



# The Asia Foundation

## **Backgrounder November 2012**

### **Overview**

The Asia Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. The Foundation supports Asian initiatives to improve governance and law, economic development, women's empowerment, the environment, and regional cooperation. Drawing on nearly 60 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

With 17 offices throughout Asia, an office in Washington, DC, and its headquarters in San Francisco, the Foundation addresses these issues on both a country and regional level. In 2011, the Foundation provided more than \$97 million in program support and distributed nearly one million books and journals valued at over \$41 million.

The Foundation's staff in Asia is a powerful combination of Asian professionals deeply immersed in their own societies as well as individuals who are experts on the countries where they serve. Through the Foundation's staff, cooperation with local partners, and a long history in the region, we offer distinctive insight on local issues and have successfully implemented thousands of programs that benefit current and future generations in the areas of:

- **Governance and Law**
- **Economic Development**
- **Women's Empowerment**
- **Environment**
- **Regional Cooperation**

### **Governance and Law**

Over the past few decades under increasing pressures of globalization, Asian countries have faced extraordinary economic, social, and political challenges. A growing body of literature suggests that the single most important factor in the relative success of different countries in overcoming the challenges and improving development trajectories has been the quality of governance.

The Foundation defines governance as the institutions and processes through which the economy and society are regulated, public resources are allocated, and government decisions are enforced. In the coming decades, continued growth and stability will increasingly depend on steady improvements in all of these areas. The Foundation's Governance programs support local initiatives aimed at strengthening the effectiveness and responsiveness of governance in Asian countries.

Building on nearly 60 years of on-the-ground presence and close partnership with a wide range of individuals and institutions in the region, the Foundation supports efforts to promote participatory, accountable, and transparent governance and strengthen the rule of law, while giving increased attention to helping societies manage the difficult process of rapid change in the context of an increasingly globalized world. Program areas focus include: conflict management, civil society, rule of law, counter-corruption, human rights and local governance.

### **Economic Development**

Asia, with almost two-thirds of the world's poor, faces enormous challenges to improving citizens' well-being. For nearly 60 years, The Asia Foundation has supported programs that promote broad-based economic growth in countries across Asia and the Pacific. The Foundation's economic programs primarily focus on improving the business environment, such as removing structural and systemic impediments to economic growth; creating more competitive markets that will foster entrepreneurship; enhancing the use of domestic capital; and attracting vital foreign investment. Market-led economic growth is a proven, effective means of reducing poverty. At the same time, the Foundation recognizes that the transition to a more open economic environment may create new tensions, as entrenched interests struggle to maintain their privileges and as societies grapple with painful short-term dislocations that often accompany reform. The Foundation therefore supports programs that seek to mitigate poverty and social dislocation in ways that reinforce and support the acceleration of economic growth.

The Asia Foundation's programs focus on the governance aspects of economic reform, addressing the institutional and political factors that frequently allow uncompetitive, inefficient arrangements to persist. Within this context, The Asia Foundation works with local partners from the private, public, and non-profit sectors to build coalitions to sustain economic reform processes. These programs are targeted at three primary objectives: improving the regulatory and policy environment for small and medium business growth; raising corporate governance standards; and supporting increased trade and investment in the region

### **Women's Empowerment**

For more than half a century, The Asia Foundation has been a leader in helping women to realize their potential. We believe that investing in women fundamentally strengthens families and societies. Our Women's Empowerment Program develops women's leadership, strengthens women's organizations, increases women's rights and ensures their personal security, and creates new political and economic opportunities for women across the Asia-Pacific region. Our operating premise is that improving social, economic, and political opportunities for women improves societies as a whole. The Asia Foundation seeks to identify change agents, build constituencies for reform around key issues affecting women's status, and promote internal efforts to identify and solve problems.

Our programs transfer tools, strategies, and lessons learned, foster synergies, and promote cooperation within and across borders. Mobilizing women has proved powerful in order to accelerate progress in each country, through facilitating networking, coordination, and collaboration among women and women's groups. Programs involve women at all stages, thus ensuring that issues identified and strategies utilized are appropriate to each country or region's socio-cultural-political context. Providing linkages with like-minded allies in government and civil society and with international networks and organizations creates greater support for their efforts so that reform is promoted from within and from without. Programs are broad-spectrum and flexible, empowering women themselves to challenge the multiple causes and consequences of their subordination and discrimination, and are customized and targeted to specific country contexts.

### **Environment**

Growing support for the protection of Asia's natural resources has risen dramatically in the past decade. Across the continent, governmental, industry, and nonprofit leaders are taking action to reduce pollution

and promote ecological sustainability. Asia's leaders also are becoming increasingly active in global environmental dialogue. In the next decade, environmental issues will become even more significant as environmental degradation is expected to rise with economic development, and as democratization continues to open new political space in which to discuss and act upon local and global environmental challenges.

The Foundation's Environment programs support Asian initiatives to ensure the sustainability of the environment and natural resources critical to Asia's development and future well-being. The Foundation works with a broad range of local stakeholders including civil society, government, and the private sector. We initiate high-impact programs to strengthen the institutions and processes through which environmental resources are managed, and to improve environmental policy.

Areas where the Foundation is having an impact in Asia include: programs on responsible mining and natural resource management in Mongolia; increasing public participation and transparency in environmental decision-making in China; and preparing for natural disasters and climate change in the Pacific Islands, among others.

### **Regional Cooperation**

Asia faces a number of non-traditional security challenges at the sub-national level which are closely linked to domestic economic and political issues in different countries, but which have important ramifications beyond national borders: from environmental degradation, natural disasters, and trafficking-in-persons to maritime security, ethnic and religious conflict, and failed systems of governance. The Asia Foundation's Regional Cooperation Program works to strengthen relations among Asian nations and their peoples in the effort to foster peace, stability, prosperity, and effective governance.

The Asia Foundation's Regional Cooperation Program focuses on: fostering regional cooperation on critical issues in Southeast, Northeast and South Asia; foreign policy capacity-building in select countries in developing Asia; providing opportunities for emerging leaders in the region; and, facilitating policy dialogues on Asian affairs and U.S.-Asian relations in Washington. Our Regional Cooperation programs assist Asian nations and their societies in dealing with challenges to peace, prosperity and effective democratic governance. In Southeast Asia, the Foundation seeks opportunities to help civil society contribute to community building in ASEAN. In South Asia, the Foundation supports efforts to promote regional cooperation on trade, counter-trafficking, and cross-border water-sharing. In Northeast Asia, we are exploring opportunities to strengthen cooperation among Japan, China, Korea, and the United States on issues of common concern.

A hallmark of Foundation programming has been its diplomatic exchange programs. For more than a quarter century, the Foundation has supported hundreds of diplomats from China, Indonesia, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Laos, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Many policy-makers believe such programs have paid substantial dividends by enabling their diplomats to deal with their counterparts in Asia, the U.S., and elsewhere in a more nuanced and informed manner.