people. "It is a great investment for economic growth and stability in the future, not a burden nor mere charity as what some governments tend to think," she said.

Unlike most ASEAN governments' social protection measures, the social protection the Network pushes for is beyond welfarism as it addresses fundamental issues of equity, empowerment, and seeks to ensure economic, social, and cultural rights. These measures must be institutionalized, thus requiring legislation, financial commitment, and accountability from ASEAN governments, the Network added.

The Institute for Popular Democracy in the Philippines, meanwhile, said that such measures are needed to empower the people, especially the poor when they collectively and successfully claim these rights at all possible levels of engaging the State—local, national, regional, and international.

"The people should not be reduced to mere passive recipients, they should be central in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of programs to get them out of poverty," said the IPD, which also serves as the secretariat for Asia of the Asia-Europe People's Forum.

"People are the driving force in making sure accountable, transparent, participatory, and transformative programs are directed towards this goal," Action Aid said.

The ASEAN People's Forum has been the mechanism by which ASEAN member-nations, which are in the process of creating an integrated regional community, engage their citizens.

"ASEAN strives to have one vision, one identity, and one community. We share ASEAN's vision of one ASEAN, and that vision should be an ASEAN where social protection is for all," the Network said.

People's organizations, civil society groups, non-government organizations, and social movements participate in the Forum; this year's Forum is between October 18 and 20.

The ASEAN Summit here will follow the ASEAN People's Forum on October 23 to 25.

ASEAN groups together Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.
