

## Asia Regional Meeting of the Policy Forum on Development

Kathmandu, Nepal – 24-26 September 2019

The Policy Forum on Development (PFD) held its Asia Regional Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal from 24 - 26 September 2019. Around 80 representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs), local authorities (LAs), and representatives of international organisations, national governments and the EU gathered to discuss different relevant aspects of the global agenda and the progress made in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



This regional PFD looked at cooperation and partnerships between the EU and Asia; examined the progress of the 2030 Agenda at regional, national and local level; encouraged debates around the state of an enabling environment and presented the specific challenges that climate change brings to the region.

The meeting reflected the essence and goal of the PFD: create a space for trust-building and frank exchange in a permanent multi-stakeholder dialogue on development policies, recognising both CSOs and LAs as essential development actors to achieve our shared development goals.

### Cooperation between the European Union and Asia

Participants received an overview of the policies that guide the development work of the European Union, including a joint Communication 'Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy' (published in September 2018) on the EU strategy to connect Europe and Asia. This EU - Asia strategy is

part of a more comprehensive approach to external action, which is framed by the European Union Global Strategy and the Consensus on Development, both of which align with the 2030 Agenda.

In a rapidly changing global context, connectivity is a new approach that brings together different sectors and improves our capacity to react. We are in a new, more contested environment, where domestic drivers of foreign policy and bilateralism are stronger and collective action seems more necessary from EU institutions and Member States.

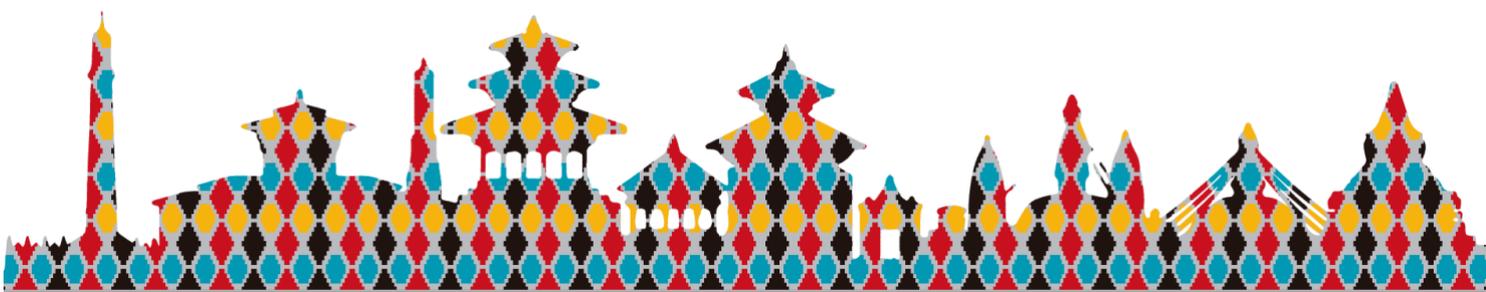
Europe and Asia represent 70% of the world's population and 60% of the global GDP, so "there can be ambition in the relationship, it needs to be more strategic." The connectivity strategy has four aspects: transport; energy; digital and human, of which the human factor was presented as the most important.

It was also pointed out that investment has been blended and grants used to attract investments allowing the EU development assistance to mitigate risks, leverage impact, support policy reform and tap into additional financing. Longer term financing instruments are an important element of the toolbox of the EU and should be used in line with agreed political priorities.

### How are the SDGs implemented in Asia?

#### The case of Nepal

One session was dedicated to the experience of Nepal, including past and current challenges and opportunities, with the objective of better understanding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the country. Nepal was one of the first countries to prepare a baseline survey and the SDGs were linked to Nepal's 5-year, 10-year, and 15-year plans. Supporting that process, different committees have been created which work on governance, agriculture, employment and other issues, in order to implement, monitor and evaluate SDG progress.





The 2030 Agenda has been combined with the national strategy, where economic prosperity, universal health coverage and social security are an integral part of Nepal's vision. Today there are 32 major goals targeted within the national development framework which use SDG outcome-related indicators and are reflected in the national budget. Areas that are still missing or need further improvement are: "game changer projects" that have large impact; grants focused on provinces and municipalities lagging far behind; and better involvement of different stakeholders.

### Regional Progress towards the Global Development Agenda

Almost all countries have shaped some form of national structures in line with the 2030 Agenda and, in one way or another, most have built separate bodies to monitor the SDGs. Despite the progress made, speakers mentioned that none of the social development goals would be collectively achieved by 2030 and that there could even be regression in relation to some of the goals.

It was stressed that, while the SDGs focus on the national level, interactions and participation at the regional level provide a space for sharing and discussion, and that this would help to identify areas of cooperation and participation. It would be beneficial to identify "nuggets" of success, learn who has done what and how, and see if these examples can be replicated at the national or global level. In short, it was widely believed that good partnerships and best practices in the region could set an example for others to follow.

In addition, a number of systemic barriers were identified and shared among participants, including availability and reliability of data; lack of political will, capacity and technical knowhow; mechanisms and structures to recognise financial

opportunities; access to available finance; and generation of local funds for local authorities.

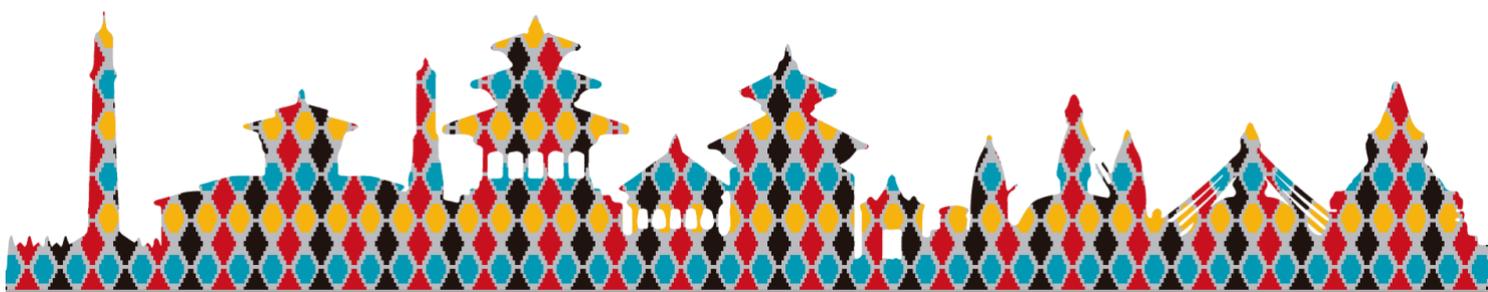
### National implementation and Voluntary National Report

The national implementation of the SDGs is the critical element to really progress on the 2030 Agenda; therefore, participants shared examples of how the 2030 Agenda is being institutionalised at national level. One example came from Indonesia, where strong political will and a firm legal basis have resulted in a government-led multi-stakeholder platform for SDG implementation; planning documents with clear strategies; a more participative process; clear and measurable goals; identified funding; specific responsibilities of ministries; assured transparent and accountable monitoring and evaluation; and included an outreach and communication strategy for the 2030 Agenda.

Accountability and the role of the VNRs as an essential part of national level engagement around SDGs were also discussed. It was said that the frequency and quality of these reports are improving, with several governments taking a more inclusive approach to the process. For example, Mongolia created a multi-stakeholder SDG Committee under the Prime Minister, in order to foster SDG work, and this served to activate other SDG structures and coalitions amongst CSOs. However, challenges remain in building SDGs into the national development plan and in a lack of policy coherence and contradictions in national and local policies. CSO and LA representatives conveyed their criticism concerning the lack of resources and capacity building to participate in such processes, as well as widespread selectivity, whereby CSOs critical of the government are not invited to participate. Recommendations included: focus on improving policy coherence; integrate SDGs and targets in national plans and ministries' activities; and institutionalise participation of CSOs and LAs in VNRs and other SDG monitoring mechanisms.

### Localisation of the SDGs

The importance of the localisation of the SDGs was repeated throughout the meeting, and specifically the need to encourage real ownership of development by local actors, who are properly heard and resourced. Those issues were discussed in two sessions. The first one presented and examined specific partnerships where federal government, local authorities, civil society, and the private sector worked together to improve the situation in areas such as health, gender rights, and economic benefits for the





people in India, the Philippines and Nepal. Social entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, transparent budgeting with citizen participation, access to justice, and access to clean cooking fuel were part of these success stories.

The second session looked at the particular situation of fragile contexts, including issues of migration and statelessness, discussing the challenges of local communities and potential solutions to overcome them. The examples described how to tackle situations that require an emergency response and shared the experiences of SDG localisation initiatives that might be replicated in areas with security, migratory or environmental problems.

### Enabling Environment

Unfortunately, the state of the working or “enabling” environment (EE) in Asia confirmed the global phenomena of “shrinking space for CSOs and LAs.” It was said that only nine countries had an EE for CSOs to work towards SDGs and the situation is worsening severely regarding freedom of expression and association. If the work is critical of governments, there have been cases of threats, jail, killing and financial coercion to silence CSOs.

Oppression also came in the form of restrictive laws or regulations or the use of otherwise supportive laws to limit activity. In this regard, the role of international partners has become more important than ever before, particularly with respect to supporting the capacity of CSOs to do their work and, as a result, the changes to advance in the implementation of international agendas like the 2030 Agenda. While 60% of the participants consider that channels are open for CSOs to contribute to SDG-related action, only 40% believe that their advocacy efforts are taken into consideration. Participants stressed that land rights of indigenous communities are not

considered; patriarchal and authoritarian approaches normalise the use of fear and power; the most marginalised continue to remain marginalised (i.e. people with disabilities, women); and there is concern as to the growing attacks on human rights activists.

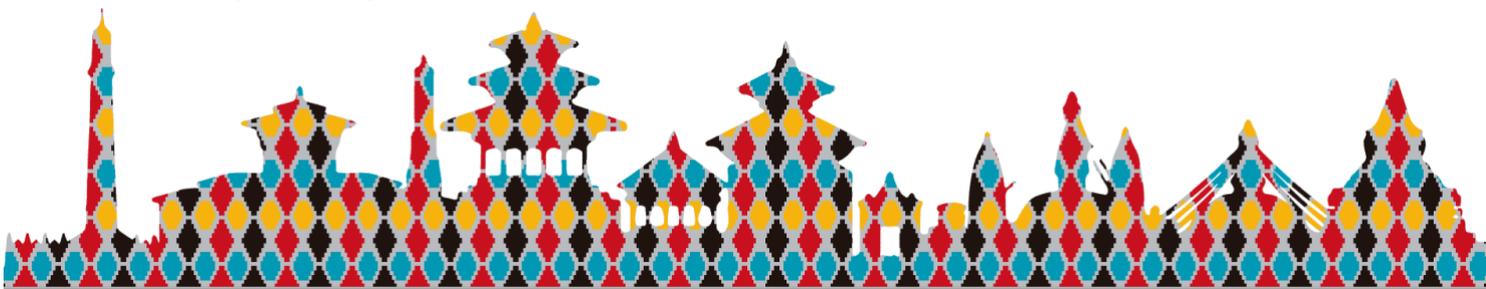


Recommendations to address this shrinking space for development actors included: institutional capacity building for CSOs and LAs; encourage and support national governments in dialoguing with CSOs and local actors, planning and budgeting in national goals; encourage decentralised, local participation; and develop projects that are need rather than donor driven.

### Climate Emergency

Despite consensus about the need to act to tackle the impacts of climate change, the Asian region is not planning well enough to deal with the potential consequences of climate change. Human and environmental rights must be balanced, and social and equitable solutions taken into consideration, as exemplified in a session that discussed the impacts of climate change on indigenous and other vulnerable communities. It was stressed that a shift needs to be made towards low carbon economies, infrastructure has to be adapted, and models of sustainable consumption as well as emission-free jobs should be encouraged.

Participants mentioned many different elements that could be part of the collective action in this area, including multi-stakeholder planning, affordable technologies, capacity building for a changing world, leadership empowerment and renewable energy-related solutions. There is need to combine innovation, work in partnership and seek opportunities for





further collaboration (also political), as the cost of not doing so is too high.

### **Conclusions**

A draft communiqué summarising the main discussions with recommendations was presented by CSOs and LAs during the closing session: "We welcome and acknowledge the value of the Regional PFD Meeting in bringing us together to constructively engage with one another... the PFD looks forward to see Asia as an equal partner to the EU in the successful implementation of the SDGs by 2030. CSOs and LAs will continue to collaborate among each other and with the EU in cooperation with regional bodies and in pursuit of genuine SDG implementation in the region towards development justice."

