Asia holds tax justice assembly; Asian Tax Justice Network formed

Uniting on a commitment to work and promote common advocacies and campaigns on tax and fiscal justice

Last September 1-2, 58 participants from social movements, people’s organizations, coalitions, unions and NGOs from different Asian regions formed the Asia Tax Justice Network. The pioneering move was inspired by a commitment to work and promote common advocacies and campaigns on tax and fiscal justice.

The East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia subregions were represented by organizations from Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, China and Australia.

JSAPMDD led in organizing the assembly with co-convenors that included Economic Reforms (AER), Bantay Kita, EquityBD, Freedom from Debt Coalition (FDC), Indian Social Action Forum (INSAF), Koalisi Anti-Utang (KAU), Prakarsa Indonesia, Praxis India, Public Services International (PSI) Asia/Pacific, Monitoring Sustainability of Globalization (MSN), Tax Justice Network Australia, Revenue Watch, Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), LDC Watch.

Overall, the two-day event succeeded in achieving the following objectives:

1. Establishing a common framework and understanding of Tax and Fiscal Justice to fight inequality and ensure financing for quality public services and sustainable development

2. Providing an opportunity for sharing information on their work and plans and exploring coordination and joint initiatives
The Asian Tax Justice Network
“...a space for exchanging information, news, materials on tax and fiscal justice” and “a vehicle for exploring and pursuing joint initiatives and coordinated actions among members for promoting common positions and calls”.

3. Catalyzing interest in developing country advocacy and campaign initiatives aimed at transforming tax policies towards more progressive and transparent tax systems.

4. Looking at ways of increasing and promoting Asian participation in global tax justice campaign efforts, especially on transnational companies and international investments.

5. Establishing an Asian Tax Justice network, including setting up structures and agreeing on processes for exchanges, coordination and facilitation of joint initiatives. The network will thereafter seek to affiliate with the Global Alliance for Tax Justice.

Among the major unities reached during the assembly was the setting up of the Asian Tax Justice Network. The new formation describes itself as: “an alliance of movements, peoples networks of organizations, NGOs and constituencies in Asia and the Pacific including, women and LGBT, indigenous peoples, workers, farmers, pastoralists, fishers, global union federations, trade unions, urban and rural poor, children and youth, migrants, refugees, stateless, unemployed, landless, seniors and the differently-abled”.

It is “open to movements, peoples organizations, NGOs and networks who are working on tax and fiscal justice, or are interested in starting initiatives on tax and fiscal justice” and is committed to “work together to promote common advocacies and campaigns on tax and fiscal justice”.

The Asian Tax Justice Network further united on its purpose, which include providing “a space for exchanging information, news, materials on tax and fiscal justice” and “a vehicle for exploring and pursuing joint initiatives and coordinated actions among members for promoting common positions and calls”.

Among the range of initiatives that the network may be involved in are advocacy and campaign activities and actions, publishing and circulating statements and resource materials, undertaking capacity building activities, participating in global initiatives and events.

The assembly also agreed that Jubilee South Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development and Public Services International - Asia Pacific will serve as overall coordinators for two years.

Having decided that the Asian Tax Justice Network will join the Global Alliance for Tax Justice, the assembly upheld that the two coordinating organizations represent the region in GATJ.
Strengthening consensus on tax justice in Asia

During the first day of the two-day assembly, the participants updated each other with a Sharing of priority Issues and major initiatives. This was followed by a panel discussion on affirming and deepening of consensus on perspectives and framework on Tax Justice and Fiscal Justice. There were short inputs given by MP Charles Santiago (MSN), Sujita Shakya (ANWA), Dani Setiawan (KAU) and Charles Fung (Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions/HKCTU).

There were many areas of convergence particularly on who should be taxed, how taxes should be collected and where taxes should be used. Taxes should be a tool for the equitable redistribution of assets and resources. There should be transparency, accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and competence of tax officials in tax policies and administration. Tax revenues should be channeled into providing quality public services, empowering the poor, shaping national development away from the neoliberal paradigm, shifting towards systems of energy and trade based on equity and sustainable development goals and protecting the environment. Countries should be encouraged to exercise their sovereignty vis-à-vis taxation and not be saddled to debt dependence.

Dereje Alemayehu, chair of the Global Alliance on Tax Justice gave an overview of tax in an international context, and focused on illicit financial flows, secrecy jurisdictions and the culpability of transnational corporations. Asia continues to register the highest outflows, caused in large part by the tax evasion and tax avoidance practices of TNCS. He emphasized that tax policy is essentially a national level policy concern. It is a tool whose use is determined by the sovereign in power.

Thus the work of GATJ is to support the work at the regional levels because international policies that affect national level tax issues. Nevertheless, we must recognize that tax dodging (both tax avoidance and evasion) is not a single country phenomenon; it is a universal issue that cannot be addressed effectively without international cooperation. It is therefore important for GATJ to focus as well on global players (e.g., TNCs, multilateral institutions and processes such as the OECD, G20, United Nations Tax committee). Questioning their legitimacy and exposing flaws are made possible by engaging their processes.

The Asian Tax Justice Network set up its basic structure, composed of the Coordinating Committee, subregional caucuses and the general assembly. The assembly selected by consensus the following members of the Coordinating Committee representing the different subregions present and regional networks who will be serving a two-year term from 2014-2016:

- Southeast Asia - Prakarsa Indonesia and Action Aid Vietnam
- East Asia – Aoba Hiroo (interim)
- South Asia – Indian Social Action Forum, EquityBD and All Nepali Women Association
- Australia and Oceania – Tax Justice Network Australia
- Regional networks – South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) and International Transport Workers’ Federation Asia

Overall Coordinators:

- Public Services International - Asia Pacific
- Jubilee South Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development