

Peoples-to-Peoples Connectivity in the Asia–Europe Meeting

‘BY THE PEOPLE’ INSTEAD ‘FOR THE PEOPLE’

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Global governance is becoming increasingly complex and propelling international institutions toward creative and cooperative terms of business. An interdependent world would ideally promote freer and seamless connectivity among people and ideas. Transregional fora such as the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) are expected to become more people oriented and foster such connectivity. Despite many non-state actors’ activities under ASEM’s Social, Cultural, and Educational Pillar, a more inclusive ASEM is still a distant, though overdue, vision. ASEM must take a holistic plan, which is embedded in wider institutional reforms, to connect people between Asia and Europe.

Why Peoples-to-Peoples Connectivity Is Relevant

Most international fora struggle with an image of state-centrism and elitism. In the public perception, they are often regarded as arcane circles of government officials, bureaucrats, and chief business executives advancing global political and economic agendas with detrimental consequences for the livelihood of the majority of the population. Globalisation critics associate with international institutions lack of transparency and weak accountability structures, resulting in economic growth that is neither equitable nor sustainable. Such fears driven by the increasing complexity of global governance propel the emergence of populist countermovements which fundamentally challenge the legitimacy of international institutions and seriously jeopardise the cooperative management of an increasingly interdependent world. Transregional fora such as the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) are no exception to this dilemma. It is thus essential that ASEM joins other international institutions which in the past two decades have made credible steps to become more people-oriented. However, despite a flurry of non-state actors’ activities under ASEM’s Social, Cultural, and Educational Pillar, little tangible progress has been made towards a more inclusive ASEM. It is thus overdue that after 20 years of existence, ASEM gets serious in overcoming its asymmetrical institutional structure that has relegated non-state stakeholders to marginal roles. While peoples-to-peoples (P2P) connectivity has frequently been named as a panacea to overcome ASEM’s legitimacy problems, people’s interactions per se are not sufficient

to achieve this objective. Only P2P connectivity comprehended as a **holistic concept** and embedded in wider institutional reforms may strengthen ASEM as a multilateral utility in the following ways:

- Intensified P2P interaction might deepen the interdependence between Europe and Asia and thereby enhance opportunities for invigorating public and private cooperation with tangible and self-sustaining material and immaterial benefits for the societies of member countries.
- Closer P2P relations might substantially improve public knowledge and awareness about the regional ‘Other’ and thereby broadly socialise the rationale for intensified cooperation between Asia and Europe. They might increase mutual appreciation; foster tolerance and better understanding of different historical trajectories and cultures; overcome indifference, prejudices, and stereotypes; and develop societal ownership of ASEM.
- P2P connectivity might facilitate the emergence of transregional track-two and track-three dialogues. Intensified and focused cooperation of epistemic communities lowers the legitimacy deficit of ASEM as it directly engages societal stakeholders in the development of solutions for cross-regional and global problems.
- P2P connectivity might additionally bolster the legitimacy of ASEM, if it does not remain a parallel structure to government interactions. The prospects for the successful implementation of ASEM projects will markedly increase through a combination of ‘input legitimacy’ and ‘output legitimacy’. Input legitimacy entails greater inclusiveness of decision-making through the consultation of non-state actors and greater accountability. Greater input legitimacy reduces resistance to the implementation of policies and thus enhances output legitimacy.

Peoples-to-Peoples Connectivity among ASEM Members

P2P connectivity can be of a cross-regional and an intra-regional nature. Facilitating intra-regional cooperation is a welcome side effect of inter- and transregional dialogue fora such as ASEM, but cannot be further elaborated here. This paper thus exclusively concentrates on cross-regional P2P interactions.

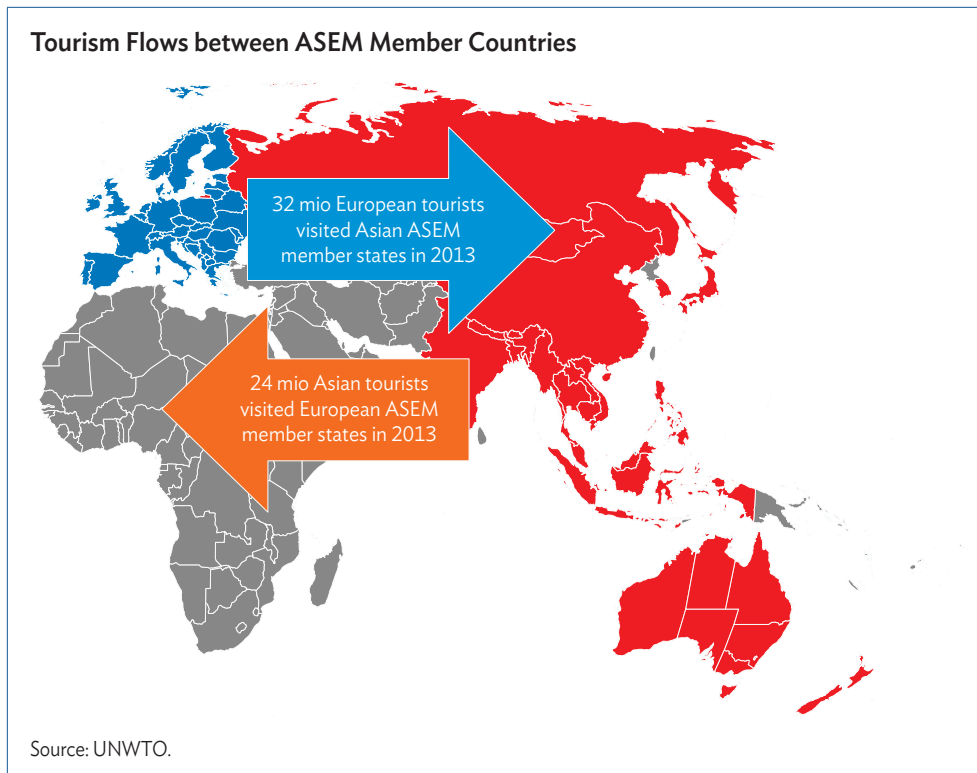
P2P connectivity is not an entirely new agenda in ASEM. Governments have repeatedly recognised the need to involve the people in order to create awareness about ASEM, to squelch suspicions about the forum’s objectives, and to advocate the opportunities it entails for non-governmental stakeholders to cooperate across regions. Three types of P2P connectivity can be distinguished which differ by function, scope, intensity, and stakeholder group: mass-based, track 2, and track 3 connectivity.

Mass-Based Connectivity. The first type of activity bringing the population of ASEM member countries closer to each other is **mass based**. Increased travel and tourism development involves the interaction of large numbers of people and connects well with ASEM's economic agenda. It may stimulate economic growth in the sending and the receiving countries. The hotel industry, gastronomy, transportation, services, and retail trade are the sectors benefiting directly from ASEM tourism. Economic growth effects may be spread broadly, including small and medium enterprises, and contributing to substantial job creation.

However, so far tourism promotion under the auspices of ASEM has had limited effects for the legitimacy of the institution and public awareness for Asia–Europe cooperation has remained diffused. As their trips are not explicitly branded as ASEM-related activity, most travellers hardly realise that their tours are the outcome of intensified transregional cooperation. Besides, travel and tourism do not automatically facilitate better mutual understanding. Their sociocultural effects largely depend on the organisation and duration of the trips, the motivation of the tourists, their level of education including intercultural competences, the intensity and frequency of contacts with the local population and the sensitivity of the population in the destination countries for a culturally different clientele of visitors. In other words, travel and tourism, while on first sight a positive contribution to P2P interaction, may also have unintended negative effects if not managed carefully.

Statistics from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) show a marked increase of cross-regional travels between Asia and Europe in the 2010–2014 period. While tourists from Asian ASEM member countries to European member countries surged from 16.1 million (2010) to 23.8 million (2013), tourists from European member countries to Asian member countries increased in the same period from 26.2 million to 32.1 million. In 2013 most-favoured tourist destinations of Asians in Europe were France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and the Netherlands, while most popular destinations for Europeans in Asia were Kazakhstan, China, Thailand, India, Singapore, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Viet Nam. Russia—a European as well as an Asian country—is the destination of 2.1 million Asian tourists and 28.9 million European tourists.

In the past, tourism was also impeded by visa regulations. Although countries such as China and India demand visas from tourists of almost all ASEM partners, preliminary evidence suggests that visa-free entry is asymmetric. In general, Asian countries seem to grant tourists visa-free entry to a greater array of countries than Europe. Available information suggests that in Europe, visa-free entry discriminates against developing countries, favouring the economically advanced Asian ASEM member countries. Sometimes, visa procedures are quite cumbersome, as Asian travellers have to appear in person in the consulates of European countries for interviewing before they can get a visa.



Air traffic and flight connections concentrate on hubs in both regions. Direct flights and inexpensive air fares exist in abundance, but the frequency and number of destinations vary considerably across both regions. Direct flights from Asia to Europe primarily target destinations in Western Europe (United Kingdom, Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy), and from Europe to Asia mainly East Asia (China, Hong Kong, and Japan) and to a somewhat lesser extent, Southeast Asia, with Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia as frequent destinations. Flights to other ASEM destinations are much less frequent and usually require transfers and considerably longer travel times.

Another P2P interaction potentially involving large numbers of people and connecting well with tourism is city twinning. However, available data show that European city partnerships with Asian ASEM countries do not exceed 10 percent of all European city twinning agreements. The overwhelming majority of European city partnerships concentrated on Russia (38.12 percent), China (28.03 percent), and Japan (18.50 percent). ASEAN countries, Australia and New Zealand, and South Asia hovered at around 5 percent. One key problem these figures mirror is that in the perception of European decision-makers, Asia is largely confined to China and the remainder of East Asia. South Asia, Central Asia, and the ASEAN region do not play a role in their world views.

To what extent city twinning promotes better cross-regional and intercultural understanding is difficult to assess and needs more specific studies. It certainly has potentials, but to what extent they are exhausted much depends on the programmatic substance, intensity, and frequency of the exchanges. Scattered evidence suggests that European–ASEAN city partnerships are less intensive than intra-European partnerships or city partnerships with North America.

Track Two Connectivity. A second type of P2P interaction focuses on **track two epistemic cooperation** and mainly involves the academia, intellectuals, artists, journalists, parliamentarians, and issue-based specialists. Unlike tourism and city twinning, these activities are more elitist, more intermittent, and usually involve only a limited number of people. However, many of these conferences, seminars, workshops, and lecture-type events are problem- or issue-oriented and thus may enhance societal awareness for ASEM's 'multilateral utility'. The backdrop, however, is that the results and insights generated by these activities find little access to the governmental track one process. ASEM thus shares the deficiency of many other international institutions which are 'pillarised'—usually including a governmental, business, and civil society pillar—with the pillars only weakly interconnected and synergies remaining limited. It is somewhat disillusioning that this problem has not been more actively tackled by ASEM in its second decade, although it has already been highlighted by the University of Helsinki's comprehensive 10-year anniversary study in 2006 taking stock of the forum's efficacy.

Facilitation of the civil society-related cultural and intellectual exchange between Asia and Europe has been entrusted to the Asia–Europe Foundation (ASEF). Established in 1997, ASEF received contributions from member countries amounting to 6.1 million Singapore dollars (S\$) in 2014. It finances its activities from an operating fund (S\$72.8 million) and a project fund (S\$32.6 million). Since its formation ASEF has implemented over 650 projects, bringing together more than 17,000 direct participants. ASEF is involved in a broad range of themes, including media, environmental issues, education and university cooperation, and many other activities. While these events help to galvanise Asian–European cooperation of epistemic communities and inculcate the idea and relevance of Asia–Europe multilateral cooperation in many of the participants, there are also voices questioning the efficacy and sustainability of ASEF activities. Although commending ASEF for its comprehensive social and cultural exchange programme, critics bemoan that the organisation's programmes are too diverse and unfocused. The sustainability of the programmes is limited given the fact that ASEF is a relatively small organisation with a staff of 46 (2014) and—in view of the size of its task—finite and unstable financial resources. As ASEF's chief executives are career bureaucrats, it has also been criticised that governments act as gatekeepers of civil society participation and P2P interactions are far from autonomous. As a response to that critique, ASEF organised four 'Connecting Civil Societies of Asia and Europe Conferences' between 2004 and 2010.

With the Council for Asia–Europe Cooperation (CAEC), a forum of think tanks primarily discussing geopolitical and security issues met regularly in ASEM's first decade. Independent of ASEP, CAEC was a parallel forum to the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, set up under the aegis of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). However, despite an impressive output of studies, CAEC had no direct interaction with ASEM governments and ceased its operation after ASEM-5 in 2004.

Contacts also exist between parliamentarians of both regions. The Asia–Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP), established in 1996, serves as the parliamentary arm of ASEM. ASEP convened for the first time in 1996 in Strasbourg, but had to be revived after it failed to convene in 1998 and 2000. Since the 2002 meeting in Manila, it has convened regularly every two years, with the eighth and most recent meeting held in Rome (2014). ASEP pursues the objectives of helping to advance ASEM, monitoring the progress achieved within ASEM, strengthening dialogue and mutual understanding among parliamentarians, and drawing to the attention of ASEM leaders a number of issues that legislators consider to be priorities as laid down in resolutions and the final declarations of ASEP meetings. The Rules of Procedure adopted in ASEP-4 in Helsinki (2006) have fostered a modest institutionalisation of the forum.

Meetings cover a broad array of topics on a non-binding basis, including themes such as international security, international law, fairer global trade, cultural identity, interfaith dialogue, climate change, energy security, education and mobility, and the role of parliamentarians in Asia–Europe relations. ASEP delegates also share information and best practices related to making laws in areas such as economic and institutional reform, economic integration, poverty reduction, and environmental protection. Critics, however, deplore the body's lack of effectiveness, its largely ceremonial character with limited time for debate and missing links to civil society, and the official track one. As a result, on the European side, only the European Parliament is a persistent participant, while many national parliamentary delegations failed to join the meeting. An Asia–Europe Young Parliamentarians Meeting convening under the auspices of ASEP met six times, but was discontinued after 2007.

Businesspeople meet in the Asia–Europe Business Forum, which convened 14 times since 1996, initially on an annual basis and since 2004 on a biennial basis. As by the mid-2000s doubts about the efficacy of the forum began to mount, in 2006 the forum was transformed into an advisory council, similar to the bodies set up by Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the ASEAN. While in the past the forum—usually attended by 200–300 business representatives—was prolific in drafting recommendations for the track one summits, assessments of the extent to which they became ASEM policies varied. Yet, compared to most of ASEM's other track two fora, business leaders seemed to have by far the best access to the political leadership, benefiting from the fact that at least in its first decade ASEM's agenda concentrated on economic cooperation.

Track Three Connectivity. A third category of P2P connectivity, which to some extent overlaps with track two activities, is the more grassroots-oriented **track three fora**, involving a broad spectrum of non-governmental organisations, social movements, solidarity networks, labour unions, and critical parliamentarians. Track three fora crystallise in the Asia–Europe People’s Forum (AEPF) and the Asia–Europe Trade Union Forum. Both fora act autonomously, without government intervention or support by ASEF although individual, mostly European, ASEM member governments provide financial support for AEPF’s alternative summits.

The AEPF was formed in 1996 and has since convened 10 times. Its operations are guided by a charter enacted in December 2005. An international organising committee coordinates the activities of the forum, supported by coordinating organisations in each region—in Asia, the Institute for Popular Democracy (Philippines) and Monitoring Sustainability of Globalisation (Malaysia); in Europe, the Transnational Institute (Netherlands). The AEPF holds its biennial meetings as alternative summits parallel to ASEM Summits. The last AEPF convened in Milano, Italy, and brought together more than 400 activists. The topics discussed and networking concentrated on international trade, neo-liberal globalisation, poverty alleviation, social justice and social protection, environmental sustainability, food sovereignty, participatory democracy, human rights, peace and security. At the end of an alternative summit, AEPF summarises the most important conclusions and submits them to the leaders for consideration. In between summits, national organising committees, working groups, and advocacy circles on specific themes organise campaigns and keep up the momentum of the forum.

However, representation of the forum’s members is unequal. On the European side, many participants come from Western Europe, Germany, and Scandinavia; on the Asian side, from the Philippines, Indonesia, and increasingly South Asia. Other subregions such as Northeast and Central Asia, Eastern Europe, or countries such as Viet Nam, Lao PDR, or Myanmar are only weakly represented. There appear to be not much direct contacts between the AEPF and track one meetings. While in the past ASEM government relations with the AEPF were strained, chairman’s statements of more recent summits at least indicated that leaders have taken note of the demands of civil society organisations, thus ushering in a more relaxed relationship. A watershed in this respect was the ASEM-6 in Helsinki, when for the first time representatives of the host governments addressed AEPF’s alternative summit. The ASEM-7, ASEM-8, and ASEM-10 summits in Beijing, Brussels, and Milano continued this practice. Trade unions split from the AEPF in 1998 and since then convened independently. Yet, none of their demands found expression in chairman’s statements, suggesting that government largely ignored them.

Recommendations for Invigorating Peoples-to-Peoples Connectivity among ASEM Members: Same, Same, But More and Better

Recommendations to strengthen ASEM P2P connectivity must take into account that many formats and events facilitating peoples and stakeholder interactions are already in place. Subsequent proposals thus avoid reinventing the wheel. Improvements of P2P connectivity should concentrate on improving its efficacy, replicability, and sustainability. The following premises guide this agenda:

- P2P connectivity must change from a top-down agenda which governments paternalistically organise ‘for the people’ to a bottom-up agenda which is borne ‘by the people’, that is, an agenda which is stakeholder driven, entailing greater popular autonomy and popular ownership, albeit without excluding government participation.
- P2P connectivity should become a process more than merely an event-driven activity, thereby invigorating the sustainability of non-state interactions.
- P2P connectivity should encourage increased participation of ASEM’s new member countries.
- Without reducing the rich agenda of epistemic communities’ interaction facilitated by ASEF, track two and track three interactions should become more focused; that is, concentrating on the most-pressing cross-regional issues.
- P2P connectivity should deepen, that is, penetrating societies of member countries to a greater extent than hitherto by not only focusing on capital-based and national actors but also by including more local audiences and target groups.
- P2P connectivity should entail a sound mix of high-profile, highly visible, large-scale events and a rich, though focused and sustainable, programme of issue- and stakeholder-driven P2P interactions.
- P2P connectivity is underfinanced. A more viable interaction of non-state actors urgently needs a broader foundation of financial resources and must involve more private sector funding;
- The significance of P2P connectivity becomes more visible if ASEM takes strides towards a gradual institutionalisation of its activities, thereby mutating towards an international forum which replaces contingent policy making by more binding, transparent, and focused decision-making. The more ASEM develops in this direction, the more it heightens the incentives for societal stakeholder participation.

High-Profile, Highly Visible, Large-Scale Events with Mass Impact. If connectivity is to become a policy priority in ASEM’s third decade, it must include P2P interaction that is highly visible and helps branding ASEM among a broad audience in the forum’s member

countries. Such a strategy can be derived from perception surveys suggesting that the population is more aware of ASEM in countries where summits or other high-profile meetings have taken place. Flagship events could be trade fairs, tourism fairs, visit Asia or visit Europe years, sports events, cultural year with an annually changing topic, featuring a European country in Asia and an Asian country in Europe, film or other cultural festivals; in short, all types of events that have a high visibility and prestige, which can be branded as activities related to the ASEM process and which would involve a great number of participants from ASEM member countries. An increased mutual presence of cultural institutions would support these activities. Also the promotion of tourism and aviation belongs to this category of activities: creating attractive and affordable tour packages; joint tourism product development; facilitation of tourist safety and security; fostering socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable tourism; the easing of visa regulations for tourists where these are still a deterrent for travelers; aviation dialogue; and eventually the conclusion of aviation agreements. However, proposals for easier and more uniform visa procedures across the entire spectrum of ASEM member countries must be seen in the light of the current refugee wave from the Middle East to Europe, which may reduce the willingness of European governments to simplify visa regulations for tourists, especially those of developing countries.

City twinning should be stepped up markedly, considering that only a minor percentage of city partnerships focus on the respective other region. It should concentrate especially on those regions that—like Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Oceania—have been largely neglected so far. Issue-oriented city twinning has the potential of markedly increasing awareness and legitimacy of transregional cooperation beyond the capitals. Many pathologies of globalisation crystallise in cities: environmental issues, socioeconomic disparities, pandemics, irregular migration, organised crime, or terrorism are only the most salient of them. City partnerships could tackle these problems; joint expert working groups, exchange of citizens, experts, and officials could facilitate the identification of best practices and foster mutual learning. City partnerships as well as partnerships of other types of local governments, provinces, or even transborder regions such as the Euro regions and the growth triangles and quadrangles in East Asia would have similar effects and would deepen awareness for Asia–Europe relations beyond the capitals. Such local government partnerships could also include intensified cooperation for sustainable development with ASEM partner countries, complementing existing schemes such as, for instance, European Union support for the Lower Mekong Region. To make such activities sustainable, virtual databases with 'best practices' or documentation of pertinent projects (or project literature) could support such activities. ASEM internship programmes could familiarise especially young people with the 'other' region and also programmes of E-connectivity—ASEM chat rooms, blogs, and the extended use of social media—could be activities which, while not being flagship programmes, may nevertheless have mass appeal, lead to an upsurge of cross-regional communication, and therefore increase transregional awareness.

Track Two Epistemic Group Events. As stated above, ASEF has developed a broad range of epistemic community interactions in many issue areas. ASEF's creativity in terms of themes for expert conferences, workshops, round tables, and seminars should by all means be maintained. But pending a thorough evaluation of ASEF activities, a number of recommendations can potentially optimise the impact and sustainability of ASEF.

Although ASEF has already focused on the media as important multipliers for ASEM activities, more needs to be done in this respect. Reports on ASEM in print and electronic media so far concentrate on the biennial summit meetings. Themes of a cross-regional Asia–Europe dimension must get priority attention. This entails nurturing a core group of specialised journalists who develop the expertise and motivation to persuade chief editors that the notorious Euro- and Asia-centrism of the media in both regions, respectively, needs to be overcome. Exposure tours in both directions must be organised more frequently and must also include journalists working for regional or local-range media. However, given its limited budget and far-stretched portfolio of activities, ASEF would be overburdened to shoulder this task alone. Therefore, civil society foundations, media and business associations, the European Union, and governments should contribute to the development of media that inform the public regularly and competently about issues of Asia–Europe relations.

ASEF and other epistemic circles should become more focused. Instead of hyperactivism, organising expert meetings in an indiscriminate way around a plethora of issues, meetings of epistemic communities should concentrate on topics that cause the greatest public concern; for instance, issues of managing financial crises, irregular migration and refugee movements, environmental degradation and climate change (REDD+), energy, disaster management, widening socioeconomic disparities, and interfaith dialogue. Also think tank interaction should be revived and interaction with track one facilitated.

ASEF should nurture epistemic communities which are less contingent in their composition and in which not only European Asia specialists should meet with Asian experts on Europe. As observed, experts of the 'other' region have only limited influence in the context of the public's Euro- or Asia-centrism, the bureaucracy, and among political decision-makers. Therefore, mainstream experts who so far did not have a transregional horizon should be invited to meetings of area-focused epistemic communities, including cultural and educational cooperation. Results should be more effectively disseminated to the public as well as the official track one, another significant reason for stepping up Asia–Europe media cooperation.

Governments should relax their control of ASEF and reduce their gatekeeping role of epistemic processes. The ASEF leadership should no longer remain in the hands of career diplomats, who are beholden to their governments. Instead, it should be opened to

recruitment taking into account specific professional expertise needed for ASEF activities. Civil society and epistemic community interaction should be largely autonomous from government interference; a *conditio sine qua non* for a self-sustaining growth of epistemic and civil society connectivity.

Also cooperation of parliamentarians under the aegis of ASEP should be fostered. This necessitates meetings which transcend the so-far largely ceremonial nature of ASEP interactions. Space for frank discussions must be widened, which calls for a reduction of plenary meetings with their prefabricated speeches. Parliamentary interaction must also entail an accountability dimension, meaning, that a parliamentary delegation meets ASEM leaders during summits and that parliamentary bodies might be allowed to summon representatives of the executives for briefing and interpellation. Themes related to ASEM and public parliamentary diplomacy should also play a greater role in the bilateral relationships European and Asian parliaments cultivate.

Track Three Connectivity. Acceptance of track three interaction by ASEM governments has increased during recent years. This is a positive development. This process should be nurtured further. Results of alternative summits should not only be rhetorically welcomed by governments but also be seriously taken into account. ASEM's legitimacy would also gain if direct and regular interfaces with civil society could be established, similar to the government–business dialogue relations during summits. A first step in this direction was made at ASEM-10 in Milano, where for the first time an interface between leaders and non-state stakeholders including ASEP, AEFP, and AEBF took place. Yet the meeting with three significant stakeholder groups was scheduled for only 15 minutes and thus hardly more than participatory symbolism. ASEM's accountability would increase if in such meetings government leaders and senior officials would have to explain their policies and decisions to civil society and other non-state stakeholders. Civil society itself must seek to become more representative of the region. Often the legitimacy of the groups convening at alternative summits is questioned, mainly due to the fact that their composition is arbitrary, with some regions and some issue areas being overrepresented, while other important member countries and issue areas are hardly represented.

Funding. So far P2P connectivity projects are grossly underfunded to have a lasting impact in terms of awareness and learning about the 'other' region. It is thus imperative that, here too, spreading thin finite resources must be avoided and programme activities concentrate on major cross-regional issues. P2P interaction must emancipate itself from the dependency on government funding, which means that to a much greater extent than hitherto, private organisations including those mentioned in the previous section must be persuaded to participate in the funding of ASEM events and activities. Without achieving a critical mass of focused and sustainable activities in all three types of P2P interactions, most pillar three activities will remain symbolic exercises.

Looking Ahead into 2025: What ASEM Must Do for Peoples-to-Peoples Connectivity

The growing significance of peoples-to-peoples connectivity can not be overstated. Enhanced interaction of peoples deepens cross-regional interdependencies and heightens public knowledge and awareness of the regional ‘other’. It fosters intercultural understanding and tolerance and nurtures popular ownership of ASEM. As ASEM moves into its third decade, it has every reason to look behind with satisfaction the progress made in bringing the peoples of Asia and Europe closer to each other. Looking ahead into the next years, it is evident that potentials of peoples-to-peoples connectivity are by no means exhausted. Many of the current activities are event driven instead of process oriented. A reinvigorated strategy for promoting peoples-to-peoples connectivity must be comprehensive and sustainable. It must complement schemes facilitating the interaction of large numbers of people with focused issue- and people-oriented track two and track three activities.

A road map for upgrading peoples-to-peoples connectivity should include recurrent flagship events with high visibility and great publicity for ASEM. Annual trade fairs, tourism fairs, visit Asia or visit Europe years, cultural years, sports events, film or other cultural festivals are examples. An increased mutual presence of cultural institutions would support these activities. Other measures include the intensified promotion of socially, culturally, and environmentally sustainable tourism, aviation cooperation, and the easing of visa regulations. City twinning, cooperation between provinces and transborder regions, and increased communication by modern social media create opportunities to spread ASEM-inspired activities to the local level in member countries.

ASEF has been a catalyst for civil society-related, cultural, artistic, and intellectual exchanges. Yet ASEF requires to define priority programmes focusing on mass media and urgent cross-regional problems such as the management of economic crises, climate change, migration, energy security, and international terrorism, to name a few. To this end, new funding sources must be generated, including funding from private donors. ASEF programmes and epistemic community interaction must be extended to the new ASEM members. A balance of career diplomats with professionals at ASEF will strengthen the organisation’s autonomy and increase its attractiveness for non-state actors.

The growing interest of civil society in ASEM is here to stay. The relevance of the recommendations submitted to the summits by the AEPF are more important than ever. Leaders should agree to strengthen the parliamentary dimension of ASEM, encouraging parliamentarians to reform the format of the Asia–Europe Parliamentary Partnership (ASEP) with the objective of increasing the forum’s efficacy.

Increased peoples-to-peoples connectivity enhances the inclusiveness of ASEM and reduces the forum's institutional asymmetry. There is a need to create channels for connecting ASEM's Socio-cultural Pillar with the forum's other two pillars. Regular interfaces between representatives of the three pillars are crucial to improve ASEM's transparency, to facilitate the flow of information from government to society, give stakeholders a greater voice, and thereby increase ASEM's accountability and legitimacy.

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