

# ASPBAE Ed-lines



Asia South Pacific Association  
for Basic and Adult Education  
Learning Beyond Boundaries

QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

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## ASPBAE'S LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

Thank  
you  
Maria



*ASPBAE Executive Council and staff, Jaipur, India, 2018*

### Civil society leadership in a time of change – A reflection on the experience of ASPBAE

*By Bernie Lovegrove, ASPBAE Asia Pacific  
EOL Coordinator*

“The only thing that is constant is change”. These well-known words of Heraclitus, an Ancient Greek who lived 500 BCE, have echoed through the centuries, and are just as true for us today, if not more so. Not only are we experiencing an

unexpected and serious global pandemic, we are facing human induced climate change, massive technological advances, the rise of artificial intelligence, an explosion of information and misinformation, economic, social and political turmoil and the emergence of authoritarian and populist leaders, which has led to dwindling democratic space in many countries, and restrictions on the meaningful participation of civil society.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) in turn have needed to make significant adaptations to maintain their viability and increase their relevance in the face of such extensive change. This has required nimble and capable civil society leadership and the learning of a wider array of leadership skills to deal with the complexity and diversity of change.

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*Maria and Bernie (1996)*

### ASPBAE's leadership change

ASPBAE is also facing significant internal leadership change. At the end of 2020, after 25 years at the helm as ASPBAE's Secretary-General, Maria Lourdes Almazan Khan (known as Maria to all) is moving on to a new phase in her life. This important transition presents a valuable opportunity not only to thank Maria for her remarkable leadership of ASPBAE, but to reflect on ASPBAE's experience of leadership, and the transition process it is currently undertaking, including the appointment of Maria Helen Dabu (Helen), as the new ASPBAE Secretary-General.

While ASPBAE's experience is that of being a regional level CSO focused on education policy advocacy and education good practice, it is hoped that the CSO leadership reflections in this special issue of ASPBAE *Ed-lines*, even though it is more internally focused than usual, will be relevant to CSOs at other

levels (local, national, global) and to other sectors.

The intention in this issue of *Ed-lines* is not simply to sing Maria's praises as an exceptional leader (although no doubt you will see that Maria is held in high regard by all, and with much affection), but also to take this opportunity for ASPBAE to articulate and learn about aspects of leadership and organisational functioning from its experience for future reference. The contributors to this edition of *Ed-lines* will be speaking from their personal and professional experience, so there will be overlaps in observations and sentiments made.

For this particular edition of *Ed-lines*, Maria has not been involved, and will not see it in advance, since so much of it is about her. It includes a tribute to Maria's contribution to ASPBAE as Secretary-General by ASPBAE's President Nani Zulminarni.



*In 2008, Maria was inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame, and as an Honorary Fellow at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).*



*World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal (2000)*

This is followed by reflections from current ASPBAE Executive Council and staff members who have worked closely with Maria. Key dimensions of leadership and organisational functioning will be touched on, including the roles and skills of influencing, mentoring, leading the organisation's advocacy drive, leading and nurturing the staff and Executive Council, nurturing the broad membership, and just as importantly, steering a smooth and effective transition of leadership in ASPBAE. On this last role, the incoming Secretary-General, Helen describes the



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*Basic Leadership Development Course (BLDC), New Delhi, India, 1995*

process and lessons she has learned in the leadership transition and taking over the reins from Maria.

### **Maria's leadership journey with ASPBAE**

Maria began with ASPBAE in 1993, and her first role was as South East Asia (SR3) Programme Officer, operating out of the offices of 'Participatory Research in Asia' (PRIA) in Delhi, India, working with its President, Rajesh Tandon, who was also ASPBAE's President. This was only two years after ASPBAE held its First General Assembly, in 1991 in Tagaytay, Philippines, where it decided on a major structural change by opening its doors to a broader membership, allowing local education organisations in each country to become members.

Maria was no stranger to leadership, having come with experience as Chairperson of the University of the Philippines Student Council, and also was a senior manager at the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), which has been a strong member of ASPBAE over the decades. Maria's work in ASPBAE involved organising regional and sub-regional meetings and workshops on adult education themes, involving and contacting ASPBAE's expanding membership, and managing small project grants that ASPBAE provided to selected member organisations.

In a short time of two years, many of Maria's skills were

noticed, including her attention to detail, intelligence, hard work, interpersonal skills, effective planning and organisational capacities. When in 1995, the then ASPBAE Secretary-General, W.M.K. Wijetunga, retired, Maria applied for the position. The selection panel saw that Maria had the strongest leadership skills and potential of the applicants, and so she was selected as the new ASPBAE Secretary-General. A young female leadership face of the organisation was exactly the progressive, energetic forward-looking message ASPBAE was sending to the world.

I joined ASPBAE as the South Pacific (SR4) Programme Officer during 1995 and have had the good fortune to have worked with Maria up to the time of her leaving as Secretary-General at the end of 2020. Through the various phases over the last 25 years, as ASPBAE's programmes continued to expand to meet the needs of a more diverse membership, increasingly more complex international education infrastructure, policy debates, stakeholders and processes, and all of this in a more complex and unpredictable region and world, I was able to observe how Maria's evident and latent leadership skills and qualities kept evolving and emerging at a pace to ensure that ASPBAE remained relevant and effective.

Maria developed into a leader of civil society education policy

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***Maria played a key role in ASPBAE's name change and in developing programmes promoting the full EFA agenda, while remaining true to ASPBAE's roots in adult learning and education.***

analysis, political positioning and advocacy strategising. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Maria along with others recognised the need for ASPBAE to enter more energetically into education policy advocacy, and while promoting education good practice. Aided by her participation in such events as the World Education Forum in Dakar, 2000, and the emergence of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), Maria promoted discussions within ASPBAE to better understand the importance of education advocacy, and the need for ASPBAE to participate beyond the region and into international advocacy spaces.

Along with embracing a fuller education agenda beyond adult learning, under the internationally agreed Education for All (EFA) goals, was the recognition that ASPBAE needed to reflect this shift of thinking in its name and its programming. By carefully bringing Executive Council members, staff and ASPBAE membership into the discussions, Maria played a key role in ASPBAE's name change (while the acronym stayed the same) and in developing programmes promoting the full EFA agenda, while at the same time remaining true to ASPBAE's roots in adult learning and education.

Maria further honed her leadership skills through her

participation in a range of international organisations on behalf of ASPBAE, such as the Board of GCE, the Coordination Committee of UNESCO's Collective Consultation of NGOs (CCNGO), the SDG4-Education 2030 Steering Committee, and most recently, the Board of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). She participated in many forums such as the World Education Forum, Incheon, South Korea in 2015 where she played active, well-prepared and visible roles. Her grasp of the issues and stakeholder politics, and her strategic thinking and planning over many years has been recognised by international civil society leaders, multilateral officials and by donors. This recognition included her being inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education (IACE) Hall of Fame, and as an Honorary Fellow at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).

### **Leadership qualities and skills**

It is evident from those who know Maria that her leadership qualities and skills stem from a core set of values such as justice, fairness, honesty, compassion, participation, consultation and respect. She also possessed a tenacious work ethic, and a desire for professional excellence. Building on these values, Maria led from the front, modelling what she saw was needed to be done. She was willing to 'think' big, and 'do' both big and small; getting her hands dirty to do the tough and the tedious work, such as the budgets, the lengthy reports to donors, and the small nitty gritty bits involved in organising events, even though it meant working late into the night, and regularly functioning with little sleep.

There is also no doubt that much of ASPBAE's success with donor partners over the years is due to Maria's professional



***ASPBAE-ICAE workshop, Mumbai, India (1998)***



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***Taking over from Wije - ASPBAE Secretariat, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1995: (L-R) Barbel Stitch, DVV International; W.M.K. Wijetunga, then Secretary-General of ASPBAE; Maria Khan; Wittewe, ASPBAE Accountant.***

leadership of programmes and budget management, including timely and extensive reports of high quality, and her remarkable interpersonal skills. To all she met, even opponents, she was warm, attentive, respectful and patient, and was adept at reading between the lines of what a person was saying. To colleagues she was able to make close connections, and leave many with a sense of them having a friend and even a confidant.

Maria was always on top of her brief, and usually everyone else's as well. This gave ASPBAE staff and EC members a sense of security that at least someone was always 'on the ball'. This is not at all to say that ASPBAE was a 'one-woman band'. There was a realisation in ASPBAE that leadership of an organisation is a shared role and responsibility, and ASPBAE has been blessed with capable and experienced presidents, Executive Council members and staff, who brought leadership experience to ASPBAE from other organisations.

All ASPBAE's presidents in my time in ASPBAE have been pro-active, capable and committed to playing their important leadership roles, while at the same time being reliant on Maria especially, and staff to be updated and informed. A strong part of ASPBAE's operational culture is to be consultative, participatory, democratic and attentive to context. Maria was mindful to cultivate this and draw out the leadership capacities and experiences of Executive Council members, which enhanced ownership of, and commitment to collective strategies and decisions.

Maria was a politically astute influencer. She was conscious of her ability to influence and used it to maximum effect. Much of this was just by Maria being who she was. Her striving for professional excellence was contagious. By 'walking the talk', and setting the bar high for the organisation, she inspired others to set their own bars higher. People are attracted to work with or be influenced by leaders with vision, purpose, passion, professionalism, and with the ability to connect with people. Maria used her respect,

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*Dhaka, Bangladesh (1998)*

reputation, charm and humour to influence people at a personal level and at the organisational level in terms of its decisions and processes.

This political astuteness and influence was often evident (even if not so visible to all) when Maria could anticipate points of potential conflict in a meeting, and act in advance to diffuse it. This would involve knowing where the power lay, speaking in advance to the respective protagonists, doing her homework on the issues, caucusing with colleagues and developing well thought out positions to enable the issues to move forward in a better direction.

### **Leadership transition**

ASPBAE is fortunate that at this time of leadership transition, the President and all Executive Council members that nominated have been re-elected to their positions for the next 4-year term, and also that most of ASPBAE's staff, and all of its senior staff are remaining in their positions until at least the end of 2021. This provides ASPBAE with strong continuity, knowledge and experience to function at a high level.

ASPBAE has also undertaken a lengthy, consultative and considered process of selecting Maria's replacement, Helen Dabu as the new Secretary General. Helen has worked with ASPBAE since 2009 and for many years in senior roles, so she knows the organisation's functioning and culture well, and has demonstrated a high level of competence. Through this transition year Maria has given much time to work with and mentor Helen, so that as much as possible she will be able to

'hit the ground running'.

With all the accolades given to Maria for her leadership excellence, Helen might feel daunted by such a hard act to follow. However, Maria has indicated a willingness to be available to support Helen if and when she needs it. Further, with the goodwill and wealth of experience of the Executive Council and staff, doubtless Helen will be given the support and time she needs to find her own feet and develop her own identity in this new and important role. All at ASPBAE wish her the very best.

However for now, congratulations Maria for your exceptional leadership. You will be greatly missed!



*ASPBAE Festival of Learning, Yogyakarta,  
Indonesia (2004)*



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### EDITORIAL

# An immeasurable contribution towards making ASPBAE an influential and respected network for education and lifelong learning

*By Nani Zulminarni, ASPBAE President*



*Nani and Maria (2012)*

The position of Secretary-General (SG) in a network such as ASPBAE can be seen from several points of view. First, in terms of power, the position of the SG is sandwiched between two forces, namely the members who hold the highest power through their executive committee, and with the implementing team, namely all staff as the direct executor of activities. To balance these two forces requires high leadership skills and the art of communication, especially in resource management and decision making, as well as the implementation of a strong governance system.

Second, from an organisational perspective, the position of the SG is like a captain on a ship who has to read a map, navigate the direction, lead the crew, and sometimes, manoeuvre to face or avoid the storm in order to arrive at the destination safely. The SG has to form a strong implementation team, divide roles and responsibilities, and navigate the team in executing strategies to achieve the goals. The SG must have capacity to manage and support her team, and create an

enabling environment for the team to respond to the dynamic challenges they face in their duties.

The third is the perspectives of other stakeholders, including donor agencies, networks, coalitions, and global policy making institutions such as the UN. The SG is the representation and face of the institution. Therefore, the SG must have a strong knowledge and mastery of issues, understand the context and its analysis, have a

strong personality and excellent social and communication skills.

The SG's performance determines the success of the organisation's advocacy work, which carries with it the reputation of the organisation.

We can imagine how difficult it would be for the SG's position to be carried out consistently and sustainably, especially for a long period of time across different contexts. Maria Khan, the Secretary-General of ASPBAE, has been in this position since 1995, taking on the mandate to develop ASPBAE as an influential and respected lifelong learning and education network regionally and internationally. Maria's leadership has contributed immensely to ASPBAE becoming a strong network of civil society organisations in the Asia Pacific, advancing the right to education and lifelong learning through advocacy and practice, at the grassroots, national and international levels.

As the guardian and implementer of the governance system

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*Executive Council meeting, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2008)*

at the ASPBAE Secretariat, Maria bridges the interests of the members, represented by the Executive Council, with staff under her leadership. Her ability to manage disagreements, comments, and difficult situations in executive meetings by providing comprehensive information allows everyone to have a common understanding in decision-making. She was always well prepared for committee meetings, providing all materials and information needed so that the decision-making process was always based on very solid information.

Under Maria's leadership, ASPBAE became a very effective and efficient network.

Maria is supported by a small number of very professional staff, who cater to a wide and diverse regional coverage, working on a critical agenda in lifelong learning and education, and sustaining strong connections with members. The challenges of lifelong learning and education in the Asia Pacific region are very complex, with a wide range of educational progress

in each country. We have countries with strong and sophisticated lifelong learning and education systems on one side, while there are still countries with low literacy levels on the other. ASPBAE must be able to navigate these different contexts by developing inclusive programmes for all members so that they feel their membership is relevant. As SG, Maria's critical role is to analyse and develop advocacy strategies at the global level and at the same time increase the capacity of members to organise themselves at the local and national level. Maria and her team have successfully built multiple strategies and approaches, including



*We thank Maria for her unparalleled leadership and dedication; for the strength, focus, vision, and foresight that guided ASPBAE into becoming the dynamic and influential civil society network that it is today.*



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capacity building, organising, and advocacy for its members.

As the only civil society network in the Asia Pacific that consistently addresses the interests of lifelong learning and education, both formal and non-formal, ASPBAE is at the forefront of advocacy at the global level. It is in this arena that Maria's role as SG was very critical and important in forming the narrative and articulating the voices of ASPBAE's members from various countries. Maria has excellent capabilities in integrating the framework of Education for All (EFA), Lifelong Learning (LLL) and Adult Education into ASPBAE's advocacy work on CONFINTEA, MDGs, and SDGs. As a feminist herself, she demonstrates strong commitment to carry forward gender equality both at the organisational and programmatic level.

ASPBAE is a network that plays an important role in building a lifelong learning and education movement. Maria, as the ASPBAE representative, occupies a strategic position in coalition work with other networks to advocate for education-related policies at the global level. Her strong leadership, experience, and analytical skills, in combination with her effective communication and social skills, make Maria often a popular choice to represent coalition

advocacies at the global level.

By the end of this year, Maria, by her express choice, will step down from her role as ASPBAE Secretary-General after more than 25 years of dedicated, exemplary service. But in this moment, join me, the Executive Council, and all of ASPBAE's staff in thanking Maria for her unparalleled leadership and dedication; for the strength, focus, vision, and foresight that has guided ASPBAE into becoming the dynamic and influential civil society network that it is today. We owe her a huge debt of gratitude, difficult to repay as she leaves us and hands over an ASPBAE we are all immeasurably proud to be part of.

This *Ed-Lines* is dedicated to Maria while we celebrate and honour her generous contribution of 25 years to lead ASPBAE up to this level. We will learn from the reflection and insights that ASPBAE staff and Executive Council members have written in this *Ed-Lines*.

We will certainly miss Maria as Secretary-General, but we are sure she will continue to walk with us in our movement towards quality education and lifelong learning for all.



*As the only civil society network in the Asia Pacific that addresses lifelong learning and education, ASPBAE is at the forefront of advocacy globally. Maria's role as SG was critical in forming the narrative and articulating the voices of ASPBAE's members from various countries.*

## Maria Madam: A boss with passion and compassion

*By Sandeep Joshi, Project Accountant & Senior Finance Officer; and Santosh Satpute, Administrative Assistant in the RNET project office of Abhivyakti Media for Development*



*Santosh (L) and Sandeep (R) at the Festival of Learning in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, during ASPBAE's 50th Anniversary celebrations (2014)*

We are writing here “Maria: A boss”, but in office we never felt as if we were working under any boss. She always treated us as equals.

There was no such hierarchy in the office irrespective of age or experience. Maria madam worked along with us to keep ASPBAE moving forward and to ensure that it was a credible and impactful organisation.

Maria madam always stood strong for the cause of her team members. She developed deep interpersonal relationships with us and built solid bonds with all staff. She was always the first to appreciate good work. One should learn from her how to acknowledge and recognize the efforts and achievements of co-workers and colleagues. She knew and understood that recognition will inspire and motivate each of us.

She was such a good role model and we truly enjoyed seeing her work and perform to her fullest potential. Maria madam was always so passionate in what she did because she loved to do this work. Some of us were inspired by this quality and began following our own creative passions, learning from her example. Maria madam knew that if one is passionate about what they do in the organisation, it would further inspire others to work hard and also be passionate.

Maria madam always spent considerable time listening to inputs from others before making any

decision. As a boss, we always observed that she was kind, humble, proud and strong, but never rude. As a successful leader, she knows how to teach, mentor, and coordinate with colleagues and encourage them to reach their full potential. She always supported us for our growth. As a mentor, she always took responsibility for the quality of work and guided us so that we will be able to give our best.

She knows how to manage stress levels effectively and also knows exactly how to maintain a work-life balance. Whenever we requested for leave for personal and/or for family time, she happily allowed it, enabling us to return to work refreshed and rejuvenated after spending quality family time. In the last so many years, she never forgot to wish staff on their birthday. We felt she took care of us.

Maria madam always kept herself updated with the latest information and technologies. Irrespective of age, learning was a continuous process for her.

Thank you, Maria madam, for everything you did for us and for being an inspiration. We will miss you very much, every day.



*ASPBAE's Secretariat in Mumbai, India, was closed down this year. Here, Maria, along with Secretariat staff, Aveline Colaco, Santosh Satpute, and Sandeep Joshi, gathered together one last time for a final photo before the curtains came down on the Mumbai Secretariat.*



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### A leader, a learner, and a forerunner in the education movement

**By Anita Borkar, Regional Coordinator,  
ASPBAE's Training for Transformation (TfT)  
Programme**



*Anita with Maria*

“**S**hatayushi Bhava” (‘May you live a hundred years’) is the choicest of blessings in the Hindu tradition. One hundred years signifies a full life. To live a full life is to dwell in the four ashrams or life stages, described as Brahmacharya-ashram, Grihastha-ashram, Vanaprastha-ashram and Sanyas-ashram. Each of these four ashrams has a life-goal to be achieved to be able to move into the next ashram. The life-goal of the first ashram is to **LEARN** i.e. to acquire the knowledge and skills required for life; the second ashram’s life-goal is to **PRODUCE** i.e. to fulfil all the responsibilities towards one’s family and occupation; the third life-goal is to **RENOUCE** i.e. to relinquish or transfer one’s responsibilities and guide others and;

the life-goal of the last ashram is to **ATTAIN WISDOM** i.e. to make meaning from one’s life experiences and offer this to the world.

In my decade-long association with ASPBAE, I have realised that Maria Khan has lived a ‘full life’ in the over 25 years that she has ‘dwelled’ in ASPBAE. I say this having experienced her leadership expressed in all of the above facets – that of an ardent learner; an avid forerunner in the education movement to achieve social justice and dignity for all; an enthusiastic motivator who weaves everybody’s dreams into a shared vision; and a kind sage who radiates an encompassing wisdom.

Very rarely one comes across a professional with innate leadership qualities – exemplary passion for the cause of education for all; dignified institutional representation at all levels; endless hard work and management of duties; the sharpest of minds and memory; precise and lucid articulation; and a fine human being with a generous heart and love for all things good!

I feel extremely privileged and honoured to have had the opportunity to work and grow in ASPBAE, guided by Maria’s leadership. I have experienced her mentoring to be non-invasive and yet steadfastly enabling. Metaphorically, I would attribute her leadership and mentoring to the long pole in the sport of pole-vaulting. The pole enables the pole-vaulter to take the leap, but at the final moment, the pole-vaulter has to let go of the pole to be able to jump across the crossbar. I have been enthused and scared in equal measures every time the bar was raised for me, but Maria’s mentoring support was always just enough to provide the impetus and energy to take the leap with confidence. On occasions, when one came crashing down with the bar, the pole was always there, once again, promising reassurance.

In the ‘full life’ that Maria has lived in ASPBAE, she has enabled so many of her fellow travellers to realise our full potential as we walked together with her.

‘*Shatayushi Bhava*’, Maria - live yet another ‘full’ life, post 2020!



*ASPBAE's 50th anniversary celebrations, Manila, Philippines (2014)*

## Anchoring the leadership transition in ASPBAE

**By Meenu Vadera, ASPBAE  
Executive Council Member  
representing South Asia,  
and Batjargal Batkhuyag,  
ASPBAE Executive Council  
Member representing East Asia**

Staying at the helm of a large network, a 50+ year old institution, and keeping it alive, active, at the cutting edge for a period of 25 years requires not just high intellect, emotional intelligence, but also what is referred to as “organisational intelligence”.

Speaking of Maria Lourdes Almazan Khan, it might be safely stated that she had, or that she developed, all these three intelligences in her in more than adequate amounts. Although it is tempting to speak about Maria's leadership in general, the authors have been mandated to write specifically about Maria and the leadership transition in ASPBAE.

It is almost a cliché but pertinent to state that change is never easy, personally or professionally; in our families or nations or organisations and networks. Which is why, when change happens after almost three decades of stability of leadership, it is even more uneasy, traumatic even, and difficult for everyone concerned, including also the leader herself. Life without being the Secretary-General (SG) of ASPBAE may also not be easy for Maria herself. But for the staff, the incoming new SG, and all the other stakeholders – internal and external - this will require “getting used to”, especially given the increasingly VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) world that we are all in.

The good news is, that Maria understands this very well. She started planning for it a long, long time ago. The 4-year period of the current outgoing Executive Council (EC) began, in fact, with this mandate – to support Maria with planning



***Maria's love affair with India began when she moved to  
New Delhi in the early 1990s***

this transition period. And we suspect that Maria would have thought this over in her own mind for a few years before making it a formal mandate for the EC.

Early on in the life of this EC, a search committee was constituted that helped in looking out for the new incoming person. Through the subsequent deliberations of the EC meetings, we talked over how the search will be undertaken, what should be the interview process, questions, the CVs that came in, shortlisting of those, and finally, the interviews themselves and the decision regarding offering of the job to the successful candidate. Alongside these, there were deliberations on Maria's own role, balancing her need to take the long-standing break that she fully deserved after spending 25+ years working, with many years where she was too busy to even do justice to the annual leave that she deserved, with the need to be available to the new SG for support.



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The process, which was nebulous and grey when we began this journey together 4 years ago, became clearer, more structured, unambiguous, and also tense over the years, as the reality of it dawned upon all. We have vivid memories of our last in-person meeting of the EC and the team, where we witnessed all these emotions come out, thanks to the space that was created by the President and the SG. You need to be strong and secure in yourself as a person, as a leader, to be able to handle dissent, disagreement, and difference of opinion, and to allow it all to express itself, to listen to it all. It has been inspiring, not just at that moment, but during several times over our tenure as the EC, to have witnessed Maria's ability to listen, really and deeply listen to the other person.

While we welcome the incoming SG, we know that Maria already has well thought through plans to support her in this new role. Just as we have witnessed Maria handhold and support many others within the network to take on new

roles, bigger roles, different roles. Her patience, empathetic leadership, and her own understanding of the details of any situation make her a great mentor and a coach.

As EC, we are committed to supporting this transition phase to the best of our ability. But it's a strange kind of loyalty, dedication, and loving what one does, to be able to put in so much energy and thought to how things will be when you leave.

Maria reminds us of the Emperor Penguins in Antarctica, faithfully holding the egg (leadership) for days (years), with patience and forbearance, a shrewd insight and determination till it's time to let the new life come into being. May the new leadership blossom and may the ASPBAE family continue to stay its course in these difficult, turbulent, and challenging times.



*ASPBAE Executive Council, Chiang Mai, Thailand (2017)*

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### Friend, colleague, and co-conspirator

By Agnes H. Maranan, ASPBAE Corporate Secretary



*Agnes and Maria on holiday in India (2004)*

This special edition of *Ed-lines* is dedicated to our outgoing Secretary-General, the only ASPBAE SecGen most of us have known. In this issue, Maria's colleagues record, for posterity, our Secretary-General's diverse accomplishments in the field of education: as an advocate, mentor, influencer, and our leader for all these years.

A fitting tribute to someone who, at 33 years of age, grasped ASPBAE's reins with a promise, and who, 25 years later, hands over to us a promise so richly fulfilled.

I write to provide a personal perspective: a window to Maria before ASPBAE



*The early years - ASPBAE Secretary-General, Maria Khan, in office in New Delhi, India (1996)*

absorbed her; snapshots of Maria growing and learning, heart-in-hand, with the ASPBAE she so loves.

I have known Maria for a lifetime: friend, colleague, and co-conspirator for 43 years. We first met at a national week-long summer camp for high school leaders; Maria was a delegate then, president and head of her school's various organizations.

"President", "Head", "First", "Chair": from her early teens, Maria perennially wore these titles with distinction. Graduated top of her class in high school, elected with the highest number of votes in her term as our University's Student Councilor. Chair of the Student Council of the University of the Philippines in the twilight years of the Marcos dictatorship in our country.

During her term as Student Council Chair of the Philippines' premier state university, she led a passionate, militant, and angry studentry in our youth's fight against a brutal political regime; battling the apathy of her elders, and the derision of so many of her peers. The student protests against the tyrannical Marcos government often seemed like the quixotic tilting at windmills: why fight a losing battle, why fight an unbeatable force... why fight at all?

But Maria and her student constituency persisted, defiantly dreaming of a country unshackled.

Today, I live in a country still flawed; still hurting. But free. A country unshackled from the shameful fear that had stained our national psyche for so long.

That is my window to the Maria I grew up with.

Fast forward 20 years, the first decade of Maria's term as ASPBAE Secretary-General.



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Our paths diverged, Maria and I. I went on to explore the more pragmatic arena of corporate law, and Maria took on what seemed to me another unnecessary crusade: nurturing and mentoring this little-known NGO called ASPBAE. I recall my puzzled query: why work so hard for this ASPBAE of yours? No dire consequence will befall anyone if ASPBAE flails and flounders, so why the fevered pace to see it flourish and grow?

But that is quintessentially Maria: there are no barriers that cannot be breached in chasing a dream; potential and possibilities are meant to be realized, not shelved. And her self-imposed work routine – then and now – has always reminded me of her favourite W. H. Auden: “where cigarette-ends become intimate friends, and it’s always three in the morning”.



*Maria, a young student at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK (1988)*



*On travel in Bonn, Germany (1995)*

So Maria, with a fistful of believers, soldiered on, bridging yawning gaps not only in dwindling funding, but in the conflicting perceptions of where ASPBAE should go, or remain. To stay relevant, to be significant, to survive, Maria guided ASPBAE towards a broader mandate, embracing changes radically distinct from our original *raison d'être* many decades ago. And we have become an influential player in this field of development and education, in large part because our leader dared to steer us through this brave transformation.

I will miss Maria Khan, my first Secretary-General. A history strewn with laurels, a record of excellence bar none: this is the incalculable legacy Maria leaves behind.

And we who remain shall persevere, so that the ASPBAE she steadfastly nurtured continues the tradition of exceptional achievement, as she always believed we could.

It is our time to do her proud.



## From strength to strength: Sustaining the legacy of leadership and excellence in ASPBAE

*By Helen Dabu, ASPBAE Secretary General-Designate*

As I write this piece, we in the Secretariat are in the thick of preparations for the Regional Strategic Planning Workshop with members, EC and staff to chart ASPBAE's directions in 2021-2024, set against the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other contextual issues in the region that underpin ASPBAE's work.

An important dimension to the challenges and opportunities presented by this upcoming regional strategic planning process is the leadership change and

transition in the ASPBAE Secretariat once our beloved Secretary-General (SG), Maria Khan, steps down from the post and hands over this enormous role to me by January 2021.

My respect for Maria as our SG was solidified the moment I joined ASPBAE in September 2009. She is in a class of her own. Intelligent, compassionate, humble and dedicated to a life of service for the education movement. I was shy around her at first, but she had her way of drawing me out and giving me the

opportunity to articulate my thoughts and take on responsibilities which built my confidence in what I was able to do in ASPBAE. I have always believed in the transformative power of social movements and I am fortunate to have found ASPBAE, led by an admirable and inspiring SG, when I finally decided to venture out after years of service to grassroots and local CSOs in my country, the Philippines.

Maria's kindness and encouragement strengthened me to be better and to



*ASPBAE Executive Council and staff, Gotemba, Japan (2019)*



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overcome the challenges in our work. Her trust and confidence in what I can do even when I just joined ASPBAE at age 28, is something I will always treasure for the rest of my life. It was clear in my mind and my heart when I met Maria that she is the kind of leader that I want to work for and aspire to be.

It is also due to my enormous respect for Maria that I will say this with all humility - taking the reins from her was a scary and overwhelming decision. She has set the bar so high in the way she carried the role, and I bear witness in the last ten years how she took ASPBAE to greater heights. To sustain this and take it further is a challenge of a lifetime.

But Maria has taught me to be courageous, with a clear head and steady hands, in navigating the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Articulating how I will take ASPBAE forward from Maria's exemplary service is rooted from my belief in what sustains ASPBAE as a strong education movement in the Asia Pacific region – its broad membership committed to the right to education and lifelong learning, its dedicated Executive Council (EC), and a team of highly competent and experienced staff.

I can also attest to ASPBAE's strong institutional fundamentals which gained the trust and confidence of its members and strategic partners over the years – 56 years and going strong!

Indeed, taking the reins from Maria starts from a position of strength. Maria is leaving behind an ASPBAE that is robust, relevant and responsive to the ever-shifting contextual challenges of our time. ASPBAE has always persisted and prevailed.

With the support of members, EC, staff, and our strategic partners, my aspirations for ASPBAE is to sustain it as a strong movement for the right to education and lifelong learning, to further create and expand platforms that will support marginalised sectors in defining and pursuing their education agenda forward, and to prepare the ground for the next generation of leaders in education who will sustain our movement that



*Helen will take over from Maria as ASPBAE Secretary-General.*

will always hold governments accountable on their responsibility to deliver education and lifelong learning.

After the rigorous application process I had to go through for this role, and when the ASPBAE Executive Council finally made their decision to appoint me as Maria's successor, the most compelling message I got from Maria which I will keep close to my heart is this – guard ASPBAE well.

And I promised her that I will, to the best of my ability – to honor Maria and take ASPBAE forward.

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### Mentor and trusted confidante

*By Aveline Colaco, Data-base Maintenance  
and Networking Officer in the RNET project  
office of Abhivyakti Media for Development*



*Aveline at the Festival of Learning, Yogyakarta,  
Indonesia (2004)*

I joined ASPBAE in October 1997. I had prayed to Almighty God to give me a woman boss and this job was exactly that. The interview was very brief but intense. I was very excited to have a woman as a boss and that too, a foreigner. My past jobs had me address my bosses as 'Sir' so as usual, I addressed Maria as 'Madam' but in her simplicity of heart with no ego or pride, with a welcoming smile, she said call me 'Maria' and till date she is Maria for me. This touched me. I was absolutely at

ease to discuss anything under the sun with Maria, share my personal life knowing very well that the matter was under lock and key, a bank locker. Moreover, Maria trusted me.

A tremendous blessing to work under the esteemed leadership of Maria, a turnaround in my career, from working for a tax practitioner to a non-profit organisation with multitasks and diverse activities. At the beginning, I could not grasp much of ASPBAE as it was a different field altogether, but the continued guidance and support from Maria groomed me to be a sound professional and made my working with ASPBAE interesting and a fulfilling experience. It would be impossible to count the number of occasions Maria helped me in my career and in my personal life in kind and through her deeds. Thank you, Maria, for all you've done for me.

Maria's inner strength, work ethics, always a smile on her face, useful advice, was an inspiring source in my work with ASPBAE. At ASPBAE Mumbai, we worked as a family, holding up both the strengths and weaknesses of each other and Maria always gave us space to address our issues and helped us in achieving our milestones in life, both at work and on the personal level. We appreciate Maria for the ever-supportive guidance she gave us, which will be treasured forever.

Maria's positive qualities, dynamic understanding, and wisdom applied at work has shaped in the handling of the staff from different regions, including me, prioritizing to get the work completed on time much before deadlines and stress-free. Maria is soft spoken, full of grace, accommodating, liberal, and kind at heart. I always looked up to Maria in times of trouble and

distress. I will always be grateful for all the support and kindness tendered to me during my duration with ASPBAE.

Today, I am independent; ready to face any kind of challenge and the large share of the credit goes to Maria who showed me the way. Thanks, Maria, for being there for me. I hope I will be able to return the favour someday.



*Celebrating Maria's 50th golden birthday at the ASPBAE Secretariat in Mumbai, India*



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### Nurturing a diverse, complex, and dynamic membership

*By Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing Southeast Asia; and Peter Clinton Isaac Foese, ASPBAE Executive Council Member representing the South Pacific*

After completing a week of intense and positive conversations about the future of ASPBAE, we, Peter Foese (representative of Sub-Region 4, the South Pacific) and Kim Anh (representative of Sub-Region 3, Southeast Asia) boarded our planes at Kathmandu Airport, Nepal. Neither of us knew that this was very likely the last time we would see each other, and other ASPBAE colleagues, face-to-face for a very long time.

Coronavirus would force the world to come to a standstill, each nation would close its borders, and families would be confined to their homes. However, ASPBAE, with its strong network of members in all parts of the Asia Pacific region, was not ready to stop its work. Instead, it would increase its efforts to hear the 'small' people; the marginalised, the vulnerable, the disabled, the disconnected, the powerless and voiceless. ASPBAE was, and is, committed to ensuring that all people have access to quality education, and at the core of its work, is hearing those that are not served by the status quo. Maria Khan has been instrumental in embedding this in the DNA of ASPBAE. Officially, she is the figure head and Secretary-General of ASPBAE, but in spirit and in practise, she has been the first 'servant', the mentor of 'wisdom', the role model of 'leadership through love'.

In his 20s, Peter attended an ASPBAE activity alongside CEOs of organisations, Chairpersons on multinational boards, regional and national politicians, people of merit and credit. He was in awe of those around him, and in many ways felt out of place and out of his depth, a small person amongst giants. It is very easy to be lost in a group of confident and successful leaders, and as the event unfolded, Peter was comfortable to not speak up and not take up space. While waiting for lunch, a woman approached him, handing him a meal and sitting down with him, asking questions and making conversation with kindness and laughter. She wanted to know him and wanted to hear his views about the conversation taking place. She was



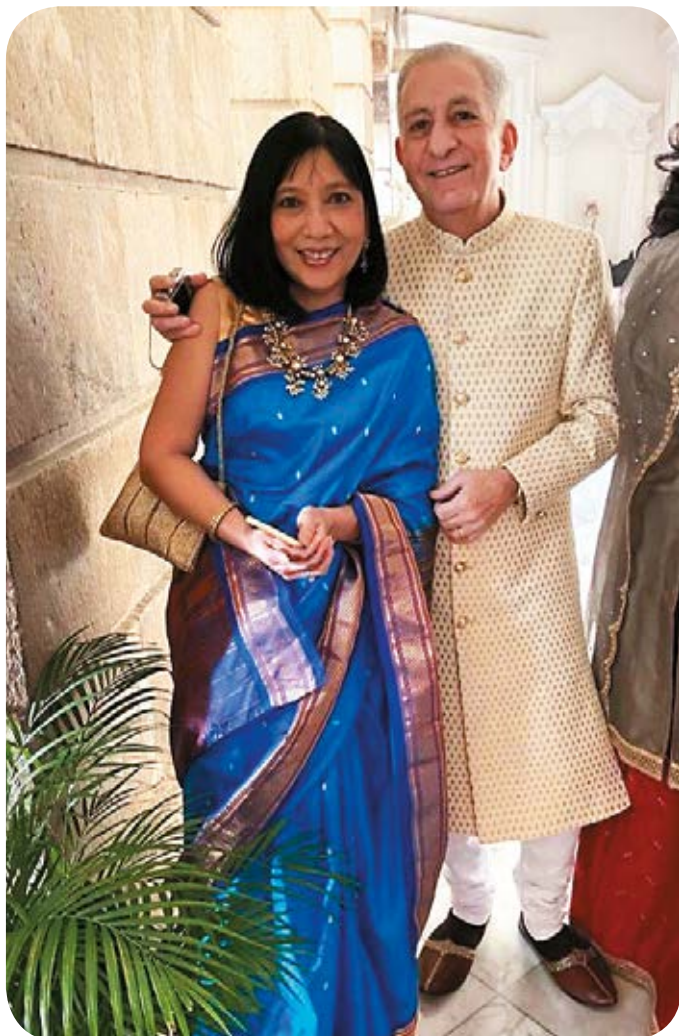
*Back in the day (1998)*

genuine, considerate and attentive, and most of all, she was encouraging. Hours later, at the main function, Peter would find out that she was the Secretary-General of ASPBAE. Her humility and openness towards him inspired him to be more vocal, her servant leadership demonstrated to him that he mattered, and his views counted.

Since Kim Anh joined the Vietnam Coalition (VAEFA) in 2011, many times the name "Madame Khan" was mentioned by older members of ASPBAE in the country with so much respect and admiration. Kim Anh back then built her own imagination about Madame Khan - must be a wise, old, serious Indian woman. In a conference in 2012, Kim Anh found that Madame Khan was Maria, much younger than her imagination, was not Indian but dressed up in beautiful Indian costume, and spoke clear and powerful messages about women's literacy. ASPBAE was instrumental in VAEFA's establishment and development through Maria's leadership, her support, her ability to listen and understand through empathy and reason.

ASPBAE is a family of individuals, organisations and coalitions, a regional network of community groups and national bodies, and therefore an important role of ASPBAE is to nurture comradeship and leadership so that diverse people are unified for a common cause. This can be a very

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*Maria with her husband, Azeez Khan*

challenging objective, with so many voices and views as well as different cultural contexts and community experiences, there is ample opportunity for misunderstanding and conflict. As the Secretary-General, Maria developed fair and just processes and provided the needed support from ASPBAE to ensure every member was heard and included. Maria and her competent team have built many bridges to and among the members of ASPBAE.

Since we served with Maria in ASPBAE, we have witnessed her humble and exemplary leadership at community spaces and at international conferences, her embodiment of ASPBAE's values is holistic and real, and it has been why so many respect her as a leader and see her as a friend. She

has supported us and many others directly or indirectly to feel confident, equipped and informed to engage and support their own communities.

COVID-19 has proven to the world the values of leadership that are most important, and the importance of serving communities to hear their voices and ensure they are heard by others. Both of us can express without hesitation how Maria has been a living pillar of leadership and practitioner of holistic support in our roles on the executive council, but more importantly in our roles as servants to our own peoples. Over her years of service, Maria has spoken powerful words in powerful spaces, but her most powerful gift to us all, to the veteran leaders and elders through to the young advocates and activists, has been her powerful example of love and service.

ASPBAE is a family of strong and kind members, and there is plenty of thanks and blessings to be uttered to a mighty woman who, as a Secretary-General, chose to eat lunch with an unknown young man. Actions always speak louder than words.



*Finally time to sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride from here!*

**For further information, please contact:**

**Medha Soni**, ASPBAE Information and Communications Coordinator

Ph: + 91 (0) 9811699292 (New Delhi, India)

Email: [medha.aspbae@gmail.com](mailto:medha.aspbae@gmail.com) • Website: [www.aspbae.org](http://www.aspbae.org)