

The Informal Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Seminar on Human Rights

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)¹ is an intergovernmental forum for dialogue and cooperation established in 1996 to deepen relations between Asia and Europe, which addresses political, economic and socio-cultural issues of common concern.

On the occasion of the first meeting of the ASEM Foreign Ministers in 1997, Sweden and France had suggested that informal seminars on human rights be held within the ASEM framework. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs joined the Seminar series as an organiser in 2011; the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs joined in 2016. The aim of this initiative is to promote mutual understanding and co-operation between Europe and Asia in the area of political dialogue, particularly on human rights issues.

Seminar topics

- *Access to Justice; Regional and National Particularities in the Administration of Justice; Monitoring the Administration of Justice* (December 1997, Lund, Sweden)
- *Differences in Asian and European Values; Rights to Education; Rights of Minorities* (June 1999, Beijing, China)
- *Freedom of Expression and Right to Information; Humanitarian Intervention and the Sovereignty of States; Is there a Right to a Healthy Environment?* (June 2000, Paris, France)
- *Freedom of Conscience and Religion; Democratisation, Conflict Resolution and Human Rights; Rights and Obligations in the Promotion of Social Welfare* (July 2001, Bali, Indonesia)
- *Economic Relations; Rights of Multinational Companies and Foreign Direct Investments* (May 2003, Lund, Sweden)
- *International Migrations; Protection of Migrants, Migration Control and Management* (September 2004, Suzhou, China)
- *Human Rights and Ethnic, Linguistic and Religious Minorities* (February 2006, Budapest, Hungary)
- *Human Rights and Freedom of Expression* (September 2007, Siem Reap, Cambodia)
- *Human Rights in Criminal Justice Systems* (February 2009, Strasbourg, France)
- *Human Rights and Gender Equality* (July 2010, Manila, Philippines)
- *National and Regional Human Rights Mechanisms* (November 2011, Prague, The Czech Republic)
- *Human Rights and Information and Communication Technologies* (June 2012, Seoul, Republic of Korea)
- *Human Rights and the Environment* (October 2013, Copenhagen, Denmark)
- *Human Rights and Businesses* (November 2014, Hanoi, Viet Nam)
- *Human Rights and Trafficking in Persons* (November 2015, Montreux, Switzerland)
- *People with Disabilities and Human Rights* (2016, Beijing, China – *upcoming*)

The following formula is employed:

- The participation of civil society representatives (invited by the organisers) and official nominees, from each of the ASEM countries;
- The participation of one representative each from the European Union and ASEAN;

¹ ASEM brings together 53 members: Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, the Lao PDR, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Viet Nam plus the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Union.

- An agenda structured around the main topics related to the subject of the Seminar, with discussions held in closed-door working groups to allow free and direct exchange of views;
- An independent background paper prepared by the main rapporteurs and commissioned by the organisers. The background paper addresses the key questions and core issues of the Seminar topic so as to meet the information requirements for the diverse set of participants;
- A set of recommendations elaborated collectively to be sent to the relevant institutions in ASEM countries as informal contributions to the official Asia-Europe dialogue.

The experience of the Seminars convened thus far have shown the usefulness of the chosen formula: a climate of confidence and mutual understanding, in accordance with the ASEM spirit, has grown stronger during this process since 1997; the topics selected by the Steering Committee, which focus on issues of common interest to the two regions, have made high quality discussions possible; the high level of participation of the ASEM partners shows the strong interest of the partners for these meetings.

Organisation

The Seminar series is co-organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (nominated by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. ASEF has acted as the Secretariat of the Seminar since 2000.

Supervision of the seminar is entrusted to a Steering Committee, composed of the Seminar's four co-organisers as well as representatives of the ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and Indonesia as well as the European Union.

The responsibilities of the organisers include the following:

- The organisers secure the financial resources for the organisation of each seminar, including the organisation of the Seminar series' Steering Committee Meeting, a briefing of the Rapporteurs, the seminar event itself, the publication of Seminar Proceedings and staff support for the Secretariat. They liaise with the host country with regards to their roles and responsibilities;
- The organisers are responsible for the selection and invitation of the civil society representatives, the rapporteurs, moderators, panellists and keynote speakers. They decide on the concept paper, the programme and other external documents (including press releases);
- The responsibility of the Technical Co-ordinators is to provide continued advice and jointly decide, with the Secretariat's recommendations, on the major substantive issues in the organisation of the seminar including the preparation of the Seminar Conclusions sent to ASEM partners shortly after the seminar, with the aid of the Main Rapporteurs;
- The responsibility of the Secretariat is to provide the administrative support for the organisation of all the events and activities for the Seminar as well as co-ordinate the production of the preparatory documents, reports and publication from the seminar.

After each conference, the outcomes of the discussions are gathered in a publication that may be used by governments and civil society as a reference on the state of play of the debate on human rights in ASEM countries. All publications can be downloaded from www.asef.org

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