



4th Connecting Civil Societies of Asia and Europe Conference:

Changing Challenges, New Ideas

1-3 October 2010, Brussels (Belgium)

An official side-event of the ASEM8 Summit

Closing Address

Ambassador Dominique Girard

Executive Director

Delivered

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Dear friends,

We have reached the end of the Connecting Civil Societies Conference. I was delighted to welcome you two days ago, and I'm honoured to address you once again before we close our conference this evening.

The idea of connecting Asia and Europe is an abstract one. The political process that is the Asia-Europe Meeting or ASEM was built on this abstract idea in 1996, when ASEM was born.

It is a credit to ASEM that this fuzzy tag of abstraction no longer applies today. The ASEM Summit and the wide variety of initiatives that have been going strong for the past 14 years at the ministerial, senior official, expert group and, not surprisingly, civil society levels all point to the solid connections and lively interactions that have turned this otherwise intangible idea of inter-regionalism into reality: a real and multi-faceted Asia-Europe connection.

The role of civil society in this transformation has been indispensable. We fully believe that this relationship would not have been complete, nor hardly as effective and meaningful without civil society participation.

This brings me to the first *raison d'être* of Connecting Civil Societies: we have brought you here to make sure that the voice of civil society is heard at ASEM 8. So that we can make a concerted call that will make our governments sit up, listen, and take note.

The issues that we have addressed here are specific, difficult, and deeply important:

How to adequately and sustainably finance education in an age of austerity measures.

Lifelong learning at a time when a university education no longer guarantees gainful employment.

When our leaders are going to take the bull by its horns to address historical conflicts that are creating political problems today.

The right of citizens to seek and receive information necessary to access public services and hold public bodies accountable.

These issues may not make it to the ASEM spotlight immediately. I am sure that all of us here have, at one point or another, complained that decision makers are oblivious to, or deliberately ignore the calls and recommendations made by civil society.

Because of this, our critics and supporters alike have lamented that the contribution of ASEM dialogues and conferences to public policymaking seems to be weak, and is in any case difficult – even impossible – to assess.

Difficult to assess, yes, but weak, no.

At the UN Global Ministerial Environment Forum earlier this year in Bali, a landmark harmonisation of three major conventions on the management of chemicals and hazardous waste was achieved. We were told informally by UNEP officials that the very

first impetus for this successful harmonisation was actually sparked off at an ASEF environment conference in Jakarta five years ago.

One ASEF workshop idea, realised on an international setting, five years later.

Our outputs don't always have to be as concrete or definite as that, mind you. Yesterday, we heard the Belgian FM's commitment to read, listen and take note of the recommendations of our conference.

In fact, ASEM is one such political creature that aims to be a forum for hearing out its members' various positions so as to inform their decision making at home and elsewhere. ASEM is not an grouping that tries to find consensus in order to take uniform action. This is how we fit, by producing messages and flagging issues that are not currently but need to be on the ASEM radar for reflection and understanding on a bi-regional level.

Let me now turn to the second *raison d'être* of Connecting Civil Societies. Connection is a two-way street: we want ASEM governments to hear civil society, but also the other way around. This is a mutually legitimising exchange between Asia and Europe, governments and civil societies.

We have brought everyone here to ensure that the political momentum of ASEM is transmitted to the ground where the people are. Our discussions are legitimising the ASEM process by echoing its core principles and priorities, giving evidence of the real work at the grassroots level and more importantly, following up on them.

Our conference has proven that scholars, educators and think tanks are closely watching regionalism and regional integration, driving forces behind the ASEM process.

Arts and culture practitioners are taking up the environment and sustainable development challenge in the urban context.

Asian and European youth movements and organisations are actively responding to the new ASEM initiative for public health and finding ways to contribute.

This exchange has had concrete results. Together with our partners – we don't work alone - ASEF puts word into action. In 2003, the ASEM Culture Ministers called for the creation of a digital platform to connect artists and culture practitioners from Asia and Europe.

ASEF took up this challenge – and today we have Culture360, an online platform that provides information, gives space for dialogue, and stimulates reflection on arts and culture between artists and practitioners.

Now, there is a lot of content and information out there on the World Wide Web. What Culture360 features is the importance of good, digital, cultural content – and this project is building awareness of it in the arts sector. The Culture360 website has had more than 20,000 visitors since its latest relaunch in April this year.

The discussions that we've had here for the past two days are insightful, relevant, and rarely occur anywhere else in such a multi-stakeholder fashion.

We will need to focus them into a form that policymakers can use. Tonight, our report will be sent to our colleagues at the Belgian Federal Public Service, who will transmit it to all the delegations at the ASEM 8 Summit tomorrow.

We at ASEF have ensured that the political ground is covered. The next step is for all of us to spread the word to all our civil society colleagues back home, to follow up fearlessly and together on these messages and make sure that they don't end here.

When you are home, I urge you also to remember ASEF. That we are an open, flexible and attentive platform for Asia-Europe exchange that is constantly seeking innovative ideas for how we can do this work of materialising Asia-Europe cooperation better.

I encourage you to come to us and to the valuable networks that we have built up over the past 14 years with bold ideas and proposals for action and change. Come to us with your commitment to work with us. We may not always be able to join you, but we will answer.

Thank you.