In support of the extraordinary transition underway in Myanmar, The Asia Foundation signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of Republic of the Union of Myanmar in May 2013 to re-establish a resident country office after an absence of more than 50 years. The Foundation’s programs work with partners in government, the private sector, and civil society to build the country’s capacity for regional and global integration, strengthen the core institutions and processes of democratic governance at national and local levels, support initiatives for inclusive economic development, promote women’s empowerment; and increase public access to information through policy research and dissemination, and our Books for Asia program which has been in operation in Myanmar since 2007.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL INTEGRATION

Regional and global integration are fundamental to Myanmar’s successful transition to a more open and dynamic society. To this end, The Asia Foundation is supporting the Ministry of Foreign (MoFA) to enhance the knowledge of its officials in critical issues in international relations, particularly related to the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) as the country assumed the chairmanship of the regional body in 2014. The Foundation organized a series of training seminars in collaboration with MoFA, Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development (MNPED), and Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) on a range to topics from India’s Look East policy to preventive diplomacy to ASEAN economic cooperation.

The Foundation supported MoFA officials to attend George Washington University’s summer training program on U.S. foreign policymaking process in 2013 and 2014, organized a training course on basic research methodology in 2014, and assisted MoFA to establish a library in Yangon to provide updated information and resources critical for improved policy research in the Ministry. Whenever possible, the Foundation also supports experts from Myanmar to participate in international seminars and forums, such as “The United States, ASEAN, and East Asia Summit Strategic Dialogue Symposium” in Washington, DC in 2014.

STRENGTHENING CORE INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Parliament: Development of well-functioning parliamentary processes is central to Myanmar’s democratic reform. To improve comparative understanding of the structure and operations of legislative institutions, the Foundation organized a study tour for members of the Union Parliament...
and Parliament’s Office to South Korea’s National Assembly in 2014. The eight-member Myanmar delegation learned about the significant ways in which the Secretariat and its support offices contributed to the functions of the National Assembly, particularly those aspects relating to providing budgeting expertise and enabling public participation in the legislative process. The Foundation also provided special book collections to the Parliament’s three libraries.

Decentralization and Local Governance:
Decentralization and state-local relations as mandated by the 2008 Constitution is a critical issue for both the country’s stability and its long-term development. A history of highly centralized governance, subnational conflicts, and ongoing disputes over the constitution, however, mean that the implementation of decentralization in Myanmar is likely to be a contested and challenging process. Yet the exact dimensions of institutional arrangements as defined by the Constitution and how these institutions actually relate on the ground are not well known to many both inside and outside of government. Given this context, The Asia Foundation and the Centre for Social and Economic Development of the Myanmar Development Resource Institute (MDRI-CESD) carried out a research effort in 2013 aimed at mapping the state of subnational government in Myanmar to contribute to the policy discussions of government, development partners, and civil society organizations on broader governance, peace, and decentralization issues. The report, State and Region Governments in Myanmar, was launched in September 2013.

Beginning in 2014, the Foundation and CESD began an extended research collaboration, releasing a series of discussion papers focusing on key issues related to decentralization and local governance, including fiscal decentralization, women’s political participation, and the central role of the General Administration Department. Upcoming research will delve more deeply into intricacies of subnational governance, looking at the functions of Development Affairs Organizations (better known as municipal offices), collaborations between civil society and local governments, and the management of local development funds. All of these research reports can be accessed on the Foundation’s at asiafoundation.org.

In addition, building on the empirical data from the research outlined above, the Foundation has begun direct support to build the capacity of state and region governments to implement necessary changes in the reform process and for further decentralization. In 2014, the Foundation, together with MDRI-CESD and VNG International, provided basic training on public financial management (PFM) to relevant officials and members of state and region parliaments in Mon and Shan states and in Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady regions. The PFM training will be extended to all 14 states and regions in 2015.

Elections: Myanmar is scheduled to hold national parliamentary and subnational elections in 2015. While national elections are a major political event in any country, these elections hold exceptional significance in Myanmar given the recent democratic transition. To inform efforts by both government and civil society to contribute to effective electoral processes as well as the long-term goal of building a strong democratic state, the Foundation conducted a national survey of civic knowledge and values in 2014. The survey found that in the early stages of Myanmar’s transition to democracy, cautious public optimism is tempered by a variety of challenges, including limited public knowledge of government institutions and their functions, limited understanding of democratic principles, as well as deep political polarization. As such, the Foundation will consider a range of activities to support civic and voter education in 2015, including working with the Union Election Commission and the vibrant community of app developers in Myanmar to ensure that information on candidates, political parties, voter registration information, and other official election information is provided to the public via web-based devices from mobile phones to tablets.
SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The success of Myanmar’s reform process will be guided by the extent to which economic growth can be delivered to address both poverty and competitiveness that would generate sustainable and inclusive development. Attracting much needed foreign direct investment is critical, but providing a conducive environment to foster a vibrant domestic private sector is also important for the long term. To address the lack of available data and information on businesses in Myanmar, the Foundation provided support to carry out the first-ever nation-wide survey on business jointly conducted by the OECD, UNESCAP, and the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The survey aims to capture a comprehensive picture of the current business activities and enabling environments in Myanmar. The Foundation has also begun to map issues affecting the country’s small and medium enterprises, which dominate the domestic private sector, in their interactions with government at the local level, to inform future program activities.

WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

Political representation: Women’s representation in politics is low in Myanmar, numbering only 4.42% in the national parliament and 2.83% in subnational parliaments according to the Foundation’s own research. As the 2015 general elections will afford women in Myanmar their next opportunity to participate in representative government, concrete insights and recommendations from the pioneering group of women parliamentarians of the current Parliament can serve to inspire, inform, and improve participation for the next generation. To that end, the Foundation is partnering with Phan Tee Eain (Creative Home), a women’s empowerment organization, to conduct a survey and series of case studies of this “first” generation of women parliamentarians. When completed in 2015, key findings will serve as a platform for promoting increased public dialogue about the current context of women’s political participation and to identify opportunities to increase both the quality and quantity of women in positions of political leadership.

Entrepreneurship: Although women actively participate in economic activities in Myanmar, the Foundation’s 2014 civic knowledge and values survey found a strong view within society, cutting across gender lines, that men make better business executives than women. Foundation experience over the decades has also identified that networking provides important knowledge but also inspiration to women entrepreneurs. To this end, the Foundation is supporting opportunities for business women in Myanmar to network, share experiences, and learn from other women entrepreneurs in the region. In 2014, the Foundation supported three Myanmar women entrepreneurs to attend the South Asia Women’s Entrepreneurship Symposium in Bangladesh.

Protection and providing opportunities: Trafficking of women and gender-based violence are becoming more visible since the country’s opening, as more information is available, but also as a result of socio-economic change in Myanmar. Recognizing an important need for improved and accessible counseling services for victims of trafficking and gender violence, the Foundation partnered with the Karen Women Empowerment Group to build its counseling practice by establishing a safe and confidential space in which counseling and referral services can be conducted, as well as supporting further training for the resident counselor. Additionally, the Foundation provided the first international grant to the Yangon Bakehouse, a social enterprise, which provides on-the-job training in culinary skills as well as mentorship on life skills to disadvantaged women, that will lead to sustainable employment in Myanmar’s burgeoning service and hospitality industry.
BOOKS FOR ASIA

The Asia Foundation has been providing donations of new, high-quality, English-language educational and children’s books to Myanmar since 2007 in partnership with the U.S. Embassy. Over the past seven years, the Foundation has donated nearly 170,000 books from leading publishers to 351 educational and research institutions throughout the country. Together with the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation, the Foundation is providing Myanmar-language books to one of the country’s few mobile libraries operated by the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation, an organization founded by Nobel Peace Prize-winner and member of parliament, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Special book collections on topics of specific relevance have also been assembled and provided to a number of institutions in the country: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Parliament’s Office, President’s Office, the Myanmar Institute of International and Strategic Studies, the Institute of Economics, and the University of Yangon’s International Relations Department. Finally, the Foundation carried out the first in-depth nationwide study of the country’s public libraries to gauge their operations, capacity, and needs that will inform future support by the Foundation and others to the development of community libraries in Myanmar.

In Myanmar, The Asia Foundation’s programs are also funded by the U.S. Department of State, DFID, AusAID, and private individuals.