



The Informal ASEM Seminar on Human Rights Series

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

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

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

Previous seminar topics include:

- Access to justice; regional and national particularities in the administration of justice; monitoring the administration of justice.
Lund, Sweden (December 1997)
- Differences in Asian and European values; rights to education; rights of minorities.
Beijing, China (June 1999)
- Freedom of expression and right to information; humanitarian intervention and the sovereignty of states; is there a right to a healthy environment?
Paris, France (June 2000)
- Freedom of conscience and religion; democratisation, conflict resolution and human rights; rights and obligations in the promotion of social welfare.
Bali, Indonesia (July 2001)
- Economic relations; rights of multinational companies and foreign direct investments.
Lund, Sweden (May 2003)

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

- International migrations; protection of migrants, migration control and management.
Suzhou, China (September 2004)
- Human rights and ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.
Budapest, Hungary (February 2006)
- Freedom of Expression
Siem Reap, Cambodia (September 2007)

The formula employed is as follows:

- the participation of two representatives from universities and NGOs invited by the organisers and one official representative for each of the 16 Asian ASEM countries, and in order to have balanced representation between Asia and Europe, 1 representative from the civil society and 1 official from each of the 27 European ASEM countries, as well as the European Commission and ASEAN Secretariat;
- an agenda structured around the main topics related to the subject of the seminar, with discussions held in working groups;
- closed-door debates to allow free and direct exchanges of view; and,
- a set of recommendations elaborated collectively to be sent to the relevant institutions in ASEM countries as informal contribution to the official Asia-Europe dialogue.

The experience of the first series of seven seminars has shown the usefulness of the chosen formula: a climate of confidence and mutual understanding, in accordance with the ASEM spirit, has grown stronger during this nine year process; the topics selected by the Steering Committee, which focus on issues of common interest to the two regions, have made high quality discussions possible; the high level of participation of the ASEM partners shows the strong interest of the partners for these meetings.

Organisation

The Seminar series is co-organised by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (delegated by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), which has acted as the Secretariat of the Seminar since 2000.

Supervision of the seminar is entrusted to a **Steering Committee**, composed of the Seminar's three co-organisers as well as representatives of the ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and Indonesia, as well as the European Commission.

The two coordinators (Mr. Frederic Tiberghien, Conseiller d'Etat, France, and Prof. Gudmundur Alfredsson, Adviser to the Director, Raoul Wallenberg Institute) are responsible for the orientations of the Seminar Series.

After each conference, the outcomes of the discussions are gathered in a publication that may be used by governments and civil society as a reference on the state of play of the debate on Human Rights in ASEM countries.

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