Following nearly a decade on the sidelines, civil society organisations and representatives from throughout Asia and Europe are demonstrating impatience to assume more of a central role in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process, which at the governmental level is acknowledged to be in need of “revitalising and substantiating.”

Some 200 representatives of such organisations, ranging from artistic and environmental groups to think tanks and human rights advocates, gathered in Barcelona recently in an attempt to consolidate past efforts by other diverse non-governmental and business movements to complement the ASEM process officially launched by governments in 1996. The 2004 event was entitled “Connecting Civil Societies of Asia and Europe.”

More than two days of informal workshops, brainstorming sessions and networking sought to lay the groundwork for a more structured and dynamic role for civil society in ASEM. These meetings were organised at Barcelona’s Casa Asia and sponsored by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), the Japanese Center for International Exchange (JCIE) and the International Institute for Asian Studies in the Netherlands.

The event was an effort to move beyond the existing activities on the margins of the ASEM summits and process, such as the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) or the Peoples’ Forum organised by a network of NGOs at each previous ASEM summit. As one of the organisers, ASEF, advised, the purpose was not to “reinvent the wheel,” but to aim at developing a complement to previous efforts and to build on existing initiatives, further strengthen the dialogue and foster greater cooperation between civil society in the two regions.

Previous civil society meetings in Brussels, Bonn and Berlin in 2002, 2003 and 2004, organised by the EU, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and others, tended to focus on social issues and were composed of a smaller number of participants.

Ambassador Ion de la Riva, the director general of Casa Asia, told the participants that he hoped this type of civil society assembly would become an annual event for his organisation in Barcelona. He remarked that while his organisation and Spain were new to the Asia-Europe dialogue, they had historical ties to the region and “the force and energy of newcomers.”

The gathering also made recommendations addressed to the governmental leaders at the ASEM 5 summit scheduled for Hanoi in...
October. While some amounted to repetitions of previous requests, such as the establishment of a specific social pillar to the ASEM process, others indicated some impatience with the inability of the ASEM governments’ informal sessions to come to grips with persistent issues facing the two regions or to define a stimulating identity to the public.

In his keynote address to the participants, Surin Pitsuwan, a member of the Thai Parliament and former Foreign Minister, focused on the role of civil society in certain key international issues such as cultural and religious tensions and misunderstandings and the consequences of globalisation. Following the September 11, 2001 attack on US targets, he wondered if “we are witnessing the beginnings of a new divide between the radical forces of Islam and Western Christianity that could perhaps shape the 21st century in the same way the Cold War defined the postwar world…” He noted that “The politicization of religion or the religiozation of politics is threatening the very fabric of many multiethnic and multi-religious societies in Asia and Europe.” The war against terror, he recommended, should be waged not only with swords, but also plowshares. He also noted that the ASEM 2002 summit in Copenhagen had established a dialogue of culture and civilisation and he concluded that because ASEM was “home to some of the world’s oldest and richest civilisations, I strongly believe it should take the lead to promote and strengthen dialogue among the different cultures and civilisations of the world.”

Regarding the complex nature and problems associated with the process of globalisation, he noted that the problem was not globalisation itself, but “deficiencies in its governance.” But he noted that one of the features of globalisation was the emergence of an international community of civil society actors that address issues of concern to citizens throughout the world. And he suggested that the problems confronting the planet were probably too vast for governments to address alone, without the help of these active parts of civil society.

The core of the work of the Barcelona meeting was the reflection and recommendations of six thematic workshops composed of participants interested in the particular subjects. These revolved around broad topics such as governance and human rights, environment and urbanisation, education and science, culture and civilisation, trade and development and regional and security issues. In some instances, the discussions revolved around the problems and multiplicity of views and remedies, and in other cases these resulted in more structured conclusions or recommendations that were reported to the plenary sessions of the meeting.

The workshop on governance, human rights, gender issues and labour relations, hosted by the Raoul Wallenberg Foundation in Sweden, examined the roles and relations between governments, civil society organisations, human rights bodies, the business sector and others in the process. As a general observation it stressed the need to learn to disagree and to get governments, grass roots of societies and business involved. It underlined the need for research networks on minority rights and of human rights commissions and cited the existing work of some Nordic groups and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) minority rights representative among others. And it stressed the desirability of creating effective monitoring and information gathering of anti-corruption conventions.

The deliberations of the workshop on environmental and urban issues, hosted by the Hans Seidel Foundation, led to a detailed presentation on new issues and approaches to the plenary session.
Asia-Europe Project - Providing Fresh Information and Analysis on the Asia-...niversity, kuala lumpur, tokio, bejing, peking, phnom phen, seoul, military

by Dr. Jamilah Ariffin of the Foundation for the Future in Malaysia.

The need was said to be for sustainability for future generations and some projects and activities tended to be problem-oriented clusters and other mission-oriented ones. In the past urban policies, services and activities have tended to overlook sustainability and rural populations and were influenced by economic and industrial models and priorities. Information and communications technologies could become a tool for reorienting for caring rather than profit. Future urban governance would have to incorporate these tools and aim toward expanded participation and the future to involve all groups including the aged, the poor, immigrant groups and youth. There would have to be a shift in paradigms in urban development and transportation away from market consumerism toward designs and amenities for all sectors of population. A data-base of best urban practices in Asia and Europe was recommended. More twinning of cities was another proposal. Tourism, transport, energy were cited as among priorities for the future.

The discussions of the education, science and academic cooperation panel reported by Paul Lim of Universiti Sains in Malaysia indicated a division of the work between a group on primary and secondary education and one on research cooperation. While there had been a post-independence tendency in Asia to remove Europe from the general process of nation-building and creation of national identities, it was perceived as desirable now to promote exchanges and increase an awareness of Europe in Asia and vice versa. Information and communications technology was also discussed both in the context of the need to overcome the digital divide between rich and poor and to train teachers. Cultural exchanges from plays to museums were also advocated. The discussions on research and degrees concentrated on concrete programmes such as the EU's Asia-Link as a means of creating more effective networks of collaboration and a culture of learning. It was recommended that asymmetries between countries that obstruct the granting of joint degrees should also be addressed by governments. It was also recommended that the business community become more involved in addition to funding education but identifying needs, that educational support be increased, that ASEF be given a mandate to support research, that more emphasis be placed in the EU programmes for humanities and social sciences and that ASEM consultation with academic circles be enlarged.

M. Rajaretnam of the Asian Dialogue in Singapore and Bangkok reported on the discussion of the working group on civilisations, faiths and cultures and noted “in an era of rapid change diversity imposes tensions…which must be addressed.” He also remarked that the current situation reflected a crisis caused by the fact that “extremists in East and West have hijacked Islam and democracy.” The group also suggested that the absence of dialogue reflected a perception of a lack of self-interest at all levels in dialogue as a process to relieve antagonisms. In this process dialogue between faiths was crucial as well as between ethnic communities. The role of culture and art was also cited as important and examples were cited, such as the work of maddrasas in Indonesia and the use of minority or immigrant language. But it was underlined that dialogue should not be engaged solely as a means of conflict prevention but to inculcate an awareness of diversity and to build shared values.

Sabur Ghayur, of the International Confederation of Free Trade Union Asia and Pacific regional organisation in Singapore, briefed other participants on the deliberations of the workshop on trade, social development and migration; He indicated that the overriding concern was the growth of joblessness and lack of social and societal dialogue except in a minority of Asian countries. He suggested the lack of coordination on production, prices, jobs,
privatisation and added that the opening of markets in some of Asia was “involuntary and inequitable.” He said ASEM should engage citizens, in a regular tripartite dialogue, in a number of crucial issues including unemployment, outsourcing, the informal economy, migration, female trafficking and the millennium development goals. He indicated that the proposed meeting of ASEM labour ministers was a useful first step but that a regular ASEM social pillar was still required.

A workshop on international relations, regionalism and security issues, according to Dr. Willem van der Geest of the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels, ranged over most current high-profile policy issues, including communicable diseases. But more concrete suggestions revolved around some recommendations or requests for the official ASEM summit and proposals for cooperative research or other projects, including a conflict prevention monitoring or best practices. The group also expressed the belief that there was a need for greater transparency and monitoring of the official ASEM activities, citing for example a desire for a status report on the concrete activities foreseen at the ASEM Copenhagen summit in 2002 to seek joint policies and measures against terrorism. There was also concern expressed regarding the differences and debates over enlargement of the ASEM process and the participation of Burma/Myanmar.

Plenary discussions on the workshops also stressed the importance of transparency and monitoring of the ASEM process and tracking the reaction to such recommendations to the official ASEM process to avoid such meetings descending into mere talk-shops.

The participants also broke up into separate sectoral working groups according to the type of organisation they represented to consider further collaboration or activities. These included research institutes, think tanks, academics, NGOs, trade unions, cultural institutions, media and resource organisations and foundations.

These also returned with some observations and projects to present to all the participants. One relayed on behalf of the NGOs participating in a workshop by Dorothy–Grace Guerrero of Asienhaus in Essen, Germany, underlined that civil society organisation had existed even before the ASEM process and therefore wanted to “critically engage” with ASEM on key issues of concern to the public. Another participant from the world of culture and the arts also underlined that independent art should be recognised as an actor in this community which had a role in challenging stereotypes and creating new paradigms. The theme of overcoming stereotypes was also at the core of discussions in a workshop on the media, which advocated exchanges and training programmes for journalists as well as information services that could supplement traditional commercial media. Mobilisation of resources for activities were addressed by another workshop that recommended a range of means to provide financing for “social entrepreneurship and investment.” These included tax incentives, subsidies, debt swaps or community bonds, among others, for certain actors with no culture or skill in fundraising.

Dr. Wim Stockhof, director of the International Institute for Asian Studies in the Netherlands reporting on the deliberations on think tanks summarised that there was a need to encourage more policy research and that this could take the path of an Asia-Europe academic network and a Institute of Advanced Studies.