

# Reflections on the Asia-Europe People's Forum 2006, Helsinki

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The 6<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Peoples Forum (AEPF) took place between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of September this year in Helsinki, just before the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). It was organized by the National Organizing Committee of Finnish NGOs and the International Organizing Committee (IOC) of the AEPF, with the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD) as the main coordination point in Asia, and the Transnational Institute (TNI) in Europe.

Since 1996, the AEPF have been organized in Bangkok, London, Korea, Copenhagen and Hanoi. The Forum brings together progressive civil society organizations that critically engage ASEM and challenge its big business bias and neo-liberal agenda, as opposed to an alternative people-centered agenda. From the perspective of activist groups, ASEM, whose member countries (in Europe, East and South-east Asia, including India and Pakistan next year) have influence over half the world's economies, should be a prime mechanism for cooperation to benefit and create opportunities for all, especially for the poor and disempowered in both Asia and Europe.

The Forum in Helsinki was a consolidating event in the development of the AEPF as a unique bi-regional network. It was participated in by 450 individuals from 30 countries and from more than 200 NGOs and social movements, including those from China, Vietnam and the Eastern Europe.

## Key insights from the sessions

The plenaries and the workshops - under peace and security, democracy and human rights, on economic security and social rights - were, in the main, pivotal venues for exchange and the articulation of alternatives. They also featured reports by leading scholars on Asia-Europe relations.

At a plenary session, the eminent economist Susan George warned that neo-liberal globalization and its promotion of unbridled free trade, liberalization and deregulation of the economy with minimal state intervention, threatens not only the welfare and interest of Asians, but is endangering and beginning to erode Europe's social model, particularly its wages and working conditions, full employment, quality public services which include good schools, health care and more leisure time.

A leading researcher on the ASEM process, Alfredo Robles, showed that in spite of the European Union's claim that ASEM promotes an open dialogue, in reality the core agenda of its dialogue over the last 10 years has centered on the EU's aim of increasing its market access in Asia by trying to convince Asian states to implement their WTO obligations, accept EU positions on the WTO rounds

and modify Asian laws to support this neo-liberal direction.

Oliver Hoedeman presented the report of the Amsterdam-based Corporate Europe Observatory, which underlined the role of the Asian-Europe Business Forum (AEBF), specifically in pushing the proposals of big business to ASEM leaders. The report said that AEBF has a formal institutionalized role within key ASEM bodies, such as the Senior Officials Meeting on Trade and Investment (SOMTI) and the meetings of the Economic Coordinators and the Investment Expert Group (IEG). According to the report, the relationship between AEBF and SOMTI is intimate if not symbiotic.

Charles Santiago summarized the joint report of Monitoring Sustainability of Globalization in Malaysia, and the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute on EU-ASEAN relations. The report revealed the implications of EU-ASEAN Free Trade agreement (FTA) and concluded that ASEAN member-countries would be obliged to change their legal and administrative regimes perceived as hindering European companies from reaping utmost profits in their countries. Forging a future EU-ASEAN FTA would require in Asia the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers as well as technical barriers to trade, services and investment and their liberalization.

### **The Final Declaration presented to PM**

The Forum also marked a breakthrough in terms of its significant interaction with the inter-governmental process. The Dialogue with the Prime Minister covered by the international media at the Prime Minister's Reception, the participation of the Foreign Minister during plenary session of the AEPF and the lobby opportunities with a number of governments have been identified as new dimensions of this AEPF. Representatives of the Forum handed to the Prime Minister the Final Declaration who received it on behalf of ASEM. It called for a new, just and equitable Asia-Europe partnership, one based on an equitable social dimension in the ASEM process. It urged that people's rights—including the right to decent work, to socialized and decent essential services such water, energy, housing, education and health—be made the cornerstone of a fairer ASEM.

The Final Declaration also asserted that after 10 years, ASEM continues to have a democratic deficit and lacks the regular democratic scrutiny of Asian and European parliaments, including the European Parliament. And while the Asia - Europe Business Forum has a voice within ASEM, civil society which also includes the trade unions, is left out and ignored. The Finnish/Japanese study on ASEM at 10 was cited in terms of its recommendation that AEPF, a legitimate expression of civil society, should be provided adequate and meaningful space in ASEM's work program and policies.

In addition, it critiqued the ASEM as having developed mainly the economic pillar which promotes pro-market policies and has concentrated on promoting cooperation between governments and representatives of big business interests. It also expressed hope that ASEM will not be another platform for big corporations to drive free-market policies through the lives of billions of ordinary Asians and Europeans.

### **Strengthening the social dimension of globalization**

A significant development also transpired during the first meeting of Asian and European Labor Ministers that was held alongside the 6<sup>th</sup> AEPF. A joint memorandum was issued calling for the strengthening of the social dimension of globalization and policies to promote human and social rights, particularly those established in the ILO Decent Work Agenda. This was also perceived as a dramatic development since the advocacy for a social pillar has been the major initiative and lobby

demand of the AEPF and the trade unions for years, supported by the Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). This action of the ministers could be the initial step towards a commitment to a social dimension of ASEM that could be realized at all levels of the ASEM process.

However, actualizing this formidable goal would require Asian and European governments, including the EC, to develop policies and a program that includes regular and painstaking reporting, monitoring and implementation procedures. Concretely, this would demand the drawing up of an Asia-Europe plan on ILO core labor standards, including migrant workers rights, and the establishment of processes for the rigorous reporting of compliance with this plan by all ASEM countries. But this was the way that the EU proceeded with trade facilitation and investment promotion Plans, so why not with labor standards? Otherwise, this momentous memorandum of the ministers will remain a mere statement on paper.

Another achievement of the Forum was the resolutions and proposals from a number of workshops to continue to work together on a Europe-Asia bi-regional basis. In response to this, a first AEPF Meeting post-Helsinki was set in the Philippines in December. The agenda is to re-define and re-energize the direction and work of AEPF in Asia, and for bi-regional platforms in-between the biennial conferences to be activated as valuable strategies to generate common actions and campaigns. These platforms take on concerns and issues strategic to both regions, e.g., trade campaigns vis-a-vis the WTO, bilateral and regional FTAs, projects against the privatization of essential services such as water, security issues such as the US War on Terror, democratizing politics and governance and the role of people-centered political parties and social movements.

In spite of these tangible gains, AEPF has much more to do still in bringing about its goals, but its own experience of strengthening people's movements by forging linkages, shaping alliances, uniting struggles and building solidarity continues to be the source of inspiration of its work across Asia and Europe.