

## **ASEM's Leading Role in Tackling Global Challenges and Realising the SDGs – Shaping the vision for a Stronger Asia-Europe Partnership**

It is a great honor for me to participate in this High Level Policy Dialogue to Strengthen the Asia-Europe Partnership and to join this esteemed panel of distinguished diplomats and experts.

Today's discussions have strongly reinforced the message that closer Inter-regional cooperation between Asia and Europe can make a significant contribution to meeting the global challenges that we face, most urgently, containing the Covid-19 pandemic and achieving a sustainable and equitable economic recovery, reducing carbon emissions and adapting to climate change and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals leaving no one behind.

I am also tremendously encouraged by the commitment to multilateralism expressed by the speakers at the forum, especially senior leaders of the Asian and European governments participating today. Viet Nam is an excellent example of a country in the region that has placed multilateralism at the center of its foreign policy, most recently evident in the launch of the High Level UN Security Council Debate on Multilateralism and Political Settlement of Disputes during Viet Nam's Presidency of the UNSC.

For the United Nations, peace and prosperity can only be achieved based on respect for national sovereignty, international cooperation and human rights. The UN Charter, signed 76 years ago this week, is a great experiment in multilateralism, motivated in the first instance by a deep yearning for peace after two devastating wars, but also an ambition to establish a new world order based on national sovereignty and the fundamental human freedoms expressed in the Charter and later in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

The world we live in today is very different from the one that emerged from World War II. Average life expectancy for the world as a whole was 46 years in 1945 compared to over 72 now. Nearly half of the global population could not read or write, a figure reduced to 16 percent in 2017. In 1945 it took forty hours to fly from Singapore to San Francisco, a distance now covered in just 15 hours.

But we also face some formidable challenges. That Covid-19 pandemic has already claimed 3.5 million lives around the world, and 170 million people have been directly affected. The IMF estimates that the pandemic will reduce global economic output by \$25 trillion by 2025. As many as 150 million more people will suffer extreme poverty in 2021 compared to 2019, and the burden of poverty will fall disproportionately on women, children and the elderly and infirm. Climate change threatens our food production systems, the health and safety of our communities and the very existence of low-lying island nations and coastal regions. We are still far from our shared ambition of eliminating poverty and hunger and realizing the other 15 SDGs.

We share with the San Francisco generation a belief that we create a better world by working together, not by going it alone. This is as much true of regions and nations as it is of communities and individuals. Yet it is troubling that some people still persist in the notion that lasting solutions to global problems can be achieved in one place or country. Even

worse, we continue to suffer from outbreaks of chauvinism, racism, sexism and xenophobia that are every bit as dangerous to the international community as the Covid-19 virus. Mindful of the lessons of history, we must reaffirm our commitment to multilateralism, respect for national sovereignty and human rights, and realization of SDGs.

Since the ASEM process was launched in 1996, Asia and Europe have achieved many milestones in economic cooperation and trade, security, education and culture. Through the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEM has contributed to United Nations 2030 Agenda through support for research, civil society organizations and inter-regional dialogue focusing on, among other issues, climate change and public health.

Trade is central to the ASEAN-Europe relationship. The new free trade agreement between the EU and Viet Nam virtually eliminates tariffs and sets up mechanisms to remove other barriers to trade. Facilitating investment and transfer of technology through closer trade relations is an essential to the conversion of energy systems from fossil fuels to renewables and other aspects of sustainable development.

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to take center stage in the Asia-Europe relationship as in most dimensions of international cooperation. The world economy, and hence progress to achieve the SDGs, cannot regain momentum until the pandemic is brought under control. More than anything else this means vaccinating most of the world's population as soon as possible. The United Nations estimates that this would cost \$50 billion dollars, but would generate trillions of dollars in economic benefits.

The European Union has contributed generously to the vaccination process through its leadership of the Global Collaboration to Accelerate the Development, Production and Equitable Access to New Covid-19 Diagnostics, Therapeutic and Vaccines, or Act-A, which includes contributions to Covax to distribute vaccines to developing countries. However, at the current pace a small minority of people living in developing countries will have been fully vaccinated by the end of 2021. This will not only act as a brake on the economic recovery in these countries but leaves them vulnerable to the spread of new variants that arise within unprotected populations.

In Asia, only two people per hundred had been fully vaccinated by the end of May 2021. Progress among the ASEAN countries ranged from 25 per hundred in Singapore to 0.03 per hundred in Viet Nam.

In addition to more funding and donations of vaccine stocks, developed countries, The EU should urge European countries to enter voluntary licensing arrangements to facilitate transfer of technology to Asian vaccine producers. Pharmaceutical companies are to be commended for the development of Covid vaccines in record time, and they will reap considerable financial rewards for this work as we will be living for Covid viruses for many years to come. But the priority this year must be accelerating production and distribution of vaccines to low- and middle-income countries, including Asia, to reduce transmission of the virus and hasten economic recovery. Viet Nam has announced its intention to build production facilities to produce vaccines for Covax for use domestically and in other countries, and is also in bilateral talks with Russia on acquiring technology to produce Sputnik V vaccines.

The pandemic has cost us valuable time in our efforts to achieve the SDGs in Asia and in other regions. UNDP estimates that 94 million people were pushed into poverty in 2020 and another 44 million people will fall into poverty by 2030 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the baseline scenario, 905 million people will still be living in poverty in 2030. The upper secondary school graduate rate will be one percent lower and maternal mortality 2.3 percent higher than expected without Covid.

If conditions worsen, or the recovery is weaker than expected, we will fall even further behind the trajectory needed to achieve the SDGs. Under the “high damage” scenario, UNDP estimates that more than one billion people will be living in poverty in 2030.

Faced with this ominous situation, we must redouble our efforts to increase and focus investments on areas that will generate high returns in terms of realizing the SDGs, including social protection and assistance, education and health, essential infrastructure, green technology and economy, digitization and governance. Mobilizing resources on the scale required will not be an easy task in light of fiscal consolidation proposed in many high-income countries. However, in an interconnected world, facing global crises of historical proportions, reducing development assistance would impose long-term costs in both developing and developed countries that far outweigh the short-term benefit of marginally smaller budget deficits.

Two fundamental principles of the 2030 Agenda adopted by the member states of the UN are to ensure that no one is left behind and that every endeavor should be made to reach the furthest behind first. We now face a situation in which we need to translate these noble sentiments into real-time action.

When it comes to the pandemic, we are all in this together: rich and poor, men and women, old and young and East, West, North and South.

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh put it clearly in his remarks at the 26<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Future of Asia. Extraordinary circumstances,” he said, “call for resolute and decisive measures. We need a new cooperation framework leading to support of our economies, enable us to weather the pandemic and to lay the groundwork for sustainable development and inclusive growth...Together we can join hands to build an Asia of peace, cooperation and development in the post-Covid era.”

Like the San Francisco generation, which put aside their differences to chart a new course for humanity, we have a choice to make between isolationism and inclusion.

Viet Nam and European commitment to the inclusive principles of multilateralism are perhaps more vital than ever to both regional and global futures for people, for planet and for prosperity.

Thank you for this opportunity to join you today, and I wish you all great health, happiness and a green resilient future where no one is left behind.