



CULTURES & CIVILISATIONS DIALOGUE



ASEF “7th Talks on the Hill”

Beyond Black and White: Confronting Modern Realities of Racism and Xenophobia in Asia & Europe

Final Report

This is the report of the **seventh Talks on the Hill meeting** organised under the Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue programme developed by the Intellectual Exchange department of the Asia Europe Foundation. This meeting was entitled “**Beyond Black and White: Confronting Modern Realities of Racism and Xenophobia in Asia and Europe**”, and began on the evening of the 13th of November 2005 and ended in the late afternoon of the 15th.

The 4th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in Copenhagen (2002) stressed the need to promote “Unity in Diversity” among the various cultures represented among ASEM countries. ASEF was asked to accompany this initiative through its own “Civil Society” architecture. The Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue Programme was established with this realisation, and primarily to promote understanding between the two regions of Asia and Europe, and also facilitate leaders of civil society meeting, interacting and engaging with one another and with audiences in the opposite regions. Within this programme, ASEF initiated the “Talks on the Hill” series to allow for frank and open discussion on issues of pertinence to the two regions in a small closed-door setting.

This report highlights the major themes that arose out of the discussions during this meeting. In keeping with the ground rules of the meeting, this report does not quote nor attribute remarks, comments or ideas to specific individuals. In order to facilitate dialogue and communication, the meeting itself, and this report avoids the use of any “jargon” or acronyms.



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

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Preface

The 7th ASEF Talks on the Hill meeting was held from the 13th to the 15th of November 2005 on the topic “**Beyond Black and White: Confronting Modern Realities of Racism and Xenophobia in Asia and Europe,**” in Barcelona, Spain.

This meeting brought together 15 high-level individuals from diverse backgrounds, nationalities and areas of expertise.

Established in 2003, the ASEF Talks on the Hill series utilises a think-tank style brainstorming retreat format, comprising a small number of individuals with the express purpose of tackling specific and sensitive issues in an open and frank manner. The aim is to forge policy recommendations from civil society that are addressed to the governments of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM).

The following briefly presents the sub-topics, main points and major themes that were raised during this “Talks on the Hill” meeting. This report is not an attempt to cover the entire substance of the very rich debate, but instead is meant to serve as an introduction to the major strands and sub-themes of the discussion and should introduce the reader to the main insights and ideas of the group.

While a very sensitive and pertinent topic, **racism** and **xenophobia** are not subjects that are talked about openly and frankly in both regions of Asia and Europe. This meeting was unique in bringing together participants to deliberate on these issues from a multi-stakeholder perspective, while keeping in focus the shared objectives of fighting racism and xenophobia in Asia and Europe.

The report that follows elaborates in detail on the various trends of the conversation, and goes into some depth in explaining the nuances and manifestations of these phenomena that are unique to each country.

Some fundamental points were established in the course of the discussions.

- ❑ At a broad level, it was very early on recognised that racism and xenophobia concern both countries in Asia and Europe, and is in fact a **universal phenomenon**.
- ❑ The manifestations of racism and xenophobia in each country however, may vary, and some examples of this include hostility towards foreigners, labour migrants and minorities living in the country among others.
- ❑ At a theoretical level, some racist ideologies are steeped in biological understandings of ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ races, while others have taken on cultural undertones.
- ❑ Three areas of society were analysed during the meeting – the reactions of the political establishment (both at a national and international level), the media and the education sector.
- ❑ Again, similar trends were observed in the range of reactions of the various sectors to this problem. This ranged from the **total denial of some societies** to even the existence of racism and xenophobia, to others where there have been **real and honest efforts to examine their specific tendencies**. Some societies support racism – in the belief that some sort of discrimination works in their particular context, while others have developed strong legal, social

and cultural reactions and policies that aim to tackle these issues openly and confront them directly.

- The diversity that we describe can be found in both regions of Asia and Europe – however, it was also possible to pick out some common trends and salient commonalities within each region.
 - ⇒ In Europe, the general opinion was that there exists a strong legal framework at the level of the European Union and the Council of Europe, which provides a strong system of checks and balances to racist and xenophobic actions and/or speech. At a general level there is usually also a strong public condemnation of racism and xenophobia in official discourse, the media or in education. However, it should also be noted that in some European countries, there exist extreme political racist and/or xenophobic movements, factions or parties that are sometimes even represented in parliaments.
 - ⇒ In Asia however, the general feeling that emerged out of the group was that addressing the problems of racism and xenophobia is **not on the political agenda** and that in fact, there is hidden acceptance of this among the societies in general, while maintaining a façade of denial at the official level. The word “racism” in general is taboo or unfamiliar in Asia, and is often replaced by “softer” concepts such as “distaste,” “discrimination” or “exclusion.”
 - ⇒ The primary targets of racism and xenophobia in Europe were recent immigrants while in Asia it was thought to be labour migrants and long-standing minorities.
- Despite the differences, the way forward is to start an open dialogue on ethnic, religious, cultural and other manifestations of discrimination. As globalisation continues, and as migration flows increase between the two regions it is becoming increasingly urgent for policymakers and leaders of opinion in both regions to have a deep understanding of the nature of discrimination in each case. Dialogue, encounters and exchanges help mitigate the situation, and enable both regions to learn from their respective experiences. Also important and recognised in this report is the crucial role of civil society organisations in both region who provide an important system of checks and balances whether in relation to the media, the education system or government policy in general.

This report contains policy recommendations to governments specific to each issue, but it also provides a good source of information, and it shares ideas and best practices, from which civil society practitioners will benefit.

ASIA EUROPE FOUNDATION

7th ASEF Talks on the Hill:

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FINAL REPORT

The first session opened with the participants being invited to share their **ideas, viewpoints and priorities** for the discussion as well as to relate experiences from their respective countries on this issue.

There was a strong intention by the group to clearly state that they accepted that different individuals had **different understandings of the term race and racism**, while recognising that many contested the existence even of the concept of race. They recognised that individual understandings of these terms are saddled with individual notions of **economic hierarchies, colour, class, stereotypes, philosophies and culture**. **The group did not intend to come up with a common definition of racism or xenophobia, but instead intended to discuss the manifestations of these concepts** in the various countries of ASEM and deliberate on their ideas for improving the situation. While not seeking to define the terms, the group accepted that mapping out the different conceptions of racism and xenophobia is a useful endeavour and starting point to further study the concepts and to practically deal with the situation.

In the opening talks on the situation in the various countries, several models emerged:

- ❑ **Subtle Racism:** Occurs in some countries, where the racism manifests itself very subtly for example, in the way one is greeted at a store or by the level of service that one receives.
- ❑ **Racial Hierarchies:** Some societies have inherent 'preferences' or classifications of the different races. In some societies, associations (such as marriage) with people who are "higher" on the racial hierarchy are considered to be "moving up" in society.
- ❑ **Racism as a Political Strategy:** In some countries, race is used as a means of categorising the population and in determining policy such as housing and education quotas. In some Asian countries, these racial categories were thought to be the result of some colonial patterns.

Governments sometimes also create an arrangement with the various racial groups of a country, assigning different roles and benefits to different groups. This arrangement with the various groups is seen both to placate the majority, while assuring minorities of certain rights/benefits within certain parameters.

"Lost in Translation"

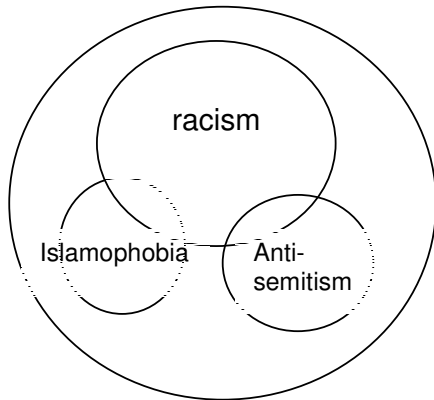
During the general discussions on the meaning of the word Racism, some members of the group expressed their difficulty with trying to find the right word for **Racism** in their local language. Many came to the conclusion that there was no such word that could capture the same connotations.

One conclusion from this is was for the group to stress the importance of adapting dialogues and other discussions to the specific cultural background of the audience or participants.

Second, many participants suggested that in terms of translations, it is easier to use broader words such as "prejudice" or "discrimination."

- ❑ **Economic Class:** Skin colour or more specifically “fairness” in some countries has traditionally been associated with the upper class, as the lower classes generally had to work in the fields or in construction jobs, which made their complexions darker. This link between skin colour and economic status may result in present day perceptions of fair skin being more desirable.
- ❑ **Internalised Racism:** Some participants pointed out the trends of some Asian people to want to dye their hair to a lighter colour or to use skin-lightening creams, which are abundantly available and very popular. This was thought by some members of the group to be “internalised racism” where individuals have these notions of the desirability of looking Caucasian so embedded in them, that they want to alter their appearance to conform to this ideal.
- ❑ **Feelings toward Immigrants:** It was recognised that feelings of resentment against immigrants can be translated into racist feelings towards all people from the same nationality, religion or ethnic backgrounds as the dominant groups of immigrants.
- ❑ **Homogenous Populations:** Some countries with largely homogenous populations have the impression that they do not have problems of racism or xenophobia in their societies, as there are few foreigners in the country. In reality, strong racist or xenophobic feelings can be latent in the society, and manifest themselves very easily upon contact with foreigners.
- ❑ **Geopolitical Dimension:** Racism can in some cases adopt a geo-political dimension, where feelings of resentment or dislike against certain groups can be directly linked or attributed a political situation, particularly of war, conflict or tensions.
- ❑ **Reverse Racism:** One participant offered that racism can also occur in a reversed way, where groups of people that traditionally were seen to be discriminated against (usually the minorities, who may be the majority in some areas) end up with racist or xenophobic feelings against the majority. This may be argued to be very often a reaction against past racisms that have been endured.
- ❑ **Naturalising Racism:** In attempts to find explanations for racist or xenophobic feelings, some have countered that it is natural to feel “different” from people who are from different communities or look different. This attempt at making racism or xenophobia “natural” is thought to be increasingly common in some countries but a dangerous trend as it “excuses” or seeks to account for racism or exclusion to some extent.
- ❑ **The Black/White power relationship:** It was suggested that for some, the term “racism” applies only to prejudice and exploitation that results from the power relationship between the black and white communities. Not all in the group accepted this though, and suggested that this may only be true of countries that have the history of slavery or some other form of white domination and control over the black community.

In analysing the manifestations of racism and/or xenophobia in the respective countries, it was important to distinguish between **theory and reality** and also between **official policy and the attitudes of the population**.



This brief exercise of mapping out the situation in the various countries brought up the varying interpretations of **racism and xenophobia**. The general agreement was that the word **xenophobia** is much broader and included not only racism, but also broader anti-foreigner feelings that are based on other criteria – such as cultural difference and economic envy. The diagram on the left demonstrates this:

The group also noted that most definitions of racism, such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, includes linguistic and cultural characteristics.

Some participants pointed out that the term diversity has strong appeal and is often used in attempts to be politically correct, but that in the rush to proclaim or celebrate diversity, one loses the opportunity to really learn from diversity but instead just uses it superficially for example in advertisements.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PERPETUATING RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

The group spoke about some of the major issues that are caused by the media in perpetuating racism and xenophobia, primarily in the context of Asia and Europe.

Some of the points that the group spoke about alluded to the understanding that much of media reporting was pushed by capital and that sensationalism had overtaken good investigative journalism.

The group also noted the **increasing use of the internet and other newer technologies** in spreading information. While the internet has been utilised for many useful projects, it is also a very accessible tool that can be used to easily and widely distribute racist or xenophobic ideas and feelings.

Given the concerns about media reporting the group debated the different avenues available for monitoring the media – specifically the respective merits of **legislation** versus **relying on civil society to act as a media watchdog**. Legislation was suggested as an **important tool** particularly in cases where the media incites hatred with the use of hate speech. Some in the group were uncomfortable with the use of legislation fearing that this could easily infringe on the freedom of speech.

Civil society as a monitor of the media was widely accepted by the group as a necessary agent in the monitoring of racism and xenophobic language or incitement in the media. It was widely suggested that a **carrot and stick approach**

A “Benetton Universe?”

A participant remarked wistfully how ideal it would be if we could live in a “Benetton Universe.” This was a reference to the advertising campaign that was used by clothing company Benetton where advertisements featured people of different colours, cultures and/or political backgrounds with a common message of peace. The slogan used was “United Colours of Benetton.”

This was seen as a publicity inspired nod to diversity without really giving full weight to the value of diversity.

should be used in encouraging the media to report responsibly on these issues. **In this way, civil society organisations will act as a watchdog of the media, and may develop an appropriate code of conduct for the journalists to adhere to.** Readership/ viewership support and backing by civil society groups should be given to media groups that respectfully report in a way that addresses issues related to immigrants, conflicts, poverty etc in a non-rationally or religiously exploitative manner. **In essence, racism and xenophobia need to be made unprofitable.**

It was pointed out though, that there still may be no social stigmatisation of racism and xenophobia in some countries or societies, and therefore there is little use expecting civil society to concretely work against such media reports.

One suggestion was to **empower independent film makers and other actors who were working at the ground level at raising awareness of these issues.** It was pointed out that in many countries where addressing these issues was not necessarily a priority for the general public, there is often an “underground” arts scene that attempts to deal with these issues, but does not have much support financially and politically. It was determined that it is crucial to support these artists who bring issues like mixed marriages and racial prejudice to the public consciousness.

Development of the museum(s) sector

The museum(s) sector provides an interesting example. Many museums across the world, including those in both Asia and Europe, were set up along colonial or post-colonial lines, and much of the way history is portrayed in the museums is a result of the still present, implicit or explicit racist ideologies of that time.

There is an increasing trend of museums trying to rectify this situation and actively move away from the colonial perspective of history.

A final point related to media reporting and the arts is that sometimes racism is perpetuated in articles of a certain language, and so this rhetoric does not reach the attention of the group that is being attacked. This happens especially in racist remarks against people of other nationalities.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

In the discussion on governmental actions and policy related to addressing the problems of racism and xenophobia, two major trends were observed. **First, that addressing racism and xenophobia seemed to be a priority for governments in Europe but not as much in Asia** and secondly that often **governments were quick to point out racism in other countries,**

but reluctant to deal with this phenomenon in their own countries.

The question brought up by the group was **how can we make addressing the fight against racism a priority in Asia, and put it on the political agenda?**

The group endorsed a proposal from a European participant suggesting to start a research project that would initiate a comprehensive study on the state of racism and xenophobia in Asia as well as the expressions and mechanisms of this phenomenon and using that as an objective basis on which to draw attention to these issues as well as to start a debate on them.

While objectively a good idea, the participants warned of potential problems in adopting a project like this. This included the fact that this could be sensitive as it may be seen as Europeans or Westerners lecturing Asians on human rights and how to govern themselves. It was also accepted that most governments who were most at fault were also those that would be highly unresponsive to such a project and that practically there would be a lot of problems in obtaining the necessary information.

Alternatively, it may be the danger that the governments hijack the project in order to skew the information in their favour. In order for this project to work it would be necessary for the researchers to have a strong ally in each country.

Some in the group also pointed out that it would be good to avoid framing this as an Asian problem but instead to recognise that this is a problem in almost all countries. In fact, it was observed that most of the new accession countries of the European Union are not too different in their situations to most Asian countries, and that there are lessons to be learnt all around. **This would ultimately be more constructive than approaching this problem with the mentality of “victims” and “perpetrators.”**

Specifically in the context of Asian countries, it was pointed out by both the Asians and the Europeans in the group, that **Asians need to move away from the mentality just of being the “victims” of racism**, but also recognise patterns of racism that are directed against minorities in their countries. The communitarian model of politics that is used in some Asian countries, could not work in the long run, even if it is seen to be “working” at this point.

At a policy and legislative level, it was felt that European countries had far more policies in place – included at the level of the European Union - which do not tolerate racist discourse, and impose sanctions on racist behaviour. On the other hand, few Asian countries have the same level of commitment at the policy level to countering this.

Why aren't governments talking to one another?

A member of the group then broached the question of **why aren't democratic governments talking to one another about the reality of racism in their respective countries and putting pressure** on each other to conform to higher standards of eradicating racism and xenophobia?

The truth, some countered, was that in many cases Racism works! In recent times, it was acknowledged that various issues have been used as covers for what are essentially racist statements or policies. The most common have been the **anti-terror discourse** that has emerged post-Sept 11 and the **discourse over migrants**.

Many governments have benefited from being able to push through policies that otherwise may have been seen as controversial through the use of these discourses.

It was also mentioned that in many cases, the trend is for government discourses and policies to move in the same direction. As the discourses worsen, the policies worsen – particularly in countries where civil society is not developed enough to provide a counter balance.

To constructively address the issue of how governments as well as civil society groups can approach one another without offending the sensitivities of the other party, two main approaches were highlighted:

1> Being self-critical and learning from mistakes

Actors from both sides can engage in a dialogue by discussing their respective challenges and thereby enabling the other to learn from their mistakes. This approach is useful in lowering defences that usually come up around sensitive topics such as this, and approaching the topic in an honest

and constructive way.

2> **Identifying non-confrontational and less sensitive topics to begin the dialogue with**

In many cases where governments are unwilling to address the issue of racism or admit that it is a problem, an alternative route is for other governments or civil society actors to begin with secondary issues that are affected – such as improving the rights of migrant workers.

Finally, it was reiterated that effective policies to counter racism and xenophobia need to be targeted at all the different layers of society and reach out to all the stakeholders in order to be effective.

The group then broke for a buzz group where they were asked to identify where they felt their local governments should focus on in order improve the situation of racism and xenophobia in their respective countries.

When the ideas were exchanged, most of the group felt that these guiding principles were applicable to almost all countries and situations. The following represent the major principles that the group came up with:

If you were advising the governments of Asia and Europe (ASEM), what measures would you recommend they adopt in order to fight racism and xenophobia?

- 1> Governments should develop and stick to a **clear policy for the integration of immigrants** into society,
- 2> Governments should ensure that the **identity of their nationals are crafted only by citizenship** and should not be prefaced by race or religion – whether this is done officially or unofficially,
- 3> Governments should show themselves to be **actively addressing the issues of racism and xenophobia in their respective countries** by involving themselves in public debates and by making a concerted effort to tackle issues that may arise,
- 4> Governments should also ensure and make known a system **of accountability** for accusations and acts of racism and xenophobia: central points where racist acts can be reported by the victims and/or their defendants. Further, in setting up this system, they should **increase minority representation in the government and governmental bodies**,
- 5> Governments should also recognise and acknowledge the **changing racial and/or religious demographic** structure of their societies,
- 6> Governments should ensure **proper investment in areas where immigrants and racial/ religious minorities live** and put in place policies that solve

Aliens in the country!

On a side note, a participant commented on how disturbing the word “**alien**” sounded when used on people who are new to a country. The word which has been used in some countries refers usually to foreigners who live in the country – whether legally or illegally.

It was suggested that any countries that may still employ the use of this term should stop using it because of the connotations of strangeness and exclusion.

problems of segregated housing,

- 7> Governments should **empower civil society** by increasing direct funding to non governmental organisations,
- 8> Governments should **depoliticise religious institutions and governments should play a neutral role** between various religious and/or ethnic groups, and no particular group/s are to be advantaged over the others,
- 9> Governments should develop **targeted social programs** to counter racism and xenophobia,
- 10> Governments should **work on migrant issues in a positive way** such as by emphasising the positive contribution of immigrants and migrants to the economy.
- 11> Governments should not impose a one identity system, but be open to the fact that in the modern world, individuals tend to have more and more multiple identities that are not co-existent with one ethnic, religious or national identity.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SCHOOLS

A final sector of society that the group addressed was that of schools and civil society groups that run programmes and activities that work toward minimising and countering racism and xenophobia.

The group discussed some important points at the outset, which represent some **clear ideas going forward** as well as **some lessons learnt from past experience**.

It was unanimously agreed that short term programmes do not work. In fact, it may even be possible that programmes that are too hastily implemented may do more harm than good. Activities and programmes that aim to be effective should be prepared **carefully, monitored and evaluated on a long-term basis**.

Similar to what was earlier said about government policies, it was also reiterated that these programmes should **not be implemented only at the elite-level, but target multiple levels in the society**.

Some participants saw value in activities such as common prayer and interfaith dialogue. This was challenged by others who thought that this could be problematic because there is still a tendency for such activities to involve some sort of power relationship between the various groups participating.

From the perspective of efficiency, **some initial experiences have shown it to be more effective to empower minorities than to train the majority**.

Overall, most agreed that some of the most effective methods are those that complement dialogue with **many other levels of activities. Common concerns and common activities and other issues usually enhance understanding as they result in real encounters and engagement between the people**. The case of student and other exchanges between French and Germans was praised as one of the best examples of a very successful programme. Women's groups have also been very effective at forging links across racial, ethnic and national divides through addressing many concerns or issues that are common to all women.

Schools and governments should also avoid using ethnic categorising, because, as one participant put it, “all our countries are getting increasingly ethnified.” There should be the realisation that many young people may not choose to be identified primarily by his/her ethnic group, but the systems force them to stay in place, thereby perpetuating the cycle of keeping the population stratified along ethnic lines.

Teachers, Textbooks & Training

Recognising that the content in textbooks has a crucial impact on framing ideas in young people, the group deliberated on the various issues of concern. Historical incidences and facts can be skewed and present a problem when describing historical encounters between communities or populations inaccurately. From the outright denial of historical facts to the instrumentalisation of certain past incidences for reasons of nationalism, these tendencies need to be addressed and concretely worked upon.

There was much support among the group for adopting common textbooks such as is currently being proposed between France and Germany. Further, the group proposed that all children be given a basic understanding of common issues – in particular through the proposed common learning of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. Alternatively, countries that face traditional issues of hostility and tensions should come together in developing textbooks which are fair and which can be used by both sides. A practical way would be an approach whereby persons either from the minority communities or from the other country are involved in the conception.

The cases of religious schools and education have been highlighted in the media and other public fora particularly in recent months. A further suggestion with regards to curriculum, was to regulate the curriculum not only in public schools, but also in private and religious schools. For example, some participants suggested that common lessons as well as common learning parameters be set up in order to have regulation and continuity among the various students in the various types of schools.

Finally, the group recognised the need to allocate resources to train and sensitise teachers to issues of racism and xenophobia. Teachers should be encouraged to address human rights issues in classrooms and should be trained to detect implicit or explicit racism and xenophobia in the learning material.

Conclusion and wrap-up

In closing, the participants of the 7th Talks on the Hill mentioned a commitment to cooperation – regionally and internationally – and endorsed the various points and trends elaborated on in this paper.

Many of the group appreciated that this meeting had presented them the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of people in an open and comfortable setting, and enjoyed the challenge of going beyond their personal experiences and into “the other’s shoes.” They recognised that the issue of racism and xenophobia is very complex, and there remains a lot of nuances and aspects that need to be discussed and deliberated upon.

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December 2005