



THE FOURTH ASEM INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Asia-Europe Meeting 3-5 June 2008 | Amsterdam | The Netherlands

Amsterdam Statement on Interfaith Dialogue

We, the representatives of ASEM partners, reflecting various cultural, religious and faith heritages, gathering in Amsterdam, on 3-5 June 2008, at the Fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, hosted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, co-hosted by the Kingdom of Thailand and co-sponsored by the Republic of Austria, the Kingdom of Belgium, the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Denmark, the European Commission, the Republic of Finland, the Republic of Indonesia, the Italian Republic, the Republic of Korea, Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Spain, the Kingdom of Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, agreed on the following to further promote the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue.

1. We renewed our commitment to deepening and broadening the Interfaith Dialogue for the benefit of a peaceful and fruitful Asia-Europe relationship and underscored the importance of consolidating the Interfaith Dialogue as an annual ASEM event. We reaffirmed the Bali Declaration, the Larnaca Action Plan and the Nanjing Statement on Interfaith Dialogue, and expressed our appreciation for the progress made since the first meeting.
2. We underlined the importance of understanding, tolerance and respect for religious, non-religious and cultural diversity as integral for our well-being, stability, prosperity and peace and are determined to fulfil our responsibility to contribute to global efforts in promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding; in rejecting stereotyping and the use of violence in the name of religions, faiths or ideologies; in opposing extremism; and in preventing and combating terrorism, possibly also in the context of ASEM counter terrorism meetings. We also underline the importance of empirical scientific research and study of the actual functions of religions in society.
3. We recognised the fact that globalisation has increased interaction among different cultures, religions, and beliefs, heightening the need for greater cooperation and understanding among cultures, religions, and civilisations, and enrichment of globalisation with commonly shared values. We noted that the great diversity of our societies and the increased level of contacts

between civilisations should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat. The increase in communication will help to foster greater understanding in facing the challenges of globalisation.

4. We were convinced of the positive role of the interfaith dialogue in improving awareness and understanding of common ethical standards and values shared by all humankind; in enhancing mutual understanding and respect through amicable interaction among adherents of faiths; in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms; in encouraging social inclusion, equity, (gender) equality, justice, and tolerance in human interactions; in guaranteeing respect for faith heritage and diversity; in reducing the potential for antagonism, clashes, and violence; and in promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

5. We acknowledged that we can find admonitions to love and peace, and rejection of hatred and violence in all the world religions, and that we can find and share a set of common universal values. We urge the ASEM partners to respect freedom of religion or belief and take necessary actions to combat intolerance, discrimination, hostility and violence based on religion or belief.

6. We took note of the valuable contributions of various initiatives and their results at the national, regional and international level to promote tolerance, understanding, cooperation, solidarity and respect for diversity of culture, belief or religion such as the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Fourth Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue held in Phnom Penh from 3 to 6 April 2008. We took note of the adoption by the UN General Assembly of its resolution 62/90 entitled “Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace”, which declares 2010 as the International Year for the Rapprochements of Cultures, including the organisation of appropriate events on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace, such as the 2007 high-level dialogue of the UN General assembly with the civil society, and welcomes the designation of a focal unit in the UN Secretariat to assist the Secretary General to effectively achieve its mandate to ensure the systematic and organizational follow-up of all interreligious, intercultural and intercivilisational matters within the United Nations system and overall coordination and coherence in its interreligious, intercultural and intercivilisational dialogue and cooperation efforts. We appreciate the outcome of the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum in Madrid on 15-16 January 2008, in particular the establishment of an Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund and a Global Youth Employment Initiative.

7. We acknowledged that, in achieving the abovementioned goals, a multidimensional approach is necessary. We believe that success in combating terrorism and religious intolerance in the long term will be highly determined by the success in empowering and strengthening the voice and efforts of those who proclaim tolerance in matters relating to religion or belief. We therefore urge governments to actively facilitate interfaith and intercultural dialogues, particularly at the regional and inter-regional levels. The ASEM Interfaith Dialogue serves as part of the intercultural dialogue, which in turn is part of a much broader dialogue between Europe and Asia. As we renew our commitment to interfaith dialogue, we also encourage and support dialogue in other settings.

8. This year we celebrate the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reconfirm our commitment to the upholding, promotion and protection of the human

rights of the individuals, including the right to freedom of thought, freedom of expression, conscience, religion and belief, as expressed in the Universal Declaration.

9. In four working groups, under the theme 'Interfaith Dialogue in Practice: Sharing Best Practices,' we discussed best practices in the fields of interfaith dialogue and poverty reduction, religious education, communication in the digital world and government policies.

Interfaith Dialogue and Poverty Reduction

10. In the working group on interfaith dialogue and poverty reduction, we dealt with questions like what role faith-based organisations and communities can play in poverty reduction and the narrowing of economic gaps and which lessons can be learned from previous experiences.

11. Faith-based organizations can contribute to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals by drawing on their social capital in terms of people's trust, religious and humanitarian motivation, and solidarity with one's neighbour in need, regardless of his/her faith and conviction. They are in a special position to reach out to the poorest members in the community and to mobilize needed resources at all levels.

12. Faith-based organizations can also provide the governments at national and local level with an integral framework that goes beyond material benefits and encompasses, amongst others, the spiritual dimension. Through concrete actions many-faith based organizations and religious leaders (male and female) -in cooperation with governments, other civil society groups and businesses- also help address immediate needs of people. They also provide the elements for sustainable development through values formation and empowerment.

13. Interfaith dialogue-in-action programs among religious communities help promote a culture of peace as a precondition for anti-poverty measures to take place. We call on faith-based organizations to underline the importance of building new networks and actively contribute to bridge traditional gridlines.

Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Education

14. In the working group on interfaith dialogue and religious education, we discussed the role of comparative studies of different religions in finding common values and promoting understanding and identified best practices in religious teachings, as well as discussed their universal applicability.

15. We stressed the importance of knowledge and the necessity of deepening our mutual understanding, as well as finding our commonly shared values. Therefore, training, formation and studies are the way to prepare students, experts, teachers and researchers in religious education to avoid misinterpretations of religions and faiths. We underlined the fact that experience, practice, action and programmes are needed to achieve such goals.

16. We realised the need to spell out basic principles that are the ground, on which to build a continuous process of understanding within the context of plurality, diversity and differences.

Hence, policies, strategies and methods of integration, participation and interaction, coming from all sectors, are essential in addressing the issues of religious education, civil liberties and human dignity. We also realised that there are tensions between nationality, citizenship and religion and that need to be overcome.

17. In preparing courses and curricula, we recognised the significance of expertise, cooperation and involvement of relevant stakeholders. We also understood that religious education is not only conducive to conflict resolution, but is also a tool that helps to build community awareness and contributes to the constant harmony in varied religious and cultural settings. We realised the role of the family in religious education.

Interfaith Dialogue and Communications in the Digital World

18. In the working group on interfaith dialogue and communications in the digital world, we clarified the role of communication in the prevention of conflicts caused by different faiths and explored how interfaith websites report on the interfaith dialogue.

19. We want to emphasize the need for accurate communication in preventing conflicts caused by different cultural or religious backgrounds. Such communication requires the resolve of all parties involved to exchange timely, relevant, credible, inclusive and unbiased information.

20. Bearing in mind our shared responsibility in the prevention of conflicts, we want to maximise the use of digital media in conjunction with traditional forms of media. We call on the international community to facilitate the building of capacity in using and accessing electronic communication. Furthermore, we recognize the value of face-to-face interaction to communication.

21. We take note of and encourage the implementation of the fourteen proposals of the ASEF Journalists' Colloquium on how to use the media in promoting mutual understanding and respect within a pluralistic society.

Interfaith Dialogue and Government Policies

22. In the working group on interfaith dialogue and government policies, we looked back and forward on the implementation of the outcomes of the interfaith dialogue process by national governments and asked ourselves the question of how governments can show respect for religious and cultural diversity in practice.

23. We noted that all ASEM-governments want to engage with faith communities as an important part of wider civil society. The working group recognised the value of sharing the experience of different countries in addressing these issues and the possibilities for sharing best practices, while acknowledging the diversity between different countries.

24. We recognised the importance for governments to deal on equal terms with different religions. We identified three strands of engagement; (a) government/faith-communities; (b) interfaith; (c) intrafaith. It is also important to recognize the need to engage, not only with communities of religious faith but also with communities of other conviction. Our observations

apply to approaches both at national and local level where many of the practical issues involved have to be resolved;

(a) In pursuing their responsibilities governments need to engage with faith-communities, who are able to help with the management of social change and with the promotion of cohesion. Faith-communities wish to influence government policies and are an important source of core values for societies. There is a need for well-structured consultation arrangements for this engagement, which needs to be a two-way process, respecting the different roles of governments and faith-communities. The agenda of this engagement concerns social issues rather than theological ones.

(b) It is important for governments to encourage and support the process of interfaith dialogue between faith communities. The task of taking forward this interfaith dialogue is essentially one for religious communities themselves to pursue, but governments can play a role in encouraging the initiation of this dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Faith communities need to have good arrangements for this engagement with each other.

(c) Governments will usually avoid intervention in intrafaith issues, but may need to become involved, for example in order to identify partners with whom to engage.

We are pleased with the outcomes of this Fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue and we are dedicated to ensure a timely and effective implementation of the proposed actions. We recognise the importance of sharing best practices within the framework of the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, including the possibility of the provision of voluntary briefings, and will continue this process in next meetings.

We congratulate the Kingdom of the Netherlands for hosting, together with the Kingdom of Thailand, this Fourth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, furthering and continuing the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue as an annual ASEM event. We express our particular appreciation for the hospitality rendered by the city of Amsterdam, a living example of a city of diverse faiths and cultures. We thank all co-sponsors for making this dialogue possible and contributing to its success.

We also appreciate the valuable contribution of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). We will be informed in due time which country in Asia will host the Fifth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in 2009. We welcome the offer of the Kingdom of Spain to host the Sixth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue in 2010.