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PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

Declaration of the SDG 16 Plus Forum, Asia

2021



SDG
16

16

PEACE, JUSTICE
AND STRONG
INSTITUTIONS



INTRODUCTION

We the diverse participants of the 2021 SDG 16 + Asia Forum (see participants [here](#)) urge all key decision-makers and stakeholders at global, regional and national levels to act urgently to address the deteriorating democratic and human rights situation in Asia and to promote peaceful, just, and equitable societies across the region. These ambitious policy objectives are set out in SDG 16 of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to which all governments across Asia are signatories.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We urge decision-makers and other stakeholders to act immediately to:

- 01 **Reform** the international peace architecture as articulated in “Our Common Agenda”, recently published by the UN Secretary General
- 02 **Establish** an official annual, multistakeholder SDG 16 + Forum in Asia, thus demonstrating policy leadership to other regions
- 03 **Increase** the provision of international development finance through the World Bank and the IMF to enhance peace, human rights, democracy, and governance in the Asia region. The existing Asian Development banks, including the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank should also mobilise & increase funding for people-centered development and SDG 16 + in the region
- 04 **Promote** true peace and human security in the region, and the full realisation of all human rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights, which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- 05 **Establish** a UN regional human rights review mechanism for Asia, based on existing models in other regions
- 06 **Establish** immediate access and safe havens for the millions of civilians fleeing unjust rule, including from Myanmar and from Afghanistan where legitimate fears exist about revenge killings, and the violent suppression of women and other vulnerable communities

1. PREAMBLE

Today many countries in Asia experience continued shrinking civic space combined with a prolonged attack on democracy which have given rise to a range of conflict situations within and across countries in the region. This has impacted not only on long term peace processes in Asia but has also prevented more inclusive participation in public decision making. These worrying regional trends have had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable communities and have exacerbated the challenges confronting them.

With the benefits of hindsight, it is clear how the lack of integrated and inclusive approaches to decision making within certain countries, coupled with a systematic erosion of democratic values over time, has led to overall system failure. The resulting political and social turmoil and unrest is quickly felt in neighboring countries and the most vulnerable populations are often the ultimate victims. National governments, UN institutions and global civil society must unite to promote the causes of peace, the protection of human rights and democracy in the region, as the fall of Myanmar to military rule, and of Afghanistan to the rule of the Taliban have been major blows to peace processes in Asia in 2021.

It is in this context that the first SDG 16+ Forum in Asia has been organised by the Asia Development Alliance and its members, the TAP Network, Forus International and Global Call to Action against Poverty. The forum was part of the Global People's Assembly on the sidelines of United National General Assembly, and was attended by over 80 participants including CSOs, national, regional and global partners, national governments and UN institutions. The SDG 16 + Forum brought diverse voices together to reiterate our belief in inclusive institutions, a just society and the embrace of democratic values.



2. A RENEWED CALL TO ACTION

The MDGs were defined by some as ‘minimum development goals’. As a result, civil society globally worked to ensure that the SDGs were a more ambitious policy framework and that they set higher standards to be achieved by all countries and regions of the world. While the SDGs are ambitious in many ways, they unfortunately do not explicitly use the lens of human rights or of justice in the way that they are framed.

The current crisis in Asia has reinforced civil society’s belief in the importance of SDG 16 Plus of the UN’s 2030 Agenda (Just, Peaceful and Inclusive Societies) for achieving fair and equitable societies in the region, as well as for the achievement of the wider 2030 Agenda. The successful implementation of SDG16+ in Asia has the potential to reduce structural inequalities and to rebuild trust between governments and people, while making societies more resilient to future shocks and crises. However, the implementation of SDG 16+ in Asia is amongst the weakest implementation of all of the 2030 Agenda goals. Overall progress with achieving SDG 16 + in the Asia Pacific region leaves a lot to be desired (e.g. increased violence against women and girls, children, etc.). Data gaps linked to SDG 16+ also present a key challenge, especially at the regional level. The **2022 UN Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development** aims to discuss on this issue, in order to increase national capacities on data availability, collection & analysis.

As civil society organisations and other stakeholders from across the region, we remain committed to the effective collective implementation of SDG16+. We know that this is critical to the successful implementation of all of the other Sustainable Development Goals. We reiterate our call to all relevant actors - especially to UN Member States and international agencies - to step up their actions and investments for peaceful, just and inclusive societies worldwide, especially in Asia. We also call upon the UN institutions, international institutions and organizations, and member states to better articulate the key challenges faced by the Asia region, in relevant international and regional forums, and in particular the challenges currently faced by Afghanistan and Myanmar so that peace and justice can be restored in these countries. We call on all governments across the Asia region to promote the inclusion of the most marginalised communities in public decision-making processes especially Women, Children, Persons With Disabilities, LGBTQ+, indigenous and ethnic minorities, especially in those processes linked to achieving SDG16+. Hence we also cross-reference the 2021 Rome Civil Society Declaration to this document and call for further endorsement of this important declaration by civil society across the globe.

Today authoritarian regimes from East to West Asia are abusing the language and instruments of democracy to continue reducing civic space for civil society organisations, from the Philippines to India. This Forum salutes the courage of Afghan women who have been protesting in the last few weeks since the Taliban took over Afghanistan. The remarkable people power that has been so evident in the region has continued to challenge draconian laws, for example in Hong Kong in recent times. We are at an historic moment for societies across Asia who must continue to call for the commitment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - to which their governments are signatories - to inform all public policy and decision-making in the region.

Unfortunately, today we witness a worsening situation in Asia where inclusive decision-making is concerned. Many governments are moving in the opposite direction, especially during the time of pandemic, which has been used to intensify a wider crackdown on civil society and on human rights activists. Asia remains one of the few regions which does not have a regional human rights review mechanism, which would serve to hold governments more accountable for the commitments they have made under various international human rights treaties to which they are signatories.

The commitment of various Asian governments to democracy is also uneven. The UN system is often compromised relating to whether it can intervene or not, given the disproportionate power of its Security Council. Civil society believes that the role of regional bodies such as ASEAN should be explored in relation to the upholding and strengthening of democracy in East and South-East Asia.





Awaz Foundation Pakistan
Awaz CDS
Centre for Development Services



Global Call to Action Against Poverty
People Rising to End Inequalities



ACTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



ADA
Asia Development Alliance



**WE STAND TOGETHER
TO ATTACK POVERTY
& INEQUALITY**

3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SDG 16 + FORUM

3.1 We call on the United Nations and International Communities to:

Afghanistan

- **Increase support** for emergency evacuation, relocation, and resettlement operations for Afghans, particularly vulnerable and deserving peoples, increase allocation of refugees by countries
- **Grant asylum** to those who are at high risk and living in Afghanistan and the speeding up of this process
- **Use all possible means to restore peace and democracy** in Afghanistan
- **Ensure** that the cases of prisoners of war in Afghanistan are subject to the standards of international law and justice
- **Act** to prevent the spreading of the difficulties and challenges in Afghanistan to the wider region
- **Build** regional and international solidarity and support for the Afghan People
- **Put pressure** on the Taliban to restore human rights, especially women's rights, in order to achieve the official recognition and financing that it seeks. In the meantime it should be pressured to allow humanitarian aid to be provided as needed.
- **Create** an enabling environment for human rights, freedom and the liberty of people and open space for the media and for CSOs to be active without unwarranted and unjust interference

Myanmar

In Myanmar, deep roots of ethnic discrimination prevent the country from becoming fully unified and achieving peace. Military authorities have exploited a general lack of ethnic understanding and solidarity. On the other hand social movements and popular power have the potential to drive changes and to promote democracy (learning from the experiences of Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia)

We urge all UN member states to:

- **Pressure the present Junta regime in Myanmar to immediately cease all violence, including killings, torture and arrests, and to reinstate the elected government, now formed as the National Unity Government (NUG), as the legitimate government of Myanmar**
- **Ensure that the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Commission urge the Security Council “to consider all of the options it has previously used to deal with gross human rights violations”, including economic and financial sanctions, arms embargoes, and travel bans, call for judicial action at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and deny recognition of the military junta as the legitimate government representing the people of Myanmar precisely because they are not**
- **Support international media to listen to and broadcast the voices of the people of Myanmar, and recognise and support the agency of the Myanmar people at this time. This will mean more engagement with protest leaders and other legitimate Myanmar voices to understand their views and to know what support and solidarity measures could be most useful, as well as financial support to independent media who are reporting, under extreme risk to their safety and lives, from Myanmar**
- **Release all political detainees and educate Tatmadaw/Junta to respect elections and their legitimate outcomes**
- **Ensure that countries like Malaysia and Indonesia work with the ASEAN to help the people of Myanmar, and the people’s representative government of Myanmar**
- **Ensure that the youth in Myanmar receive assistance in terms of mental health support given the challenges they have faced in their country. It is very important to address them and to engage them in the youth development activities so that they are not left behind**

3.2 Call on UN , Member States and International Organizations

- **Reform** the international peace architecture as articulated in “Our Common Agenda”, recently published by the UN Secretary General
- **Ensure that** National Governments, UN institutions, international donors and global civil society unite for the cause of peace, protection of human rights and democracy across the Asia Region
- **Strengthen mechanisms for inclusive public participation** in the monitoring & implementation of the 2030 Agenda through localisation and inclusive approaches, especially through the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable communities
- **Promote true peace and human security across the region, and the realisation of all human rights** enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights, which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- **Ensure** that militarised approaches to peace and security, which unfortunately tend to be the norm, are not pursued by governments in the Asia Region as they consistently exclude and undermine women’s participation, the protection of human rights as well as systematically undermining opportunities for sustainable peace
- **Establish immediate actions and safe havens** for the millions of civilians fleeing unjust rule, especially those coming from Afghanistan where there are legitimate fears about revenge killings, the violent suppression of women and other vulnerable communities
- **Negotiate arrangements** with neighbouring countries for humanitarian operations.
- **Increase financial support from the international community** to support the effective and inclusive implementation of SDG 16+ across the region
- **Apply sanctions** to any country whose government is not legitimate, remove any preferential trading arrangements and cease commercial operations with it
- **Ensure that UN Resident country offices enhance their communication with UN regional offices**, to offer support for any development programs, especially those providing opportunities for young people to engage with UN spaces and consultation processes to support Youth monitoring and implementation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda

3.3 Redefining Democracy

- Rebuild democratic models to make them more people centric and representative, and ensuring the availability of adequate processes for citizens' dialogue
- Ensure that the human rights discourse is retrieved from the hands of technocrats, and instead is used and owned by the people and not by elites
- Ensure that the promise of the 2030 Agenda to “Leave No One Behind” is fulfilled and that robust democracies are build which enable to full participation of the most marginalised communities ("Nothing About Us Without Us")
- Ensure that fully funded independent public monitoring and watchdog bodies are in place, and their ability to continue functioning ensured, even if there is a change of government
- Ensure that human rights institutions comply with 8 points of Paris principals
- Encourage national politicians to stand not for populist ideas but for what is in the interests of all people, including minorities, and to act with a longer-term perspective in mind
- End corruption, (e.g. ensure independent police force in Malaysia to check excessive power)



3.4 Linking SDG 16 +

- **Recognise the critical interlinkages** between SDG 16 plus and other SDGs, especially during COVID 19
- **Urge governments to commit more towards urgent action on SDG16+**, and to clearly outline what they are doing regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; the VNR process is a clear opportunity to do so
- **Recognise the role of CSO led spotlight reporting** as an important accountability tool where the 2030 Agenda monitoring is concerned
- **Use tools**, such as the [SDG 16 plus CSO toolkit by TAP Network](#), to support CSOs to work at the local level

3.5 Human Rights/Partnership

- **Support strong popular movements** in ASEAN countries to put pressure on their respective governments to support the people of Myanmar, and on businesses that invest in them, to start with
- **Strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships** between state, private sector and CSOs
- **Urge the governments of Republic of Korea and Japan** to take the DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society (adopted 6 July) seriously and to change their policies and practices accordingly
- **Urge the UN member states** to increase the provision of international development finance through the World Bank and the IMF to enhance peace, human rights, democracy, and governance in the Asia region. The existing Asian Development banks, including the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank should also mobilise & provide increased funding for **'people's centered development'**, linked to SDG 16 + in the region.

3.6 Capacity Building

- **Recognise SDG 16 + as the best framework to set the agenda for capacity building of different stakeholders** including civil society, and to address issues of human rights, criminal justice, and upholding the rule of law. This kind of training should be made available to empower grassroots communities and various movements
- **Organise regular regional and national workshops** to engage grassroot communities and to support them in developing indicators for the implementation of SDG 16 Plus, and to support effective monitoring and tracking
- **Provide extensive capacity building** to popular movements working with Myanmar/Afghanistan on how to use existing human rights mechanisms, including enlisting support from UN special rapporteurs, from the UN Human Rights Council etc.
- **Ensure ongoing capacity building is provided for different stakeholders**, to educate communities at the grassroot level (+ for young people) and to support the involvement of experts, especially those with expertise on the rule of law, crime prevention, criminal justice, democracy and human rights
- **Strengthen capacity building courses/tools available** to different stakeholders, including civil society in terms of the rule of law, crime prevention, criminal justice, democracy and human rights and encourage learning about the benefits of multi-stakeholder engagement where diverse partners share their experience and expertise
- **Support the SDG 16 + related knowledge, tools and resources** to support the gathering of data/evidence and the documentation of human rights violations happening in Myanmar and Afghanistan and elsewhere in Asia at present

3.7 Humanitarian Assistance

- Increase humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and its neighboring countries to which Afghans are fleeing.
- Pledge new support for civil society groups inside and outside of Afghanistan, recognise their need for humanitarian assistance and support them in protecting the rights of people from Afghanistan and Myanmar
- Massively increase humanitarian aid to the people of Myanmar and Afghanistan and accompany this with political action to protect the human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the people of both countries
- Forge collaboration between donor agencies, both bilateral and multilateral agencies, and ensure that aid conditionalities promote CSOs participation in relevant peace processes
- Provide adequate humanitarian assistance and basic necessities along with psycho-social support to the most vulnerable groups
- Mobilize relevant agencies and mechanisms to provide relief for people in distress.
- Ensure the strong voices of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in relevant decision-making processes including where the provision of humanitarian assistance is concerned
- Build and strengthen local civil society, including human rights and development CSOs, in these countries instead of exclusively supporting global aid agencies

3.8 Restore Peace and Stop Violence

- Ensure quality education for all as a fundamental condition for peace-building and stability, protecting people's rights and freedom, particularly the rights of women and girls
- Create an independent, disability and gender-sensitive investigative and accountability mechanism at the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- Ensure that the UN Security Council passes a resolution to protect Afghan and Myanmar women, girls and minorities
- Reject all violence against peaceful protesters and call for “utmost restraint” by the current regimes in Afghanistan and Myanmar, to uphold “democratic institutions and processes” and for the immediate release of detained government leaders
- Uphold the rule of law, the democratic process and human rights in countries in the region which are in conflict

THE DECLARATION OF THE ASIAN FORUM ON SDG 16+

This declaration was drawn up based on wide-ranging presentations and deliberations during the 2021 SDG 16 + Forum, and inputs were provided by participating organisations from across the Asia region and internationally.

The participants of the 2021 SDG 16 + Forum included

Organizer

Asia Development Alliance

Co-Organisers

Forus

TAP Network

GCAP Global

Japan NGO Center for International
Cooperation

Participating Organizations

Afghanistan National Education Coalition Organization (ANECO)

ARGO, Kazakhstan

Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism

CECOEDECON & PAIRVI

Finnish Development NGO, Finland

Former UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions and Extreme Poverty & Human Rights (P. Alston- NYU Law Professor)

Governance and Peacebuilding Team Leader Bangkok Regional Hub, UNDP

Govt of Malaysia

Human Right Commission, Malaysia

Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development, Republic of Korea

Malaysia CSO-SDG Alliance for SDGs

Bihar Legislative Council, India

MGOS Coordination Mechanism for the HLPF

Oxfam India

Pakistan Development Alliance

Progressive Voice, Burma

UN ESCAP, Bangkok

