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Europe Meets Asia

The Transnational Construction of
Access and Voice from Below

Sabrina Zajak



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Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate on the role of democratic participation in complex systems of governance. It takes a process-oriented constructivist approach asking how transnational activism over time contributes to the construction of access and voice from below and uses the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM) to analyze how interactions between civil society and global governance institutions shape concrete forms of participation. The paper shows that transnational activism triggers both discursive and institutional changes within the official ASEM process leading to an informal, fragmented, and fragile institutionalization of civil society participation. However, the paper reveals a division between civil society organizations with some, such as business representatives, having preferential access and voice in comparison to more contentious organizations. The paper explains this fragmented form of democratization as the result of three interrelated processes: the particular history and economic origins of the ASEM; international developments particularly in the ongoing economic crisis; and domestic developments within individual countries (in particular China) which have begun to favor controlled access for civil society participation.

Zusammenfassung

Vor dem Hintergrund der Debatte um die Rolle und Funktion demokratischer Partizipation in globalen Governance-Regimen fragt dieser Aufsatz, welchen Einfluss transnationale Mobilisierung auf die Konstruktion von Partizipations- und Mitbestimmungsmöglichkeiten haben kann. Am Beispiel der Asien-Europa-Treffen (ASEM) wird gezeigt, wie die Interaktion zwischen zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen und globalen Governance-Institutionen verschiedene Partizipationsformen hervorbringt. Dabei wird argumentiert, dass ein qualitatives sozialkonstruktivistisches Vorgehen gut geeignet ist, Prozesse der Demokratisierung von unten zu verstehen. Die Analyse zeigt, dass transnationale Mobilisierung im Zeitverlauf zu diskursivem und institutionellem Wandel in den ASEM-Institutionen beigetragen hat, und veranschaulicht, dass sehr informelle und sporadische Partizipationsmöglichkeiten entstehen, die teilweise auch zu einer diskursiven Annäherung zwischen Kritikern und politischen Eliten führen. Gleichzeitig lässt sich jedoch zwischen wirtschaftsintegrationsfreundlichen Organisationen (Wirtschaftsverbänden) und kritischeren Organisationen (Gewerkschaften, NGOs) eine starke Trennung von Partizipations- und Einflussmöglichkeiten feststellen. Insgesamt wird die Entstehung von polarisierten, informellen und sporadischen Partizipationsformen mit drei Faktoren erklärt: der ökonomischen Orientierung des ASEM-Prozesses, den internationalen Wirtschaftskrisen und dem Wandel einzelner Staaten in ihrem Verhältnis zur Zivilgesellschaft.

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Europe Meets Asia: The Transnational Construction of Access and Voice from Below

1 Introduction: Global governance, transnational activism, and democratization

This paper contributes to the ongoing scientific debate on civil society participation within global governance. It departs from the main ways in which international relations and transnational political sociology approach and discuss static measures of civil society participation and its normative implications (Kohler-Koch/De Bièvre/Maloney 2008; Steffek/Kissling/Nanz 2008; Tallberg/Uhlin 2012). Instead, it takes a process-oriented constructivist approach, asking how transnational activism contributes over time to the construction of access and voice from below. In doing so, the paper combines insights from three strands of literature: research within international relations and transnational political sociology discussing the degree and quality of democratization of global governance institutions (Scholte 2011); research on transnational mobilization and advocacy networks discussing the mechanisms of influence of transnational activism on governance beyond the state (Keck/Sikkink 1998); and literature on inter-regional governance, describing interregional integration as a specific form of global governance whose democratic essence largely remains under-researched (Rüland 2010).

A significant amount of scientific literature today focuses on the role of civil society and civil society organizations – predominantly in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – in a context of international organizations such as the UN or the Bretton Woods organizations, international meetings such as the G8, or supra-national organizations such as the European Union (Armstrong et al. 2011; Bexell/Tallberg/Uhlin 2010; Kohler-Koch 2010a; Kohler-Koch/De Bièvre/Maloney 2008; Scholte 2002; Tallberg/Uhlin 2012). The normative vision behind civil society participation is the promise of democratizing global governance:

Through formal and informal participation in international institutions and other global governance arrangements, civil society actors may not only contribute to a broadened participation in global policy-making, but also improve the accountability of powerful global actors. (Tallberg/Uhlin 2012: 212)

Based on this assumption, organized civil society functions as a “transmission belt” between international organizations and citizens. As a transmission belt, civil society organizations give voice to citizens’ concerns while simultaneously making the internal processes of international organizations more transparent to the wider public (Steffek et al. 2008: 8).

Up to now, studies have defined and measured civil society participation within global governance (Steffek/Nanz/Kissling 2008). These are important contributions, showing the extent of participation and evaluating its democratic potential. This literature also provides viable explanations for the emergence of civil society participation – for example, as part of the rise of new norms of legitimate governance (Tallberg 2008). However, this literature pays little attention to how concrete interactions between civil society and global governance institutions actually shape concrete forms of participation.

In contrast, research on transnational social movements, advocacy networks, and activism asks how extra-institutional actors challenge those institutions and thereby impact them (della Porta/Tarrow 2005; Keck/Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 2005; Teune 2010). Thus, from this perspective, the democratization of global governance institutions is driven by continuous contestation and challenges from outside actors who politicize global decision-making and the legitimacy of its procedures and outcomes (Rucht 2012; Taylor 2008). Yet this line of research treats governance arrangements as open or closed opportunity structures without taking seriously the complexities and changing boundaries of the particular institutional design of a global governance arrangement. This is a major deficit when examining into transnational governance arrangements, which tend to be weakly institutionalized and thus subject to continuous change.

Combining insights from both lines of research helps to shed light on how several rounds of mobilization, interactions, and contestation between a range of inter-institutional and extra-institutional actors contribute to specific forms of participation. Thus, instead of trying to measure fixed criteria at a given point in time, this paper traces the social construction of access and voice over time. It argues that such a qualitative, longitudinal, social-constructivist perspective is better suited to capturing processes of democratization from below, particularly in the context of very fluid and flexible governance arrangements such as the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM). The application of static criteria at a given point in time can only reflect a snapshot, which overlooks the fact that a linear, continuous development of democratization does not necessarily exist. In this regard, ASEM is a crucial case, since access and voice from civil society do not remain stable but continuously change within weakly institutionalized governance arrangements. This is particularly the case in interregional governance.

So far, little attention has generally been paid to the forms of and potential for civil society participation within the research on international governance. This is not surprising since, although not an entirely new phenomenon, interregional governance as a mechanism for interregional integration is only beginning to be explored as a significant political and economic process (Gilson 2005; Reiterer 2009; Rüländ 2010). Nevertheless, interregional integration – the process of enhanced cooperation in the political, economic, and social fields between different regions – has become an important process in the increase in regional trade agreements as a consequence of the limited progress in multilateral trade negotiations within the WTO (Crawford/Fiorentino 2005; Fiorentino et al. 2007).

This paper seeks to contribute to filling this empirical gap by looking at a specific type of interregional arrangement between Europe and Asia in the form of the Asia-Europe Meetings – the so-called ASEM process. ASEM is of significant political and economic importance as it is the “EU’s vehicle for a more holistic approach to Asia thereby fostering a more economic and political multipolar world order” (Reiterer 2009: 179). But while there is a significant amount of literature on its economic and international political importance (Bersick/van der Velde 2011; Brennan et al. 1997; Dent 2003; Gaens 2008; Hwee 2007; University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006; Zhang 2008), there is hardly any discussion about its degree of participation, access, and openness to civil society or the responsiveness of head of states to the societal concerns in this process.

This paper shows that transnational activism over time contributes to both discursive and institutional changes within the official ASEM process: in terms of *access*, the analysis shows that an *informal, fragmented, and fragile institutionalization of civil society participation* has been emerging, where politicized organizations – and to a certain extent, trade unions – remain further excluded compared to organizations which are more favorable to economic integration. This means there is a division between civil society organizations, with some having preferential access and voice (such as business representatives and non-contentious service-oriented organizations) compared to others (trade unions and more critical NGOs). This is often overlooked when the criteria of civil society organization participation is examined only in an abstract way. Thus, this article makes a distinction between depoliticized civil society organizations with direct access to the ASEM process and politicized, critical civil society organizations, which largely operate outside of formal channels, constructing their own channels for participation (in the form of counter-forums) but also contributing to at least a slight opening into more formal procedures (such organizations are referred to as transnational activists).

And yet in terms of *responsiveness*, this study shows that there is some discursive convergence between critical civil society organizations and ASEM representatives on single issues. Here, the issue of labor is a good example to illustrate discursive convergence, a convergence which nevertheless fails to balance the priority given to economic issues over social and other rights-based issues.

However, this development cannot be attributed alone to activism from the outside. Instead, three contextual factors explain the responses to activist demands. These include: the historic development of the ASEM within particular international constellations at a given point in time; the divergent understandings of democracy between Asian and European countries; and – at the same time – their joint emphasis on economic issues as part of the global spread of markets.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section defines major concepts and analytical approaches. The paper then gives an overview of the ASEM process, its major issues, tasks, and institutions. It then traces the development of the trade unions’ and NGOs’

mobilization process and the responses this process triggered between 1996 (the foundation of ASEM) and 2010. The conclusion discusses the implications of the informal, flexible, and fragmented forms of civil society participation for democracy in inter-regional integration.

2 Conceptualizing the construction of democratization from below: Organizing, claiming, and gaining access and voice

There is an ongoing debate as to whether and how civil society participation in global governance automatically translates into a democratization of politics across national borders. These are crucial and decisive questions given the limited democratic quality via elected representatives from nation states. However, democracy is a highly normative concept. Depending on the normative criteria, we can find different evaluations in the democratic quality of global institutions. Core democratic values that can be identified across a range of different democratic theories are *participation* and *accountability* (Tallberg/Uhlin 2012). Next, I elaborate on these principles and their specifications before combining them with a process-oriented constructivist perspective.

According to Dahl (1970), the participatory ideal implies that all those significantly affected by a decision should have the opportunity of participating in its making (Dahl 1970). Within global governance, people participate either via their elected state representatives or via the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and social movements that constitute “transnational civil society.” Accountability in general can be understood as a relationship “in which an individual, group or other entity makes demands on an agent to report on his or her activities, and has the ability to impose costs on the agent” (Keohane 2003: 12). It refers to the right of actors to hold other actors accountable to a set of standards and potentially impose sanctions if their responsibilities have not been met (Bovens 2007). Civil society organizations increase accountability when they themselves legitimately represent the people, criticize and reveal non-compliance to certain standards, and are able to impose consequences (Kohler-Koch 2010b).¹

Given that accountability often remains contested (who should be accountable to whom), Steffek and Nantz define criteria which also cover the idea of accountability but are clearer to operationalize and measure empirically: they differentiate between *access*, *transparency*, *responsiveness*, and *inclusion* as core criteria for evaluating the degree of democratization in global governance arrangements (Steffek et al. 2008: 4). In line with

1 Thus, within global governance, accountability is multi-dimensional (Bovens 2007), but not all forms of accountability can qualify as democratic (e.g., between policy-makers and markets; Keohane 2003)

Dahl, *access* is important because the concerns and interests of all those affected by political decisions should have an equal influence on the political process; *transparency* ensures that actors have access to all the information that enables them to engage in public debates and form opinions; *responsiveness* refers to societal concerns being “adequately reflected” within political decision-making allowing criticism to be acknowledged in political debates and contributing to the modification of official positions; *inclusion* goes beyond *access* by representing the idea of democratic equality, meaning that all affected individuals and their arguments are, in fact, included rather than excluded because of, for example, a lack of resources that undermines the opportunities for access (Steffek et al. 2008: 10–12).

In this article, I take this understanding of democratic criteria as a starting point for my analysis. However, I exclude *inclusion* as this would require an in-depth analysis of all civil society organizations and their specific claims and issues. Similarly, *transparency* is less important for the analysis since it does not directly impact the construction of access and voice from below. I therefore focus on *access*, *voice* and *responsiveness*.

But instead of treating these as static, I focus on their making and shaping in the contentious interactions between ASEM, depoliticized civil society organizations, and transnational activists. Transnational activists are defined as “people and groups who are rooted in specific national contexts, but who engage in contentious political activities that involve them in transnational networks and contacts” (Tarrow 2005: 29). The term “activism” describes political activities which are based on a conflict of interests, challenge (or support) existing power structures, and take place at least in part outside of formal political institutions (Piper/Uhlin 2009). A transnational activism perspective specifies the constructivist approach in two ways. First, it helps to focus on how activists *organize and claim the voice of the people*, who are not yet included within the governance process. This means the organization of voice can lie outside of official governance structures. This aspect is not fully covered by the criteria discussed above which focus on the channels of voice rather than on the construction of voice from the outside. For the empirical analysis, this implies paying attention to the organization of challengers or critical organizations and their claims.² In the case of ASEM, it means focusing on the development and claims of the Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF) and the Trade Unions Forum, which I call politicized and contentious civil society. They stand in contrast to non-contentious, depoliticized civil society, which is part of the official ASEM process and organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation and the Asia-Europe Business Foundation.

2 Yet I do not want to suggest that challengers are internally more democratically organized than the non-contentious organizations. Several authors have stressed that it is not only important to discuss the institutional determinants of democratization but also to examine the democratic credentials of civil society organizations (Steffek/Hahn 2010). However, looking at the internal accountability mechanisms of hundreds of organizations (many of them hopping in and out during the Asia-Europe People’s Forum) is beyond the scope and intention of this article.

Second, a transnational activism perspective helps us to understand institutional changes and responses to external claims as a result of contentious interactions. This also sheds a slightly different light on the criteria of access and responsiveness. Access is not a stable criterion, and the degree of access can change over time. Responsiveness is not necessarily linked with access to the political order, but can also be *a result of external claim-making*. For example, one form of responsiveness is granting increased access to outside actors. Another form is responding positively to activist demands – e.g., by putting the issue on the agenda (thereby being accountable to those actors). Both aspects are taken into account in the qualitative process by looking at an increase of access to the official process and a congruence of issues between activist demands and the official summit statements.

The empirical analysis is based on three kinds of data sources. First, on official documents and statements by civil society organizations. Document analysis here reconstructs the development of claims and the official responses to them in ASEM chairman's statements. Second, the empirical analysis uses interviews conducted with organizations, trade unions, official ASEM organizers, and EU representatives during ASEM 2010 in Brussels, which were used to describe the specific forms of contentiousness and reasons for selective responsiveness. The final type of data source is participant observations at the AEF (Asia-Europe Foundation) meeting and the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) during the ASEM meeting in Brussels (2010). These observations helped provide an in-depth understanding of institutional interactions in a specific situation. The overview of the data sources can be found in the Appendix, Tables 2 and 3.

3 Understanding interregional integration: ASEM actors and institutions

Interregionalism is a relatively new form of international relations between states that has existed since the mid-1980s and which characterizes a widening and deepening of regional relations (Rüland 2010). It is important to understand the character of ASEM as a particular form of interregionalism, because its structure also impacts on interactions with politicized and de-politicized civil society organizations and thus affects how activists are able to construct access and voice from below. Different types of interregionalism have been identified in the literature, types which vary in their degree of institutionalization. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) counts as a “trans-regional” (Rüland 2010)³ form of interregionalism because two regions are interacting based on

3 Other patterns of interregionalism have been characterized as bi-regionalism (interactions within any institutionalization) or hybrid interregionalism (such as strategic partnerships; Rüland 2010: 1272).

multiple mechanisms of coordination but membership is more diffuse and does not fully coincide with the geographical regions and the regional organizations EU and ASEAN (Hwee 2007).

More specifically, ASEM is a rather informal process of dialogue and cooperation between ASEAN countries and representatives of EU member states.⁴ It is supposed to foster closer political, economic, and cultural relations and enhance economic cooperation, trade, investment, and business networking (Maull 2010). It consists of a multi-layered architecture of various dialogues, forums, and levels of exchange (Keva/Gaens 2008).

Its foundation in 1996 is directly linked to Europe's changing strategy towards Asia and China since 1994. International changes since the end of the Cold War, the increasing integration of European states, and Asia's rapid economic growth has led to a major shift in the Asian-European relationship (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006: 16ff.). This was reflected in the European Commission's paper on the "New Strategy towards Asia" (Table 3: COM1), in which the Commission acknowledged the growing economic and therefore political importance of Asia and expressed the need to strengthen and deepen economic relations: "The Union needs as a matter of urgency to strengthen its economic presence in Asia in order to maintain its leading role in the world economy" (Table 3: COM1). European leaders intended to strengthen Europe's presence in Asian markets and its role in the global economy. ASEM was intended to pave the way to having a more dominant role in the Asian region and to act as a counterbalance to the prevalent and more pronounced US presence (Hwee 2007).

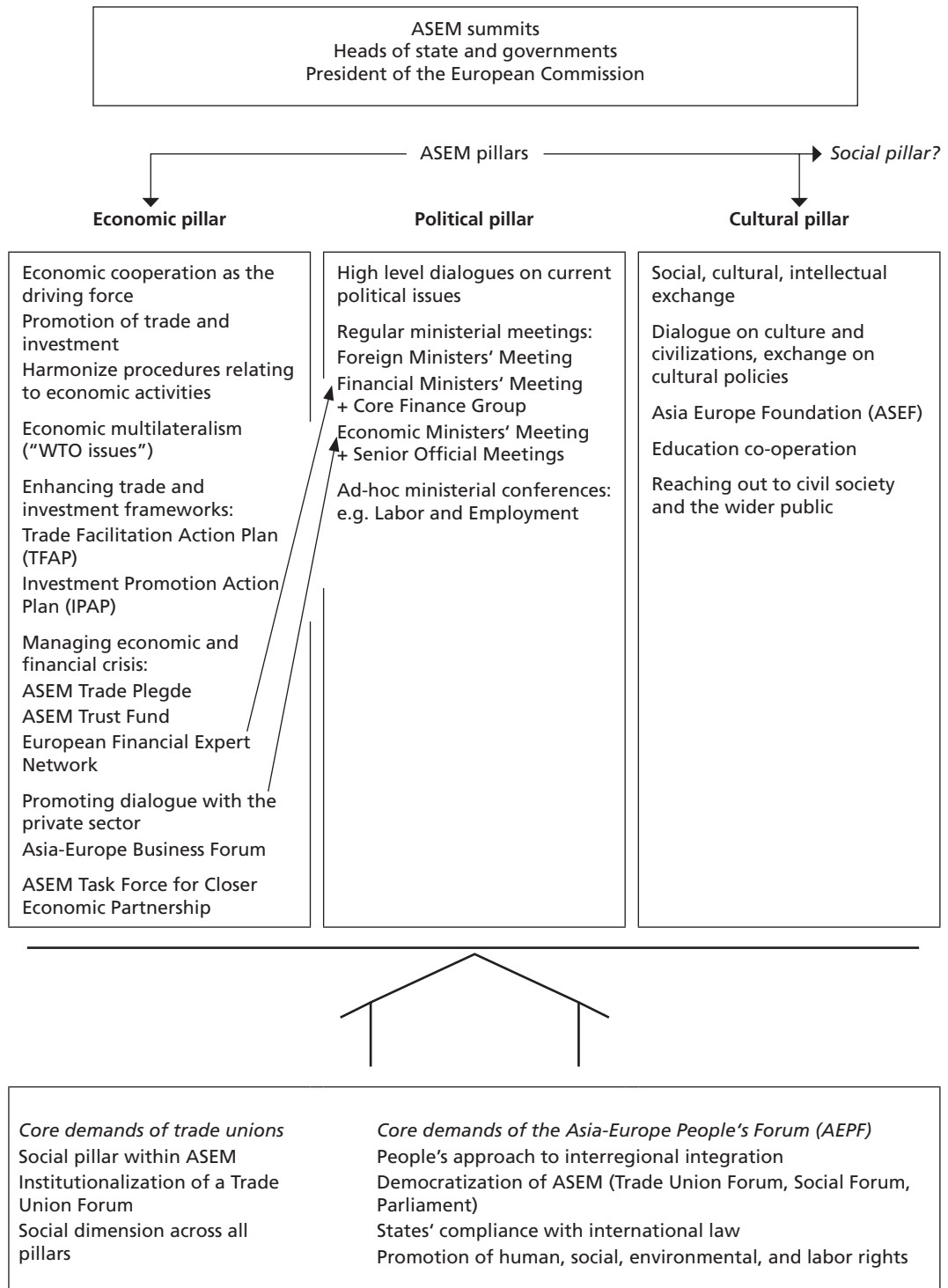
The introduction of the ASEM meeting was also a response to the difficult negotiation process in the existing EU-ASEAN cooperation. Insurmountable differences on human rights issues were a major point of disagreement. An informal setting was considered a way to overcome these differences and to redefine the relationship between the two regions (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006). Such a setting was intended to create mutual understanding and facilitate joint decision-making in other forums such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization.

Head of states decided that ASEM should cover three issue areas – the so-called *economic, political, and cultural pillars*.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the major pillars of the ASEM process and the demands of trade unions and NGOs as of 2010.

4 The original number of members has almost doubled since the foundation of this forum. In 2010 there were 46 countries from Asia and Europe participating (see <www.asem8.be>).

Figure 1 ASEM pillars and the demands of trade unions and NGOs



Source: Own compilation based on various sources in the literature and official documents as quoted in the text.

The *economic pillar* is the most developed and substantial because economic cooperation is considered to be “the driving force behind the whole ASEM process” (ASEM6.1, 2006). Although it does not include a negotiated interregional trade arrangement, it covers various aspects of trade and investment facilitation, the development of the economic infrastructure, and dialogue with the private sector to identify obstacles to trade and investment. This is why the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF)⁵ has been an integral part of this pillar, along with the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP), and the Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP) (Dent 2003; O’Brien 2001). However, business organizations are part of the definition of non-governmental organizations and thereby part of the official definition of civil society (Kohler-Koch, De Bièvre and Maloney 2008), which is part of the EU’s external legitimation politics. The AEBF is the most institutionalized form of civil society participation, granting business permanent and far-reaching access to government officials. They are also the actors who are most in favor of economic integration and the ASEM process. This is why I call them “uncontentious civil society”⁶ (see also Figure 1). The AEBF and its preferential access have been strongly criticized by trade unions and the people’s forum.

Civil society exchange is officially part of the *cultural pillar*, a pillar established by the heads of state in order to facilitate transnational exchange and build trust to underpin economic relations. Business between Asia and Europe means business across very different cultural environments, and it appeared to be essential to build up personal ties and networks at various levels (O’Brien 2001). The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) was founded in 1997. It is ASEM’s only established organization, and is funded by voluntary contributions from ASEM members. Its official mandate is “to promote and catalyze cultural, intellectual, and people-to-people exchanges between Europe and Asia.”⁷ ASEF claims that through it, “civil society concerns are included as a vital component of deliberations of the ASEM.”⁸ This exchange is another vital part of ASEM’s legitimation politics. I refer to the ASEF meetings as “slightly contentious civil society.” The ASEF is part of the official structure, but sometimes even it voices concerns. The People’s Forum is highly critical of the ASEF because it focuses on exchange instead of critically reflecting on the ASEM structure and its business orientation. The following analysis shows that contentious interactions between the two have led to some changes within ASEF.

The political dialogue (*political pillar*) takes place at various political levels, and topics and issues have expanded over time. As will be seen, ASEM’S agenda has evolved gradually, and reflects developments in Europe and Asia, but it also responds to international

5 International business forums being linked to trade negotiations is a common phenomenon in the European Union. For example, the Mercosur-European Business Forum (MEBF) is linked to the trade talks with the Mercosur countries (O’Brien 2001).

6 They are not de-politicized since they are strongly engaged in shaping transnational politics through their recommendations and lobbying activities. In a way, they are also not uncontentious as for them, economic integration cannot be fast enough.

7 See <www.aseminfboard.org/working-method.html> (About ASEM, Pillars).

8 See <www.asef.org/index.php/about/history>.

developments such as the War on Terror or the financial crisis. Since 2006, labor rights and social standards have become part of the ASEM agenda which found its expression in the ASEM labor and employment ministerial conference. Ministerial conferences are not as institutionalized as the regular ministerial meetings. They are ad-hoc meetings, addressing topics of current concern. Nevertheless, there have been three meetings since 2006, something that suggests the continuous relevance of these issues.

Trade unions and politicized civil society have not become an official part of the infrastructure. These transnational activist networks have been organizing a counter-event, a transnational opposition presenting their alternative “People’s Vision” (Table 3: AEPF2a) to interregional integration at counter-forums to the official ASEM summits, the Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF) and the Trade Union Forum.

The following section traces the development of ASEM and particularly to its changing relationship to activists’ organizations including trade unions and critical advocacy organizations. For each summit, I reconstruct the major demands of activists, their voices, forms of access, and official responses.

4 Transnational opposition and the changing structure and agenda of ASEM

ASEM 1 (1996)

The first ASEM meeting took place in Bangkok in 1996. Participants were the ASEAN⁹ countries plus China, Singapore, Japan, the European member states, and the EU Commission (ASEM1). It is important to understand the earlier settings because the first meetings laid the groundwork for future developments. Even before the first meeting, Asian countries were concerned about European states bringing labor and human rights onto the agenda, which some countries – particularly China – refused to discuss. But the Europeans were also unwilling to jeopardize the renewed dialogue between the regions by bringing up delicate issues since they had already experienced major discrepancies in the EU-ASEAN cooperation (Loewen 2008). Economic interests dominated on both sides: Asian governments were interested in counterbalancing the weight of US and Japanese trade and investment in their countries, while the EU hoped to develop ties with a large, fast-growing region. Neither side wanted to jeopardize the development of economic relations over discrepancies and conflicts regarding human rights or labor rights. Instead, all topics with conflict potential were outsourced to informal discussions in a “track two” level in order to prevent clashes at the level of state officials

9 ASEAN member states therefore play an important role in the ASEM process. This is why interviewees sometimes refer to ASEAN when they talk about the Asian side of ASEM in contrast to ASEM as a whole.

and heads of government (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006). During the first meeting, the aims of ASEM were set to create a “new comprehensive Asia-Europe Partnership for Greater Growth”: “Such a partnership should be based on the common commitment to market economy, open multilateral trading system, non-discriminatory liberalization, and open regionalism” (Chairman’s Statement, ASEM1).

One organizer of the ASEM meeting in Brussels and member of an European think tank summarizes the intentions in the following way: “ASEM is business driven, economics driven, it was very clear that the leaders wanted very much to create a cooperation between industry, business, and trade” (PD54). This orientation to economic cooperation is also reflected in the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF), which was launched in Paris in October 1996 as a follow-up to the first summit. It should “consider the appropriate modalities for fostering greater cooperation between the business and private sectors of the two regions” (Chairman’s Statement, ASEM1). AEBF members became part of the joint government and private sector group participating in the development of a shared Investment Promotion Action Plan (IPAP). Over time, AEBF has expanded its role in organizing business networking across both regions and in the formulation of policy recommendations (Gains 2008: 35ff.)

While business and business associations have become part of the official ASEM structure, other civil society organizations had to organize themselves from the outside. Unions organized a Trade Union Forum, and critical NGOs organized the Asia-Europe People’s Forum (AEPF), in which trade union representatives from various Asian and European countries participated. The Trade Union Forum was organized by major international union confederations – the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) together with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the ICFTU Asian and Pacific Regional Organization (ICFTU-APRO) – and foundations closely linked to the labor movement, such as the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. For trade unions, economic integration is inherently an important issue to which they needed to respond. In sum, their aims were threefold: a *substantial goal* to influence the ASEM agenda to establish a social agenda; a *procedural goal* to gain similar acceptance in the ASEM framework to that of business representatives; and a *movement internal goal* to deepen the exchange between Asia and Europe at the union level (see ASEM_unions1-5 and ASEM_unions8). In short, unions aimed at balancing the trade and investment agenda and at strengthening the voice of labor in this interregional process.

Other activist organizations in Europe and Asia have not yet formulated shared goals and issues. The first Asia-Europe People’s Conference in 1996 was organized by a transnational network consisting of NGOs such as Focus on the Global South, the Transnational Institute, and the Asia House, in response to the exclusion of civil societal interests from the ASEM process (for an overview and analysis of the first AEPF meetings see also Gilson 2005b; Richards 1999). They brought together 400 organizations and individuals to discuss the topic “Beyond geopolitics and geo-economics: Towards a new relationship between Asia and Europe” (Table 3: AEPF1-8). The issues were pluralistic,

reflecting the diversity of the organizations participating in the meeting. The major frameworks of the goals referred to a people-centered approach to social and economic relations between these two regions, democracy and human rights, sustainable development, peace and security. Afterwards, the Transnational Institute and Focus on the Global South published a book on the major issues and positions of this first meeting (Brennan/Heijman/Vervest 1997). They stated that

The participants of the NGO conference were of the view that by centering relations almost exclusively on economic considerations, ASEM is primarily serving the narrow interests of dominant elites in the two regions. It is in this context that the participants sought to put forward an alternative vision of Asia-Europe relations that would be people-centered, socially just, economically equitable, ecologically sustainable and politically participatory. (Brennan/Heijman/Vervest 1997: Introduction)

The first meeting was aimed at networking and exploring issues of common concern among NGOs from these regions.

There was no interaction with the official ASEM delegates during that first meeting. Gilson found that summit leaders were very concerned and suspicious about the counter-summit, and the non-democratic countries in particular sent observers to spy on the participants (Gilson 2005a).¹⁰ As a result of this conference, the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) was established as a loose network of Asian and European organizations such as the Transnational Institute (Netherlands), Focus on the Global South (Thailand), the Asia-House (Germany), and the Institute for Popular Democracy (Indonesia). These organizations form the basis for an ongoing counter-forum so that the idea of a counter-forum was realized at an interregional level long before the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001.

ASEM 2 (1998)

The second summit took place in London in 1998 (ASEM2). The Asian economic crisis of 1998 dominated the meeting. But it also foreshadowed the WTO meeting in Seattle in 1999. The discrepancies between Europe and Asia on matters of trade and labor became apparent. While European states intended to include labor standards in the WTO framework, the Asian countries refused this proposition. No agreement could be reached on the matter within the ASEM dialogues (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006: 100).

10 Participants in the ASEM 2010 told me that this practice of state observers (particularly from China and Vietnam) continued throughout the meetings, checking and controlling participating organizations from their countries.

The Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) used the summit as an opportunity for transnational exchange and to formulate demands to reform and democratize the content and structure of ASEM. Roughly 150 organizations participated in the counter-forum and produced a joint statement "People's Vision: Towards a more Just, Equal and Sustainable World" (Table 3: AEPF1-8), in which they outlined their idea of a more people-centered approach to interregional integration.¹¹ It also includes specific reform suggestions for the Investment Promotion Action Plan (IFAP), the Trade Facilitation Action Plan (TFAP), and the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF): for example, the proposition to incorporate international standards into the trade and investment plans and to explore "ways to regulate global capital markets" (Table 3: AEPF2a). In summary, the counter-forum concluded that "it is unacceptable to divorce discussions on economic cooperation and democracy and human rights" (Table 3: AEPF1-8). Trade unions met in parallel to the NGOs. The trade union statement also recommended regulations for the financial sector and the strengthening of social policies in the wake of the Asian economic crisis (ITUC 2008: 16–93).

The second ASEM showed some very basic forms of responsiveness towards transnational activism: the European Commission as well as ministers from the UK government took notice of these events, and both forums were allowed to present their demands and statements to delegates. The UK Foreign Secretary showed some responsiveness to the demands of the trade unions – e.g., agreeing upon the importance of the inclusion of social elements and the involvement of unions within ASEM. However, these issues did not enter the official statement (ITUC 2008).

ASEM 3 (2000)

The recognition of the AEPF was increased to some extent during the next summit in Seoul in 2000. For example, the South Korean government supported the People's Forum by sponsoring roughly 40 percent of the funding (Gilson 2005a). This time more issues were discussed, including topics such as labor, trade, women's rights, agriculture, peace, security, environmental issues, and spirituality (Table 3: AEPF1-8). For the first time, trade unions laid out a more detailed plan to include a social pillar in ASEM. The trade union summit adopted the ICFTU/ETUC/APRO statement "Charting a Social Direction to ASEM" (ASEM_unions1). The statement called for the inclusion of social and employment issues in the ASEM agenda, the restructuring of the business forum, and the establishment of a social pillar of ASEM with regular consultations with trade unions (ASEM_unions1, p. 16/95). For the second time, delegates from the host country visited the AEPF to listen to their concerns. This practice brought about a new

11 More specifically, the document includes appeals to the heads of state to promote economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights in line with international human rights and humanitarian law and to enable the active participation of civil society organizations in the ASEM process.

and slight change to the official routines. The European Commission welcomed such informal exchange and proposed in 2001 that such meetings and exchanges between the AEPF and senior officials should take place regularly (ASEM_EC). In the following years, other governmental representatives from the summit's hosting country followed this practice. However, the concrete form of this very informal means of access was also very much shaped by the host country organizing the official meeting and its willingness to engage with trade unions and a critical civil society.

None of the core demands entered the final ASEM statement (ASEM3, 2000). Yet there was an opening to some issues which were also discussed at the AEPF, such as that of human rights, which were included in the chairman's statement. In addition, the chairman's statement expressed the will to promote cooperation on social and cultural issues. This mainly covered cultural exchange – e.g., between students and universities as organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). However, this congruence of single issues can hardly be explained by the presence of outside mobilization alone. Human rights issues have a long and much debated history in EU foreign affairs. And as Asian countries became increasingly interested in the European market, they realized that some concessions had to be made to avoid another stalemate such as that in the EU-ASEAN cooperation (Loewen 2008: 21). In addition, legitimacy concerns for governance beyond the nation state had become a more pressing concern. In the case of ASEM, this led to a stronger appreciation of civil society, but only of a particular kind: non-contentious organizations which are promoted and sponsored by the Asia-Europe Foundation.

ASEM 4 (2002)

Prior to the next summit in 2002 in Copenhagen (ASEM4), the German-Chinese relationship became an important driver for an initiative which drew on some suggestions made by trade unions and the AEPF. Specifically, both countries proposed the introduction of a social pillar into the ASEM process and the institutionalization of a meeting between labor and social ministers. This initiative was linked to the change in Germany's government in 1998, from the conservatives to the Social Democrats under Chancellor Schröder, which raised the German government's international commitment to the ILO joint report "A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All" (Deworetzki 2009: 25). This ILO report became an important frame of reference for the German government, and was picked up in particular by the new German labor minister, Walter Riester, who was a former representative of Germany's biggest union, IG Metall. In contrast to the situation at the European level, German unions – the DGB in particular – had direct contacts to the labor ministry which they used to lobby for the social pillar in ASEM. In addition, the trade unions and the People's Forum (AEPF) were active in getting a social pillar included in the ASEM process before and during the summit. The ITUC, together with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, organized the meeting "Towards an ASEM Social Pillar: An Open Dialogue on a Social Dimension of ASEM" (ASEM_unions4) in Bonn

in March 2002, where union representatives from Asia, NGOs, governmental officials, and business discussed the need for a social pillar in ASEM (ASEM_unions4). As a result, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), together with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), and the ICFTU Asian and Pacific Regional Organization (ICFTU-APRO), formulated a joint statement on “Building a Social Pillar for ASEM” (ASEM_unions1).¹² A stronger role of parliaments within ASEM was also suggested. In addition, unions continued to demand the institutionalization of an Asia-Europe Labor Forum with an equal status to the Asia-Europe Business Forum (ASEM_unions1). Unions also proposed an *institutionalized social pillar* within the ASEM structure along with the existing three pillars, and based on the exchange between labor ministers across Europe and Asia (ASEM_unions1).

However, attributing the initiative for a social pillar only to activist mobilization would be exaggerating. According to Deworetzki, German officials rejected the assumption that there was influence from the unions. Instead, they considered the push for a social agenda to be their own initiative (Deworetzki 2009: 31).¹³ In addition, the German initiative would not have been possible without China’s acceptance of the ILO’s decent work agenda (Zajak 2013: Chapter 4). This enabled diplomats to find a common framework on economic growth, safety, and social stability. In 2002, at the summit in Copenhagen (ASEM4), the German and Chinese governments took the initiative and proposed a new exchange between labor ministers of the ASEM countries, who could then formulate ideas for the summits (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006). In the official statement, leaders endorsed an “ASEM Workshop on the Future of Employment and the Quality of Labor” to further explore the advancement of a social pillar (ASEM4).

However, a detailed look at the official ASEM statement reveals that none of the proposed models for a social pillar were picked up. Nevertheless, trade unions evaluated the endorsement of an ASEM labor and employment ministers’ meeting as a development in the right direction, which would have not been possible without the mobilization of trade unions and NGOs (see, for example, ITUC 2008: no. 103; University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006: 118ff.)

As a consequence, trade unions were invited to take part in the informal ASEM seminar “On the Future of Employment and the Quality of Labor” in Berlin in 2004, which was a follow-up to the German-Chinese initiative during the Copenhagen summit. The

12 Several models of how a social dimension can be integrated into ASEM have been discussed among trade unionists and NGOs. AEPF promoted the inclusion of a social dimension across all three existing pillars of ASEM. The social impact of all three pillars would then be evaluated and discussed by a Social Forum, which would take on a consultative function for the ASEM meetings. This would also help to balance the institutionalized and preferential access of business within ASEM (Table 3: AEPF4 2002; also AEPF5 2004).

13 This again highlights the difficulties in evaluating the influence of a certain actors group, as the actors themselves perceive their influences differently.

informal seminar was supposed to be the first step towards the official labor ministers' conference. European and Asian government representatives were invited. Unions, NGOs, business and science were allowed to join on the second day of the conference (ASEM_unions6). In addition, trade unions met with EC representatives in the run-up to the next summit in Hanoi in 2004 to discuss the ICFTU/ETUC/ICFTU-APRO proposal "Creating a Social Partnership in ASEM." The EC representatives did not consider a new pillar (the social pillar) in the ASEM structure or an ASEM Trade Union Forum to be feasible. Instead, the Commission stressed its commitment to organizing consultative meetings with civil society organizations and trade unions (ITUC 2008: 18, no. 105).¹⁴ This shows some increase in terms of access and voice, which could be summarized as informal and sporadic consultation. Yet the goal of a more defined, constructive and established role of critical civil society was not reached.

ASEM 5 (2004)

But despite those initiatives, at the next summit in Hanoi (2004), no decision was made to establish a permanent labor and employment ministers' meeting. The summit was largely dominated by concerns about how to deepen economic relations, which included issues like increased cooperation in areas such as information and communication technology, the knowledge-based economy, energy, transport, tourism, intellectual property rights, and small and medium-sized enterprises (ASEM5). The Asia-Europe People's Forum, hosted by the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO), again reaffirmed their concerns about social inequalities, the need to end the "race to the bottom" between the regions and countries, and the need to democratize the ASEM process by *building stronger participatory democracies* within countries, but also by establishing a *Social Forum* and a *Trade Union Forum* within the ASEM architecture (Table 3, AEPF5b).

In the chairman's statement, there was no reference to the ASEM employment conference in Berlin, nor to increased participatory democracy or a further institutionalization of contacts with trade unions. Only cultural exchange and the "important work" of the Asia-Europe Foundation were noted (ASEM5). The only reference made mentioned that "governmental leaders acknowledged the importance and potentials for Asia-Europe cooperation at all levels in various fields such as social development, labor and employment, education and training, public health, and environment" and agreed to expand cooperation in these issue areas (ASEM5). This indicates at least some responsiveness to the demands of labor advocates and NGOs.

14 The EC itself had organized several workshops and seminars such as the "Asia-Europe Consultative Seminar" in 2003, where the European Commission invited unions, NGOs, and the Asia-Europe Foundation to Brussels to discuss the role of civil society within ASEM (ASEM_unions5).

ASEM 6 (2006)

As a consequence, Germany took the initiative to organize the first meeting of ASEM labor and employment ministers with the title “More and Better Jobs – Working Jointly to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Globalization” in Potsdam in 2006 (PO6). Trade unions had been preparing a statement to the ministers’ meeting and for the next ASEM summit in Helsinki 2006 (“10 years of ASEM: Time to Deliver!”, ASEM_unions2). They called for wanted the establishment of an ASEM dialogue on social and labor issues and supported its further institutionalization. The People’s Forum also welcomed the labor and employment ministers’ meeting as a “first step in recognizing the social dimension” and evaluated it as an outcome of consistent efforts by trade unions and networks such as the AEPF (Table 3: AEPF6a).

During the sixth ASEM summit in Helsinki, heads of state endorsed the recommendations made at the labor and employment ministers’ meeting, including the commitment to integrate dialogue and cooperation on social issues into the highest level of the ASEM structure: “Leaders also recognized the need to strengthen the social dimension of globalization, underlining that productive employment, decent work, the protection of the rights of all workers, and social cohesion are crucial for sustainable socio-economic development” (ASEM6: par. 23). Part of this commitment was a call for the further inclusion of social partners in the ASEM social pillar. These commitments reflected the demands of international labor advocates, who evaluated the outcomes of Helsinki positively: “The reference to the involvement of social partners in further ASEM work, although not defined in specific terms, represents a solid ground for the recognition of unions’ formal status within the ASEM structure” (ITUC 2008: 8, no. 42).

Yet the degree of institutionalization of access for trade unions and activist organizations remained low, and no trade union forum, social forum or social pillar as a fourth pillar within ASEM was established. Moreover, the degree to which trade unions and NGOs have contributed to the slight opening of ASEM to social and labor rights issues and societal participation remains debated. In an evaluation report, the University of Helsinki concludes that

The overall effect of AEPF in the official ASEM process remains limited. It is not included in the decision-making or agenda-setting processes and there are no regular meetings between AEPF and ASEM officials. Some occasional meetings have taken place in the sidelines of ASEM summits, however official participation, especially from Asia, has remained low. (University of Helsinki Network for European Studies 2006: 120)

Yet the barriers between trade unions and the institutional structure of ASEM became increasingly porous as more and more informal and semi-formal means of contact and exchange emerged. The labor ministers’ meetings and other sporadically organized events have become points of access.

For example, in 2008, the first *Social Partners' Forum* was organized by the European Commission in Brussels on June 30th.¹⁵ In addition, parallel to the ministerial meeting, trade unions organized their Trade Union Summit, at which they had the opportunity to discuss their ideas of a social dimension and the inclusion of social partners with labor ministers during an informal consultation. Their calls were reflected at least partially by the final declaration, in which ASEM labor and employment ministers agreed to find “the adequate framework for constructive dialogue with the social partners under the ASEM process” (ASEM_unions7 and ASEM_unions8).

Labor advocates were also invited to lower level dialogues on specific topics. Whether and how such a dialogue includes social partners also depends upon the country where the meetings take place. For example, the three follow-up conferences to the labor ministers' meeting have been organized in Germany (on CSR), in France (on social protection) and in Indonesia. In France and Germany, the social partners were invited: “In Potsdam and in Nice the social partners were quite active and in Nice we had a big panel on the participation of the social partners ... [where] the social partners expressed their position” (PD56).

Invitations to sporadic meetings can be characterized as only a rudimentary and low degree of institutionalization of participation for labor advocates within ASEM. Access remains informal and erratic, as a representative of DG employment explains: “It was a governmental meeting to which the social partners were *invited* and could participate actively. So it's a difference. Not like in the ILO, that you have three *equal partners*” (PD56). This means that participation has not become an institutionalized part of the official structure, but rather that form and intensity of exchange depends to a large extent on the host country's willingness to engage. The same EC representative continues:

Obviously it makes it more difficult to organize such a meeting if the host is an Asian country. This year it is the Netherlands and they are very much committed. There is obviously a political will to do that. It depends who will be the next host. If it is India it is not a problem, because they have quite strong social partners. ... But I think there will be a pressure from the European side to organize such a meeting. And I think, because we have established a tradition, I think it will be possible. And maybe the Asian countries see that in a way it is useful. (PD56)

Asian countries are hesitant to pick up on such practices, as a program executive of ASEM explains: “Where Europe is now more outreaching to civil-society, Asian governments remain very wary of civil society.”

15 About 150 workers' and employers' representatives from 43 European and Asian countries attended the meeting on the topic “How to make globalization a success for all - the social partners' contributions to the ASEM dialogue” (ASEM_unions3).

ASEM 7 (2008)

This change – and the difficulties for Asian governments, in particular for China – became visible during the next summit. The ASEM summit of 2008 took place in Beijing under the theme of “Vision and Action: Towards a Win-Win Solution.” The summit was dominated by the international financial and economic crisis of 2008. Again, a People’s Forum was organized by the Asia-Europe People’s Network and Chinese partner organizations, including mass organizations such as the All-China Environment Federation, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, All-China Women’s Federation and the All-China Youth Federation. These mass organizations are, strictly speaking, not state-independent, but are part of the Chinese state corporatist structure (Unger 2009), already signaling that the state wanted to have at least some control over the event.

Roughly 500 organizations and individuals participated, demanding a people-centered approach to solving the crisis (Table 3: AEPF7a). The Chinese Foreign Ministry was among the sponsors of the event (alongside other Foreign Ministries, the EC and various NGOs), and Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi visited the forum. Nevertheless, several restrictions were put in place: for example, the forum was confined to a specific hotel location far away from the official summit so that participants could be kept under control in one place. Moreover, some organizations were excluded from participating:

Well, I think China was put under a lot of pressure by ASEAN parliaments to hold this civil-society meeting. If I remember correctly, it was held quite far apart from the leaders. There were quite a few restrictions put on that meeting ... They restricted the movement of the activists, I think some people were denied visas – but I mean, it’s a gesture of good will towards ASEAN, you know, China believes very strongly in ASEAN. (PD54)

This example shows that the idea of a people’s forum has been accepted even by non-democratic states – as long as the state puts several control mechanisms in place.

ASEM 8 (2010)

So far, the most intense interactions between governmental officials, the EC, trade unions and civil society organizations took place during the subsequent summit in Brussels in October 2010 (ASEM8). The National Organizing Committee coordinator – the Belgian trade union CNCD-11.11.11. – also had good links to the Belgian government, which facilitated the organization of several informal venues for exchange and discussion with civil society actors. In general, events were coordinated by Belgian organizations, Brussels-based European networks, and the AEPF International Organizing Committee. The topic of the eighth AEPF again included a strong claim for democratization: “Challenging Corporate Power: Building States of Citizens for Citizens” (Table 3: AEPF8b). Other core issues of the AEPF were food sovereignty, climate change, decent

work (including social protection), peace and security, and the preferential access of business in the form of the AEBF (AEFP8c). Roughly 600 civil society organizations from across Asia and Europe came together to discuss these issues.

The dominant topics of ASEM 8 were trade issues, but issues connected to the financial crisis which hit Europe in 2007 and 2008 and ideas of how to overcome it were also discussed. This intention of further deepening economic relations went along with the promise of a people-centered approach. ASEM members stressed that they “aim to increase its visibility and a stronger outreach to civil-society actors” (ASEM8). Again, this development cannot be attributed to the existence of outside mobilization. As in earlier stages, resonance to activist demands has to be understood against the backdrop of international developments and intentions of the ASEM host country. In this case, an increasing interest in civil society beyond the exchange organized by the Asia-Europe Foundation was the result of stronger EC commitment towards societal participation, the need to (re-)gain political legitimacy for international restructuring in the light of the international crisis, and internal developments within Asian countries:

But I think [what can] really transform the debate in Asia is ... internal development. When growth and development really take off as they are doing now, I think trade unions [will] become more influential, more powerful. And also social activists [will] become important. And they [will] make very strong demands [for] changing labor conditions; there are strikes and ... pressure [from] consumer organizations. So I think a great deal of different factors comes into this debate. (PD 54)

In practice, access and responsiveness to participants of the people’s forum (trade unions and NGOs) took the following shape:

The Belgian Prime Minister Yves Leterme visited the AEPF and responded positively: “I am a strong believer of trade unions and social dialogue, more specifically on the role of trade unions in the new economic architecture and in countries of ASEM” (prime minister PO11; see also Table 3: AEPF8a). In addition, the European Commission and the European Parliament invited trade unions and NGOs into EU buildings for two days to discuss topics such as decent work, trade, climate change, the environment, and social protection with a range of general directorates including DG trade, DG employment, DG on Agriculture, EuropeAid, and DG Regional Policy. This was a unique opportunity for the Asian participants in particular to voice their concerns directly to the European Union, and they made extensive use of it (PO13). They demanded a stronger role of the EU in protecting social standards: e.g., through the establishment of complaint procedures and participation channels in trade negotiations for non-European citizens as well. The responses were disappointing to them, since EC representatives rejected stronger interference by the EC in other countries, as the EU could not exert sovereignty in a foreign country (PO13).

Table 1 Overview of demands of trade unions and activist organizations and official responses

ASEM	Issues/demands of activists	Official issues and responses
ASEM1 1996 Bangkok	Networking, explore common issues, idea of an alternative vision of interregional integration	No response Topic: Trade and investment between EU and Asia
ASEM2 1998 London	Formulation of alternative vision: people-centered approach	Ad-hoc access by information: visit of a delegate Issues: Labor standards in WTO; Asia economic crisis
ASEM3 2000 Seoul	Detailed plan on social pillar Consultation status for trade unions and civil society organizations	Access by visit of delegates Topic: Extending promotion on social and cultural issues
ASEM4 2002 Copenhagen	Asia-Europe Labor Forum Institutionalization of an additional social pillar, social forum with consultative function, stronger role of the parliament	Country initiatives: Access to ad-hoc ASEM Workshop on the Future of Employment and the Quality of Labor
ASEM5 2004 Hanoi	Same demands as above Democratize ASEM countries	No institutionalization of labor and employment ministers' meeting Topic: Deepening economic relations in various industries, promoting cultural exchange
ASEM6 2006 Helsinki	Positive evaluation of first steps towards a social dimension	Endorsement of the labor and employment ministers' meeting recommendation
ASEM7 2008 Beijing	Against deregulation, trade liberalization and for more accountability of international corporations and institutions	"Controlled" people orientation Topic: Financial and economic crisis of 2008
ASEM8 2010 Brussels	Creation of participatory channels and a stronger role of the EC to protect social standards internationally	Institutional openness for dialogue with EC institutions. Topic: Overcoming financial crisis; international financial regulation; promise of a people centered approach

Yet despite the openness of the EC, no reference to restructuring ASEM to include a social pillar or the inclusion of trade unions, civil society or the parliament was made in the chairman's statement (ASEM8). This stood in stark contrast to the openness to members of the Asia-Europe Business Forum who had been invited to have breakfast with government leaders of the ASEM countries – which was vigorously criticized by the trade unions and NGOs. Table 1 summarizes the activists' major demands and the official responses. In terms of access and voice, it shows that the boundaries of the official ASEM structure have become porous. Still, opportunities for access have rarely stabilized (only at the very basic level of a visit of a delegate to the AEPF), and remain rather informal and erratic.

A combination of factors seems to be blocking further structural reform to ASEM. These factors include the history and the development of the ASEM as primarily a facilitator of financial and economic integration between the regions, as well as the reluctance on the Asian side towards a more open, unrestrained approach to civil society participation. As one advisor to the parliament explains:

Well, it's not only the EU, the Asian side must also agree. ... I would think that the Asians are less interested and concerned to have civil society put at the same level as the business community. Because in Asia the integration is very much market driven and they do this for business opportunities, not to put people at the centre of their preoccupation. Even the parliamentarians – there will be no representative of all the parliaments that will be invited to address the meeting of the leaders. So the only ones that really have access, and a very big access, is business. (PD57)

But at the same time the EC has been criticized for not pushing harder for reforms: “So Asian members of ASEAN will not push for it [the participation of parliamentarians] for sure, but it seems that in the EU they are not really pushing for it either” (PD57).

5 Conclusion: Fragmented, informal, and erratic democratization through civil society participation

This paper has discussed the interaction between a specific political project of interregional integration and transnational activist organizations. The paper approached the question of democratization through civil society participation from a qualitative process tracing approach, reconstructing attempts to construct access and voice from below. The reconstruction of the events from ASEM 1 to ASEM 8 revealed the following findings.

The people's forum and the trade unions' forum have been important venues for organizing and voicing the concerns of those organizations that are critical of elite-driven interregional economic integration behind closed doors. Over time, several opportunities for accessing and feeding at least some concerns into the official process have emerged. Forms of access include meetings with ASEM delegates, trade unions' meetings with labor and employment ministers, or the organization of conferences and workshops by the EC. Thus, the exchange is rather informal, non-institutionalized, and sporadic depending on the specific situation and the organizers of the ASEM meeting. In addition, access remains unbalanced and exclusive, given that a certain types of non-contentious civil society organizations and businesses continue to have preferential access.

In terms of responsiveness, some of the issues have made it at least into the official ASEM summit statements. Still, most issues – such as demands for a social pillar, more formalized possibilities for participation, and the international rights violations of participating countries – are kept out of the official agenda. In sum, I characterize this development as a fragmented, informal, and erratic form of democratization through civil society participation. *Fragmented*, since there is a bias and control of access to formal structures in favor of non-contentious and business-oriented organizations; *informal*, as there is only a small amount of direct access and routine openness to participation for activist organizations and trade unions; *erratic*, because access continues to depend on the situation and the interests of certain countries or the host of the event.

But how can we explain this particular form of fragmented, informal, and erratic democratization? The article has identified three major factors that help to explain why activists have not been more (but also not less) successful in constructing access and voice from below.

The first factor is the particular history, origins, and shape of the Asia-Europe Meeting, which remains an economic and business-oriented process. Both political and economic elites prefer to leave critical voices out and only talk to those civil society actors who deliver constructive input to interregional integration.

Second are international developments, some of which helped to bring activist agendas onto the table (such as the broader international trade-labor debate and the agreement on core labor rights within the ILO); or the international economic crisis, which on the one hand raised the need for legitimizing economic integration, while at the same time strengthening economic aspects over social concerns.

The third factor is domestic developments inside individual countries, in particular Asian countries and China, where interest in dealing with the negative consequences of global economic integration rose (e.g., by introducing regulation and labor rights), while at the same time, uncontrolled and unrestricted participation remained blocked. Loewen, for example, stressed that informal meetings and non-binding agreements are “the ASEAN way” of cooperating (Loewen 2008: 8). The decision about who gets access and what demands are allowed to enter the agenda also depends on internal political developments and the regimes’ perspectives with regard to what policies will increase system stability.

In sum, the article contributes to debates about mechanisms and processes of democratization (Eder/Trenz 2007), focusing in particular on mechanisms for the construction of access and voice from below – and thus on the role and functioning of democratic participation in complex systems of governance – in the following ways. First, if we want to understand whether global democracy can also be constructed from below, it is important to analyze interactions between civil society, activists, and global governance arrangements and to be sensitive to the various facets and shapes of access and responsiveness. This cannot be done through more quantitative studies, which cannot conceptualize the fluidity and instability of democratic criteria. Second, the article has not only reconstructed a certain process, but also explains why this process took a certain shape. It explains why certain attempts to construct access and voice from below become blocked or modified. This last aspect also points to some of the limitations of this study: there are additional ways in which activism can contribute to democratization – for example, creating a transnational public sphere by publicly discussing issues which are neglected from the official agenda. Counter-forums are also important for networking and exchanging ideas and understandings of democracy, which could contribute to triggering democratization processes within countries.

Appendix

Table 2 Data sources

Type of data	Data source
Official documents	Official ASEM summit statements ITUC/ETUC documents AEPF statements List (see Table 3)
Participant observations	ASEM-CSR-Conference: "Shaping CSR – Opportunities for the Well-Being of the ASEM Workforce" (PO6) Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) (PO11) Asia-Europe Foundation meeting (ASEF) (PO12) EU institutions' dialogue with AEPF (PO13)
Interviews	International Trade Union Confederation (PD58) EU DG employment (PD56) EU-China Civil Society Forum (PD55) Analyst for the Directorate General for External Affairs of the European Parliament (PD57) Program Executive ASEM (PD54)

Table 3 ASEM Documents

ASEM1	Bangkok Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	1996
ASEM2	London Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	1998
ASEM3	Seoul Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	2000
ASEM4	Copenhagen Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	2002
ASEM5	Hanoi Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/content/documents/chairmans_statement_asem_5.pdf	2004
ASEM6	Helsinki Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	2006
ASEM6.1	ASEM in brief	http://www.ase6.fi/WHAT_IS_ASEM/ASEM_IN_BRIEF/INDEX.HTM	2006
ASEM7	Beijing Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/Documents/Summit/	2008
ASEM8	Brussels Summit	http://www.aseinfoboard.org/content/documents/ASEM_8_Chair%27s_Statement_0.pdf	2010
ASEM9_CSR	High Level ASEM – CSR Conference 2009 “Gestaltung von CSR – Chancen zum Wohle der Arbeitnehmer in den ASEM-Ländern” Ministry of Labor	http://www.csr-in-deutschland.de/portal/generator/7332/property=data/09_03_25__ASEM_Conference_Programme.pdf	Mar 2009
ASEM10_labor	First ASEM Labor and Employment Ministers Conference Chairman’s Conclusions	http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/asem/conference/labour0318.pdf	Sep 2006
AEPF1-8	Asia-Europe People’s Forum Declarations 1-9	http://www.tni.org/archives/aepf	1996–2010
AEPF2a	A People’s Vision towards a more Just, Equal and Sustainable World Final draft	http://www.tni.org/archives/asem-watch_asem24	Feb 1998
AEPF4a	Integrating a Social Dimension in the ASEM Process Towards a Social Forum	http://www.asienhaus.de/public/archiv/socforum_draft_3_02.htm	Mar 2002
AEPF5a	Für eine soziale Dimension im asiatisch-europäischen Dialog: Herausforderungen vor dem fünften ASEM-Gipfel in Hanoi	http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/02592.pdf	2004
AEPF5b	ASEM5 People’s Forum	http://www.tni.org/article/asem5-peoples-forum-1	Sep 2004
AEPF6a	People’s Vision: Building Solidarity Across Asia and Europe	http://www.tni.org/archives/asem-helsinki_final-declaration	Sep 2006
AEPF7a	7 th Asia-Europe People’s Forum. Final Declaration	http://www.cnpe.org.cn/aepf7_blue2.0/en/Column.asp?ColumnId=52	Oct 2008
AEPF8a	Belgian prime minister supports NGOs’ call for decent work	http://www.aepf.info/news/statements/124-belgian-prime-minister-supports-ngos-call-for-decent-work-.html	Oct 2010

AEPF8b	Key issues on the table at the 8th Asia-Europe People's Forum	http://www.aepf.info/aepf-8/83-resources/130-key-issues-on-the-table-at-the-8th-asia-europe-peoples-forum.html	Oct 2010
AEPF8c	Recommendations to ASEM8 from the Asia-Europe People's Forum	http://www.aepf.info/news/articles/141-recommendations-to-asem8-from-the-asia-europe-peoples-forum.html	Oct 2010
ASEM_unions1	ICFTU/ETUC/ICFTU-APRO, 2002: Building a Social Pillar for ASEM	http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/statementtoasem2002.pdf	Sep 2002
ASEM_unions2	ETUC: Trade Union Summit: 10 years of ASEM - time to deliver!	http://www.etuc.org/a/2786	Sep 2006
ASEM_unions3	1st ASEM Social Partners' Forum "How to make globalisation a success for all? Social partner contributions to the ASEM process"	http://www.fes.de/aktuell/focus_gute_arbeit/2/docs/42_ASEM_Social_Forum_Programm.pdf	Jun 2008
ASEM_unions4	Towards an ASEM Social Pillar An Open Dialogue on a Social Dimension of ASEM An Asia-Europe Trade Union Dialogue	http://www.tni.org/archives/acts_bonn	Mar 2002
ASEM_unions5	Asia-Europe Consultative Seminar with Civil Society	http://www.eias.org/conferences/euasiacivilsoc1711/programme.pdf	Nov 2003
ASEM_ASEF	Connecting Civil Society: The Barcelona Report An Informal Consultation Featuring Recommendation from Civil Society on Asia-Europe Relations Addressed to the ASEM Leaders	http://www.asef.org/index.php/pubs/asef-publications/1826-connecting-civil-society-the-barcelona-report	Jun 2004
ASEM_unions6	ASEM Conference on Employment. The future of employment in Asia and Europe.	http://www.asienhaus.de/public/archiv/ASEM_Employment_letztes.pdf	Jun 2004
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