

**Asian Civil Society Forum 2002**  
**UNCC, Bangkok / December 9 to 13, 2002**

*UN/NGO Partnerships for Democratic Governance:  
Building Capacities and Networks for  
Human Rights and Sustainable Development*

**Final Statement**

(Final version adopted on Dec. 13, 2002)

**Introduction**

1. We, more than 500 participants of Asian Civil Society Forum (ACSF) 2002, representing over 200 local, national, regional and international NGOs from more than 33 countries of the Asian region and the rest of the world gathered in Bangkok, Thailand, from 9 to 13 December 2002, to participate in the Asian Civil Society Forum (ACSF) 2002 on the theme, “UN/NGO Partnerships for Democratic Governance: Building Capacities and Networks for Human Rights and Sustainable Development”. The Forum was convened by the Conference of NGOs in consultative relationship with United Nations (CONGO) under its Working Group on Outreach to Asia (WGOA) and was held at the United Nations Conference Centre of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).
2. In convening the Forum, the CONGO was implementing its mandate to increase the participation of NGOs and other organizations in developing countries whose contributions are essential to realizing our vision of a truly inclusive global community. The ACSF 2002, envisaged as a multi-dimensional, multi-sectoral and multi-faceted process and event, was organized to contribute to developing a conceptual and practical framework for civil society actors in formulating and advancing their advocacy strategies at national, regional and global levels.
3. We come from countries with diverse cultures and religions, different levels of social and economic development, political systems and environmental conditions. Some of our countries suffer from internal conflicts and external threats, while others have enjoyed relative peace and stability for a long time. Some of our countries suffered from the 1997-98 financial crisis, while others were able to protect themselves against the ravages of global finance. Some of our countries are classified by the United Nations as “least developed countries”, while others are more economically advanced. Yet, despite all these differences (and the tensions that sometimes exist between our governments), through the ACSF, we had the opportunity to share our common concerns and aspirations, and how we can forge partnerships and build solidarity across the region to promote the goals of peace, human rights, justice, truth and reconciliation, equity, sustainable development and environmental protection.

## Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

4. We affirm the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), based on the commitments made by the largest gathering of heads of State at the Millennium Assembly in December 2000. We have examined implementation of MDGs from the perspective of a rights-based approach with the principle of sustainability and aim to promote them in a consistent, coherent and intentional manner. At a time when global decision-making in economic and social affairs has become much less democratic, and transparent, while the resources and influence of the UN have eroded and the power and mandate of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO have expanded, a rights-based approach with the principle of sustainability would help ensure the needed stability and symmetry necessary for democratic governance.
5. As we learned how to make more effective use of our UN consultative relationship, we also reflected critically on how UN-NGO partnerships can promote implementation of the MDGs. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in his message to ASCF 2002, stated: “In Asia, the region with the largest portion of the world’s population, your efforts to strengthen civil society—and to build links among Asian civil society organizations—hold considerable promise not only for making progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, but also for strengthening your voice in international fora, including the United Nations.”

## Global Democratic Governance and Civil Society

6. We looked into the outcomes and the commitments made at all the major UN World Conferences and Summits of the past decade, especially the more recent ones such as the World Conference Against Racism (Durban, August 31 to September 8, 2001), the International Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, Mexico, March 18 to 22, 2002) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, August 26 to September 4, 2002), as well as the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). In achieving the goals set by these conferences, the work and contribution of civil society organizations and NGOs are vital. These include reviewing current practices, prioritising policy reforms, identifying means of policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
7. We, in recognizing that a gender perspective has not fully been mainstreamed into all these events and their subsequent follow-up, commit ourselves to work towards the development of a coherent policy of gender mainstreaming that is inter-generational into all our advocacy policies and strategies.
8. We affirm the challenges coming from youth who are agents of social and political transformation, and strongly encourage and support their participation at all levels.

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<sup>1</sup> The eight Millennium Development Goals are: (1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) Achieve universal primary education; (3) Promote gender equality and empower women; (4) Reduce child mortality; (5) Improve maternal health; (6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) Ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) Develop a global partnership for development. See further information on [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/).

9. We recognize the importance of improving education, both formal and non-formal, for human rights, tolerance, non-violence and sustainable development and in injecting ethical values and the spiritual dimension of building sustainable communities.

### **UN Reform and Civil Society**

10. Having considered the Report of the Secretary General on “Strengthening of the UN: An Agenda for Further Change”, within the context of “building partnerships”, we appreciate the strong recognition of the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in the implementation of the goals of the UN. However, we are also aware that there are efforts by some member States to arbitrarily curtail the voice of civil society and this should be vehemently opposed. Serious concerns have also been expressed at ACSF 2002 regarding possible efforts at rationalizing UN information centres, and further clarification and dialogue was called for regarding new initiatives to reform human rights treaties’ reporting frameworks.
11. The holding of regional civil society forums, such as ACSF 2002, strengthens UN-NGO relations in a manner that brings the UN closer to the levels where real action takes place, and at the same time demonstrates that efforts to reinforce UN-NGO partnerships can be done in multiple and creative ways that effectively complement our work at UN meetings in New York, Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. This kind of initiative also provides one avenue to address the perennial concerns about inadequate participation of NGOs from developing countries.
12. We appreciate the message of the UN Secretary General to ACSF 2002, that “The UN looks forward to strengthening this relationship – from the front lines of conflict or national disaster; to places far from the spotlight where community and institutional development occur without much fanfare; to the conference halls where your ideas and passion enrich the official proceedings.”

### **Main Findings and Concerns<sup>2</sup>**

13. After a week of intense discussions, debate and sharing of experiences, we have agreed to develop a framework for our advocacy strategies to pursue democratic governance at national, regional and global levels, bearing in mind that many Asian NGOs, particularly human rights organizations and human rights defenders operate under duress, especially in the context of anti-terrorism and internal security laws. This framework is firmly rooted in an integral approach to human rights and sustainable development which helped us to deal with the wide spectrum of issues that concern us all.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The rich content of our discussions and the details of our plans for the future are contained in the reports of plenary sessions, roundtables and workshops covering the full breadth of human rights, sustainable development and peace and security issues that we share in common with the UN. These are annexed to the report of ACSF 2002.*

<sup>3</sup> *These issues were tackled during the many workshops and roundtables that took place in the duration of the meeting. These were: racism and racial discrimination; discrimination based on work and descent (Dalits); human rights defenders; terrorism and anti-terrorism; peace and human security; women’s rights and gender equality; freedom of religion and belief, as opposed to religious intolerance; linguistic rights; the International Criminal Court (ICC); torture; arbitrary detention; enforced and involuntary disappearances; death penalty and extra-judicial killings; right to self-determination; peoples living under foreign occupation or alien domination; Indigenous peoples*

14. On all these issues, we know that our analyses, programmes and policy recommendations must be systematically evaluated from the prism of a human rights and the intersectionality of perspectives that include, among several, race, gender, class, ethnicity, caste, age, disability and citizenship.
15. It is our belief that by empowering women and the protection of their rights, we are also fostering the rights of children, especially the girl child, who remains most vulnerable as well as improving the well-being of whole communities and nations.
16. The partnerships, alliances and coalitions we are developing are intended, among others, to foster effective mechanisms and means to hold our governments and international institutions accountable to the commitments they have made at global UN conferences, in addition to the host of legally-binding economic, social, cultural, civil and political human rights and environmental treaties and conventions they have signed and ratified<sup>4</sup>.
17. We are fully aware that UN commitments and obligations may remain unfulfilled if we do not join forces to combine a strategic use of our UN consultative relationship with undertaking national and region-wide campaigns and advocacy programmes to hold our governments accountable. In his message to ACSF 2002, the Secretary General urged us to hold our governments to the pledges they have made, particularly “where commitment seems to flag”. Indeed, one of our key objectives is to share our capacities to analyse the patterns of our national budget allocations in relation to what resources will be needed for our governments to meet the MDGs and other UN commitments such as Agenda 21. The duty of progressive realization of our peoples’ human rights legally compels our governments to demonstrate meaningful steps in the right direction.
18. When our governments fail to comply with the elementary duty to give us the political space and access to the information we need to carry out these tasks, we will call them to account for the violations of these rights and, in this regard, we expect the UN leadership to show uncompromising political and institutional support on our behalf.
19. We know that much can be achieved through resource redistribution and changes in power relations at the national level. But it would be illusory to expect real progress without a major breakthrough on the 8<sup>th</sup> MDG, which focuses on international cooperation and where

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*rights; minority rights; globalisation and economic social and cultural rights(including the rights to health, food, water and education); national human rights institutions; refugees, internally displaced persons and non-citizens; children, including the girl child; productive ageing and persons with disabilities; workers in the informal sector; migrant workers; WSSD follow-up; the World Summit on the Information Society and the human rights of media professionals; cultural diversity and biodiversity; Indigenous peoples and traditional knowledge; privatisation of water and sanitation; corporate accountability and anti-corruption; transnational corporations; “glocalization” and grassroots organizations; sustainable development governance; youth; education; the Earth Charter; financing for sustainable development; the right to health and HIV/AIDS; the negative impact of militarization in the region.*

<sup>4</sup>*Where our governments have failed to sign and ratify any of the key UN treaties, we will exercise our power of mobilization and persuasion for them to do so as a matter of urgency, and to press them to withdraw any reservations they may have been put on record with regard to the content of these treaties.*

primary responsibility falls on developed countries. On this front, despite civil society campaigns around the world—from the global Jubilee movement to free the people of the poorest countries from the shackles of debt, to the struggle for just and equitable trade relations—we have seen little but minimal progress on these issues and a near absence of effective efforts by the leaders of the world’s economic powers. In this respect, we are convinced that we have to build stronger global coalitions among civil society organizations in developed countries if we are to make any meaningful reforms in the structures of global trade and finance. Despite an evident crisis of legitimacy, the governments of developed countries continue serving vested and global corporate interests through the WTO, international financial institutions (IFIs), and in many instances, through their bilateral financial and trade relations with our countries<sup>5</sup>.

20. We must capitalize on the overtures made under the 8<sup>th</sup> MDG, i.e., moving from mere lip service to a major overhaul in the international cooperation paradigm. Genuine international cooperation, free from abuses of power and vested interests, is not a matter of charity but a legal obligation under the UN Charter and numerous human rights treaties.
21. We will deploy all our efforts to ensuring that the negotiations and agreements our governments commit to in international economic institutions and arrangements are in conformity with international human rights and environmental obligations and reflect commitments made at UN world conferences. At the same time, we acknowledge that our governments, especially those of us who come from developing countries are under tremendous pressure from the more powerful countries and international trade/finance institutions that, instead of upholding peoples’ human rights, do everything within their means to consolidate corporate power and reinforce the neoliberal ideology that underpin current institutions of global economic governance.
22. Through networks of cooperation with other civil society groups and allies in industrial countries, we will seek to raise public opinion and undertake joint campaigns and plans of action on the deleterious effects of their governments’ foreign policies on the world’s peoples—whether these are linked to foreign debt, migration, trade or military/security policies. Special efforts should be made, in particular, to raise awareness and dialogue with the people of the United States, as citizens of the only superpower in the world.
23. We echo the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr Sergio Vieira de Mello, who said in his message to ACSF that “the work of the UN [and of governments] is not possible without NGOs contributing to our shared goal of human rights for all.” We believe that it is possible to forge genuine partnerships with governments and with the UN system. Together we can make things happen, like we already have at the global level: through the campaign to ban landmines, or in the creation of the International Criminal Court. However, we recognize that it is also necessary to maintain a critical dialogue in the process. “In Asia, the most diverse and dynamic region of the world, it is critical for civil society to assert its role as an independent and effective”<sup>6</sup> voice of the people. In such a process, we are empowering both our governments and the UN to do their jobs effectively and in a manner that is transparent and equitable, and we call on them to respect and support

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<sup>5</sup> *In this regard, many of us are working on alternatives to so-called “neoliberal globalization”, and some of us will be attending the Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad, India from January 2 to 7, 2003 and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil from January 23 to 27, 2003.*

<sup>6</sup> *Message to the ACSF 2002 from Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)*

the space that is necessary in the fulfilment of our role as countervailing forces for the public interest.

## **General Guidelines for Action**<sup>7</sup>

### **Special call from the Youth Workshop**

We call upon all the governments, inter-governmental organizations and civil society to acknowledge the necessity of youth participation and interventions in decision-making processes that affect the life of youth at local, national, regional and global levels.

### **To All Governments in Asia**

*Democratic Global Governance begins at home*

We urge all governments in Asia to:

1. ratify the core human rights treaties, optional protocols, and other relevant conventions, and multilateral environmental agreements, and especially, the UN convention on migrant workers and the Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court, and the Kyoto Protocol, without any reservation, where they have not done so, as soon as possible;
2. support draft treaties such as the draft Convention on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, or the draft Declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples as adopted by the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights;
3. promote cooperation within the region in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals and other major commitments made at all UN world conferences;
4. ensure that their line ministries and decision-making bodies, in particular those dealing with trade, finance, justice and security, act in coherence with UN human rights, health, labour and environmental standards and obligations;
5. reverse the current growing militarization of our region and, in the process, ensure the full protection of human rights and the environment in and around military bases and sites related to military activities;
6. repeal national security and anti-terror laws and policies that undermine human rights in the region;
7. respect and be more open to partnerships with NGOs in pursuing the ideals of democratic governance based on the principles of human rights, human security, sustainable development and gender equality;
8. make more efforts to integrate a gender perspective at all levels from policy formulation, budgeting, implementation to monitoring and evaluation;
9. collaborate actively in promoting the development of legally-binding corporate accountability agreements based on international human rights and environmental standards with the appropriate monitoring mechanisms for transnational corporations;
10. integrate into school curricula the nurturing of values related to human rights, peace and human security, sustainable development and gender justice.

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<sup>7</sup> *The more specific recommendations coming from the various sessions will be included in the final report of the meeting which is due in January or February in 2003.*

## **To the United Nations and its Member States**

*Global democratic governance is essential in ensuring full implementation of MDGs*

We request the UN and its member States to:

1. continue to ensure that the UN remains a global and democratic institution that upholds the principle of multilateralism, democracy and the international rule of law;
2. strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of the UN Commission on Human Rights and special procedure mechanisms, and of the UN human rights treaty bodies;
3. provide the space and opportunities to strengthen and expand NGO participation rights within the UN system;
4. increase resources to improve its relations with NGOs and its capacity to reach out to the regional, national and local levels, by strengthening the NGO section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and its newly created UN Informal NGO Regional Networks (IRENE), the NGO Section of the UN Department of Public Information (DPI), and the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), as well as encourage the creation and/or strengthening of the NGO liaison units of specialized UN agencies, programmes and funds;
5. open up NGO participation at the General Assembly and in the Security Council;
6. substantially increase resources for UN bodies working on human rights and sustainable development activities, especially those under severe financial stress, such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP);
7. seriously address and counter those policies and practices of the IMF, the World Bank and WTO rules that contravene fundamental human rights, including the right to development, and UN social, environmental and sustainable development objectives;
8. collaborate actively in promoting the development of legally-binding corporate accountability agreements based on international human rights and environmental standards with the appropriate monitoring mechanisms for transnational corporations;
9. make the preparatory process of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) more open to civil society, particularly NGOs at the grassroots level.

We request the ESCAP and UN bodies' regional offices in Asia to:

10. provide more resources, political space and access for grassroots organisations and all NGOs, particularly those working in the fields of human rights, sustainable development and women's empowerment, to participate in their meetings and programmes;
11. integrate a holistic and values-based approach in the planning and implementation of their policies and programmes in accordance with the principles of human rights, human security, sustainable development and gender equality;
12. take the necessary steps towards the creation of a regional mechanism for human rights.

## **To Civil Society Actors in Asia**

*Democratic participation is a prerequisite for genuine global governance.*

We invite all civil society actors in Asia to:

1. make more efforts in developing genuine partnerships with the UN and governments in implementing the MDGs, based on mutual respect and trust and with a common commitment to upholding human rights;
2. be more active in making use of UN instruments and mechanisms in advocating the cause of human rights, human security, sustainable development and gender equality and, towards this end, undertake training and capacity building programmes to enhance our advocacy skills;
3. be more active in building coalitions and alliances across sectors towards democratic global governance in solidarity with the people, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable groups and sectors;
4. be more vigilant about our own values, practices and behaviours, and our independence from governments and the corporate sector, in order to ensure transparency and accountability of our organizations to our people whom we serve.

We commit ourselves to undertake the tasks we have set before us at this Forum. We believe it has provided a space for building networks and capacities for upholding human rights and working for sustainable development, peace, justice and human security with a commitment to gender justice and equality. We are convinced that the organization of this Forum is one step to the realization of the vision of creating a Global Civil Society Forum, as agreed at the NGO Millennium Forum which took place at UN Headquarters in New York in May 2000.

Bangkok, 13 December 2002

*[Adopted by acclamation at the final plenary session of ACSF2002,  
further to amendments proposed by the floor]*

The full text of this statement and other related documents of ACSF 2002  
are available at the website of CONGO.

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