

**East and South-East Asian NGOs:
Challenges for greater participation in the United Nations Economic
and Social Council**

**By
Yi-Nostal KWON¹**

August 2010

¹ Master student in International Relations at Seoul National University, Republic of Korea,
and in Science of Management at ESSEC Business School, France, graduating in July 2011.
yinostal.kwon@gmail.com

Disclaimer:

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily imply official endorsement or acceptance by the NGO Branch or any other part of the United Nations system.

This research was conducted by Yi-Nostal KWON in the context of the Headquarters Internship Programme of the United Nations, Summer Session 2010. The author interned in the NGO Branch, Department of Social and Economic Affairs (DESA), from June to August 2010.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank Mikyong Kim who started this project, especially the statistical work on which several results of this paper are based; Diego Rumiany who supervised me during my work and helped to improve it greatly.

I also thank the Non-Governmental Organizations from East and South-East Asia that took the time to answer my various questions and surveys.

INTRODUCTION

“We have entered a new era of ever-greater partnership, and there are few limits to what civil society can achieve...it is clear that there is a new diplomacy where NGOs, international organizations and governments can come together to pursue their objectives”

-Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, May 7th, 1999

With globalization, NGOs or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been increasingly playing a more decisive role to promote development and social change during the last decades. From national to transnational, global civil societies influenced the world with new diplomacy by expressing the values and ideas on behalf of the society. As NGOs or CSOs became the best source of expert information and direct assistance at the grassroots level, the United Nations enlarged the playing ground by granting consultative status at the Economic and Social Council to some NGOs.

The adoption of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 1996/31 increased the participation of the NGOs and CSOs in the UN system. The reinforcement of UN-NGO relation built a stronger foundation for NGO activities and a better participation in the UN and its agencies in dealing complex global issues. When the accreditation by the ECOSOC Council is granted, NGOs have access to all meetings of ECOSOC and its official subsidiary bodies. While NGOs were mere observers before the

Resolution was put into effect, they are now entitled to formal participation rights and acceptance during the intergovernmental proceedings, which is a noteworthy evolution.

There is no topic dealt in any part of the UN system that does not cover the expertise or the advocacy concerns of the NGOs. Even though number of organizations that were accredited with consultative status has increased rapidly since 1996, the regional participation has remained asymmetrical between developed and developing nations. Furthermore, there were gaps even amongst the developing nations. Thus, NGO participation is lacking in the regions such as Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia when compared to the other areas that are Europe and North America.

In order to improve the disproportionate representation among the different regions, it is crucial to examine the challenges and obstacles that the NGOs from these areas face. After several reports made by the NGO Branch on the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Commonwealth of Independent States and Middle Eastern and North Africa, this paper will discuss the issues that NGOs from East and South-East Asia face and the solutions that can be implemented in the area. We will take the countries as it is given by the United Nations Statistics Division¹ and will remove Japan as it is a developed country. As Resolution 1996/31 encourages “*greater participation of non-governmental organizations from developing countries in international conferences convened by the United Nations*”, “*in order to help achieve a just, balanced, effective and*

¹ According to the United Nations Statistics Division, UN DATA, *Composition of macro geographical (continental) regions, geographical sub-regions, and selected economic and other groupings*, Eastern Asia countries are as the following; China, Japan, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Mongolia, and Republic of Korea. According to these same UN DATA, South-Eastern Asia are as the following; Brunei-Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

*genuine involvement of non-governmental organizations from all regions and areas of the world*¹, this paper will therefore focus on the developing countries of East and South-East Asia (ESEA).

We will use extensively in the first part the data from the NGO Branch to measure the participation of NGOs from ESEA. It is important to bear in mind that there may be some inconsistencies, especially for the meeting attendance data, as the registration in the online system is made on a voluntary basis. We will have nevertheless sufficient data to reach our conclusions.

PART I

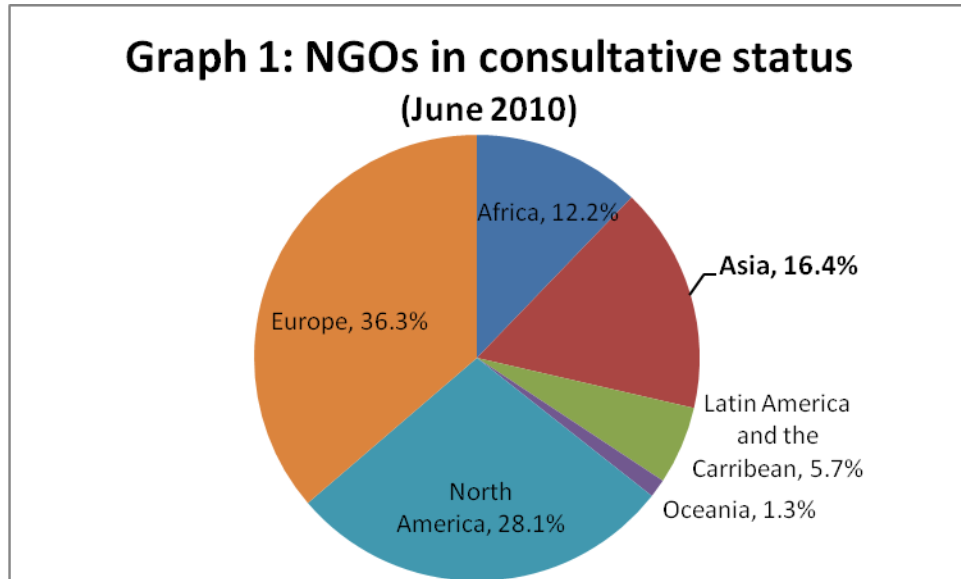
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia NGOs with consultative status at ECOSOC

The imbalance between developed countries and developing countries is clearly depicted in the number of NGOs with consultative status. NGOs from Europe and North America take up around 64% of all the accreditations (Graph 1). On the other hand, Asian NGOs represent only 16% of the total and represent roughly half the number of NGOs with consultative status from Europe or NGOs from North America. If we focus on the countries from East and South-East Asia (Japan excluded), the NGOs from this area represent only 4.3% of the world total (Graph 1b), and a quarter of Asian NGOs

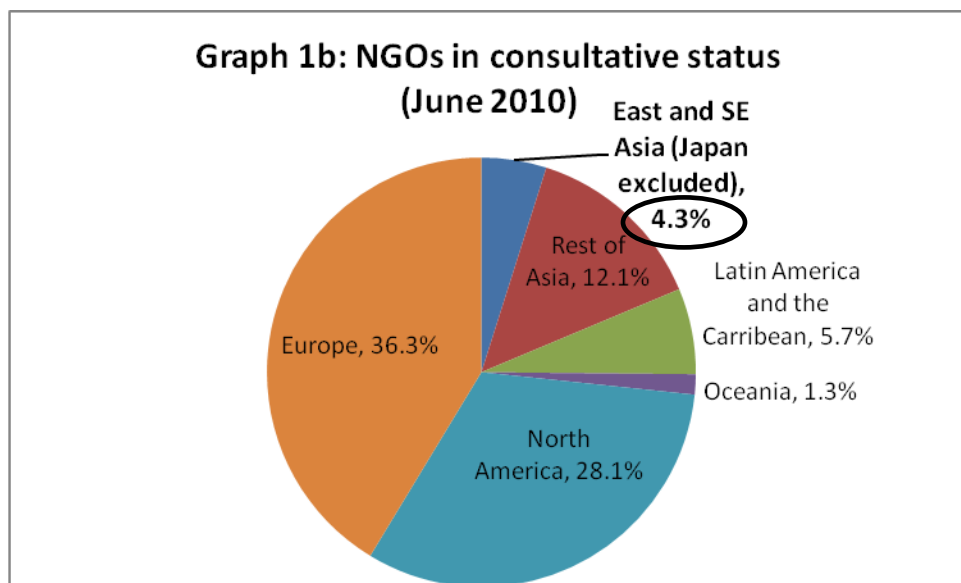
¹ United Nations, ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 : « Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations », United Nations, New-York.
<http://esango.un.org/paperless/Web?page=static&content=resolution>

(Graph 2). By looking at the composition of those NGOs, we realize the large share of South Asian NGOs.

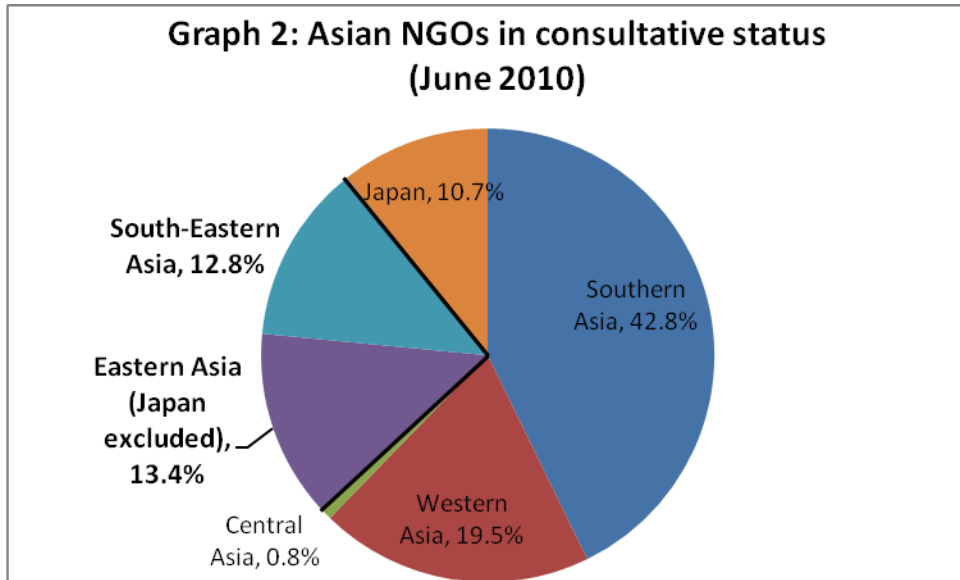
Therefore, despite the resurgence of civil society in East and South East Asia (ESEA Asia) during the past few decades, the participation of the area's NGOs is relatively limited.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

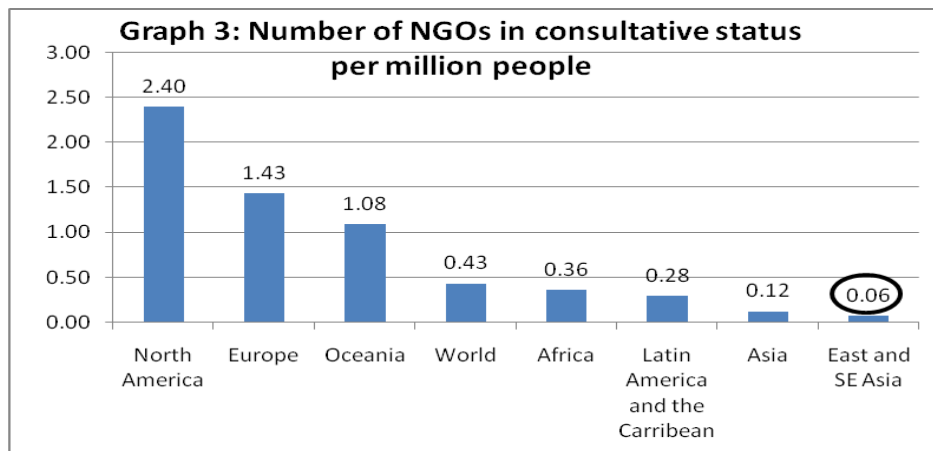


Source: NGO Branch/DESA



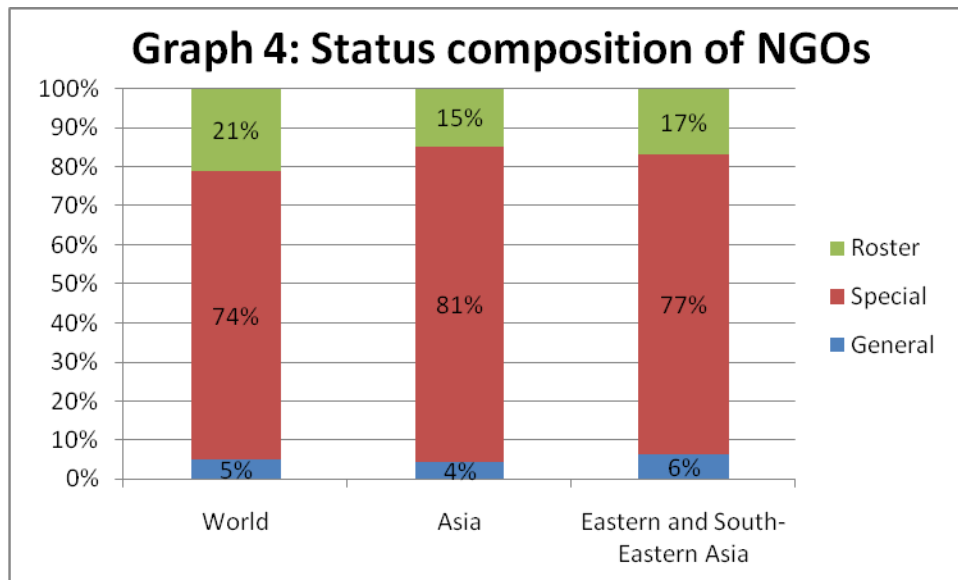
Source: NGO Branch/DESA

This limited relative participation is highlighted when we compare the data with the population of the different areas. Thus, the whole Asian region has the weakest representation (0.12 NGOs with consultative status/million people), but a focus on the countries of ESEA shows us that the area has a lower representation with 0.06 NGOs/million people. Graph 3 shows the number of NGOs with consultative status per million people in each region.



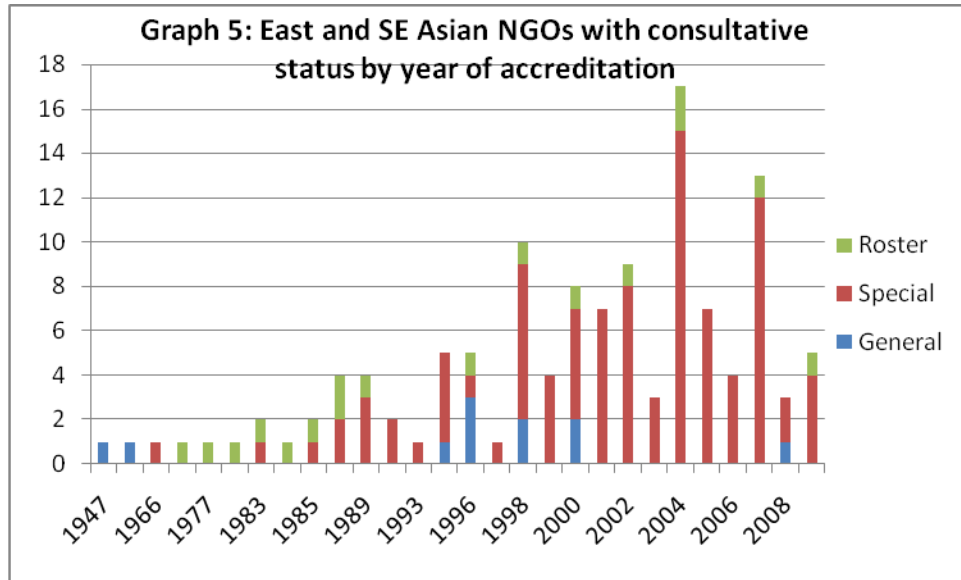
Source: NGO Branch/DESA and Population Reference Bureau, 2009 World Population

This low representation in the ESEA region does not lead nevertheless to a different status composition of NGOs compared with other regions (Roster, Special, and General). Actually, there is a similar pattern in all regions of the world concerning the NGOs' status, the special status overriding the number of General and Roster Status. This pattern is also the same amongst NGOs in Asia and East and SE Asia (Graph 4). This may be explained by the decision pattern of the NGO Committee of ECOSOC.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

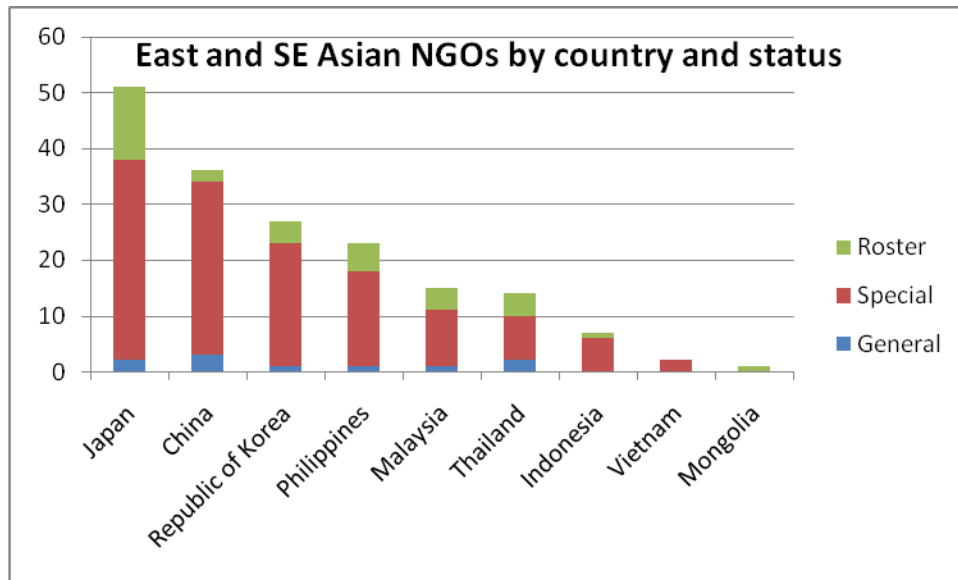
Unlike other regions, the ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 was not a major breakthrough for the ESEA region's NGOs accreditation. The number of accredited NGOs has increased slowly over the years, until a steeper increase in the end of the 1990s and the 2000s, with particularly a record of newly accredited NGOs in 2004.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

Between the year 2004 and 2005, the NGO Committee received indeed the highest number of applications. In parallel to this increase, the largest number of East and SE Asian NGOs was thus granted.

The main six countries in terms of NGO accreditation in ESEA are China, Republic of Korea, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. The other countries have a very limited participation, Brunei-Darussalam, Cambodia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Laos People's of Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Singapore, and Timor-Leste having no NGOs with status at all. There is therefore a distinction to be made between the 6 main countries and the other countries in our analysis. The following graph shows us the situation in the different countries of the region. Even though Japan will not be studied in this report as it is a developed country, it may be used (as it is the case in the following graph) for comparison.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

If we observe the names of the NGOs from ESEA, we realize the frequency of the names of countries inside the names of NGOs. Thus, the words “Korea” or “China” are often mentioned as the two countries are the most represented in terms of NGOs from the area. This frequency of countries names does not necessarily mean that NGOs are more focused on local issues, but is more explained by the language. The name of the country is indeed much more frequently used in the names of organizations in Chinese and Korean than in English or French (for the names of schools, universities...and NGOs). More interesting are the words showing the topics tackled by the NGOs: we can therefore see in the following table that the most popular topics among ESEA NGOs with consultative status are gender social development and sustainable development issues.

Words included in NGOs' names or issues	Number of NGOs
China, Chinese	26
Gender, woman	24
Asia, Asia-Pacific, Asian	19
Social development, economic justice	18
Korea, Korean	15
Sustainable development, environment, nature	14
Human rights	10
Economic development	8
Children, child, youth	7
Peace, disarmament, diplomacy, friendship, against violence	7
Technology, sciences, IT	6
Commerce, industry, business, corporations, finance, entrepreneur	5
Culture, religion	5
Health	5
Family, family planning, parenthood	5

Source: NGO Branch/DESA

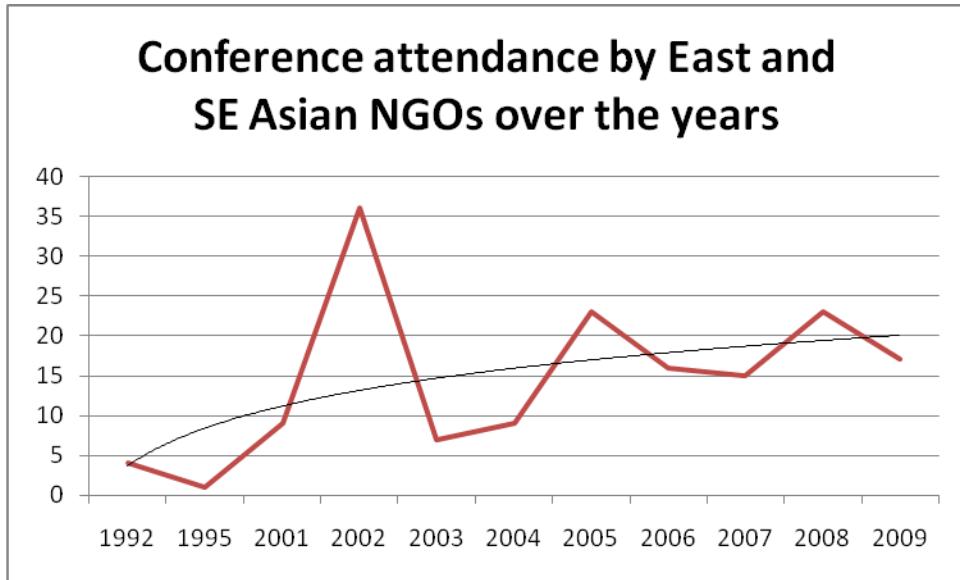
The data we have seen so far showed us the quantitative participation of NGOs from East and SE Asia and their interests. However, quality of the participation of NGOs also matters. To observe that quality of the NGOs' participation, we can look at the participation of NGOs in meetings and conferences organized by ECOSOC, and the number of written statements submitted at the High-Level Segment. As we said, measure of the "quality" of that participation has its limits because of methodology issues. This quality measure shows however interesting results.

Concerning written statements, the Asian region has not the lowest rate as 16% of the total number of written statements between 2006 and 2010 come from the Asian region. However, a focus on ESEA shows us that the NGOs from this area have the second lowest rate after only Oceania!

	Total number of written statements in 2006-2010	Share
Africa	9	5%
Asia	32	16%
<i>from East and SE Asia, Japan excluded</i>	8	4%
Europe	71	37%
Latin America and Caribbean	13	7%
North America	65	34%
Oceania	4	2%
Total	194	100%

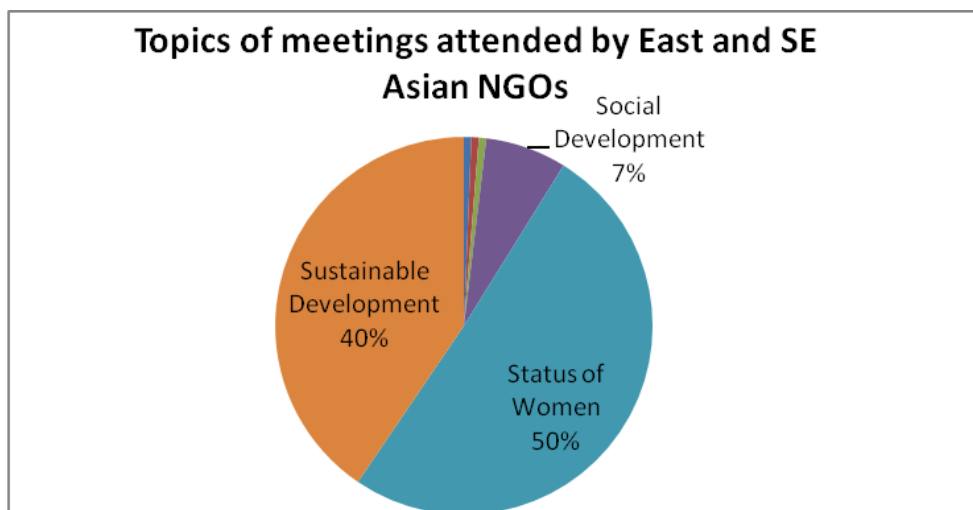
Source: NGO Branch/DESA

Concerning the participation of NGOs in meetings organized by ECOSOC or its subsidiary bodies, the participation from NGOs in East and SE Asia has evolved over the years as the following graph shows us. The black trend line shows us that there has been an increasing participation trend of those meetings. Clearly, this is to associate with the increasing number of NGOs in the area, illustrated in graph 5.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

A focus on the topic of those meetings shows us the interest that the ESEA region's NGOs have for the gender issue, sustainable development and in a less extent for social development meetings. Other issues such as financing for development, indigenous issues, and public administration have been less popular in the past two decades.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

Thus, the conferences that NGOs from the ESEA region attended the most were as the following, participation being probably influenced by the organization of famous meetings and conferences:

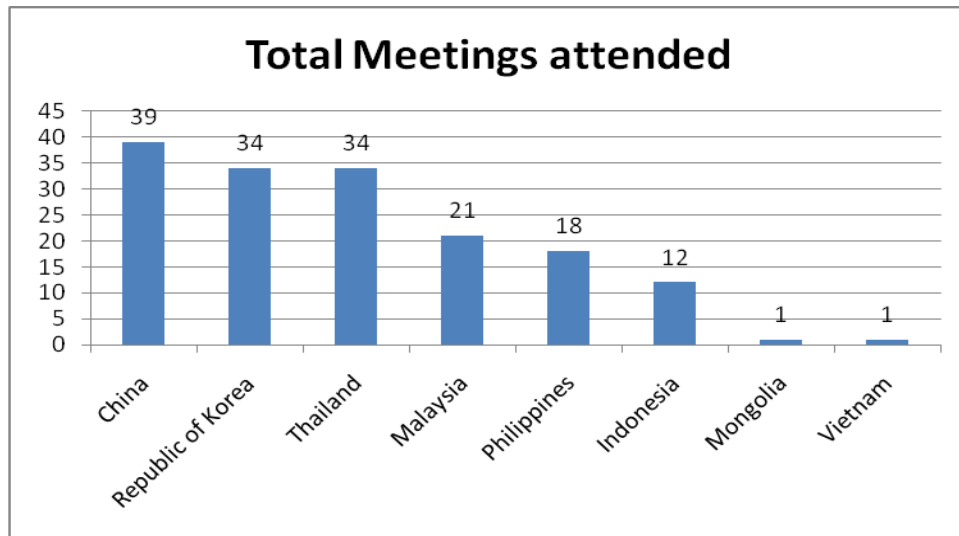
<u>Top conference participations by East and SE Asian NGOs</u>		
• Johannesburg (2002)		25 NGOS
• 10th year review: 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2005)		18 NGOS
• 52nd Session of the Commission on the Status Women (2008)		11 NGOS

Source: NGO Branch/DESA

However, even though these figures are the highest for the ESEA region, they have to be put into perspective with the **778 NGOs** that participated in Johannesburg Summit, or the **535 NGOs** that attended the 10th year review session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2005.

Concerning the countries participation in meetings, NGOs from China, Republic of Korea and Thailand have been the most active since 1992. This is also to associate with

the number of NGOs in those countries, but we can also infer that NGOs of some countries participate more in such events than others.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

Overall, 160 participations of ESEA NGOs in official meetings have been registered in the NGO Branch database since 1992. Thus, **NGOs from the ESEA area represent 4% of all meetings attendance from all NGOs since 1992.** This figure must be compared with the previous figures that we showed:

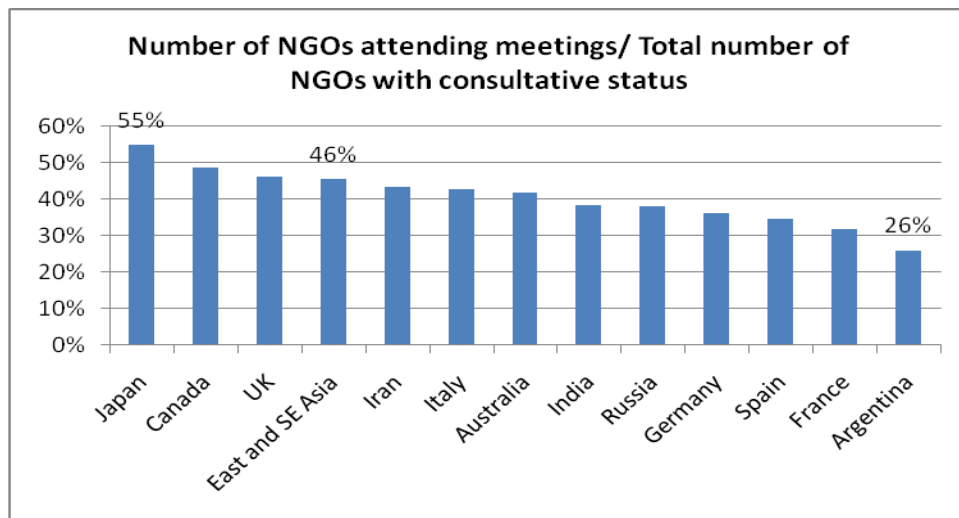
- NGOs from ESEA represent in number **4.3% of all NGOs** with consultative status.
- They have published **4% of the total written statement.**
- They represent **4% of the total attendance of official meetings.**

What do those figures mean? As we said, two things have to be observed distinctly: the quantity of NGOs from our focused area, that is to say the simple number of NGOs in the area; and second, the quality of these NGOs' participation (that we could call activity, or dynamism). The close figures we have observed in the previous paragraph (4,3%, 4% and

4% again) make us think that the NGOs from our region are not passive in comparison of their number. They may not be overly active as it could be the case for NGOs from other areas, but the figures tell us that the activity of East and SE Asian NGOs correspond to their numbers.

The limited participation of the area's NGOs would be then more explained by its limited number than by an exaggerated passivity¹.

This observation is confirmed by other data: when the share of NGOs participating in meetings is determined for some countries (Number of NGOs attending meetings divided by total number of NGOs with consultative status), we can see that the ESEA region is far from having the lowest rate, and is in line with other countries. In spite of some factors that could limit its participation (and that we will see in the next part), NGOs from the region have a higher rate than those of some European countries.

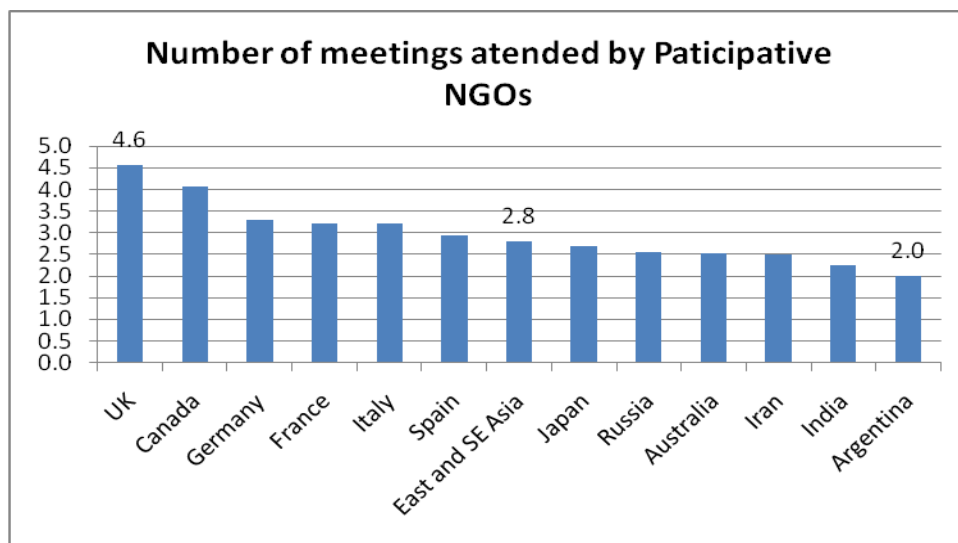


Source: NGO Branch/DESA

¹ It is important to note that the notions of activity and passivity are inherent and exclusive to that report, and the author, the NGO Branch, or the UN are not judging the activity on the field of the NGOs but their mere participation in ECOSOC events.

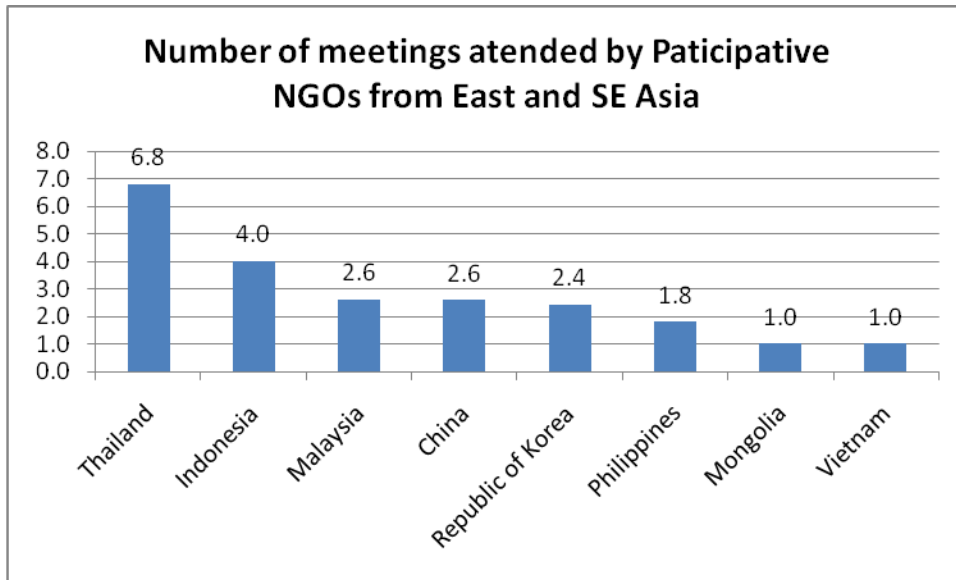
Also, this indicator may show us the participation concentration on some particular major NGOs of the region, as it could be the case in Latin America. Once again, this is not really the case for ESEA as the rate is relatively high.

Other indicator we can see is the number of meetings attended by participative NGOs, which is the average number of times an NGO that has already participated to a meeting will participate to meetings over the years. By using that rate, we exclude the passive NGOs. It then shows us that ESEA is not the best nor the worst performer.

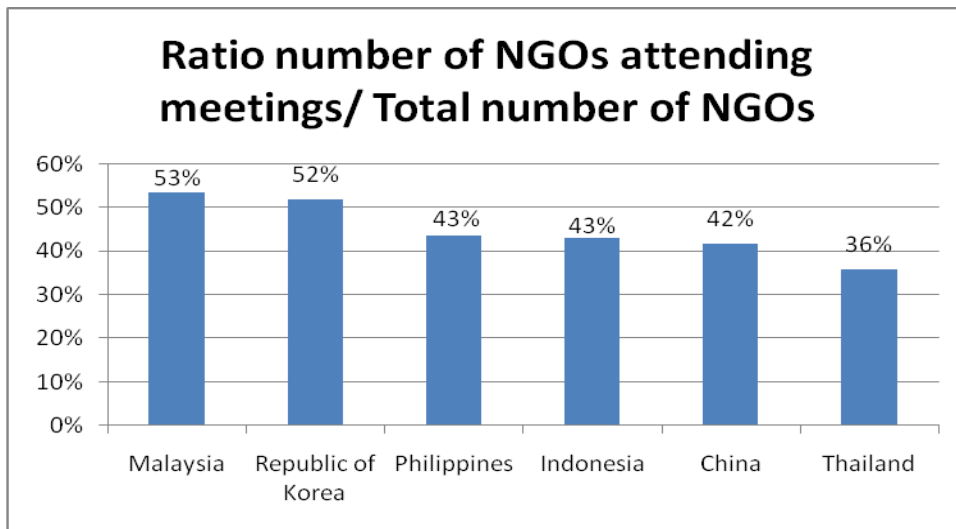


Source: NGO Branch/DESA

However the use of such indicator for the whole ESEA region should not make us forget that the region is very diverse. Thus, the two following graphs show us the very different cases for each country, and confirm that the region is not homogeneous in term of NGO participation.



Source: NGO Branch/DESA



Source: NGO Branch/DESA

For example, number of Thai NGOs that attend meetings out of the total Thai NGOs with consultative status is relatively low, while the average number of meeting attended by an active Thai NGO is the highest among the ESEA countries. This shows a concentration

of participation among certain NGOs in Thailand that may not exist in other countries of the region.

Two main conclusions are drawn from that first part.

First, the NGOs in East and South East Asia represent a very small share among the total number of NGOs with consultative status. This is more striking when we compare the number of NGOs from ESEA with the population of this area.

Second, the NGOs of the area seem to have nevertheless an average activity, meaning that they are not passive when they do get consultative status.

From that second conclusion, we could then suppose that if the United Nations did engage more the NGOs from ESEA, we would automatically have a bigger participation of the NGOs of ESEA. In order to increase that participation of 4% in written statement and meeting participation of NGOs from ESEA, the NGO Branch would only have to implement a new strategy that would get more NGOs from the area ask consultative status.

We are therefore going to evaluate that last assumption in the next part: is the whole participation of the ESEA NGOs only limited by their numbers, or are there factors influencing the NGOs from the area and limit their participation, that would break the link between quantity of NGOs and their “quality”?

PART II: Factors influencing the NGOs' participation

From the conclusions drawn from the first part, the UN has a first possibility to simply increase the number of NGOs from ESEA with consultative status in order to increase participation of the NGOs from that area.

There is an idea that there is an untapped potential of NGOs in ESEA that could have the same activity and contribution than the NGOs from the area that already have consultative status. It would only depend on the UN to tap this untapped universe of capable NGOs.

However, the NGOs from ESEA have to face several challenges that may make the initial number of ESEA NGOs capable to be active in the UN system limited. Then, our issue would not be as simple as it appeared in the end of the first part.

The scope of this study covers a geographical space that is not only huge in term of areas and population but is also very diverse culturally, politically and economically. There are indeed broad differences between countries as diverse as China, the Republic of Korea or Thailand, and there are major difficulties to study them in the same manner.

However, there are some commonalities between the countries of the area in their evolution during the last decades. For example, referring to the historical context of the region, many countries of ESEA were under colonialism, occupation or dictatorships. Furthermore, several countries of the area experienced democratization and liberalization of the national economy in the last three decades.

Some of the main events of the region are as the following:

1978	Economic reforms in China transforming China from a planned economy to a market economy.
1980s and 1990s	Democratic transitions in several Asian countries. (Philippines in 1986, South Korea in 1987, Mongolia in 1990, Thailand in 1991-1992, Cambodia in 1993, Taiwan in 1996 and Indonesia in 1998).
1980s and 1990s	Economic liberalization in the ESEA, rapid economic development of the Four Asian Tigers.
1985	Collapse of oil prices.
1997	Hong Kong returns to Chinese rule. Asian Financial Crisis.
2001	China's accession to WTO.
2003	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) spread in Asia, North America, and Europe.
2004	Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, number of deaths evaluated to 240,000 people.
2009	China becomes the third largest economy in the world.

1-Link between government and NGOs

The evolution of political and economical environment and its impact on NGOs

Countries from the ESEA have had different experiences, but two main trends can be observed. First, there was a wave of democratic transitions in the 1980s and 1990s for several of them. Second, the economic liberalization and the impact of globalization struck most of them, including the communist countries such as China, in such an extent that China, for example, joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.

These trends do have a strong implication for NGOs because the economic liberalization in the area has created problems that the state cannot solve alone. In parallel, democratic transition has increased the space and role civil society could take.

The different crisis that struck the region (the collapse of oil prices in 1985 for oil exporting countries like Indonesia, or the 1997 financial crisis for South East Asia and South Korea) has also increased the challenges and the expectations placed on civil society to create a safety net or to improve governance of society in several countries.

Overall, the relation with the government proves to be essential in the activity and evolution of the NGOs in ESEA, and the roles of such organizations have admittedly increased in most of the countries of the area.

In China, with the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China relaxed the state control over the economy and society, and induced the creation of large NGOs that had to carry out certain functions the state was responsible before. If we take the

example of environment protection, the political space for popular participation in that matter has progressively opened, and establishment of NGOs was not only authorized, but also encouraged. Media investigation and support of grassroots efforts were encouraged as well in a certain degree¹. Thus, the first environmental NGO in China was launched in 1994 (Friends of Nature).

In the Republic of Korea, the democratic transition in 1987 from a military authoritarian government towards a civil government secured the institutional foundation upon which civil society could develop. The 1990s were thus called the decade of the “Associational Revolution²” as thousands of NGOs were created at that time in the country. They became very active in political and economical life, having a major influence for example in the outcome of elections.

In South East Asia, the development of NGOs also occurred rapidly: in the Philippines, the new constitution in 1987 gave power to NGOs, and the new, more democratic regime clearly offered opportunities for NGOs and other non-profit groups to collaborate with government. In Indonesia, the end of the authoritarian government of Suharto that used to weaken the civil society forced NGOs to adapt and to have a stronger political role. Similar development occurred after the diverse democratic changes in Thailand.

¹ Zhang Y., « China’s Emerging Civil Society », from The Brookings Institution, 2003.

² Salamon L., “The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector,” from Foreign Affairs, July-August 1994.

With the recent globalization, challenges faced by societies have had a larger scale (SARS in 2003, Tsunami in South East Asia in 2004) and NGOs gained a complementary role with the government.¹

A change in the nature of the cooperation between the state and NGOs

It is important to note however that NGOs have not suddenly appeared in Asia after these changes (democratic transition, liberalization, or globalization). NGOs existed before the different democratic transitions in several countries of the area and actually contributed heavily to democratization (South Korea, Thailand, Philippines...). In the case of countries where there was no such democratization, civil organizations with different purposes already existed for a long time, even if they were organized and framed by a central authority (“Danwei” organizations in China).

When important changes occurred in ESEA countries, the main change was the relation between the different states and the NGOs.

In the case of countries where democratic transitions happened, the state-NGO relation changed from an antagonistic relation to a more **cooperative, complementary relationship**.

In spite of changes in the political and economical environment that eased and reinforced the work and importance of NGOs in ESEA countries, the legal framework in the different countries is such that NGOs are dependent on the government in several

¹ Lowry C., « Civil Society Engagement in Asia : Six country profiles », 2008.
And Tan S.S., « Non-official diplomacy in Southeast Asia : ‘Civil Society’ or ‘Civil Service’ ? », from Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol.27, No.3, 2005

matters. Registration, funding, or even approvals of action in some cases are made by the government. Especially in South East Asia, most NGOs do not have the capacity to deliver the messages of their target groups to the government because they lack strategies to deal with the government or simply do not want to confront the government for the sake of their survival.

It is more striking in China as some NGOs are actually classified as GONGO or “Government organized non-governmental organizations”. Having a direct link with the government, those organizations avoid criticizing the state.

Besides, organizations usually have difficulties to register as an NGO or CSO and many actually have to register as businesses. This is less profitable for the organizations as it will have to pay taxes like a normal company.

In general, the regulation and the legal framework prevent NGOs from gaining too much autonomy. Thus, a clause in the Chinese legal system prohibits NGOs from establishing regional branches, and bars any individual from serving as the legal representative of more than one NGO. Also, the clause states that the government will not allow any new NGO to be established if there is already an NGO doing similar work in the same administrative area. This is a major obstacle for NGOs that would seek to increase their size, scope or influence.

On the other hand, central government has encouraged government agencies to transfer some of their function to NGOs. However, many local agencies are reluctant to do so as it would diminish their resources and influence. Therefore, even if some NGOs have been

set up, they may not have any real responsibilities or impact. For example, Kenneth Foster reported such case in Shandong Province, China¹:

“Several local government agencies, emulating their superiors at the provincial and national levels, have set up associations for the explicit purpose of having them take over the function of promoting product quality and certifying compliance with quality standards. [...] However, bureau leaders had second thoughts when it became apparent that giving away one of the bureau’s functions could potentially affect its level of funding. The result was that the association was left dormant.”

Finally these bureau leaders have no real incentives to transfer any responsibility to the associations and NGOs.

Clearly, some governments including the Chinese one have adopted a policy of forestalling the formation of NGOs which might challenge them politically, weaken their control over society or limit their autonomy in formulating economic and social policies. For example, NGOs set up by “specific social groups” in China, such as migrant labourers, laid off workers, or ex-servicemen, receive rarely authorization from civil affairs departments².

The dependence on government (in terms of funding and administrative network) is such that the **support of the government has become more important than the support of the common people to implement projects.**

¹ Foster K., « Embedded within state agencies : business associations in Yantai », from The China Journal, N.47, January 2002.

² Lu Y., « The Growth of Civil Society in China, Key challenges for NGOs », from Chatham House, 2005.

Even if the situation looks better in Korea, the NGOs are also dependent on the government in a certain way. Like in several countries of the ESEA area, the relationship between NGO and the state has progressively turned from conflict to partnership over the years.

NGOs in Korea played particularly an important role in fighting against corruption in politics, and have for example published blacklists of political men who were not suited for political life due to misbehaviours. However, it is believed that such a direct and excessive political participation of these organizations has tarnished their images and sapped their credibility¹.

Another limit of this activity increase of the NGOs is the risks of being co-opted by the government. The relationship between the government and the NGOs have become so collaborative that some NGOs received government funds for their support, which raised serious questions about conflict of interest and the groups' sincerity.

Another controversial aspect of the cooperative relationship between NGOs and the government in South Korea involves the entrance of NGO leaders into government service. Since the mid-1990s, many leaders of civil society have worked in the presidential office and other government agencies. NGO leaders have also been invited to join various independent commissions as well as advisory committees for major

¹ Kim E., « The limits of NGO-government relations in South Korea », from Asian Survey, Vol. 49, No.5, 2009.

government agencies. This has raised concerns about the neutrality and non-partisanship of those organizations.

It is however important to note that this phenomenon has been observed mainly for NGOs with a certain size. Unsurprisingly, as the NGOs grow from local to national level and get mature, these organizations and their staffs draw attention, and problems of cooptation become more frequent. The NGOs in that case focus less on effective grassroots participation and lose credibility¹.

Instead of a role in which the NGOs would be supposed to criticize the government's actions, NGOs in ESEA have often taken the roles of government agencies that work in fields where the state's role has diminished. Thus,

*“The essence of non-governmental organizations in Western civil societies lies in a time-honoured tradition of voluntary participation, moving beyond the confrontations within governments, markets, and citizens. In developing countries, on the other hand, national economies have been weak, with little or no capital to support social welfare policies. Accordingly, the NGOs in these countries followed one of two different paths, either leading anti-government movements and aligning themselves with anti-establishment political movements, or acting to supplement the functions of weak public welfare systems by developing close relations with the government based on mutual interests.”*²

The NGOs in ESEA have taken both roles, the anti-government role in the past, and the substitute of the government in the years following democratization and economic liberalization.

¹ Ha S.K. ,“The role of NGOs for low-income groups in Korean society”, 2002

² Same reference than 1.

This specific relation is confirmed by one NGO from Indonesia that was surveyed:

“So far, the NGOs that represent the region in the UN are more likely to represent the well-established NGOs. In fact some of them cannot be separated from the government. As a consequence, the voice they brought cannot represent the richness of views of the Asian Civil Society¹”.

In the countries where the democratic process has been incomplete, uneven or even absent, the relations between NGOs and the government depend totally on the action of the government and not on the NGOs themselves. In Vietnam for example, the government has not yet developed a clear legal framework for local and international NGOs, or a settled view of the status and role of such organizations. NGOs operate therefore without restriction but lack recognition². Before the democratization in Cambodia, the government provided little support to NGOs and according to some NGO workers, the government's attitude toward local NGOs was more of suspicion than cooperation. If we compare with Thailand, the Cambodian situation was then somehow similar to Thailand's in the 1970s and early 1980s when emerging grassroots-level NGOs were under government suspicion as political agencies in disguise³.

Thus, the relationship that NGOs have with the government is up to the government's behaviour and to the opinion it has on NGOs.

¹ From the Institute for Migrant Rights, Indonesian NGO with special consultative status (2001), the comment was made in June 2010.

² Thayer C., « Vietnam and the challenges of political civil society », from *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol.31, No.1, 2009.

³ Pednekar S.S., « NGOs and Natural Resource Management in Mainland Southeast Asia », 1995.

The state can also have an indirect influence on the activities of the NGOs. In that same South East Asian region, NGOs' international impact and influence have decreased with the success of ASEAN, as the organization extols the importance of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of state, in the expense of the work of some NGOs in the field of democracy or human rights.

Besides, the terrorist threat has actually diminished the space for civil liberty in the South East Asian region, as governments have been reacting to the threats with an increased control of the NGOs. Indonesia has for instance enacted new laws following the terrorist attacks of Bali in 2002, and internal security acts in Singapore and Malaysia have been implemented. Thus, Muslim civil society groups have ended up coming under scrutiny of the governments for their alleged links with terrorist groups. *“Homeland security has somehow received the priority over Human security”*¹.

This phenomenon is also present in South Korea as the “National Security Law” has granted the authorities since the Cold War broad powers against persons who commit acts the government views as endangering the "security of the state". If we take a recent example, the South Korean government has been investigating and will possibly prosecute an NGO with consultative status (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy²) for having submitted a report to the member States of the UN Security Council raising doubts over the results of the South Korean government's investigation on the sinking of the South Korean ship Cheonan.

¹ Lowry C., « Civil Society Engagement in Asia : Six country profiles », 2008.

² South Korean NGO with special consultative status since 2004.

Overall, the relation with the state has a strong influence on the work and development of the NGOs in ESEA. This is not surprising when we see the important role played by the “developmental state” in the economic development of certain Asian countries. However, this influence also represents a challenge for NGOs of the area as NGOs are more and more dependent on the state. This dependence limits the action and development of the NGOs, has an impact on the capable number of NGOs, and eventually limits the potential participation of the NGOs in the UN fora.

Unlike other countries, NGOs in several ESEA countries play less a role of arbiter or even intermediate between the government and the people, than a role of substitute or “government agency”.

Even though the situation differs greatly depending on the country, these special relations with the governments may have a serious incidence on the applications of ESEA NGOs to obtain consultative status. Resolution 1996/31 of the Economic and Social Council stipulates indeed that the government or its members should not “interfere with the free expression of views of the organization”¹. The UN should act then in consequence, and carry out the selection of the NGOs of this area knowing these specific relations. In other words, the UN will have two choices:

-Apply this resolution and pay more attention to the NGO/government relation during the selection process of ESEA NGOs. This implies that ESEA NGOs will have more difficulties to obtain consultative status and that the UN will have to put new resources into that selection process.

¹ Economic and Social Council, Resolution 1996/31 of the 49th plenary meeting on 25 July 1996.

-Adapt the resolution to these specific cases and be more flexible with the NGOs from ESEA as they have a different background and come from different cultures. It is however important to note that in that case, the substance of the resolution risks not to be taken into account. NGOs are indeed encouraged to get involved in the UN fora so that they can give a different view than the one of governments and member countries. What would be then the use of giving consultative status if the NGOs get somehow similar views than the states?

Concerning the NGOs' participation in the UN fora, as NGOs with capacity to send people to the events and who can bring something new to the forum's debate have more chances to participate, NGOs in countries where the government's influence is too large may have difficulties to develop and to bring a new point of view in the fora. Therefore, not only is there a **quantitative** effect where the overwhelming influence and control of the government limit the mere number of NGOs that could extend their scope and capacities to go to the international arena, but there is also a **qualitative** one as NGOs that are too close from the government would have a too much similar view than the one of the member state to bring something new to the debate. It is important to note that having a similar view than the government is not negative for the debate, but the original goal of including NGOs in the UN fora was to let them express the values and ideas on the behalf of society, similar or different of the ones of the state. However, with a tight control or influence from the state, NGOs would be limited in expressing these views of the society in the UN arena. In the cases of countries where NGOs are facing opposition of the government, the NGOs would face criticism and threat of losing its consultative

status (or other domestic rights). Clearly, the recent example of the Korean NGO shows this kind of influence in the international arena.

The problem induced by this dependence on the government is multiplied when the capacity of the government is limited. Thus, as the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs Bureaus are understaffed for the NGO management duty, priority is given to monitoring and controlling NGOs which it suspects on political and ideological grounds, while worrying less about NGOs that are guilty of economic misdeeds or that simply need assistance¹.

Nevertheless, besides the capacity of the government, the limited capacity of the NGOs has actually more impact on the NGOs' participation at ECOSOC.

2-A problem of capacity

Besides the problem created by the NGO-government relation, another challenge for the NGOs is their limited capacity to act effectively in the UN system. Surveys had been sent in the last months to NGOs from ESEA to have their opinions on the challenges they were facing. One of the main challenges they state in this survey was the limited operational capacities they had.

Financial capacity

On top of those limited capacities, funding is the main problem NGOs are facing today in ESEA. NGOs report therefore a “*lack of funds supporting*”, of “*insufficient resources for*

¹ Lu Y., « The Growth of Civil Society in China, Key challenges for NGOs », from Chatham House, 2005.

tracking debates and developments in the UN system in general and ECOSOC in particular”, or simply “*financing problems*”.

Funding has been made difficult by the recent economic crisis, especially for the countries where the NGOs depend more on international donors rather than local contributions.

This is the case in Indonesia where NGOs have been dependent on foreign funds, which represents a major problem for their sustainability in the current situation. The donor fatigue and significant decline in grants from foreign donors resulting from the crisis has increased the general problems of these NGOs. Overall, NGOs of the area have to fight for these funds and are often in competition with international NGOs.

Even in the Republic of Korea, where several NGOs with consultative status are present, financial weakness is the main structural weakness of the NGOs. According to the Korean statistics office, the annual budget of 56% of the listed NGOs in 2003 was below 100 million won (USD 100,000) and their financial situation was getting worse. The percentage of NGOs with an annual budget lower than that figure increased from 49.8% in 2000 to 55.5% in 2003, while the percentage of organizations with an annual budget above 1 billion won (\$1 million) decreased from 14.0% in 1997 to 10.1% in 2000 and to 5.71% in 2003¹.

Being active in the UN fora and participating to the ECOSOC activities need actually to mobilize a non-negligible amount of money (transportation, housing, visas...) that the organization may barely afford. This cost has to be put into the balance with the benefits

¹ Lowry C., « Civil Society Engagement in Asia : Six country profiles », 2008.

the NGOs could obtain in attending conferences. When asked about their participations to events, several NGOs have expressed their disappointment on the outcome of those events, noting a “*lack of role clarity on the part of NGOs when it comes to ECOSOC in New York or ESCAP in Bangkok*”, and that ECOSOC gatherings were perceived more as “*talk-fests*” than processes for moving forward in a collaborative manner on important matters. Clearly, the cost-benefit ratio seemed not profitable for the ESEA NGOs.

Finally, the limited financial capacity of most NGOs in ESEA has made them more concerned with economic independence than with social change or reform of the society, resulting to fears that this concern would divert them from their main activities to income generating activities...

Human resources

Another challenge mentioned by the NGOs is the limited manpower both in terms of quantity and quality. Thus, NGOs in ESEA mention a lack of qualified personnel on NGO affairs making it more difficult to send representatives to conferences, as the staff members are already overloaded and multi-tasking. NGOs from the area are “challenged with many services demands and lots of representation opportunities but limited capacity”, making it difficult to fully participate to the UN meetings.

Another obstacle is the simple fact that NGOs in several countries of ESEA do not have enough personnel with English proficiency who could attend events organized by the UN, or make written statements.

In the Korean case, statistics show that that almost 80% of the listed NGOs in 2003 had less than 10 staff members while only 0.66% had more than 100 staffers¹.

Experience and interest

NGOs that were surveyed also mentioned frequently the following:

- Lack of familiarity the ESEA NGOs had with the ECOSOC and UN mechanism or working operation.
- Lack of interest for the themes discussed at ECOSOC: themes in the global meetings may indeed be not related to the issues or topics that ESEA NGOs are interested in.
- Lack of awareness of the relevance or even the mere possibility of obtaining ECOSOC status.
- Lack of knowledge connecting domestic issues to international ones.

Overall, NGOs mention a lack of familiarity, interest, awareness or knowledge.

For all those “lacks”, NGOs mainly blame the lack of experience of the staff (which leads us to the previous part) but also the lack of guidance from ECOSOC...

3-The culture and resulting environment

The different types of relations with the government and the limited capacity of NGOs have built over the years a specific environment and culture in which NGOs have to adapt.

¹ Lowry C., « Civil Society Engagement in Asia : Six country profiles », 2008.

According to the NGOs that have been questioned, challenges that NGOs in ESEA are facing lead actually to new ones. Thus, the limited capacity of the NGOs is partly explained by the fact that NGOs are less and less attractive for the young graduates searching for work. The highly trained professionals with knowledge of NGOs or with English proficiency are not very enthusiastic to work in NGOs that seem to have limited capacity. Besides, relation with the state is such that governments appear to have more impact on important societal issues than NGOs, reinforcing the reluctance for potential workers to work in such organizations. In countries such as China, it is argued that civil society has actually been hindered more by the people than the state as there has been a fear of offending the government. This fear had been a major constraint on the NGOs' ability to engage in activism¹.

In South East Asia, the limited size of NGOs has led to regional disputes between NGOs to keep boundaries of their project site under their control. Thus, NGOs have to inspect before implementing a project whether a village or a group is already taken by another NGO. This is an unspoken rule that can cause dispute among NGOs in case of violation and trust seems not to prevail all the time among NGOs, even if they work in the same areas or same fields. More importantly, this hinders greatly the efficiency of NGOs to solve issues that a target group may encounter².

¹ Lu Y., « The Growth of Civil Society in China, Key challenges for NGOs », from Chatham House, 2005

² Jeong E.S., « Indonesian women NGOs in transition : the roles and limits of women NGOs in Indonesia », Thesis from Seoul National University, 2001

Many studies have been made on the political culture in Asia, defining some cultural aspects within organizations of the area. In China for example, elitism, fatalism and lack of cooperative spirit were identified as cultural features not conducive to civil society activism¹. Even though the studies highlighting these aspects have limitations and do not explain all the challenges the NGOs from ESEA face, they seem to have an effect on the work of NGOs. If we take the example of China again, NGOs mention a pessimism or realism about what they can achieve. This has an impact on the people's will and interest in engaging in actions to challenge the status quo represented by the government policies or traditional practices. These cultural aspects make people think that NGOs should set realistic goals and should be sympathetic to the government's position.

The fear of doing illegal activities by joining NGOs (even if it is not justified) gives then more credit to joining organizations close to the government.

In Korea, the relation between the NGOs and the government has an opposite effect on the culture and image of NGOs: there may be no fear of offending the government, but because of the closer relation that NGOs get with the government, these organizations lose credibility and see their status declining. Thus, words such as "Citizen movement without citizens", "Politicized NGOs" or "Handmaidens of the government" are often used in the media to designate the NGOs in South Korea².

¹ Liu A., « Mass Politics in the People's Republic: State and Society in Contemporary China », 1996.

² Kim E., « The limits of NGO-government relations in South Korea », from Asian Survey, Vol. 49, No.5, 2009.

Overall, a vicious circle seems to take place in the NGOs' environment in ESEA. The important role the government plays in regulating the environment of the NGOs limits the capacity of the NGOs. These two characteristics (relation with government and limited capacity) reinforce the culture present in the different countries, either willingness not to confront the government or discrediting of NGOs, and this in turn limits the role the NGOs can play in the different societies by harming their accountability or their influence. The media increases the impact of the circle by enhancing the different effects (particularly for the discrediting effect)

Eventually, this vicious circle hinders the development of NGOs in the area and **limits the number of big, well-known and capable NGOs that can benefit from having consultative status with the UN.**

PART III: Recommendations

The first part of this paper showed that the NGOs from ESEA represented a small portion of NGOs with consultative status, and that those NGOs from ESEA had nevertheless an average activity compared to their numbers.

From these observations, ECOSOC has three possibilities to reach its objective to increase the share of NGOs with consultative status from areas that are under-represented like ESEA:

- The first possibility would be to focusing on increasing rapidly the number of NGOs with consultative status from ESEA by supposing that NGOs from the area would all have in average the same activity than the NGOs form ESEA that already have consultative status. The second part of this paper showed us that this is not as simple, as NGOs from the region face several challenges that make the potential number of NGOs capable to work effectively with the UN not that big and are not easy to tap.

In practical terms, it will not be enough to just let NGOs from the region know that they can have consultative status and to inform them of the advantages of doing so. That is to say it will not be enough to merely increase the number of NGOs with consultative status, i.e. it will not be enough to only play on quantity.

- The second possibility would be to play on quality instead of quantity, that is to say by increasing the participation of the NGOs that already have consultative status.

- The third possibility would be to combine quantity and quality, that is to say increase the number of NGOs from ESEA with consultative status with potential to participate actively and qualitatively in the UN fora.

The third possibility would be the best option but is, obviously, the most difficult among the three to carry out. This third part of the paper will be to evaluate the possibilities to execute the second and third possibilities.

In regard of the nature of the challenges that NGOs face, the scope of the possible actions that the UN can take to improve participation of the ESEA NGOs is actually limited. The UN shall not change the relation between the government and the NGOs, improve the capacities of NGOs by supporting them financially, or to change the culture in the different ESEA countries. It has more possibilities to change the relation between the UN and NGOs or possibly the member states. It means that recommendations will be internal and practical changes rather than general recommendations on what to do in a specific country.

Localize the UN fora

According to the collected surveys, NGOs from ESEA were recommending the UN to organize more events or conferences in Asia so that they could have a greater participation in the UN fora. They especially mention conferences on specific topics that are linked with their interests (focused on their geographical areas), and training session organized in the area. It would match more with their capacities as costs of participation

(especially for transportation) would be reduced. Also, there would be the idea that the topics of such events would answer to the ESEA NGOs' concerns.

Overall, NGOs wish the UN to "localize" the events of the organization so that NGOs can be more active. This is often demanded by NGOs from under-represented areas.

The UN events may have indeed an influence on the NGOs activities and more surprisingly on their evolution. For example, the UN launched the Decade for Women (1976-1985) by organizing a world conference in Mexico for the International Women's year in 1975. This Decade was designated a ten-year determined effort to improve the status of women. This change in the International arena affected funding policies of donor agencies to fund women's groups in developing countries and a lot of women's NGOs in Asia benefited from that change in the international atmosphere¹.

The UN is however limited in its capacity to organize multiple events, and would have to do so in all different parts of the world. Like the idea of creating a fund that would financially help the NGOs to go to New-York or Geneva, the idea of creating a process where events would be regularly and frequently held in the ESEA region is difficult to establish for financial reasons. It is therefore complicated to make such recommendations in this paper.

The language is another issue difficult to solve. Unlike other areas in the world like Latin America, no Asian language is really used in ESEA as a main common or business language. Even though Chinese Mandarin is one of the official languages of the UN and the share of people speaking Mandarin is large, taking time and resource to convey

¹ Jeong E.S., « Indonesian women NGOs in transition : the roles and limits of women NGOs in Indonesia », Thesis from Seoul National University, 2001.

information or even only translating the website in Chinese would not be very paying in regard of the current origin of the ESEA NGOs with consultative status: Chinese Mandarin would be useful for China, but not at all for Korea or South East Asia. Use of Mandarin would not be an optimal solution.

Communication between NGOs and the UN

The NGOs from ESEA also demand a better communication between ECOSOC and the NGOs. In particular, NGOs call for an offer of suitable information (that is to say on topics that would interest them) dealing with ECOSOC, and examples of the regional NGOs that would have exerted good influence in the global affairs.

Communication and information flows between ECOSOC and NGOs have been considered “*poor*”, “*infrequent and sporadic*” by NGOs even though some admitted it had been improving. An idea of a regular newsletter addressed to the NGOs with consultative status should be then considered. This newsletter would show the new trends of the global governance and the roles that NGOs with consultative status should play.

It would have an obvious informational role, but would also have a pedagogical aspect for NGOs. The ESEA NGOs have demanded indeed clearer explanations on what is expected from them by the UN. Besides, the Branch could circulate the best practices of the NGOs with consultative status of each region.

Giving more information on the NGO Branch and ECOSOC, the creation of such newsletter can be made relatively cheaply. It should be compared with the actions of similar branches of the UN such as NGLS or of other organizations such as the World

Bank or the Asian Development Bank. Clearly, it would need to be focused on the activities of the NGO Branch and ECOSOC and should be made on a regular basis.

It is then important to consult with the other UN offices and agencies that work with the NGOs to learn from them and also to avoid any repeat or contradiction in messages.

The improvement of the communication flow between NGOs and the UN is a key issue to increase the participation of NGOs with consultative status, but also to improve their activities through the communication of best practices. Besides increasing the participation of NGOs that already have consultative status, it is important to maintain a regular link with NGOs to make the UN more known and accessible to the NGOs that have not obtained yet consultative status. NGOs with consultative status may have indeed an indirect effect on NGOs that are untapped through the word of mouth effect.

Outreach plan

In order to obtain more NGOs with consultative status from the ESEA region, the UN may have to engage the untapped NGOs directly. One solution would be to find these new NGOs by contacting the ones that already have consultative status. These NGOs can assist the UN in connecting with NGOs that would have a decent activity in the international arena¹. An email campaign seems an appropriate way to do it.

¹ One Thai NGO that has been surveyed offered us to help us to connect with these new NGOs: Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD), consultative status, 1996.

We need to learn from other organizations on how to improve our communication flows with the NGOs, but we can also get from them new NGOs that could obtain consultative status¹.

It is important then to have a system that can keep track of the number of NGOs with consultative status, their origins and their activities in a visible manner. It has been difficult during this project to gather useful information on ESEA NGOs, and data should be made easier to access in order to have a strategic view of the application processes over the years.

With the increasing number of applications that the UN receives, there is less and less time to evaluate properly the different applications. There is therefore a lack of time to be really proactive in the search of possible new NGOs and to have an efficient outreach activity. One solution for the NGO Branch would be to seek cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. This commission could help first to find new NGOs, and possibly in the longer term take the role of application screening in the different ESEA languages. This decentralized process would constitute a first filter that could help NGOs and the NGO Branch to manage the applications in a better and a more efficient way. The objective of such decentralization process would be to increase the number of NGOs that would apply by using the knowledge and the proximity of the commission, spend more time on each application, improve the first contact that the NGOs have with the UN, and to link that process with a possible training that would explain NGOs what is expected from them and what they can draw from the

¹ The same Thai NGO recommended us to contact the “International Council of Voluntary Agencies”, cf. survey.

consultative status. This would hopefully increase both quantity of ESEA NGOs applications and the quality of their contributions.

Conclusion

To conclude and to sum up, the data showed us that NGOs from ESEA were under-represented among the total number of NGOs with consultative status in the UN. However, we saw that their activities (measured by their attendance to international meetings and number of written statements published) matched actually with their numbers: representing 4% of the NGOs with consultative status, these NGOs from ESEA have represented roughly 4% of the meetings attendance, and wrote 4% of the written statements in the last years. In regard of obvious practical challenges they have to face, such as the distance of the events venues, these figures can actually be regarded as better than average. In order to solve the misbalance problem between NGOs from developed and developing countries, the UN could then tap into the untapped universe of ESEA NGOs, expecting that new NGOs with consultative status would have the same activity. However, we also saw that NGOs from this area face major challenges that make the potential number of NGOs that can be active in the international arena limited. Thus, the special relation that has existed between the different ESEA governments and the NGOs has challenged the development of NGOs of the area and made it difficult to get a sustainable status to be active in the UN fora. NGOs in ESEA have played a tremendous role in developing and in some cases democratizing the region, but they are today often

criticized for being too close from the government or too limited by the state's control. This influence has an effect on their capacities to attract funds and valuable human resources. More importantly, it has tarnished the images of NGOs and has therefore limited their development toward capable NGOs in the international forum.

Recommendations have been made to change the strategy of the UN in regard of the NGOs in ESEA or in the developing countries in general. This paper has admittedly several limits. The diversity of countries of the focused region, East and South East Asia, makes it difficult to have a precise analysis covering the whole area. Above all, the challenges we have found out in that second part of the paper makes it more difficult to come out with practical recommendations to solve these problems facing NGOs. This paper has therefore been a study on the challenges facing NGOs more than recommendations to solve them. Even though not much can be made concerning the relation between governments and NGOs in Asia, the UN can change its own strategy to have more NGOs from ESEA with consultative status and more activity from them. More precisely, if breaking that misbalance between South and North NGOs is really the objective of the UN, it will have to take the measure, as a first step, to set up the efficient tools that can show a clear picture of the NGOs' origins and their activities and regular communication with the NGOs.

References

Foster K., « Embedded within state agencies : business associations in Yantai », from The China Journal, N.47, January 2002.

Ha S.K. , «The role of NGOs for low-income groups in Korean society», 2002.

Jennings K., « Political Participation in the Chinese Countryside », from American Political Science Review, No91, 1997

Jeong E.S., « Indonesian women NGOs in transition : the roles and limits of women NGOs in Indonesia », Thesis from Seoul National University, 2001

Kim E., « The limits of NGO-government relations in South Korea », from Asian Survey, Vol. 49, No.5, 2009

Liu A., « Mass Politics in the People's Republic: State and Society in Contemporary China », 1996.

Lowry C., « Civil Society Engagement in Asia : Six country profiles », 2008.

Lu Y., « The Growth of Civil Society in China, Key challenges for NGOs », from Chatham House, 2005

Nomura K., « Democratisation and Environmental Non-governmental Organisations in Indonesia », from Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol.37, No.4, 2007.

Pednekar S.S., « NGOs and Natural Resource Management in Mainland Southeast Asia », 1995

Population Reference Bureau, 2009 World Population Data Sheet, Washington D.C.
http://www.prb.org/pdf09/09wpds_eng.pdf

Salamon L., «The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector,» from Foreign Affairs, July-August 1994.

Simon K., « NGO Regulation in East and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Perspective »

Tan S.S., « Non-official diplomacy in Southeast Asia : ‘Cicil Society’ or ‘Civil Service’ ? », from Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol.27, No.3, 2005

Thayer C., « Vietnam and the challenges of political civil society », from Contemporary Southeast Asia Vol.31, No.1, 2009

United Nations, ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31 : « Consultative Relationship between the United Nations and non-governmental organizations », United Nations, New-York.
<http://esango.un.org/paperless/Web?page=static&content=resolution>

Yeung R., « Post-2003 Hong Kong : The Rise of Civil Society Activism vs. Decline of Autonomy ? », from The Brookings Institution, 2006.

Zhang Y., « China’s Emerging Civil Society », from The Brookings Institution, 2003.