

Report on the ASEAN Civil Society Conference on  
Building A Common Future Together  
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Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

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Isagani R. Serrano  
Vice-President  
Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

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The Conference was a side event of the 11th ASEAN Summit. It was organized by the Centre for ASEAN Studies based at the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

About 150 participants were invited, coming from 11 member-countries of the ASEAN. I was a speaker on the theme of natural resources and environmental management in one of the two plenary sessions.

The Conference was intended as a platform for engaging the ASEAN, particularly the 11th ASEAN Summit on 12-14 December 2005 in Kuala Lumpur, where a 15-minute opportunity was opened for civil society inputs. This space was originally reserved for the organizer, the Centre for ASEAN Studies, but was adjusted after negotiations among participants and between the Conference and the ASEAN Secretariat. Now the participants from each country represented would themselves select their spokesperson at the Summit.

The Conference aimed to:

1. identify the role that civil society can play in achieving an ASEAN community;
2. arrive at an outcome to facilitate future collective efforts in line with building an ASEAN community;
3. provide a platform for ASEAN Civil Society to discuss matters of common interest;
4. enhance the rapport between the respective governments and civil society for the betterment of the ASEAN community; and
5. open up a discourse among civil society organizations and also between the civil society caucus and the government.

The Conference bannered the theme "Building a Common Future Together". The sub-themes were (1) ASEAN Identity and Media; (2) Economy and Trade; (3) Human Dignity; (4) Natural Resources and Environment; and (5) Women, Youth and Indigenous Groups.

Malaysian Foreign Minister YB Dato Sri Mahd Najib Abdul Razak keynoted the opening ceremonies. His message revolved around the now familiar ASEAN slogan "One vision, one identity, one community" and the desire of this intergovernmental body to engage civil society in the pursuit of its dream for the region.

The Conference tackled the five themes through a mix of plenary sessions and workshops. The outcome document was a Conference statement to be presented to the 11<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit. Two plenary sessions were dedicated for inputs and a closing one for finalizing the Conference statement. Workshops were grouped according to the five themes and ran for two days with the same set of participants.

Human rights, a term which ASEAN avoids to use officially, generated some heated discussions. The case of Burma, of course, was centerpiece issue.

Some issues also surfaced as to the manner the Conference was organized. One set had to do with content and process, another about logistics. In fairness, the organizer, the Centre for ASEAN Studies, was set up only a year ago and this was their first major international conference.

All issues considered, I still believe the Conference succeeded in meeting its objectives. It was also a breakthrough of sorts in the ASEAN-civil society relations.



The Conference participants were treated to a dinner reception and cultural night at the Putrajaya Lake Club on December 7. This was sponsored by the Prime Minister's Department and the Chief Secretary of State.

## **The Bangkok Conference**

The Regional Conference on Civil Society Engagement in the ASEAN was held on 3-5 October 2005 at the Trang Hotel in Bangkok. The Conference explored the possibilities of engaging the ASEAN on various issues affecting the citizens and communities of this region. The Conference also discussed civil society participation in the 11<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in December in Kuala Lumpur.

Representatives from the ASEAN Secretariat also participated. The Conference had a frank dinner conversation with the ASEAN Secretary General Ong Keng Yong himself.

The Conference was organized by the South East Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA), Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA), FORUM-Asia, and Sustainability Watch Asia. About 75 participants came, representing various Asian civil society organizations.

The Conference was designed to include orientation on the ASEAN and plenaries and workshops to discuss various issues related to the ASEAN functioning. These issues concern trade, agriculture, migrants, conflict prevention and peace building, human rights and media, environment, and Burma.

An 11-page summary of discussions was drafted by Rashid Kang of Forum Asia. Based on this the Conference agreed on a shorter Conference statement (attached) finalized through email exchange coordinated by Daphne Villanueva of SEACA. The statement was sent to the ASEAN secretariat for their consideration.





## About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

