

## Looking at gaps and challenges in education and education aid in Southeast Asia

Open Society Foundations (OSF) Southeast Asia Education Conference  
26-27 October 2019, Bangkok, Thailand



**The OSF Southeast Asia Education Conference aimed at analysing the gaps and challenges in education and education aid in Southeast Asia, and to examine ways that OSF can help to address them.**

The Open Society Foundations' Education Support Programme (ESP), in conjunction with its Scholarships Programme, organised a conference in Bangkok aimed at analysing the gaps and challenges in education and education aid in Southeast Asia, and to examine ways that the Open Society Foundations (OSF) can help to address them.

Moreover, the conference also sought to foster closer working relationships between ESP, the Scholarships Programme, scholarship alumni, education civil society organisations, and national and regional organisations.

To unpack the core themes of the conference, participants were invited to share their perspectives on how OSF's education priorities can be explored in Asia based on the following strategic questions -

- What are the most promising locally developed models of critically aware inclusive education practice?
- Could the Open Society Foundations play a positive role in supporting, documenting, and disseminating, or advocating for policy space for such models?
- What are the most significant challenges to good governance in education in the Asia Pacific region?
- Is there a place for global compacts, like the Abidjan Principles or the Safe Schools Declaration, in education advocacy in the region?
- What is the impact of religious education institutions, such as the Buddhist monastic education system and Islamic madrasas, on issues of inclusivity, social cohesion, and quality of education?
- How has international assistance to education in the Asia Pacific affected the quality and governance of education?

Setting the framework and context of the discussion, ASPBAE's Helen Dabu delivered the Keynote Address entitled '*Pursuit of SDG 4 in Southeast Asia: What's getting ahead and being left behind?*' which summed up the progress of SDG 4 implementation in Southeast Asia. It essentially drew from the CSO Spotlight Reports produced by five education campaign coalitions from the sub-region consisting of Vietnam, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.



**ASPBAE's Helen Dabu delivered the Keynote Address which summed up the progress of SDG 4 implementation in Southeast Asia.**

Helen described the process of producing the civil society organisation (CSO) Spotlight Reports, summarised the results, and the outlined the urgent CSO calls which emerged from these Reports. She highlighted that financing the SDGs, including SDG 4, emerges as one of the most critical issues. Most countries have no clear financing strategy and no estimate of the financial requirements needed to achieve the SDG 4

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targets. There are mere verbal commitments to generate resources for the SDGs but with limited action, with most countries admitting that current resources are insufficient to deliver on the promise of leaving no one behind.

Among all global regions, the Asia Pacific has consistently been the lowest education spender in relation to the GDP. Within Asia Pacific, Southeast Asia (particularly Timor-Leste, Myanmar, and Cambodia) is one of the least spenders in education in relation to the total public expenditure and the size of the domestic economy. And while governments in the region have convened SDG-related consultations with stakeholders, CSOs noted that the spaces for meaningful participation and engagement in the SDG processes were limited.

In addition to delivering the Keynote Address, Helen also moderated a panel discussion on Education Sector Planning (ESP) Process which featured inputs from Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, the National Coordinator of Vietnam Association for Education for All (VAEFA) and ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing Southeast Asia, and Jose De Jesus, National Coordinator of Civil Society Education Partnership (CSEP Timor-Leste).



**Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, of VAEFA (Vietnam) and ASPBAE EC Member representing Southeast Asia, shared experiences of VAEFA in engaging with the government on education planning processes and the role of civil society in holding governments to account on commitments to education.**

This session shared direct experiences of VAEFA Vietnam and CSEP Timor-Leste in engaging with their governments on education sector planning processes and highlighted the important role of civil society in holding governments to account on their education sector plans and commitment to fully implement SDG 4. In the panel discussion tackling the implications of privatisation in education, ASPBAE's Rene Raya and the National Coordinator of E-Net Philippines, Addie Unsi, provided inputs and advocacy experiences.

Rene gave a presentation on '*Financing and Privatisation Challenges in Education*' which discussed the privatisation drive and trends at the global, regional, and sub-regional levels by looking at the growth in private school enrolments. He also emphasised the clear link between low financing of public education and the growth of privatisation. Further, he raised critical issues on private sector in education around equity, inclusion, transparency, and accountability.

Various panel discussions unpacking the main themes were held throughout the conference and ASPBAE's Executive Council Member representing Southeast Asia, Thein Lwin, representing his organisation, Thinking Classroom Foundation (TCF), also provided input in the panel discussion tackling critical thinking and pedagogy.

The findings and feedback from the conference would be used to help develop a strategy for strengthening the Open Society Foundations' education initiatives in Asia. [END]