

## **Ensuring Sustainability as the Key Driver for Achieving Development Justice**

CSO Statement at the 1st Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia-Pacific

19-20 May 2015, Bangkok

Earlier this week, more than 100 representatives from civil society in Asia-Pacific met in Bangkok to discuss the themes that will be addressed at this Forum and to strengthen civil society engagement in the post 2015 development agenda in Asia-Pacific. This Statement reflects the deliberations of civil society relevant to this Forum.

We welcome UNEP's efforts to organize this 1<sup>st</sup> Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia-Pacific. This is long overdue. In the past decade, UNEP's regional office has organized annual regional CSO meetings that provided opportunity for civil society to discuss and formulate positions on the agenda of the annual UNEP Governing Council meetings in Nairobi, but without any interface with member-states at the regional level. We look forward to inclusive, constructive and vibrant engagement with governments, institutions and other development actors in this Forum that we hope will evolve into a principal platform for regional deliberations on environmental issues and ensure delivery of environmental commitments.

Building on good practices in regional and global engagements in UNEP processes and the long-established recognition by the UN and Asia-Pacific governments of the invaluable contributions of civil society in sustainable development, we put forward these concrete recommendations for effective and meaningful civil society engagement in this Forum:

- Promote direct participation of civil society representatives based on established practices at UNEP;
- Provide adequate opportunities and spaces for civil society to substantively contribute to the agenda of the Forum;

- Ensure timely access to documents relevant to the Forum and related processes; and
- Respect and support efforts of civil society to self-organize to effectively communicate our substantive contributions to the deliberations of the Forum.

We expect openness to these recommendations towards an inclusive, transparent, action-oriented and forward-looking Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia-Pacific.

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In response to the themes of the Forum, the 107 civil society representatives that met this week offer the following contributions:

### **Environment Outlook for Asia-Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities Ahead**

Asia-Pacific has experienced stellar economic growth in the past decades side-by-side with staggering disparity in wealth distribution among and within countries. This economic growth comes at massive costs to the region's natural resource base.

A key culprit for this problem is the segregated approach to development. Lip service is paid to the linkage between environmental and human wellbeing, but not operationalized nor translated clearly in development programs and interventions. The daily realities of people in communities, however, are not made up of segregated economic, social and environmental components but a totality of these inextricably linked dimensions. Environment challenges confronting communities everyday cannot be separated from the underlying causes of poverty, powerlessness and lack of access to resources.

Climate change is taking a heavy toll on the region, to very dramatic proportions in the Pacific where sea-level rise is gradually obliterating coastal communities from the world map and bringing new development challenges such as climate migration and refugees. Disasters in unimaginable magnitude hit

many parts of the region more frequently than ever, many due to extreme weather events. In the face of these devastation and uncertainties, the region particularly its industrialized and emerging economies is steadily increasing its share in annual global greenhouse gas emission while governments continue to subsidize the extraction of coal, oil and gas. Half of the US\$5.3 trillion annual subsidy for the fossil fuel industry comes from three major economies in Asia – equivalent to US\$5 million per minute. This dirty subsidy puts the health of people in this region at serious risks, mainly from local pollution that costs a staggering US\$2.73 trillion annually and from the impacts of global warming on food and water security at US\$1.27 trillion per year. Fossil fuel subsidies are immoral and indefensible, and must end now.

Environmental crimes continue unabated with serious consequences on wellbeing and the future generations. Extractive industries particularly mining activities diminish the ability of local and indigenous peoples to eke out a living, compromise food security, gravely damage ecosystems and endanger people's health and safety. Environmental crimes - crimes on wildlife, forest and marine resources - must be addressed as serious challenge that impede sustainable development, undermine the rule of law and threaten global and regional stability. Corporations involved in plundering the environment must be made accountable.

Concessions for multinational corporations to control vast tracts of land or coastal and marine areas marginalize and displace farming families out of their lands, driven them to urban areas and cause perennial conflicts in many parts of the region. In 2013, Indonesia alone had 427 agrarian conflicts over nearly 3 million hectares of land. Some Asia-Pacific countries have adopted environment protection measures to systematically displace indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands and restrict them from practicing traditional agricultural systems, thus threatening their livelihoods and undermining their right to conserve their intangible cultural heritage. These and countless stories of people's struggles to defend their lands and protect the environment show that the assault on the environment often happen with

violation of people's rights and suppression of their voices. Any solution to environment challenges will only succeed if it recognizes community control over productive resources based on stewardship principles, respects their participation in decision-making processes, and empowers communities.

The oceans, the earth's final frontier, are not spared from this continuing plunder. The region's coastal and marine ecosystems are steadily degrading. As much as 98% of coral reefs in the Philippines are threatened by human activities, 75.6% of mangrove forest cover has been lost, and about 625 fish species are in alarming state of decline due to overfishing. This has serious repercussions on food and nutrition security since as much as 90% of total dietary protein in the region are derived from fish. The people of the drowning small islands of the Pacific struggle with the impacts of toxic wastes, chemicals and micro-plastics that end up in their shores, washed up by ocean currents from the coasts of the region's middle-income economies that are among the world's top dumpers of plastic wastes into seas and oceans.

Global macro-economic and trade policies aggravate the sustainability challenges in Asia-Pacific. Current and forthcoming trade and investment agreements, such as the opaque TPPA and other mega regional and North-South FTAs, are threatening the three pillars of sustainable development. Bilateral investment agreements are undermining environmental policy regulations and natural resource conservation by allowing transnational corporations to sue national governments in secret arbitration cases under Investor-State-Dispute-Settlement (ISDS) clauses for any policy changes that may reduce profits. Pressures from harsh competition promoted by current trade regime lead to increased exploitation of natural resources. Trade and financial policies that perpetuate poverty, food insecurity and all forms of inequality must be abolished.

The poor, women, young people, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, elderly and LGBTIQ disproportionately bear the burden of environmental degradation. Asia-Pacific women and girls as well as their communities face multiple human rights and sustainable development challenges aggravated by

severe economic, social, and environmental injustice. Fundamental policy shifts are necessary to incorporate gender equality and human rights in environmental initiatives, and reflected in all regional and international agreements. Such shifts require redistribution of unequal and unfair burdens on women and girls in ensuring environmental sustainability, societal wellbeing and our economies, intensified in situations of violence and conflict, and during economic and ecological crises.

Addressing this grim situation from the segmented lens of ministries and providing patch-work solutions based on silo-ed approach to development will not bring long-term solutions. Opportunities in changing the current narrative depend on overall strategy to eradicate poverty, tackle inequality and address powerlessness. We call for an end to intersecting and structural drivers of inequalities and discrimination including review and reform of unjust laws and policies.

### **Environment and Health Linkages**

The flipside of urbanization expansion, land conversion and industrialization in Asia-Pacific is a grim landscape of environmental degradation that brings resurgence of infectious diseases such as dengue and malaria, sanitation-related diseases and zoonotic diseases like avian flu that take heavy toll on human lives, productivity and public expenditures. Pressures to increase agricultural productivity to feed the region's burgeoning population and satisfy the consumption demands of its growing middle class is equated with massive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to extract more from continuously

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