ASPBAE’s 7th General Assembly culminates in a Regional Workshop on ASPBAE’s Strategic Directions

20-21 November 2016, Bangkok, Thailand

ASPBAE’s 7th General Assembly (GA) was the first GA after its 50th anniversary and also the first after the new global development and education agenda articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Education 2030 Framework for Action were agreed. Civil society organizations and ASPBAE played strong roles in informing this strong and ambitious new education and development agenda. For education, the challenge now and in the coming period is to consolidate and preserve the hard-won gains as governments, the international community and other stakeholders begin concretising the agreed commitments towards realising the goal of Ensuring Equitable and Inclusive Quality Education and Promote Lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

A two-day regional workshop on ASPBAE’s Strategic Directions, themed ‘Consolidating our Gains to Better Advance Transformative Education and Lifelong learning for All’, was planned as part of the 7th General Assembly, which was also a culmination of ASPBAE members’ country-level consultations through 2016. It brought together over 100 participants including country voting representatives, ASPBAE Executive Council (EC) members and EC-elect, representatives of national education coalitions across the Asia Pacific region, and strategic partners and staff. The aim of the workshop was to deliberate and build consensus on the future priorities and directions of ASPBAE. The set of recommendations emerging from these deliberations will inform the new Executive Council on ASPBAE’s future work and drafting of the new strategic plan (2017-2020). The Regional Workshop was hosted by the Thinking Classroom Foundation, ASPBAE’s member organisation based in Chiangmai, Thailand and in Myanmar.

Thein Lwin, of the Thinking Classroom Foundation and ASPBAE Executive Council member, welcomed the participants to the workshop. Participants observed a moment of silence in respect for late King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand. In his opening remarks, ASPBAE President, Jose Roberto (Robbie) Guevara, called for ASPBAE’s membership to uphold the core beliefs and principles of the organisation and take forward the right to education and lifelong learning movement. He further stated that though this regional workshop on strategic directions is part of the defined ASPBAE governance process, it should also be understood as part

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of a continuous organisational learning process – premised on ‘non-acceptance of permanence and a predetermined future’, referring to one of Paulo Freire’s thoughts on education being necessarily shaped by context.

ASPBAE Secretary-General, Maria Khan, presented the Secretary-General’s Report in which she highlighted ASPBAE’s achievements over the last 4 years (2012-2016). She stated that it was an exciting and yet challenging time for ASPBAE as the new global agenda for education is being shaped. Civil society needs to persevere to ensure the new agenda is concretised in ways that affirm and actualise the right to education, and where education is promoted as a means to fight poverty, promote sustainable development, lives with dignity and a just and lasting peace. She emphasised that a transformative education can only be at the heart of the effort to combat conflict and violence, and the stark threats to the democratic functioning of societies that have emerged of late. Finally, she called on all to use the space of the strategic planning workshop to have the much needed conversation together to critically understand the current context, define the ways forward and draw confidence from the power that collective thinking and action brings.

In the open discussion that followed, representatives from member organisations and strategic partners from the Asia Pacific shared relevant issues from their country contexts affirming the challenges and the socio-political developments as presented in the Secretary-General’s report.

To further discuss and deepen the understanding of the development and education contexts of the region, participants came together in sub-regional groupings, where ASPBAE Executive Council members, representing the four sub-regions (South and Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific), initiated a conversation on the development and education context of their sub-regions, the strengths and limitations of CSOs, and the value addition of a regional organisation like ASPBAE.

Jerald Joseph, of the National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia and former ASPBAE EC member, provoked participants to put more energy to making education work more powerful to confront the challenges faced by marginalised communities and the youth.

Maki Hayashikawa, UNESCO-Bangkok, presented linkages between the SDGs and SDG4 and provided updates on Education 2030. She identified challenges and issues in aligning SDG4 targets to national policies and plans and highlighted education financing issues in the region.
the issues pertaining to poor attention to quality and inclusiveness in basic, non-formal, and adult education, the crisis of internal and cross-border migration, gender-based violence, and political polarization. The value-addition of a regional organisation was affirmed and highlighted by all the groups, describing the diverse roles that ASPBAE played in facilitating knowledge exchange and capacity building of civil society organisations (CSOs) across the region, in spurring coordinated action for policy advocacy linking national, regional and global processes, and in nurturing spaces for dialogue and discourses on development and education.

Jerald Joseph, Commissioner in the National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia and former ASPBAE Executive Council member, along with ASPBAE President, Robbie Guevara, led the session synthesizing the outcomes of the sub-regional group reports. Jerald acknowledged the shrinking democratic spaces, especially for civil society organisations. He provoked all to put more energy to making education work more powerful to confront the challenges faced by marginalised communities and the youth who are vulnerable due to lack of access to knowledge and resources, including disparate access to technological resources. The ASPBAE President reiterated the value addition of a regional organisation like ASPBAE and hoped that it will be expanded and deepened by its members in the coming years.

A panel discussion on advancing the right to education within the SDGs and Education 2030 offered various perspectives from panelists. Maki Hayashikawa, Chief of Section for Inclusive Quality Education, UNESCO Bangkok, presented the linkages between the SDGs and SDG4 and provided updates on Education 2030. She pointed out that the SDGs arose from the merging of development and environment agendas. She further expanded that education impacts directly and indirectly all the SDGs, which concern the Planet, Prosperity, People, Peace, Place, and Partnerships. She identified two regional coordination mechanisms - the Regional Thematic Working Group on Education 2030+ and the Regional Network of National Coordinators of SDG4 - which support the implementation of SDG4. Maki Hayashikawa identified critical challenges and issues in aligning the SDG4 targets to national policies and plans and highlighted the education financing issues in the region for Education 2030. She
concluded by stating that APMED2030-III will be organised in 2017 with the aim of continuing the support to national consultations on SDG4-Education 2030, scaling up regional and national advocacy strategies and technical support for capacity building for localising/integrating the SDG4 targets into national education plans and policies.

Malu Marin, Asia Pacific Regional CSO Engagement Mechanism (APRCEM) Focal Point for People Living with HIV and AIDS, presented the engagement mechanisms for CSOs in the Education 2030 Agenda. She shared that the political space for communities and civil society in national, regional, and global UN and intergovernmental platforms is constantly being threatened and challenged, and that there is a struggle to reclaim that space and build and sustain partnerships that support and safeguard such spaces. She cited some of the roles of civil society in UN Intergovernmental processes including - claiming and promoting our rights, advancing ownership over international agreements, and demanding accountability. She stressed that CSOs should be engaging at all levels, such as in building and enhancing capacities; advocating in different platforms; demanding representation, space, participation, and building and nurturing the community as experts. Malu Marin further identified challenges in engaging with the SDGs such as accreditation issues for grassroots group; access to decision-makers; diversity or homogeneity of civil society, and the rise of multi-stakeholder partnerships. But the main challenge, she emphasised, was how to reach grassroots communities who do not know the SDGs and urged for more work towards this.

Katarina Popovic, Secretary General of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), spoke on adult literacy and SDG4 and persisting problems, such as assessment tools for adult literacy which are still based on traditional self-reporting. She stated that 15% of adults globally lacked functional literacy skills, 63% of them being women. She enumerated the important issues and challenges in adult literacy, of which some are the low understanding on the concept of literacy as a continuum; its translation into national policy and practice; its implementation; low financing of adult literacy programmes; and non-prioritisation of lifelong learning and promotion of ICT as a 'magic recipe', among others.

Tanvir Muntasim, International Policy Manager (Education), Action Aid International, presented a CSO critique of SDG4 financing. He stated that the global consensus has regressed from earlier commitment of 20% of public expenditure and 6% of GNP to education. He addressed the increasing role of the
private sector as budgets for education decrease. Some other alarming trends included the share of education in total aid falling from 13% to 10% with only 24% of all education ODA disbursed to low-income countries in 2014. The need for funding education in emergencies increased by 21% since 2010 but aid for it declined by 41%. He mentioned several financing frameworks and processes such as Financing for Development, International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, Global Partnership for Education, Education Can’t Wait, while highlighting the importance of looking at other funding options. He enumerated on the different ‘Innovative Financing Mechanisms’ being discussed and proposed that involve tapping into non-state sectors for public education - including private development assistance, financial transaction tax, venture funds, diaspora bonds, debt swaps, public-private partnerships, and contribution from migrants. Tanvir cautioned that pursuing these should not lead to a withdrawal of state responsibility in education. He recommended advocacy for increase in share, size, sensitivity, and scrutiny of the education budget; increase in domestic resource allocation from 4% to 5.8% of the GDP; equitable financing and higher investment to reach the disadvantaged; investment in technology to supplement but not replace quality teaching and teachers; and ensure the role of civil society monitoring effective and efficient financing.

The session on re-visiting ASPBAE’s core strategies deliberating on ways to enhance their relevance in the changing contexts of the region and the world. Maria Khan began the session by presenting a summary of the feedback and analysis of ASPBAE members during the national consultations on the relevance of the strategies. Following this, the participants were divided in to 6 discussion groups, each focusing on a specific ASPBAE strategy: capacity building for adult education; capacity building for advocacy; policy advocacy; information and communications; resource mobilisation; and, membership and governance. The sub-groups presented their discussions and recommendations for each strategy in the plenary.

Sandy Morrison, President of ICAE, shared her reflections on the leadership and capacity building strategy of ASPBAE. Rasheda Choudhury, Executive Director of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Bangladesh, and Vice-President of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) gave her comments on ASPBAE’s policy advocacy strategy. Eri Yamamato, ASPBAE Executive Council member and Director of Shanti Volunteers Association (SVA) and Uwe Gartenschlaeger, Regional Director, DVV International, shared their reflections and recommendations on ASPBAE’s strategy on institutional strengthening. Further, Elaine Butler from WAVE Australia was invited to present her overall reflections on gender equality and inclusion with reference to ASPBAE’s strategies, and Peter Foaese from ACE Aotearoa was invited to give his reflections on ASPBAE’s strategies with a youth perspective.
Robbie Guevara in summing up the group presentations used an octopus as a metaphor. He elaborated that the core of the octopus holds the 4 core principles of ASPBAE - rights-based, transformative education, gender equality, and education for sustainable development. The arms of the octopus represent the contextual approaches that ASPBAE employs to operationalise its core strategies. He hoped that ASPBAE’s new Executive Council would take forward these recommendations in the new term.

The regional workshop concluded with a hand-over ceremony between the outgoing and incoming Executive Council. Robbie Guevara, as outgoing President, addressed the incumbent Executive Council members and thanked them for their time and wisdom to steer ASPBAE to achieve its goals during their term. Nani Zulminarni, incoming ASPBAE President accepted the challenge of leadership on behalf of the incoming Executive Council members (2017-2020).

An interaction with NGOs based in Thailand was planned as part of the 7th General Assembly. On 20 November 2016, a ‘Meet and Greet’ event was organised to facilitate an interaction between ASPBAE members and representatives of Thai-based local NGOs.

Representatives of local NGOs included Suwanami Foundation/Mae Sot Clinic; Migrant Learning Centre/Thinking Classroom Foundation (MLC/TCF); Sangsan Anakot Yawachon Development Project; Chulalongkorn University; The Constellation for AIDS Competence, CMU, Thailand; and the Burmese Migrants Teachers Association (BMTA).

Cynthia Maung, founder of the Suwanami Foundation/Mae Sot Clinic (a Burmese NGO based along the Thai-Myanmar Border) and recipient of the Magsaysay Award, spoke about providing extensive health care services to refugees through the Mae Sot Clinic. Director of Sangsan Anakot Yawachon Development Project, Matcha Porn-in, recalled her association with ASPBAE which began with her participation in ASPBAE’s Basic Leadership Development Course (BLDC) in 2009 that motivated her to start working with young people on issues of health and sexuality.

The local NGOs displayed their educational materials and publications. A lively interaction followed, with ASPBAE members visiting the stalls to understand the work of the local NGOs based in Thailand and Myanmar.

Click to read blogs written by Sashi Kiran, of FRIEND Fiji, and ASPBAE Executive Council member representing the South Pacific; and A. Young Moon, Representative, Peace Education Project MOMO, Korea. Both Sashi Kiran and A. Young Moon write about their reflections of ASPBAE’s Regional Strategic Planning Workshop.