

Land Issues Working Group: The people of Asia facing common crises, experts say

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People in Laos and the other countries of the Asian sub-regions have numerous common problems to confront, which will be raised for discussion at the upcoming 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF-9) to be held in Vientiane. International experts expressed the point of view yesterday at a press conference in Vientiane to update the media on the progress of preparations for the forum, which will take place from October 16 to 19. They highlighted the issues posed by threats to food security, environmental degradation, poverty and the lack of social services and protections amidst a changing economic climate.

“[We need] to analyse the process of these crises, not only the present crises, but chronological crises that we have been experiencing in the world, and the worsening poverty that has resulted from these crises,” said Ms Maria Dela Cruz, a representative from the International Organising Committee's (IOC) Asian secretariat for AEPF-9. In the preparations for the AEPF-9, the IOC has already held three regional meetings for the Asian countries in Hanoi, Jakarta, and New Deli, attended by developing countries from East Asia, South East Asia and South Asia respectively, aiming to address the common issues being faced throughout the region. Ms Cruz said among the social issues the region is facing is the number of people who lack access to basic essential services such as clean water and electricity or education and health services. Another issue is the growing numbers of workers in informal employment and how the respective governments and related organisations are able to ensure the workers' rights are protected. Providing essential services and developing safety nets to protect the most vulnerable in society was also a central focus of the sub-regional meetings, which includes ensuring access to education, healthcare, clean water, electricity and housing. The interests of rural and marginalised communities are of course inseparable from the use of natural resources, and how that is managed. Ms Cruz said the transference of land rights for other economic purposes, especially to big businesses, affects the livelihoods of local communities and threatens their future food security. Local communities want the use of the natural resources to be controlled, sustainable and safe, she said. Another issue for the people in Asia is the many millions of people who do not have access to electricity. Ms Cruz said while there is a pressing need to expand access the rising demand for electricity is putting a greater burden on natural resources and the environment. Ordinary people should have involvement in the design and implementation of energy policies, she said. Meanwhile, the AEPF-9 sub-committee responsible for outlining the themes of the meeting reported on the results of provincial consultative workshops already held in Laos. Committee members said that protecting the natural environment and providing educational opportunities are central to people's happiness in Laos, while some foreign investment projects to extract natural resources are known to be causing suffering amongst local communities. The upcoming Asia-Europe People's Forum has its theme: “People's Solidarity against Poverty and for Sustainable Development: Challenging Unjust and Unequal Development, Building States of Citizens for Citizens”. According to both the national and international organising committees, the preparations for the AEPF-9 are now 90 percent complete. Director General of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and NOC member, Ms Khamphao Ernthavanh and other Lao and international officials involved in the preparations for the forum attended the press conference after the meeting.