

# Connecting Civil Societies III: An Asia-Europe Dialogue on Economy and Society

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## Concept/ Background

Disturbances in the world economy have an impact on society, particularly its most vulnerable sectors. What are the identifiable benefits and potential risks of regional integration? What role can Asia-Europe co-operation play? The responses form the *raison d'être* of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, now comprising 57% of the world's population and 59% of the world's GDP. Each ASEM summit presents opportunities for bringing pressing societal issues to the attention of the leaders of 43 of the world's countries and two of its most dynamic regional bodies. A significant feature of the ASEM process is its creation of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), mandated to bridge civil society between the two regions and act as a conduit for dialogue between civil society and governments.

A key document of the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit in Helsinki in 2006 entitled "The Future of ASEM", which sets the directions for ASEM after passing the milestone of its first decade, leaders "(encourage) ASEM partners to more actively consider the recommendations resulting from ASEF's activities with a view to sustaining and increasing public interest and support for the ASEM process."

For these reasons, the **Connecting Civil Societies series continues to play a pivotal role as an accompaniment of the ASEM summit events.**

Before the ASEM V Summit in 2004, the inaugural conference brought a broad range of civil society actors onto one platform as the largest ever informal consultation on governance, environment, education, inter-cultural dialogue, economic & social issues, and regionalisation themes. The meeting simultaneously afforded the opportunity for various sectors from both regions to build co-operation. Back to back with the ASEM VI Summit celebrating ASEM's 10th anniversary in 2006, the Connecting Civil Societies II was on the theme "ASEM at 10"--a broad introspective and prospective dialogue on Asia-Europe relations that also brought the Asia-Europe Business Forum and Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum on a common platform for the first time with other civil society groups, building on the potential for more regular dialogue and interaction between the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF), the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum (AEPF), and ASEF.\*

While the 6<sup>th</sup> ASEM Summit was centred on assessing the achievements of ASEM's first decade, the 7<sup>th</sup> Summit in Beijing—which takes place in one of the world's most important engines of economic activity—is expected to advance ASEM and demonstrate significant and tangible impact for its peoples. ASEM 7 will attempt to strengthen inter-regional co-operation on many of the major pressing socio-economic issues facing Asia-Europe at the moment. The ASEM 7 agenda will promote issues such as creating common and sustained economic development, international development co-operation (in conjunction with the Millennium development goals), and policy dialogue and capacity building to combat financial instability. Therefore, **at a time where economic turbulence in the financial and currency markets has sent tremors across the economies of Asia and Europe**, the theme of the third Connecting Civil Societies event is proposed to be on an Asia-Europe Dialogue on the threats facing our Economic and Social Stability.

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\* Asia-Europe Business Forum is a meeting of business leaders, created to strengthen economic co-operation between the business sectors of Asia and Europe. The Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum is an inter-regional network of civil society and social movements across Asia and Europe. Both fora organise their respective summit events on the sidelines of the ASEM summits.

At present there is an expressed need for more involvement of civil society actors in the ASEM process. A move to increase civil society involvement offers ASEM participants newer fresher approaches to issues and also enhances the legitimacy of ASEM in the public eye.

## Project Description

A side event of the ASEM VII Summit, the two-day conference will be a culmination of ASEM's new initiative on the same theme, which will generate focused policy discussions on key socio-economic issues facing the regions. The objectives of the conference itself will be to prepare a **report on an economic and social agenda to ASEM** produced from expert analyses and multistakeholder consultation. The conference will bring together 60 international participants from the government, NGOs, Academe, media and research sectors, including the AEBF & AEPF members. The conference will also include an evening lecture session involving a high profile speaker. This event will be open to the public, the officials in Beijing for the Summit and all of the conference participants.

## Objectives

The conference is designed to analyse the benefits and risks of regional integration and Asia-Europe co-operation and more, specifically to:

- Report to the ASEM leaders on an economic and social agenda for ASEM to help better understand the most prevalent socio-economic threats facing the two regions,
- Formulate key recommendations through a multistakeholder process to prepare ASEM to tackle these major issues.

## Implementation Arrangements

The conference is designed to have three main sessions:

*Session 1. What does the ASEM process have to offer?* The purpose of this session is to explain what it is that ASEM does. This will offer the participants a good understanding of its processes, structures, and its strengths and weaknesses. This will be important for later discussions as the clearer understanding the participants have of ASEM the better the participation and input we receive. This session will attempt to analyse the key mechanisms of ASEM (e.g. new innovations such as Issue-Based Leadership, where a pair or cluster of countries spearhead and sustain priority initiatives), in terms of crafting civil society contributions to both the process and substance of ASEM activities.

*Session 2. Roundtable discussion on the main issues at hand.* Participants will enter into a roundtable discussion group to discuss the main issues relating to economic and social stability between our two regions. Does regional integration help or hinder the stabilization of the two regions in this current period of economic instability?

The main issues under discussion could include:

- **Food and environmental security.** Sharp rises in food prices and constraints on food supply have uncovered the vulnerability of global agriculture. The mixed outcomes of biofuels utilization is a relatively new subject field and the consequences for climate change mitigation, on one hand, and food security, on the other, need to be further investigated. Have subsidies and policy incentives to promote biofuels as an alternative to fossil fuels caused a drop in food production and the consequent rise in prices? After the UN and the international community's immediate measures to respond to food emergency, what necessary policy adjustments need to be made?
- **Energy and Oil.** Oil prices have been increasing at an alarming rate over the past four years and the growing instability of the market hark back to the oil crises of the 70s and 80s,

evoking fear of the subsequent financial insecurity. How does the surge in oil prices contribute to the impending convergence of emergencies in the world economy and environment?

- **Financial Market Turbulence.** The crisis in the US financial markets reverberates in Asia and Europe. Can we expect further disturbances? Are we headed toward another financial crisis little over a decade after the Asian crisis in 1997? Should we put the brakes on policies that advance market integration?

The role of the participants will be to hold open and frank discussions on how these elements of the current socio-economic climate can best be addressed.

*Session 3. Developing an Economic and Social Agenda for ASEM.* Participants will then break into working groups mixed among the different participating sectors. Moderators will be invited to steer the discussions and rapporteurs will be selected from among the participants. The output from this session should result in precise recommendations for ASEM, on issues which will be discussed at the Summit such as ASEM's visibility, global financial instability and the pressing issues facing the two regions at present. Other facets of the economic policy integration will be discussed in light of the findings of the ASEM finance and economic ministers meeting due to take place this year in June (Jeju, Korea) and July (Bali, Indonesia) respectively. The moderators and rapporteurs will meet at the end of the session to prepare an integrated report.

*Establishment of the Expert Evaluation Panel.* A small group will be identified, who will act on the sidelines of the event to evaluate the dialogue and formulate recommendations for future co-operation on economic and social issues.

### **Expected Outputs/Impact**

The conference will yield the following outputs: (1) Report on an Economy and Society Agenda for the ASEM VII Summit; (2) The Report will be communicated to ASEM's considerable network of media in ASEM countries in order to support public understanding of the ASEM process and its impact on society.

Also, significant media involvement in the event will create more awareness of the ASEM VII and its outcomes. A short video will be produced to highlight the outcomes of the conference and the issues that it addresses. This video will be made widely available online.

### **Targeted Participants**

60 Asian and European participants from foreign/finance/economic ministries in ASEM, the business sector, trade unions, NGOs (working on issues related to poverty/development, economic, agriculture, women, youth), researchers/think tanks and the media. As with the previous Connecting Civil Societies conference, members of the Asia-Europe Business Forum and the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum will be invited to take an active part in the conference.

### **Evaluation, Monitoring and Follow up**

The follow up to the event will include an expert's panel for future activity under the theme of economy and society, which will meet for the first time on the sidelines of the conference. Along with evaluating the event itself, this panel will also identify potential cooperation for the future.

## Partners

### **Asia-Europe Foundation**

The Asia-Europe Foundation was established in 1997 as the sole permanent institution of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process. Acting as ASEM's civil society, ASEF works for intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchange among its partners in Asia and Europe. In particular, Intellectual Exchange aims to contribute to policy debate and strategic thinking on themes of current and future inter-regional importance between Asia and Europe. For more information, please visit <http://www.asef.org>.

### **Centre for Comparative Regional Integration Studies, United Nations University**

The United Nations University - Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) is a research and training unit of the United Nations University. UNU-CRIS specialises in studying the processes and consequences of regional integration and cooperation. Established in Bruges in 2001, the centre is a research and training programme of the United Nations University. UNU is a global network of centres engaged in research and capacity development to support the universal goals of the UN and generate new knowledge and ideas by providing a framework to bring together leading scholars from around the world to tackle pressing global problems. <http://www.cris.unu.edu/>

### **Irish Institute of Chinese Studies, University College Cork**

In June 2006, the Irish Institute of Chinese Studies was established at University College Cork. It seeks to develop a distinctive research profile and fosters links with partners in Asia, Europe and United States. It offers a range of research degrees including MPhil, PhD and Visiting Scholars programmes, which aim to initiate and develop programmes of social science and humanity-led research on contemporary China. Research areas include: Politics, regulation and governance in Greater China and the International relations between China, Asia and the West; ; Human rights, education and society; gender inequality in education, workforce and society; urban and rural and minorities development; Popular culture and language; media and mass communication; Business, management and investment, economic growth dynamics and sustainable development Globalisation and regionalism; Cultural adaptation and social integration of Chinese students in Irish higher education; Chinese Sport, Asian Sport and Olympic Studies. Since it was established the IICS has delivered rapidly, introducing five undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes (BA, BComm, HDip, MA, MPhil/PhD) in Chinese Studies at UCC. Already there are 235 Irish/European students taking Chinese Studies undergraduate courses and evening classes, as well as 8 PhD students carrying out research on a wide range of topics at the IICS.

<http://www.ucc.ie/en/DepartmentsCentresandUnits/ChineseStudies/>

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