

High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2019 – a remarkable arena for civil society to engage!

The High-Level Political Forum in 2019 was an important event for ASPBAE and organisations working on education throughout the world. The significance of this HLPF for education rights advocates was attributed to the fact that SDG 4 – equitable, inclusive, quality education and lifelong learning – was in focus during this follow-up and review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The HLPF 2019 was held from 9-18 July 2019 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

HLPF 2019 was convened under the theme of ‘*Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality*.’ Aside from SDG 4, it reviewed SDG 8: decent work and inclusive economy, SDG 10: reduced inequalities, SDG 13: climate action, SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions and SDG 17: partnerships, which is under review every year.

It gathered education practitioners, advocates, and members of UN agencies and international NGOs to discuss education’s transformative role in the empowerment of people and SDG 4’s indispensable role in the attainment of the 2030 Agenda.

ASPBAE participated in the HLPF and called for urgent action in five main areas including inclusion and equity, which aims to intensify and increase efforts to overcome all barriers towards achieving equity and inclusion in



ASPBAE participated in the HLPF 2019 and called for urgent action in areas such as inclusion and equity, and advocated for education financing for the right to education and lifelong learning.

education, ensuring that no one is left behind in the effort to ensure universal access to 12 years of free, publicly funded, quality primary and secondary education and at least one year of pre-primary education, multiple pathways to literacy and learning through formal and non-formal education for all ages. ASPBAE also advocated for education financing for the right to education, lifelong learning opportunities for all encompassing skills for work and life, global citizenship education, human rights education and education for sustainable development. ASPBAE reiterated its call for institutionalised civil society participation in all SDG processes, and youth participation and engagement in the formulation of education policies.

The HLPF was a crucial platform for monitoring the progress of the SDGs, not only for the government and UN partners but equally for CSOs as well. The reporting to the HLPF is a practice that gained traction, as several governments volunteer each year to participate and contribute their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). VNRs are the main reporting medium for governments on their country efforts to meet the Agenda 2030 commitments

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Civil society identified financing as the most critical shortfall in the SDG rollout. There is no firm commitment from governments to increase budgets for the SDGs and no clear financing strategy.

and targets. In 2019, 47 countries volunteered to present their VNRs to the High-level Political Forum.

Civil society coalitions at national and international levels also prepared their own Spotlight Reports to follow-up on their governments efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. ASPBAE took the initiative to launch Civil Society Spotlight Reports on SDG 4, prepared by ASPBAE and national education coalitions in 16 countries across the Asia Pacific region. Anchored in the coalition's case studies, consultations with marginalised groups, and other monitoring processes, the reports represented ASPBAE's contribution in presenting civil society analysis and perspective on the SDG/SDG 4 progress.

The Spotlight Reports highlighted the SDG 4 rollout processes in the Asia Pacific countries. Based on CSO reviews of 16 countries, the SDGs are being rolled out in varying stages in different countries and the CSOs have contributed significantly to the rollout process. They have engaged with the government and generated discussions on the implementation of SDGs, even if the government consultations were not held on a regular basis.

Several favourable outcomes emerged from the HLPF, including increased coordination, mobilisation, and participation of the civil society in the Asia Pacific. Prior to the HLPF, CSOs engaged in advocacy efforts at the regional level preparatory processes which prepared them well for actively engaging at the global level. The voices, concerns, and recommendations from grassroots, sub-national and national levels were reflected in these dialogues. Though far too limited, civil society continued to have space to engage the VNR reporting process at the global stage.

ASPBAE and its partners continued to make a strong case for SDG 4 as a key driver for sustainable development, and as essential to ensure decent work and economic growth, reduce inequalities, address climate change, promote peace, justice and strong institutions, i.e. SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 13 and SDG 16 respectively. These strong linkages were articulated in the ASPBAE-led side-event, *Education to End Inequality and Promote Peace*, which discussed inequality and challenges to peace in the Asia Pacific region and the transformative role of education in

the empowerment of people. This event was organised in collaboration with the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Relationship with the UN (CCNGO), along with the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), Asia Development Alliance (ADA), General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), Episcopal Church Center, and Soka Gakkai International.

ASPBAE co-organised with DVV International, International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), and UNESCO's Institute for Learning (UIL), the side event on 'The Invisible Friend; Adult Education and Sustainable Development Goals.' The event shed a positive light on the potential of non-formal youth and adult education for sustainable development. Ms. Nani Zulminarni, President of ASPBAE, highlighted the positive impact of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in enabling the full economic empowerment of women. As an advocate of ALE, she went on to stress that gender-just skills equip women with the necessary tools to negotiate within their families, deal with the social-cultural norms that impede their access and offer a supportive environment that facilitates their continued learning. ICAE Vice President for the Asia Pacific, Robbie Guevara facilitated the discussion on 'Adult Learning and Education in the 2030 Agenda – Potential and Challenges' in this side-event which highlighted the relatively invisible and underestimated potential of non-formal youth and adult education for sustainable development.

Linking SDG 4 to SDG 8, ASPBAE presented its research with its members Azad Foundation (India) and PEKKA (Indonesia) on policies and financing on skills development for decent work of marginalised women in the side event on, *Tapping the Potential of Non-Traditional Livelihoods to Empower Women and Girls*. This event gathered a select group of leaders and thinkers to consider the critical role non-traditional livelihoods (NTL) programmes play in bringing true economic empowerment and justice to marginalised women and adolescent girls. The focus was that NTLs not only equipped women and girls with the skills and training to take higher-paying, more stable jobs in sectors traditionally off-limits to women, they also supported women and girls to challenge the stereotypes and oppressive structures – including based on gender, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation – that limit their life



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options and perpetuate gender inequality. The discussions in this side-event pondered upon many questions, including how do NTLs challenge to think deeper and differently about women's economic empowerment, and how can this approach be integrated into and improve upon more traditional livelihoods and jobs programmes. It also sought answers to what other barriers need to be dismantled to create an ecosystem conducive to economic rights and empowerment for women and girls. The discourse generated also reflected the role of the government, funders, and private stakeholders and what they can do to support NTLs and contribute to a more gender-just economic system. The dialogue proved to be useful in bringing forth new perspectives on SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 8.

Even though there were numerous opportunities for civil society to engage in discussions, the HLPF 2019 proved to be a challenging space to navigate. Civil society had the chance, although limited, to occupy the same space as governments to bring to light some of the more pertinent issues on education, especially with reference to the implementation of the SDGs. At the global level, civil society still functions in a limited space especially when it comes to influencing agendas. Government delegations and member states came to the HLPF with pre-set programmes and had limited time to hold discussions with civil society constituents – making the global space unfavourable for detailed discussions. Nevertheless, CSOs were very organised and persevered. As governments presented their VNRs discussing their progress on the SDGs under review, civil society not only provided an alternate perspective, but pushed for additional key recommendations. With spaces for CSOs shrinking globally, CSOs used the HLPF to ensure that their voices are heard, captured spaces for advocacy, as well as increased their solidarity with different movements.

Another issue that arose in the HLPF was the disconnect between the regional and global architecture and processes. It was increasingly recognised that agreements and discussions forged at the regional HLPF preparatory processes should be accorded more weight in the global processes and agreements. The outcomes from regional dialogues should organically inform the global consensus. Currently, the global HLPF outcomes document is



One of the wins for ASPBAE and civil society was the ability of education advocates to use SDG 4 as a starting point to engage in discussions on the other SDGs.



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prepared in parallel with the regional HLPF processes. Further it was observed that governments should play a larger role at the regional level where VNRs should be discussed, with outcomes informing more strategically pitched conversations at the global level.

This year's July 2019 HLPF did not have an Outcome Document since the HLPF 2019 was convened under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. The in-depth analysis and specific recommendations related to the SDGs under specific review for 2019 were not codified in an outcomes document unlike in previous HLPFs. The political statement of the HLPF 2019 forged at the SDG Summit, which was held from 24-25 September 2019 nevertheless made reference to SDG4.

In the **Political declaration** of the SDG summit, 'Gearing up for a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development', Heads of State and Government resolved, "to realise our vision of a world with access to inclusive and equitable quality education" and to "promote and support quality education and lifelong learning to ensure that all children, youth and adults are empowered with the relevant knowledge and skills to shape more resilient inclusive and sustainable societies that are able to adapt to rapid technological change." The Declaration also placed emphasis on investing in data and statistics for the SDGs, mobilizing adequate and well-directed financing and enhancing national implementation and global partnership.

The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda have captured the attention of member states, civil society, the UN system, and national and local governments. Despite the challenges faced by civil society, the High-Level Political Forum remains a remarkable platform to engage on this global agenda, tackling complex issues with noteworthy stakeholders. The HLPF provides an opportunity to connect local, national, and global actors and processes, forge connections across different sectors and stakeholders - not only to advance education but also human rights, democracy, and peace.

Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) advocates for adult learning and education at High-Level Political (HLPF) 2019

By Ricarda Motschilnig, Policy and Advocacy Officer, International Council for Adult Education (ICAE)

2019 is considered a momentous year for the education constituency worldwide as SDG 4 was reviewed during the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2019 for the first time ever since the 2030 Agenda was adopted. More than 2400 participants registered for this year's HLPF, including representatives of Member State countries (presenting Voluntary National Reviews) and Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS).

MGoS is the main channel for civil society engagement in the UN sustainable development agenda. They are crucial to the successful implementation, follow-up, and review of the 2030 Agenda. As we all agree, civil society must play an active role in the SDG process, since we all have a stake in ensuring that all the SDG 4 targets are realised by 2030. One of the MGoS is the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG), which is open to all organisations working for the full realisation of the right to a quality education, the implementation of Agenda 2030, and of SDG 4 in particular. The EASG brings together human rights-based education and academia organisations and networks to engage with the monitoring and review of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Group is organised



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by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), Education International (EI), the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), and the European Students' Union.

In preparation for the 2019 HLPF, MGoS contributed to review processes at all levels, including at regional forums and through national review mechanisms. For example, EASG drafted a joint public statement on 'Empowering people and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality' for the HLPF 2019. Additionally, an official session during the HLPF 2019 offered MGoS an opportunity to report on their contribution to the implementation of the Agenda and SDGs and speak to the theme of the HLPF. It focused on the recommendations of MGoS around the implementation, follow-up, and review of the 2030 Agenda, with particular emphasis on addressing the systemic barriers to achieve sustainable development and strengthening the follow-up and review process to best contribute to 'Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality'.

EASG, as member of the Steering Group of the MGoS Coordination Mechanism, met with the President and Vice President of ECOSOC. Topics of this meeting were the progress and prospects in organising MGoS' contribution to the HLPF, the initial impressions and expectations regarding the current HLPF, and space for MGoS interventions as well as brief reflections on HLPF review.

This year, 47 countries

presented their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on their implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Logistical and planning challenges left little time for interaction during the discussions for civil society organisations (CSOs). Nevertheless, due to EASG's efforts in the preceding coordination mechanisms and in being very active in coordinating this process with the MGoS, it was successful in making interventions and giving statements for adult learning and Education. As a result, there were several questions to member states by education stakeholders referring to education.

Further, EASG organises strategy and coordination meetings for education stakeholders, which equip participants with tools to find their way around the HLPF 2019 and be effective in their engagement. Also, EASG works closely together with other groups, such as the Women Major Group, Stakeholder Group on Ageing, NGO Major Group, and the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities (SGPwD). Additionally, EASG members prepare and deliver statements for the official thematic review sessions, this year for SDG 10, 13 and 16.

A statement on behalf ESAG was delivered during the ECOSOC High-Level Segment General debate.

A side-event by the EASG, 'Education and lifelong learning at the gateway of the Global Agenda', reiterated the understanding of education as an important human right as well as an enabling right – and, thus, a precondition for the dignity for human life. Education and lifelong learning are considered at the heart of decent work, equality,



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Katarina Popovic, ICAE Secretary-General, chairing the 1st meeting of Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG) after the HLPF 2019 opening session.

environmental sustainability, and peaceful, just societies. This side-event explored elements and approaches that can contribute to the significant improvement of the quality and completion of education at all levels and across the globe, the preconditions, the musts and must not's in education as well as in other sectors, for fostering sustainable development and human rights as a way of life. The questions discussed were: What data are needed and what kind of financing? What are important target groups? What is the role of teachers and why do we need public education? What are the good practices and solutions that have been proven to work? Building on critical and intersectoral approaches and promoting dialogue and coordination in the education sector, this side-event busted some myths around the implementation and monitoring of SDG 4, recognising the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights across the 17 SDGs, with special focus on strengthening public education and lifelong learning.

The 2030 Agenda has been in many ways a game changer. Its universal application requires all countries to report on their progress in achieving the SDGs, not only programme countries or development assistance recipients. Thus, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have captured the attention of member states, civil society, as well as of many parts of the UN system, which are slowly restructuring their work plans towards their achievement. Member States have taken ownership of the SDGs and many have integrated them into their national planning and budgets.

As a result, the HLPF has become the go-to forum for the last four years. It has a global constituency among

Member States, UN agencies, civil society, and the private sector. In particular, CSOs have maintained a commitment many demonstrated during the drafting of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs into the tasks of monitoring and contributing to their implementation. VNRs are being analysed by civil society groups to see the extent to which they are focused on leaving no one behind and tackling the furthest behind first. CSOs have shown a range of self-organising and diverse ways of working from community to global levels, often demonstrating a blend of experience and expertise. Their autonomy is recognised by the rights of participation spelled out in the HLPF resolution (A/RES/67/290), which set the minimum standard for the UN as a whole, including the General Assembly.

Nevertheless, a main challenge seen is unfortunately still the involvement of CSOs and MGoS in the VNRs and the HLPF processes itself, as the opportunities for engagement are still limited, even though Agenda 2030 foresees meaningful participation of civil society. Due to high interest from Member States, civil society, academia, and the private sector, the already limited timeframe of the HLPF becomes overloaded by bite-size snapshots. So many countries have volunteered to report on their progress through the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) at the annual HLPF session (some for the second and even third time) that the session is staggering under the weight of not enough time – and not enough substance, too much talk and not enough (inter)action.

These developments place pressure on the HLPF review process, which will take place in 2019-2020 and be 'launched' at the SDG Summit in

September 2019, to break out of its time management, coordination, and working methods mindset to pioneer a new generation of governance. With one third of the SDG implementation period to 2030 already over, 2019 is the time for serious 'lessons learnt' from this first phase.

In establishing the HLPF, the Rio+20 conference mandated that it be held at Summit level every four years. In 2019, this will take place in September in conjunction with the annual UN General Assembly high-level debate. This is inadequate to the task; rather, it should convene a two to three-day conference every four or five years, not a day tagged on in September for speeches. Furthermore, Summit leadership should be charged not to reflect and put a stamp on earlier meetings and declarations, but to drive agendas forward, flag major concerns and emerging issues, and kick-start related action plans.

The SDG implementation phase since 2016 has certainly spun off many initiatives, studies, meetings, and reports. At the HLPF alone, there have been a total of 158 VNRs over four years. The first phase of SDG monitoring has concentrated on quantity – of countries reporting, on processes and institutions and constituencies hitching their flags. The second phase must show quality as well as seriousness in addressing the obstacles to achieving the SDGs. It must break the 'domestication only' approach currently dominating the reporting in the VNRs and address the trade-offs across goals and spill-over effects across borders. Many goals cannot be achieved in country isolation but are dependent on international cooperation. A new reporting framework needs to be developed to measure the power imbalances and be an obligatory chapter in VNR reporting.

The SDG Summit and the HLPF review process should be opportunities to reposition the HLPF and the 2030 Agenda more firmly in the General Assembly machinery. The remaining decade to 2030 needs to build in cycles of quality and independent oversight, and robust accountability.

ASPBAE calls for more action as Spotlight Reports highlight growing inequalities in education across the Asia Pacific



The Spotlight Reports represent ASPBAE's contribution in presenting civil society analysis and perspectives in SDG/SDG4 progress during the HLPF 2019.

ASPBAE launched Civil Society Spotlight Reports on the status of SDG 4 implementation covering 16 countries across the Asia Pacific - Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

ASPBAE President, Nani Zulminarni, and ASPBAE Executive Council member representing South and Central Asia, Meenu Vadera, launched these reports during the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) 2019 at a side event co-organised by ASPBAE on 'Education to End Inequality and Promote Peace' on 10 July 2019 in New York. Nani declared these reports as "borne out of a one-year process of consultations with grassroots communities, education sector stakeholders, marginalised youth, and NGOs." She acknowledged the diligent work done by ASPBAE members and coalitions in producing the reports that hold governments to account on their promises.

The Spotlight Reports represent ASPBAE's contribution in presenting civil society analysis and perspective in SDG/SDG 4 progress, placing particular focus on the concerns and aspirations of the most marginalised and excluded groups.

The Regional Synthesis of the Spotlight Report, "Ensuring Equity and Inclusion in Education, Leaving No One Behind", summarised the civil society analysis on the SDG 4 contextualisation and localisation in the 16 countries covered by this coordinated CSO review process, including the challenges to implementation.

In all the 16 countries covered, the SDGs and SDG 4 processes were rolled out with SDG committees/working groups/task forces set up in all countries – five at the highest level, directly under the Office of the Prime Minister or President. Twelve of the 16 countries reviewed adopted a national SDG policy framework; four with a clear and comprehensive implementation strategy and action plan.

Fourteen of the 16 countries developed their respective SDG indicator framework and corresponding SDG 4 indicators; however, most countries do not have disaggregated data – rendering the system weak in tracking access and participation of marginalised groups and how to really "leave no one behind". This is worrying as inequity in education remains a serious challenge and has actually widened in a significant number of countries. Poverty has been cited as a major barrier to quality education and as a key factor that widens disparities in education.

Most countries do not have a clear estimate on the financial requirements for achieving SDG 4. Among all global regions, the Asia Pacific has consistently been the lowest education spender in relation to the Gross Domestic



The Regional Synthesis of the Spotlight Report summarised civil society analysis on the SDG 4 contextualisation and localisation in 16 countries in the Asia Pacific.



While governments in the Asia Pacific have convened Voluntary National Review consultations with stakeholders, CSOs found that spaces for meaningful engagement in SDG processes were limited.

Product (GDP). Education expenditure relative to the GDP has decreased between 1999 and 2017 (or latest year available) in about half of the 29 countries with data in the Asia Pacific region.

The lack of sensitivity in allocating resources has also perpetuated inequality, with people with disabilities, economically poor, and socially marginalised youth and adults losing out. The proliferation of the largely unregulated, fee-paying private schools across the region, including the expansion of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements in education, is becoming a driver of inequality. Privatisation discriminates against the poor, widens gender disparities, undermines the public education system, and leads to segregation.

Only five of 16 countries have institutionalised government-civil society coordination mechanisms on the SDGs/SDG 4. While governments in the Asia Pacific have convened VNR-related (Voluntary National Review) consultations with stakeholders, CSOs found that spaces for meaningful engagement in SDG processes were limited, largely “tokenistic”, providing little opportunities for substantive inputs and exchanges.

Arising from the report, ASPBAE and its members call for intensified efforts to **overcome all barriers** towards achieving equity and inclusion in education; **increased public investments** to meet all the SDG 4 targets including basic, non-formal, and youth and adult education, as well as **strengthened regulatory measures** to prevent the privatisation and commercialisation of education; provision of **empowering lifelong learning opportunities** for all, including adult literacy as a right and foundational to further learning, education for engaged and responsible citizenship, skills for decent work and life for youth and

adults, especially girls and women, in the framework of sustainable development, the pursuit of lives with dignity and a just peace; **institutionalised civil society participation** in education governance and in all SDG processes at country, regional, and global levels, ensuring their effective and meaningful participation and contribution in policy development, planning, and monitoring and evaluation, and; **institutionalised spaces for the effective participation and influence of the youth** in the formulation of education policies and governance of education systems, ensuring quality education and learning opportunities for all youth, especially those from highly marginalised

and excluded groups.

The Spotlight Reports highlighted the power of education as a critical agent for social change that contributes towards transforming our world to one that is just, inclusive, peaceful, gender-fair, and resilient. The reports also noted that inequity and gender disparities in education remain serious challenges and have actually widened in a significant number of countries. Many governments tend to overlook the magnitude of inequity and gloss over the impact of such disadvantages on access and quality of learning.

Much more needs to be done to ensure that everyone, of all ages, social and economic backgrounds, and gender identities are able to benefit from quality education and lifelong learning opportunities delivered by strong public education systems. Civil society certainly has its work cut out for itself!



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CSEP Timor-Leste ensures national civil society voices are represented in regional and global SDG-SDG 4 platforms

By Jose de Jesus, National Coordinator, Civil Society Education Partnership (CSEP), Timor-Leste



Some recommendations emerging from Timor-Leste's Voluntary National Review include access to quality basic education, especially for children in rural areas, and inclusive schools for persons with disabilities.

The Civil Society Education Partnership (CSEP), Timor-Leste, was very active in the processes for developing Timor-Leste's 2019 Volunteer National Review (VNR). It participated in the VNR consultations together with other civil society organisations (CSOs) and the government's different line ministries. CSEP's research and policy work informed

its inputs and recommendations to the VNR. Specifically, CSEP drew from the outcomes of its tracking of infrastructure, school facilities, and access to education by marginalised and poor people in the Municipality of Ermera in 2018. Key recommendations emerging from Timor-Leste's Spotlight Report on SDG4 focused on people with disabilities, children, and youth, including quality Technical Vocational Education (TVET) opportunities for young people's skills and employment also informed its inputs to the country VNR. Other recommendations advanced included access to quality basic education, especially for children in rural areas, and inclusive schools for persons with disabilities.

Through its active participation and the evidence it was able to offer, CSEP's inputs and suggestions were included in the VNR of Timor-Leste - "According to the Civil Society Education Partnership (2018), while significant investment in building classrooms has taken place, due to the huge demographic pressure on the education system, and the tradition for settlements to be spread out over long distances, there are still insufficient



The government of Timor-Leste invited CSOs to be part of the government delegation to the 2019 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) – a success for the CSO constituency in the country.

classrooms. This leads to double and triple shifts at schools, reducing the day for students, and limiting the quality of education students receive."

At the regional level, CSEP was active in the 2019 Asia Pacific People's Forum for Sustainable Development (APPFSD), convened by Asia Pacific Regional Coordination Engagement Mechanism (APRCM), as a pre-consultation event for 2019 Asia Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD) in Bangkok, Thailand. CSEP presented lessons learnt in Timor-Leste's participation in the VNR process at these platforms. Timor-Leste's Minister of Parliamentary Affairs and Legislative Reform Fidelis Leite Magalhães, when elected as Chair of the APFSD, publicly appreciated and acknowledged CSEP's contributions to education policy work in the country and the implementation of Agenda 2030 in Timor-Leste.

Because of CSEP's strong engagement, the government of Timor-Leste invited CSO representatives to be part of the government delegation in the 2019 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and to present the country's VNR together with government representatives, youth, and the private sector – a success for the CSO constituency in the country.



CSEP was active in the 2019 Asia Pacific People's Forum for Sustainable Development (APPFSD) where it presented lessons learnt in Timor-Leste's participation in the VNR process.

For further information, please contact:
Medha Soni, ASPBAE Information and Communications Coordinator
Ph: + 91 (0) 9811699292 (New Delhi, India)
Email: medha.aspbae@gmail.com • Website: www.aspbae.org

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