

**solidar**

**COUNTERING  
SHRINKING SPACE  
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Joint Statement



# The CSOs space in Southeast Asia keeps shrinking

Strong Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), democratic, independent and representative trade unions (TUs) and social movements are paramount for sound democracies and to ensure that Governments fulfil their duties to protect people's fundamental rights, offer remedy for those whose fundamental human and labour rights are violated and adopt policies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and the Paris Agreement to revert climate change.

Yet, the space for CSOs, democratic, independent and representatives TUs and social movements to act freely and safely in Southeast Asia is shrinking. Therefore, we, CSOs and Trade unions, from European and Southeast Asia countries have come together to identify concrete measures the international community, including the European Union (EU), can take to counter the shrinking space and support them growing stronger:

1. **Adopt a Feminist Approach;**
2. **Support a Strong Labour Movement;**
3. **Respect and Protect Migrants' Workers Rights;**
4. **Ensure Flexible, Accessible and Continuous Funding.**

## Our Demands to counter shrinking space.

### 1. A Feminist Approach

Civil society is particularly important for women and people of gender diversity, as they are often excluded or marginalised from all decision-making processes including government structures. When the space for civil society is shrinking, women's rights activists have fewer options or arenas to fight for political influence, equality, and social justice.

Women's rights activists challenge traditional norms on how a woman should be and act and often find themselves discredited, assaulted and even murdered. In Southeast Asia, as we have seen conservative and nationalistic movements grow, the situation for women's organisations has become increasingly difficult. Nationalism and conservatism limit women's access to public spaces.

Feminist organisations are finding new ways of organising in shrinking CSO space. In order to nurture women participation and leadership,

- ◆ Social protection systems and floors, including day care development of other social services and social security like maternity leave, sick leave, etc. shall be strengthened as well as, labour law protecting the rights of pregnant women. Social protection systems and floors benefit women and everyone else: **A feminist response is not a women-only response. It is an all-gender response.**

- ◆ Programmes shall be flexible enough to allow for the replacement of staff for parental leave schemes, including day-care costs for breastfeeding to allow women to participate in public events.
- ◆ Strengthen the Financing opportunity for grassroots and tailor made specifically on women and youth organising.
- ◆ Deploy all efforts to eliminate violence against women and children in all forms.

## 2. Building a strong labour movement<sup>1</sup>

Respect for labour rights has been declining in the Southeast Asian region, and the decline in civic space conditions remains a cause of concern. Systematic violation of labour rights has been occurring at an accelerated pace, as the Asian region is observed as the second worst in the world for workers' rights. Prosecution and murders of trade unionists and labour activists continue to rise in countries like the Philippines and Myanmar. Shrinking or even closing civic spaces have occurred in the form of wilful reduction of political and human rights, as well as civil liberties. Militarization in various forms have been in place in the region (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia), which has reduced or closed the spaces and function of labour and civil society organisations.

Workers' freedom of association forms the bedrock of a democratic and equitable society. **Freedom of association and rights to collective bargaining are basic human rights** that must

apply to all workers, regardless of their employment arrangements.

Moreover, even though trade unions historically have been 'organisations of brotherhood', it could play an essential role in addressing **gender equality** today. However, while women's membership rates have increased significantly in many trade unions worldwide, their representation in union leadership remains low. By targeting gender discrimination, pursuing gender-equal pay and enhancing women's representation in decision-making, trade unions can effectively expand space for women and their struggle for social justice.

It is therefore imperative that the EU

- ◆ **Promotes sustainable and strong labour movements** by providing financial and political support. It must understand the urgency of fostering and strengthening grassroots movements in the face of shrinking civic space and facilitate international solidarity between labour movements and civil society organizations in Southeast Asia and Europe.
- ◆ **Prioritises human rights and labour standards in all its trade relations**, shaping a global economy that is fair, ethical, and sustainable. Trade agreements shall integrate bold provisions on the respect of ILO international labour standards (ILS) and their signature shall be conditioned to the prior ratification of ILS. Moreover the EU shall strengthen its mechanisms to monitor the implementation of ILS by states participating in trade agreements.

<sup>1</sup> In Southeast Asia much of the workforce is in the informal sector therefore the term "labour movement" is not restricted to formal labour unions but it refers to a broader spectrum of independent, democratic and representative organisations promoting workers' rights .

- ◆ **Guarantees a fair business sector:** Due diligence is needed to oblige companies to respect human and labour rights obligations when establishing and operating in third countries. The European Union shall ensure European companies comply with its own legislation when operating abroad and that remedy is ensured also through the European national judicial systems where companies' headquarters are located.
- ◆ Provides targeted support for labour movement organisations most affected by shrinking civic space to support organisations to survive and rebuild when they are attacked.

### 3. Organising Migrants to Ensure Access to Rights

Across Southeast Asia, migrant communities face significant barriers to accessing their rights. Shrinking civil space is a cause of migration, and activists in human rights and labour spaces are particularly targeted with persecution causing them to migrate. In host countries, migrants are often excluded from social protection systems and full participation in formal civil society organisations, for example being unable to form or lead unions.

Living conditions of migrants also create barriers to their participation in civil society groups due to low wages, long working hours, fear of persecution or deportation by authorities and fear of reprisals from employers. Complex and restrictive documentation processes for migrant workers hinders their capacity to demand their rights.

In order to engage with and support migrant organising, it is essential for CSOs, trade unions and international allies to broaden their understanding

of what organising, and organisations look like. Due to the operating context, many migrant-led groups have fewer formal structures and less resources.

In this context,

- ◆ To reach grassroots migrant-led groups, the EU's support to migrants' organisations must be flexible, must support capacity building of the group in ways that they identify as valuable and must take due regard for security concerns. It is also essential to build relationships with workers in the host country and their organisations, and for international allies to identify and create pressure on states which are not upholding the human rights of migrants.
- ◆ Given its strategic position as a major trade partner, the EU shall step up its commitment to **protect freedom of association of migrant workers**. By effectively instrumentalizing trade agreements and incorporating provisions that ensure the safety of workers who exercise this fundamental right, the EU has a profound impact on the lives of millions of migrant workers across the region.

### 4. Flexible, Accessible and Continuous Funding

National and regional funding support for CSOs in Southeast Asia is limited and particularly CSOs who challenge authoritarian regimes are persecuted. These CSOs may be subject to increased control from authorities, banned from registration, have bank accounts frozen and have staff or members harassed, arrested or killed - all of which create emergencies which cost time, money and wellbeing of staff and prevent CSOs from building movements. This restricts the already very limited or non-existent

local income sources for CSOs and increases reliance on international support. However, international funding targeting CSOs and Trade unions presents several challenges that need to be addressed in order for these funds to achieve their objective to strengthen CSOs and to ensure the civic and democratic space to enable CSOs to act and operate freely and safely.

As civil society space shrinks, the sustainability and diversity of civil society is undermined, and **it is essential that international support does not also shrink to a limited number of actors or organisations who are bigger or adapt their mandate to fit with authoritarian policies.** International supporters must create funding pathways that are accessible to a diverse range of grassroots CSOs and support the priorities of grassroots movements.

**Moreover, funders shall rethink the design of funding and equip themselves to operate when space is shrinking.**

In order to effectively support civil society development, international funding mechanisms must:

- ◆ **Ensure Sustainability and Continuity:** funding priorities change across years challenging CSOs work sustainability, consistency, effectiveness and investment in staff/activist development. Long term projects and core funding is necessary for movements' building which requires long term strategies. Donors' support should focus on relationship and trust building to support strategies of CSOs in shrinking spaces where donor conditionalities on funding are not practically possible.

- ◆ **Emergency Solidarity Mechanisms** to support independent, democratic and representative Trade Unions and civil society organisations when they are under attack (for example to provide legal support, sustain families, psychosocial support, relocation support) and their funds frozen. To do so, the EU programs shall foresee that a percentage of their budget could be used for solidarity support.

- ◆ **Flexible and Needs' Based Programs' design:** we need responsive and flexible funding based on co-design from grassroots organisations, which must be adaptable to changing contexts during implementation. More particularly, there is the need for less 'report-demanding' small grants for small emerging groups and grassroots organisations (e. g. youth led organisations); and a willingness to engage with grassroots groups who are not organised in traditional forms such as unregistered organisations and social movements. Ensure that funds are available to enable the development of grassroots that are more and more subject to public authorities scrutiny.

- ◆ **Reinforce international CSOs Networking:** International programs at national, regional and global level, should reinforce the partnership between local CSOs in Southeast Asia and other sister organisations (e. g. from Europe) to nurture international solidarity, cooperation, mutual learning and networking. When it comes to global programs, international support for multi-actors' networks for global advocacy and campaigning could be a very effective tool (e. g. the anti-asbestos campaign targeting the REACH convention).

# Signing organisations:

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Country</i>
ALTSEAN-Burma	Thailand
BWTUC	Cambodia
C.CAWDU- Day Up Global Factory	Cambodia
Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions [CATU]	Cambodia
Center for Migrant Advocacy Philippines (CMA)	Philippines
Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR)	Philippines
Hong Kong Labour Rights Monitor	United Kingdom
Just Economy and Labour Institute	Thailand
Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU)	Philippines
Mekong Migration Network	Honk Kong, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam
National Confederation of Transport Workers Union	Philippines
Olof Palme International Center	Sweden, Myanmar, Cambodia
SIM-CARRD INC.	Philippines
SOLIDAR	Belgium
Solidar Suisse	Hong Kong
Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA	Australia
Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association - YCOWA	Thailand and Myanmar



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