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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

# ASIA-EUROPE SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIVITY SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE

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Strengthening Asia-Europe links  
through data and research

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SEPTEMBER 23-25, 2020



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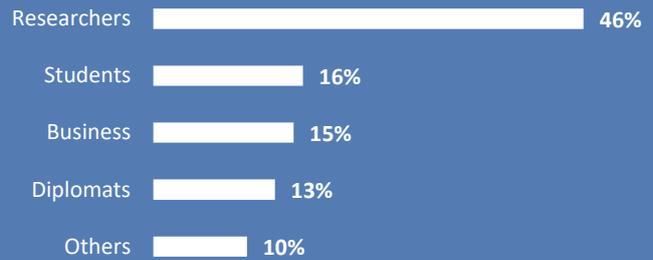
# AESCON in numbers

## Participants

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**200+** Attendees

**40** Countries



## Conference

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**55+** Speakers

**45%** Female speakers

**6** Virtual formats

- Opening ceremony
- Keynotes
- Panel
- Scientific sessions
- Virtual coffees
- Poster booths

**40** Attendees  
on average per session

**70** One-on-one  
meetups

## A conference for all

On 22-25 September 2020, over 200 participants from research, diplomatic and business communities got together online for the first Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity Scientific Conference (AESCON).

The conference was initially planned to convene in Singapore in February 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic the conference had to be postponed and turned into an online event. Nevertheless, transforming the conference into a virtual experience allowed a much wider audience to be reached than an in-person event.

The conference gathered over 50 speakers, with connectivity topics including people-to-people, political, trade and investment, energy, transport, and the impacts of COVID-19 on connectivity. It offered an open platform for exchanging knowledge and experiences between the 200 participants via a variety of virtual formats, such as keynote speeches, panel debates, scientific sessions, virtual coffees, a poster exhibition and networking opportunities.

In a time in which many forms of global connectivity have taken a hiatus, people from different contexts came together over the course of four days to share and exchange on how research is addressing the global challenges linked to connectivity, as well as to discuss the potential of science to support evidence-driven policymaking on sustainable connectivity.

AESCON was the result of a joint effort by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, the European External Action Service, the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), the Asia-Europe Foundation, The Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia and the Center for China and Globalization.

The organisation of the conference was a follow up of the work conducted by the Joint Research Centre in providing a scientifically sound data framework to measure sustainable connectivity between European and Asian countries. In 2018, the "ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal" was launched on the occasion of the summit of heads of state and government of the 53 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) partners.

This report highlights five key takeaways and messages from the AESCON conference. The full list of research papers can be found in the "Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity Scientific Conference - Book of Abstracts" (<https://europa.eu/lfp46Hf>).



## 1. Bringing science and policy together to advance sustainable connectivity



*“Scientists need to invest in understanding real policy needs, and to understand and accept that it will not be scientific evidence alone that will determine political choices. At the same time, policy makers need to be much more specific in what they would like scientists to provide, and understand that science does not necessarily bend in the light of policy preferences.”*

*Stephen Quest, Director-General of the Joint Research Centre, European Commission*

The conference showed the importance of strengthening the connection between science and policy as well as the potential of international cooperation. Connectivity is seen as a broad concept and an unexplored field for both politicians and scientists. There is a huge potential to work in close collaboration and engage in a two-way dialogue between the two communities.

On the one hand, some of the researchers see the role of science as “supply-based” to politicians. This means that by focusing on global challenges and priorities, scientists have the role to come up with their own research proposals. On the other hand, researchers agree that scientific support must not always be “supply-based” and that a more “demand-based” approach is necessary if we want science to be used by policymakers.

A mixed approach on the role of science is thus required. Scientists should not forget that it is important to understand the actual policy needs, while politicians need to specify the scientific support they are looking for.

Another aspect of the discussions focused on the communication of science to policymakers. Policymakers need access to concise information, in the form of briefings and one-pagers. They do not have the time to delve into extensive scientific reports or scientific papers, and thus scientists need to invest more in improving science communication skills and products for non-scientific audiences, including not only policymakers but also the civil society at large.

Connectivity brings together challenges and opportunities which need innovative and holistic approaches as well as evidence-based policy making. The ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal was a first exercise carried out by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre on gathering evidence on sustainable connectivity to support policymaking in the context of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). The Portal was acknowledged as a valuable tool that should continue to be updated, but it could benefit further from accompanying focused studies and one-pagers to better reach out to the political community.

Researchers also highlighted the need for timely data to conduct their research and inform policy. They call on international organisations to extend further their data collection processes, so that a better and up-to-date understanding of global connectivity can be achieved.

As a follow up of the conference, it remains important to reflect on how research can be scaled and directed so that it can meaningfully contribute to policy making on sustainable connectivity.

## 2. Building a network of researchers connected to policy



*“One thing is clear: COVID-19 has not diminished the need for connectivity, but, on the contrary, it has even emphasised the necessity for more connectedness. Just like other challenges that are global in nature as they don’t know borders, this challenge of a global pandemic necessitates us to come together to find solutions that go beyond individual countries, regions or continents.”*

*Barbara Plinkert, European Union Ambassador to Singapore*

Participants have shown a strong interest in the continuity of a process linked to the AESCON conference. They called not only on a next edition of the conference in the near future, but as well on building and strengthening a network of researchers connected to the political and diplomatic communities to exchange on Asia-Europe sustainable connectivity.

Such a network would allow people to share their knowledge and expertise at all times and not just on the occasion of a conference. It would also help in building new partnerships.

The participants debated on how best to build this network. A group of participants stressed the importance of linking such network to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) process and to the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF).

The Asia-Europe Foundation is the only institution of the ASEM process. The Foundation goes beyond governments and aims at enlarging the dialogue between people, from academia to civil society. So, it was considered as well positioned to guarantee continuity to the network created by the AESCON conference.

Throughout AESCON, it was also stressed that we should not reinvent the wheel, but rather make use, strengthen and enlarge existing structures already created in the context of the ASEM process. These are for example: the ASEM Classroom network, the ASEM Education and Research Lifelong Learning, the ASEM Rectors’ Conference, the ASEF Public Health network or the ASEAN University Network.

The ASEM process could work as a good platform to make the encounter between policymakers and researchers possible. Nevertheless, some participants see it as too formalised to achieve such a goal.

Yet, a key question around the concept of connectivity remains. The concept is very broad in nature and it is important to develop a common understanding between the scientific and political worlds, which could be shared in such a network.

### 3. Connectivity starts with people and trust



There exist today many different connectivity initiatives and blueprints, and the biggest concern “is that little attention is given to the actual beneficiaries of connectivity – the people” as raised by Shada Islam, Managing Director of the New Horizons Project.

It is important that connectivity initiatives involve more than policymakers and researchers, but they also involve the civil society, so that their interests can be taken into account. For example, the civil society should be consulted on connectivity-related projects. It is also important that connectivity plans create trust among the different partners. Indeed, Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee suggested that “connectedness”, achieving mutual understanding and trust, should be a vital component of any connectivity strategy. This is ever more important in the sometimes turbulent geopolitical arena.

COVID-19 exposed new dependencies on connectivity, from global value chain risks to economic and digital security. More connectivity should not necessarily always be the goal, and the type of connectivity matters. Digital connectivity has gained significant ground due to the travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, but faces political and security challenges and competing national interests. But as Romana Vlahutin, the European Union’s Ambassador-at-Large for Connectivity points out, “The post Covid-19 economic stimulus provides a new opportunity and can be used as a turning moment to steer investments to be more sustainable, more digital and green, both in Europe and across the globe.”. ASEM has an important role to play as a platform for dialogue and cooperation.

According to Maaïke Okano-Heijmans of the Netherlands Institute for International Relations ‘Clingendael’, “This is a crucial area to focus on, because those that control digital technologies will be able to influence economic and control political outcomes in the 21st century. So far, the US has put business interests first; China appears to be prioritizing national security, while the European Union is taking a human-centred approach”. Citizens will need transparency and a choice in how their data are going to be used and managed.

“Trees can only grow if they get enough water and enough sun. So if we want to nurture the Asia-Europe connectivity tree – if we want it to grow – then we need trust through greater partnerships and common standards. These are now more relevant than ever because of the COVID-19 crisis, which calls for a stronger global response and greater sharing of best practices across borders. Trust is what will allow us to connect our connectivity agendas for more resilience” said Raimondo Bussi, Acting Head of the Partnership Instrument Unit in the European Commission’s Service for Foreign Policy Instruments.

## 4. Placing the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement at the core of connectivity



With only 10 years to go to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, connectivity is indispensable for achieving the universal action plan for people, planet and prosperity. Connectivity is an instrument for addressing global issues and is a recognised pathway to narrow the development gaps among the regions.

"Connectivity must first and foremost be sustainable - from an ecological point of view, but also financially and socially sustainable. In short, it is about leaving a more interconnected world and a cleaner environment to future generations, not the mountains of debt or a suffocating planet", said Romana Vlahutin, the European Union's Ambassador-at-Large for Connectivity.

Regardless of the tensions that may exist around connectivity plans and initiatives, it is important to create a collaborative platform, ideally of a multilateral nature, where connectivity plans can converge around common rules and standards.

The European Union Connectivity Strategy is very much focused on sustainability. The European Union norms and standards could become the core of a multilateral rulebook in connectivity, as suggested by Shada Islam, Managing Director of the New Horizons Project. Nevertheless, rules and standards should be co-created and agreed on by all parties with mutual understanding.

Many forms of global connectivity are under pressure: they are not environmentally sustainable and are based on fossil fuels. As we struggle to come out of the pandemic, the time is right to do something more ambitious and invest in a sustainable recovery.

According to research conducted by Mario Esteban Rodriguez and Lara Lázaro at Elcano Royal Institute, 80% of the funding in the energy sector in the frame of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) went to fossil fuel projects over the period 2015-2017. If BRI investments continue to be directed to fossil fuels as the available data suggest, then it will be very hard to see an alignment between the BRI and the Paris Agreement.

Connectivity projects such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) power grid could be a valuable contribution in enhancing electricity trade across regional borders and thus meeting the rising energy demand with clean and sustainable electricity supplies delivered through integrated infrastructures, a point raised by Fabio Indeo of the Nato Defense College Foundation.

Connectivity also needs to rely on clear procurement rules that benefit local businesses and not just businesses of the home countries. Studying the local impacts of global connectivity is of utmost importance as seen during the AESCON sessions. More generally, the impacts

of connectivity on all groups of society, in terms of gender, age, race and educational background, need to be better understood. This can only be achieved with better data collection.

As shown by Bustanul Arifin of the University of Lampung, Indonesia, partnerships between smallholder coffee farmers and global coffee corporations have ensured not only better market access and product quality meeting global sustainability requirements, but also greater access to information, technical assistance, empowerment and capacity building programmes for the smallholder farmers.

## 5. A call for stronger cooperation on research and education



*“Our concept of connectivity is not only limited to infrastructure, transport networks and energy and digital connections, but also and above all has an important human dimension based on exchanges and cooperation in the fields of education, research and innovation. And it is open to all countries, all are welcome, no country is excluded.”*

*Romana Vlahutin, Ambassador-at-Large for Connectivity,  
European External Action Service*

The study on ASEM Sustainable Connectivity, carried out by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre in 2018, found that over 200,000 scientific articles were the fruit of collaborations between Asian and European research institutions every year.

At the same time, graduate student mobility between Asia and Europe accounted for 400,000 students every year. The United Kingdom was the top destination for Asian students, with nearly three quarters coming from China, India and Malaysia. Chinese students represented almost half of Asian students in Europe.

According to Miao Lu, Vice-President of Center for China and Globalization “China is the biggest overseas education market in the world. Amid US's harsh rhetoric, it is likely that US will no longer be the top choice for Chinese students seeking for an overseas education. Alternatively, it is estimated that European countries may replace US in the future in the overseas education destination.”

Missy Oktavia Manullang and Yuliana Prasetyawati of LPSR Communication & Business Institute, Indonesia, found that the European Union funded project to encourage student exchange between ASEAN universities (SHARE), played an important role in strengthening connectivity between students and strengthening the ASEAN identity, i.e. a secondary identity own by ASEAN students after experiencing some time in their host countries.

Movement of people has been hit hard by the pandemic—“distance is back”—according to Plamen Tonchev of the Institute of International Economic Relations, Greece. These mobility constraints have significantly affected student exchanges, but at the same time have given a boost to online distance learning. The pandemic is a crisis, but it is also an opportunity to address shortcomings and improve collaboration.

Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, Director of the European Union Centre in Singapore, believes that there is a significant potential and opportunities in creating online contents which could be openly shared between universities and researchers. In the ASEM context, these online contents could build on previous structures created such as the ASEM Classroom Network managed by the Asia-Europe Foundation. Another opportunity could be to develop online mentorship and traineeship programmes to help young people improve their skills.

For sustainable connectivity to succeed, we need shared knowledge and collaborative action among different stakeholders, from research and business to policymakers and civil society.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- **Recordings:** <http://bit.ly/aesconvideos>
- **Presentations:** <http://bit.ly/aesconpdfs>
- **Book of Abstracts:** <https://europa.eu/!fp46Hf>
- **ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal:** <https://ec.europa.eu/asem-sustainable-connectivity>
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