

On the 9th Asia Europe People's Forum in Vientiane

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The 9th Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF9) took place with 1000 participants -most of them from South East Asia - in October 2012 in Vientiane, Laos. The AEPF seemed to be a symbol that Laos is not only opening up for the market and investors but for civil society as well.

The small country had never before hosted such a big civil society event and such a high ranking governmental meeting like the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) which took place beginning of November 2012.

ASEM is organised every second year, alternating from Europe to Asia. AEPF is a kind of people's forum preceding the ASEM. In the end, the participants always adopt a declaration which is handed over to ASEM in order to make civil society discourses and positions visible. WIDE had been involved with the AEPF - sometimes in cooperation with DAWN - since 2004 in Hanoi, then 2008 in Beijing and 2010 in Brussels, mostly in workshops on labour, trade and an alternative trade mandate.

For the Lao government and administration the hosting of the AEPF was a tremendous democratic challenge and a learning process. Initially they had planned to "protect" the event by at least 500 soldiers. But after long negotiations with the international AEPF-organisation committee they seemed to open up for new ideas, curious to learn about innovations from civil societies (different from the hosts 2004 in Vietnam and 2008 in China).

Preparatory meetings were organised in each of the Lao provinces to find out about the problems and needs of the people and to introduce the four main topics of AEPF to them, namely universal social security, sustainable energy supply, food sovereignty, and decent work/sustainable livelihoods. The whole process in Laos was facilitated by Sombath Somphone, a crucial figure in Lao civil society, who in 2005 was awarded the prestigious Magsaysay prize for community leadership. Earlier he/his NGO had done together with UNDP a nationwide survey of "happiness" and "suffering" of the people - an exercise the Lao government strongly disliked.

Though not a majority, women prominently shaped the AEPF discourses as they shape the profiles of civil society organisations in South East Asia. Starting from a livelihood perspective they were key to the debates about food, land, water and social security. It is already a tradition of the AEPF that male trade unions dominate the labour debates. However, in Vientiane for the first time an additional focus was laid on care work which could easily be linked to the debates on livelihoods, food, and social security. It is striking that presently women from all over Asia (and Europe) demand recognition for their work, including women workers' organisations, like domestic workers, garbage collectors and petty traders. Migrant workers claim civic and identity rights, they want integration without assimilation. The recent case of the convention on domestic labour which was adopted by the ILO in 2011 was applauded as big step forward in terms of acknowledgement.

The ongoing liberalisation of investments makes South-East-Asia suffer from a deep crisis of livelihoods and resources, and from widespread and unfettered land and water grabbing. As usual,

at the macroeconomic level of investment and trade policies, women's voices are weak. But when it comes to the microlevel where the adverse impact of macroeconomics is felt, women are outspoken and courageously struggling to defend their livelihoods.

Investment leading to GDP-growth regularly asks a high price from local people in terms of loss of land and livelihoods and of being forced to explore new survival strategies and securities without being assured rights. Even Asian countries with high GDP-growth-rates did not succeed in securing livelihood rights and introducing the planned social security nets. Also the concepts of food security and measures against the price hike of food announced by governments and international finance and development agencies primarily serve the commercial interests of transnational industrialised food chains, and not the needs and rights of the poor.

A critique of trade, investment and resource extractivism from a North-South-perspective alone is no more sufficient in a multipolar world. It's true that the EU launches new trade, investment and resource strategies as a way out of the crisis. E.g. in October 2012 FTA-negotiations (Free Trade Negotiations) between the EU and Vietnam started. However, at the same time a large number of FTA's and economic partnership pacts are launched between Asian countries and between Asia and the Americas. Investors from all over use the EU-trade initiative „everything but arms“ which was supposed to give trade preference to LDCs (Least Developed Countries), for profit maximisation. For example a Thai company is busy grabbing land in Cambodia to plant sugar for the export into the EU. Thus economic power structures have become increasingly complex. At the same time, this is a new starting point for transcontinental solidarity, networking and the linking up of struggles.

The crisis situation in Europe works as another framework for transcontinental exchange and cooperation. It shows how the global South has gone North: nowadays debt management and proposed solutions like structural adjustment, conditionalities and austerity inform EU policies. The debt crisis is becoming permanent in Europe. So are austerity policies that dismantle the famous European social welfare model. They cause everywhere a precarisation of labour and social security going along with social disintegration. Thus informal and precarious, outsourced and contract labour is spreading in Europe - forms which are dominant since ever in Asia.

There is a multitude of struggles all over the two continents. In Asia they start from the grassroots, they are place-based, needs- and rights-driven: people are afraid of the risks in access to affordable drugs, protest against the eviction of petty traders and street vendors because of supermarkets like Metro und Carrefour, and demand decision making power vis-à-vis encroaching TNCs (Trans National Companies) and investors from tourism to mining.

In some cases, resistance strategies pay out: in Jakarta, the campaign "reclaiming public water" forced the French multi utility firm Suez to withdraw from urban water supply. Everywhere in Asia and Europe people are concerned about food sovereignty. Social movements like Via Campesina coin this a struggle concept because it calls for a change of paradigm in agriculture. After the disaster in Fukushima, people, in particular women, are extremely worried about nuclear power plants and the fact that many are under construction in Asia. Therefore they launched an anti-nuclear network of women at the AEPF.

The AEPF9 opened a discursive platform between radical and moderate social-democratic positions, e.g. between fair participation in decisions about investments and a claim for complete sovereignty and autonomy with regard to local resources, between corporate social responsibility and a change of paradigm.

Despite the broad range of topics discussed, some burning issues were missing. Pablo Solon, the new director of Focus on the Global South, criticised the absence of environmental problems and the

externalisation of ecological discourses from the economic discourses. Referring to the concept of *buen-vivir* from Bolivia, he asks for an „alternative to development“, because development always implies growth and resource extractivism. But most activists from Asia prefer to continue to work in their countries with a critical development approach. Thus, debates about de-growth and critique of consumerism, about a caring economy or an economy of solidarity and about a socio-ecological transformation remained at the margins.

The civil society topography of critical discourses and the struggles still have a number of blind spots, and they are fragmented. Both, a gender mainstreaming and a feminist perspective are not overwhelmingly strong. One even gets the impression that a decade ago they were stronger. Linking up discourses and struggles, reconnect issues and people, build strategic alliances, strengthen a holistic and simultaneously differentiated view - these are the main tasks of AEPF which have to be followed up again in 2014 in Brussels.

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PS: During the AEPF the Lao government got scared to loose control. It planted administrators and ministry employees in workshops where the Lao government was criticised. They defended and praised official policies with regard to investments, land, resources and dam construction.

On December 15th, Sombath Somphone was abducted and did not re-appear till today despite of international protests and wide coverage in international media. The international NGOcommunity is very worried about his disappearance and a possible link to his important role for the AEPF. As said in the beginning, the Lao government has a long way to go to democracy and respect for civil society.
