

Thematic Convergence Spaces

The convergence space concept is designed for the APF/ACSC to provide space for organizations, groups and networks working on interrelated/similar issues to come together and collectively discuss a common issue which they could advance/support/develop as a regional campaign. The focus is built primarily around strategy sessions in order to develop core output/s for each convergence space. The idea is also to encourage inter-organizational efforts and contribute to strengthening peoples' solidarity and movement building.

1. Corporate Greed and Power

Issues: trade, climate, migration, corporate governance, development aggression resource grabs, and food sovereignty

The unrelenting depression of the global economy has prompted a resurgence of neoliberal offensives that threaten the people's democracy, rights, lands and lives. These attacks come in various forms including so-called 'free trade' agreements that subject developing economies to greater exploitation in favor of the interests of rich industrialized countries and their host of corporations. Corporate-backed policies continue to drive workers away from their home countries in search of greener pasture abroad. The proliferation of big mining operations lead to more resource grabs threatening the food sovereignty and displacing entire communities while exacerbating the impacts of climate change – all in the name of corporate profit and control.

2. Labour mobility and mixed migration

Issues: labor migration, abandoned families, marriage migration, mixed/dynamic migration, climate displacement

2015 was a special year for the ASEAN region because of its regional economic integration that allows free flow of goods and services and labour. However, this integration was strongly criticised by civil society in the region as it will only serve the interests of businesses and economic giants vying for the markets of ASEAN. While the ASEAN economic integration will provide greater opportunity for greater mobility of workers, the discussions have primarily been focused on labor mobility for skilled workers that provide freedom of movement and rights across the region for professionals in eight fields. The bigger challenge of protecting the rights of the majority of migrant workers in the region who are found in semi and low-skilled sectors is not being addressed. Moreover, tens of thousands of people searching for livelihood and safety including refugees, stateless persons, displaced persons and other migration flows such as climate migrants and marriage migrants have been left vulnerable to abuse and various forms of exploitation due to State's restrictive policies and increased securitization of borders.

Due to lack of regular channels, migrants and refugees have increasingly make use of the same routes and means of transport to reach their destination. They resort to exploitative migration flows along irregular routes which often result to a range of human rights abuses. This includes but is not limited to smuggling, trafficking, forced labor, torture or even death. In 2015, ASEAN witnessed another humanitarian crisis with Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in their home countries have been left adrift in the Indian Ocean. For too long, ASEAN has remained silent about this issue.

The large flows of migrants and refugees and the need for protection oriented responses have been the subject of international community which led to the New York Declaration on Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees in September 2015. The Declaration contains bold commitments to address the issues concerning migrants and refugees.

The APF will provide space for organizations/groups or networks working on migrants and refugee issues to come together to better understand how labour migration other mobility flows intersect with each other and develop a common narrative that establishes the links among these issues and agree on ways on how to advance the protection of migrants and refugees in the region.

3. Life with Dignity

Issues: Decent jobs, guaranteed essential services and social protection for all

Neoliberal programs aggressively pushed in ASEAN integration have widened inequality in the region. Market liberalization, deregulation and privatization wherein big businesses and transnational corporations are the main beneficiaries, have led to the loss of traditional livelihoods and means of survival, and further exploitation of workers. They have also led to diminished public access to essential services as well as social security.

Majority of the people have been suffering from social and economic insecurities. More than 50 percent of workers are in precarious condition – without regular jobs and suffering from poverty-level income. Seventy-five percent of women's employment is in the informal sector, unprotected and not covered by labor laws or social protection. And only 27% or 2 to 3 in every 10 persons have social protection.

Governments must therefore ensure a social dimension in regional integration where decent work and sustainable livelihoods, workers' rights, as well as guaranteed essential services and social security for all are integral components.

National level ratification and implementation of the ILO core labour standards are essential to creating the conditions to achieve decent work. Stable and sustainable forms of employment should be promoted, and oppressive labor flexibilisation practices outlawed.

Aside from decent work, social protection is a human right, an economic necessity, and investment. It addresses social injustice and inequality, as well as promotes social cohesion, human development and political stability. ASEAN governments should create and legislate a universal and comprehensive social protection system towards guaranteeing a life of dignity, empowering people, and transforming societies in a democratic and sustainable manner. This includes, but not limited to living pensions for the elderly and the disabled, child allowances, maternity protections, and income guarantees during unemployment, sickness, and natural disasters.

Guaranteeing essential services is part of a comprehensive social protection framework. Universal, affordable, and accessible quality healthcare, water, education, housing, and energy are public goods. The provisioning of these must therefore be guaranteed and financed by the state, as they are connected to the survival, dignity, and development of individuals as well as society as a whole. This calls for reversal of the privatization of these public goods, as well as forging of public-public partnership as alternative —state partnerships with non-profit groups like peoples' cooperatives or social enterprises – to achieve more people-centered, transparent and accountable modes of social service delivery.

4. Peace and Human Security –

Issues: peace and security, militarization, territorial dispute/conflict, human trafficking

A collective search for regional peace and stability was one of the core foundations for the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). More than fifty years since its establishment, the ASEAN region remains far from such. With the continuing oppression of Muslim Rohingyas and other indigenous ethnic peoples in Burma (Myanmar) and the Philippines, the long-running armed ethnic and self-determination struggles in Burma (Myanmar), South Thailand and Bangsamoro, and the persistent violence in Maluku and West Papua, among others, there is still much to do.

The conflict in the region are predominantly characterized as sub-national and asymmetric in nature, divided into two types: intra-state (between a state actor, and one or more non-state actors) and communal (between non-state actors that are organised along a shared communal identity). The first are liberation struggles anchored on political-ideological grounds, and driven by the objective to seize political power or realise certain autonomy or self-determination. While there are existing peace processes, the sincerity of the parties and the inclusivity of the process always remain in question.

The second are the growing inter-ethnic and inter-religious social conflicts, which has eventually affected the former.

On the one side, these growing social divides and the frustration in the existing peace processes and political decision-making create a fertile ground for elements of transnational terrorism to take root. On the flip side, driven hugely by the anti-terror paradigm, the growing public prejudice against certain sectors (Muslims and other ethnic minorities), and the government response (to insecurity issues) being dominantly characterized by 'control' (based on premise that insecurity can be controlled through military force or containment), erode public and official support for formal talks and the peace processes, and distract states from addressing roots of the conflict.

The shift to authoritarianism of many Southeast Asian states impact on actual and perceived spaces for meaningful political participation and for peaceful and just resolution of conflicts, thus, further disenfranchising and radicalising already disenfranchised and radicalised sectors of society.

Add to these, the deepening Chinese involvement in territorial disputes with ASEAN member-countries, and the overt, as well as the tacit alignments of other world powers both as a cause and result of the former has been a consistent and growing concern not just in Southeast Asia and the greater Asia-Pacific region but also beyond. Beyond our immediate scope of influence as respective individuals and organizations, we also have to contend with the unmitigated impacts of market globalization, climate change and violent fundamentalism, that both exacerbate and cause violent conflict.

In this APF, we seek to provide a space for organizations/groups or networks working on various issues to come together to better understand the complex factors that cause and affect violent conflict, to unpack and integrate our meanings of human and people-centered security (vis-a-vis traditional, state-centered security), and explore collective ways forward towards a common agenda for peace.

5. Human Rights and Access to Justice

Issues: human rights, peoples' rights, children's rights, women's rights, peasant's rights, food security, participatory democracy, access to justice

As the ASEAN turns to its golden year this 2017, one of the major concerns to be look at is the human rights situation in the region. Even after the adoption of the Universal declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, it has significantly advanced many human rights and treaties; only in 2007 that the ASEAN adopt a charter that mentioned human rights principles and subsequently formed the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009 to ensure the human rights are promoted and protected.

While the AICHR has been a critical platform as an independent body and a watchdog of human rights violations in the region, it has no real powers, and its outweighed by the ASEAN language emphasizing the importance of "non-interference in the internal affairs" of the ASEAN members that hindered it to report on human rights issue in any country and making them accountable.

The ASEAN may have advanced significantly in recognizing human rights to its principles, at least on paper; still the region is on a critical period and at the height of human rights violations and abuses made by the state and non-state players.

Human rights violations have been very evident to the continuous threats of democratic rights, fundamental freedoms and economic rights especially towards the marginalized and minority groups. ASEAN is not a safe region for human rights activists and defenders, journalists and people who have progressive and modernizing ideas. The recent Bersih 5 protest rally in Malaysia clampdown Malaysian activists, the extra-judicial killings in the Philippines reaches to more than seven thousand and still counting, the Rohingya are still left hanging, stateless, while they are beaten, abused, raped and killed. And the ASEAN way of serving justice is a death penalty that is being practiced by many ASEAN countries, while the Philippines is trying to resurrect the death penalty law.

These human rights violations will be addressed through a multi-form approaches. One way is the pro-active participation of civil society that is vigilant to the make the government accountable to fulfil its duties to promote and protect the human rights of its people. Human rights institutions at the national and regional level should be more empowered and should transform itself into a more relevant and strong institutions capable to demand and sanction human rights violators.

The 50th year of ASEAN should be a year to realize the hopes of its people that is anchored to human rights, promotes non-discrimination, equality, sustainable and inclusive development. This year should be a mark that the road to a people-centered ASEAN that are in line with the principles of human rights, justice, democracy and freedom in all aspects of our lives is possible.