

**APPAP WORKING GROUP ON PREVENTION OF HATE  
SPEECH AND INCITEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**



The Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P), in cooperation with The Habibie Centre, organised the meeting of the Asia Pacific Partnership for Atrocity Prevention (APPAP) Working Group on Prevention of Hate Speech and Incitement in Jakarta on 12 and 13 March, 2019. Some twenty local and international participants across various sectors—government, media, civil society groups, and academia—attended the meeting. In their opening remarks, Dr Noel Morada and Dr Rudi Sukandar both highlighted the increase in the use of hate speech in the region by various groups and facilitated mainly through the use of social media. In Indonesia, for example, it was noted that there was an increase in the use of hate speech as part of indiscriminate political and religious targeting in the run-up to the local and national elections this year.

Participants in the two-day meeting focused on the following: 1) domestic and regional contexts of situations of concern related to hate speech and incitement; 2) priority issues that should be addressed through various efforts and initiatives of stakeholders; 3) concrete ideas, action plans, and initiatives that could be supported in the next 12-18 months following the meeting.

Participants discussed examples or cases of hate speech and incitement in Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines. They also discussed potential grassroots pilot projects that would serve as good models for implementing action plans/strategies in preventing hate speech and incitement in the region.

**Key Issues and Challenges**

In the first session, the participants focused on existing challenges in dealing with hate speech and incitement. In democratic states, the open political space that guarantees freedom of expression and press freedom can be abused by certain groups in order to promote their extremist ideas or radical claims through fake news. In the context of Southeast Asia, this poses a serious challenge especially for states that are undergoing delicate democratic transitions (e.g., Myanmar) or in societies where there are ongoing fragile peace processes (e.g., Myanmar and the Philippines).

*Role of Political Leaders, Women, and Educational Institutions*

Participants pointed to the important role of political leaders and government officials in preventing hate speech even as it was also acknowledged that, in some cases, they could also be perpetrators or enablers of incitement to violence in public statements in the traditional and social media. It was acknowledged that educational institutions play critical role in combating hate speech through teaching of values such as respect and tolerance for diversity of ideas, beliefs, and faiths or religions. However, it is also important to recognise that these values must be learned early on at home and communities, and should not be limited to schools or educational institutions.

### *Defining Hate Speech*

A fundamental issue with regard to preventing hate speech and incitement is how to define what constitutes hate speech. Participants agreed that it is important to have a consensus on its definition and an understanding of the contexts in which hate speech is used. This would then help in building public awareness or knowledge about how it is related to prevention of atrocities, including incitement. As well, a consensus on the definition would contribute to developing the relevant toolkits for prevention of hate speech and incitement. A useful starting point are materials and publications by advocacy groups such as Article 19, which could be examined further by members of the Working Group for a deeper understanding of hate speech and incitement, as well as the domestic and regional contexts where they happen.

For those engaged in humanitarian work, defining hate speech and locating it are quite difficult, and thus make the task of preventing its spread rather challenging. Often, humanitarian workers are left to deal with the consequences of hate speech and incitement; i.e., humanitarian crisis situations in the aftermath of violence or atrocities where they are expected to provide aid or humanitarian assistance. They are also not prepared to deal with hate speech or incitement in camps where prejudice and intolerance against refugees (e.g., Rohingya people in Cox's Bazaar) are also increasing and triggered by feuds among religious leaders in communities.

### *Impact of Social Media*

Participants agreed that the use of social media in itself could be a two-edged sword: on the one hand, it could be a platform for spreading hate speech and incitement; on the other hand, it could also be useful in preventing the same. It is therefore critical to also examine the context, nature, or psychology of individuals or groups as perpetrators of hate speech and incitement, as well as those who are being targeted through the social media. As well, the impacts and consequences of the use hate speech on individuals, groups, or communities must also be examined in order to develop relevant policies and strategies in combating its use.

### **Combating Hate Speech**

Participants in the Working Group also discussed ongoing efforts to counter hate speech across the region, such as the importance of interfaith dialogue amongst different religious communities and minority indigenous groups who adhere to other spiritual beliefs. It was noted that in some Southeast Asian countries, various actors and stakeholders working towards the prevention of hate speech have adopted a number of strategies and programs. This includes education and training, dialogues, awareness-raising through social media, interactive youth programs, policy-relevant research, and advocacies for promoting religious freedom. In Indonesia, for example, some human rights advocates have been engaging with law enforcement agencies as part of combatting hate speech under existing cybercrime laws. Some groups are utilising existing mechanisms of national human rights institutions to educate and promote awareness about the responsible exercise of freedom of speech and respect for religious freedom and diversity.

### *Engaging Parliamentarians and Civil Society Groups*

In the context of ASEAN, combating hate speech may be pursued through various mechanisms and initiatives. For example, the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) created a Task Force on Freedom of Belief, which attempts to mainstream protection of freedom of belief and respect for religious differences or diversity in the region. Engaging lawmakers and encouraging national parliaments to pass laws that protect freedom of belief could contribute significantly to preventing hate speech and incitement against minority groups. The ASEAN People's Forum (APF)—a network of

civil society groups—are also contributing towards combating hate speech and incitement through their human rights advocacies and programs.

### *Engaging ASEAN*

Within ASEAN itself, there are various mechanisms that could promote the prevention of hate speech and incitement. For example, the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) could take the lead in building public awareness about the dangers of hate speech and incitement as part of implementing the ASEAN Declaration on the Culture of Prevention. The Declaration, which was adopted by ASEAN leaders in 2017 under the ASEAN Social Cultural Community pillar, encourages all member states to support efforts in promoting tolerance and diversity in the region through public seminars, education and training, and policy-relevant research. It also recognises the dangers of the rise of extremism, the spread of fake news, and abuse of social media platforms to peace and social harmony in the region. The ASEAN Communication Master Plan 2018-2025 can be a good entry point for promoting awareness about hate speech and incitement. Specifically, ASEAN member states are expected to use this plan as a platform to discuss about communication issue where combating hate speech is also an important element.

ASEAN could also engage with relevant UN agencies and offices in promoting the Culture of Prevention by deepening knowledge and understanding of the relevant risk factors related to hate speech and incitement, and in the larger context of atrocities prevention. The UN OSAPG, for example, has published the *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention*, the *Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Other Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes*, and more recently the *UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech*, which may be useful for ASEAN mechanisms to study and incorporate in implementing the ASEAN Declaration on Culture of Prevention.

### *Engaging Youth Sector*

The importance of focusing on the youth as a priority area in preventing hate speech and incitement in the region cannot be overstated. As the most technologically savvy group, young people are the main users or consumers of information in the internet and social media. They can also be the most vulnerable sector to false information or fake news, and ideas, ideology, or beliefs by groups that use hate speech in espousing extremist views. Hence, developing youth programs and activities that help young people develop values of tolerance and respect for diversity are key to combating hate speech. In Indonesia, the Community Empowerment in Raising Inclusivity and Trust through Technology Application (CERITA) program is one example of engaging the youth sector through interactive education and socialization among young people from various communities, religions, and orientations. At the regional level, the ASEAN Youth Network could also be engaged in promoting respect and tolerance for diversity and prevention of hate speech and incitement.

### *Other Suggestions*

Participants in the meeting also explored other ideas in preventing hate speech and incitement. This includes: 1) exploring the appointment of a regional rapporteur on hate speech and incitement (e.g., ASEAN, UN) who will be given the mandate to report on cases, situations, or events that contribute to the spread of hate speech and/or incitement to violence, and engage with relevant national, regional (ASEAN), or international (UN) agencies, mechanisms, or stakeholders in combating hate speech and related situations of concern; 2) engaging with traditional media (journalists and media practitioners) and social media influencers on the prevention of hate speech and incitement, atrocity prevention,

and human protection through education and training, public seminars, and developing media kits; and 3) facilitating national and regional dialogues through the APPAP Working Group on Hate Speech and Incitement as part of building awareness about R2P, atrocities prevention, and human protection.

### **Prevention of Hate Speech and Incitement: Some Ideas**

Participants in the meeting agreed that increasing public awareness through education and training is critical for prevention of hate speech and incitement in the region. Among the key sectors that should be given priority in this regard are the youth and media practitioners. It is also important to consider supporting the relevant work and projects of ASEAN mechanisms related to combating hate speech and incitement, which could strengthen efforts in realising the culture of prevention in the region.

#### *Engaging the Youth Sector*

A number of initiatives and ongoing projects that engage the youth sector in this area were identified. This include:

- Regional training “gameshops” in Malaysia, which aim to develop democratic values among young people (e.g., “Idola Demokrasi” or followers of democracy) and encourage school activism (“sekolah aktivisme”) that build awareness about issues, including hate speech.
- CERITA project undertaken by The Habibie Center, which helps build awareness and acceptance among the youth in Indonesia about the importance of respecting and embracing diversity, as well as capacity building through story-telling and dialogue facilitation in providing positive narratives to counter hate speech and intolerance.

#### *Engaging the Media Sector*

Engaging the media sector is also critical in the prevention of hate speech and incitement. The Working Group participants agreed that capacity building for editors and journalists through education and training seminars may be conducted to develop awareness and sensitivity to racial or religious tensions or social schisms when reporting on events or political issues. This is particularly important especially for journalists who work at the community-level and cover conflict-affected areas. It was also suggested that the Working Group could initially engage with editors of media or news outlets, including the regional Southeast Asia Press Alliance on atrocity prevention and hate speech through dialogue and public seminars. Capacity building for the media sector may also be pursued in collaboration with civil society groups and other critical stakeholders in the region who are working on the prevention of hate speech and incitement, including the spread of fake news in social media.

#### *Supporting the Work of ASEAN Mechanisms*

Participants in the meeting also recognised the importance of engaging with ASEAN and its mechanisms in the prevention of hate speech and incitement. For example, in mainstreaming the Culture of Prevention in the region, the Working Group could pursue dialogue and participate in activities related to protection of freedom of speech/expression with the AICHR as part of its mandate to promote human rights. As well, it could support some projects of AIPR such as conducting research on hate speech and incitement and contributing to the development of a regional pool of experts in this area. It is important to also understand how ASEAN as a regional organisation works—i.e., through consensus principle—and to patiently engage with member states who need to be convinced that there is no danger to adhering and committing to universal norms related to atrocities prevention, which are relevant to countering hate speech and incitement to violence.