



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

Welcome Speech

**Ambassador Dominique Girard
Executive Director**

Delivered
Venue: The Square, Brussels (Belgium)
Date: Saturday, 2 October 2010; 10:30am

Good morning distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to warmly welcome you to Brussels and to the 4th *Connecting Civil Societies Conference*.

Connecting Civil Societies takes place as an official side event of the ASEM8 Summit. It is a joint venture of four institutions that work together in a consortium called the Europe-Asia Policy Forum: the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS), the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), the European Policy Centre (EPC), and my own organisation - the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) - ASEM's only permanent institution.

I am very happy that I have the honour to welcome today nearly 150 people from 35 countries - a rich diversity of ASEM voices. *Connecting Civil Society* brings together government and civil society representatives who work in the field of education, public health, research and think tanks, human rights, youth, the arts and culture, urban planning and the media. I am also glad to welcome representatives from the ASEM community - the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) and the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF).

ASEF is proud to organise this conference for three reasons - which also form the basis of our mission:

- 1) *Connecting Civil Societies* is a platform for unique dialogue and networking
- 2) *Connecting Civil Societies* is a forum where priority issues in Asia-Europe relations are identified, discussed and recommendations & solutions are formulated
- 3) And, the third reason: *Connecting Civil Societies* complements the ASEM process with a civil society component and contribution.

1) CCS4 as a platform for unique dialogue and networking

Since the Asia-Europe Foundation, or ASEF, was founded thirteen years ago in 1997, our constant objective has been to build bridges and networks between the two regions. ASEF's mission is to create better mutual understanding between Asians and Europeans to replace existing indifference and ignorance with awareness and knowledge, to change inaccurate perceptions and overcome prejudices and to build common ground for future action.

H.E. Steven Vanackere, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs for Belgium has earlier mentioned in his speech that we neither “look East nor West, but forward”. We do, because Asia and Europe are built on a century-long rich history of political, economic and cultural engagement: We had and have so *much to share*.

There is no doubt, ASEF's mission is ambitious. If we want to be successful, we have to design our projects and activities in such a way that they can modify attitudes among people: a willingness to view each other as an equal worthy of respect. They don't offer room for arrogance or condescension: How shall we otherwise be open and learn from each other? They are engaging, involving people from all walks of life. Finally, they are based on the spirit of mutual respect and trust.

Connecting Civil Societies is an important step in this direction. The conference invites you to an open exchange – on an intellectual, people-to-people and cultural level. I am glad that all of you will experience during the next two days a gist of ASEF's work and ASEF's idea of providing platforms for constructive dialogue. I encourage you to speak frankly with one another, led by both curiosity and courtesy. Only knowledge leads to understanding and understanding leads to respect.

As with all our activities, ASEF has also adopted an inclusive approach for *Connecting Civil Societies*. We have worked in close partnership with other institutions from Asia and Europe. The potential of such partnerships is tremendous and, if I count the number correctly, we have involved 16 institutions

in the conceptualisation and organisation of this meeting – always matching Asian with European partners.

This is ASEF's modus operandi and exactly what we are supposed to do: being a facilitator and a multiplier. We target institutions and/or individuals whose exchanges will help clarify issues, establish connections, bring about confidence or just knowledge – to further improve the conditions for higher level interaction.

That leads me to my second point:

2) CCS4 as a forum for discussion to formulate recommendations on areas of common concern to the leaders

The second significance of this conference can be found in the choice of the theme and the content of our meeting: “Changing challenges, new ideas”. Seven thematic workshops take place at *Connecting Civil Societies*. They touch a number of specific and sometimes also difficult & sensitive issues, including regional conflict management, regional integration, the financing of higher education, challenges in lifelong learning policies, the role of the youth in promoting public health, the right to information for environmental protection, development and anti-corrupt practices, and the role of arts in globalized urban contexts. On Sunday, ASEF in partnership with the Chatham House also organizes a roundtable discussion with senior editors of the European and Asian media who will deliberate on the topic “Asia and Europe: Engaging for a Post-Crisis World.”

You will have many important issues to raise and to ask during the next two days. Yes, do engage in a free and candid exchange of views, even if some topics might be controversial. Maybe a clear consensus might not always be found – but I am confident that you will get insights into current challenges and highlight particular areas of actions for Asia and Europe. Joint reflection and exchange of perspectives will provide the seed for possible future initiatives.

At the end of the conference, the results of seven workshop discussions will feed into a focused report which will outline the main concerns of civil society that could contribute to the ASEM agenda in the next two years and beyond. Key

recommendations will be formulated in a joint conference declaration and conveyed to the ASEM Leaders.

Let me conclude now with my third point.

3) CCS4 complements the ASEM process as a civil society component

Inter-regional dialogue is an indispensable facility, and ASEM's sustainability directly derives from that fact. ASEM was founded in 1996 as an "incarnation" of the existing Europe-Asia partnership to renew the commitment to and build a framework for co-operation in the area of politics, economy, and culture. It has a unique role with its informal dialogue structure. But ASEM's political dialogue need not and cannot be conducted only on an official track.

ASEF was created as the political tool of ASEM, designed to help the two regions to develop, beyond their immediate interests, the ability to communicate and co-operate with the support and involvement of the people. Through ASEF's activities, civil society concerns are included as a vital component of deliberations of the Asia-Europe Meeting. *Connecting Civil Societies* is an excellent example of this component – a dialogue among the real people of Asia and Europe, which will hopefully contribute towards the enrichment of the dialogue between Asian and European policy makers.

Allow me to provide you with the history: This is the fourth edition of the *Connecting Civil Societies conference* series which started in 2004 in Barcelona. On the occasion of the 6th ASEM Summit in 2006, ASEF organised the 2nd *Connecting Civil Societies Conference* in Helsinki, in Finland. The third conference, held as an official side-event of ASEM7 in Beijing in 2008, took place in the midst of the financial and economic crisis and focused on the topic "Dialogue on Economy and Society".

On Monday and Tuesday, leaders of 46 Asian and European countries plus the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat will meet in Brussels for the 8th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM8). *Connecting Civil Society* will complement this

process by involving civil society voices from both regions to reflect their common concerns. I hope that the conference participants will find areas of convergence in their discussions and reduce the areas of divergence between Asians and Europeans. Because deep and robust Asia-Europe relations are the key cornerstone of the global architecture. It is only logical and natural that both regions work towards closer links as the significance of Asia-Europe relations will increase with time.

Thank you for your attention.