The Asia Foundation’s History in the Maldives

The Asia Foundation’s programmatic involvement in the Maldives has reflected the changing needs of the multi-island nation. The Maldives spans a distance of 90,000 square kilometers, making equitable development a key challenge. Due to its size, isolation, and limited resources, the country is reliant on its interactions with other nations to sustain its economic and social development.

Prior to the 1980s, Maldives remained in relative isolation. As one of the only international organizations active in the country in the 1980s, The Asia Foundation’s programs have played an increasingly important role in the country’s social, political, and economic development administered entirely from the Colombo, Sri Lanka field office. By 1990 it became one of the most rapidly developing nations in South Asia. To meet the country’s changing needs, the Foundation has focused on the government’s two major priorities: human resource development and institutional development in law, education, and media.

1980-1984

Throughout the 1980s, The Asia Foundation maintained its commitment to providing English-language books and journals through its Books for Asia program. These books were distributed to education and research institutions as well as community and government libraries. In conjunction with providing books to the libraries, the Foundation held a librarian training program in partnership with the Ministry of Education.

In the early 1980s, the Foundation supported targeted fellowship programs to build capacity in the public sector and facilitate national development. These included education planning programs for the Ministry of Education at Stanford University and training seminars for members of the National Planning Agency at the U.S. Bureau of Census. In 1984, the Foundation supported a fellowship for an administrative officer to pursue a master’s degree in public administration at Golden Gate University.

1985-1989

In 1985, the atoll secondary schools were formed and began functioning with the help of 860 books provided by The Asia Foundation and distributed by the Ministry of Education. The largest grant in 1985, jointly sponsored by the Malaysian government, provided a two-year training program in Malaysia for 10 future headmasters of the outer atoll education system. Due to the success of this program, the Foundation again supported nine headmasters in 1987 to take part in the same two-year program. Training atoll headmasters contributed to the government’s plan to bring development opportunities to some of the most distant atolls, long neglected due to distance and poor communication. Toward that end, the Foundation also supported three officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to receive training in rural development communication.

Starting with only 500 books in 1986 and expanding to 2,748 books in 1989, the Foundation was devoted to English-language training across the 200 inhabited islands of the Maldives. With the support of the Foundation and other government organizations, the literacy rate in the Maldives rose from 82 percent in 1977 to 95 percent in 1990.

With the lack of higher learning opportunities in the Maldives, the Foundation provided grants for graduate training in other countries in the fields of international relations, public finance, and public administration. In 1985, the Foundation funded the first Maldivian law student to pursue his law degree at the University of Colombo. In 1987, a young officer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated...
Beginning in 1991, opportunities centered on the media and training took place in Asian press systems and environmental journalism. Sustaining economic growth in the Maldives was directly related to environmental management. The islands were an average of 5 feet above sea level, and protected from waves and swells by surrounding coral reefs. The destruction of the fragile reefs would lead to shoreline erosion and destruction of infrastructure. To circulate information about the environment, the Foundation sponsored a public-awareness campaign for communities and a workshop on the environment for journalists.

2008-PRESENT

In 2008, The Asia Foundation’s Maldives programs provided scholarships to young diplomats to pursue international relations degrees at the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies and two travel grants provided for the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and the Minister of Islamic Affairs to take part in a regional conference in Bangladesh coordinated by USAID and the Foundation. The conference focused on the role of religious leaders in advancing development in Asia, with participants from more than 14 Asian countries.

Most recently, in 2010, the Foundation launched a Leaders of Influence program in the Maldives. This program operates with the understanding that respected leaders of influence, such as religious and traditional leaders, are especially well placed to contribute to national development efforts specifically in the context of conflict resolution, human rights, public security, corruption prevention, and the advancement of democratic values. This program provides an opportunity for leaders of influence to communicate community needs and priorities to the government and development professionals. Leaders of influence are uniquely situated in society and are important stakeholders on community issues at the local level.

The Asia Foundation is a private, nonprofit, 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.