



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

ASEM, the Asia-Europe Meeting¹, is a forum that promotes various levels of cooperation among Asian and European countries. It represents a process based on dialogue with the objective of strengthening interaction and mutual understanding between the two regions and promoting cooperation that aims at sustainable economic and social development.

ASEM is an informal process of dialogue and cooperation among partners on all issues of common interest to Asia and Europe. Summit meetings are held every other year in Asia and Europe alternatively. This is the highest level of decision making in the process, featuring the Heads of States or Governments, the President of the European Commission, accompanying ministers and other stakeholders. So far, eight Summit meetings have been held: in Bangkok (1996); London (1998); Seoul (2000); Copenhagen (2002); Hanoi (2004); Helsinki (2006); Beijing (2008) and Brussels (2010). The next Summit meeting will be held in Vientiane, in 2012.

On the occasion of the first meeting of ASEM Foreign Ministers in Singapore in February 1997, Sweden and France had suggested that informal seminars on human rights be held within the ASEM framework. The aim of this initiative was to promote mutual understanding and co-operation between Europe and Asia in the area of political dialogue, particularly on human rights issues.

Previous seminar topics include:

- Access to Justice; Regional and National Particularities in the Administration of Justice; Monitoring the Administration of Justice.
Lund, Sweden (December 1997)
- Differences in Asian and European Values; Rights to Education; Rights of Minorities.
Beijing, China (June 1999)
- Freedom of Expression and Right to Information; Humanitarian Intervention and the Sovereignty of States; Is there a Right to a Healthy Environment?
Paris, France (June 2000)
- Freedom of Conscience and Religion; Democratisation, Conflict Resolution and Human Rights; Rights and Obligations in the Promotion of Social Welfare.
Bali, Indonesia (July 2001)
- Economic Relations; Rights of Multinational Companies and Foreign Direct Investments.
Lund, Sweden (May 2003)
- International Migrations; Protection of Migrants, Migration Control and Management.
Suzhou, China (September 2004)

¹ ASEM partners include Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brunei, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission.

- Human Rights and Ethnic, Linguistic and Religious Minorities
Budapest, Hungary (February 2006)
- Human Rights and Freedom of Expression
Siem Reap, Cambodia (September 2007)
- Human Rights in Criminal Justice Systems
Strasbourg, France (February 2009)
- Human Rights and Gender Equality
Manila, Philippines (July 2010)

The formula employed is as follows:

- the participation of two representatives from civil society (invited by the organisers) and one official representative for each of the 16 Asian ASEM countries, ,
- the participation of one representative from the civil society (invited by the organisers) and one official from each of the 27 European ASEM countries,
- the participation of one representative from civil society (invited by the organisers) and one official from each of the three new ASEM member (namely Australia, New Zealand and Russia);
- the participation of one representatives of the European Commission and one of ASEAN Secretariat
- an agenda structured around the main topics related to the subject of the seminar, with discussions held in working groups;
- closed-door debates to allow free and direct exchanges of views; and,
- a set of recommendations elaborated collectively to be sent to the relevant institutions in ASEM countries as informal contribution to the official Asia-Europe dialogue.

The experience of the first ten seminars has 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 13-year process; 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 French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (delegated by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), which 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 Commission.

The three coordinators (Mr. Frederic Tiberghien, Conseiller d'Etat, France, Prof. Guðmundur Alfredsson, Adviser to the Director, Raoul Wallenberg Institute and Amb Rosario Manalo, Philippine Commissioner of the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights) are responsible for the orientation of the Seminar Series.

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.

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