

# **Report of the Asia-Pacific Civil Society Forum for Sustainable Development 2017**

26 – 28 March 2017  
Novou City Hotel, Samsen Road, Bangkok, Thailand

## **Summary**

The Asia-Pacific Civil Society Forum (APCSF) is a platform for major groups and other stakeholders from different sectors and countries in the region to work together and consolidate their position for the regional and global intergovernmental processes including Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development, High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and the UN Environment Assembly.

This year's forum was co-hosted by UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), UN Environment, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (RCEM) with focuses on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 (poverty eradication), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry and infrastructure), 14 (marine ecosystem) and 17 (partnership for the goals).

Participants include 150 civil society organization (CSO) representatives across Asia-Pacific region and different constituencies such as NGOs, women, youth, social and community enterprises, farmers, trade union/workers, science and technology, indigenous peoples, urban poor, migrants, persons with disability, people living and affected by HIV and AIDS, LGBTI, older people, people affected with conflicts and disasters and fisher folks. Staffs from UN Environment and ESCAP also joined the forum.

The forum produced a draft CSO statement for the 2017 UN Environment Assembly (Annex I), CSO statement on regional perspective on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (Annex II), and CSO statement for regional road map for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific (Annex II).

## **Report of the Forum – sessions with focus on environment**

Opening Session: Regional Director and representatives for UN Environment Asia and the Pacific, Dechen Tsering, highlighted the strong stakeholder's engagement policy both in UN Environment's intergovernmental process as well as project implementation at global, regional and national levels. She informed the meeting that the 2017 UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) is scheduled on 4-6 December 2017 in Nairobi with focus on opportunities for achieving a pollution free planet and developing an international action agenda to address some of the most pervasive forms of pollution - air pollution, marine litter; land/soil pollution, water pollution, and chemical and waste pollutions, including in its' relation with SDGs. She express appreciation for CSO's strong commitments to the delivery of SDGs in the region and wished to continue to engage with the civil society to create innovative and sustainable solutions to address pressing environment and sustainable development challenges and towards pollution free planet in the region.

## Session 2: Global and Regional Processes for Follow-up and Review and the Realities of Engagement: Architecture for the Implementation of the SDGs

Alexander Juras, Chief of Civil Society Unit of UN Environment, presented the global and regional processes for the 2017 UNEA and how civil society organizations (CSOs) could effectively engage in the regional and global processes. Currently, the Asia-Pacific CSOs are engaging in the preparatory processes for the 2017 UNEA through their pledges and commitments on the six key pollution risk areas, and CSO statement for the 2017 UNEA. Other engagement opportunities suggested are: i) participation in the preparatory process, including Committee of Permanent Representatives; ii) lobbying of governments; iii) written input, comments, proposals; iv) Major Groups Facilitating Committee; v) regional representatives; vi) Perspectives Publication Series; vii) Global Major Groups and Stakeholders Forum; and viii) participation in Assembly Sessions.

## Session 4: Towards the 2017 UNEA: Achieving a World without Pollution

UN Environment and CSO representatives explored how environment is integrated with the two other pillars of sustainable development and in the implementation of the SDGs. This session also aimed to produce recommendations from CSOs on achieving environmental justice for the 2017 UNEA. UN Environment Asia and the Pacific Office presented regional overview on the six key pollution areas. CSO representatives from farmers, women, fisher folks and workers constituencies shared the current status of pollution in their respective areas, and visions for a pollution free world.

Farmer constituency had concerns over land grabbing by governments and corporations and land pollution caused by pesticides, fertilizers, chemicals, toxics and fuel spills from industrial and military activities. These pollutants result in food chain contamination, which is not as widely discussed as it should be. Farmer constituency had a vision of achieving chemical-free food and water production system, self-sustainable environment, just control and access of natural resources by small producers and local communities, just access to safe and nutritious food, lasting peace and equal distribution of food.

Women constituency discussed how women bear heavier burdens from biodiversity destruction and haze, caused by forest clearing for homogeny plantations of palm and acacia. Women constituency envisioned a world without environmental destruction, massive exploitation of natural resources, huge homogeny plantation, burning of forest for industrial purposes. To achieve this, they highlighted women's role in promoting agroecology farming, preserving local seeds, local and traditional wisdom maintenance, providing services and facilities in any environmental disasters.

Fisher folks experienced decrease in fish catch due to ocean pollution caused by industrial activities at or near sea. They also showed concerns over the pollution build up in the marine resources that are consumed as food. Fisher folks called for justice towards protection of marine resources, as they are the source of the constituency's livelihood.

Workers constituency shared their environmental risks from industrial pollution, occupational hazards and e-waste. Workers have no protection from pollution from manufacturing products,

processes and practices due to the lack of occupational safety and health (OSH) policies, systems and programs. Workers demanded green jobs- employment that preserves, restores quality of the environment- and greening of jobs by changing manufacturing processes and practices to be more environment-friendly. They also called for more efforts for reduction of energy, materials and water consumption across supply chains.

CSOs representatives agreed that systematic barriers should be overcome, as they are causes and drivers of large-scale global pollution. Their recommendations include: i) massive political education to raise awareness; ii) increased government engagement with communities; iii) policy measures at the national level; iv) strengthening CSOs; v) enhancing CSO participation in national decision-making process as well as in the UN; vi) increased rights of constituencies; and vii) more dialogues between stakeholders.

As a response, Isabelle Louise, Deputy Regional Director of UN Environment Asia and the Pacific office, flagged how all these pollution areas are linked to the SDGs and that UN Environment and CSOs have to join forces to address the issues. She also suggested CSOs to reach out to UN Country Team and UN Resident Coordinators in their respective countries to cooperate with UN.

Six parallel workshops were held on this year's selected SDGs for the High Level Political Forum - 1 (poverty eradication), 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health), 5 (gender equality), 9 (industry and infrastructure, 14 (marine ecosystem) and 17 (partnership for the goals). CSO representatives from different constituencies had in depth discussions on the current challenges and possible solutions and UN Environment staff participated in each of the session to provide and highlight environmental perspective.

#### *Workshop 1: Poverty*

The participants discussed different aspects of poverty. Although poverty is a multi-dimensional issue, most development activities address economic aspect of it. They emphasized that environmental dimension of poverty should also be recognized, discussed and addressed and that women, migrants, old people and youth who live in poverty are most disproportionately affected.

#### *Workshop 2: Land/Sustainable Agriculture/Food Sovereignty*

Participants discussed interconnections between land, water, air and agricultural pollution and health risks to farmers. Excessive uses of pesticides, insecticides and fertilizers as well as burning of fields for agricultural purposes were mentioned as causes. With regards to achieving food sovereignty, participants suggested that mass political education and mobilization of rural communities to fight for environmental justice is needed.

#### *Workshop 3: Health*

Participants discussed various topics related to environmental health such as indoor and outdoor air pollution, occupational hazards, radiation from nuclear reactors and health tragedies such as disabilities and anti-biotic resistance. Despite the importance of maintaining good health, many of Asia-Pacific governments have allocated low proportion of budget for health. In 2014, health

expenditure of Laos, Myanmar and Timor Leste were below 2.5% of their GDP. Some participants argued that if peace is achieved, national budget allocated to military could, instead, be used for health.

#### *Workshop 4: Gender*

Participants discussed how all forms of pollution disproportionately affect women and girls due to their heavy involvement in household activities and informal sectors with huge environmental and health risks. Yet, precisely because their big role, women can be agents of change and solution. To empower women, equal access and ownership of the land is important and traditional knowledge they possess should be appropriately understood and integrated in solutions.

#### *Workshop 5: Industry and Innovation*

Participants discussed how workers, especially those sub-contracted or even sub-sub-contracted, are exposed to environmental and health risks at work places and urged businesses to adopt occupational safety and health (OSH) policies, systems and programs. They also called for policies that incentivize environmental impact assessment (EIA) and sustainable investments by businesses. They agreed that CSOs should build their capacity to partake in implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EIAs.

#### *Workshop 6: Oceans*

Participants discussed various sources of marine pollution such as industrial activities at or near sea, marine litter and tourism. They also identified issues that need civil society attention such as overfishing, genetic engineering in seafoods and coral bleaching. As governments do not always reflect what the civil society requests, CSO space and capacities should be strengthened in national and UN decision-making processes. Participants suggested UN Environment to form a subgroup on marine issues for CSOs.

### **Asia-Pacific CSO Statement for the 2017 UN Environment Assembly**

Based on the discussions they had, CSO representatives built their collective strategy and produced the zero draft of Asia-Pacific CSO Statement for the 2017 UNEA.

CSOs, while recognizing UN Environment's efforts in providing CSO space to raise their issues and concerns on environmental issues, urged UN Environment to reflect and acknowledge the social causes of pollution experienced by people and communities in their everyday lives.

Key CSO recommendations for governments and UN Environment are:

- Strengthen State and corporate accountability to the people for pollution free production or services to be central to decision making;
- Educate and organize communities to know their rights and advocate for their issues;

- Create and use spaces for engagement for grassroots communities to highlight pollution based issues, to seek redressal and to be consulted and included in decisions and initiatives that affect their lives;
- Promote people-led, scientific and evidence-based solutions to problems of pollution;
- Begin and support a process of a just transition from dirty to clean energy as a critical issue that will have a significant impact on dealing with climate change;
- Recognize worker’s welfare, the right to a clean and pollution free workplace as a condition for decent jobs;
- Strong and strict implementation of Environmental safeguards of each countries with independent mechanisms in place to monitor and hold corporates and industries accountable;
- Encouraging the youth to be at the forefront of the struggle for the environment and the future.

The full text of the zero draft can be found in Annex I.

### **Asia-Pacific CSO Statement on Regional Perspective on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda**

The CSO statement highlighted systematic barriers that still widely exist in the Asia-Pacific region, preventing the implementation of the SDGs in an inclusive manner. The identified barriers are: i) continued marginalization of the vulnerable groups by businesses in the name of green growth; ii) worsening militarization that deviates resources and creates unstable situation; and iii) on-going government regulations that limits CSO engagement in development issues.

To remove the systematic obstacles, CSOs called on states to: i) addresses the root causes and consequences of poverty, inequality, discrimination, violence and injustice; ii) build greater regional cooperation; and iii) ensure meaningful participation of the civil society and peoples’ movements.

### **Asia-Pacific CSO Statement for the Regional Roadmap for Implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific**

The CSO statement pointed out the proposed regional road map’s silence on the serious lack of resources to achieve the SDGs in the Asia-Pacific region. The statement emphasized the need to maximize available financial resources to deliver the SDGs by: i) improving quantity as well as quality of Official Development Assistance; ii) mobilizing domestic resources through improving tax systems and curbing illicit financial flows; and iii) align trade agreements with the SDGs before and during their implementation.

CSOs also highlighted the issues of science and technology and urged UN ESCAP and Member States to: i) establish a regional mechanism for environmental and social impacts assessment of the emerging technologies promoted as solutions to development challenges; and ii) ensure the participation and develop capacities of communities and stakeholders in technology assessment.

## **Annex I. Zero Draft of the Asia-Pacific CSO Statement to the third session of the UN environment Assembly (Not for circulation)**

A “Pollution Free World” for the People towards Achieving Development Justice on the road to Agenda 2030

*Asia Pacific CSO Statement to the 2017 UN Environment Assembly*

We, representatives of 150 civil society, grassroots and sectoral organizations from Asia and the Pacific, gather here today in Bangkok, Thailand to reaffirm our commitments and pledges to be in the process on the road to achieving sustainable development in the region. We consistently stand to bring in the voices of the marginalized and most vulnerable sectors of our societies--small farmers, fisher folks, indigenous peoples, people with disability, women, youth, elderly, migrant workers, among others, to the policy-makers and influential stakeholders in achieving the policies and recommendations that would impact our lives and societies.

We acknowledge the efforts of the UN Environment to provide space for civil society to raise our issues and concerns with the environment and its crisis. The theme of the 2017 UN Environment Assembly “Pollution Free World” is a cross-cutting issue for communities, and indeed one of the most alarming threats to our sustainable future. However, the UN definition of pollution may not at all capture people’s realities and how people in the communities experience it. While it is also important to reflect that there has been a growing understanding of the issues of our environment and of the problem of pollution, still missing in the discourse is the acknowledgement and action on the root causes and drivers of these problems, which people’s movements across the region repeatedly point to the profit-driven or business-as-usual framework of the global capitalist economy.

Systemic barriers identified as large-scale land and resource grabbing, corporate agriculture, trade, militarism, patriarchy and fundamentalism, and corporate hegemony, are directly linked to the intensification of environmental plunder and destruction of local and natural ecosystems, impacting food chains and people’s health. Environmental degradation is a pervasive problem and indeed has been hitting hard the most marginalized and vulnerable sectors of our societies whose lives are dependent on their respective ecosystems.

The interlinkages between impacts of pollution and the natural ecosystems, which grassroots communities depend on for livelihood is silent in the SDGs, as well as demanding accountability, reform and justice from the actors causing the systemic barriers. Big corporations tend to get away easily from responsibilities and accountabilities. In such cases because of existing trade deals, corporations have even more rights than the communities as seen with how Oceanagold—a transnational mining corporation, was able to sue the El Salvadoran government for disallowing them to continue operations.

Terrestrial activities of large-scale mining and/or pesticide-dependent plantations, could heavily impact or pollute the mountains, agricultural lands, and even water bodies, which farmers and fisher folks depend on for a living. The introduction of GMOs and use of toxic and unsafe chemicals in large-scale industries or industrial wastes is also an alarming pollution threat. These materials

are not just unsafe for the environment, but most to the people working in these conditions and consuming products from such environment. Women, on the other hand, are not just among the most impoverished but also the most vulnerable especially to any changes in the environment as experienced in disasters and climate-related events, as well as exposure to unsafe and toxic materials affecting reproductive health.

Other activities that are very visible in the communities but are not in the discourses of the inter-governmental processes such as increasing militarization due to resource disputes has also been gravely impacting the environment. Experiences across the region have shown how militarization is marginalizing the indigenous communities, especially those living in mineral-rich domains and hardly impacting natural ecosystems where these people depend on. There is also silence when talking about direct impacts of military toxic wastes to human health, which is actually a continuing and alarming threat to communities living near militarized areas.

In this context, we reaffirmed that our stance that the struggle for the environment is also the people's fight for development justice, and that global pollution is also a people's issue. We need more than band aid solutions to the issue, and that is addressing the root causes by acknowledging the systemic barriers to sustainable development.

State of the issue of pollution in the region

Pollution affects people in numerous ways, it impacts their lives through food chains, water sources and ecosystems that are directly linked to their well-being. Thus, we present here concrete experiences from the local communities on how the systemic problem of global pollution is impacting them.

#### Agricultural pollution impacts to farmers

Pollution as experience by small-scale farmers is directly connected with their livelihood and well-being. Through introduction of pesticides, toxic fertilizers, and GM seeds by big agricultural corporations result to soil contamination. Agro-fuel as an emerging industry as a response to shifting to renewables is also alarming since the monopoly planting of agro-fuel plants such as Jatropha is harmful and toxic to the soil. Apart from this many of the agro-fuels production leads to food insecurity and water crisis since many of these crops are heavily water dependent. Soil contamination leads further to genetic pollution, which is the kind of pollution that could be passed

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