



## Ancient Civilisations, New Beginnings: A Dialogue of Change

10-12 December 2007  
UNESCO, Paris

### BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

#### Addressing real issues and moving forward positively

Over the last few years, and notably since the attacks in the United States on September 11 2001, there have been a **plethora of initiatives** by organisations and individuals that have sought to encourage and facilitate increased dialogue between communities and groups in conflict. The methodology has been to rely on dialogue as a tool to mitigate violent discourse and actions while working actively to prevent isolation and the “ghetto-isation” of communities at risk.

Most of the topics that have been addressed have been ones that are sometimes difficult or sensitive to address candidly. Issues like racism, justice, freedom of expression and the responsibility of the media or transparency in government for example, are often more subject to controversy and readily acknowledged in other communities but not within ones’ own. The starting point for meaningful dialogue and change is to bring individuals and leaders to a recognition and understanding of the problems that lie in their respective societies.

The initiatives in this field include those by the Asia-Europe Foundation Dialogue of Cultures & Civilisations, the World Public Forum – Dialogue of Civilizations, The United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, the UNESCO Dialogue among Civilisations, the International Progress Organisation: Dialogue among Civilisations and the Toda Institute Dialogue of Civilisations for World Citizenship.

In doing so, this ground work has resulted in a number of excellent reports, recommendations and studies that have been valuable in deepening understanding of many of the issues that have been driving tensions as well as forging understanding between people all over the world.

These various initiatives have been an indispensable first step towards strengthening inter-community and inter-religious relations. However, there **remains a need to push for concrete decisions at a policy-level so as to ensure that fulfilling and sustainable measures are implemented.**

A primary objective of the conference “Ancient Civilisations, New Beginnings: A Dialogue of Change,” will therefore be to build a strategy toward achieving this aim. In doing so, this conference will:

- offer a platform for political leaders from Asia and Europe to address a broadly-based audience of experts and civil society leaders from across both regions,



- offer opportunities for exchange between stakeholders to brainstorm and strategise on building on and furthering what has already been established through the various initiatives;
- bring together stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, religions, ethnic communities and disciplines;
- further build networks of individuals and institutions in Asia and Europe with a focus on the Dialogue of Cultures & Civilisations;
- recognise the achievements of initiatives between Asia and Europe despite many of the hurdles and difficulties over the last few years..

The format of the conference will include **two plenary sessions and 4 working groups. Using innovative and unique methods of facilitation and mediation**, each working group will:

- bring together a diverse group for two days of intense brainstorming and debate on vital issues for both Asia and Europe related to religion, politics, culture, migration, education, justice and the media;
- set out ideas and findings to be articulated towards policymakers;
- build on past ideas and findings major studies and research in the various fields.

The main priorities of selected themes will be addressed during the plenary sessions and in more depth during the working groups. Over the course of the last 3 years, the following themes have surfaced in many consultations and meetings as particularly pertinent in the endeavor to bridge differences. Furthermore, these are topics where civil society groups may have the most impact in lending their voice to the decision-making process and can be addressed by carefully crafted public policies.

While varied in focus, the necessity of addressing these various themes is clear when analysing the various aspects that drive tensions and conflict. Conflicts are rarely ever about any singular issue, and more often than not, the various elements below link and impact each other – in causing or exacerbating difficulties.

### **Working Group 1: Should the media be held accountable for the impact that it can have on conflict?**

Over the last few years, the media has come under increased scrutiny for the role that it plays in **shaping public opinion** on difficult issues and even **impacting government policy**. Through various consultations with media practitioners and civil society, it has been established that the role of the media is a priority in addressing inter-cultural conflict. Examples of concerns related to the media include 1) the role the media plays in perpetuating religious or ethnic stereotypes, 2) how media coverage of conflict and emergency situations impacts public opinion and policy 3) the media as an instigator or actor in conflict.

Closely linked to the topic of the media, has been the debate on “freedom of expression.” Clashes between communities have occurred over seemingly insensitive portrayals of religious symbols in newspapers and magazines. This has necessitated a review of the relationship between the media, civil society and governments. Some of the questions the working group will address include:

- Should media organisations be regulated by an overarching body that ensures their impartiality and objective investigation and reporting?
- What training or competencies are journalists provided with when dealing with particularly sensitive issues?
- Has the economic interest of media agencies increased? Has there been a decline in political control or strategy in media agencies?
- How can governments support freedom of the media, while balancing this with sensitivity for religious and ethnic communities?

## **Working Group 2: How can governments address racism and xenophobia in relation to immigrants, migrant workers and refugees?**

The existence of racism and xenophobia is a deplorable reality in all countries of Asia and Europe. It is recognised that the manifestations of racism are unique in all societies, and indeed these phenomena as we know them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are vastly different from how they have happened previously. However, the need to address this problem remains as crucial as ever. The consequences of mismanaged perceptions and prejudiced impressions have a direct impact on Asia-Europe relations. At the same time, relations between governments can also be adversely impacted on by incidents resulting from racist or xenophobic behaviour directed towards their nationals.

Civil society leaders and government officials in both regions recognise that racism and xenophobia have a strong impact on the preservation of social stability. Episodes over the last few years have shown that discontentment grounded in perceived or real inequalities can lead to tremendous unrest. Within the larger issue of racism and xenophobia, immigrants, migrant workers and refugees have been recognised as particularly vulnerable target groups, and should be specifically addressed. Some of the questions the working group will address include:

- Is there a consensus in the two regions on the interpretation of Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? (*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*)
- To what extent have governments incorporated existing standards and codes to protect communities at risk into their practices? Are existing provisions in public services (e.g. healthcare) sufficient to protect against discrimination?
- How have racism and xenophobia been defined by law in the various countries in Asia and Europe? Are existing sanctions against this behaviour sufficient? Is there adequate redress for victims?
- What role does the education system play in this? How can educators be roped in to combat racism and xenophobia?

## **Working Group 3: How can public and private partnerships contribute towards countering conflict in Asia and Europe?**

The role of the corporate sector has been largely overlooked in discourse related to countering the “clash of civilisations.” Despite this, companies in both Asia and Europe have proved to play an important role in supporting development and bridging many of the cultural, linguistic and religious differences in societies. Having a stake in stable economies and societies, companies have a strong interest in forming partnerships with civil societies and governments. Incorporating socially responsible principles in operations is increasingly popular in the corporate world.

On the other hand, by managing investments and funding, many corporations are also already actors in many contentious issues, for example by influencing media organisations through funding or lobbying political parties. Linked to this, a lack of transparency of governance within companies can be a major impediment towards bridging issues related to trust in many of the societies that they operate in. Companies are also often the first to feel the brunt of civil society action, where product-boycotts are a common tool used to put pressure on governments and organisations. Some of the questions the working group will address include:

- Should the private sector be accountable to societies for their actions and policies?
- How can companies assure civil society of their commitment to supporting social initiatives? How can public policies encourage the business sector to contribute positively in inter-cultural dialogue?
- Are socially responsible programs adopted for the sake of public relations, or are companies genuinely concerned with supporting causes and communities?

## **Working Group 4: Does religion interfere with the state, or does the state interfere with religion?**

There has been a call among some sectors for a re-examination of the relationship between church and state, especially in face of the changing demographic composition of most countries of Asia and Europe. In particular, immigration has resulted in new interpretations and challenges for generally established notions of “secularism.” This mixed with what some contend to be a growing religiosity has led to inquiries by governments and civil society about the rights and responsibilities of religious leaders and organisations.

Further complicating this issue have been recent incidences where religion has been tied closely to organisations linked to violence. In other events, religious tensions have arisen due to inflammatory statements by politicians, civil society leaders and the media or perceived unequal treatment of certain religious groups by the state. Lastly, in many cases, the issue of gender equality or women’s rights is inextricably tied to addressing religious interpretations and tearing away stereotypes. These issues have necessitated opening up discussions on religion in the public sphere. Some of the questions the working group will address include:

- Countries in Asia and Europe have developed different models of structuring the state relationship with organised religion. Can a discussion on best practices and lessons learnt be helpful for governments in structuring policy?
- Are existing state institutions (the parliament, judicial system) sufficient for addressing issues related to religion? Should governments conceive new institutions tailored towards dealing with religious-linked conflicts?
- What is the place of religion-based parties in today’s political landscape? Should religious groups be represented in international and regional organisations?
- How can policies protecting freedom of religion be reconciled with policies limiting religion in public life?

### **EXPECTED OUTCOMES:**

From the discussions, brainstorming and debate during the conference, the expected outcomes from the discussions include;

- contributions to the policy debates in Asia and Europe;
- policy papers that focus on methods for the concrete implementation of recommendations arising from the discussions;
- print publications and audiovisual outputs that will enable the proceedings to reach a broader audience;
- media coverage that is targeted towards promoting the ideas and recommendations.

### **CONTACT POINTS**

#### **Sohni Kaur**

Asia-Europe Foundation  
31 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119595  
Email: [sohni.kaur@asef.org](mailto:sohni.kaur@asef.org)  
Tel: +65 6874 9709  
Fax: +65 6872 1207

