



Communiqué of the 3rd Policy Forum on Development – Asia Regional Meeting

We, representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) and local authorities (LAs) and other stakeholders, gathered in Kathmandu, Nepal on 24-26 September for the 3rd Policy Forum on Development (PFD) – Asia Regional Meeting, with the support of the European Union (EU).

The 3rd PFD Asia Regional meeting was a platform to exchange and share the status of implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region, including: engagement of CSOs and LAs and other stakeholders' experiences in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at global, national and local levels; insights into voluntary national review processes as an accountability tool; the state of the working or “enabling” environment; and climate justice.

Status of the 2030 Agenda implementation

Our region is home to diverse societies, cultures, and biodiversity. However, the realities of widespread poverty and inequalities still exist.

On its current trajectory, Asia will not achieve any of the 17 SDGs by 2030. Progress has been made towards some SDGs in Asia, but the rate of progress is insufficient (Goals 1, 4, 7). For more than half the SDGs, progress is stagnant or heading in the wrong direction in Asia (Goals 2, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16). For three Goals, the situation has deteriorated (Goals 6, 8, 12). Asia needs to strengthen its means of implementing the 2030 Agenda (Goal 17), which includes strengthening global partnerships. Lack of progress towards SDG 17 could undermine progress towards all other SDGs.

The region has made important efforts in building mechanisms (regional and sub-regional frameworks, guidelines, plans, and engagement mechanisms), however, systemic barriers still exist hindering effective partnership and engagements. From our sharing of experiences, we believe that while there is an expressed commitment by governments to implement the 2030 Agenda and many have included it in their national development plans, concrete action is still very much lacking. CSOs and LAs are not effectively involved, and accessing resources for implementation by CSOs and LAs on the ground is difficult.

SDG Implementation in Fragile Context

The lack of progress and increasing fragility of small island communities, mountain communities, migrants and other displaced and stateless people are immediate barometers of weak SDG implementation in the region. Efforts have been made to put in place mechanisms and enact policies at

different levels, yet fragility and inequality worsen. In general, a disconnect between the global agenda and national bureaucratic systems do not help facilitate progressive implementation of SDGs, especially in fragile communities. While there are good practices and success stories that could be scaled-up and implemented, capacities, knowledge and concrete responses to such issues are still inadequate.

Climate Emergency

We recognise the latest research of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on the urgency to tackle the climate emergency. The Climate emergency is alarming in the region; we are not moving forward at all. We need to urgently change the business-as-usual attitudes and approaches in confronting these issues. Those who have caused and/or causing climate change are the least affected. They need to take urgent action to reduce emissions and to provide climate finance to the most vulnerable based on their historical and differentiated responsibilities. Putting all the burden on local communities is like punishing the non- or least contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. The Asia region is not homogenous. There is a need to recognise the different voices and roles of various sectors in tackling the root causes of climate crisis, including the children and youth as the future generation. Vulnerable communities should not be seen only as victims but should be recognized as agents of development capable of responding to these issues. We need to immediately shift from extractive industries to low carbon non-nuclear economies that ensure green decent work, social protection, education and skills training, and redistribution of paid and unpaid care work, especially for grassroots communities, through just and equitable transition measures that respect human rights, ecological balance and gender equality, established via social dialogue and other meaningful forms of participatory consultations.

Systemic barriers

We believe that there are systemic barriers that put the 2030 Agenda in danger of failing the people in the region and in the world. These barriers include: an economic model that focuses on GDP growth and denies the rights to basic services; inequitable trade and investment agreements; dominance of elites in development policies; concentration of wealth and power; land and resource grabs; unethical consumption and production; militarism; the spread of authoritarianism and corruption; as well as patriarchy, discriminative social and cultural norms, and fundamentalism. They not only impede the 2030 Agenda but also perpetuate the condition of abject poverty, widespread forced displacement and grave inequalities of wealth, power, and resources between countries, between rich and poor and between men and women and among generations. Policy coherence between the 2030 Agenda and economic policies, including trade and investment policies, is needed. It is important to ensure these financial and economic policies are not violating and undermining human rights and hindering the 2030 Agenda.

Voluntary National Review

Despite efforts in several countries to institutionalise SDGs at the national level, in general, there has been little progress in setting up local and national institutions and mechanisms to ensure that the voices of civil society and people are reflected in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs. Some Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) are still far from the realities of the people. Effective monitoring and review, at both national and local level, requires high-quality, timely, reliable, disaggregated and accessible data. The access to information should also extend to state policies and budget allocation. States should also look at strengthening the role of supreme audit institutions and parliamentary oversight over the organs of the state. We welcome local governments' initiatives to monitor, review and collect data such as through the Voluntary Local Review (VLRs) led by local and sub-national governments with a robust peoples and civil society engagement at the local level and feel this should be supported. LAs and CSOs contributions to the achievement of the SDGs need to be recognised, and their capacities need to be further built and strengthened. There should be complete inclusion of SDGs in development policies in an integrated and coordinated manner, as well as strengthening accountability framework of the SDGs through a more robust follow-up and review mechanism in the national, sub regional, regional and global level.

Localisation of SDGs

We recognise advancement of efforts in localising SDGs through the political will of LAs and targeted interventions by CSOs such as social enterprises and cooperatives. The challenge is in sustaining these efforts to ensure ownership by vulnerable, marginalized groups and social movements on the one hand, and the institutionalization in LAs, that includes resource allocation, which can withstand changes and the dynamics within national politics, on the other hand. Inclusive people-empowerment programs of LAs that encourage participation of and partnerships with the marginalized are a crucial means to implement SDGs at the local level. Successes at the local level should be regarded as models for replication in other localities and showcased at the national, regional and international levels.

Enabling Environment

Human rights violations and the rise of authoritarianism are major concerns in the region. The democratic space in Asia is not only shrinking and regressing, but also closing in many countries in Asia. Recentralization is disempowering local government's ability to respond to local needs and priorities. The democratic deficit becomes more untenable as civil society and human rights defenders as well as elected representative officials face intimidation through illegal arrests and detention, terror tagging, enforced disappearances, restrictions to freedom of association and expression and collective bargaining, and extrajudicial killings. Particularly vulnerable are peoples' movements working for farmers, workers and trade unions, indigenous peoples, Dalits, women, children, and other marginalised sectors. Civil society organizations contend with new restrictive NGO laws and regulations that compromise their mandate and fiscal and organizational independence. NGO with rights-based approach are increasingly controlled and not allowed to function.

Recommendations

We welcome and acknowledge the value of the Regional PFD Meeting in bringing us together to constructively engage with one another. Cognizant of barriers and challenges, the PFD recommends that the EU: 1) increase support to enable mechanisms for CSOs and LAs' meaningful engagement, especially at the grassroots level; 2) simplify procedures and requirements for local and grassroots for accessing and reporting on funding support; 3) increase support for data gathering, monitoring, and reporting on SDGs, and documenting and replicating good practices, especially at the regional and sub-national levels; 4) create a functional grievance mechanisms which allow our constituencies to hold EU partnerships implemented in the region to account; and, 5) continue providing and creating more spaces for learning and sharing on SDGs, but with more inclusive participation of constituencies and a mechanism for follow-through and feedbacking on joint commitments both from this meeting and more widely.

In particular, we recommend for the EU to partner with:

Local Authorities by:

1. **Promoting decentralisation and subsidiarity principles in Asia** through its bilateral and thematic programmes.
2. Further enhancing the capacity of **local governments to engage meaningfully in dialogue and partnership** with civil society aligned with the democratic cycle.
3. **Implementing impactful and transformative micro-level development projects and programmes** aimed at:
 - Improving the basic infrastructure (such as access to water, public transport, housing and sanitation) to benefit local communities.
 - Increasing decent employment and inclusive economic progress.

- Fostering meaningful dialogue with local actors and development partners.
- 4. **Empowering and building its capacities** by upskilling local leaders, engineers and planners, health and nutrition workers, agri-extension providers, educators and human resource administrators.
- 5. **Promoting trust-building activities between the national and local authorities**, in efforts to minimise barriers especially on access to finance and public institutional reform.
- 6. **Supporting the regular monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs** at the National level, not just before VNR deadlines.
- 7. **Supporting the development of VLRs** in local and regional governments.
- 8. Strengthening the existing and promoting the development of **Local Government Associations in Asian Countries**.
- 9. **Promoting and replicating best practices** such as:
 - Upscaling resilient communities
 - Decentralising fiscal policies which adapt to the local level
 - The use of the ‘people’s budget’ where the budget of LAs can be decided with the local stakeholders
 - Innovative finance, such as effective and transparent blended finance which empowers local actors, is transparent and holds all partners to account
 - Working models on integrating the SDGs in policies and support for monitoring and accountability
 - Inclusive policies and programs that institutionalise consultations with, participation of and partnership with CSOs in SDG implementation and governance
 - Active learning from other countries within the region

Civil Society Organisations by:

1. **Strengthening enabling environment by enhancing policy coherence.** It is important to ensure EU financial and economic policies are not violating and undermining human rights and SDGs.
2. Strengthening social dialogue and **providing a platform for meaningful dialogue for all stakeholders, especially the marginalised** such as women, disabled, youth, migrants, informal workers, cooperatives, small farmers, fishers, Indigenous Peoples, and other minority groups.
3. **Providing high quality capacity-building opportunities** to help CSOs participate actively and advocate effectively despite the shrinking space.
4. **Advocating and supporting best practices** such as:
 - Collecting reliable disaggregated data, especially in rural areas (as opposed to conducting costly surveys)
 - Opening calls for participation in VNR processes for all citizens and stakeholders, in particular the marginalized
 - Direct implementation of development programs and/or projects by local or grassroots community associations
 - Robust, multi-level review processes – local, regional, provincial, national
 - Highlighting opportunities to cooperate on VNRs by working with the National government, private sector and academia
 - Establishing structures and mechanisms to ensure policy coherence

Other key stakeholders by:

1. Supporting national governments by institutionalising structures, mechanisms and policies among government ministries which ensure inter-agency consultations and collaboration towards policy coherence and cross-sector implementation, and the participation of all constituents across all sectors.
2. Supporting national governments in building capacities to address sustainable development as a holistic and interlinked system.
3. Educating children and youth on the importance of achieving SDGs, listening to and working with and empowering them in the efforts toward and beyond 2030.
4. Engaging the private sector and employers' organisations, especially the micro, small and medium enterprises (which make up 96% of companies in Asia) with capacity building programmes and knowledge sharing opportunities to ensure equitable economic development and climate responsiveness.
5. Highlighting to donors and development partners that the localization of aid must respond to and respect human rights and local priorities, cultures, norms and values.
6. Promoting public information campaigns on SDGs commitments towards the acceleration of SDGs implementation and achievement to have no one and no place left behind
7. Establish multi-stakeholder consultations and institutionalise participation of rights holders in the implementation of SDGs.

Taking into account the recommendations above, the PFD looks forward to seeing Asia as an equal partner to the EU in the successful implementation of the SDGs by 2030. CSOs and LAs will continue to collaborate along with EU in cooperation with regional bodies, including the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), in pursuit of genuine SDG implementation in the region, working towards development justice.