

Asia Europe Peoples Forum (AEPF)

‘Working for inclusive, Just and equal alternatives in Asia and Europe’

Report of the 11th AEPF, Ulan Bator, Mongolia, 4-6th July, 2016, by Prof. Anuradha Chenoy, rapporteur AEPF11

The 11th AEPF meeting held in Ulan Bator was dedicated to celebrate two decades and ten biennial meetings of this Forum. It was a special occasion for activists, social movements, engaged academics that comprise leading sections of civil society. The theme was “Working for inclusive, just and equal alternatives in Asia and Europe”.

This Report would especially like to record its appreciation to the Mongolian Government (GoM) for its extraordinary support and yet minimum intervention. The GoM and the office of the President gave all kinds of logistical support but the agenda, discussions, conclusions and recommendations were done in an entirely democratic process as is the tradition of the AEPF.

The AEPF records its appreciation for financial support from the ASEM Dialogue Facility of the European Union through DEVCO and the support for participants; The German Foreign Ministry’s support and the support of organizations like the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for participants, speakers, activists, which proved critical. The AEPF collective would like to thank the support from many international organizations that enabled the participation of many young people, activists and civil society workers.

This Report would especially like to record its appreciation of the Mongolian National Organizing Committee (NOC) and the International Organization Committee (IOC) for their tireless effort as volunteers who worked silently but effectively in the background to enable the smooth working of this event where several hundred people participated.

This Report is divided into the following sub themes: (1) Aims, Program and intellectual rationale. (2) Structure, organization, speakers and participation; discussions and outcomes; plenary sessions; local participation, (3) Logistics (4) Conclusion, Feedback and Assessment.

Aim, Program, Rationale, Structure, Participation

The meeting had several aims:

- (i) To bring together and review ideas on inclusive, just and equal alternatives, because policies that exclude lead to alienation, dissatisfaction and unrest. Policies and systems that fail to deliver justice or are perceived as unjust, lead to all kinds of oppressions and people taking law into their own hands. Economic and social policies that lead to inequality, result in the breakdown in social cohesion and unrest. The AEPF wanted to further the dialogue and bring out ideas and practices of civil society on these themes.
- (ii) To review the work, ideas and practices of the past AEPFs to assess if AEPF had fulfilled the mandate it was set up for.
- (iii) To continue the conversation of CSOs, social movements and activists from Asia and Europe on alternative and new ideas and policies, in the only forum of this nature. This dialogue allows for comparative assessment of key issues between the two continents and within these countries as well.

The National Organizing Committee (NOC) worked together with the International Organization Committee (IOC) for many months in advance to construct a program that would have plenary, introductory and concluding sessions as well as meetings, workshops of 'clusters' around thematic issues. Many reviews were done to consider the appropriate social movements, CSOs, activists and academics at various levels so as to invite the people most engaged in selected issues. In this process, care was taken to include those who had come and spoken in past AEPFs would balance with people who had not come before, but were

known for their activism, writing and engagements with the themes over the past years. The consequence was a good balance between activists who had attended earlier AEPFs and continue their activism and those who were invited the first time. The Mongolian NOC organized the speakers and participants from Mongolia, in a way that each session would have Mongolian speakers and that Mongolian civil society would be well represented and become stakeholders in the process.

The rationale was that both the process and the outcome reflected a democratic process, a method of widening participation that was inclusive. These rules of inclusion were widely followed (gender, class, ideas, physically different, ethnic diversity etc).

The result was a program (attached in appendices) that reflected the theme at its fullest and speakers combined wisdom, experience, grass root knowledge, theoretical insight, practice in social struggles in working for inclusive, Just and equal alternatives in Asia and Europe.

The program was structured around three goals: (1) To set context and analyses in order to understand the process, and frame the theme in the international context in the Opening Session and to introduce the seven themes for discussions over the three days. The fact that it was graced by the President of Mongolia, made this a special occasion. (2) The workshops were organized for deepening and broadening the seven themes, where problems, contexts, sub-texts and challenges towards creating an alternative vision would be discussed. (3) Working out strategies for people's vision and future perspectives and how these can be taken forward. Besides this, there were 'open spaces' where many CSOs had organized workshops on themes where they worked and which were related to the AEPF.

Report on Plenary, Workshops, Sessions:

An introduction and welcome to His Excellency Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, President of Mongolia was done by Mr. Tur-Od Lkhagvajav, that set the tone by the Mongolian NOC hosts for the event.

The President of Mongolia underscored the importance of civil society in democratic transformations. He stressed that Mongolia believed in its CSOs and NGOs and that their ideas and work were inputs into the development of Mongolia both at domestic and in its international vision. He spoke of the importance of people to people diplomacy and appropriate intentions of CSOs and social movements to make the international system more democratic. The resolution and adoption of Mongolia as a nuclear weapons free zone, revealed the serious intention of Mongolia on peace and security.

This session had a passionate speech by Shui-Meng Ng, wife of Sombath Somphone, who was the co-organizer of AEPF 9 and subsequently missing since then. The speech read out by Evelyn Serrano of Forum Asia reiterated the ideas of Sombath for an alternate vision.

The second plenary was on AEPF at 20 - Reflections and Moving Forward. Prof. Anuradha Chenoy showed how the AEPF meetings over the last two decades had provided an alternate voice to that of the states of Asia and Europe- in ASEM. This alternative was shown through five different sets of relations by contrasting the official relations between the states of Europe and of Asia with the kind of relations advocated by AEPF; by contrasting the model of economic development and neo liberal globalization by the states of ASEM with the vision advocated by AEPF; by the approach and methodology towards conflicts- local, regional, intra-state and inter state by the ASEM states in contrast with the approach by AEPF. In conclusion Chenoy recommended that for AEPF: increase advocacy through social media; have a audit on compliance of ASEM leaders- between statements, rhetoric and implementation. Propagate new and substantive research on issues related to AEPF recommendations. Andy Rutherford who along with prof. Chenoy had conducted a review of AEPF some years ago, showed how AEPF had been an inclusive, plural and democratic process and had consistently brought the views

of people to the forefront and reflected the voice of the common collective of CSOs and social movements. Prof. Sebastian Bersick of Ruhr University, did an analysis of the ASEM process and showed the strengths and importance of the ASEM dialogues and its multiple agendas. He also pointed out some of the weaknesses of the ASEM by arguing that because it was not a negotiating body, and did not have leverage in other multilateral institutions, it did not have a collective voice as ASEM. He however, showed that ASEM remained relevant and important as an meeting point of Asian and European countries, especially since there was no comparable forum.

The third plenary of the July 4th morning was to introduce the theme for “Building solidarities for inclusive, Just and Equal Alternatives in Asia and Europe”. Here Lidy Nacpil of Jubilee South and Sanchir Jargalsaikhan of Mongolia, Sustainable Development Institute, spoke on the theme. This was followed by Christophe Aguiton of ATTAC, France who de-constructed the impact of austerity and other polices and their impact on states and societies and then presented the questions that AEPF needed to address in the follow up sessions. This was followed up briefing on the structure and events and activities to follow.

The subsequent sessions were parallel, where participants attended any one thematic that they were engaged in. For instance on July 4th afternoon the sessions were: (a) Resource Justice (b) Food Sovereignty (c) Climate Justice (d) Trade and Investment. Since this Reporter could only attend one thematic during each of these parallel sessions, this report will focus on the ones attended.

The Thematic workshop Trade and Investment was remarkably informative. Charles Santiago, Member of Parliament from Malaysia and MSN Malaysia, showed by way of personal experience how patents and trade treaties were impacting peoples lives adversely. He cited the incident when a cancer stricken - mother of three children walked into his office and said she had become a burden on her family because the cost of her medicine and health care was cutting into the expenses required for her children’s education. Charles as well as Roland Kulke , Sanchier Jargalsaikhan and Fidanka McGrath all argued that to follow

sustainable development, people's needs on health and education needed to be subsidized. Only then could a country move forward.

The next set of parallel sessions, the one on Social Justice moderated by Francine Mestrum attracted a wide audience. Christophe Aguiton stressed the need for social protection especially since dominant state policies were for austerity. In the case of France, Aguiton argued, the regime was prepared to take unconstitutional measures against labour rights. He argued that social protection would have to be complimented by other social measures and agreed with the discussion on the need for social justice. Prof. Kamal Chenoy looked at various types of social protection in Asia and elsewhere to show its effectiveness and its positive impact for removing poverty and providing succor to the less privileged. He suggested that cash transfers plus social protection could move a society towards social justice. Zoltan Pogatsa said that after the negative performance of communism in Hungary, more progressive social protection and other policies were necessary. He felt that the current democratic environment was conducive to more social policies depending on the instruments and possibilities. This session had many interventions and discussion from the floor and there was lively debate.

In the peace building session, Prof. Anuradha Chenoy gave an overview of the comparative situation in Asia and Europe. She gave the broad trend in the international system, which was multipolarity and the emergence of several power centers. She did an analysis of the BRICS emerging powers showing their internal weakness. She showed the impact of military interventions in West Asia and its consequences. Jenny Clegg spoke effectively of the campaign and need for nuclear disarmament in the UK and Europe and contrasted the defense spending with need for social expenditures. Other speakers like Pham Van Chuong of the Vietnam Committee for Afro Asian Latin American Solidarity and Mihyeon Lee, Peoples Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, spoke of the new instabilities and threats in Asia. They called for a nuclear free Northeast Asia and peaceful resolution to the South China Sea disputes. Lisa Clark of the International Peace

Bureau, spoke of the multiple conflicts as well as militarism and made clear recommendations on disarmament, reduction in defence spending.

The parallel thematic cluster meetings on July 5th had many important and lively discussions. Of those I attended, was on “Strategic Perspective on Migrants and Refugees”. There were some brilliant presentations and analysis on the situation following from the migrant issue in Europe from Alex Scrivener, Kristos Giovanopoulos of Solidarity 4 All, Greece, Tom Cassee of Moving Europe, Carsten Schatz, and an excellent analysis on Asia from Yiombi Thona from South Korea and Bonn Juego. The main argument from Alex Scrivener was that this was ‘not a migrant crises but a global crises of war, poverty and repression’. So framing the crises is an important aspect of understanding it. The moral point of these crises should not be taken away. The analysts Tom Cassee, Carsten and Kristos all showed how in Greece and Germany for example, most migrants were from war torn Syria. So the root cause of migration should frame the debate. The argument that economic migrants are demonized was also made and the alternative suggested that the forces of xenophobia that had come out in front should be resisted and as Yiombi Thona stated there was a need for common international legal status of refugees and migrants and displaced. The speakers as well as interventions from the floor spoke of the need for the new narrative that emerged from this meeting and other like minded forums be popularized since it was an anti- racist approach that was important. There was a proposal that the Geneva Convention and international law be developed to cover these complexities. The presenters also showed how in Greece and in other countries, local people helped in coping with the issue and looking after refugees.

The sessions dedicated to the ‘Open Space’ that were organized by several CSO’s encouraged a lot of participation from young activists and were on a wide number of themes from participatory democracy to peace building in Korea. The underlying appeal was that the democratic and inclusive method and open discussion was very important in building long term institutions, whether these are for governance or peace making.

As the thematic sessions continued on July 6th, all the workshops took the issues raised to a deeper level. The session on Climate Justice deconstructed the Conventions and Treaties on climate change and made recommendations that will ensure greater sense of justice for climate change victims as well as ensure a slowing down of emissions. In the session on Peace Building and Strategies for a People's Vision started with a theoretical overview by Prof. Kamal Chenoy who showed the three parallel discourses on peace, security and conflicts and argued that non violent negotiated and inclusive peace talks that had linkages with state-civil society- mass consciousness could be a better way of building confidence and conflict resolutions. Peter van Tuijil of GPPAC argued for strengthening peoples diplomacy and the important role of the youth in networking for peace. Tuijil as well as Arel Plosceanu of EESC showed of Europe is currently 'inwardly looking' and that people had anxiety over migration and there was tension because of austerity policies. The Europeans on the panel argued that the European project was in peril. They argued for Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals for peace for an inclusive society. Kalle Sysikasi of the Finnish AEPF committee showed how corporate power has accepted military spending. He spoke of EU as a peace project for bringing together old hostile states like France and Germany but also said it was necessary of bringing in Chinese civil society into AEPF. Of the ASEM states and EU he said that the military is over funded and peace building is under funded. Some balance should be restored. The former Mongolian ambassador spoke in this session and stressed Mongolia's steps taken to establish a nuclear weapon free zone in North East Asia. The measures needed to further this goal would involve CBMs and an engagement with China, USA and Russia since all these powers were interested in this area. All the parties needed to address the issue of the DPRK. North Korea was unlikely to give up these weapons. But the process of all governments declaring Northeast Asia as a nuclear weapons free zone should be initiated. The speakers and also participants also asked that the South China Sea issue be resolved amicable since almost 40% of world exports passed through this. In addition to the day sessions a lively discussion on BREXIT took place in the hotel at night.

The last few sessions of the Forum were dedicated to discussions on the way forward. In this session Charles Santiago and other distinguished speakers asked that states of Asia and Europe exercise some autonomy from the big banks and financial institutions that had taken over much power and value of capital. They argued that much of what AEPF had warned about the current crises should have been heeded to and now the recommendations of AEPF that came from the ground should be acceded to. Kristos Giovanopoulos of Greece argued that there currently (using a Gramsci framework) an 'organic crises' that is when a new is to be born is a dangerous period. There is therefore the need from the people to build their own material structure from below, which should be based on democracy, justice and inclusiveness. It was for this that such social forums were required. Speakers also said that such structures can be built by 'renouncing ourselves' and 'creating our own creative solutions and it was not just about individual rights'. This concluding plenary was particularly wise in its words from the speakers. Many people from the audience and local Mongolian participants spoke from the floor.

The Final Declaration, it's presentation elicited wide response from the participants. Both local and international participants discussed the wording, ideas of each recommendation before it was finalized. (Recommendations attached in appendix)

Logistics

A special thanks to the Government of Mongolia, the National Organizing Committee, the IOC and all the volunteers, for the flawless logistics. From invitations, to visas, to tickets, to arrivals, to accommodation to departures, all of which make a conference really successful, were executed without a flaw. All participants would like to record their gracious thanks.

Feedback

All the feedback that I received was very positive. I present it as a random sample, but one that is fairly accurate. The voices I heard stated: "Very useful"; "learnt a

lot despite years of activism”. Some activists said “We came out of our bubble” and “got many new ideas”. There was talk that activists learnt how to make recommendations to policy makers and also to engage with each other “to resolve our differences” and many said that they heard completely “new debates”. Overall it was felt that “such spaces as the Aepf are indispensable “for building struggles and retaining civil space”.

The organizers and others felt that the preparation for the next Aepf should start soon after this event to maintain the intellectual richness of the Forum.

Conclusion

The panels, speakers, discussions, written papers, presentations and interventions in the entire Forum were of high quality and standard. They were well researched, carefully thought out by speakers and participants. This reporter believes that the standard of discussion, paper presentation and participation was of a much higher standard than ever before in comparison to earlier AEPFs, all of which were also good in their own contexts. The positive result of the Forum was not coincidental, but a consequence of the painstaking preparation and methodology developed by the IOC of the AEPF and their democratic and consultative functioning. This Forum was particularly enriching by any measure.