

East Asian IR Net – A Joint ILO and ASEAN Initiative

1. Why East Asian IR Net?

The East Asian IR Net aims primarily to meet a perceived need among the organizations of the social partners at national and regional levels, and among governmental organizations for information and analysis on developments in industrial relations in East Asia. The East Asian IR Net aims to serve as a powerful tool for mutual learning and sharing of unique industrial relations experiences among the participating countries. The sharing of experiences and innovations of industrial relations will in turn help to form a common vision for sound industrial relations in East Asia with a full recognition of diversity of industrial relations system of each country as well as the internationally recognized principles embodied in the ILO standards.

2. How “East Asian IR Net” Came To Be

- It is an ILO initiative to respond to perceived need and efforts for information on innovative industrial relations initiatives in the region by the ASEAN itself
 - financially supported by the Government of Japan through Japan-ILO programme
 - pioneered by the Ministry of Manpower of Singapore in developing ASEANIR Net in the context of the bi-lateral Japan-ASEAN industrial relations programme
 - perceived as a continuation of the emerging ILO-ASEAN cooperation
 - perceived as a contribution of the ILO to the IR development in East Asia
 - through partnership with national experts under the specific parameters set out in view of the concerns of the ILO and the ASEAN
- It is also a joint ASEAN-ILO initiative supported by forward looking representatives of the governments, social partners, research community
- It takes into consideration of unique developments of IR in ASEAN plus China, Japan and Korea as well as universal principles of the ILO

3. What is the East Asian IR Net?

Objective of East Asian IR Net

- The knowledge products of the East Asian IR Net serve tripartite decision-makers in formulating their strategies and policies on industrial relations and sound

labour market governance at the national level, contributing to informed deliberation. Research carried out by national experts of the East Asian IR Net should neither be purely academic nor incline to value judgement.

- The research outcomes aim to bridge the knowledge gap between participating countries, and also between intellectuals and academics on the one hand, and tripartite policy-makers and practitioners on the other.
- The East Asian IR Net, collects, stores, disseminates, and initiates the generation of information and knowledge on industrial relations developments with a particular focus on innovative aspects and new initiatives in industrial relations for sound labour market governance.

Scope of East Asian IR Net

- The field of observation for East Asia IR Net is the collective industrial relations issues. Even when the East Asian IR Net focuses on labour market issues or individual employment relations issues, it would approach these issues from industrial relations perspective of describing and analyzing industrial relations actors' interaction and involvement at the collective level.

Geographical coverage

- The East Asian IR Net strives to support the development of knowledge sharing, mutual understanding, and common vision among the tripartite partners of the member countries of the ASEAN plus three process in the area of industrial relations developments and sound labour market governance.
- In its website logo ("IR-Asia"), the East Asian IR Net suggests a possibility of an expanded geographical coverage at a later stage, as a sign of openness based upon regional identity. Expansion of geographical coverage will be considered only when the ASEAN plus three platform is consolidated.

4. What Does the East Asian IR Net Do?

Distinctiveness of the East Asian IR Net

East Asian IR Net is distinctive, in that:

- It is **comprehensive**. Major aspects of industrial relations developments in the East Asian countries (ASEAN plus three) will be covered by the IR Net in objective manner.
- It is **authoritative**. The East Asian IR Net contracts with a leading research centre in each country, selected on the grounds of their expertise in the area of industrial relations and their ability to report in a timely way on developments and provide pertinent analysis.
- It is **up-to-date**. The information and analysis collected by the IR Net is made publicly available as soon as possible.

- It is **relevant**. The IR Net' operations do not exist in a vacuum, but exist to serve the needs of a specific audience – primarily the social partners and the governmental organizations.
- It is **electronically based**. The core of the IR Net's operations is the IR Net database and website.
- The East Asian IR Net research strives to be **objective, practical and targeted**.
- It is supported by the **ILO's** experts who have considerable knowledge and up-to-date information on industrial relations developments in the region

Contents

The East Asian IR Net will have three main contents:

- *Comparative thematic reports*: the IR Net will produce thematic reports on industrial relations developments in the participating countries on regular basis. In its initial stage of building basic knowledge infrastructure, the thematic reports will cover basic legal and institutional framework of three main aspects of industrial relations: collective bargaining, labor dispute settlement mechanisms and tripartite social dialogue. Later, the IR Net will gradually expand its scope of thematic reports to cover specific issue of industrial relations such as wage determination and other relevant collective industrial relations of common concerns in the region.
- *Feature articles*: the IR Net will also contain feature articles, which will cover most significant IR developments and events in the participating countries in timely manner. The feature article is not just meant to be a news article, but to be an in-depth analysis of the most significant IR developments with their background, implications and future prospects. The feature articles would help the users of the IR Net to have better understanding of the current issues and trends of industrial relations in the region.
- *Linkage with useful and relevant IR related websites*: the IR Net will establish links with other IR related websites where tripartite partners in the region can have easy access to variety of information, resources (such as, for example, ILO training manuals on collective bargaining, mediation and social dialogue), useful data (such as ILO's global minimum wage database, for example), websites of leading IR research institutes in the region as well as tripartite partners' organizations.

5. The Work Plan of the East Asia IR Net

Achievement so far

Following the initial development stage, the East Asian IR Net is now almost ready to enter into a new stage.

- Contents are being developed and finalized: Three basic reports (national and regional) on collective bargaining, dispute settlement mechanism, and social dialogue) are in their final stages of preparation
- Website design is almost completed and it will be ready for going on-line by the end of April 2007.

- The East Asian IR Net National Experts Workshop was successfully held in March 2007 in Bangkok, Thailand: The workshop was instrumental in sharing common vision among the national experts and the project team. The workshop helped create enthusiasm about the future vision of the project among the national experts, and give them a sense of ownership beyond their contractual relations with the project.

Scope of work in coming years

- Once the project completes the incubation stage (establishing the participating national experts and completion of the basic national reports) by 2007, the East Asian IR Net will establish stable work schedules from 2008, which will be composed of two components.
- The first component will include regular updates of the basic national reports (collective bargaining, dispute settlement mechanism, social dialogue) and feature articles. Three basic reports will be updated and modified every year in turn in three year cycle (for example, update of collective bargaining report in 2008, dispute settlement report in 2009 and social dialogue report in 2010). Each national expert will be asked to contribute 4 feature articles of around 1,200 words a year.
- The second component would be small-scale annual thematic survey. For example, the East Asian IR Net may carry out a region-wide survey on minimum wage system in 2008, the outcome of which will be uploaded to the East Asian IR Net website. By repeating this thematic survey, the East Asian IR Net can expand and enrich its contents so that government policy-makers and social partners can develop better understanding of various aspects of IR at national and regional level.

The Guidance by the ILO and ASEAN

- An advisory governing body for the East Asian IR Net jointly established by the ILO and ASEAN will support the national experts and project coordination team to assure their effective work.
- The advisory governing body will ensure that the work and product of the East Asia IR Net remain true to the "mandate" given to it by the ILO and ASEAN.

Supporting and consolidating national experts network

- National experts are key partners of the East Asian IR Net on a long-term basis. Each of the national experts are envisaged to gradually play a role of "East Asia IR Net National Coordinator", drawing in other IR experts contributing their expertises to the East Asia IR Net initiative, and to build national support base.
- National experts shall establish and maintain a close contact with tripartite partners so that their works with the East Asian IR Net are recognized and utilized by tripartite partners in each country. At the same time, in preparing

national papers and other knowledge products, national experts are expected to take objective and neutral approach as far as it is possible, though it does not necessarily mean that the national experts need to have 'political clearance' from tripartite parties.

- National experts could be a great resource for industrial relations related activities – workshop, seminar, training and research - in the countries concerned for the ILO and the ASEAN plus three community.

Strengthening and expanding the project coordination team

- East Asia IR Net will need, in near future, to expand and consolidate the coordination team capable of translating the vision of the East Asia IR Net endorsed by the ILO, ASEAN, and other stakeholders into action. The technical service – such as designing the knowledge product, managing knowledge generation process, ensuring the timely work schedule, etc. -- provided by the coordination team will continue to be vital for the success of the entire project.

6. Governing structure: ensuring the continuing ILO-ASEAN cooperation

- The East Asian IR Net is initiated as an ILO project supported by the Government of Japan. From the very beginning of the project conceptualization, there was an understanding that the ILO would 'disown' the East Asian IR Net as it would eventually need to be 'owned' by the participating countries of East Asia, and that the ILO would play the incubator role until the East Asian IR Net become self-sustainable and owned by the participating countries within the ASEAN plus three process.
- An advisory governing structure shall be established to provide political support and technical advice for the overall direction and work of the East Asian IR Net. The governing structure shall reflect the unique arrangement of the commitment to the "ASEAN plus three" process, the competence of the ILO, and the objective of serving the tripartite constituents in the region. Such a governing structure will locate the East Asia IR Net in-between the ASEAN plus three and the ILO. It will provide the East Asian IR Net the necessary support and flexibility enabling it to grow.
- The East Asian IR Net, with its governing structure, shall be recognized and endorsed by the ASEAN(+3) Senior Labour Officials Meeting – the only inter-governmental process in the region responsible for labour policy concerns – and the ILO.
- As the East Asian IR Net deals with IR issues affecting tripartite partners, it would be vital to have selected representative of social partners on board together with government representative in its governing structure. The advisory governing body may also include representatives of the ILO, donor(s), the ASEAN Secretariat, and the major labour research institutes participating in the project.

East Asian IR Net: the ILO Contribution and the Broader Partnership

❖ ILO and East Asian IR Net

- The ILO has played a key role as the initiator and incubator the East Asian IR Net by conceptualizing the project, by building a network of national experts and a core project team, and by providing significant technical inputs for the project. The ILO is committed to continue its support for the East Asia IR Net, in its role as the incubator, and through providing technical expertise and resources.
- The ILO has an impressive range of IR related activities in most of participating countries, which generate rich information and develop close relations with IR community in those countries. In some countries, particularly where large scale technical cooperation project on IR is being carried out (such as Viet Nam, Cambodia and Indonesia), ILO has been the major supporter of IR development. The continued involvement of the ILO in East Asian IR Net will generate synergy effect where the knowledge products of the East Asian IR Net and the ILO's technical assistance to tripartite constituents in East Asia will reinforce and complement each other.
- The ILO – both at HQ and field level – undertakes major research programmes on IR and social dialogue, aimed at generating valuable information on and analysis of industrial relations development. The knowledge products of the East Asian IR Net can be an invaluable source of inputs and information for ILO's research programme on IR. In this respect, the ILO may consider integrating its support for the East Asian IR Net activity within the framework of its Programme & Budget cycle.
- The East Asian IR Net project, thus, can create a new knowledge management framework for the ILO and new interface between the ILO and IR community in its member states and in the region.

❖ East Asian IR Net and its partnership with other organizations

- *Labour research institutes in the region:* Major labour research institutes in the region are participating in the East Asian IR Net. Some of them have human and financial resources to support the East Asian IR Net as a regional public good in common research agenda. At the same time, they may find the East Asia IR Net a vehicle for expanding

and consolidating their regional outreach capacity.

- *Creating and meeting the information need of tripartite partners in the region:* All national IR research institutes face the need for credible information on industrial relations and labour issues in East Asia as a part of their national level service. East Asia IR Net can assist the national level research bodies to meet this need. East Asia IR Net can become the regional platform for serving the needs of tripartite partners at both national and regional level.
- *Partnership with research institutes in other regions:* East Asia IR Net may assist IR research bodies in other regions, such as the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), whose representative took part in the East Asian IR Net workshop, in developing a better knowledge and understanding of IR and its development in Asia. East Asia IR Net can also serve as a vehicle for inter-regional cooperation in IR research, contributing to meeting the needs of the tripartite and research constituents in Asia.

7. Financing the Sustainable East Asian IR Net

- There are two different budget requirements for sustainable operation of the East Asian IR Net.
 - Budget for prerequisite minimal activities of annual update of national reports and regular feature articles. This component of budget will be required to maintain the network by covering labour costs for regional coordinator and editor(s), and retention fees for national experts for their regular update and preparation of feature articles. In addition, it would allow the regional coordinator to upload useful IR related information from other sources of IR information through useful links and direct cut-and-paste from other websites.
 - Budget for small scale region-wide annual survey report: This component of the budget would be able to cover external collaboration contract fees for national experts to prepare a small, simple, policy-oriented survey papers, labour costs for the regional coordinator and editor(s).
- In addition to the above budget requirements, it would be desirable to secure a budget line for off-line meeting of national experts or regional advisory body.
- The initial stage of setting up East Asian IR Net has been generously supported by the Government of Japan. While this support ends with the finalization of the preparation for the official launching of the East Asia IR Net, the Japan-ILO programme is invited to continue to support the East Asia IR Net in ways it sees fit.

- The financial support for the East Asian IR Net is expected to come from various stakeholders in the region who are committed to supporting the initiative. So far, a number of stakeholders have expressed their willingness to support the East Asian IR Net.
 - Social Dialogue Department of ILO, Geneva has expressed its commitment to financially and technically support the East Asian IR Net. In mid-term, the research plan of the East Asian IR Net needs to be closely coordinated with the research plan and information needs of the Social Dialogue Department, if this support is to be sustained in mutually beneficial manner.
 - ILO-Korea Partnership programme is in principle willing to financially support the East Asian IR Net project, provided that it is coherently integrated with ILO's IR activities in the region under the overarching decent work agenda.
 - KLI would support – both in terms of financial and human resource – the East Asian IR Net, because it sees the Net as a valuable platform for region-wide research, which can generate IR and labour related information meeting the need of tripartite partners in Korea.
- The commitment for support that has been already secured would enable the East Asian IR Net to carry out the minimal prerequisite activities of annual update and feature articles. The possibility the East Asia IR Net provides to pull the existing resources and to maximize the effects of existing programmes can also enhance the growth of the East Asia Net.
 - For example, when a donor undertakes to support a country-specific IR project or a region-wide policy-oriented thematic research (such as technical assistance project for national IR capacity building workshop undertaken through the ILO), the outcome of such activity can be amplified through the East Asian IR Net, enabling the information to be shared by all interested groups in the region.
 - Special commitments would need to be sought from all concerned parties to utilise the East Asia IR Net as the hub of synergy effect for various initiatives to support the capacity building efforts at national and regional level in the IR area.