Building Bridges and Promoting People to People Interaction in South Asia   Nishchal N. Pandey / Kumar Shrestha

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PREFACE

This publication is an outcome of a regional conference on **"Building Bridges and Promoting People to People Interaction in South Asia"** jointly organized in Kathmandu by the Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) in October 2011.

South Asia is one of the least connected regions. Political and security cruxes have for long impacted on regional cooperation endeavors even as trade, connectivity and travel have become helpless victims in the face of bilateral problems. Despite these hurdles, the civil society of South Asia has continued not only to advocate for peace and amity in the region, but also to recommend measures to strengthen SAARC, taking cue from the success story of ASEAN and the European Union. The South Asian civil society is a robust and enthusiastic group of people from every profession that has time and again demanded that SAARC must become a flexible alliance that is effective and efficient. While SAARC is an inter-governmental association, successive Summits have emphasized on the importance of promoting people-to-people contacts at all levels outside the State sector.

The community of academics, CSOs, women leaders, NGO representatives and media persons that participated in this roundtable turned out to be an illustrious community with shared values championing peace, freedom and greater economic integration. Together, they not only deliberated on what remain as the main

issues and problems for us in South Asia but also devised appropriate strategies to overcome for the overall betterment of one fifth of humanity. The roundtable aimed to promote greater awareness about SAARC, share experiences and lessons learnt from other regional organizations, promote greater interaction among the people, and encourage wider participation of CSOs in SAARC's activities. As members of the civil society, media and academia, they not only shared their views with one another through papers and writings/ presentations but also interacted with SAARC Secretariat officials, and a wide array of government and non-governmental luminaries stationed in Nepal. The roundtable also suggested measures to promote mutual assistance, cooperative security and the idea of eventually realizing an economic union, as envisaged by the leaders of SAARC. I am personally indebted to the GPPAC and the RCSS for supporting this endeavor. This conference would not have been possible without the support of Prof. Amal Jayawardane, the then Executive Director of the RCSS and Ms. Nadeeka Withana, the then regional liaison officer of the GPPAC-South Asia. I am grateful to the current Executive Director of RCSS Dr. Mallika Joseph for encouraging the CSAS in bringing out this compilation.

"Building Bridges" — both in terms of physical connectivity and figurative political dialogue — was chosen by The Maldives as the theme for the Seventeenth SAARC Summit. The participants felt that it was an appropriate and a timely theme. During the two days of the conference, what we did achieve was precisely the notion of bridging differences between some of us and increasing connectivity not only within South Asian states but also among SAARC, ASEAN and the European Union.

SAARC, as the only regional organization at the governmental level for the 8 member countries, has provided a platform to chalk out their differences and promote welfare of the people, to improve the quality of their life and accelerate economic growth. In the last 27 years, SAARC has made significant strides to strengthen economic cooperation and maximize the region's vast potential for trade and development. It has been said that the destiny has already been

proclaimed for Asia and South Asia will be the fulcrum for its growth in the coming decades.

There have been a number of initiatives in order to bring together the CSOs, think-tanks, the media and the business community of the region. The Consortium of South Asian Think—Tanks (COSATT) supported by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) periodically meet in one or the other South Asian capital every year and brainstorm on the theme of the Summit. Ambassador Veena Sikri, whose paper is incorporated in this publication and myself are associated with the South Asia Foundation (SAF) founded by UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madanjeet Singh. Among other things, SAF has been providing group scholarships to South Asian students in diverse fields such as journalism, fine art, green energy technology and international relations. SAF Madanjeet scholars will soon be coming to Kathmandu to pursue four years of bachelors degree in development studies and regional cooperation which we hope will be yet another milestone in connecting South Asia. Similarly, the SAFMA, as a very effective organization of media persons of the region, advocating for press freedom through its national and regional network comprising prominent and professional journalists was also represented in the conference. Mr. Ranjan Roy from The Times of India has presented an interesting paper on the unique initiative taken by two widely read newspapers of India and Pakistan called *Aman Ki Asha*. Mr. Gopal Khanal, a well known Nepali journalist and currently associated with SAFMA Nepal chapter, has presented an outline of the functions and activities of his organization. The distinctive feature of the conference were the presentations from the ASEAN and EU on their respective experiences and lessons learnt from how civil society organizations have been a part and parcel of activities in their regions and I am thankful both to Corinna Lopa and Catherine Woollard for this. No regional cooperation project anywhere in the world has succeeded without taking the CSOs, academics, business persons, think-tanks and women leaders together. We are glad that gradually the official SAARC process is beginning to recognize the substance and significance of the Track II.

I am especially obliged to the then Secretary General of SAARC Uz. Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed who graced the inaugural session despite her tight schedule just ahead of the 17th SAARC Summit which was going to be held in her own country. I am also thankful to Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo, former SAARC Secretary General for an excellent paper coming out of his rich experience and knowledge on regional affairs. I would like to place on record my sincere appreciation to our Afghan participant Mr. Hussain Hassrat for braving all kinds of hurdles, including taking visas of two countries, in order to participate in this conference.

While the papers of most of the participants have been incorporated in this book, I am thankful to Ms. Hema Kiruppalini of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), Singapore; Ms. Ayreen Khan of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Dhaka; Dr. Farhan Siddiqi of the Department of International Relations, Karachi University; Ms. Seema Kakran of Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace, New Delhi; Ms. Saloni Singh of Didi Bahini, Kathmandu; and Ambassadors Kedar Bhakta Shrestha and Prof. Dr. Mohan P. Lohani for being discussants on the presented papers that not only enlivened the conference but also added value to the deliberations. I will be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the help I received from Mr. Kumar Shrestha in editing this volume.

In all respects, all of us would like to see SAARC move forward on the path of larger, deeper and faster integration. Given our historical background and the immense potential of our people, we must draw a sense of realistic urgency from the necessity, in today's world, in dealing with more and more of our problems and addressing more and more of our aspirations together, as a cohesive region, rather than as a mere collection of states.

SAARC's success is in the interest of all of us in South Asia.

Nishchal N. Pandey
August 2012

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RELATIONSHIPS AND LINKAGES BETWEEN SAARC, THE CORPORATE SECTORS AND CSOs

Nihal Rodrigo*

The Declaration adopted by the SAARC Heads of State and Government at the Tenth SAARC Summit held in Colombo in July 1998 recognized that South Asia, while "reflecting a rich, complex and varied plurality of cultural and religious traditions" was, equally, heir to "a profound common civilizational continuum of great antiquity which constitutes a historical basis for sustaining harmonious relations among the people of the region." This paradox continues to exert a considerable two way influence on many developments in South Asia bringing both positive as well as negative impacts on regional cooperation. The relatively more recent colonial experiences have also left lingering legacies, for example, of border disputes which often surface to sully closer bilateral and regional synergies being developed among the Governments of South Asia.

"Contentious bilateral issues" - to use the language of the SAARC Charter - are formally forbidden from consideration at SAARC

* Former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador of Sri Lanka to China, Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo was the Sixth Secretary-General of SAARC from January 1999 to January 2002.

Meetings. Such issues nevertheless do emerge often, adversely affecting progress towards closer cooperation on other larger 'unrelated' issues facing SAARC. They should not affect the positive, practical and cooperative connectivity that is gradually being built up in many spheres within the region. However, room should be left for private engagement, even at SAARC meetings, in confidence, between the countries fraught with controversial bilateral issues. One such close encounter of the confidential kind took place on the margins of a Session of the Council of Ministers held in Sri Lanka when two Ministers took a "walk in the woods" in a forest reserve in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka, clearing up some bilateral matters.

All governments in SAARC, at the present time, are committed to democratic political processes although some national issues do pose complexities for democratic governance. Political prejudices, heightened in the media and among the general public for whose support democratic parties lobby, are other factors which need to be addressed. This Conference in Kathmandu will be discussing the Aman Ki Asha initiative between India and Pakistan which is a refreshing media initiative that needs to be carried through.

All the individual SAARC Member States have, within their respective borders, active corporate sectors; independent economic research institutes; open perceptive media (though not always favorably disposed to some governments); and civil society organizations (some of which may derive external funding, hampering independent assessments). The views of general public are, in addition, also often powerfully voiced through trade union action. The voice and noise of the people need to be heard, heeded and helped, if justified. Interests of some corporate entities also do clash with remote communities, lacking articulate advocates for even their just causes, where life-sustaining tradition-bound environments face threats from excessive commercial exploitation by invasive mercenary interests. In extreme cases, violence and terrorism could break out, as the last or only resort for either of

the contending parties. Connectivity and careful consultations and compromises could, and have helped - but may not be always resorted to.

Apart from inter-state regional cooperation, intra-national connectivity, within states, is also vital to ensure social harmony. Civil society has a major role to play in developing connectivity and promoting understanding within states as well, apart from their advocacy and projection of regional synergies and collaborative activities across borders.

The corporate sectors in South Asia have played a significant role even in times when bilateral and other political factors have obstructed and stymied activities of SAARC, including causing undue delays in the holding of Summits.

To quote an example, at a time when contentious bilateral issues (the triple K : Kandahar, Kashmir and Kabul) exacerbated, they caused undue delay in the convening of the Eleventh SAARC Summit in Kathmandu. Nevertheless, to move regional economic cooperation forward, the Hon. S. M. Krishna, the present Indian Foreign Minister, at that time as the Chief Minister of Karnataka State, organized a three-day South Asian Business Leaders' Summit in Bangalore in August 2000 in association with the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Some South Asian Ministers, the SAARC Secretary-General, members of the South Asian corporate sector, academic groups and the media participated, helping to keep the regional economic nexus alive and moving, however slowly.

Beyond that, to support and to sustain the implementation of inter-governmental economic activities moving towards the goal of a South Asian Economic Union, four successive South Asian Economic Summits have taken place, promoting linkages among Government representatives, the corporate sectors and economic research institutes. The first South Asian Economic Summit (SAES) was convened in Colombo as an initiative of the Institute of Policy

Studies (IPS) and the Research and Information Services (RIS), following the Tenth SAARC Summit. The second SAES took place in New Delhi (2009), the third in Kathmandu (2010), and the fourth in Dhaka (2011). They all had considerable impact in identifying and promoting areas of potential State-corporate sector economic connectivity and collaboration. However, as I indicated at a Consultative Session in Male earlier this month, the existing formal institutional SAARC mechanisms need to be adjusted to benefit from such encounters.

A major step forward for SAARC economic cooperative connectivity was taken at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit in Thimphu in April 2010. The Heads of State/Government decided to form a South Asia Forum (SAF) "for the generation of debate, discussion and the exchange of ideas on South Asia and its future development." The Forum, organized by the Indian Government (Ministry of External Affairs), SAARC and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) met in September 2011 in New Delhi bringing together, as specified, "eminent personalities of diverse backgrounds," including Ministers from all SAARC countries. It greatly benefitted from the Summit's explicit unequivocal mandate to formally "provide inputs, based on a comprehensive understanding for charting out the future course of SAARC" including, significantly, to recommend "necessary improvements required in the existing mechanisms" of the Association. The Forum is to function on "public-private partnership lines… for multiple inputs beyond Governments" for consideration of SAARC's future. In essence, the Declaration stressed the unambiguous need to reach out to different sections of the South Asian community, particularly "its students and youth, private media, private sector, think tanks, civil society and institutions of economic development" - all links which require to be further institutionalized for action in formal SAARC mechanisms and structures of cooperation.

A bilateral issue which caused considerable difficulties for India-Sri Lanka relations is now being dealt with through the active engagement

of many sectors involved. The sectors concerned include thousands of members of the fishing communities in the two countries who are those most directly and deeply affected. The Indian and Sri Lankan Governments addressed the basic issue of encroachments into each other's territorial waters, particularly by Indian fishermen. I was myself engaged in some discussions held, which at various points, involved not only the two Governments, but the two navies, the corporate sectors, academics and, most important, the people most affected, the fishing communities and their Associations in the two countries. Some issues persist and are being dealt with through engagement of all concerned groups, including the media. There have been intelligence reports of complicity of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) with even Somali pirates who have posed threats to the lives and security of Indian, Sri Lankan and Maldivian fishermen in the central Indian Ocean.

The defeat of the mono-ethnic LTTE, described by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as the deadliest terrorist organization in the world, has certainly rendered the Indian-Sri Lankan equation less complicated. However, some internal aspects in politics continue to complicate matters.

Deadly aspects impinging on Indian Ocean security and non-traditional security (NTS), such as illicit immigration, people smuggling, gun running and drug trafficking have been to an extent reduced. Yet, these activities do still continue under globalised underworld criminal cartels with which some residual rump elements of re-branded LTTE groups collaborate, including in operations in developed countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada and the USA. SAARC Member States have, following wide consultations with defence and other sectors, including concerned civil society organizations, signed a number of Agreements for the control of terrorism and other related evils in the region. These include the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987) and its Additional Protocol (2004); the Regional Convention on Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substances (1990); and the Regional

Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2002). Their effective implementation requires involvement and engagement with all sectors in South Asia as well as affected countries beyond the region.

SAARC countries, including the land-locked three, are located in the Indian Ocean Region, home to the most traversed sea lanes in the world, mid-point between East and West. It is a centre for international naval and aviation connectivity for security, defence, economic and other factors, now greatly enhanced in strategic utility value, as well as endangered by developments in the globalised framework.

In the prevailing international scenario, together with economic and other linkages between the institutions of SAARC and the region's governments and representative political parties, corporate sectors and economic and other research institutes, it is vital to also relate with SAARC's Observer states and organizations including United Nations bodies. As of October 2011, the Observers are Australia, China, Iran, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mauritius, Myanmar, the United States of America and the European Union.

In China, in July 2011, the Government of Yunnan Province, which projects itself as a "Gateway" (considering its shared borders with many SAARC countries), hosted a Conference in its capital Kunming, in association with the Yunnan Academy of Social Science (YASS). Its theme, "Towards a Better Understanding through Enhanced People to People Exchanges," was close to that of this Roundtable in Kathmandu. Its aim was to promote China-SAARC cooperation. All SAARC countries participated at government, corporate, academic and civil society levels. The "Gateway" concept of the Yunnan Province was more than symbolic as it complemented the theme for the Seventeenth SAARC Summit in Addu, Maldives: "Building Bridges."

Memoranda of Understanding to promote collaboration have been also signed with over 20 United Nations and international bodies including the Asian Development Bank which, for example, greatly assisted the Consultative Sessions held in early October in Malé as a follow-up to the South Asia Forum in New Delhi and a lead-in to the Seventeenth Summit in Maldives. Recommendations on revitalization of SAARC's institutional and procedural structures discussed at Malé are expected to be factored into consideration at the appropriate level at the Summit.

Insularity and exclusivity in strategic economic and financial management have had grave implications as demonstrated in people's action in Wall Street, New York City and many other major cities in the Western world, not to mention the complex situations in the Arab world. Those who were found guilty in having made-off with millions (pun intended), including Madoff in the US, Sri Lanka's Raj Rajaratnam and others are facing consequences for their actions.

Finally, it is important that SAARC seriously considers evolving international structures that could serve as a forum for discussion and discourse on global issues – economic, environmental, security, NTS, conflict prevention, armed violence, peace-building and reconciliation processes impacting on the region as well. Acceptable lessons could be derived respectively from the Davos, Boao, Shangrila examples, to engage regional and global political leaders, government officers, security/defence personnel, economic, strategic and other think-tanks, women's groups and relevant civil society organizations in a South Asian Global Enterprise. The theme of the Fifteenth SAARC Summit in 2008 in Colombo was "Partnerships for the Growth for Our People." The Declaration directed "the SAARC mechanisms to continue to embody in their programmes and projects, a strong focus on better connectivity not only within South Asia, but also between the region and the rest of the world" while stressing the necessity of "fast-tracking projects for improving intra-regional connectivity and facilitating economic, social and people to people contacts" in South Asia. ❑

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: THE DIRECT ROUTE

Professor Veena Sikri[*]

I congratulate the Centre for South Asian Studies (CSAS), Kathmandu, on convening this Conference with the focus on the importance of people-to-people interaction in South Asia. "Building Bridges" is the theme of the Seventeenth SAARC Summit being held in the Maldives next month. I am sure the results of our deliberations over the next two days will provide useful inputs and ideas for the SAARC Summit in Addu City in November 2011.

SAARC has important achievements to its credit, carefully put together in the first twenty-five years of its existence. There is the impressive infrastructure of conventions, charters, agreements and institutions that have developed over these years. There is the SAARC Charter of Democracy, the SAARC Social Charter, the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (with an Additional Protocol on Terrorism), the SAARC Convention on

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[*]   Professor Veena Sikri (Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi), has been a career diplomat, who has served as India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh and to Malaysia. She is presently the Vice Chairperson of the India Chapter of the South Asia Foundation (SAF) and the Convener of the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN).

Combating and Preventing of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, the Agreement on SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Area), and the Agreement on the Avoidance of Double Taxation. The potential for regional cooperation has enhanced significantly through SAARC institutions, such as the SAARC Development Fund, the SAARC Food Bank and the South Asian University.

However, in the words of Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, in his address to the Sixteenth SAARC Summit in Thimphu on 28th April 2010:

> "We have created institutions for regional cooperation, but we have not empowered them adequately to enable them to be more pro-active… The challenge before us is to translate institutions into activities, conventions into programmes, official statements into popular sentiments. Declarations at summits and official level meetings do not amount to regional co-operation or integration. Regional cooperation should enable freer movement of people, of goods, of services and of ideas. It should help us rediscover our shared heritage and build our common future."[1]

This, then, is the crux of the matter : people-to-people interaction is the essential ingredient to translate SAARC's achievements into ground realities for the people of South Asia. SAARC's achievements are impressive and laudatory, but these have remained those of a successful or intergovernmental organisation (IGO). What we are looking at today is the need for a process of "building bridges" to transmit the benefits of regional cooperation to peoples across the

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1. Opening Statement by Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit in Thimphu, Bhutan, on 28th April 2010, accessed at http://meaindia.nic.in/myprint.php?id=290015757&d=01&sz=c&m=&y=&pg=&flg=&searchdata1=

nations of South Asia. This is vital and necessary if SAARC is to succeed in its cardinal objective of "promoting peace, stability, amity and progress in the region."[2]

The peoples of South Asia do not yet know each other. They are neighbours, but do not enjoy free movement across each other's territories, either of people, goods and services, or ideas. After centuries of colonial rule and the trauma that followed the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, there is a greater sense of mistrust and doubt than there is of trust and acceptance of each other's good intentions. We cannot learn from each other because of the infrequency of our contacts and the great difficulties faced in making these contacts more frequent. Our textbooks are often so dissimilar in describing both history and recent events that one cannot blame the younger generation for huge gaps in perceptions, leading to misunderstandings and sharp differences of opinion.

Thanks to regular SAARC Summits and frequent Ministerial meetings, interactions have improved considerably at the higher echelons of government and bureaucracy. However, people-to-people interactions remain abysmally low. The absence of such contacts has today become a major stumbling block in realising the SAARC mission and vision.

Public opinion, particularly among the youth in most SAARC nations, is now increasingly in favour of direct interaction and contacts with their counterparts across borders. They have before them the examples of the European Union (EU) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the EU, nations like France and Germany fought each other for centuries. After the end of World War II, however, as the European Economic Community gained strength and credibility, both nations (along with many others

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2. SAARC Charter, signed on 8th December 1985 in Dhaka (Bangladesh), accessed at http://www.saarc-sec.org/SAARC-Charter/5/

across Europe) have consistently worked together in the interests of shared progress and prosperity. So much so that, since 2006, French and German scholars have published a series of joint Franco-German history textbooks, covering even the most contentious period from 1815 to 1945! Speaking at the launch (on Thursday, 4th May 2006) of the first volume in this series, known as Histoire-Geschichte, the then French Education Minister said "the great lesson of this story is that nothing is set in stone – antagonisms that we believe are inscribed in marble are not eternal."[3]

The ten member countries of ASEAN, the grouping formed in 1967, too, have major disagreements among themselves on one or the other bilaterally contentious issues. However, this has not prevented them from moving ahead on issues of common interest such as trade, investment and connectivity, education, culture and people-to-people contacts.

Today, across the SAARC region, successful businessmen and young professionals, media representatives, academics and cultural personalities recognise and accept the need for and the requirements of regional cooperation. Indeed, regional cooperation has assumed special significance in the age of globalisation. Globalisation is here to stay. Instead of opposing the process or decrying its negative impact, all of us in South Asia should be focusing on ways and means of working together to face up to the challenges thrown up by the process of globalization. Our shared heritage and civilisational values, our traditional knowledge that encompasses every sphere of activity, and our music and culture: all these are threatened by the onslaught of globalisation, and in the name of 'modernisation.' Working together under SAARC is our best hope of reversing such trends.

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3. Speech by French Education Minister, Giles de Robien, reported by BBC at http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4972922.stm

An important way to compete in the globalised world is to develop regional synergies and complementarities, so as to withstand the might of financial entities and multinationals much larger than any individual company in South Asia. The word coined to explain this process is 'glocalisation' : thinking locally in order to compete or act globally. Ten or fifteen years ago, when petroleum prices and, as a result, transportation costs were much lower, such regional economic cooperation did not seem attractive enough to be of overriding concern. Today, it is. Consider the major sector of textiles and readymade garments, where almost every country in South Asia (Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, among others) has unique competitive strengths and advantages. Earlier, it did not matter much for final costs whether the yarn was imported from Egypt, or the machinery and equipment was imported from Europe or USA. Today, given the sharp global competition, lowering costs on such elements can make the crucial difference. Hence the need for all of South Asia to think local in order that they can compete globally. The countries of South Asia could benefit enormously by working together in this sector, rather than competing globally to each other's detriment. The corporate communities in the respective SAARC nations are becoming increasingly aware of the significant difference that regional cooperation in South Asia can make.

Interaction among the youth of SAARC nations can make an equally vital difference. Thanks to the internet and above all, the social media (facebook and twitter), the younger generation is far better interconnected than ever before. However, in the absence of opportunities for direct interaction, there is considerable confusion about who or what to believe! Positive and far-reaching decisions have been taken at SAARC meetings, or even on the sidelines of such meetings where 'bilaterals' are frequently convened between individual leaders. However back home, in the respective national media, the tenor of any such progress is often contradicted or contra-indicated by internal political propaganda, which is driven by domestic political compulsions or vote-bank politics. This can make it very confusing for the thinking person, who has to decipher

which is real : the internal political propaganda or the over-riding importance of cooperation for collective socio-economic prosperity among the nations of SAARC.

The only effective answer is to encourage direct interaction among the youth in similar areas of interest and activity so that they can learn from each other and appreciate progress and developments in other SAARC countries in sectors of direct interest and relevance to them. G-to-G (Government-to-Government) projects and programmes have not been very successful on this front. G-to-G contacts, often described as Track I diplomacy, involve government representatives from each nation. Their range of interaction is perforce restricted by government briefs on each issue. Over time, there evolved Track II diplomacy, where the participants were not government functionaries, but often included retired dignitaries, together with representatives from academia, think-tanks and sometimes even the corporate world. Such interactions have tried to evolve out-of-the-box solutions for contentious issues, whether bilateral or regional. Regardless of success or failure, Track II diplomacy rarely explains itself to the people, and has almost all the elements of closed-door interactions that Track I diplomacy has.

The term NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) was first used by the United Nations (UN) to describe any private organisation that is independent from government control. These are normally non-profit organizations, present in enormous numbers in almost every country of the world. In developing countries, NGOs are frequently recipients of funds from single-country or multilateral donor agencies, and concentrate their work in one or the other social sectors, such as education, health, food security or the environment. Many NGOs work with people at the grass-roots, delivering services or filling in the gaps where the government has been unable to deliver.

In South Asia, only a few NGOs work directly to bring together people across borders. SAARC, at the Thimphu Summit in 2010,

did establish the South Asia Forum as a think-tank with diverse stakeholders from all member countries. FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry), based in New Delhi, hosted the first meeting of the South Asia Forum in September 2011. This is essentially a platform for debate, discussion and exchange of ideas on the future directions and development of SAARC.

The South Asia Foundation (SAF) is unique among the NGOs that have succeeded in making people-to-people interaction across SAARC a reality. SAF was founded in 2000 by UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Madanjeet Singh as a secular, non-profit and non-political organisation, with eight autonomous chapters in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SAF has been recognised as an apex body of SAARC. SAF's core objective is to promote regional cooperation across South Asia through granting scholarships to young students to study in one or the other of the 12 educational establishments that SAF has established, one in each SAARC nation, with two in Pakistan and four in India. These are Institutions of Excellence, recognised by UNESCO, named the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence. Each of these institutions focuses on a unique area of study, and is, in most cases, affiliated with one of the nation's Universities in order to ensure high academic standards. The areas of focus include journalism (at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India), contemporary art (at the Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, Pakistan), water management (at the Moratuwa University in Sri Lanka), forestry studies (at the College of Natural Resources under the Royal University of Bhutan), green energy technology (at the University of Pondicherry, India), human rights and South Asian common law (at BRAC University, Bangladesh), preservation of Afghanistan's cultural heritage (at a specialised institution in Kabul, Afghanistan), Kashmir studies (at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India), development studies and regional cooperation (at Kathmandu University, Nepal), and so on.

Every year, each of the 12 UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence award scholarships, on the basis of gender equality, to eight or sixteen students (one or two from each of the eight SAARC nations). This is over and above the normal intake of students at these institutions. In this manner, the Madanjeet Singh Group Scholarship holders who represent the younger generation in each SAARC nation, get the opportunity, at an impressionable and formative stage in his or her life, to acquaint himself/herself with the realities in a neighbouring SAARC nation. In addition, he or she is able to acquire a valuable degree or diploma that will be immensely useful in his or her future career.

The feedback from the large number of scholars who have studied in the UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence is uniformly one of tremendous exhilaration and perceived benefit, derived from the experience of learning at first hand the meaning of being South Asian.

Among the programmes supported by SAF is the South Asia Women's Network (SWAN), headquartered in the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, a Central University located in New Delhi (India). SWAN emerged from the Conference on "Women of South Asia : Partners in Development," inaugurated in March 2009 by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, Bangladesh. SWAN brings together, in partnership, women leaders and activists from nine countries of South Asia : the eight SAARC members and Myanmar. These include women parliamentarians, media representatives, writers and creative workers, civil society activists and those working in diverse areas like education, environment and health.

The women of South Asia have similar problems of grinding poverty, poor levels of achievement in the human development indices, poor maternal and child health, poor literacy rates and high levels of school drop-outs, violence against women, social injustice and gender inequalities of the worst kind, economic discrimination,

including through lack of ownership or inadequate control over resources, tremendous vulnerability during and in the aftermath of environmental disasters and armed conflicts. These problems are common to women from all communities, religious beliefs and ethnic groups across South Asia. Hence these issues can be addressed more effectively through sharing and collaboration across borders.

In order to do so, eight South Asian Women's Networks (SWANs) have been established. Through these sector-networks, women in similar areas of activity network with their counterparts in other South Asian countries : they share experiences, learn from each other, identify best practices, and work towards issue-based collaboration across South Asia through agreed plans of action. Women work with their peers in their own sectors, and simultaneously reach out to other networks in an interactive way in order to achieve maximum results with minimum resources. The eight SWANs cover the sectors of Microcredit and Livelihood Development; Education; Arts and Literature; Women in Peacemaking; Environment; Health, Nutrition and Food Security; Crafts and Textiles; and Women in Media.

SWAN holds an annual Conference each year, together with sector-network meetings as and when necessary. At its third Annual Conference in Dhaka in July 2011, the Dhaka Declaration on "Women of South Asia and the Green Economy" elaborated shared perspectives on issues of sustainable development that are in sharp focus in the preparations for the Rio+20 Summit. SWAN firmly believes that development, if not engendered, can be endangered.

The key objective for SAF, and for SWAN, is to imbue in us the value and merit of our South Asian identity. SAARC can never succeed unless we accept the reality and the shared benefits of "Brand South Asia." The change in mindset that is so essential for this to happen cannot be legislated, nor can it be determined

through Ministerial or even Summit declarations. The people of South Asia have to appreciate and accept their South Asian identity. The best hope for this is through increasing opportunities for direct experiential interactions, especially among the youth, so that we realise how much we have in common, and the strength we can derive from unity in our diversity. Let us rededicate ourselves to this noble cause. ❑

EU AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS: PARTNERSHIP FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION

Catherine Woollard*

Introduction

This paper describes and assesses the relationship between civil society and the European Union (EU) in the field of conflict prevention and peace-building. Although it focuses on the work of the European Peace-building Liaison Office (EPLO) and its relationships with different EU institutions, it seeks to draw general conclusions about and provide a comparative analysis of the relationship between the EU and civil society.

The paper looks first at the legal and policy framework concerning the EU's relationship with civil society on conflict issues. It then looks at the case of EPLO as the platform in Brussels representing civil society working on peace-building. It sets out some of the characteristics of the relationship and concludes with a discussion on challenges that have an impact on the relationship between the EU and civil society.

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While the paper concludes that the relationship between the EU and civil society on conflict policy is relatively good, it also argues that – like the EU itself – the relationship is highly complex, variable and could be improved in a number of ways.

The paper uses "peace-building" as an umbrella term which refers to all activities that aim to transform conflict and address the root causes of conflict; peace-building covers all parts of the conflict cycle, preventing violent conflict, intervention when violent conflict has begun and post-conflict activities aimed at building lasting peace, promoting reconciliation and justice and preventing re-emergence of violence. "Conflict prevention" is understood as one part of peace-building. In addition, it draws on the thinking of Jean-Paul Lederach and others associated with conflict transformation, which sees conflict as inevitable and often positive but which rejects violence and seeks to transform conflict in order to prevent violence.

1. Policy and legal framework

The EU has a large number of important policy commitments (with different legal statutes) relating to civil society. These commitments variously express that the EU understands the importance of civil society in conflict prevention and that it believes that it should be supporting and working with civil society.

Notable among the commitments are the following:

The *Cotonou Agreement* (2000) signed by the European Community and its Member States and 78 African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states includes participation as one of four fundamental principles of ACP co-operation.[1] It talks about Non-State Actors (the EU term for civil society) and how they should participate in EU

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1. Article 2 of the Partnership Agreement ACP-EC, Cotonou (23/06/2000) and revised in Luxembourg (25/06/2005).

policy-making.[2] Later, the EC adopted a Communication on NSA participation in EC Development Policy, including commitments to working with and supporting Non-State Actors in all programmes and regions covered by EU development assistance[3]; this has led to funding under the Non-State Actors funding programme. The EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts in Gothenburg (2001) commits the EU "to develop co-operation with UN, OSCE, Council of Europe, NATO, NGOs, other international and regional organisations."

The White Paper on Governance (2001)[4] talks about involving EU citizens in EU policymaking and was part of the EU's response to the "democratic deficit" (the idea that that the EU is distant from and confusing to many of its citizens and thus unresponsive to their needs and not accountable to them). It talks about "opening up the policy-making process to get more people and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy"[5] because "the quality, relevance and effectiveness of EU policies depend on ensuring wide participation throughout the policy chain – from conception to implementation."[6] The European Consensus on Development adopted in 2005 committed to "the broad participation of all stakeholders in countries' development and encourage all parts of society to take part."[7]

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy also includes commitments for coordination with NGOs, regular exchanges of

2. Article 4 of the Partnership Agreement ACP-EC, Cotonou (23/06/2000) and revised in Luxembourg (25/06/2005).
3. Participation of Non-State Actors in EC Development Policy, Brussels, 07/11/2002, COM (2002) 598 final.
4. European Governance, a White Paper. EC, 25.7.2001. COM (2001) 428
5. European Governance, a White Paper. EC, 25.7.2001. COM (2001) 428, p. 3.
6. European Governance, a White Paper. EC, 25.7.2001. COM(2001) 428, p.10.
7. European Consensus on Development, 22.11.2005. 14820/05.

views and involvement of NGOs in early warning and planning of the EU international missions. It recognises in particular that NGOs are a valuable source of knowledge about conflict.

2. Mapping the relationship in practice

As is the case in many areas of EU policy, the challenge lies in the implementation of the commitments to working with civil society. While the EU is very good at producing normative commitments and other policies, often it does not then develop the secondary policies, legislations and instructions or provide the necessary resources – human or financial – to implement commitments.

In the last 10 years, the EU has co-operated with civil society in a variety of ways on the prevention of conflict inter alia: providing funding for civil society's conflict prevention activities; sharing information and analysis; and working jointly at different levels to influence peace processes. Civil society also plays a watchdog role in monitoring and holding to account EU policy-makers when it comes to the implementation of policy on conflict prevention.

There has been a large difference between the institutions when it comes to the extent and the depth of co-operation. The European Commission has developed more fruitful working relationships with civil society than has the Council. That is due partly to the regulations that govern – and stipulate – Commission's co-operation and partly due to differences in organisational culture, with many officials in the Commission understanding the value of co-operation with civil society. Within the Council, EU Member States have very different approaches to civil society: some are open, whereas others are very hostile.

The case of EPLO

Within the field of peace-building, civil society organisations work together within the network EPLO, the platform for European

not-for-profit organisations active in peace-building. EPLO has 28 members, including NGOs, NGO networks and think-tanks, covering 12 European countries directly and over 20 indirectly.

EPLO's only focus is the EU – thus it does not work on other international organisations or target governments except insofar as they relate to the EU. For example, EPLO would not try to influence the UN but is interested in EU-UN relations, including cooperation at country level and the use of EU funding for conflict prevention by UN agencies. Or, EPLO does not work on German government policy but it does try to influence Germany's policy towards the EU and the decisions that the German government makes in its role as an EU Member State (and thus one among many EU policy-makers).

As a network, EPLO's primary objective is to influence EU policy in order to make the EU more active and more effective at preventing conflict and building peace. Thus, it does not focus on the other types of functions that a network may play, such as sharing information or providing services to members (again, it may carry out these activities, only if they support EPLO's overall objective of influencing EU policy).

EPLO was founded in 2001 by 17 organisations in response to developments in the EU – as the EU developed its own foreign policy and became more ambitious and active, seeking to be a "global player," peace-building organisations wanted to influence the EU so that it promoted peace within its external affairs.

The EU as a peace project

One of the reasons they believed that the EU should promote peace in the world is because the EU is itself a peace project: the European Economic Community (EEC) was formed in the late 1950s in order to promote not only economic development in Europe but also to promote peace in Europe and to prevent a return to conflict –

European nations and nationalism having provoked two horrific wars in the 20th century. In this aim of creating peace in Europe, the EEC (which was transformed into the EU in 1992) has been very successful by creating an integrated economic and political community with shared interests, whose members have not gone to war with each other since its establishment.

However, the EU still faces many challenges when it comes to promoting peace outside its borders; indeed, the EU – and individual European countries – have been responsible for and complicit in many conflicts. This remains a key concern for European civil society, as does the EU's, to some extent, unmet potential to promote peace.

EPLO's work demonstrates the relationship between the EU and civil society. It has developed a good working relationship with the main EU institutions with responsibility for conflict prevention, while being critical while necessary. For example, EPLO manages a project called the Civil Society Dialogue Network which aims to facilitate dialogue between civil society and EU policymakers. It brings civil society analysis, experience and evidence into EU policy making; it provides input into EU policy planning and implementation in formal and informal processes; and it develops joint policy positions and then advocates for them.

It plays a role, typical of European advocacy organisations, based on the following steps: analysis, policy recommendations, publications, promotion and persuasion (through dissemination, events and meeting). However, the political culture in Brussels is particular – it is not the same as the political culture in any of the EU Member States (and the political culture in each of the EU Member States is itself very different), thus the types of recommendations prepared, the way events are organised and the way advocacy is done, in short, have to be adapted to the particular situation in the EU.

EPLO also tries to communicate to its members about EU policy on conflict prevention, including providing information on EU policy, funding opportunities and advocacy opportunities through its newsletters, briefings, website and training events.

EPLO's policy work

EPLO's policy work is based on meeting its policy objectives as set out in its three year Strategic Plan (2010-2012), which are listed below:

1. Ensure prominent place for conflict prevention and peace-building in EU structures and institutions
2. Secure increased resources for conflict prevention and peace-building
3. Make the EU's conflict prevention and peace-building work more effective and hold the EU institutions to account
4. Make EU development assistance more conflict-sensitive
5. Bring high-quality gender analysis into EU policy-making

For example, in order to meet its first policy objective, EPLO has focused on the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in the last two years. EPLO argues that peace-building should be at the heart of the work of the EEAS. Its analysis and recommendations are contained in its policy paper: Towards a Peace-building Strategy for the EEAS (EPLO paper, September 2010). The paper contains 40+ recommendations on how the EEAS can meet its Lisbon Treaty commitments on conflict prevention, including significantly increasing peace-building capacity in the EEAS, a strong, empowered Directorate for Conflict Prevention and Security Policy, staffed by peace-building experts and with a formal role in providing expertise on conflict to regional teams, and a peace-building strategy for the EU to cover guidance, processes, responsibilities for conflict prevention and peace policy. (An initiative on this was developed by the Hungarian EU Presidency and then subsequently blocked by the High Representative).

EPLO and specific conflicts

EPLO does not develop positions on specific conflicts, instead it facilitates dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers, so that civil society – primarily those from conflict-affected countries – can express their own analysis to EU policy-makers. For example, EPLO has facilitated dialogue between EU policy-makers and civil society from conflict-affected areas (under the CSDN project, with EEAS and EC) e.g. dialogue meetings on Somalia (2010), South Caucasus (7 July) and Sudan/South Sudan (6 October) which brought together EU policy-makers and civil society activists from the regions in question.

EPLO recommendations on EU cooperation with civil society

The following recommendations on improving EU cooperation with civil society were presented by EPLO in February 2011.[8]

Assessing the relationship

The relationship between EPLO and the EU is complex and demonstrates many of the features that characterise the relationship between civil society and the EU in general, which are listed below:

- Funding – donor & recipient
- Accountability – power-holder & monitor
- Information flows – information provider & information supplier
- Allies (facing common opponent) – ally & ally
- Proxy – delegator & proxy
- Manipulation – manipulator & instrument

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8. See EPLO Review of the Gothenburg Programme in February 2011.

Co-operation with civil society: Use the Civil Society Dialogue Network as a vehicle

The Civil Society Dialogue Network was set up in July 2010. Under this framework, EPLO manages dialogue between EU policy-makers and civil society on conflict prevention and peace-building. Under the Civil Society Dialogue Network, (1) EPLO will act as the interface between civil society and the institutions on peace-building; (2) the following types of meeting will be organised: geographic meetings; policy meetings; meetings on the IPS; Member State meetings; dialogue meetings in conflict-affected countries where the EU is active; (3) EPLO will organise training on the EU and peace-building (although primarily for civil society, the training sessions will also be open to officials, as was the case for EPLO's recent training seminar, 'Civil/Military Integration in Planning for Crisis Management').

The Civil Society Dialogue Network will include meetings on EU policy in EU Member States' capitals. There will also be in-country meetings to review the EU's integrated approach post-Lisbon.

Consultation of civil society at country level

Civil society is the way to make contact with local populations; it is important to ensure timely and meaningful co-operation. Although this can be challenging, there are many examples of how to take a participatory approach to policy making and implementation.

Support civil society conflict prevention

As well as working in co-operation with civil society, it is essential to support the independent activities of civil society in the field of conflict prevention, which may include management of early warning systems, provision of conflict analysis, mediation and dialogue, a wide range of governance activities, conflict-sensitive economic development projects etc. The support that civil society needs is not

just financial. In many contexts, civil society may require political, legal and practical support.

Civil Society-EEAS Working Groups on particular topics or regions

Working Groups of EEAS officials and civil society experts on particular topics/regions e.g. Expert Working Group on Mediation or Expert Working Group on the Great Lakes has been formed.

Early Warning Group

A confidential Early Warning Group is in place, which is composed of the relevant EAS and civil society experts. The group could convene when early warning information is received so that civil society and EAS officials can share information about emerging crises and possible responses (e.g. long before violence broke out in Georgia in 2008, EPLO member organisations working there had information that there was a high risk of conflict).

Civil Society briefings to relevant committees and working parties

Briefings to CIVCOM, PMG, PSC, COAFR and other relevant groups – since 2007, EPLO has arranged briefings by civil society experts at the CIVCOM, following two years of dialogue meetings from 2005 onwards. The subjects of the briefings can be agreed in advance according to interest.

Evaluation and review of the EAS

An annual peace-building dialogue could be established to review how well the EEAS is contributing to the prevention of conflict and building peace in different conflict-affected areas.

A meeting with civil society on peace-building should be part of the reviews of the EEAS in 2011 and 2013.

3. Challenges in the relationship between the EU and civil society on conflict prevention

Overall, the relationship between the EU and civil society on conflict prevention (and many other policy areas) is comparatively good – it is good compared to relationships between many national governments and their civil societies, and it is good compared to some regional and international organisations. There are challenges in the relationship, however. These challenges can be divided into three categories: challenges that relate to global politics, challenges that relate to the nature of the EU and challenges that relate to the nature of civil society (and in this case to EPLO).

Global political and high-level political challenges include the following:

- The EU financial crisis
- Europe's place in the world (and the different views of the EU and its Member States)
- Nationalism in Europe (and the lack of resistance to it from the political elite)
- The need to reform international engagement and assistance
- Military versus civilian action, implementing the World Development Report, responding to the changing nature of conflict and violence
- Threats to civil society and the closing of space for civil society to operate – cooperating with civil society when there is opposition from governments.

There are also challenges that relate to the nature of the EU itself:

1) Complexity – the EU is an extremely complex set of institutions, with complicated and multi-polar policy-making processes. It can be difficult for civil society to understand EU policy-making first of all before trying to influence it. The EU institutions have rather different political cultures and the relationship between civil society and the EU varies from institution to institution.

2) Fragmentation/proliferation of EU actors and agencies – the EU consists of different institutions.

3) Bureaucracy – the EU is a very bureaucratic institution. There is a tendency often to bureaucratise the relationship with civil society. This can lead to very formal and unsatisfactory dialogue processes which are time consuming but weak when it comes to content. Often termed "structured dialogues," these processes tend to be managed only by the EU institutions themselves and are often rather frustrating for both sides.

 The Civil Society Dialogue Network managed by EPLO in cooperation with two EU institutions, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS), is an attempt to develop a new type of dialogue process which is more flexible, focused on providing good quality policy content and promoting a constructive dialogue (e.g. by encouraging civil society to provide recommendations and proposals rather than simply being critical).

4) Perpetual (and "catastrophic?") transition in external affairs – the EU is going through a difficult period of transition when it comes to external affairs. The major change is the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, the provisions of which include the creation of the EEAS and the position of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. These developments were supposed to make the EU "more capable, more coherent and more visible" in external affairs. Due to the difficulties in establishing the EEAS and the lack of integration of key policy areas with external dimensions (notably development, investment, trade), the situation is rather problematic, with the new High Representative, Baroness Ashton, widely criticised and losing credibility, with morale very low and staff turnover in the EEAS very high, and with a continuation – or even exacerbation – of the "coherence" problem.

5) Resources (and their distribution) – although the EU is a huge conglomeration of institutions and states with a large budget, close examination of its allocation of resources shows that there are significant disparities in how resources are distributed and that limited resources are available for conflict prevention.

Overall, only 4 % of the EU's budget is spent on external affairs, within that a very small proportion is spent on conflict prevention. This can be contrasted with the 40 % of the EU's budget which is still spent on the Common Agricultural Policy (although less than 5 % of the EU's population works in the agricultural sector). The CAP is a dysfunctional policy which has serious negative effects on developing countries. EPLO has argued that the EU should increase its spending on external policy and within it, should increase what it spends on conflict prevention (See EPLO statement, February 2011).

6)   Other influences on EU policy on conflict issues – while civil society is somewhat influential on EU policy, it is relatively weak because of its limited resources. There are other far more powerful forces attempting to influence EU policy, notably private sector interests and the lobbyists and quasi-independent research institutes that represent them, plus partisan groups such as political party foundations. For example, the arms industry is very effectively lobbying the EU in order to increase the resources it receives from the EU budget. This is linked to a process of militarization of EU foreign policy.

The EU faces key questions as it develops its foreign policy, including the following:

•   What is the comparative advantage of the EU in external affairs?
•   What activities does the EU have the capacity to carry out?
•   What are the examples of good and bad practices from within the EU? (e.g. inspiring examples of the EU supporting peace or being itself a peace-building project). What negative effects do undemocratic activities in the EU have on its role in external affairs?
•   Do other policies generate conflict and/or limit the EU's ability to promote peace? (e.g. trade, investment, agriculture, fisheries, defence etc.)
•   Double standards – does the EU practice what it preaches?

For EPLO and civil society generally there are also challenges, the main ones are:

1) How to measure the impact on EU policy of civil society work? What is effective advocacy? NGOs doing EU advocacy need to move away from the simplistic approach of saying: "SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE DONE. DO SOMETHING!"

2) In order to influence the EU, civil society needs to work collectively. Working as a network is necessary but difficult – the following difficulties arise: Conflicting interests; Coordination time; Quality concerns; Competition; the "lone wolf" and "cultural superiority" syndromes.

3) There are challenges facing the peace-building sector. European peace-building organisations need to look at internal issues – risks of conflict in Europe – not just at promoting peace externally; European NGOs need to change how they work with NGOs in other countries and, in particular, to try to avoid neo-colonialism. Finally, peace-building civil society needs to understand and respond to the changing nature of conflict and violence, including the need to build effective institutions, changes in causes of conflict, and in particular the role of Non-State Actors in causing and resolving conflict, and the challenge of criminal rather than political violence and the collapse of the distinction between the two.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to set out some of the characteristics of the relationship between civil society and the EU on conflict prevention, using the case study of EPLO. The relationship is complex, which reflects the complexity of the EU policy-making. Both the EU and civil society face a number of challenges, relating to financial, political and institutional/organisational issues. These challenges will have an impact on the relationship between civil society and the EU but also on the effectiveness of both when it comes to prevention of conflict. ❑

SOUTH ASIAN FREE MEDIA ASSOCIATION (SAFMA) - TOWARDS SOUTH ASIAN UNITY

Gopal Khanal*

With the aims of promoting regional cooperation, peace, professional collaboration, independence of media, freedom of and access to information, South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) was established in the year 2000 by the leading media persons and media bodies of South Asia.

At a time when other regional bodies such as EU and ASEAN had been contributing at the global forums through their unified frameworks, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was lagging behind even after a quarter century of its establishment.

It was against this background that the senior journalists of South Asia felt the need of a common forum, which, was thought to be instrumental in fulfilling the dream of SAARC to make South Asia a ''prosperous'' region. Therefore, SAFMA was formed as an auxiliary of SAARC for achieving the common goals of the Association and for maintaining freedom of the press in the region.

*Secretary, SAFMA (Nepal Chapter)

Though very little was achieved, SAFMA today is more pertinent. It is because the people of South Asia, who represent vibrant and diverse cultures, still face challenges of rampant poverty, massive underdevelopment, backwardness, illiteracy, poor governance and authoritarian culture, besides a lack of human and social rights. It was even worse a decade before.

Despite a vast potential for economic development, cultural cooperation and progress, the region is still far from evolving an institutionalized framework for mutually beneficial regional cooperation. SAARC remains largely dormant and compares poorly with other regional bodies that have made substantial progress, benefiting their people.

The situation of media in South Asia is relatively better now. However, the disturbing fact is that both print and electronic media in the region is not as freer as it should be in this age of freedom and information revolution. Even though it is comparatively freer in some countries, it is not as independent, objective, unbiased and responsible as it is expected to be as an institution of civil society.

The media, even today, largely serves the establishment and corporate interest. In some cases, media has become the friends of commoners too - be it the Anna Hajare's movement against corruption in India or fight against the rising impunity in Nepal. Many more examples can be found in other countries too. But there is still a lack of unified approach and campaign of South Asian Media to fight against these common evils. SAFMA, indeed, is the forum, which wishes to lead such movements that will ultimately transform the contemporary scenario of South Asia.

SAFMA advocates for press freedom through their national and regional networks comprising prominent and professional journalists. The urge for dialogue, interaction and partnership is overwhelming among the media colleagues across the region that they even wish to join hands on a regular and institutionalized basis

to pursue the objectives of freedom of expression, independence of media, freedom of, and access to information.

SAFMA has headquarters in Pakistan and every member has country chapters. The main steering committee is formed with the senior members of every chapter represented proportionately. A Regional Secretariat, under the Regional Coordinator, is created to run the organizational affairs of SAFMA.

In the beginning, SAFMA, the umbrella body, handled all the issues – from media monitoring to the issues of women journalists - but gradually, it has also been forming other specialized organs, called sister organizations.

South Asian Women in Media (SAWM)

South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) is a network of women media professionals in South Asia. SAWM was launched in April 2008 and its Central Secretariat is in Lahore, Pakistan and the association has country chapters in the 8 Member States of SAARC (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka).

The association aims to highlight women's issues and perspectives and act as a platform where women media persons can identify and find solutions to their problems. SAWM plays an active role in networking, campaigning, advocating and lobbying for awareness and resolution of issues faced by women media practitioners.

South Asia Media Commission (SAMC)

South Asia Media Commission (SAMC) was formed in April 2007 to monitor journalists' safety and violation of media rights and publish periodical reports. It was envisaged to respond promptly to the violations against press for remedial action.

Media Monitor, in collaboration with the SAFMA chapters and associate editors of South Asian Media Net, publishes an annual report.

South Asian Policy Analysis Network (SAPANA)

South Asian Policy Analysis Network (SAPANA) is a non-partisan, South Asia-wide research and policy analysis network which plays an influential role in guiding discussion, analysis and policy both in South Asia and outside the region.

SAPANA comprises 14 research groups, each of which focuses on a particular area of policy analysis. Over the past years, these groups have evaluated the existing research in their respective areas, carried out fresh studies, critically analyzed current policy, and recommended policy alternatives where necessary.

The 14 areas are:

1. Trade and tariffs
2. Customs laws
3. Macroeconomic coordination
4. Poverty alleviation
5. Regional economic cooperation
6. Communications and physical infrastructure
7. Energy
8. Water
9. Nuclear stabilization and regional security
10. Conflict resolution
11. Political integration and a South Asian Parliament
12. Rewriting South Asian history
13. Religious intolerance
14. WTO and South Asia

Major activities of SAFMA

Conferences, Seminars and Workshops

Conferences, seminars and workshops have been organized for press freedom and freedom of expression and to create social harmony and justice in the media sector of South Asia. The topics are selected from research studies and activities on women rights, violation of human rights and press freedom etc. These programs help mitigate the gap among the media organizations, governmental bodies and civil society.

Interactions and Talk Programs

Interactions and talk programs have been organized to create awareness and responsibility among the media professionals. Such programs help highlight about journalists who are afraid to write news due to utmost threats. They also help emphasize that due to impunity and poor implementation of law, journalists and media at large are unable to publish and broadcast news freely.

Besides these, SAFMA has focused on three regular works.

SAARC Journalists' Summit

SAFMA has been organizing SAARC Journalists' Summits and Conferences in commemoration of the SAARC Summit being held every year. These events consider issues as the state of press freedom and press laws, right to know and access to information in member countries and free movement of journalists and free flow of information across the South Asian region. So far, eight such Summits have been organized with different themes. The conclusions of each Summit have been handed over to the respective governments for implementation.

SAFMA has been lobbying to ensure an easy and unrestricted visa regime for journalists, which means a free movement of media personnel and products across the region as well as the provision of gratis visas for journalists to facilitate dedicated collaboration among the media of the region.

SAFMA has proposed to SAARC and its member countries that the South Asian Media Centre, which has been established in Lahore as SAARC's Media Centre that funds be allocated for the creation of a South Asian Media Endowment Fund, either out of the SAARC Development Fund or with the contribution from member/observer countries of SAARC.

SAFMA has been working towards establishing itself as SAARC's only Regional Media Forum and acquiring the status of a SAARC Apex Body for it. SAFMA has been advocating for free flow of information, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, TV channels and other electronic productions across South Asia.

These are the common issues before all the summits. But, unfortunately, the South Asian Governments have not been able to fully address these common concerns of South Asian journalists.

South Asian Media School (SAMS)

In 2007, SAFMA set up a South Asian Media School (SAMS) at the South Asian Media Centre, Lahore, Pakistan. SAMS has been organizing training programs for upcoming journalists across the region. So far, seven courses for young journalists from eight countries of the region have been undertaken. The training provides a choice to candidates either to specialize in television or radio journalism. This is a two-month course, combining practical and theoretical approaches to media and training.

South Asian Journal (SAJ)

SAFMA publishes an analytical quarterly journal in collaboration with experts, analysts and editors of the region. The Journal focuses on the issues pertinent to South Asia as a region, and those related to particular countries. It has completed seven years of publication and has a readership of over 2000 scholars, editors, policy makers, legislators, politicians and all those who matter in the region. It engages the best minds to share their thoughts with policy and public opinion-makers, besides the representatives of civil society.

Similarly, SAMC, a regional media watchdog in eight countries produces annual and periodical media reports (South Asia Media Monitor), besides taking up the issues of media freedom and media content.

In an effort to create commonness in South Asia, SAPANA has produced 13 books on South Asian Policy issues and is in the process of producing another 10 volumes on major issues by cross-border groups of researchers and experts.
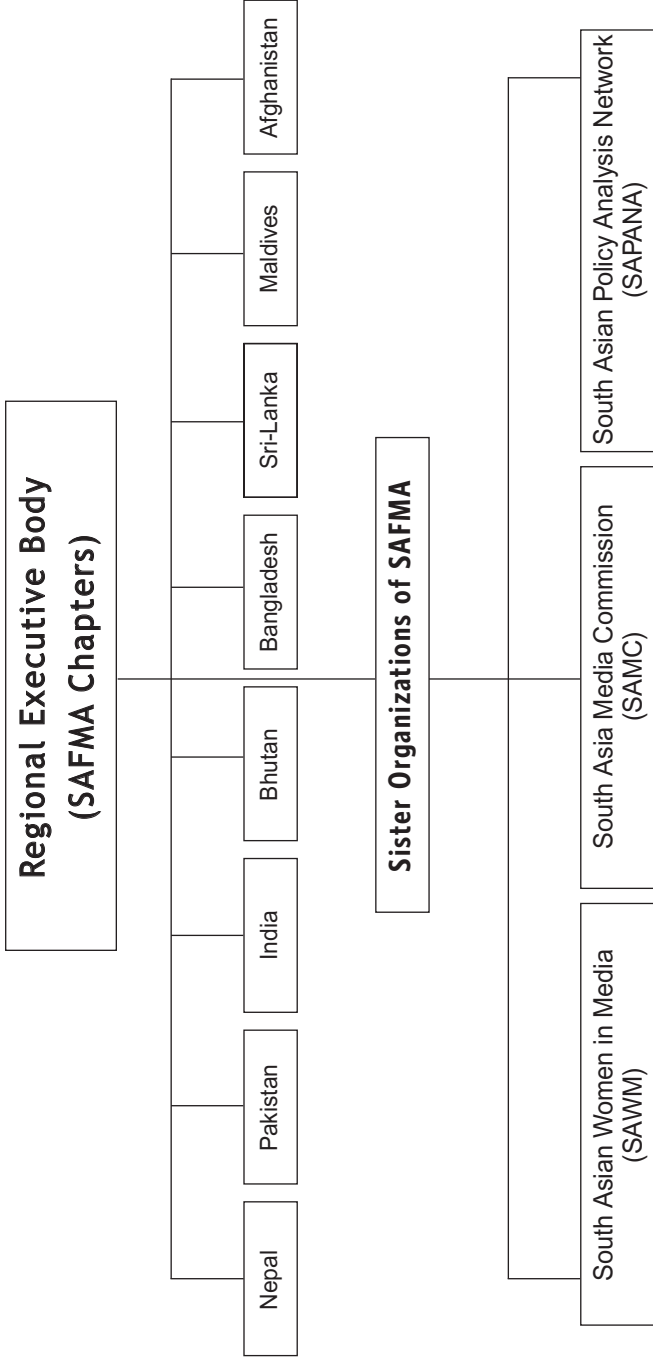
Likewise, the South Asian Media Net (SAMN) updates reports on media daily. For eight years now, it has been serving the South Asian media by providing information on the South Asian media.

Organizational Structure

- Name of the Organization: South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA).
- Logo: Two opening hands (as of the SAARC symbol) holding eight pens.
- Membership: Any media-person from the member countries of SAARC who agrees with the objectives and goals of SAFMA can become a member of the organization by filling up the Membership Form, subject to approval by the National Unit.

- Delegate: Every member is entitled to become a delegate to the General Body of the National Unit and SAFMC, participate in its activities, elect office bearers and freely express his/her opinion on all matters in the National Unit and SAFMC.
- National Unit: There will be a National Unit in each country with a National Executive to be elected by the General Body consisting of all members or the delegates elected by them.
- The General Body: It will consist of all members in a National Unit that will set the direction, frame rules and elect office-bearers of the National Executive.
- The National Executive: The National Executive will consist of office bearers, namely, President, Vice President(s), General Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer, and as many executive members as decided by the General Body. The term of the National Executive will be for two years.
- Regional Executive Body (REB): It will consist of four members from each country, including President, General Secretary and two members from each National Unit, at least one woman member, plus a President-by-rotation, three Vice Presidents, the executive Secretary General, two Joint Secretaries and one Information Secretary who will be directly elected by the SAFMC.
- The President: The President of the National Unit, hosting the South Asian Free Media Conference, will be the Chairperson of SAFMA and will remain in office till the holding of the next Central Conference.
- Secretary General: There is an executive Secretary General, to be elected by the SAFMC for a period of three years. S/he will run all affairs of SAFMA.

SAFMA STRUCTURE

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                    Regional Executive Body
                       (SAFMA Chapters)
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Nepal  Pakistan India Bhutan Bangladesh Sri-Lanka Maldives Afghanistan


                    Sister Organizations of SAFMA
  ┌────────────────────┬────────────────────┐
South Asian Women      South Asia Media      South Asian Policy
in Media (SAWM)        Commission (SAMC)     Analysis Network (SAPANA)
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Role of Civil Society Organizations to promote South Asia

Regionalism and regional and sub-regional cooperation have been the major characteristics of international politics and diplomacy at the end of 20th century. The European Union (EU) in 1958, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, are the much-cited instances of regional cooperation in the globalized world. However, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), 1985, seems to have done very little in promoting the welfare of the people of South Asia.

Some observers have claimed that SAARC, as a regional bloc that envisages a South Asian Economic Union, cannot fulfill its goal until and unless Indo-Pakistan tension is solved permanently. If so, the future of SAARC depends upon the bilateral relations of India and Pakistan. It means "uncertainty."

However, SAARC is a forum that only deals with the common issues of the region. In that sense, there is a possibility of SAARC being developed as an influential regional player. The primary responsibility of making South Asia, a powerful stakeholder of global politics, is of the governments of the respective countries, however.

Hasan Mubashir depicts the picture of South Asia as he writes "On a New Vision for South Asia" that South Asia is insecure, malnourished, ill and saturated with the fear of brute strength; violence is their only recourse and hatred their only wealth.

It is sure that South Asia is a volatile region. It has been facing various conflicting circumstances, both intra and interstate, related to resources, water distribution, territorial claims, tussle over sharing power, rivalry of ideologies and ethnicity, and collision between the aspirations of the people and forces of the status quo.

However, the efforts of development are persistent in South Asia. The member states have been progressing. Forget about South Asian governments what they should have or not to develop the region. What are the roles of Civil Society Organizations then to further develop "commonness" in South Asia?

In fact, Civil Society (People's movements and NGOs) have been working together for some time to forge people's forums in the SAARC region and to enable non-governmental voices to be heard at the regional level. The civil society movement deals basically with the common concerns of the region through the commoners' perspectives. They have been trying to address the concerns and aspirations of the people that reflect the struggle for empowerment, livelihood and dignity of the South Asian people as a whole.

The 1994 meeting held in Kathmandu discussed the ways to foster cooperation, solidarity and action at the grassroots level in fragmented South Asia. After two years, the first unified forum of the SAARC's people was formed as Peoples' SAARC. The first and second summits of Peoples' SAARC led to an acknowledgement that human trafficking is a crucial concern for the region.

Though the governments of the SAARC region have been giving less importance to the civil societies, many initiatives have been taken by the non-governmental side to connect the governments and people. The best example of civil society efforts to link South Asia is the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) - a common forum of all South Asian journalists.

Except SAFMA, no other regional professional organizations have been formed, but Peoples' SAARC have tried to include all civil society movements. Because of the pressure of civil society, the South Asian governments have been gradually addressing the issues of human rights, climate change and food security. Similarly, one of the major demands of SAFMA is for visa-free South Asia.

The agenda of Peoples' SAARC is to establish South Asia as a peaceful region. Furthermore, to fulfil this agenda there is urgent need for the countries to minimize the expenditures on conventional arms and move towards Nuclear Weapon Free Zone.

Inter-state relations must be based on respect and equality along with nullification of all unequal treaties. Above all, states must respect each other's sovereignty. Military intervention and espionage operations on each other's territories are the most glaring violation of this sovereignty. Terrorism has been another serious problem in the region. Afghanistan, Pakistan and India are badly affected by terrorism. Terrorists' movements of the region must be condemned. But if they are of political nature, there should not be military means to solve them; rather there will be the need of a serious dialogue. Fundamentalists' movements, who refuse dialogue, should be countered. Militarism as a state ideology is a threat to democracy and peaceful dissent. Peaceful and just resolution of all conflicts in the region through political negotiations is imperative.

The right to mobility with dignity is a human right. I think these are the issues that should be raised by the civil society groups. SAFMA and Peoples' SAARC have been advocating upon these continuously.

What else can be done?

1. The civil society groups should be unified, not divided and partisan as it has been seen in member countries and in South Asia as a whole. Leaving aside the petty interest of a handful of people, the civil society organizations should move forward with the regional interest in line with universal compulsions.
2. Specialized professional groups should be formed in the model of SAFMA. Lawyers, University Professors, Teachers, Women Activists, Trade Unionists and Human Rights Activists should build up their regional network so that their voice can be louder.
3. There is an urgent need of identifying common issues of the

region. While doing so, favor and biasness towards any country or issue should be dumped.

4. Similarly, after identifying the common problems and issues, there is the need of identifying the common solutions too. The South Asian governments have often undergone many domestic and bilateral problems. In such a situation, Civil Society Organizations, which are the part of Track II diplomacy, should douse the domestic, bilateral and regional tensions and suggest a way out. Effective and recognized Civil Society Groups can be fruitful to create 'South Asianness.'

5. Exchange of professionals and Civil Society Members as per the need of time and situation should be encouraged. Likewise, regular meetings and interaction between Civil Society Members and Governments could help familiarize themselves with each other. It can create understanding between the two. There is a huge gap between the Civil Society Organizations and South Asian Governments.

If the people of South Asia are united, the governments too will be united for a South Asian Union. ❐

CIVIL SOCIETY AND PEACE-BUILDING: AN INNER PERSPECTIVE ON PEACE-BUILDING AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN AFGHANISTAN

M. H. Hasrat*

In this article, I am trying to explore the role of civil society on peace building in Afghanistan. The ideas in this paper stem from my observations and experiences during the last ten years in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) can pave the way for peaceful conflict transformation and provide peace talks agenda for parties in conflict whether government or Taliban. Now, some questions raised within and out of Afghanistan are: along with conflicting parties including Afghan government, USA and NATO countries, what is the role of civil society in the realm of conflict transformation and peace-building in Afghanistan? What Afghan CSOs have done and what they have missed?

Before all, it necessitates to have a quick look at civil society background in Afghanistan.

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The civil society's background

Afghan civil society organizations were formed in exile, while some refugees in Pakistan received countless offers from western countries represented in Pakistan during the Soviet Union invasion in 1980s and 1990s. These financial supports were mostly part of the comprehensive agenda of backing Afghan Mujahedeen in order to dismantle Soviet Union's troops and the regime in Afghanistan backed by them.

Thus, within Afghanistan there are some abortive efforts, trying to mark some domestic institutions like clergy councils, *Jirga* and elders' circles as civil society institutions. As an insider, I think the aim of these institutions is, in fact, the opposite of what the actual civil society institutions want.

Anyhow, as it seems, the birthplace and purpose of establishing civil society institutions in Afghanistan were at the beginning artificial. Thus, what today in Afghanistan is called civil society is strongly fragmented, fragile and obviously influenced by the international donor community. Some of Afghan intellectuals believe that Afghanistan's experience of civil society was not the same as other countries; on the one hand, Afghan civil society institution looks more like contractors and brokers which have received and spent resources given by international community; on the other hand, Afghan civil society organizations have been facing the same challenges as government, such as corruption, lack of capacity and inadequate funding to achieve their goals (Schirch, 2011). It shows that what we call CSOs was not an exceptional experience in our history. Apparently, it is said that the CSOs foster tolerance, democratic dialogue, and trust between groups, but most of grassroots have not seen their actual steps in this regard (Schirch, 2011). The result of a decade's efforts of CSOs, specifically of what was claimed earlier is not acceptable for Afghans. Hence, the specific topic of CSOs' role on peace-building is the same as Afghan government is claiming.

With articulation of civil society's background, it seems easy to analyze the role of civil society institutions in peace-building and conflict transformation. As described earlier, the nature and background of civil society organizations in Afghanistan do not allow them to act freely, but do provide for a public sphere for modifying the violent nature of political power in Afghanistan.

Peace-building and civil society

Conflict is chiefly perceived as contradiction of interests, attitudes and behaviours between persons or groups, and is the obvious state of any society. Thus, if conflict is dealt with in a constructive way, it can lead to positive outcomes for individuals and society. At the same time, conflict can also lead to violence when channelled destructively (Thania Paffenholz, 2006).

Accordingly, in practice, two kinds of peace-building and conflict transformation processes have been experienced, the preventative process and the post-conflict peace-building and conflict transformation process. The first refers to activities, practices and initiatives, addressing the root causes of conflict and those factors that may lead to violent conflict. The second manner, the post-conflict peace-building process refers to a variety of activities in the form of a comprehensive strategy to address and transform the main challenges prevailing in post-conflict and war-torn societies.

Hence, the main question is, what has been the position and role of Afghan civil society in addressing the root causes of Afghan conflict and initiating a comprehensive conflict transformation agenda? As it was clarified, Afghan civil society is not essentially the same as other civil society institutions existing in similar conditions. There is some general functionality for each civil society, which Afghan civil society failed to implement during the last 10 years.

The first and foremost significant responsibility of Afghan civil society was to monitor of government's accountability, either in its peace agenda or implementation of peace talks programs.

Monitoring and evaluation of Afghan government's agenda for peace talks was the main function of Afghan civil society which failed to operationalize it. This was the only way to control the government and holding them accountable for what they are claiming about the success of peace talks with Taliban. The monitoring functions of civil society can refer to different issues, such as human rights violation, peace talk agenda, managing the sources for running peace talks, peace-building efforts and meeting basic needs of people. This function can consolidate the peace talk's agenda and make government more responsive.

Whereas more than three decades of war has left a traumatic society with countless victims, the second area that civil society can work for sustainable peace is advocacy and public communication. The nature of Afghan conflict was essentially ethnic and tribal-oriented, which was later transformed, to some extent, to ideological conflict. At this time, no one, especially victims, can raise their voices, because the current trend labels them as the spoilers of *Jihad* (Holy War), thus, their grievances cannot be heard. In such a condition, civil society has a significant task to advocate and address grievances of victims and pave the way for implementing justice. Afghan civil society tried more to address past atrocities, but it is still unsuccessful to articulate the actual interests, needs and grievances of victims and marginalized groups, and also create channels of communication to get these issues adapted to the national agenda of peace-building and conflict transformation. Advocacy of victims, peace education and raising human rights awareness is what civil society can do easily. As the past years show, civil society's struggle to provide such an environment was fruitless.

The third functionality of Afghan civil society for the purpose of both peace-building and doing justice to their essential responsibility was intermediation and facilitation between citizens and state. As my observations and findings show, CSOs have not done anything for creating mutual relationship between grassroots and government and making people aware of what government is doing. Most of the people are disappointed of what they call the ambiguity of

government's peace talk's agenda with Taliban. Essentially, there are no arguments amongst Afghans in order to reconcile with the Taliban, but the claim is only about the ambiguity and lack of clear condition for reconciliation process.

Though the Government has covertly done many things with regard to peace talks with Taliban during the last ten years, CSOs have not made people aware of what has been going on. The chronology of reconciliation with Taliban itself clarifies some public concerns about its structure and policy. Initially, the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, exposed the will to bring back Taliban to power. He openly said in a speech in April 2003 that a "clear line" has to be drawn between the ordinary Taliban who are real and honest sons of this country and those who disturb peace and security in the country (Tarzi, 2005). Although the search for a moderate or Neo-Taliban began promptly after their dispersal, the efforts failed to find such categories of Taliban (Robert D Crews, 2009).

Two years later (2005), the independent peace and reconciliation commission was officially established based on a decree in May 2005 (Tarzi, 2005). It was the main official step towards reconciliation with Taliban. Although the actual step progressed and the call for peace and reconciliation was repeated frequently, the instability and violence continued to increase. Along with this initiative within Afghanistan, in parallel, the Pakistan pressure began to integrate the Taliban in Afghan government (Robert D Crews, 2009). The AfPak[1] peace *Jirga* (gathering) held in August 2007 in Kabul and in 2008 in Islamabad was defined as a determining role of Pakistan in Afghanistan, even after 9/11 (Antinio Giustozzi, 2010).

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1. It is a neologism, constructed by Richard Holbrooke, the former US representative for Afghanistan – Pakistan. It is used mostly in US foreign policy to suppose that the problem of Afghanistan and Pakistan is the same; therefore a shared policy has to be considered in these areas of conflict.

The most conclusive international conference, which took place in London in January 2010, opened the official reconciliation with Taliban. The outcome of the conference was decisive in subsequent events. One of the important unanimously agreed points was supporting the peace and reconciliation process with Taliban (UK government, 2010). The final stage of these efforts was completed with national consultative peace *Jirga* and Kabul Conference in June and July 2010 respectively. Although in national consultative peace Jirga, Mr. Karzai invited the Taliban to join the political system, they rejected, like many times before, through rocket attacks at the moment of invitation (BBC, 2010). Talking to the Taliban was reconfirmed when international and national officials were asked in national consultative peace *Jirga*[2] to guarantee the safety of Taliban leaders (BBC, 2010). Although the consultative peace *Jirga* was an official initiative, it raised many questions amongst grassroots level relating to the secret discussion and relationship before that. The people believed that the reconciliation process was not transparent; therefore the government neglected them without hearing their grievances. The recent NATO countries' Summit in Lisbon, mostly focused on Afghanistan, resulted in the unanimous agreement on exit strategy, which US President, Barak Obama, insisted on last year (Farmer, 2009).

Now, the main question that is posed to the civil society is why the CSOs have not shared grassroots concern and did not provide direct talks between people and government in the period of a decade in which Afghanistan had countless opportunities, support and help of US, NATO and global community ? Lack of trust between people and government is mostly originated from passivity of civil society for not performing rightly their responsibility.

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2. Peace *Jirga* was an official gathering of various Afghans to discuss on reconciliation with Taliban. They were tasked to prepare a practical mechanism for reconciliation process. It took place on 2-4 June 2010 in Kabul.

The fourth area where civil society failed to build structural peace and stability was its inability to build community and strengthen democratization process. The democratization process and peace-building are good subjects for discussion, but this short article does not allow me to deal with them any further. By the way, civil society was able to participate in voluntary associations, paving the way for strengthening bonds among citizens and build social capital. In Afghan's peace-building context, the most important issues are social cohesion, where various ethnic groups have different narratives for peaceful future. Strengthening and consolidating unity and social capital bridges societal cleavages and lead to a new national narrative about Afghanistan's future and are the critical elements of sustainable peace process. As it seems, Afghan civil society was not successful in this functionality. Civil society's passivity and ineffectiveness have led to the current ambiguity in not having functioning agenda for conflict resolution and peace-building.

Conclusion

Afghan civil society was not successful in each of the four functionalities that are referred to every powerful civil society. Monitoring of peace agenda and conflict transformation program could make government more accountable which was, however, missed. The same was the case with advocacy and public communication, which eventually left a big gap between people and government. Strengthening the social capital and democratization process were other issues, which Afghan civil society did not count as a fundamental step for structural peace-building. I think the only thing that Afghan civil society lost was the historical opportunity and time which will never come again. ❑

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CSOS' ENGAGEMENT WITH ASEAN: PERSPECTIVES AND LEARNINGS

Consuelo Katrina A. Lopa[*]

Overview of the landscape: ASEAN

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established by six South East Asian countries in 1967. It was founded in the geo-political context of the cold war to address political and security concerns in the region. Throughout the 1980s to the 1990s, membership expanded to include the region's socialist governments, namely Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Cambodia. (Rillorta 2008).

In the last 44 years of its existence, the ASEAN has evolved in the context of a highly globalizing world. In addition to political and security concerns, economic integration and cooperation have come to play a greater role in the life of ASEAN. Among the elements of ASEAN economic integration and cooperation that are being promoted are the removal of national barriers to establish a free trade region, affecting the movement of capital, goods, people and labor across its member countries (Tadem 2006).

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The envisioned regional integration brings to the fore inequalities that result from unequal partnership arrangements—between the ASEAN and its trading partners such as the US, EU, Japan, China, India; within the ASEAN, in particular the dynamics between the more developed and underdeveloped member states; and within ASEAN member countries, the unequal distribution of the benefits of regional integration between the center and the peripheries, between the private sector and the marginalized poor (Chandra and Chavez 2008). Likewise, regional policies agreed upon at the ASEAN level, i.e. migration policy, trade policy, demonstrate widespread impacts on migrant labor, and the labor sector across the sub-region. (Nuera 2008)

The ASEAN Charter, which came into effect in 2008, almost 41 years after its founding, now gives the ASEAN its legal basis for existence, and provides for the legal framework that enables the process of regional integration aimed for by 2015. The ASEAN Charter codifies ASEAN's norms, agreements, treaties and declarations, and binds its members legally. The Charter is seen as a positive development for the ASEAN as it ensures compliance and accountability amongst its members. (Rillorta 2008)

Research institutes and academic institutions, what are known as Track II actors, were among the first to engage the ASEAN. Notable among these were the Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), which began its engagement in 1988, as well as the annual ASEAN Peoples' Assembly initiated in 2000. (Lim 2009). The Regional Working Group on a Human Rights Mechanism, a mixed grouping of governments, parliamentarians, and CSOs, led discussions towards the formation of a regional human rights body.

The ASEAN also had a civil society accreditation process, enabling 58 regional organizations to affiliate themselves with the ASEAN and to receive preferred status (ASEAN 2006). However, closer examination of the ASEAN roster of the 58 affiliated organizations reveals that less than ten would be identified as development

oriented NGOs or peoples' organizations, and the rest as either regional cultural and professional or trade and industry associations.

While civil society had traditionally not engaged the ASEAN during the first 30 years of its existence, there has been a slow but steady interest in engagement over the last years. Upon the invitation of then ASEAN Secretary General Ong Keng Yong, civil society organizations participated in the first ASEAN Civil Society Conference organized by the Malaysian government as the chair of ASEAN (ACSC) in 2005. Assurances from the ASEAN Secretariat that accreditation was not necessary for engagement further enabled greater civil society interaction with the ASEAN. Hence, regional and national civil society organizations have taken this as a signal for engagement and have initiated thematic campaigns with the ASEAN in increasing numbers.

Civil society engagement with the ASEAN has not been without difficulties. There is a high level of distrust and discomfort between the parties involved. ASEAN governments fear dealing with CSOs, as the latter are seen as trouble makers and subversives, seen as dissidents in their home countries. CSOs, likewise, have a great distrust of governments, and view them as corrupt and undemocratic, protecting the interests of the elite and the private sector.

On top of the attitudinal differences between civil society and the ASEAN, there is also a clear lack of mechanisms that provide for civil society engagement with the ASEAN Leaders, the ASEAN Secretariat and its functional bodies. There are no rules of procedure for civil society participation; no regular open, public hearings and consultations that enable civil society to provide formal inputs and submissions to the ASEAN. While there has been in existence an ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC) which brings together the private sector and ASEAN, no such similar body exists for civil society.

Yet, despite the barriers to engagement, there are windows that are open to possible engagement. The ASEAN Charter, in force since late 2008, acknowledges the importance of civil society participation in the ASEAN community and identifies bodies tasked with dealing with external partners (ASEAN 2008). Also, ad hoc consultations have been taking place between ASEAN bodies and civil society--often at the prodding of the latter--on issues such as human rights, labor, migration, women and children, environment, disaster management, among others.

Some recent developments in the ASEAN, under the leadership of Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, have also been viewed as generally positive—among them, ASEAN seeking a greater role in the mediation of crises and conflicts within and amongst its member countries, i.e. its coordinating role in relief and disaster management during the Nargis cyclone in Burma in 2008, and Indonesia's push for ASEAN mediation in the Thai-Cambodia border conflict in early 2011, among others.

People's Participation in ASEAN

The ASEAN Charter provides the legal basis for people's participation in ASEAN community life:

The ASEAN Foundation is tasked with 'supporting ASEAN community building ... by promoting … ASEAN identity, people-to-people interaction and close collaboration among the business sector, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders in ASEAN (ASEAN Charter, Art 15).

ASEAN National Secretariats/Directorates General are also tasked with 'contributing to ASEAN community building' (ASEAN Charter, Art 12d).

The ASEAN Committee of Permanent Representatives are tasked with 'facilitating ASEAN cooperation with external partners' (ASEAN Charter, Art. 13f).

Current practice also provides for civil society participation in ASEAN: The ASEAN NGO Accreditation Process stipulates a formal process for accreditation for regional organizations (ASEAN 2006).

The ASEAN Charter also specifies 'Entities Associated with the ASEAN: among them, the Regional Working Group on a Human Rights Mechanism as 'Other Stakeholders in ASEAN' (ASEAN Charter Annex 2) which has had a long history of working with the ASEAN on human rights.

ASEAN has also provided official acknowledgement for the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC), an annual civil society engagement event with the ASEAN Heads of State.

On the occasion of the 11th ASEAN Summit of Heads of State, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2005: ASEAN, in the Chairman's Statement, "recognized that the civil society will play an increasing important role in ASEAN as we develop a people-centred ASEAN Community. Thus, we supported the holding of the Conference annually on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit and that its report be presented to the Leaders."

In the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015) Socio-Cultural Blueprint, Art E.4 Engagement with the Community States: "Convene the ASEAN Social Forum and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference on an annual basis to explore the best means for effective dialogue, consultations and cooperation between ASEAN and ASEAN civil society."

While ASEAN provides for an NGO accreditation process, it has not made it a basis for engagement with civil society. Since 2005, ASEAN and its various functional bodies, High Level Task Forces and Eminent Persons Groups have accommodated requests for both formal and informal dialogues with and received submissions from civil society, in particular those on the ASEAN

Charter Drafting process, the AICHR, the AMWC, and the ACWC, to mention a few.

Civil Society and ASEAN

Organizations that have engaged the ASEAN at on the regional level have been a mix of national organizations, regional organizations, regional networks, open platforms, and peoples' movements.

ASEAN Peoples' Assembly (APA)

The APA was an annual assembly convened by the Track II members of the Institutes of Strategic and International Studies network from 2000 to 2007. The ISIS through the APA, envisioned their role of bridging civil society/Track III on the one hand, with ASEAN and its member governments/Track I on the other. The annual APA process brought together delegates from these three sectors (governments, academe, civil society) from the ten member countries of ASEAN, dialoguing on a range of issues such as human rights, peace, Burma, agriculture, labor, migration, among others.

By 2005, however, even as there was much appreciation for the APA process, there had developed some discontent among civil society participants on the APA process which had quite limited civil society participation in determining the APA agenda and programme, and did not have follow through action outside of the annual Assembly. Moreover, only a Chairman's statement was prepared at the end of each Assembly, not an Assembly statement. There was a growing aspiration to have more direct engagements with the ASEAN on agendas defined by civil society itself. Thus, the APA process was overrun with the coming of the ASEAN Civil Society conference in 2005, and the ACSC/APF being claimed by civil society organizations from 2006 to 2009, and thereafter. The APA was suspended in 2009.

Regional Working Group on a Human Rights Mechanism (RHRM). Proceeding from ASEAN's declaration in 1993 that "ASEAN should also consider the establishment of an appropriate regional mechanism on human rights," the Regional Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, a mix of government officials, academicians, and human rights advocates/defenders, engaged since 1995 in a "step-by-step, constructive and consultative approach" to institutionalize a human rights mechanism in ASEAN. The Regional Working Group has national working groups in Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and Singapore. (RHRM)

ASEAN Charter Drafting Processes and Consultations

The SAPA Working Group on ASEAN in 2006 provided submissions to the Eminent Persons Group and to the High Level Task Force on the Drafting of the ASEAN Charter. Under the leadership of the Malaysian EPG, the EPG/HLTF held formal consultation processes and civil society gave submissions on the political and security pillar (Ubud, Bali 2006), on the economic pillar (ISEAS, Singapore 2006), and the socio-cultural pillar (Manila 2006). A Dialogue was held with the HLTF in March 2007. SAPA WGA also conducted country consultations in 8 countries on the ASEAN Charter in 2006 in the Thai-Burma border, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, and reflected the consultation outputs in the submissions to the EPG and HLTF.

ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and ASEAN Peoples Forum (APF) and Interface with ASEAN Heads of State

The ACSC, initiated by the Malaysian government in 2005, has since 2006 become a civil society space; it is a peoples' process, civil society-led and self-organized. It is neither a government process nor an ASEAN process. The ACSC is usually held in parallel with the annual ASEAN Summit of Leaders. It focuses on both ASEAN advocacies and peoples' advocacies. It is where year-long civil society campaigns and engagements with the ASEAN are reported. It is a free and open process, in terms of organizing, participation,

and agendas and themes covered. The Regional conference is complemented by both thematic and national processes. These have been held in Malaysia (2005), Philippines (2006), Singapore (2007), Thailand as ASEAN Peoples' Forum (2009), Vietnam as ASEAN Peoples' Forum (2010), and in May 2011 in Indonesia as ACSC/APF.

The ASEAN over the last few years has given recognition to the ACSC process. This is reflected in the Chairman's Statement on the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2005, in the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015) Socio-Cultural Blueprint, and in the Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, 2010. The ACSC has become an annual space for South East Asian peoples' discussions of regional issues and the formulation of common positions and joint action plans on regional responses to these issues. Peoples' participation in the ACSC has steadily been growing, and the rotational hosting of the ACSC process has contributed to the growing awareness of civil society on the ASEAN in the host countries.

In its early years, the ACSC process was driven largely by regional organizations and networks, but have steadily seen the growing participation of country organizations. In the last three years (in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia), there has been an apparent attempt by ASEAN member governments to play a greater role in this civil society process by sending government selected delegations to the ACSC and CSO representatives in the Interface with Leaders. It is therefore a challenge currently for civil society to maintain the ACSC as a space to build community and build unities amongst themselves, to ward off attempts by ASEAN member governments to control the process, even as they engage the ASEAN Heads of State during these parallel processes.

Thematic Engagements with ASEAN

Regional Advocacy Platforms

Since 2006, the region has seen the proliferation of open platforms used by civil society organizations to engage ASEAN, putting forward policy proposals and alternatives in the governance of the ASEAN community. These open platforms have allowed greater synergy within civil society--crossing nations, crossing various themes, crossing sectoral interests, and allowing strategic and tactical unities to take place viz. governments and ASEAN.

These are led by convenors, co-convenors and have no full-time secretariats. Resources are shared by members to enable multi-centric action and advocacy to take place. Processes such as e-networking, consultations, submission writeshops and workshops, dialogues and delegations are used.

A pioneer in such open regional advocacy platforms has been the Solidarity for Asian Peoples' Advocacies (SAPA) which has been active in the South East Asian region since 2006. It has various thematic Working Groups and Task Forces. Outside of the SAPA, there are the Indigenous Peoples' Task Force on the ASEAN (composed of the Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact, Forum-Asia, and various country based indigenous peoples' organizations) (Forum-Asia 2010), and the Southeast Asia Women's Caucus on ASEAN (composed of national and regional organizations of women in South East Asia).

Over the last five years, since 2006, South East Asia has seen a number of thematic regional advocacy campaigns with the ASEAN. They have shown a variety of paths towards their regional advocacies, and have not had the same successes and failures in their advocacies. The campaigns are dependent on civil society's capacity to root itself in thematic country constituencies, as well as the capacity of regional organizations to sustain country awareness and constituency building and to mount a regional advocacy

campaign that involves consultations and unity building, organizing delegations, dialogues, media campaigns, and organizing writeshops for preparing submissions to the ASEAN.

Human Rights

Key players have been the Regional Working Group on an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, as well as the SAPA Task Force on ASEAN and Human Rights. They have advocated for the protection and promotion of human rights in ASEAN, and the institutionalization of an ASEAN human rights commission and human rights court based on international standards and treaties, notably the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of the United Nations. Their advocacies have been directed towards the Eminent Persons Group and High Level Task Force on the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), and the ASEAN Commission on Women and Children (ACWC). The SAPA TFAHR 2010, together with SAPA Working Group on ASEAN is targeting the AICHR Thematics initiatives such as those on corporate social responsibility, and the ASEAN Declaration on Human Rights.

Labor and Migrants

International trade union federations' regional centers have taken the lead in advocacy on an ASEAN Social Charter, together with regional migrant organizations. These are the ASEAN Trade Union Council (ATUC), and the ASEAN Services Trade Union Council (ASETUC), joined by Union Network International (UNI-APRO), Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) and the Public Sector International (PSI). The ASETUC has taken the lead in bringing to light the impact of ASEAN economic integration on workers and trade unions; in particular, the construction sector, financial services sector, government services sector, and the health care services sector. ASETUC has called for increased social protection, economic justice, and compliance with international core labor standards and decent work in ASEAN.

The trade union advocacies, together with migrant advocacies, have been on the protection of labor and of migrant labor, through the promotion of the notion of equal protection of labor and migrants in ASEAN member countries (Chavez 2006). Following the Cebu ASEAN Summit Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Welfare of Migrant Workers in 2006, trade unions together with migrant organizations and networks have taken the lead in advocacy on a legally binding, regional Instrument for the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers.

The Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers and the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) have pushed for equal protection of migrant workers and their families, as well as the recognition of 'illegal' (viz. 'legal') migrant workers, and the recognition of domestic workers as workers with the ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers (ACMW). Also included in their calls are the elimination of practices of violence, discrimination and other forms of stigmatization against migrant workers (SAPA WGA 2010; SAPA TFAMW 2010; SAPA TFAMW 2011).

Trade Issues

The EU-ASEAN FTA Campaign Network brings together European NGOs and South East Asian movements, and focuses on the inter-regional partnership of the EU and ASEAN, as embodied in the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. In 2007 and 2008, they campaigned on the right to information and participation, dialogued with trade negotiators, and eventually resisted the EU-ASEAN FTA, citing adverse impacts of the agreement through campaigns in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Europe, as well as on impacts on Bio-IPR and access to medicines. (EU-ASEAN FTA Campaign Network 2010)

EU-ASEAN negotiations have been put on hold as ASEAN insists on negotiating as one with the European Union, while the EU does not want to negotiate with Cambodia, Laos and Burma. On top of this, many FTAs are being negotiated by the ASEAN with other

partners. A challenge for civil society regional trade campaign networks currently is the question of readjusting from engaging the regional processes back to bilateral negotiations, which seem to be the track that most trade partners are now doing (SAPA WGA 2010).

Extractives Industries

Mining, Gas, Oil. The SAPA TF on ASEAN and Extractives Industries, led by the Institute for Essential Services Reform of Indonesia and the Shwe Gas Movement, and working in close coordination with environmental organizations and indigenous peoples' organizations, are advocating for the ASEAN to have a standard on extractives industries in general, starting with the revenue perspective as an entry point. They are targeting the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) to be mainstreamed in the ASEAN. For the long term, they hope to draft an ASEAN framework on extractives industry practice to include human rights, environmental and social standards, and benefit sharing mechanisms.

Environment/Climate Change/Climate Justice

A call for a 4th Pillar in the ASEAN Community is being made by the SAPA Working Group on Environment, bringing together regional organizations working on environment, climate change, climate justice, and biodiversity. Their advocacy positions environmental issues as cross-cutting issues, citing as bases of the trans-boundary impacts and transnational character of environmental issues in ASEAN (SAPA WGA 2010). Since 2009, there has been a clamour for a 4th Pillar on the environment expressed in the two ASEAN Peoples' Forums (APF) of Thailand in 2009, and 6th APF in Vietnam in 2010.

Gender and Child Rights

In 2008, the Southeast Asia Women's Caucus on ASEAN was formed, led by Asia Pacific Women in Law and Development (APWLD), and International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAW).

Child Rights Asia, a network of organizations working on children's rights was formed in 2010. The network's main objective is to mainstream the children's rights perspectives and agenda into regional and international advocacy processes.

Child Rights Coalition Asia and the Women's Caucus' interests are in how the ASEAN Commission on Women and Children (ACWC) will implement international human rights instruments, particularly the CEDAW and the CRC regionally, and on ACWC's coherence with the AICHR. (SAPA WGA 2010; Women's Caucus 2011)

Indigenous Peoples

Led by the Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact (AIPP), the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) Task Force on ASEAN seeks to highlight the struggles of by bringing to the ASEAN's attention the historical denial of the distinctiveness of IPs; the denial of their right to self determination, self-governance and cultural integrity, amidst the gains in international levels (UN, WB, ADB). The calls that have been made are: to recognize IPs as distinct communities within ASEAN member countries; to respect the collective rights of IPs through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by all member states of ASEAN; to review national legal frameworks in view of UNDRIP; and to ensure free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in all ASEAN programmes and projects. The AIPP and the IP Task Force have made submissions to the TOR of the AICHR calling for greater corporate accountability and government regulation of corporations, and made presentations in national workshops on ASEAN and corporate social responsibility (Forum-Asia 2010; SAPA WGA 2010).

Disabled Peoples' Engagement with ASEAN

As an initiative by persons with disabilities themselves, Disabled Peoples' International Asia-Pacific (DPIAP) launched the "Mainstreaming Disability Perspectives in the ASEAN Community" project in April 2010, with the aim of mainstreaming disability

perspectives and promoting inclusiveness of disabled persons in the implementation of ASEAN's 3 Community Pillars and ASEAN human rights mechanisms. DPIAP forwarded a proposal to establish an ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF), envisioned as a multi-stakeholder initiative proposed by disabled people's organizations. This idea was subsequently adopted in the ASEAN's Strategic Framework on Social Welfare and Development (2011-15) during the ASEAN chairmanship of Thailand (Taisuke 2011).

Communication Rights and Freedom of Information

The SAPA Task Force on FOI and ASEAN, led by Focus on the Global South and South East Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA) seeks to establish an ASEAN Freedom of Information (FOI) Protocol, referring to access to information held by the ASEAN and its bodies (and not information held by individual ASEAN member countries) with basis on the right to information as an international human right (SAPA WGA 2010). As this is a relatively new campaign, initiatives are now focused on fine tuning the advocacy calls and building unities on elements of a proposed ASEAN FOI policy and protocol. (SAPA WGA 2011).

Burma

Burmese diaspora groups that are campaigning on the level of the ASEAN are led by Burma Partnership (composed of Burmese democracy campaigners and Asian solidarity organizations), and by the SAPA Task Force on ASEAN and Burma. Calls are being made to ASEAN member governments to support a UN-sponsored Commission on Inquiry (CoI) on Burma, citing as bases, the widespread and systematic violence, and lack of legal internal recourse for victims inside Burma. Calls are likewise being made for the unconditional release of all political prisoners as a measure of good faith from the Myanmar government as it aims to chair the ASEAN in 2014. (SAPA WGA 2010)

Some Engagements with ASEAN Bodies

South East Asian Peoples' Center (SEAPC) and engagement with the CPRs and ASEAN Secretariat

The SEAPC is a center located in Jakarta, Indonesia set up by two regional networks, Forum-Asia and SEACA, for the purpose of having a regional physical center right in the heart of Jakarta where the ASEAN Secretariat's headquarters are based. The SEAPC, has been conducting briefings on various themes (human rights, Burma, trade, agriculture and rural development, peace and conflict, extractives industries) for the ASEAN Committee for Permanent Representatives, the ASEAN diplomatic community, and the ASEAN Secretariat.

Oxfam International secondment of staff to ASEAN Secretariat for Disaster Management and Preparedness

Having historically been at the forefront of disaster management and preparedness globally and in Southeast Asia, and supporting ASEAN's efforts to lead disaster management in Myanmar in 2008 after the Nargis Cyclone, Oxfam International, as part of the ASEAN Partnership Group, seconded staff as consultants to the ASEAN Secretariat in 2009 to provide policy, planning and monitoring support for the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), which looks into joint cooperation mechanisms and coordinated disaster responses, and its operational expression, the ASEAN Co-ordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management/AHA Center (Oxfam 2011).

Perspectives and Learnings on CSO engagement with the ASEAN

Gaps and unequal capacities have been most evident in the realm of regional civil society engagement with ASEAN. There are gaps between countries with more developed and less developed civil societies. Countries where there is a more developed civil

society (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand) are the sources of leadership in regional organizations in terms of membership, leadership/convenorship, participation in delegations and dialogues, staffing of secretariats and regional offices, resource persons in education and advocacy campaign work, and participation in regional and international conferences. Burmese in the Diaspora have exhibited much greater capacity than civil society members coming from national civil society organizations from Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar and Vietnam. Brunei civil society is almost always absent in regional activities.

There are gaps between regional organizations and national organizations. Regional advocacy in ASEAN is often led by the regional organizations (whether regional NGOs, regional networks and coalitions, regional open platforms, or regional federations and alliances), even as they attempt to root their advocacies through their memberships and national constituencies. There are a few strong national organizations, for example, that could perform a coordinating role in a country, say for ASEAN advocacy. We have seen capacities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, where big or well respected organizations are able to raise resources and facilitate sustained year-by-year processes amongst country CSOs on ASEAN and other thematic engagements in ASEAN. In Vietnam in 2010, the mass organizations to a limited extent demonstrated this capacity amongst themselves with the support of the Vietnam government, at the cost of fringe civil society organizations' participation.

Capacities

Mounting regional advocacy with the ASEAN has demanded a variety of capacities from civil society organizations:

Articulating a peoples' agenda viz. ASEAN agendas demands full knowledge of ASEAN agendas and their impacts on the lives of peoples and communities in the ASEAN. It demands being able to articulate policy gaps and proposed alternatives, through education,

consultation and consensus building. It demands multi-stakeholder cooperation amongst civil society, academe and think tanks, the private sector and government officials.

Rooting regional campaigns at the national levels demands ensuring that discourses and advocacies are understood and owned by the community, local, and national level organizations. It demands education work, consultation and consensus building.

Bringing different thematic civil society constituencies behind regional campaigns means that other civil society constituencies are viewing their advocacies with a variety of other lenses so that responses are holistic and systematic.

Mounting campaigns at the regional level means that country delegations and voices are reflected at the regional level. This means enabling the participation of country delegations in regional level dialogues, conferences and workshops, lobby meetings, and the like.

Conveying the message to the regional public involves the use of tri-media and new media in a concerted, coordinated way.

Winning champions amongst advocacy targets means being able to segregate and identify the internal champions amongst the intergovernmental and governmental institutions that are the object of civil society advocacy. This means that they are able to understand and identify with civil society's advocacy positions and proposals, and are in a strategic capacity to push civil society's agendas as being in sync with governments' agendas.

Seeing through targets into actual policy and institutional changes means being able to convince policy makers about the validity of civil society's policy proposals and these being reflected in government and ASEAN policy pronouncements and institutional mechanisms.

Resources

A very significant amount of program resources for regional civil society advocacy are received by regional organizations through grants from international donors. In the last five years, a great deal of resource sharing has been taking place amongst CSOs for common advocacies.

Relations with donors on regional advocacy have evolved over the last five years. In 2005, a number of donors expressed comfort with supporting Track II engagement activities with ASEAN and were hesitant to venture into supporting direct engagement by Track III, led mainly by regional civil society organizations. Through the engagement processes on the ASEAN Charter drafting, the annual ASEAN Civil Society Conferences/ASEAN Peoples' Forum, the sustained engagement of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on Women and Children, the Committee on Migrant Workers and civil society organizations were able to demonstrate their unique capacity to bring actual constituencies behind concrete proposals on ASEAN policies.

Whereas donors were previously comfortable with supporting Track II mediated engagement, they have in recent years, together with international organizations/INGOs, shown an openness, a willingness, and in some cases, an over eagerness and overt intervention, in supporting civil society engagement with the ASEAN. While this support is generally welcomed, this has created tensions as well, and in some cases has contributed to the perception that foreign agendas are being forced on civil society processes.

CSOs' role in governance

ASEAN's early types of relations with civil society were largely defined by the ASEAN through ASEAN-external partner councils, and through a civil society accreditation process. Relations have evolved over the last years since 2005, with civil society campaign organizations demanding for greater openness in ASEAN, and for

more institutionalized consultation processes on a broader range of issues than what had previously been in the early years.

While ASEAN has shown greater openness to civil society participation in governance, as reflected in its pronouncements, in practice it has vacillated on these pronouncements. Take for example the practice of Interface between ASEAN Heads of State and Civil Society Leaders, which was a key feature of the 2005 Malaysian chairmanship, initiated at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC). The Philippine and Singaporean hosts in 2006 and 2007 respectively did not implement this model, but rather slid back to recognizing the Track II process and initiated ASEAN Peoples' Assembly, receiving the APA Chairman's Statement instead.

The 2009 Chairmanship of Thailand proved to be most innovative, adding on a Town Hall Meeting between the ASEAN Secretary General and ASEAN Chair/Thailand's Foreign Minister on the one hand, and the ASEAN Peoples' Forum's 1000 delegates on the other. This Town Hall Meeting was on top of the Interface with ASEAN Heads of State. At the 2nd ASEAN Peoples' Forum, however, even as Thailand still hosted the Interface with ASEAN Heads of State, it made attendance by the leaders voluntary. Clearly, this was already a response to the negative reaction of ASEAN Heads of State to the previous Interface in Thailand, which was characterized by walk-outs and rejection of civil society representatives to the Interface by some ASEAN member governments. At the 6th ASEAN Peoples' Forum in 2010, Vietnam did not even attempt an Interface meeting between ASEAN Heads of State and civil society. Instead, they sponsored a meeting between Vietnam's Vice Prime Minister, who was also the Chair of the ASEAN for 2010, and civil society.

Amongst regional civil society, there are issues that remain highly contentious, such as discussions on the value of engagement with the ASEAN viz non-engagement. There still remain a great number of national and regional organizations that have remained skeptical of the engagement process, given the history of ASEAN member

governments' track records in dealing with their own civil society. There are charges, unfounded or not, of cooptation of civil society by the ASEAN or by its member governments.

Why the need to engage the ASEAN?

The engagement of civil society with ASEAN is a logical extension and is complementary to its work at the sub-regional, national, local and community levels. One is incomplete without the other, especially if viewed from the perspective of public policy diffusion. What becomes policy at the ASEAN level, with the ASEAN Charter coming into effect in 2008, becomes policy at the ASEAN member country level, and has implications on the lives of local communities and individual citizens. Therefore, regional civil society advocacies that are reflected on ASEAN policies, institutions, and ways of working contribute to social change at the local and national levels.

On policy changes

ASEAN Recognition for human rights, understood in the context of international norms and standards, and enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, is a major policy change for the ASEAN, and has potentially significant impacts. Certainly, the long engagement by Track II actors (ASEAN ISIS) and the Regional Working Group on an ASEAN HR mechanism, with an upward push from the civil society SAPA TF on ASEAN and Human Rights, coupled with pressure from western dialogue partners like the European Union may be attributed to having made this possible. This has extensive positive impacts on other rights-based advocacies upheld by civil society and other sectors in society such as labor, migrants, farmers and fishers, women, youth, children and the disabled, the environment and future generations, where human rights can be an over-arching principle that impacts on the security-political, economic, and socio-cultural pillars of ASEAN life.

On 'ASEAN way' and ASEAN's consensus decision making

This has historically been used by some member governments to

whittle down policy decisions to the least common denominator, rendering the association ineffective in its community building towards regional goals. In recent years, however, adopted formulas such as 'ASEAN minus x' have afforded the majority of ASEAN's members to have agreements on key issues, despite the lack of consensus amongst themselves.

On institutional changes

The creation of ASEAN mechanisms such as the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights, the ASEAN Commission on Women and Children, the ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers, the ASEAN Disability Forum, and the like are a result of very concrete institutional proposals that have been part of civil society advocacy with the ASEAN. Most often, these institutional mechanisms have actually been expressions that reflect compromises between and among the ASEAN members, and civil society proposals.

The proliferation of ad hoc informal and formal consultation processes by different ASEAN functional bodies reflect the changes that are taking place in the life of the ASEAN. Current discussions on an ASEAN civil society council, civil society community fora, the ACSC Interface with Leaders, Town Hall meetings, external relations and community building mandates for the ASEAN Committee of Permanent Representatives and ASEAN Foundation, and other configurations reflect the thinking within the ASEAN that they are grappling with appropriate and effective ways of institutionalizing their commitment to people's participation and responding to the demand of civil society to participate meaningfully in the governance of ASEAN.

On changes in attitudes and outlooks

Slowly but surely, and with much resistance as much as there is greater openness--attitudes and stereotypes of the actors involved such as civil society, peoples' organizations, Track II academe, and government officials are changing. With greater interaction come

awareness and knowledge of the other. With greater knowledge come understanding and the willingness to dialogue and come to mutual agreements and compromises.

Prospects for the Future

ASEAN's history is a reflection of the fast changing, globalizing world. ASEAN finds itself strengthening the association as a regional organization in the context of the globalization process and the trend towards enhanced inter-regional relations.

ASEAN, likewise, from an association of governments, has had to confront the reality of ever greater demands by its constituencies—academe and research institutions, the private sector, civil society and peoples' movements—to be inclusive in the process of governance of the ASEAN. We have seen the evolution and continuing birthing of ASEAN mechanisms and instruments for participation—granting of legal status to organizations, accreditation processes, engagement mechanisms such as councils, assemblies, conferences, consultation mechanisms, commissions and committees, interfaces and town hall meetings, among others.

Alongside the development in ASEAN, we have likewise been witness to the proliferation of civil society—NGOs, community based organizations, action based organizations, regional NGOs, regional networks, advocacy platforms, virtual platforms—representing different themes, different social sectors, different countries, sub-regions and inter-regional configurations.

ASEAN is a space, an arena of contestation for both governments and civil society. Contending interests and perspectives are very much at play in this arena, with all sides claiming to represent the interests of the public, of the commons. In this arena, therefore, one will find contestations regarding democratic representation, legitimacy, historical and ancestral rights, vested interests, corrupt practices, cooptation and collaboration, among others.

By and large, however, civil society at the regional level, have managed to reflect the issues and advocacies that one might find at the country level. Regional civil society constituencies are rooted in country constituencies and membership. Issues reflecting the need for holistic and efficient service delivery, for asset and services reform, for policy change, for democratic participation and inclusive governance are reflected in both country and regional civil society advocacies.

Engagement with the ASEAN on these advocacies by regional civil society is growing, in terms of themes covered, and in terms of numbers of advocates. This has prompted change in the ways of doing things on the part of both civil society and the ASEAN. We have been witness to a range of movements identified with engagement: opposition, proposition, contestation, cooptation, division, consensus and consolidation. We have witnessed a lot of creativity in the responses of both civil society and governments, and will most likely see an evolution of the engagement process in the coming years. What is certain is that we will witness a lot of changes and dynamism in the regional community building within the ASEAN by both country and regional players. ❐

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AMAN KI ASHA: DESTINATION INDO-PAK PEACE

Ranjan Roy*

A recent Economist cover described the India-Pakistan border as the most dangerous place on earth. The scene of a bloody partition, three wars and almost a hundred thousand deaths, the border has held the two countries hostage for decades. Unfortunately, with no political solution in sight.

Against this grim backdrop, imagine the surprise of 4 million Indian readers, as they woke up in the New Year last year to the words Love Pakistan emblazoned across the front page of the country's leading newspaper. The bold missive was the launch of Aman Ki Asha (A Hope for Peace), a unique people-to-people movement that dared to look beyond the 60-year old political boundary to the ancient bonds that tie together the peoples of these two great nations.

Launched jointly by the Times of India and the Jang Group of Pakistan, Aman Ki Asha didn't intend to trivialize in any way, the very real areas of difference that exist between the neighbors. It just recognized that we can't remain hostage to those differences forever and sought to take the relationship beyond the dead-end it found

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itself in. Because we realized that the price of doing nothing is too high to contemplate, for both India and Pakistan.

As the largest media groups on either side of the border, Jang and The Times of India felt the media can serve as important facilitators in fostering greater understanding between people. Unfortunately the media in both countries has tended to focus far too much on the negative. In the process, the good that people do is drowned out by the sensational and the constant flow of death-and-destruction headlines.

Distrust thrives in an atmosphere of ignorance. What we do not know, we tend not to trust. Decades of hostility have reduced normal interaction to a less than a bare minimum. Apart from those with relatives on the other side, or those who need to travel on business, there is little traffic between the two countries. The big benefit of the two biggest media groups coming together would be to help open new windows into each other's world.

Opening new windows

The Aman ki Asha initiative sought to foster greater understanding between the peoples of India and Pakistan using the main planks of Cultural Exchange and Commerce. It was decided that to begin with, harder issues surrounding the core areas of conflict between the two countries would be kept aside. The idea was to first create a more conducive environment, under which the civil societies of the two countries could move to the next stage of discussing the more intractable issues plaguing the bilateral relationship.

Cultural exchange was the first to be activated. Over the first quarter of 2010, music festivals were held across 6 major cities of India, in which top artistes from both countries shared a common stage. Kailash Kher and Rahat Fateh Ali held an audience of over 10,000 enthralled at the Purana Qila, New Delhi. Shubha Mugdal and Abida Parveen sang to packed grounds in Mumbai, Hariharan and Ghulam

Ali in Bangalore, Euphoria and Strings in Kolkata, Arif Lomar and Gazi Khan in Hyderabad and Wadali Brothers with Abu Mohammad in Ahmedabad.

This was followed by literary and food festivals, again spanning several cities. Top authors from both sides, including Chetan Bhagat, Mohammad Hanif, MJ Akbar, Mohsin Hamid and Gulzar took part in book and poetry reading sessions as well as animated discussions. Zia Mohyeddin perhaps Pakistan's tallest theatre personality shared a stage with Amitabh Bachchan, who recited several of his father Harivansha Rai's poems.

Each of the15 cultural events was sought to be attended by audiences several times the venue capacity; guests unable to enter were seen standing outside the venues to listen to their favorite artistes from across the border. India's heir apparent Rahul Gandhi reached out on his own to attend the inaugural Aman Ki Asha open-to-all concert in Delhi (despite the huge security risk that this may have involved). Other dignitaries of the rank of cabinet ministers and state ministers attended events organized by Aman Ki Asha across various cities of India.

Similarly, Mushaira sessions as well as music concerts were organized by Jang in Lahore and Karachi. Amongst the participants were leading names like Nida Fazli, Shaharyar, Khushbeer Saad, Malikzada Manzoor Ahmed from India and Tariq Mahmood Shaam, Anwer Shaoor, Muhammad Tariq from Pakistan.

Aman Ki Asha felt it important to reach out especially to children whose minds have not yet been filled with hate, and who obviously have a huge stake in the peaceful future of their country. We got in touch with hundreds of schools to ask their children to write peace messages to their friends across the border, on handkerchieves. In all, over 92,000 schoolchildren from India and 30,000 from Pakistan participated; a chain made with some of the best messages was exchanged at the Wagah-Attari border, on the occasion of the Commonwealth Games baton travelling from Pakistan to India.

All the above ground events were anchored by fullsome editorial coverage in the media vehicles of the two groups, that brought alive the rich cultural heritage shared by both the sibling nations.

Commerce: The only lasting bedrock for peace

Aman ki Asha sees as perhaps even more important than culture, the plank of Commerce. The lessons of history are clear: it's only when two hostile countries develop an economic stake in each other does peace become an imperative, and war a non-option. Take the United States' relationship with China or Japan, for instance. The forces of commerce and economics have compelled these erstwhile foes to change their posture towards each other, paving the way for ever-increasing people-to-people interaction, and a progressively more amicable relationship… this, despite their being at the opposite ends of the globe.

India and Pakistan have so much more in common. We share a 2000 km land border, common tastes born of centuries of a shared heritage and a ready demand for each others' products. Yet, at a paltry 2 billion dollars Pakistan doesn't feature in the top 30 trading partners of India - while distant and not-so-large countries like Belgium and Netherlands do, as do as our smaller neighbors like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

To kick-start the process of economic cooperation between the neighbours, Aman Ki Asha organized the largest-ever Indo-Pak trade meet in New Delhi in May 2010, in partnership with CII, featuring some of the most prominent names in business and policy in both countries (including the Finance Minister of India Pranab Mukherjee, Pakistan High Commissioner to India Shahid Malik, Former Pakistan Finance Minister Dr Shahid Javaid Burki, Former Governor State Bank of Pakistan Dr Ishrat Hussain, Brijmohanlal Munjal of the Hero group, Narayanmurthy and Nandan Nilekani of Infosys, Sunil Mittal of Bharti Airtel, and heads of several other leading Pakistani and Indian business houses).

The Aman Ki Asha trade meet recognized the huge untapped opportunity for bilateral trade and identified six high-potential industries. In the months following the meet, bilateral committees have been set up in each of these six industries; an IT trade delegation from India has travelled to Pakistan for a productive 3-day visit and a Textiles delegation visited India in March 2011. The bilateral Committee on Health organized an Indo-Pak meet chaired by Dr Trehan of Medanta in Delhi in August 2011. The various sub-committees have made their recommendations to the CII and the governments of India and Pakistan for small changes in the policy framework to improve bilateral trade and investment. One of the biggest thrusts of the programme is to get India to grant Most Favoured Nation status to Pakistan, a proposal that is receiving increasing traction in the relevant ministries in India.

Going beyond the aspects of culture and commerce, Aman ki Asha is gradually moving into the more intractable issues that have held the two countries hostage for decades. Over the past year, an Editors' Meet in Karachi, a Strategic Summit in Lahore and a conference in Delhi on the contentious issue of Water Sharing were organized. Each summit was attended by some of the best minds from both countries, comprising a mix of senior journalists, strategists as well as people who have held senior positions in their countries' administrations in the past. We found, as we expected, that freed from the need to toe the country's official line, members of civil society can speak far more frankly, fairly and imaginatively about the possible solutions to the various obstacles in the relationship – terrorism, the Kashmir issue, the sharing of river waters, the problems with obtaining visas etc. Jang and The Times of India have taken the main ideas thrown up by these summits editorially to their readers, in an attempt to engage the civil society in drawing out a possible peace map.

Results

The campaign has been hailed across segments of the state and civil society in both countries, as an important one. A detailed research

on public attitudes towards Indo-Pak issues conducted by IMRB (India's leading MR firm) showed a significant change in the desire for peace amongst ordinary people over the one year of the campaign – from 59% to 74%. The corresponding figures in Pakistan in an identical survey conducted by Oasis International showed a move from 64% to 70%.

Apart from the acclaim received from all stakeholders within the two countries, the campaign has also been hailed internationally. The British Parliament formally passed a resolution commending Aman Ki Asha. The US Under-Secretary of State Judith McHale personally visited The Times of India office to compliment the initiative and offer all possible help from the USA. The US Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, similarly reached out to the CEO of the Jang Group, as did the French and German Ambassadors to Pakistan and the Chef-de-mission for the Commonwealth Games, Dr Mohammad Ali Shah. Concurrently with this roundtable, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meet at Perth has given a prime slot to Aman ki Asha, to tell its story of hope.

The journey ahead

Now well into its second year, Aman ki Asha continues its bold journey. A series of Indo-Pak concerts were again held across 4 Indian cities earlier this year; the second Indo-Pak trade meet, this time to be held in Lahore, is being planned, as are a Strategic Seminar in Karachi and a conference of prominent Women Achievers from both countries in New Delhi. The bilateral trade committees of the six identified industries have charted out their respective road-maps.

While it may clearly take more than this humble initiative to engender lasting peace between two bitterly hostile neighbours, Aman Ki Asha intends to stay the course, in the hope of a better tomorrow. Because that is the least we owe our children. ❑

KEY-NOTE ADDRESS

H.E. UZ. Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed*
Secretary-General of SAARC

Distinguished Chair Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo,
Prof. Amal Jayawardane,
Mr. Nishchal N. Pandey,
Distinguished Delegates

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address the Conference on "Building Bridges and Promoting People-to-People Interaction in South Asia." With the coming together of so many distinguished personalities from within the region and beyond, I am confident that this Conference is well poised to come up with worthwhile recommendations in strengthening regional cooperation in South Asia.

I would like to acknowledge the distinguished presence of my predecessor, Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo, in our midst this morning

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* UZ. Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed was the first female Secretary-General of SAARC and served the regional Association from March 2011 to January 2012.

as Chair of this Inaugural Session. Ambassador Rodrigo has been a strong advocate of regional cooperation in South Asia. Even after relinquishing charge as the Secretary-General of SAARC several years ago, he has been actively involved in garnering support for mutual cooperation in our region. Only two weeks ago, we saw him speaking passionately for the cause of strengthening SAARC and its Institutional Mechanisms at the Consultative Session organized by the Republic of Maldives as the host of the Seventeenth SAARC Summit. I am confident that his deep insights and contribution will enrich the outcome of this Conference as well.

I would like to thank Mr. Nishchal N. Pandey, Director of the Center for South Asian Studies, for organizing this Conference on such a topical theme in collaboration with the Global Partnership for Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Netherlands and the Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS), Sri Lanka. This Conference couldn't have been organized at a more opportune time than this. Convening just two weeks before the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, this Conference will not only generate the momentum for the forthcoming Summit but will also provide inputs to its preceding meetings.

Distinguished Delegates

One of the primary objectives of SAARC is to promote mutual understanding and goodwill among the peoples of South Asia. Successive SAARC Summits have underscored the need and importance of promoting people-to-people contacts at all levels. Recognizing the need for promoting a sense of regional identity among the people of our region, the Eleventh Summit held in Kathmandu in January 2004 lauded the roles played by intellectuals, professionals and eminent persons in promoting people-to-people contacts within the region and agreed to encourage such endeavours as a healthy sign of regional cohesion and fraternity. More recently, the Fourteenth SAARC Summit agreed to improve intra-regional connectivity, particularly physical, economic and people-to-people

connectivity. At that Summit, the Heads of State or Government agreed to the vision of a South Asian community, where there is a smooth flow of goods, services, peoples, technologies, knowledge, capital, culture and ideas in the region.

Indeed, the cause of promoting people-to-people contacts in the region has always received impetus from our Member States. The launch of the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, organization of tourism and trade fairs, establishment of the South Asian University, and grant of recognition to popular and professional bodies as SAARC Recognized and Professional Bodies are some of the initiatives undertaken by SAARC to achieve that end.

Keeping in mind the visionary goals of our Leaders and subsequent interventions made by our Association in addressing them, this Conference which is devoted to the theme of "building bridges and promoting people-to-people interaction in South Asia" is very relevant to the agenda of SAARC. It is all the more relevant in the context of the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, which is also devoted to the theme "Building Bridges."

Distinguished Delegates,

During a quarter century of its existence, SAARC has embarked upon the path of regional cooperation in diverse areas; and created a number of inter-governmental mechanisms to deal with them; established eleven Regional Centers in specialized areas; commissioned many different studies on thematic issues; and ratified a host of regional agreements. While there has been considerable progress in several areas, it is widely acknowledged that SAARC has fallen short of delivering on the hopes and aspirations of our people. With this realization, our Leaders have time and again stressed on the need to strengthen SAARC and its Institutional Mechanisms so as to make our Association more effective. In this context, I might mention that the recommendations made by the First Meeting of the South Asia

Forum held in New Delhi last month and the Consultative Session on Strengthening SAARC and its Institutional Mechanisms held in Malé just a fortnight ago also underscore such a need.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Following the directives of successive Summits, SAARC is currently pursuing efforts geared towards the eventual realization of the South Asian Economic Union. An inter-governmental Expert Group on Financial Issues has been mandated to develop a roadmap in realizing that vision. Among other things, this Group has identified the need for evolving common custom procedures, harmonizing standards, avoiding double taxation, promoting and protecting investments and adopting measures to facilitate trade. While considerable progress has been registered in these respects, tariff and non-tariff barriers continue to impede intra-regional trade under SAFTA. Likewise, the Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investment is pending for long. It is hoped that the upcoming SAARC Summit will provide explicit guidelines to address these bottlenecks.

Distinguished Participants,

Improving intra-regional connectivity is the key to the goal of the South Asian Economic Union. Cognizant of this, at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit held in Thimphu in April 2010, our Leaders declared 2010-2020 as the Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity. They also noted that seamless connectivity within the region would not only promote intra-regional trade but also usher in a new era of increased people-to-people contacts. While on this subject, I must mention that the SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study conducted with the technical and financial assistance of the Asian Development Bank has proved to be a very useful reference document to help us improve intra-regional physical connectivity. Accordingly, as envisaged in this Study, Member States are in the process of implementing their respective national components on a

priority basis in order to develop a multimodal transport mechanism to connect our region. Likewise, we are currently seized with the task of finalizing two separate Agreements on Railways and Motor Vehicles. With these agreements in place, I am confident that we will have covered considerable miles in connecting our countries. While on this subject, I am also happy to mention that regional connectivity initiatives have for the first time entered into the area of maritime connectivity to connect our Member States that are separated by oceans. The initiative to launch the Indian Ocean Cargo and Passenger Ferry Service, involving India, Sri Lanka and Maldives, is a vivid example in this respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a much broader context, however, the overarching goal of poverty alleviation has remained largely unaccomplished and our region still has the highest concentration of the poor people. At the same time, our region is faced with new and emerging challenges which are threatening to overshadow whatever modest progress we have achieved thus far. Ensuring food security is still a challenge for us, as the SAARC Food Bank is ineffective for a variety of administrative and procedural hurdles. Further, frequented by the devastating natural disasters, affected by the vagaries of climate change and impacted by the intensity of globalization, our region is finding it difficult to reach a higher trajectory of growth, prosperity and well-being. This gloomy, yet stark, reality reminds us of the imperative to promote mutually beneficial regional cooperation and to strengthen our institutional mechanisms, including the SAARC Regional Centres and the SAARC Secretariat. At the same time, it is also necessary to bring our peoples closer, not only to combat the emerging challenges, but also to take advantage of the complementarities that our countries have on offer.

Distinguished Participants,

There is a growing realization that in order to be able to make an enduring impact on the lives of our teeming millions in the region, SAARC mechanisms need to be strengthened. It is accurately so, as over the years, the proliferation of institutions, mechanisms and activities has burdened Member States so much so that they are finding it difficult to meet their commitments. At the same time, while the range of activities under the auspices of SAARC has increased both in content and substance, we have not been able to strengthen our mechanisms to deal with them. It is therefore only logical that we undertake a comprehensive review of SAARC and its institutional mechanisms in the light of the changed context of regional cooperation and emerging demands of our Member States. In undertaking such an exercise, inputs of civil society organizations across the region would be essential. Seen from that perspective, we do believe that the outcomes of this Conference would certainly be an invaluable input to this process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While SAARC is essentially an inter-governmental mechanism, it is encouraging to note that over the years, it has increasingly recognized the need to benefit from the Track II initiatives in order to make the process of regional cooperation more effective and responsive to the needs of our people. The recently established South Asia Forum representing the academia, media, bureaucracy and business, among others, is therefore a befitting development. The Forum provides for a unique mechanism for the public-private partnership, aimed at generating a debate in charting out the course of SAARC in the decades ahead. It is hoped that the recommendations emerging out of the Forum would eventually guide our Association to take timely, useful and pragmatic decisions towards fast-tracking regional integration and strengthening SAARC mechanisms and institutions. In this context, I am happy to mention that the recently held first meeting of the South Asia Forum has come up with a set of very

useful recommendations for consideration of our Leaders during the forthcoming Seventeenth Summit. Among other things, the Forum emphasized on the imperative of learning from the success stories of other regional associations; creating a robust and mutually beneficial trade regime; establishing effective physical connectivity; strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms; managing regional public goods; and facilitating unhindered people-to-people contacts and interactions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is heartening to note that as Maldives prepares to convene the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, several activities have been organized by both the government and non-government sectors across the region to generate inputs for the Summit process. All these activities have unequivocally stressed on the need to expand the ambit of regional cooperation and integration and to strengthen SAARC's mechanisms and institutions. I do believe that these are reflective of the collective views of the very people that we aim to serve.

On this note, I would like to wish this civil society initiative every success. I thank you. ❑

BUILDING BRIDGES AND PROMOTING PEOPLE TO PEOPLE INTERACTION IN SOUTH ASIA   Nishchal N. Pandey / Kumar Shrestha