In 2016 FORUM-ASIA celebrates its 25 anniversary. 25 years of working, struggling, striving for the realisation, promotion and protection of human rights across Asia. 25 years of trainings, campaigns, missions and many other activities.

The road has not always been easy for FORUM-ASIA. As with any organisation it has had its highs and lows, growing pains and moments where we needed to re-evaluate and re-strategise. While completely natural to the growth of an organisation, such moments have not always been easy for those involved. It is the belief in human rights that brought us and continues to bring us together.

The following chapter tells the history of FORUM-ASIA. Obviously it is a subjective selection of moments that we – the editors – believe have been significant for the history and development of the organisation and network. We have not included everything, and apologise in advance to all that have played an important role in FORUM-ASIA over the years who we did not manage to include.

The founding years 1991–1994

In December 1991, a regional consultation, ‘On Collaboration between Human Rights Organisations in South and South-East Asia’, was held in Manila, the Philippines. During the meeting a new network was established, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia).

The idea for the consultation came from D.J. Ravindran, former Legal Officer for Asia for the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). Prior to the consultation he had visited several countries in the region to gain input for a working paper to be used during the event.

This first consultation had participants from nine countries representing 19 organisations,¹ who became the founding members of Forum-Asia. These organisations were:

¹ Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia), (1991), A compilation of Documents of the Founding Consultation held in Manila, the Philippines, December 1991, Forum-Asia: Bangkok, Thailand.
Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) from Bangladesh,

Legal Resource for Social Action (LRSA) from India,

Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) from Indonesia,

Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM) from Malaysia,

Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) from Nepal,

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) from Pakistan,

Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) from the Philippines,

Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) from the Philippines,

Protestant Lawyers League of the Philippines (PLLPR) from the Philippines,

Pilipina Legal Resources Center (PLRC) from the Philippines,

Paglilingkod Batas Pangkapapatiran Foundation (PBPF) from the Philippines,

Tanggol-Kalikasan (TK) from the Philippines,

Paralegal Training and Service Center (PTSC) from the Philippines,

Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) from Sri Lanka,

Law and Society Trust (LST) from Sri Lanka,

Information Human Rights Documentation Centre (INFORM) from Sri Lanka,

Union for Civil Liberty (UCL) from Thailand,

Coordination Group for Religion in Society (CGRS) from Thailand, and

Friends of Women Foundation (FWF) from Thailand.
The initial objectives of Forum-Asia were to: 'conduct programmes to further strengthen the effectiveness of human rights organisations in the region and to facilitate collaboration between them.' The idea was that while there was an increase in organisations working in Asia on human rights, these organisations were mostly set up or run by groups in Europe or North America. The notion was that the region needed a regional network that was set up by Asians for Asians. Forum-Asia would provide a voice for victims of human rights abuses, their families and those that were attempting to defend them, the human right defenders (HRDs) themselves.

‘(..) The idea was really, during that time, to capacitate, with that vision, to have an Asian voice, to capacitate activists to be able to express that voice.’

Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA

There was a conscious choice to include both human rights and development in the name. While most, if not all, organisations initially involved were human rights organisations, there was a recognition of the interconnectedness of the human rights concerns that many of the founding members worked on with socio-economic development, including developmental and economic inequality, and market globalisation. Throughout Forum-Asia’s history so far though – that is till 2016 – the development part of its name has been overshadowed by the work on human rights.

The first months after the founding meeting were spent drafting proposals and raising funds. D.J. Ravindran was asked to help develop and establish the organisation as a consultant, and was joined in this task by Chalida Tajaroensuk. During the 1991 meeting it had been suggested that Forum-Asia should be hosted by one of the founding organisations. The UCL, based in Bangkok, Thailand became the host to the regional secretariat of the network. Ms. Songphorn Tajaroensuk became the first Secretary General of Forum-Asia.

The first activity that Forum-Asia undertook was organised jointly with TFDP and PTSC. It was a ‘Regional Training Programme on Fact-Finding and Documentation of Human Rights Violations’, which took place on 27 September-12 October 1992 in Manila. It was an indication of the initial focus of the network. During the first years the activities and campaigns of Forum-Asia largely centred on capacity building with the vision of strengthening the member organisations in the region. Building on the experience of some of the members, these skills were shared and spread throughout the network.

In 1993, Forum-Asia became involved in the UN World Conference on Human Rights, including in the preparatory process that resulted in the ‘Final Declaration of the Regional Meeting for Asia of the World Conference on Human Rights or Bangkok Declaration’. This was the start of the advocacy component of Forum-Asia’s work. Something which would become a central part of its strategies in the following years.
‘(..) FORUM-ASIA is a kind of first, original inspiration, Asian inspiration for many of us who became closer, informed, educated about the local level Asian movements in various parts of Asia. So FORUM-ASIA is the centre for human rights education and for the inspiration for the struggle to take forward.’
Adilur Rahman Khan, Secretary of Odhikar

On 14-17 October 1994, the first General Assembly (GA) of Forum-Asia was held at the Wangree Resort in Nakorn Nayok, Thailand.\(^4\) The first three years had been labelled to be ‘an experimental period’ from the start, so the GA focussed primarily on reviewing this period and making decisions for the future. During the meeting it was agreed that Forum-Asia had a distinct character and role to play and should therefore be continued and expanded.

‘(..) FORUM-ASIA is unique, (..) it is an Asian solidarity human rights NGO for Asians and also by Asians.’
Anselmo Lee, former Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA

Given its status as being in an experimental phase, no full-fledged Secretariat had been set up in the first years. During the 1994 GA it was decided that such a full-fledged Secretariat should be established, yet remain an unregistered association that would not seek judicial status. As such, it was decided that UCL would continue to host the Secretariat.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) See faculty.washington.edu/swhiting/pols469/Bangkok_Declaration.doc.


\(^5\) Ibid.
Consolidation and growth
1994–2004

With Forum-Asia no longer being in the experimental phase, the time to strengthen and expand the network started after the GA of 1994. New strategies and programmes were developed, including diplomacy, human rights education, advocacy and campaigning. The Secretariat also expanded its work on particular focus areas, including from 1995 on women’s human rights.

‘(..) We need a safe space and also an enabling [environment] for us to realise the dream that we have to implement our belief and commitment. (..) FORUM ASIA is the one who created and provided that safe space. (..) and that platform that we can come together and hold hands to each other.’

Khin Ohmar, Coordinator of Burma Partnership

In 1995 Forum-Asia undertook its first country mission. The regional mission to Burma focused on assessing the situation in the country. The group met with different stakeholders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and based on these engagements assessed how Forum-Asia could assist the HRDs of the country to improve the human rights situation in Burma.

A year later, in 1996, the involvement of Forum-Asia in Burma became instrumental to the establishment of the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma (ALTSEAN-Burma), a network comprised of organisations and individuals based in Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that support the movement for human rights and democracy in Burma. For the full story on ALTSEAN-Burma see page 29.

Forum-Asia’s involvement in the developmental stage of new initiatives has been repeated multiple times during the network’s existence. Forum-Asia would be part of identifying a key concern or issue related to human rights, it would (co-)organise a meeting on the topic, during which a new network or collective would be established. Often, Forum-Asia would initially fulfil the role of Secretariat or host the Secretariat for the new group before they became independent.

In this manner the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) was established in 1997. ANFREL works to promote and support democratisation at national and regional levels across Asia. They focus on elections and election monitoring. For more about ANFREL see page 37. Another example is Forum-Asia’s involvement with the non-governmental organisations (NGO) Coalition for the International Criminal Court (CICC) in 2001, see page 47, and many would follow.

With time, the particular organisational priorities of Forum-Asia changed. In a report from 1999 the network describes itself by stating that ‘(..) It strives to promote, on the basis of global perspective, a regional initiative towards the protection of human rights,'
development and peace in the region through collaboration of human rights and development NGOs and people’s organizations in Asia.\textsuperscript{16}

Testimony to this growing focus on global advocacy, was the granting of consultative status to Forum-Asia in 2004 to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC status) after a two year application process. ECOSOC status provided Forum-Asia with access to ECOSOC, its many subsidiary bodies, the various human rights mechanisms of the United Nations (UN), ad-hoc processes on small arms, and special events organised by the President of the General Assembly. To be able to obtain ECOSOC status, the Forum-Asia Foundation was officially registered in 2000.

‘(..) In addition to support the national at a regional level, FORUM-ASIA also provides a platform in the context of global civil society movement. (..) a platform for Asian, southern NGOs, civil society to play a role at the global level.’ Rafendi Djamin, First Representative of Indonesia to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and Executive Director of the Human Rights Working Group (HRWG)

While by no means unique to a network organisation, Forum-Asia decided to address these issues and those raised in a previous evaluation. In 2003 it established a project on ‘Transforming the Secretariat’. An external consultant, Deep Rai, was tasked to address the challenges and needs identified by staff and the Executive Committee.\textsuperscript{9}

Reflections from 2002 highlight ‘the emergence of FORUM-ASIA [as] a regional entity recognized by governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society groups in the region and elsewhere. It has emerged as a major partner in most leading human rights activities.’\textsuperscript{7}

However, at the same time it was also said that ‘We are still faced with the challenge of linking human rights activism from local, national, regional and global level. (..) we have to acknowledge that not all members are equally engaged in all the campaigns and activities conducted by Forum-Asia.’\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

The path to independence
2005–2013

Initiated by the aforementioned evaluation and the project, ‘Transforming the Secretariat’, a process was set in motion to change Forum-Asia. At the GA of 2004 it was decided that a new function would be established, being that of an Executive Director. In January 2005, Anselmo Lee was the first to take this position. The position of Executive Director of Forum-Asia would later be held by Yap Swee Seng, Giyoun Kim (Acting), and Evelyn Balais-Serrano.

The restructuring process also led to the decision to establish the network as an independent body. A change that was not to the agreement of all. Forum-Asia set up its own office, and went through the difficult process of re-establishing itself. With this came an adjustment in the name, from Forum-Asia to FORUM-ASIA. It was a difficult period in the history of the organisation and network, but one that was necessary in its evolution.

The changes prompted FORUM-ASIA to re-evaluate its strategies and programmes. By 2005 the network consisted of 36 members in 14 countries. The refocusing of its strategic priorities led to a stronger focus on international advocacy and coalition building.

A highlight of which was the establishment of the Geneva Office\(^ {10} \) in 2006. The objective of the Geneva Office was and continues to be two-fold. First is to increase the impact and effectiveness of FORUM-ASIA and its members’ advocacy in UN fora. Second is to encourage accountability of Asian member states to UN Human Rights Mechanisms.

‘(..) FORUM-ASIA did well to bring Asian human rights defenders at the Geneva level (..) bringing the Asian voice into the Geneva discourse (..), the voice of the civil society and human rights defenders.’
Sayeed Ahmad, Protection Coordinator for Asia at Front Line Defenders

In 2010 the Geneva example paved the way for the establishment of an office in Jakarta. The objective was and still is to monitor, engage with and inform FORUM-ASIA members about the developments of ASEAN, in particularly those related to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). The office is hosted by the Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan (KontraS or Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence), a prominent member organisation of FORUM-ASIA in Indonesia.
In 2006, FORUM-ASIA was involved in two notable other initiatives. The establishment of the Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) – a network focussed on cross-sectoral partnerships build around shared advocacy targets – and the creation of the Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI). For more information about ANNI see page 75.

An external evaluation from 2007 concluded that ‘(...) the principal added value [of FORUM-ASIA] is a) protection (...) b) facilitating regional and international human rights advocacy, and c) providing a platform for learning and collective action (...)’". This observation indicated another shift in FORUM-ASIA’s efforts away from the focus on capacity building from the initial years of FORUM-ASIA.

‘(...) In one way or another, FORUM-ASIA or FORUM-ASIA members have been working on a daily basis to make every day a turning point in human rights’ Debbie Stothard, Secretary General of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Coordinator of ALTSEAN-Burma

Furthering the tradition of involvement in the birth of new networks and coalitions, FORUM-ASIA was part of the establishment of the Asia Pacific Refugees Rights Network (APRRN) in 2008. FORUM-ASIA hosted APRRNs first coordinator after his appointment in 2010, and hosted the network during its formative years to allow it to grow. APRRN became independent in 2012. See page 67 for the full-story.

One of FORUM-ASIA’s latest initiatives, in this tradition, was the Regional Initiative for a South Asia Human Right Mechanism (RISAHRM). RISAHRM’s aim is to establish a South Asian human rights mechanism that brings together national processes and regional aspirations. For the story about RISAHRM so far see page 91.

10 Officially called the International Office.

A new era 2013-till unknown

In 2013 a new management team was appointed, led by Evelyn Balais-Serrano as Executive Director, to guide FORUM-ASIA into a new period. With the 25 year anniversary in 2016 coming up the network and organisation once again needed to reflect and re-evaluate the role, the added value and the priorities of the movement.

‘(..) FORUM-ASIA has been like a guiding light, we were a very small organisation and FORUM-ASIA helped us to grow a lot in the past 10 years or so’, Shahindha Ismail, Executive Director of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)

In recognition of the desire of many to make capacity building and training once again a central component of FORUM-ASIA’s work, in 2013 it initiated the Glo-cal Advocacy Leadership in Asia Academy (GALA Academy) together with the Asian Development Alliance (ADA) and the Asian Democracy Network (ADN). The aim of the GALA Academy is to strengthen the international advocacy capacity of mid- and high-level staff in civil society organisations (CSOs). For the story about the GALA Academy see page 81.

Realising the need to enhance FORUM-ASIA’s advocacy efforts in South Asia, the Kathmandu office, in Nepal was established in 2015. Hosted by founding member, INSEC, the Kathmandu office provides a permanent presence to strengthen and consolidate the human rights movement through effective collaboration with member and partner organisations in South Asia.
The next 25 years?

Some have commented over the last decades that the dream for FORUM-ASIA should be that someday its existence might not be necessary anymore. For the moment that dream still seems a long while away. And so FORUM-ASIA and its members prepare themselves for the next 25 years.

‘(..) It is very difficult to get people together, to agree on common plans and programmes (..) and the fact that all these organisations from so many different countries, so many different realities were able to get together, to put their priorities on human rights together and then have programmes together is a magnificent example for all the rest of us who do human rights around the world.’ Frank la Rue, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

FORUM-ASIA has always placed the needs and interests of its members at the forefront of the strategies and thematic priorities it pursues. The coming years will not change this.

FORUM-ASIA will continue to bring HRDs from all over Asia together to learn from each other, to exchange experiences and to stand in solidarity. To speak out in local, national, regional and international platforms on behalf of those that cannot do so themselves. To bring its members to these political arenas for them to find their own voice. To monitor human rights violations, and offer emergency assistance to those in need.

To develop knowledge and issue reports on emerging trends, and to engage with stakeholders at all levels to ensure that human rights priorities are known and addressed appropriately.

It will continue to do all of this and more, but FORUM-ASIA is acutely aware that it can only do so upon the request of and in collaboration with its member organisations. So more than anything, it will continue to strengthen, expand and serve its network.

‘(..) You have to be yourself a human rights defender of a human rights movement to know the need of other human rights defenders. So I think FORUM-ASIA is not a human rights organisation, FORUM-ASIA itself is a human rights defender.’

Nimalka Fernando, President of the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)