



POST-EVENT PRESS RELEASE

16TH ASEF TALKS ON THE HILL
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Asia and Europe need to refocus on common values

The recent referendum in Switzerland in which the majority of Swiss voted in favour of banning the construction of new minarets in Switzerland has re-ignited the controversial debate of religious freedom and tolerance in Europe. Following this development, a group of education and interfaith experts from Asia and Europe point to the urgent need to refocus public attention on our common values.

While differences among different religious creeds can pose problems, common values do exist among them. Nevertheless, a lot remains to be done, according to the participants, who noted that these common values needed to be actively shared in practice. The group highlighted that ASEM governments should work with UNESCO, the UN Alliance of Civilisations and other international initiatives to promote common values through educational cooperation programmes.

This was the key message from the 16th Talks on the Hill organised by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and Casa Asia. This meeting, which was held in Barcelona last month, gathered a group of education and interfaith experts from Asia and Europe for a collective reflection on the challenges and opportunities of promoting common.



Experts from Asia and Europe gathered in Barcelona to discuss common values. In the photo: Prof Qin Hangyin, Beijing Normal University, and Mr Peter Schier, Consultant for the Global Ethic Foundation

Topmost in the expert group's recommendations was the need for broad-based education about the world's major religions as well as non-religious beliefs. The group warned against a pervasive ignorance about the diversity of religions and beliefs in societies across Asia and Europe today, fueling misunderstanding and intolerance at the root of societal tensions and conflict.

Government-led efforts to implement values-based citizenship classes to promote social cohesion were seen as the right way to go. The group called for long-term investment in teacher training, which is a critical prerequisite for the success of any education programme that addresses sensitive issues like religion, beliefs, values and multiculturalism.

“Our discussions highlighted the important role that civil society organisations play, especially in the non-formal education sector, where changes and initiatives can move faster,” says the meeting facilitator Thomas Uthup of the UN Alliance of Civilisations. “Every opportunity should be given to increase civil society competence in non-formal education,” he added.

The Talks on the Hill is an ASEF dialogue programme that provides a neutral venue for open and non-confrontational Asia-Europe dialogue and debate between opinion-leaders and area experts. Since 2003, the Talks have engaged diverse individuals and audiences on issues of cross-cultural significance, ranging from the tension between press freedom and religious freedom, to the management of emotional and at times violent public responses to external conflicts.

For more details on the 16th Talks on the Hill on common values in education, see attached Briefing.

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About the organisers



The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) promotes greater mutual understanding between Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges. Through ASEF, civil society concerns are included as a vital component of deliberations of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). ASEF was established in February 1997 by the participating governments of ASEM. Since then, ASEF has implemented over 350 projects, engaging over 15,000 direct participants as well as reaching out to a much wider audience in Asia and Europe. www.asef.org

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) now brings together 43 member states (Austria, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, Vietnam) plus the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat. www.aseminfoboard.org



CASA ASIA

Casa Asia is a Spanish public consortium, formed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the Catalanian Autonomous Government, the Barcelona City Council and the Madrid City Council, that aims at promoting mutual understanding between the societies of Spain and of the Asia-Pacific region and at developing the relations between Spain, Europe and Asia and the Pacific in the institutional, cultural, educational and economic fields. It develops cross-cultural dialogue and understanding through a wide range of activities such as Art Festivals, dialogues, lectures, courses, conferences, meetings and seminars. www.casaasia.es



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