

**ASIA DIRECTORS’ RETREAT: MEETING REPORT**

**Double Tree Hotel, London, UK**

**Friday 23rd May, 2014**

**2:00 – 5:30 pm**

**Attendants: (in alphabetical order)**

Brittin Alfred – Asia Office, Program Associate

Maureen Aung-Thwin – Burma Project, Director

Martin Hala – Asia Office, Asia Regional Manager

Tom Kellogg – Northeast Asia Program, Director

Irman Lanti – TIFA Foundation (Indonesia), Executive Director

Binaifer Nowrojee – Asia Office, Asia Regional Director

Hari Sharma – Alliance for Social Dialogue (Nepal), Director

eloise burke – Facilitator

**Regrets**:

Jargal Perenlei – Open Society Forum (Mongolia), Executive Director

***Facilitator: eloise burke***

| **TIME** | **ACTIVITY** |
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| 2:00pm – 2:05pm | Opening and welcome remarks *(Binaifer Nowrojee)* |
| 2:05pm – 2:30pm | Introductions *(eloise burke)* |
| 2:30pm – 3:30pm | Asia gaps *(Hari Sharma)* |
| ***3:30pm – 3:45pm*** | ***Health break*** |
| 3:45pm – 4:30pm | Staff learning and training *(Tom Kellogg)* |
| 4:30pm – 5:25pm | Way forward (*eloise burke)* |
| 5:25pm –5:30pm | Closing remarks (*Binaifer Nowrojee*) |
| ***6:30pm*** | ***Asia Directors Dinner*** |

This was the first Asia directors’ meeting following the creation of the OSF Asia Office in April 2014. It was a short 3-hour meeting intended to bring the Asia directors together for the first time. The goal was to get a conversation started on what role the Asia Office should play and to identify some areas of interest and/or divergence. A few action points emerged from the retreat that are captured at the end.

The meeting incorporated the thoughts and views of the wider OSF Asia team which had been invited to fill out a survey in advance of the directors’ retreat to express their wishes for the new office. The input was provided anonymously and was not attributed to any individual. An executive summary of the staff survey synthesized the raw data responses and was distributed to the directors in advance of the retreat. Out of the 78 total Asia staff (with roughly 50 of those being program staff), 37 responded. The feedback helped to ensure the voices of the team were included and to provide a more comprehensive picture of our staff’s values, visions, and wishes for the future Asia Office.

1. **Welcome**

The welcome remarks by Binaifer Nowrojee, Asia Regional Director, clarified among other things that the role of the new Asia Office will be to support the aspirations of the Asia team and seek to add value to the work being undertaken at the national level. The directors’ retreat and the staff survey were intended to ensure the Asia Office’s role is crafted in broad consultation with the team based on the needs.

1. **Values**

The introductory session asked each director to speak to one of the OSF values that had emerged as being the most important to our staff from the survey results:

* A learning organization;
* Network, knowledge, expertise;
* Risk-taking;
* Flexibility;
* Presence on the ground:
* Like-minded, inspiring colleagues:
* Politically astute and not technocratic;
* Rights-driven organization; and
* Respect for local context and knowledge.

Each director was asked to anonymously select and articulate the meaning of one, and to do this by describing the value through the five senses. This was a fun, yet revealing and considerate exercise which provided each director with the opportunity to think about the stated values. The responses were colorful and thoughtful, providing a snap shot of what each of the nine values currently looked like, as well as what it should look like in the future.

Here are two randomly selected examples: “*A learning organization*” was described as “**looking** like a dynamic work space; there is a lot of interaction, conversation, vibrant/robust debate. It **feels like** exciting self-reflection. It **tastes** complex, flavorful. It **smells** pungent in a good way, it has an aroma of activity. It **sounds** noisy; there is a lot of back and forth. A lot of disagreement, of healthy debated. I feel positive.”

“*Like-minded, inspiring colleagues”* was described as “it looks like colleagues working well together. In order to work at a certain organization, you need to have certain values in common. It **feels** good, it **tastes** good, and it **sounds** good. If all are like-minded it **smells** the same, if not, it smells differently”.

The response to each value reflected the feelings of the team for a strong regional office; an office which supports the work being done on the ground, represents them to other arms of OSF – specifically New York - and together define the role of the regional office in a manner that demonstrates its added value.

1. **Identifying Gaps**

The next session, led by Hari Sharma, Alliance for Social Dialogue (Nepal) Director, focused on gaps relying on the responses from the staff survey to guide the discussion. Hari Sharma noted that several themes had emerged from the staff survey:

* **Communication between programs:** At the moment, there is little intra-Asia program communications. Often communication is not undertaken with each other, but only through New York. In the past, it was unclear who would do the coordination, but now the Asia Office could play that role. At the moment, the Asia team has no regional identity. Work is undertaken in country silos with little interaction. It would be helpful if we could meet somewhere regularly, but this does not happen at the moment. Many programs work on similar themes, but with little interaction about best practices and lessons learned. We have an absence of learning, monitoring and evaluation practices and no mechanism for collective decision-making. In order to move forward, we need to be able to understand what we did in the past and how to learn from it.
* **Advocacy:** There is an absence of any framework to promote our partners to undertake advocacy efforts at a sub-regional, regional or international level. There were different opinions ranging from the need for greater support from the OSF advocacy team to help our grantees get their message out to questions about whether such an undertaking was feasible in the Asian context where there is no regional mechanism comparable to the African Union or the Organization of American States. It was noted that it took the Africa Regional Office years to build an advocacy structure in an organized way. There was some discussion on what advocacy targets would be useful—ASEAN, sub-regional mechanisms, the UN and key bilateral countries such as Australia. It was agreed that developing such a capacity would be a long process and there are trade-offs. Advocacy for certain issues may be good for one country, but not for another. There was no resolution on how we would build and effective and functional advocacy program for our partners in Asia. Should we be drawing up a 1-3 year plan to encourage the OSF advocacy team to build Asia capacity?
* **Geographic Coverage:** Why do we work where we do? Why are we present in some places but not others? We need to be able to respond to these questions and understand the logic of our geographic footprint in Asia. Our work has grown opportunistically, often prompted by the interest of George Soros, rather than a deliberate, strategic rollout. Little thought is given after we have entered at a opportune (revolutionary) moment about how we adjust to a longer term approach. As a result we end up working in places because we have historically always worked there and we want to continue. But we need to think more clearly about this. In some countries, there is a historic opening, but in others we need to be there for the long, slow slog. Do we envision any new openings for Asia? We need to do some thinking about this.

1. **Staff Learning and Training**

This session was led by Tom Kellogg, Northeast Asia Program Director, who summarized the findings from the staff survey, noting that requests for three different types of learning had emerged:

* **Substantive learning on current events and thematic issues:** The Asia Office could bring together some of the key thinkers on various issues in Asia. There are precedents set from other regional programs that we can learn, from such as the MENA Office.
* **Learning, monitoring & evaluation**: We need to learn from our various efforts and document and share experiences. Again, we can learn from other programs, for example, the Public Health Program at its annual retreat gives out an award for the best and worst grant which allows for critical reflection and self-questioning.
* **Professional skill building for staff:** How do we help all our staff to undertake professional skill-building? There are growing opportunities for short staff trainings in New York. How can we bring these out to Asia to ensure that our team can benefit from these opportunities? Since OSF’s network offices use English, giving our staff in Asia opportunities to improve their English language skills might be a way to give us a stronger and more visible voice within the network. Another option that was suggested is to hire expatriates to help clean up any English language drafts before they are submitted to New York.
* **Internal information-sharing, working with network programs and shared frameworks:** Often developments within the OSF network are not communicated through the entire network efficiently. Can the Asia Office help to keep the Asia team appraised on internal developments within OSF? Some discussion focused on the work of thematic network programs and how the Asia team could better understand and manage network program interventions in the region. There are some network programs that are doing no work in Asia, and where relevant, we should be proactive about reaching out. There was interest in ensuring that network program interventions in Asia are undertaken in a coordinated and consultative manner to ensure relevance, and there was some discussion on whether a framework could be created.

Staff peer learning was raised as a way in which to expose our program staff to different possibilities either through retreats or short placements.

As the funding structure of OSF changes with shrinking base budgets and the creation of shared frameworks and the reserve fund, interest was expressed in having a greater understanding of how to access these new funding mechanisms. There was some discussion on whether the Asia team should pick one shared framework that we could work on jointly across the region, which would help to address the lack of coordination and cooperation by allowing us to work together on an issue that affects us all. Several themes were suggested including migration (which had appeared as a dominant theme in the staff survey); Diversity; and Youth.

* **Grantee learning and capacity building:** Questions were raised about whether the Asia Office could help to expose our grantees to best practices in the region. Some country programs in Asia have been doing this on an ad hoc basis. How could we do this? Could we have internships, exchanges? Could the Asia Office facilitate this?

1. **Action Points for the Asia Office:**

The meeting ended by asking all the participants to give one word to describe how they felt the meeting had gone. Words included: Good, constructive, optimistic, less cynical, anticipatory, positive, tired, excited, impatient to get started, excited for the possibilities.

1. Institute a biannual (twice yearly) meeting of the Asia directors. It was agreed that the next Asia directors’ meeting would be on August 5, 2014 in Burma. (August 2014)
2. Organize an annual week-long retreat of the larger Asia staff. It was suggested that the first such gathering should be scheduled for Oct 2014 or early 2015 at the latest. (October 2014)
3. Ensure that the Asia voice is carried into all OSF design teams and committees, most recently the one on the relationship between the network offices and foundations. (Ongoing)
4. Consider building advocacy capacity in the Asia Office, understanding that this will be a long term endeavor that has to be undertaken carefully. (Ongoing)
5. Examine the possibility of undertaking a shared framework for Asia, initially examining possibilities for migration, diversity and justice. Youth was also raised as a huge cross-cutting gap in Asia that we should be looking at. The following directors will examine possibilities for a shared framework: Migration within Asia (Martin Hala and Tom Kellogg); Youth (Maureen Aung-Thwin and Hari Sharma) and Diversity (Irman Lanti) (by September 2014)
6. Ensure that the Asia Office creates a sense of community, a place for regular interactions, of continuous learning both for staff and for grantees. (Ongoing)
7. Create a framework for network program interventions in Asia to maximize relevance and impact (by June 2014)