

Asia looks to Europe for a green planet

Environmental management and sustaining natural resources are now among Asia's most arduous task. It is the result of extraordinary economic growth.

The boom is providing tremendous benefit to the region's peoples but it has also created pollution and resource degradation that threatens to undermine the economic gains and integrity of global environmental systems.

Ways of ensuring that this does not continue were identified at a three-day international conference in Jakarta late last month where 350 high-profile government representatives and environmentalists discussed: *What can Asia and Europe do for sustainable development?*

Here, it should be remembered that Asia covers about one third of the planet.

The purpose of the gathering – part of the Asia-Europe Environment Forum – was to provide concrete proposals for co-operation between the two continents to defeat pollution.

In doing so, the conference launched what might prove an invaluable partnership in strategic policy research for environ-

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mental protection and also showed that Asia has chosen Europe as its model for 'greenness.'

And that seems proper because Europe, as a major consumer of Asia's natural resources, surely has responsibility for a healthy environment by helping Asia achieve sustainable development.

Asia's demand for energy is expected to double in the next decade and supersede the total demand of Western Europe.

Solid waste generation is also being multiplied.

It means that Asia must respond to economic growth and global integration with the proper management of the environment and natural resources.

It cannot afford to neglect or dawdle about undertaking this task because the cost of non-action will become prohibitively expensive as well as create irreversible damage.

But most Asian countries have yet to prepare themselves

to tackle the environmental impact of economic expansion and integration.

So now it has become crucial for Asian law makers and environmentalists to learn from those countries that have already started the task, especially those that began in the second half of last century.

Global problem

Government officials and representatives of both civil society and the business community discussed environmental degradation in Asia and its impact on the continent and other parts of the world. These issues were discussed at 12 workshops during the conference.

They agreed that environment degradation is no longer a problem of any one country or region because the damage done in a single country impacts on many others.

As Indonesia's Environment Minister Rachmat Witoelar, explained issues of the environ-

ment cross national boundaries and no unilateral action provided an effective response.

Governments and lawmakers must ensure that future development policies take into account their consequences for the global environment, he said.

A partnership of equals between Asia and Europe need not be constrained by the difference in socio-economic development within and between the two continents.

Mutual respect and a supportive partnership were essential to sustainable development.

"Nothing should ever be non negotiable," said Rachmat.

"No matter how hard to achieve, partnership is the way to go if we want to benefit all humanity and manage the environment that nourishes and nurtures it."

Or as the Hans Seidel Foundation's Professor Ursula Maennele put it while analysing cross-border environmental protection in central Europe and Northeast Asia: Pollution knows no borders and many environmental problems can only be addressed across national boundaries.

And although borders separate states and sometimes divide

nations, border regions, because of this seclusion, are often especially environmentally valuable regions.

In Europe, cross-border cooperation in protecting the environment had transformed the former "iron curtain" into a new "green belt," she said.

Governments, non government and international organisations were working together to secure this new green belt as a zone of environmental protection and sustainable living.

But cross-border environmental co-operation had become crucial in Northeast Asia and "yellow dust", or desertification, was being met by a common approach by China, South Korea and Japan.

The Asia-Europe Environment Forum was launched in 2003 and promotes open official dialogue about specific environmental concerns for Asia - Europe.

It is co-organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation, Germany's Hans-Seidel Foundation, the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Japan, and the United Nations Environment Programme. — VNS