

The 2017 ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ ASEAN Peoples' Forum

Philippines National Organizing Committee

c/o Freedom from Debt Coalition, 11 Matimpiin St., Brgy. Pinyahan, Diliman, Quezon City, Tel. 9211985

PRESS RELEASE

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Philippine CSOs challenge 50 years of ASEAN, call for new form of regional integration towards a just, humane, and equitable Southeast Asia

Prior to the Philippine Government's launching of the ASEAN's 50th Founding Anniversary commemoration activities in Davao City on January 15, at least 50 national and local people's organizations and NGOs in the Philippines have come together as the Philippines-National Organizing Committee for the 2017 ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum or ACSC/APF 2017. They announced their intention to engage the ASEAN leaders, particularly the Philippines government as ASEAN Chair this year.

"More than half of the population in the Philippines are living insecurely – without permanent jobs and livelihoods, guaranteed access to essential services and income in times of exigencies. People in the Philippines are seeking for a real change that will give them economic and social security as well as peace and safety. We believe, we have almost common concerns across Southeast Asia. The change we need in the Philippines and the rest in the region may be summed up as just, humane, and equitable society," said Philippines-NOC ACSC/APF co-convenor Dr. Eduardo Tadem.

Tadem, also president of the Freedom from Debt Coalition, shared that the general themes that will be tackled by APF/ACSC this year include the issues of human rights; social inequalities, social protection, labor and migration, women, gender and LGBTIQ; foreign policies, peace and security, and trade and investments; and climate change and food sovereignty.

These issues also resonate with the challenges in the region that were identified by Dr. Suriya Chindawong, deputy director general of the ASEAN Department at the Thai Foreign Ministry in a news report the other day. He said that "ASEAN has to be more inclusive and consider inputs from common people." He also said that "ASEAN's other challenges include both traditional and non-traditional issues such as climate change, food security and safety, terrorism, disaster management, poverty eradication as well as issues related to social protection."

The ACSC/APF is a network of Southeast Asian civil society organizations and social movements that engages the ASEAN process in order to bring attention to the issues and concerns of its constituencies. Its constituents include workers, the peasantry, urban poor, fisherfolk, women, children, LGBT community, indigenous peoples, migrants, older persons, employees, professionals, students and persons with disabilities. In the past 11 years since it started, the ACSC/APF was able to gather an average of at least 1,500 civil society representatives across the region in every Forum – the last was in Dili, Timor-Leste in August 2016.

Jelen Paclarin, co-convenor of the Philippines-NOC for ACSC/APF 2017 and also Executive Director of the Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau and Coordinator of PhilWomen on ASEAN, said that now that the ASEAN Summits will be held again in the Philippines (the last time was in Cebu City in 2006), the civil society

here has another opportunity to call the attention of our leaders and the rest of the leaders in ASEAN to listen to the people who are at the receiving end of policies and decisions of governments, and make ASEAN more relevant to them. She shared the conclusion of ACSC/APF Ten-Year Review conducted last year, that “ASEAN and its member governments have been seen to be more comfortable with the private sector and academic and research think tanks than with civil society” and that “individual ASEAN member countries have consistently resisted and vacillated with regards civil society participation and engagement.”

She also quoted from the ACSC/APF 2016 Timor Leste Statement “ASEAN civil society remain extremely concerned about ASEAN’s prevailing silence and lack of attention and response to the observations and recommendations raised in all previous ACSC/APF Statements.” And that “This ... connotes disregard of the need to engage substantively with civil society in ASEAN and is cemented in the lack of open and safe space that promotes meaningful and substantive participation, inclusion and representation of all peoples of ASEAN ... in the various processes of ASEAN structures and mechanisms.”

The ACSC/APF yearly activities of engagement process include National consultations and workshops, National and regional meetings with government counterparts, Regional Consultation Meetings, Crafting the ACSC/APF Statement, Parallel conference, and Interface.

Ms. Ana Maria R. Nemenzo, a nominee to the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), quipped that while the ASEAN has created several bodies such as ACWC for civil society to be able to participate, these remain weak and lacking teeth like in the case of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). “The participation or so-called dialogues with the civil society remain token, thus the civil society must continue to push for more meaningful involvement in the discussions and other processes in ASEAN especially in our respective governments,” said Nemenzo who is also Convener of WomanHealth Philippines and DIGNIDAD Alliance.

Tadem highlighted that since the ASEAN has not been effective in meeting the needs and fulfilling the rights of the people, new forms of regional integration must be developed. He said that the ACSC/APF will endeavor to develop these through coordinating the interactions between the alternative practices; convening and organizing conferences and workshops of the groups and communities involved in alternative practices; researching and documenting the practices and building a data base; conducting alternative learning and training programs based on grassroots needs; and conceptualizing and making sense of the practices and developing new paradigms and strategies of development, among others.

The Philippines-NOC for the APF/ACSC 2017 vowed to conduct series of actions this year in pursuing the needed change in ASEAN and its member governments especially the Philippines.

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