Reclaiming Peoples Solutions: Addressing Systemic Challenges in Environmental Protection and Sustainable Consumption and Production

*Asia Pacific Major Groups and other Stakeholders Statement
to the Third Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities for Asia Pacific
and the 4th UN Environmental Assembly*

23 January 2019

We, more than 90 CSOs from Asia Pacific representing small farmers, indigenous peoples, urban poor, people with disabilities, women, youth, workers, NGOs, science and technology, among others gathered at Marina Bay Sands Convention Centre, Singapore, discuss key systemic issues and barriers and peoples innovations in addressing environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production. We advance our unified positions to be recognized and addressed in the Third Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific and in the 4th UN Environmental Assembly.

Overview
The dominant paradigm of consumption and production continue to devastate and worsen the situation of the environment and the people. This can be seen in the crises in food, climate, reduced biodiversity, depleted natural resources, increasing violation of people's rights and inequality.

The corporate drive for profit is fueling intensified plunders of resources as seen in the massive land grabbing for industrial plantations, and control of water and seeds resulting to hunger, malnutrition and use of pesticides and fertilizers that contaminate land, water and air.

The aggressive extraction of mineral and oil resources by big transnational corporations (TNCs) is further worsening the export-oriented nature of economies in the global south, as well as worsening conditions of local ecosystems and communities.

There are also critical issues; environmental governance in particular, the lack of state safeguards and protection measures for the environment and communities from large-scale technological fixes being financed by transnational corporations. Also, the increasing demand for energy is driving intensified use of scarce resources and extraction of minerals to meet large-scale consumption demands.

These different forms of corporate capture legitimized by States exacerbate the destruction of the environment, hunger and poverty, and inequalities.

Our demand for development justice
The Asia Pacific civil society's development justice approach to Sustainable Consumption and Production involves both environmental sustainability and social justice as part of its core objectives. Every stage of the consumption and production cycles should be guided by ecosystem approaches—that minimize the carbon footprint to the extent possible. This includes establishing systems that also reduce consumption and production to the extent possible. This puts at the center the needs of the poor and marginalized, and for them to have access and control over their resources, and what is produced as much as how it is produced and consumed.

Additionally, our idea of innovative solutions to environmental challenges broadly includes social innovations, local innovations, indigenous and traditional knowledge

systems, time-tested technologies and appropriate practices that matter most to people's lives and contribute to the achievement of SDGs and for SCP as a mode of operation.

Key issues in relation to the focus issues under the theme of Sustainable Consumption and Production of UNEA-4 which are on food security, renewable energy, land resource management and biodiversity:

Corporate agriculture and land grabbing are undermining food security
The Asia Pacific region faces major challenges in food and agricultural production. These have been worsened by agricultural liberalization which resulted in policy support and financing for export-oriented production and corporate agriculture. These include the expansion of palm oil plantations in several countries which is causing air and land pollution, displacements, destruction of sustainable livelihoods and hunger for poor communities. Government policies, including seed laws, laws supporting land conversion and forest laws have supported corporations at the expense of the people. The resulting loss of traditional seeds disempower women, indigenous peoples, farmers and local communities. These policy developments are destroying the sources of livelihoods of small-scale food producers and their communities, resulting to hunger and forced migration. Climate change and disasters aggravate poverty, misery and even suicide rates in rural communities.

Challenges to sustainable land resource management: Extractive industries
We stress the need for SCP standards to be applied on extractive, agro-chemical, large-scale agriculture and logging industries. Over-extraction of resources for profit are destroying people's sources of livelihood, their access to natural resources and proliferates intergenerational inequity that basically undermine people's collective rights. Communities affected by mine disasters continue to suffer the negative impacts to their health and local ecosystems. Workers are exposed to physical and chemical hazards in these industries that compromise their safety and health. Women and children are the most vulnerable to these changes in the environment.

Dirty energy, the climate crisis and disasters: the shift to renewable energy
The "business-as-usual" trend in energy industries and fossil fuel subsidies by governments continues to worsen the climate crisis. Investments in coal is increasing contrary to the demand for divestment and the need to respond to the worsening climate conditions impacting island-states, low-lying countries and resulting to disasters in the global south. Dependency on coal is also resource-intensive, unsustainable and waste generating.

Chemicals and waste
Production and use of chemicals is shifting to developing and transition countries, which is leading to increased use of pesticides, herbicides, products and processes containing hazardous chemicals, including those that disrupt reproduction, cause birth defects and persist in the environment and human bodies increasing the burden of disease and causing irreversible damage.

Many governments and communities in developing countries struggle with poor waste management and services creating dirty landfills and polluted environments generated largely by multinational corporations. Poor national legislation, insufficient information on environmental and health impacts, lack of funding, and poor technological and human resources result in disproportionate impacts on developing and transition countries.

Environmental Governance
There is a major gap in enforcement of environmental laws, or the lack of it, in most countries in the region. Corporate projects and investments that are mostly endorsed by states often disregard people's rights and deliberately exclude communities, grassroots movements and civil society from deliberations and decision making such as in relation to corporate-introduced technologies that may have potential impacts on the environment and society.

A compounding challenge is the lack of political commitment and concrete action from governments to support and operationalize lip service to peoples' participation in environmental governance.

Human rights violations: undermining the meaningful participation and innovations of civil society
The region has among the highest number of killed environmental defenders with 256 from 2011 to 2017, and many unreported human rights violations. These defenders are those standing up against encroachment of their lands and grabbing of their resources by big transnational corporations that is oftentimes facilitated by states. The increasing military presence backed by corporate funding and investments in resource-rich and rural areas is an indicator of state priorities and this has major negative impacts to the communities and people's collective rights.

The increasing rate of killings, harassments and threats being experienced by environment and human rights defenders should alarm states and should be the center of discussion in the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

People's Solutions and Community Innovations

People and community solutions are innovations and appropriate technologies that protect the environment, promote sustainability, community ownership, social solidarity and mutuality and based on development justice. Innovative solutions that make a difference in people's lives are often not technological but social innovations, linked with traditional practices and based on indigenous and local knowledge systems. This is the case in sustainable consumption and production that is rooted in the way people lived and societies developed. Any technological solution, no matter how innovative, that are not consistent with the values of people and communities vis-à-vis natural resources would not bring sustainability. Thus, dimensions of environment, economy and society, the three pillars of sustainable development, are all taken into account in people's solutions and community innovations towards sustainable consumption and production.

There is an urgent need to shift to safe, clean, sustainable, accessible, affordable and renewable sources of energy that will serve community and local needs particularly of those left behind.

Indigenous, traditional knowledge and peoples' innovations contribute to building community resilience and response to environmental challenges. Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) should be guaranteed in relation their right to their lands, territories and resources, as well as the requirement for the development of renewable energy that affects them.

Women play an important role as innovators providing solutions to environmental problems. They are crucial in seed saving and through the years have developed knowledge systems in seed selection, breeding and conservation.

Just transition of the workforce with the creation of decent and green jobs, as confirmed by the Paris Agreement and reiterated by global and regional commitments, provides a shift towards climate resilient economies and societies. The people can benefit fairly from economic gains from Climate Action through inclusive government policies anchored on respect for human and workers' rights, including ratification of internationally recognized labor standards, implementation of universal social protection, and promotion of skill education and training.

Organizing and strengthening movements along with building capacity and tools is also key in developing local and community innovations. These community innovations can promote the concept of SCP.

Enacting policies on SCP would require stronger environmental and safeguard measures. Equitable compensation and support to those adversely affected by industries should be a priority. Likewise, protectionist measures against foreign and large-scale industries in resource-rich countries in the region must be established and its control, use and management should be people-centered.

Key messages and Recommendations

Sustainable Consumption and Production

1.   People's rights and welfare should be at the center of innovations and Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) and must be recognized and advanced. An enabling environment must be provided to develop and advance peoples and grassroots innovations and alternatives as responses to environmental challenges and unsustainable lifetstyles.
2.   It is proven that in food production, agroecology as a practice, a science and a social movement is known to improve soils, protect health and the environment, improve livelihoods, and increase household income. Agroecology also harnesses traditional and indigenous knowledge systems supported by people's science and builds community unity.
3.   Social enterprises are recommended to be mainstreamed, not only as a model for doing business but also as a best practice for sustainable consumption and production. These put forward poor communities and marginalized sectors to become key economic players based on principles of care, cooperation, solidarity, fair trade, participation and satisfaction of basic needs. This model has a strong focus on the human dimension, from territorial to local level, on the need to reduce wealth in order to diminish poverty, on fair redistribution, co-responsibility and the ethics of equality.
4.   Policies in national and regional level supporting local and community innovations can be strategic, as such in governance of natural resources and community-based resource development. Participatory and community action researches on the issues surrounding sustainable consumption and production will provide evidence-based solutions and should be supported.
5.   Renewable energy projects, particularly large-scale wind farms and solar farms as climate actions should respond to the needs of communities and should respect their rights and access to resources, should not result to further extraction of resources and should be consistent with SCP principles.

Innovative Solutions to Environmental Challenges

6.   Recognition of indigenous and traditional knowledge and peoples' innovations contribution to building community resilience and response to environmental challenges.

7.   Recognition and promotion of the role of women in providing innovative solutions to environmental problems and SCP.

8.   Other innovations include community-initiated micro-grids from solar power that are environmentally sound and socially acceptable; as well as community developed water wells that preserves water for use in irrigation and livestock.

9.   An enabling environment to promote peoples' solutions and innovations through legal framework, policy support and programs.

10.   Policies and regulatory standards to address corporate-driven interests and technological fixes that cause and further aggravate environmental problems and undermine peoples' rights and responses.

11.   For member states to collaborate, identify and develop gender responsive plans and actions, including gender responsive indicators and putting in place a robust monitoring systems. Women are not Plan B and should not always be seen as a mere vulnerable sector but more as agents of change.

Ecosystems and biodiversity management and protection

12.   Assert and protect public control over natural resources and prioritize cultivation of nutritious food for local consumption.

13.   Provide an enabling policy environment for farmers including land to the landless, genuine agrarian reform, access to productive resources including seeds, participation in policy-making and policy coherence at the national and international levels.

14.   Strengthen and promote agro-ecology through appropriate laws, policy and programs. Protect local, indigenous and traditional knowledge in agriculture and create markets for traditional and heirloom produce.

15.   Advance good governance with increased accountability and transparency, removing all anti-people policies to protect natural resources.

16.   Member states should mainstream biodiversity protection and enhancement across sectors and engage indigenous people and ensure the protection of their rights to land, resources, establish accountability mechanism to ensure compliance to human rights, social and environmental safeguards.

17.   Call on member states to actively participate in the intergovernmental working group on the elaboration of legally-binding treaty on TNCs and other businesses with respect to human rights.

Resource Efficiency, chemicals and waste

18.   Bring back focus on mitigation and reduction of energy use in industrialized countries.

19.   Just transition should involve the recalibration of existing fossil fuel infrastructures by reducing their emissions while reskilling workers towards green and decent jobs. Governments should not give licenses to new fossil fuel projects.

20.   Prohibit transboundary movement of the hazardous waste particularly e-waste and plastic waste that may contain mercury, lead, and other hazardous chemicals.

21.   Support a new legally binding instrument to combat marine plastic pollution and for a resolution for a treaty to be adopted at UNEA-4. Support the initiative "Stop Plastic Pollution", particularly steps towards banning or phasing out single use of plastic and micro-plastics by 2025.

Environmental governance (including geoengineering governance)

22.   Ensure and enable peoples' participation in environmental governance at the national, regional and global levels and address the barriers to effective participation.

23.   Ensure and promote transparency and access to information as a fundamental prerequisite to meaningful peoples' participation in environmental governance. Information on evidences and scientific basis for and against a technology/proposal, as well as on existing alternatives, must be provided to enable robust deliberations and informed decision-making. Assumptions of evidences and scenarios need to be made accessible and transparent for interrogation by broader society.

24.   Integrate assessment in environmental governance to ensure flexibility, dynamism and responsiveness by providing foresight on new and emerging technologies and developments and their potential impacts on the environment and people.

25.   Ensure participation of civil society, grassroots movements and other stakeholders in assessing new and emerging technologies as a key component of environmental governance. Due importance should be given to capturing the interpretation of evidences by different actors and enabling broad participation in societal deliberation on technologies.

26.   Provide mechanisms for equitable, effective and inclusive participation of civil society based on recognition of existing inequalities and the need to level the playing field.

27.   Environmental governance should also include governance of research and ensuring peoples' participation in defining the direction and priorities of research on technologies that would benefit society and those who are left behind.

28.   Give due importance to data and data management in ensuring transparent, inclusive and evidence-based environmental governance.

29.   Lastly, we urge member states and the private sector to ensure the safety of environmental defenders and to provide an enabling environment for their legitimate activities for the planet and the people.