10th Asia-Europe People's Forum:
Towards a Just and Inclusive Asia and Europe – Building States of Citizens for Citizens

The Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) 2014 in Milan somehow ended where it began. An ambiguous mixture of desperation and hope dominated the mood in the huge hall in Fabbrica del Vapore, an old industrial building made of clinker.

"Please return Sombath safely"

On the one hand the enormous anxiety about Sombath Somphone, one of the main organisers of the 9th AEPF in Laos 2012 who was kidnapped shortly after the forum, was ubiquitous at both the opening and the final speech. His forced disappearance was symbolized by an empty chair, and his wife, who was part of the opening committee, gave a very stirring speech pointing out the Laotian government's rigid ignorance in terms of her husband's disappearance. The final declaration contains an insistent demand addressed to the members of ASEAN: "We remind all ASEM [Asia-Europe Meeting] member states of their human rights obligations, both domestically and internationally. We urge ASEM member states, especially Malaysia as the forthcoming Chair of ASEAN, to ensure that Sombath and his family receive justice and that he is returned safely to them." On the other hand all participants seemed to be really enthusiastic and happy to meet familiar faces, exchange political interest and create a feeling of transnationality. That hopeful morale lasted from the very beginning of the forum until the last words spoken into the microphone and was only suddenly interrupted by the claims to justice for Sombath Somphone, as already mentioned.

Debates and solidarity

From Friday 10th October until Sunday 12th October over 400 activists from 42 countries including China, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, France, Greece, Hungary, Sweden, United Kingdom and many other countries in Europe and Asia debated more or less about specific subthemes of the forum's five main topics in four plenaries and eleven workshops. The official main topics were: Socially just trade and investment; universal and

transformative social protection; food sovereignty and sustainable land and natural resource management; climate justice, sustainable energy production and zero waste; as well as peace and security. There were some debates which dealt with topics especially connected to Europe, like the European crisis and the EU's austerity policy or the European refugee policy after Lampedusa. The latter played a decisive part at the beginning of the forum. A group of migrants who survived Lampedusa created an emotional atmosphere by chanting their claim: "migrant rights are human rights!" Also very emotional and an example for an Asia-oriented debate, was a workshop focused on democracy and human rights in Thailand, when a victim of the military dictatorship broke down in tears whilst talking about her childhood.

Networking

Even though lots of workshops were controversial and constructive, the most important communicative practice was networking. Before and after the workshops, next to the plenary and during lunch, many activists spent their time talking to other activists in order to connect their organisations with one another. Some of the participants took part at the AEPF for the first time, hence it was a very important opportunity for them to meet people in real life that they usually only addressed via mail or phone. Others had already known each other for years and so cultivated a friendship independent from borders and nations. Therefore the forum serves as an informal platform for transnational exchange and contact. Some moments, like the emotional speech of Sombat Somphone's wife, turn the AEPF into a huge community of friends. This seems to be even more important than the fact that at the end a declaration marked the outcome of the forum.

Missing links

This declaration, a set of detailed demands and recommendations, was presented for the first time ever at the Asia Europe-Meeting which took place in Milan one week later than the AEPF. Combined with speeches of representatives of ASEM, the declaration is the only connection between ASEM and AEPF. Apart from that, there is no direct link from the AEPF to the ASEM, a point that is often criticized by some of the AEPF participants. Some criticized the non-transparency of parts of the decision making progress according to the final declaration. Every workshop had been ordered to write a short summary of its outcomes. These summaries have then been merged with the rough draft of the final declaration over night by a small group of people. In the final plenary the raw version was discussed sentence by sentence. The critics demanded a fully transparent and direct

democratic writing of the declaration. Others criticized the chaotic organisation of the 2014th AEPF. Another criticism concerns the forum's double standard of emphasizing its zero waste policy but serving food and drinks in plastic cups and plates instead of dishes.

Next stop Ulaanbaatar

The main problem in the future results from the AEPF's temporal and spatial dependence from ASEM. In the past the AEPF always took place in the countries in which ASEM was staged. Looking ahead to the 11th AEPF 2016 in Mongolia, the problematic situation regarding the process of organizing the people's forum will probably get worse, because Mongolia is far away from the common participating countries and organisations. Usually the AEPF is organized by the AEPF international organising committee and national groups. Their problem could be that there are no national organisations that are able to organise the forum in Mongolia. It seems like this will be a crucial point in the AEPF's history respective its former connection to ASEM. For the first time, the 11th AEPF possibly will not be staged in the same city as ASEM.

Bochum, 28th October 2014

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