Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Program

Bangladesh has made impressive strides since independence in 1971, but development has been uneven. Many local communities, especially in remote areas, remain disconnected from national development initiatives. Lack of communication between citizens, government, and NGOs often frustrates efforts to address poverty, illness, human rights violations, and extremist violence. The Asia Foundation’s Leaders of Influence program, funded by USAID, has begun to address these development challenges by helping trusted leaders of local communities master the tools of grassroots activism to support democratic values and promote access to basic social services.

Community and civil society leaders can be instrumental in realizing national development goals at the grassroots level. Trusted locally, their knowledge and experience of public affairs in their communities can also serve the critical function of communicating local development needs to government and development practitioners. The four-year Leaders of Influence (LOI) program has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of enlisting civil society and traditional leaders to raise public awareness and devise effective local strategies to meet development challenges in Bangladesh.

With funding from USAID, The Asia Foundation began reaching out to influential community leaders in 2004, starting with more than 5,000 Muslim religious leaders. The four-year LOI program, launched in 2007, grew to include more than 21,000 diverse participants, including Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian leaders as well as imams, local elected officials, community service club members, women and youth leaders, and professionals such as lawyers, doctors, educators, business-people, and journalists. A network of local NGO partners worked to engage these varied groups, and helped to mount a series of orientations and workshops designed to familiarize them with USAID-funded development projects and practices in their communities in areas such as health, education, religious harmony, environmental conservation, and women’s empowerment.

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY THROUGH ON-SITE ORIENTATIONS

Between 2007 and 2011, The Asia Foundation and its partners conducted roughly 300 orientation sessions for community leaders, consisting of one- to three-day site visits to USAID-supported local partners from different sectors across Bangladesh.

LOI 2 (2007-2011) was built on the success of LOI 1 (2004) in exposing influential local leaders to modern development practices incorporating governance, democracy, and human rights themes. This knowledge sharing culminated in a regional conference in March 2010 in Bangladesh on the Role of Religious and Community Leaders in Advancing Development in Asia, which brought together religious and traditional leaders, political actors and development practitioners from 14 countries in Asia, many of whom expressed great interest in expanding and replicating the LOI model.

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Bangladesh. Participants learned ways to promote discussion of development challenges and crucial services within their communities, to inform practitioners of community needs and give feedback on development impacts, and to serve as catalysts for similar activities locally. Interfaith and inter-group workshops on topics such as youth leadership, social justice for women, corruption, and religious differences were found to be especially effective in bridging gaps between different leaders, cementing the commitment to pursue development initiatives, and kindling further discussion.

REGIONAL EXCHANGES: EXPANDING EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

Study visits coordinated with The Asia Foundation’s country offices in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, and Malaysia exposed 48 Bangladeshi delegates to civil society organizations working on development issues in other countries in the region. The Foundation also organized in-bound study programs to introduce 48 leaders of influence from Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Thailand, Nepal, and Pakistan to development work in Bangladesh. These participants reported that the objectives and activities of LOI—fostering grassroots activism to promote democratic values and ensure access to basic social services—could fill a much needed role in their own communities, and expressed interest in replicating the program.

RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS

To raise awareness in their communities and promote dialogue on modern development practices, obstacles, and opportunities, orientation participants were provided with practical outreach materials, including customized Talking Point Guides to help them share their newfound knowledge and skills. The Foundation also conducted community and media outreach campaigns to promote public awareness and enhanced media coverage of LOI events and achievements.

ASSESSING THE CHANGING VIEWS OF LEADERS OF INFLUENCE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

Using before-and-after participant evaluations and public opinion surveys, The Asia Foundation found significant positive attitudinal change among participating leaders and their communities. After participating in the discussion forums, many leaders of influence developed specific strategies to counter widely held misperceptions about sensitive development issues in their communities, and to promote community understanding and acceptance of activities such as conflict resolution, religious tolerance, accessing NGO services, and preventing corruption. LOI also improved local perceptions of foreign development interventions. Learning more about such projects allayed community suspicions, as evidenced by the increased acceptance of such interventions. In fact, all USAID partners, including those operating health clinics and pre-primary education programs, reported increased community participation and demand for services after showcasing their work through LOI. And community leaders who participated in LOI reported that the orientations helped them implement their own development initiatives, drawing on instruction and outreach methods gleaned from their exposure visits. These influential leaders also reported improved relationships and collaboration with local government, and a number became members of committees or governing bodies in their communities to support anti-corruption efforts or school improvement.

Prior to the orientations, a large number of imams expressed the view that it was religious and improper for women to seek medical assistance at public medical facilities. Results showed that this view had changed considerably by the end-of-project survey. Additionally, more than 80 percent of imams responded that they were now working to raise awareness of women’s rights, and 91 percent confirmed that they had advocated for women’s empowerment in their communities following completion of the program.

LOI participants and partners, including The Asia Foundation, see enormous potential for the LOI model in Bangladesh and other countries in the region. This work—convening and training leaders of influence, strengthening their relationships and dialogue with development practitioners and each other, and rectifying misperceptions in order to further critical USAID work and increase community ownership of development efforts—has added to the momentum and enthusiasm for development throughout the country. By educating the public and raising awareness, LOI has increased participation in crucial services and projects, and unleashed the potential for multiplier effects at the community level, enhancing the efforts of donors and governments to materially improve stability, security, and quality of life in Bangladesh and other countries.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Australia, and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress.