

The AEPF at 20: An Assessment of ASEM and the Role of Civil Society

Department of the International Political Economy of East Asia
Faculty of East Asian Studies
Prof. Dr. Sebastian Bersick

Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), Ulaanbaatar, 4th July 2016



An Assessment of ASEM (1996-2016): Achievements, Failures, Strengths & Weaknesses, Potential & Outlook

Achievements (I)

- In 1996 ASEM's basic rationale was to provide a forum that allowed for the evolution of cooperative relations amongst Asian and European state and non-state actors.
- Over the course of the following 20 years ASEM operationalized this basic rationale.
- ASEM thus contributed to the alleviation of the problem that led to ASEM's formation.
- **In this fundamental sense, ASEM has been effective.**
- **However, as I am going to argue: It is time to upgrade ASEM.**

Achievements (II)

- **Enlargement**
 - 1996: 25 member states (plus EU Commission)
 - 2016: 51 member states (plus EU Commission and ASEAN Secretariat)
 - Amount of members doubled: 53 ASEM members
- **Shows attractiveness of ASEM**

- **Inclusion of state and non-state actors**
 - Officially, civil society, together with the government and the business sectors are considered “prime actors” in the ASEM process (Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000)

Achievements (III)

- States (European, incl. non-EU members (soon e.g. UK?) and Asian countries)
 - Regional organizations (EU, ASEAN)
 - Members of Parliaments (Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership, ASEP)
 - Private sector (Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF))
 - Civil society: Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF); Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)
- **Pluralisation of Asia-Europe relations**

ASEM's Failures (I)

- **Lack of political interest in ASEM affairs causes ASEM's largely:**
 - lack of “tangible results”,
 - invisibility in the media,
 - irrelevance to political, security and economic decision making as well as
 - irrelevance in the eyes of the general public.

- **Not ASEM “fails”, but political and media establishments do not utilize ASEM's potential with regard to the prosperity and security of the peoples and citizens in Asia and Europe.**

ASEM's Failures (II)

- Originally ASEM was conceptualized as a top-down and elite-driven process.
 - After 20 years civil society is still not “a prime actor”.
- **Pluralisation is too limited**

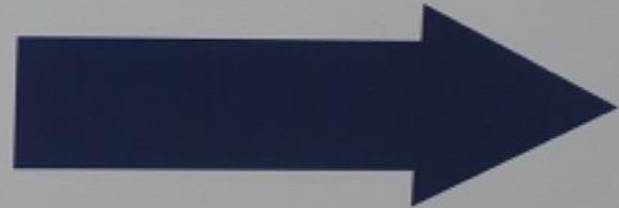


Asia-Europe Meeting
ASEM - BRUSSELS 2010

NO ENTRY



**WELCOME
ZONE**



The Role of the AEPF (I)

- Having been excluded from the official ASEM process, civil society actors founded their own alternative forum: the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF).
- During a first meeting in Bangkok in February 1996, representatives of civil society emphasized e.g. the importance of human rights issues when they were deliberately left out by leaders during the first ASEM summit.
- AEPF developed three main functions: 1. network-building; 2. analyzing common interests; 3. providing a channel for critical engagement with the official ASEM process
- Macro-objective: de-globalization of the world through the building of alternative regionalisms

The Role of the AEPF (II)

- As a result of AEPF's activities, horizontal networking between European and Asian NGOs increased.
- Despite these advances, the influence of NGOs on the ASEM process has been moderate.
- AEPF remains excluded from formal agenda-setting processes and decision-making processes.
- Yet, remarkable development took place during Milan ASEM Summit in 2014.
- In a joint session an AEPF delegation presented the Final Declaration of AEPF10 „to ASEM itself“, i.e. the leaders.

The Role of the AEPF (III)

- Will interaction between AEPF and ASEM actors continue like in Milan during ASEM10?
- Will such interaction result in an agenda-setting function and/or a mediation and communication function between citizens and state?
- ASEM11 in Ulaanbaatar could further increase role of civil society actors and AEPF in ASEM process and thereby make a difference.

Strengths and Weaknesses (I)

- After first 20 years mixed picture:
- **ASEM's main strengths are also ASEM's main weaknesses:**

Strengths and Weaknesses (II)

Strengths	Weaknesses
ASEM's enlargement	Collective action problem
Exclusion of US	Relevance of an international forum without US-participation (still) questioned in Europe
Informality	No agreement on how to utilize the resulting flexibility and transform the latter into advantages
Pluralisation of participation	Too limited inclusion of civil society, dominance of top-down approach remains
Open regionalism	Voluntariness, non-binding nature of cooperation
ASEM's potential for major political projects (e.g. an FTA)	No major political project
Broad agenda	Missing focus

Potential and Outlook (I)

- **Enlargement:** Regions are socially constructed. Thus, geography does not constitute the principle propensity of a region. Social interaction does.
- Within ASEM, enlargement is a lifeline: As long as all Asian and European countries have not become ASEM members, “ASEM proper” has not been formed.
- In this sense **ASEM remains an open process.**

Potential and Outlook (II)

- **Connectivity:** For ASEM “connectivity” counts: on the most fundamental level ASEM’s rationale is to connect Asia and Europe.
- Connectivity is not a means in itself. It is a function of cooperation and integration. Not the other way round.
- If there is no political interest in deepening e.g. economic cooperation and integration within ASEM, promoting “connectivity” will not make a difference.

Potential and Outlook (III)

- Calls for “tangible results” are getting louder.
 - But why?
 - Because of ASEM-fatigue or because of ASEM-need?
 - Good reasons for both arguments exist.
 - But the “need” for a functional Eurasian forum/organization is increasing due to the changing international economic, political and security context in Asia and Europe (e.g. One Belt One Road initiative by PR China).
-
- **A Eurasian dimension of Asia-Europe affairs is evolving.**
 - Therefore room of manoeuvre increases to develop a new balance between informality and effectiveness in ASEM.
 - **As a “prime actor”, more input by civil society and AEPF is needed.**

The AEPF at 20: An Assessment of ASEM and the Role of Civil Society

Department of the International Political Economy of East Asia
Faculty of East Asian Studies
Prof. Dr. Sebastian Bersick

Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), Ulaanbaatar, 4th July 2016

