

# Growing Together

## The Academic Invigoration of the Asia Europe Business Forum

Whereas political and business circles recognize the importance of the biannual Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM), the significance of these deliberations and the possibility to influence them seems to escape many in academia. Alongside the ASEM political summits in the media spotlight, the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF) gatherings provide researchers the opportunity to constructively influence the process of business cooperation, facilitating and invigorating the AEBF deliberations and ultimately the ASEM agenda as such.

Forum >  
General

By Jan Annerstedt

Coinciding with the September 2002 ASEM Economic Ministers' Meeting in Copenhagen, the seventh annual Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF 7) conference was held just ahead of the ASEM IV summit. Well in advance, academic researchers and other specialists from East Asia and Western Europe met to discuss strategic issues identified at the previous meeting in Singapore.

In Singapore in 2001, it was decided that three strategic issues cutting across the AEBF working groups would be brought to the fore to bring momentum to the deliberations: (1) dynamic regions, metropolitan hubs, and modern governance in the globalizing economy; (2) strengthening the economic fabric through the growth of small and medium-sized business enterprises; and (3) the global challenge to corporate governance and business participation in socio-economic development.

These themes were discussed in meetings among Asian and European specialists, and evaluated in a workshop that brought together academics and other specialists from Asia, Europe, and North America three months ahead of the Copenhagen AEBF. The resulting 30-page Briefing Paper presented a comprehensive set of suggestions for the eight working groups and for deliberations in the plenary sessions. The working groups then used this content to develop their platforms for advice to

the ministers and other top policy-makers involved in the ASEM process.

To deliver tangibles, much of the work in the AEBF conferences is conducted in the aforementioned working groups, each co-chaired by an Asian and a European business representative. The two chairs prepare the deliberations and help in the follow-up to the conference. Over the past years, the 'Trade' and 'Investment' working groups have been instrumental in identifying obstacles to trade and investment and in proposing specific actions by governments, the WTO, and similar international and regional organizations. Last year, with the Doha development agenda at the centre of discussions, business representatives urged governments to liberalize intercontinental trade and to simplify and make more transparent rules for foreign direct investment.\*

As in Singapore, the conference in Copenhagen hosted working groups for Financial Services, Information and Communications Technology, Infrastructure, and Life Sciences and Health Care. Two new working groups, 'Environment' and 'Food', discussed the food processing, biotechnology, and environmental technology industries and implementation strategies for sustainable economic growth that allows for social as well as environmental improvement. While the private role in initiating and facilitating trade and cross-continental investment was emphasized, so were the issues of corporate citizenship and social responsibility.

### Research and urgent policy issues

For many AEBF 7 participants, the discussions in Copenhagen were useful and intellectually inspiring. For the 30-odd researchers involved in preparing the AEBF Briefing Paper, AEBF 7 was a challenging set of encounters, where research results were confronted with urgent policy issues as expressed by top business representatives and public officials.

Areas for improvement were also identified. The lack of a permanent ASEM secretariat and the annual shifting of AEBF conference responsibilities render continuity in deliberations and the implementation of follow-up recommendations more difficult. As a result of the transfer of responsibilities between Europe and Asia, specialized knowledge is unfortunately lost. Therefore, the installation of a 'lean, yet effective' ASEM secretariat was recommended on behalf of ASEM leaders. With the expansion of the European Union, these proposals are more urgent. They also fit well with Wim Stokhof's emphasis in his 'Director's Note on ASEM' (IIASN 30, p.2): The ASEM process, of which AEBF remains an important part, is in need of a 'long-term internally driven strategic vision, which can be translated into clear and concrete objectives'.

Deliberations among business representatives, academics, and other specialists need to continue to invigorate the next AEBF planned in Seoul for October 2003. <

### References

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### Note >

\* The November 2001 declaration of the Fourth Ministerial Conference in Doha, Qatar, provides the mandate for negotiations and other work including issues concerning the implementation of current WTO Agreements, i.e. the agreements arising from the Uruguay Round negotiations. In Doha, ministers agreed to adopt around 50 decisions clarifying the obligations of developing country member governments with respect to issues including agriculture, subsidies, textiles and clothing, technical barriers to trade, trade-related investment measures and rules of origin.