

Identifying gaps and strategising for increased UN-civil society cooperation towards achieving the SDGs

12-13 May 2017, Bangkok, Thailand

The Asia Pacific members of the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with the United Nations (CoNGO) met in Siam University in Bangkok. ASPBAE, a full member of CoNGO, contributed to the discussions on how UN-civil society cooperation can be strengthened towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The meeting was organized by the CoNGO Regional Committee in Asia Pacific (RCAP), with support from Siam University headed by President Pornchai Mongkhonvanit.



In his welcome speech, Cyril Ritchie, CoNGO President, said that for the UN to achieve its goals, it *“needs the input of civil society, which brings grassroots knowledge, comparative experience, and technical competence to the table.”* Further, he said that one of the aims of the meeting was to *“identify existing gaps and propose strategies for increasing UN-civil society cooperation, and determine what, if any, complementary agent may be useful to empower follow-up of the SDGs.”*



Cyril Ritchie, CoNGO President, emphasised that for the UN to achieve its goals, it *“needs the input of civil society, which brings grassroots knowledge, comparative experience, and technical competence to the table.”*

To draw lessons from the Asia Pacific, different organisations presented their experiences and results of their engagements with UN bodies. Sai Jyothirmai Racheria, of the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), talked about civil society engagements with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). She said that preparatory meetings to the conferences are important spaces – these are where the debates, negotiations, and shaping of the agenda and language happen. Towards meaningful and broad civil society participation, Sai argued that CSOs should have access to official documents and access to funding that enables organisations, even those that are not accredited to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), to participate.

In the experience of CoNGO in working with the UN, Cyril Ritchie noted that shrinking spaces at the country level have impacted civil society participation at the regional and global levels, thereby affecting UN processes. CoNGO observed that at times, unfriendly governments speak against and collude to constrain civil society organisations. Cyril Ritchie also cited that the Asia Pacific is increasingly becoming a region where decisions are being made from

regional imperatives. Therefore, NGOs should cooperate more at the regional level.

Other presenters at the event were from the International Alliance of Women, International Association of University Presidents, International Planned Parenthood Federation, FORUM-Asia, and Christian Conference of Asia.

In the open forum, ASPBAE’s Cecilia “Thea” Soriano shared the network’s experiences – both the

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challenges and gains - in engaging UNESCO and intergovernmental bodies in ensuring a stronger civil society presence and influencing education policy platforms at the global, regional, and sub-regional levels. Citing ASPBAE's contribution to the "*Reflections on the effectiveness of partnerships – past and future—to promote education for all in Asia and the Pacific*," (a paper co-published by ASPBAE and the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, EAPRO), she said that lessons towards effective engagement with the UN include – (1) Documentation of evidences from civil society constituencies through citizens' reports and shadow/alternative reports to ensure that policy and programme development address the contexts and needs of marginalised groups; (2) Strong partnerships between regional-national-grassroots civil society organisations to ensure the agenda and voices of marginalised groups in regional policy platforms; and (3) Regional partnerships and capacity building of civil society organisations through knowledge sharing, exchanges, linkages, and trainings to enable them to engage in regional UN platforms towards ensuring that member states deliver on the right to education.



ASPBAE's Thea Soriano (extreme right) shared ASPBAE's experiences in engaging UNESCO and intergovernmental bodies in ensuring a stronger civil society presence and influencing education policy platforms at the global, regional, and sub-regional levels.

To further the cooperation under the Regional Committee in the Asia Pacific (RCAP), participants agreed to expand the base in the Asia Pacific by sharing databases of organisations, as well as continue online exchanges on the engagements on the SDGs and with the UN.

At the end of the meeting, Cyril Ritchie encouraged participants to attend the CoNGO General Assembly to be held in Geneva in 2018.

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