Annual Report 2020 | Special edition

30 Years of Striving for Human Rights in Asia
About FORUM-ASIA

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a network of 82 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu.

Website and social media

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Foreword
From Urantsooj Gombsuren, Chairperson of FORUM-ASIA

This year we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), and it is with immense pride that I present our annual report to mark the occasion.

Founded as a membership human rights network aimed at strengthening movements for human rights and sustainable development in Asia and beyond, against authoritarianism of all kinds, our organisation has come a long way since its humble beginnings.

Over the years, we have brought together human rights organisations from a number of countries, working together to prove that human rights are not western or Asian, but universal – although they are often still overlooked in the region.

As we have grown and expanded, we have set new goals, reached great victories in the field of social justice, and inched a few steps closer to a more equitable and sustainable ecosystem in Asia for people’s rights and freedoms. In a way, our evolution could be seen as the epitome of human rights progress across the region.

That of course does not mean our work is done. Far from it. Despite the achievements we have accomplished collectively – from the passing of progressive laws to the rise of regional movements that demand higher accountability for rights violations – there are still large sections of people who are exploited, oppressed and discriminated against. Many of our societies are still torn apart by hatred and intolerance. Just as worryingly, human rights defenders are still facing constant attacks.

That is why FORUM-ASIA continues to stand here 30 years on. And just like when we started, we remain committed to take actions, creating knowledge, and helping people find greater equality. It is what we always set out to do, and what we hope to one day see become a reality everywhere in Asia.

This special edition Annual Report, titled ‘30 Years of Human Rights in Asia’ is dedicated to the strength of our members and many others who have accompanied us in our advocacy for human rights. Without them, we would not be where we are today: able to campaign more vigorously and credibly than ever before.

For the new generation who may not be familiar with who we are and what we do, we invite you to read our stories in the pages that follow, and join us in the human rights movement for many years to come.

Urantsooj Gombsuren, Chairperson of FORUM-ASIA
From Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA

As human rights defenders in Asia, we are no strangers to rights violations perpetrated by state repression, irresponsible business operators and discriminatory social and cultural practices.

But when the pandemic hit in early 2020, we witnessed a new level of social injustice across the region. As countries struggled to grapple with the health crisis, government responses to the acute human rights challenges posed by COVID-19 negatively affected the rights to health, media freedoms, and access to justice. In other words, the lives of ordinary people came to be threatened in unprecedented ways.

As a network working primarily with grassroots organisations, the way we operate also underwent a major shift. With the implementation of restrictions and extended lockdowns, we had to seek new alternatives and solutions to effectively respond to the escalating human rights situation brought by the spread of the virus. Meanwhile, on an internal level, we began upgrading our systems and mobilising resources to meet the needs of our members and partners.

To that end, for FORUM-ASIA and many colleagues at the Secretariat, 2020 was a year of learning and continuous reflection. We adopted and adapted to new technology, embraced virtual training, built an online community, and increasingly conducted advocacy via digital platforms.

Amid this health crisis, we also took stock, and strived to become more mindful of our wellbeing – an aspect that has immense implications for those around us, and the overall development of the organisation.

Ahead of our 30th anniversary, we have made a conscious effort to revisit and revamp the core values that reflect the ethics and principles FORUM-ASIA holds dear to, with the aim to make them a cornerstone of our workplace behaviours and engagement with external stakeholders.

For me personally, it is a privilege to have the opportunity to be a part of this network – a space of solidarity, support, and cross-regional collaboration. We hope to continue to serve as both a leading voice and engine of advocacy for the human rights movement in the region.

Through this report, we are excited to share our journey with you: our evolution through the decades, milestones in 2020, and, looking ahead, our mandate to be a torch-bearer and a change-maker in advancing human rights in the Asian region.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to our Executive Committee, members, partners and the team at the Secretariat for your dedication, hard work, resilience and willingness to adapt as we fight for more just societies in this region we call home.

Shamini Darshni Kaliemuthu, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA
30 Years of Striving for Human Rights in Asia
The history of FORUM-ASIA

In the late 1980s, a number of international groups working in human rights began setting operations in Asia. Diverse in reach and scope, these organisations were mostly run by offices based in Europe or North America. There was a notion that the region needed a regional network to provide an Asian perspective.
Despite the wave of democratisation that started taking place in Asia during those years – largely led by people’s movements – an Asian voice was missing from the global human rights discourse.

It was to fill that void that FORUM-ASIA was established in 1991, following a regional consultation with its founding members in Manila, Philippines. The idea behind it was to create a regional network formed by Asian human rights organisations to take ownership of our stories – stories lived and told by Asian people that reflect the real experience of our struggle for human rights, development, and democracy.

In 1992, FORUM-ASIA set up its Regional Secretariat in Bangkok. The following year, we took part in the UN World Conference on Human Rights, and made our advocacy work a central part of our strategy.

Since then, FORUM-ASIA offices have also opened in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu.

With its unique origins and emphasis on Asia, our network has worked from its very beginning to empower civil society organisations and human rights defenders, with the mission to stand for victims of human rights violations, their families, and the defenders themselves.

Indeed, because of its specific Asian background, FORUM-ASIA provides a unique platform for human rights organisations from the region to speak in a unified voice. It also creates a safe space for defenders to support each other, and build solidarity beyond national boundaries when authoritarianism and repression arise.

Throughout the past 30 years, FORUM-ASIA has served as a facilitator between human rights organisations in the region, helped forge collaborations, and played an instrumental role in the developmental stage of several new collectives, all of which share our same vision of building alliances and supporting human rights movements in Asia.

Today, as the human rights movement continues to grow and expand globally, FORUM-ASIA remains on the forefront in advocating for the causes of social justice and equality in the Asian region. By continuing to strive for justice and freedom across all the countries we work in, we are determined to keep playing this role in the years ahead.
Our evolution through the decades

1991
19 members in 9 countries
FORUM-ASIA is founded in Manila on 17 December
The first training on Fact-Finding and Documentation of Human Rights Violations takes place in the Philippines

1993
FORUM-ASIA participates in the UN World Conference on Human Rights
Advocacy becomes a priority on our agenda

1994
We hold our First General Assembly
A full-fledged Secretariat is established in Bangkok

1995
We expand our areas of work to focus more on human rights for women
Our first country mission takes place in Myanmar

1996
The Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma) is established. FORUM-ASIA plays an instrumental role in its development process
1997
The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) is hosted by FORUM-ASIA. We will continue hosting it until 2007

2004
FORUM-ASIA is granted consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC Status)

2005
36 members in 14 countries
We develop a stronger focus on international advocacy and coalition building

2006
The Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) is established. FORUM-ASIA becomes deeply involved in its work
The Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI) is created and hosted by FORUM-ASIA

2008
Asia Pacific Refugees Rights Network (APRRN) hosted by FORUM-ASIA till 2012
The Geneva office opens

2010
The Jakarta office opens

2012
The Regional Initiative for a South Asia Human Rights Mechanism (RISAHRM) is launched. FORUM-ASIA serves as the Secretariat of its Task Force

2015
47 members in 16 countries
The Kathmandu office opens

2016
58 members in 19 countries

2017
FORUM-ASIA is accredited the consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)

2018
81 members in 21 countries
We expand our areas of work to include Central Asia

2021
82 members in 23 countries
30 years of striving for the realisation, promotion and protection of human rights
FORUM-ASIA’s vision is to build democratic, just, equitable and sustainable societies in Asia and beyond, where human rights of all individuals, groups, and peoples are fully realised, in accordance with international human rights standards and norms.
Mission

To fulfil our goals, we have made our mission to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions with human rights defenders and civil society organisations.
How we see change happen

We believe that civil society organisations and human rights defenders are the driving force to create bottom-up pressure to build an environment conducive to the promotion and protection of human rights in the region and around the globe.

In order to achieve such an equitable ecosystem, however, it is essential that States and non-state actors also play their part, and bring human rights to the forefront of their policy-making process. It is only then that they can truly respond to the lived experiences of their people, including the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in their societies.

For tangible change to happen, civil society organisations and human rights defenders should be capable and able to work as a bridge between States and people, through constantly challenging state wrongdoing, facilitating constructive engagement between the two, and advocating for policy and institutional change based on the needs of and evidence from the individuals they work with.
FORUM-ASIA has a number of intervention strategies in place to promote political, social and legal reforms for ensuring human rights in the countries of the region.

Documentation and research to produce principled and practical recommendations to all stakeholders – the backbone of our evidence-based advocacy

Capacity building to enable civil society organisations and human rights defenders to promote and protect all human rights

Advocacy to foster inclusive and participatory policy-making processes and policy changes, to bring positive impacts to people’s lives

Coalition building to support human rights movements in the wake of emerging human rights and development challenges in the region

Solidarity actions to advance and safeguard a wide range of rights in unison, build a collective response to emergency situations and prevent crisis escalations

Institutional capacity consolidation, to better serve and represent our constituencies at national, regional and global levels
How we work - organisational values

Everything we do in the pursuit of FORUM-ASIA’s purpose, vision and mission is guided by our core values and principles, which reflect who we are and what we stand for.
Transparency & Accountability
To be transparent and accountable in all decisions and activities

Inclusion
To leave no one behind in the struggle for the promotion and protection of human rights through involving the most vulnerable in the decision-making process

Relevance & Impact
To ensure that the people we serve can benefit from the work FORUM-ASIA does in a relevant and impactful way

Creativity & Learning
To respect new ideas and always strive to learn

Safeguarding Wellbeing
To recognise that human rights work can be at times challenging, and that safeguarding wellbeing is essential to continue working on the world’s toughest issues

Empathy & Compassion
To have empathy and compassion drive all our core values and be at the centre of all the work we do
Who we work with

We work primarily with our member organisations, most of which are national or grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in different countries in Asia. We also work closely with national civil society organisations, human rights defenders and Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) to always have first-hand information about human rights situations and be able to inform the policy-making process at all levels, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and United Nations (UN) human rights mechanisms.
Where we work and our members

82 members in 23 countries

- 4 members in Central Asia
- 10 members in Northeast Asia
- 36 members in South Asia
- 31 members in Southeast Asia
- 1 member in the Pacific
Afghanistan

- One full-fledged member*

Cambodia

- Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)
- Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
- Worker’s Information Centre (WIC)

India

- Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP)
- Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM)
- Centre for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS)
- Centre for the Sustainable Use of Natural and Social Resources (CSNR)
- Dalit Foundation
- Human Rights Alert (HRA)
- Jananeethi
- People’s Watch (PW)
- Quill Foundation
- Rights Education And Development Centre (READ)
- South India Cell for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (SICHREM)

Bangladesh

- Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK)
- Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA)
- Odhikar
- Resource Integration Center (RIC)
- Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)

Indonesia

- Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI)
- Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)
- Human Rights Working Group (HRWG)
- Indonesian Human Rights Monitor (Imparsial)
- Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI)
- Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation – Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (YLBHI)
- Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM)
- Yayasan Sekretariat Anak Merdeka Indonesia (SAMIN)

*Name withheld for security reasons
Japan
- Human Rights Now

Kyrgyzstan
- Bir Duino

Maldives
- Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)

Myanmar
- Equality Myanmar (EQMM)
- Progressive Voice (PV)
- Women’s League of Burma (WLB)

Kazakhstan
- Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KIBHR)
- Dignity – Kadyr-kassiyet (KK)
- International Legal Initiative Public Foundation (ILI)

Malaysia
- Education and Research Association for Consumers Malaysia (ERA Consumer Malaysia)
- Pusat KOMAS
- Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)

Mongolia
- Center for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
- Globe International Center (GIC)
- MONFEMNET National Network
- National Center Against Violence (NAV)
- Psychological Responsiveness NGO (PSR)
New Zealand
- Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)

Pakistan
- Association of Women for Awareness & Motivation (AWAM)
- Awaz Foundation Pakistan – Centre for Development Services
- Bytes for All, Pakistan (B4A)
- Forum for Dignity Initiatives (FDI)
- National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP)
- Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy (PODA)
- Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC)

Nepal
- Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC)
- Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC)
- Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal (JCYCN)
- Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDARC)
- National Alliance for Human Rights and Social Justice – Nepal (Human Rights Alliance)
- Women’s Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)
- Youth Action Nepal (YoAC)

Philippines
- Balay Alternative Legal Advocates for Development in Mindanaw (Balaod Mindanaw)
- Karapatan Alliance Philippines (KARAPATAN)
- Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)
- Philippine Collective for Modern Heroism (Dakila)
- Public Interest Environmental Law Office – Tanggol Kalikasan (TK)
- Purple Action for Indigenous Women’s Rights (LILAK)
- Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP)

Singapore
- Think Centre

82 members in 23 countries

- Full-fledged member
- Associate member
- Affiliate member
South Korea
- People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)
- Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS)

Taiwan
- Covenants Watch (CW)
- Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)

Sri Lanka
- INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre
- Law and Society Trust (LST)
- Rights Now Collective for Democracy (RN)
- Rights to Life Human Rights Centre (R2L)

Timor-Leste
- Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP)
- Association for Law, Human Rights and Justice – Hukum, Hak Asasi dan Keadilan (HAK)

Thailand
- Asian Resource Foundation (ARF)
- Community Resource Centre (CRC)
- People’s Empowerment Foundation (PEF)

Vietnam
- Vietnamese Women for Human Rights (VNWHR)
2020 at a Glance
Human rights in Asia in the time of COVID-19

In years to come, 2020 will go down in history as a time of unprecedented change. The coronavirus pandemic upended life as we know it with its devastating effects on health and domestic economies, but also aid, cooperation and human rights, on a global level.

Asian countries were no exception.
Across the region, where human rights and democracy have long been a contentious topic,

many governments used the health crisis as a convenient excuse to push their authoritarian ambitions forward through repressive measures, disproportionate restrictions and severe limitations of people’s basic rights.

From landlocked Central Asia to the region’s island nations, militarised approaches and arbitrary emergency actions were implemented to stifle dissent; while discriminatory treatment reinforced inequality, xenophobia and violence against minorities. Such responses exacerbated the region’s vicious poverty cycle, further impacting marginalised and vulnerable groups.

At the same time, the pandemic worsened harassment against human rights defenders at the frontline of the human rights movement. Throughout 2020, FORUM-ASIA recorded at least 656 cases of rights violations against defenders in 20 Asian countries. State actors were the main perpetrators behind them.

Yet, despite such grim circumstances, people continued to strive for more just and democratic societies, where fundamental freedoms and rights can be respected.

In Thailand, young people spearheaded protests across campuses to the streets to raise pro-democracy demands, namely dissolving the parliament, rewriting the military-based constitution, ending the intimidation and arbitrary arrests of critics of the government, and reforming the monarchy.

In India, hundreds of thousands of farmers marched from their villages to the capital, protesting against a series of agricultural laws that would severely hinder their livelihoods and dignity.

In Hong Kong, mass protests took place against the national security bill passed by mainland China, which was among a raft of repressive measures introduced to crack down on democratic and civic space.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, people’s movements across Asia kept forming alliances and fostering solidarity in the journey towards human rights, sustainable development and democracy in the region.
FORUM-ASIA’S response to the pandemic

- Documenting COVID-19 related rights violations and response
- Raising public awareness and advocacy
- Supporting the human rights community
Documenting COVID-19 related rights violations and responses

Since the onset of the pandemic – and as part of our existing efforts to record rights violations in the region – we have been monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on human rights defenders and fundamental rights such as free expressions, associations, and peaceful assembly.

Based on the documentation we gathered, we have been able to produce trend analysis and policy recommendations to stakeholders such as government ministries and diplomatic missions in several Asian countries, where the civic space has been severely restricted due to emergency decrees.

As the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) are often considered the institutional defenders of human rights at a domestic level, we also produced a briefing paper highlighting how NHRIs addressed human rights issues arising as a result of governments’ responses to, and their handling of, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Raising public awareness and advocacy

Throughout the past year, we have continued to publicise our key findings in the form of press releases and media briefings, with the aim to provide a human rights perspective to the media’s reporting of the pandemic.

To raise public awareness on the growing attacks and threats faced by rights defenders amid the health crisis, we developed a series of infographics as part of a digital campaign spotlighting the issue, to call for better protection of human rights defenders.

As we shifted our work online, we organised a series of webinars starting April 2020, presenting emerging human rights violations in the region through first-hand accounts from some of the communities that have most been affected by the pandemic; experts’ insights; and recommendations for a human rights-based response to the crisis.

In Southeast Asia, we held six webinars between April and May, discussing topics such as how emergency decrees could violate international standards of human rights; the relevance of ASEAN as a regional institution in the context of COVID-19; and
strengthening human rights activism and community resilience. All key discussions and findings can be found in the report ‘Human Rights in Southeast Asia in Times of Pandemic.’

Additionally, five webinars were held in South Asia in May and June, covering issues spanning rights of women and children; debt and inequality in relation to public services financing; rights of migrants and workers in the informal sector; and the need for radical changes in the public health system. The webinar series also resulted in the report ‘Human Rights in South Asia in Times of Pandemic.’

One of the webinars also highlighted the need to protect human rights defenders and the responsibilities of the business sector during Asia’s economic recovery. For it, we produced a six-minute video alongside our partner Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.

Supporting the human rights community

To support the larger human rights community in the shift towards digital, we have provided basic digital security knowledge and tools such as VPNs to our member organisations and partners, so that they could be better equipped to mitigate online threats and operate safely.

At the UN level, we also joined other civil society organisations to advocate for the preservation of civil society space in the Human Rights Council amid the COVID-19 restrictions. These joint efforts were instrumental in enabling civil society representatives and defenders to participate remotely in the meetings of the Council.

Throughout the pandemic, we also looked at the gender implication of COVID-19, its impact on women and the Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning (LGBTIQ) community, and the ways groups with different vulnerabilities were adversely affected from the virus and associated measures.
Key milestones in 2020

230 stakeholders, mainly civil society representatives, engaged in policy forums and process

108 dialogues and consultations on policy-related issues organised between civil society and governments

379 human rights defenders and civil society representatives who attended advocacy initiatives related to ASEAN, SAARC, and UN

5 meetings organised alongside other advocacy efforts to recognise the establishment of a South Asia Regional Human Rights Mechanism

26 oral statements joined or delivered by FORUM-ASIA, with 8 side events organised or supported during the Human Rights Council’s regular sessions

7 Asian human rights defenders and member organisations supported to participate in the UN Human Rights Council’s sessions

3 monitoring and evaluation tools FORUM-ASIA developed or adapted during 2020

15 donor reports submitted

2 years extension for the organisation’s registration

2 new donors secured

2 extensions of existing projects

20 financial reports submitted

1 organisational policy revised

33 cases supported through FORUM ASIA’s protection plan, benefiting 57 human rights defenders and groups

17 capacity-building missions conducted

6 sessions of security audit conducted with member organisations

17 human rights defenders and civil society representatives who attended advocacy initiatives related to ASEAN, SAARC, and UN

5 meetings organised alongside other advocacy efforts to recognise the establishment of a South Asia Regional Human Rights Mechanism

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2 years extension for the organisation’s registration

2 new donors secured

2 extensions of existing projects

20 financial reports submitted

1 organisational policy revised

8 out of 22 urgent appeals submitted to the UN Special Procedures Mandate Holders were communicated to Asian governments

15 financial reports submitted

15 new communication and media tools we adopted

15 organisational policy revised

43% increase in media coverage

23% increase of followers on Facebook, 20% on Twitter, and 550% on Instagram

21% rise in subscriptions to our monthly e-newsletter

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Publications
FORUM-ASIA’s Strategic Objectives

4
Objective 1:

Empowering civil society organisations and human rights defenders across Asia

FORUM-ASIA works to enable Asian civil society organisations and human rights defenders to participate effectively in the policy-making processes related to human rights, democratic governance and sustainable development at national, regional and international levels.

We do so through organising policy dialogues, training, stakeholders consultations, and workshops that facilitate reflection and learning among civil society actors as well as policy makers.
Too often, rather than protecting people, laws and policies in Asian countries are used by authoritarian regimes to harass civil society and human rights defenders, restricting civic space, and stifling fundamental freedoms and rights.

One of FORUM-ASIA’s core interventions to support our members in documenting repressive laws and their impact on freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association has been to systematically analyse these repressive trends. We have also been charting how civil society’s efforts have led to positive change in terms of defending rights in the region.

In response to the Anti-Terror Law enacted in the Philippines in 2020, we supported our member Balaod Mindanaw in conducting paralegal training and education sessions with at least 200 grassroots human rights defenders and journalists. The training aimed to enhance the local community’s capacity to gather evidence and draft basic legal documents, as well as their understanding of the human rights implications linked to the Anti-Terror Law.

In Nepal, we met with our members and identified repressive legislation such as the Media Council Bill, which was registered by the local government in 2019, with provisions that would muzzle freedom of expression through printed and online media, and adversely impact people’s right to information – something especially vital during the crisis triggered by the pandemic. We have since continued our lobbying and advocacy efforts with targeted ministries in the country, and asked our members to share their commitment towards the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism in South Asia.

To make resources available to the public, we have uploaded relevant documentation online through an interactive map that we have been constantly updating since late 2019. In 2020, its coverage expanded from eight to 11 Asian countries.

The past year also saw us launch two country chapters on the status of freedom of expression aimed at diving into key issues and providing recommendations through country case studies, so as to complement the monitoring of repressive laws.

One focused on the ‘War on Drugs’ in the Philippines and how it has been leveraged to silence dissenters.
Protection of personal data has long been recognised as a fundamental aspect of the right to privacy.

In Indonesia, for instance, the increasing trade agreement negotiations with various countries involving the e-commerce sector have led the government to expedite its data protection regulations. In January 2020, President Joko Widodo signed the Personal Data Protection (PDP) bill, which regulates a wide range of matters, from types of personal data, stakeholders’ rights and obligations, processing and transferring, data protection officer appointments, dispute resolutions, and even administrative and criminal sanctions. This development created momentum to strengthen the country’s legal framework for data privacy, and at FORUM-ASIA we joined hands with our member Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM) to formulate an advocacy strategy that would address key privacy concerns concerning the bill.

Upon its finalisation, Indonesia will become the fifth country in ASEAN to implement regulations regarding Personal Data Protection.

Besides offering access to online resources, our website also expanded to provide a channel for civil society organisations to update the status of repressive laws in the region, from drafted bills to cases of judicial harassment, and civil society’s interventions. Ultimately the platform serves as an advocacy tool for our member organisations and alliances to play a greater role in the policy-making processes on the protection of human rights in Asia.

The other spotlighted the situation in Thailand where a narrative of national security has been used to deter critics of the regime. More country chapters will be launched as the project evolves.

Protecting the right to privacy and personal data in Indonesia

Protection of personal data has long been recognised as a fundamental aspect of the right to privacy.

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To that end, we organised a workshop to capacitate the local civil society community and identify problematic clauses within the draft bill.

Held in Jakarta from 9 to 10 March, the event brought together 25 participants from various organisations working on children rights, women’s rights, health, and anti-corruption. Together, they identified eight critical areas where the Personal Data Protection Bill should be revised or amended, providing the foundation for future policy advocacy papers.

The workshop was followed by a series of strategic interventions led by our members and the civil society coalition, including lobbying political parties and legislators, developing infographics for digital campaigns, and organising a webinar in collaboration with local media to raise public awareness.

As a result of these efforts, we secured the government’s commitment to include the bill as one of its priorities for the 2021 agenda.

In the long term, we will continue to forge partnerships with like-minded organisations in the region and beyond to advance the protection of rights to privacy and personal data as part of the human rights values that all States should uphold.
The future of assembly in Asia: a regional consultation with UN Special Rapporteurs

In response to the COVID-19 restrictions on mass public gatherings, human rights defenders and civil society organisations have increasingly shifted their activism to online spaces. At the same time, authoritarian States have intensified the use of online surveillance and unregulated contact tracing applications to curtail any online expression and mobilisation deemed “unwelcome” towards the status quo.

Understanding how social movements may continue in the midst of these restrictions will determine the future of assembly in the region. UN special procedures mandate holders should therefore ensure to consider these challenges in their work.

To help them do so, we brought together civil society and defenders from Asia and UN Special Rapporteurs through a virtual consultation similar to those we ran in 2017 and 2018.

The meetings, which were held virtually between 1 and 3 December, were attended by 65 civil society representatives, and aimed to provide a safe space for participants to exchange experiences and best practices that would benefit their human rights advocacy at the country level, as well influence Special Rapporteurs’ reporting and subsequent strategies.

Among the topics discussed were digital rights; the roles of tech companies such as Facebook; the rising power of China and India; and the repressive laws and policies that have limited civil society participation in the electoral space.

Through the consultation, civil society organisations were able to directly share their concerns and recommendations to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) advocacy

Since 2006, we have served as the Secretariat of the Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI) – a network of 33 civil society organisations and human rights defenders working on strengthening the mandates and functioning of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), and advocating for the establishment of NHRIs in Asian countries where such mechanism do not yet exist.

Instrumental in fostering human rights culture, NHRIs are generally considered the domestic recourse mechanisms for human rights protection in their respective countries. However, due to the restrictive
political climate in the region, they are too often unable to comply with international standards – particularly in regards to their autonomy, independence, pluralism, and effectiveness in implementing their mandates.

One of our priorities in 2020 was to continuously monitor and ensure that the newly established NHRI in Taiwan would adhere to the Paris Principles – the international minimum standards for effective and credible NRHIs.

In February, the ANNI Secretariat, together with the Asia Pacific Forum of NRHIs (APF) and ANNI’s member Covenants Watch, had the opportunity to engage with members of Control Yuan, the designated NHRI in Taiwan, to discuss its work and mission.

Among other things, the meeting emphasised the importance of enabling Control Yuan to cooperate with civil society and other stakeholders, such as the parliament, to extend the Control Yuan’s effectiveness.

We also turned our focus to Thailand, where the local NHRI has faced great restraint since the 2014 military coup and the restrictive political environment that has followed.

Together with Thai civil society organisations, we recognised the need to reform the Thai NHRI, and establish a national civil society network to support this reform process.

Between 12 and 13 October, the ANNI Secretariat, supported by its member People’s Empowerment Foundation, held the first civil society consultation on the strengthening of the NHRI in Bangkok, joined by 40 local civil society organisations, representatives of NHRI and political parties.

During the consultation, facilitators shared lessons from NHRI in Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia, so as to offer guidance in developing a cohesive reform strategy.

13th ANNI regional consultation from 11 to 12 February in Taiwan
Objective 2:

Fostering a better environment for human rights protection, democracy and sustainable development in the region

FORUM-ASIA works to create institutional and policy changes that can have a sustainable impact on the protection of human rights and the people we work with. We do so through evidence-based research, providing emergency assistance to defenders at risk and empowering them to mitigate threats. We also bring together stakeholders such as civil society actors, government authorities and private sectors to actively involve them in the discussion.
Countering mining-related rights violations in Mongolia

As the number of mining operations has been soaring in Mongolia over the past decade, so have cases of rights violations of local communities and the environment.

Since 2012, we have worked closely with our member, the Center for Human Rights and Development in Mongolia, to record such breaches in the country, as well as the challenges faced by human rights defenders who have exposed them. We conducted two fact-finding missions in 2012 and 2019, and have subsequently rolled out a series of interventions, including publishing evidence, conducting press conferences, and lobbying at policy level.

On 7 May 2020 our work, alongside efforts by the country’s civil society and local communities, led to the passing of Resolution No. 46, by the Mongolian parliament, a ground-breaking decision that recognised an additional 102,690 hectares of protected areas in 13 districts – what is now the Gutai Davaa River Source National Park.

The resolution also provided a legal framework for the mining companies to comply with and proceed to the closure and rehabilitation of former mining sites.

Yet, while the environmental recognition of these areas signalled a positive change, harassment and intimidation against rights defenders opposing mining operations remains prevalent.

That is why advocating for a more transparent legal environment for rights defenders and lobbying the Mongolian government to enact the Human Rights Defenders Protection Law continued to be one of our key priorities in the country.
In Cambodia, hundreds of families were forcibly displaced during 2008 and 2009 to clear the way for an industrial sugarcane plantation operated by Mitr Phol – a Thai company and Asia’s largest sugar producer. In 2018, Cambodian plaintiffs Hoy Mai and Smen Tit filed a lawsuit against Mitr Phol, representing over 700 farming families, with the hope to seek justice and reclaim their rights to remedy and protection related to transboundary operations.

Since then, we have joined forces with our Thai member Community Resource Centre, members and partners in Cambodia, and other regional allies to monitor and publicise adverse environmental and social impacts of Thai outbound investments and their lack of accountability for rights violations.

We featured an analysis and recommendations on Thai outbound investments in a working paper on business and human rights published in 2018, and have been continuously raising those same points at the UN Human Rights Council’s sessions.

Cambodian community celebrates as the verdict is announced on 31 July
Throughout 2020, our Protection Plan for Human Rights Defenders at Risk offered emergency support to 57 human rights defenders and groups around the region, and 18 of their family members.

Protecting human rights defenders at risk

Human rights defenders around the world are at the frontline of social justice work. This is especially true in Asia.

It is through the efforts of incredibly dedicated advocates that FORUM-ASIA was established in the first place, and it is because of their pivotal role that so much of our work is about facilitating the creation of an environment where they can act effectively and securely.

Working closely with human rights defenders and recognising the risk associated with their work and identity, we have been providing protection measures and practical tools to better mitigate the many challenges they face.

On 31 July 2020, we observed the trial together with our partners. In a landmark decision, the Thai Court allowed the two Cambodian plaintiffs to proceed with a class action against Mitr Phol, essentially paving the way for Southeast Asia’s first transboundary class action on human rights abuses.

This is a pivotal change for the legal landscape of Thailand and Asia at large, as it provides that class action legislation can be used in transboundary cases and to protect some of the region’s most vulnerable people.

Trial observation on 31 July in Bangkok
The Protection Plan consists of temporary relocation and various types of urgent assistance, from financial, medical and psychosocial to legal support, to ensure defenders can protect themselves while continuing their human rights work.

We also worked with our members to guarantee that defenders and the organisations they work with are able to observe security practices from a holistic approach.

Between October and November 2020, we collaborated with one of our member organisations to conduct two holistic security trainings in the Philippines, intended to equip defenders with the capacity and knowledge to address physical and digital security, as well as psychosocial wellbeing at the individual, organisation and community levels.

To make this a sustainable aspect of the support we offer, we plan to organise follow-up trainings, and develop a tailored curriculum that can be used for different needs and contexts. In the coming years, we will roll out similar interventions in Nepal and other Asian countries, in collaboration with local partners.

Our hope is that such efforts can lead to a stronger national human rights defenders’ network around the region, contributing to better protection and security for defenders at a grassroots level.

Relatedly, we have made efforts to foster relationships between those working in human rights and university institutions, so as to promote collaborations that could lead to practical and innovative research regarding social justice issues. We have also expanded our engagement with artists that address human rights in their work.

To further enhance the resilience of human rights defenders, we have carried on our efforts to establish sustainable and systematic temporary relocation mechanisms in several Asian countries.

In a country like Indonesia, where a consolidated and structured protection mechanism is still missing, we have worked with our local members and commissioned a research study to identify the needs, constraints, and possible stakeholders required to establish one.

The research provided a roadmap consisting of concrete steps and timeframe that have since become the basis for our members and partner organisations to mobilise support and resources to implement the project.

On a regional level, we have provided inputs for the development and review of the Regional Action Plan on Human Rights Defenders 2021-2025 led by the Asia Pacific Forum of NHRIs (APF). The plan recognises the central role that NHRIs play in the protection of human rights defenders, and lays out clear indicators to monitor the performance of NHRIs towards ensuring that protection at both a domestic and regional level.

This initiative may further strengthen our engagement and partnership with NHRIs in the region, to jointly and collaboratively implement future action plans.

Raising awareness on the work of human rights defenders has also been an important part of the work we have done. Over the
years, we have too often documented the way these essential players have been discredited and vilified. A shift in the narrative around them is a must to ensure they are given the recognition and support they deserve.

In response to this need, we have been publicising materials such as infographics, resource books, case studies, and policy briefs, in an effort to educate the public, influence policies, and build a stronger human rights community in the region.

In 2020 we released two key booklets:

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and Other Resources and Psychosocial Wellbeing for Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines. The former explains the roles and rights defenders have, as well as the tools they can access to ensure their protection in a clear and accessible way; the latter provides defenders with the basic knowledge to address their wellbeing – a topic that has often been neglected due to the social stigma surrounding it.

Looking ahead, we aim to translate these materials into different and local languages, to make them accessible to those in need at the grassroots level.

We believe that raising the visibility of human rights defenders and making their stories heard is essential to countering repression against them and their work.
Objective 3:

Enhancing the impact of Asian human rights defenders’ advocacy actions in relation to SAARC, ASEAN, and UN human rights mechanisms

Through our civil society consultative status with regional and international human rights mechanisms, we highlight the Asian perspective on a global level, and advocate for an inclusive and participatory policy-making process that can reflect the human rights situation on the ground, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised communities.
Aspiring for a regional human rights mechanism in South Asia

Since 2010, we have been advocating for the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism in South Asia, where, due to the geographical proximity between countries, rights violations often have consequences outside the national jurisdiction.

Besides producing evidence-based research, we have been focusing on advocacy initiatives to influence decision-makers at the regional level.

One of such initiatives was the submission of an open letter to the SAARC Council of Ministers on the eve of the SAARC’s ministerial meeting on 24 September 2020.

Endorsed by 21 civil society organisations from South Asia, the letter emphasised the essential need to create a regional human rights mechanism as a common platform to collectively address human rights challenges in the region. It also urged SAARC Member States to introduce an article specifically on human rights in the SAARC Charter as a first step towards this goal.

Leveraging the fact that Nepal is the current Chair of the SAARC, we convened a National Strategy Consultation on the South Asia Regional Human Rights Mechanism and invited Nepal’s Foreign Affairs Minister as one of the keynote speakers, with the ambition to strategically influence the direction of SAARC.

The national consultation was jointly organised by our member the Informal Sector Service Centre on 6 November with 45 participants including human rights defenders, civil society representatives, the former commissioner of the NHRI Nepal, and media professionals. A paper reviewing the efforts and challenges towards the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism was presented to facilitate the discussion.

The consultation concluded with participants agreeing on a broader coalition framework within Nepal, followed by a broader cooperation with counterparts from South Asia, including the NHRIs, to identify key human rights issues that warrant a regional response.

23 September 2020
FORUM-ASIA Intervention:
Joint open letter to SAARC Council of Ministers

24 September 2020
Advocacy Opportunity:
SAARC’s ministerial meeting

6 November 2020
FORUM-ASIA Intervention:
National Strategy Consultation in Nepal on the South Asian Regional Human Rights Mechanism

Advocacy Opportunity:
Nepal is the current Chair of the SAARC
A more human rights and people-centred ASEAN

6 March 2020
FORUM-ASIA Intervention:
Public dialogue ‘Women and Children at Risk: Struggle of Combating Violence and Discrimination in ASEAN’

8 March 2020
Advocacy Opportunity:
International Women’s Day

25-26 June 2020
FORUM-ASIA Intervention:
ASEAN Community Virtual Summit

26 June 2020
Advocacy Opportunity:
36th ASEAN Summit

8 October 2020
FORUM-ASIA Intervention:
We publish an impact assessment report on the ACWC+10
Advocacy Opportunity:
10th anniversary of the ACWC

Since 2005, we have been engaging with ASEAN as part of our efforts to promote and protect human rights in the region – an aspiration we share with the two human rights bodies under its structure, namely the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), established in 2009, and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), launched in 2010.

It was with the aim to better monitor, engage with and inform our members about the developments of ASEAN human rights mechanisms that in 2010 we established a permanent office in Jakarta, where the ASEAN Secretariat is. Our acquisition of the consultative relationship with the AICHR since 2017 has further enabled us to have more leverage in building constructive and meaningful engagement and cooperation with the regional rights body.

Additionally, being one of the co-convenors of the Solidarity for Asian Peoples Advocacy (SAPA) has provided us with more opportunities to mobilise civil society organisations for a more inclusive, independent and effective regional human rights mechanism in the ASEAN region.
Creating open space between AICHR and civil society

In 2020, we continued to play a role in facilitating open dialogues between civil society and the ASEAN human rights mechanisms, to increase the rights body’s transparency and accountability. In Indonesia, an interface consultation with AICHR Representative Yuyun Wahyuningrum held on 3 March in Jakarta shed light on AICHR’s achievement in 2019, its progress in 2020, and its five-year plan from 2021 to 2025. Yuyun also elaborated on how AICHR Indonesia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs share a similar vision and commitment in addressing human rights issues and strengthening AICHR’s mandate of human rights protection. Joined by 21 civil society representatives and media professionals, the event also included an interactive Q&A session where participants raised questions spanning ASEAN’s efforts in addressing women’s rights and the rights of LGBTIQ community, and voiced concerns related to the ASEAN’s consensus in responding to human rights crisis in the region.

Through this consultation, AICHR Indonesia and the relevant ministries set a positive precedent in creating an engagement platform with civil society organisations, which other AICHR representatives have yet to achieve in neighbouring countries.
The 10-Year evolution of the ASEAN Commission of Women and Children’s Rights

Since its creation in 2010, ACWC’s mandate has been to advocate on behalf of vulnerable women and children and ensure the protection of their rights. However, the Commission’s annual performance reports have never been made accessible to the public, making it difficult to evaluate its effectiveness and impact.

To fill this gap, we teamed up with SAPA to produce annual reports assessing ACWC’s performance and providing recommendations to strengthen its functions. Using the momentum of ACWC’s 10th anniversary and the fifth anniversary of its Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children in 2020, we commissioned an impact assessment to reflect and examine ACWC’s achievements, challenges, opportunities, and setbacks over the past decade.

For the purpose, we drew inputs and analysis from 20 experts from the civil society community, but also academics, ACWC representatives, and government officials who had worked in or with ASEAN over the past ten years. During the ensuing Experts Meeting, held in Jakarta from 5 to 6 March, we then asked participants to reflect on the cross-sectoral collaboration between the ACWC, civil society organisations, and other ASEAN sectoral bodies. The meeting resulted in an action plan aimed at strengthening the role of ACWC.

Another event followed on 6 March in Jakarta, organised jointly by FORUM-ASIA, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIC), and the Weaving Women’s Voice in South East Asia (WEAVE). Titled Public Dialogue ‘Women and Children at Risk: Struggle of Combating Violence and Discrimination in ASEAN,’ it brought together diverse voices to discuss the state of fundamental rights and freedom from the perspective of women, raising ACWC’s visibility as one of the key ASEAN human rights mechanisms in conjunction with International Women’s Day on 8 March.

On 8 October, after months of preparation, including stakeholder consultations, a survey, interviews and literature review, we finally launched the Report on the ACWC+10: Assessing the Commission’s Impact on Protecting Women and Children’s Rights in ASEAN via a webinar.

Participating to the online panel were Thai and Indonesian representatives of ACWC, Indonesian representative of the AICHR, and a researcher from the ASEAN Studies Centre, all of whom provided insights from their expertise and engagement with the ASEAN human rights mechanism. The webinar was broadcast and live-streamed across FORUM-ASIA’s social media platforms to boost the event outreach and disseminate the report to wider audiences.
Mobilising the ASEAN community to hold ASEAN Member States accountable

To respond to the global health emergency, ASEAN leaders gathered online at the 36th ASEAN Summit on 26 June, aiming to further strengthen cooperation on public health and develop a post-pandemic recovery plan.

The task at hand was not an easy one. Despite AICHR’s recommendations asserting the importance of protecting peoples’ rights during such unprecedented times, ASEAN had in fact failed to adopt a human rights-based approach to the crisis, leaving vulnerable and marginalised groups bearing the brunt of the virus outbreak.

It was within this context that we organised a parallel ASEAN Community Virtual Summit on 25-26 June to demand meaningful participation of civil society in ASEAN’s decision-making process, and urge ASEAN to adhere to human rights standards and best practices when tackling the pandemic.

The summit opened with a Town Hall Meeting where human rights defenders and civil society organisations raised their concern and demands to members of parliament and relevant ministries in the region. A closed-door diplomatic briefing followed, to provide information to foreign missions in ASEAN on the impact of COVID-19 on democracy and human rights across the region.

Some of the key issues raised during the talks included the rise of xenophobia and anti-migrants and refugees’ narratives; the deterioration of freedom of speech and civic space; and the potential human rights impacts caused by business operations.

A press conference by human rights experts and advocates seeking to raise media attention on civil society organisations’ recommendations to ASEAN for advancing human rights amid the pandemic closed the event. The two-day summit attracted: 437 participants from various backgrounds, including members of parliament from the Philippines and Malaysia, the Indonesian representative to the AICHR, ambassadors and diplomatic delegations to ASEAN. The event led to a joint statement endorsed by 45 civil society organisations calling ASEAN to centre human rights in its regional recovery framework, strengthen the regional human rights mechanism, and meaningfully engage with civil society in its policy-making process.

Efforts of civil society organisations were reflected in the ASEAN comprehensive recovery framework, which includes a commitment and action plans related to upholding human rights principles and gender justice in the region.

The framework will provide direction for the national recovery strategy in ASEAN Member States.
Influencing UN action to protect and promote human rights in Asia

Aiming to increase the impact and effectiveness of Asian human rights defenders and civil society’s advocacy in the UN, particularly at the UN Human Rights Council, in 2008, FORUM-ASIA established an office in Geneva focusing on UN advocacy.

This has allowed us to enable Asian human rights defenders and civil society to advocate with UN human rights mechanisms with ownership and direct participation, towards the promotion and protection of human rights in Asia.

Over the past 13 years, we have done so through facilitating their participation in relevant debates and lobbying with diplomatic missions in Geneva, so as to increase the visibility and impact of Asian voices in the decisions of the UN Human Rights Council and other relevant international mechanisms on human rights situations in Asia.

These include advocating for international action to promote accountability for human rights violations and increased international scrutiny of deteriorating situations in Asia as well as contributing Asian perspectives into discussions about international human rights institutions and frameworks.

During the three regular sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in 2020, we delivered or supported a total of 26 oral statements, organised eight side events, and facilitated the participation of seven Asian human rights defenders to advocate for the Council’s action on human rights situation in several Asian countries.

43rd UN Human Rights Council: 24 February - 20 March 2020

44th UN Human Rights Council: 30 June – 20 July 2020

45th UN Human Rights Council: 14 September – 6 October 2020
In 2020, our main advocacy objectives were related to the human rights in Myanmar and the Philippines as well as other deteriorating situations in Asia.

**Myanmar**

Following the UN-mandated Fact-Finding Mission report in Myanmar in 2018, we have continued to call on the UN Security Council and the international community to refer Myanmar to the International Criminal Court, or to set up an ad-hoc tribunal to hold the Myanmar military accountable for its atrocities, including the genocide of the Rohingya community, through greater international action.

At the 43rd regular session, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar for a year.

Several key asks from FORUM-ASIA were reflected in the resolution. These included calls to ensure the participation of all minority groups in the country’s general elections; support to the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism; and emphasis on the international community’s responsibility to ensure accountability for grave international crimes committed against ethnic communities in the country.

During the session, we facilitated the participation of five human rights defenders from or working in Myanmar in all relevant Council debates on the country. Through engagement with diplomatic missions, UN human rights experts and other stakeholders, these advocates provided first hand testimony of pressing human rights concerns and recommendations for Council’s action on how to address them.

**The Philippines**

Our long-standing objective in the Philippines has been to establish international investigative and accountability measures for the thousands of extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations carried out across the island nation in the context of the so-called ‘war on drugs’ first started by President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016.

The persistent impunity and formidable barriers to accessing justice in the country only proves that domestic mechanisms are incapable of ensuring justice and accountability.

As part of our advocacy, we organised three virtual side events, and invited human rights defenders from the Philippines and international NGOs to participate. The end goals of such undertakings were to raise the awareness of both the diplomatic community and the general public of the human rights violations happening in the country, and the need for urgent Council’s action to ensure international accountability.

However, the resolution of the Council on the Philippines adopted during the 45th regular session failed to address concerns of the civil society as well as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on these issues. Instead, much to the dismay of thousands of victims, survivors and their families, the Council opted to prioritise technical cooperation for the promotion of human rights at the expense of accountability.

Despite these shortcomings, the resolution at least maintains the Philippines on the Council’s agenda for the next two years and allows for regular reporting by the OHCHR, including implementation, or lack thereof, of OHCHR report recommendations.
Together with our members and partners, we will continue to follow developments closely, and advocate for independent investigations should the killings and crackdown on civil society not come to an end, and perpetrators not pursued.

Other areas of concern

In addition to Myanmar and the Philippines, we have continued to demand scrutiny and robust action by the Council on the human rights situations in Cambodia, India, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka, among others, as well as thematic areas of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and protection of human rights defenders.

We have also joined civil society advocacy on the institutional development of the Council, and countered the growing pressure to undermine international human rights mechanisms, including the independence of the Special Procedure mechanisms. Lastly, we have worked with other national, regional and international NGOs to ensure the protection of civic space and the recognition of the role of civil society and social movements in galvanising positive change and defending hard-won democratic values around the world.

FORUM-ASIA’s full interventions at the UN Human Rights Council in 2020 is available here.
Objective 4:

Strengthening FORUM-ASIA’s institutional and operational capacity as a regional umbrella organisation

FORUM-ASIA works to better serve and represent our constituencies through the adoption of standard policy practices, financial sustainability, strong managerial capacity, and the fostering of an organisational culture that encourages learning.
To ensure that we would be able to respond to the pandemic from an operational standpoint – both externally and internally – we have continued to update and improve our monitoring and evaluation systems and tools.

We believe that to constantly assess and evaluate our work is not only essential for creating relevant and effective impact, but it is also vital to increase accountability towards the people we work with and our donors.

Based on each of our different programmes, we updated and customised data collection and reporting tools, and expanded our operational manual to provide guidelines and templates regarding data storage, privacy, and other aspects related to monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, we introduced a more responsive risk register matrix to support the organisation in managing challenges and mitigating risk.

Aiming to enable our staff members to better manage the increased number of projects we had to work on, we also developed a two-month certification course on Project Management for Development Professional, which spanned theoretical knowledge as well as practical tools to effectively plan, execute, monitor and evaluate every initiative we were tasked with.

The organisation’s strengthened capacity led to the submission of over 15 donor reports, the extension of a number of projects, and more strategic relations with stakeholders.

Aware that several colleagues had to work remotely due to travel restrictions, we adopted new participatory methods and online technologies to facilitate engaging and interactive discussions during our annual review, reflection and planning workshops in January and July 2020.

The full participation of all staff members from various parts of the world was much needed in developing our organisational work plan and fostering a learning environment.
We believe that only when more people become aware of and take action on human rights issues a movement can be built to create change. To maximise our outreach and convince our audiences of the importance and relevance of the causes that FORUM-ASIA and its members stand for, the past year saw us work hard to rethink our communication methods.

Before the pandemic hit, our communication and media work used to mostly rely on in-person interactions with our audiences, including members, partners, and journalists.

‘How can we engage with and grow our audiences when staying home?’ was the first question we asked ourselves at the onset of the pandemic in early 2020.

The mounting public appetite for information also signalled the need for us to shift operations online if we wanted to remain relevant.

To that end, the pandemic fast-tracked our digitalisation, and made us reassess the way we use technology.

Thanks to tools like video editing and graphic design, we were able to create a series of outreach campaigns, including #DignifiedMenstruation, which explored women’s fight for dignified menstruation in Nepal through a compelling video we premiered on 9 August 2020 – the anniversary of the day Nepal outlawed menstrual exile three years prior.

We developed more campaigns featuring infographics, animations and videos, and launched several publications throughout the year. In December we designed a month-long #HumanRightsMonth campaign to mark the International Women Human Rights Defenders Day, Human Rights Defenders Day, Human Rights Day, and the 27th anniversary of the Paris Principles.

We have also invested in a new media monitoring tool and a media intelligence platform to help us develop more strategic messages to targeted media, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our media interventions, from press releases or to journalists’ inquiries.
In 2020, six new regular staff members, five fellows and six interns joined the diverse teams of FORUM-ASIA, reaching a total of 46 people working at the Secretariat’s offices in Bangkok, Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu.

Due to the sensitivity of human rights work and data protection in the region, we have continued to prioritise our effort on ensuring digital security of the Secretariat and member organisations, through constantly updating relevant guidelines, protocols, and tools, and conducting regular orientations on basic digital security to newcomers.

To diversify our funding sources and ensure our financial sustainability, we intensified our fundraising efforts by adopting a more robust resource mobilisation process that included a clear step-by-step guide. The guide ensures that the decision-making process for every opportunity is collective and systematic in support of the organisation’s strategies.

Lastly, we completed at least 20 different financial reports to donors and auditors, and strengthened our financial controls including the management of funds, accounting, payments, procurement, and authorisation process.
Fostering wellbeing and staff development

Fostering wellbeing and encouraging staff development are essential aspects to ensure FORUM-ASIA continues to be effective in the work it does.

As the organisation evolves, we have embarked on a process to redesign our core values and identify corresponding behaviours that reflect our belief and principles, in the hope they will guide us on our path pursuing the organisation’s purpose, vision and mission. To this end, we conducted two workshops in July and September with the participation of all staff members.

To achieve this, we have embarked on a more robust performance management process through revamping our performance management policy and facilitating continuous training for both supervisors and supervisees.

The revised policy aims to ensure the planning, monitoring, and reviewing of staff members’ performances; the clear outlining of responsibilities and expectations; ongoing coaching and guidance provided by supervisors; and other elements that support a more open and systematic performance management process.

To roll out the policy, we conducted an online session in April 2020, providing guidance on how to set performance deliverables and learning objectives that are aligned with both our organisational plan and staffs’ personal aspiration. We have also been working closely with an organisational development consultant to assess and adjust our performance management plan and provide mentorship or coaching sessions when necessary.
Compassion

Be a Safe Space

Listen, understand, and

A Planet & Its Moons

Well-being oriented
We prioritize well-being for a conducive work environment

We focus on human principles
FORUM-ASIA’s Governance
FORUM-ASIA’s Governance

As a membership-based network, FORUM-ASIA is governed by its organisational statutes and by-laws which guide the organisation’s objective and means of interventions, and lists out its organs, roles and functions, condition of membership, and financial controls such as reporting and auditing.

The statutes and by-laws, along with the FORUM-ASIA governance manual, also lay the foundation for the development of other organisational policies and regulations that reinforce FORUM-ASIA’s commitments towards accountability and transparency for both its internal and external stakeholders.
The **General Assembly** is the organisation’s highest policy-making body and comprises all qualified member organisations. Its roles and responsibilities include but are not limited to: elect the Chairperson who provides leadership to the organisation; elect the Executive Committee; decide on the organisation’s policies and programmes; review and assess the organisation’s programme implementation; and approve by-laws and membership.

The General Assembly is convened every three years in any part of Asia where a member organisation is present.

The **Executive Committee** is composed of seven to nine member organisations elected by the General Assembly for a term of three years. As it is accountable to the General Assembly in areas such as policy-making, accountability obligations, and resource mobilisation, the Executive Committee is tasked to take collective responsibility for proactive decisions at a strategic level.

The Executive Committee meets three times a year to stay informed, discuss and make decisions to provide effective stewardship of the organisation’s governance oversight.
Members of the Executive Committee 2019-2021

Chairperson
Urantsooj Gombosuren
Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD)
Mongolia

Vice-Chairperson
Sevan Doraisamy
Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
Malaysia

Treasurer
Suresh Kumar Dhakal
Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC)
Nepal

Asfinawati
Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI)
Indonesia

Dr. Nymia P Simbulan
Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)
Philippines

Shahindha Ismail
Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)
Maldives
The Secretariat is headed by the Executive Director, who is responsible for ensuring that the Secretariat implements the decisions of the Executive Committee. The Secretariat is composed of an international team of staff, fellows and interns. Their work is structured through programmes that reflect the strategies and priorities of FORUM-ASIA.
Programmes at the Secretariat

Administration Department
Finance Department
National Human Rights Institutions Advocacy Programme
South Asia Programme

Communications and Media Programme
Development and Knowledge Management Programme
Human Rights Defenders Programme
United Nations Advocacy Programme

East Asia and ASEAN Programme
Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Programme

For more details, please refer to the relevant sections in the document.
Financial Overview
Financial overview

Balance of funds as on 31 December 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>USD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening balance on 1 January 2020</td>
<td>2,158,566.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income 2020</td>
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<td>Expenses 2020</td>
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<td>Currency conversion adjustment</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Balance as on 31 December 2020</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,526,553.43</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Income in 2020

Total: $1,619,076.26

- Donors & Partnership: $1,597,090.68
- Interest: $6,206.17
- Other sources: $15,779.41

Funding partners

Total: $1,597,090.68

- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA): $746,799.13
- European Union (EU): $454,479.03
- Open Society Foundation: $237,654.71
- MISEREO: $107,326.55
- Heinrich Boll Stiftung: $31,390.36
- CIVICUS: $14,827.91
- Freedom House Inc (Lifeline: Embattled CSO Assistance Fund): $4,612.99
Expenditure in 2020

Total: $2,183,161.04

- 36.62% Operating Cost
- 14.48% Human Rights Defenders Programme
- 13.29% East Asia and ASEAN Programme
- 11.82% UN Advocacy Programme
- 7.02% Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Programme
- 3.74% Development and Knowledge Management Programme
- 3.33% NHRI Advocacy Programme
- 0.66% Partnership and Resource Mobilisation
- 0.21% Gender Mainstreaming

Expenditure of activities based on organisational objectives

Total: $553,471.08

- 38% Objective 1: Empowering civil society organisations and human rights defenders across Asia
- 33.3% Objective 2: Fostering a better environment for human rights protection, democracy and sustainable development in the region
- 19.4% Objective 3: Enhancing the impact of Asian human rights defenders’ advocacy actions related to human rights mechanisms
- 9.5% Objective 4: Strengthening FORUM-ASIA’s institutional and operational capacity as a regional umbrella organisation
Our Partners in 2020
FORUM-ASIA’s partners in 2020

Alternative ASEAN Network of Burma (ALTSEAN Burma)
Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM)
Amnesty International
ARTICLE 19
Artist at Risk Connection
ASEAN Disability Forum (ADF)
ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)
ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR)
ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC)
ASEAN Study Center Universitas Gajah Mada
Asia Democracy Network (ADN)
Asia Foundation
Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF)
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)
Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRPN)
Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)
Asian Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA Asia)
Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)
Asian Region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA Asia)
Athan
Australian Human Rights Commission
Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC)
Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR)
Chulalongkorn University
CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
Civil Rights Defenders
Climate Strike Thailand
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
DefendDefenders – East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project
Diplomacy Training Programme (DTP)
DLA Piper
EarthRights International
Equitable Cambodia
Euro-Mediterranean Foundation Of Support To Human Rights Defenders (EMHRF)
Fortify Rights
Franciscans International
Front Line Defenders
General Election Network for Disability Access (AGENDA)
Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)
Global Witness
Hivos Southeast Asia
HRnet
Human Rights Watch
Inclusive Development Initiative
Initiatives for International Dialogue (IID)
International Center For Not- For- Profit Law (ICNL)
International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN)
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net)
International Organization for Migration (IOM)
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
Jan Sahas
Kalikasan People’s Network for the Environment (Kalikasan PNE)
Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)
Lifeline: Embattled CSO Assistance Fund
Mahidol University
Martin Roth Initiative
Media Legal Defence Initiative (MLDI)
Medical Action Group
Mekong Cultural Hub
Myanmar National Human Rights Commission
Reform Working Group
Partnership for Governance Reform in Indonesia (Kemitraan)
Peace Brigades International
PEN America
ProtectDefenders.eu
Protection International
Reporters without Borders
Rights Exposure
Scholars at Risk
South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)
Southeast Asia Public Interest Lawyers Network (SEAPIL)
Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/ Southeast Asia (SHAPE-SEA)
Tebtebba – Indigenous Peoples’ International Centre for Policy Research and Education
The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW)
The Institute of International Education - Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF)
TunnelBear
Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Rights (UAF)
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)
Youth Delegation for Environment (YouthEN)
Our Donors in 2020
We would like to thank the following donors for their generous support in 2020:

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- Misereor Ihr Hilfswerk
- Open Society Foundations
- CIVICUS
- Dreikönigsaktion Hilfswerk der Katholischen Jungschar
Acronyms
**Acronyms**

**ACWC**
ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children

**AICHR**
ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights

**ANNI**
Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions

**ASEAN**
Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**ECOSOC**
United Nations Economic and Social Council

**LGBTIQ**
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning

**NGO**
Non-governmental organisations

**NHRI**
National Human Rights Institution

**OHCHR**
United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

**SAARC**
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

**SAPA**
Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy

**UN**
United Nations

*Acronyms that only appear once in the report or have been mentioned in the Our Partners in 2020 section are not included here*
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