In Vietnam, The Asia Foundation supports programs to advance effective governance, facilitate economic dialogue and private sector development, address environment and climate change challenges, and empower women and vulnerable populations.

Two decades of intense market-oriented development have transformed Vietnam into one of the fastest growing economies in the world with a remarkable poverty reduction record. However, rapid economic growth in a system built on central planning is exacerbating fundamental institutional weaknesses and creating new challenges, from social inequality to inadequate public services and rising pollution.

Increasing industrialization is resulting in the loss of agricultural land and high rural unemployment. As the gap between urban and rural areas grows and environment degradation becomes much more visible, public sentiment has shifted from growth at all costs to equitable and sustainable growth.

THE ASIA FOUNDATION IN VIETNAM

The Asia Foundation has been supporting Vietnam’s ongoing transformation since 1993 through a network of committed partners in government, the private sector, and civil society and since 2000 through a resident office in Hanoi. Vietnamese are well aware that the country needs new institutions and practices to support its continued growth and position in the region and the world. That process will take time, and its success requires not only greater openness from the state, but also a higher level of social consensus on what constitutes effective governance. To this end, the Foundation supports Vietnamese efforts to generate constructive debates about governance options and practices, increase public participation in the policy dialogue, support private sector development, and continue the country’s regional and international integration. Helping to build the country’s human resources and ensuring that the disadvantaged can access economic and educational opportunities are themes that cut across all Asia Foundation programs in Vietnam.

Our programs are built around four key themes:

1. Advancing effective governance.
2. Supporting economic policy dialogue and private sector development.
3. Addressing environment and climate change challenges.
4. Empowering women and vulnerable populations.

ADVANCING EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

Effective governance requires institutions and practices that are responsive to citizen needs and that leverage all the resources available within society to address social concerns. The Asia Foundation partners with the Institute of Legislative Studies and the Office of the National Assembly to strengthen the capacity of Vietnam’s legislature, an increasingly important and active institution. Our activities have helped to enhance the skills of Vietnam’s lawmakers and create more opportunities for citizens to participate in the lawmaking process.
Transparency and accountability are critical dimensions of effective governance. The Foundation supports policy research and interventions responding to emerging issues in Vietnam. We identify and conduct research on key issues, using the results to design targeted, evidence-based programs. One example is our sponsorship of research into the rising number of citizen petitions on land issues, followed up with support for work with the Vietnam Lawyers’ Association, and the Government Inspectorate to improve management of citizens’ complaints. The Foundation also assisted government agencies and CSOs to conduct public consultations to inform the drafting of laws, from the Law on Environmental Protection to the Labor Code and the Law on Access to Information.

The Foundation works to improve understanding and develop policy responses to urban development and public service improvement. This includes partnering with the University of Economics and Law in Ho Chi Minh City to assess models of municipal governance for Vietnam. The Foundation has conducted a series of projects to assess and support improvement of public services, including developing a systematic tool, the Rural Public Services Index, to assess the quality of public services for rural inhabitants based on citizens’ feedback and satisfaction.

The Foundation is also at the forefront of strengthening civil society organizations in Vietnam. Since 2009 our pioneering civil society organization (CSO) capacity building program has provided training for hundreds of Vietnamese CSOs in organizational development, non-profit sector governance, public participation mobilization, communication, and policy advocacy skills. Wherever possible, the Foundation assists efforts to bring civil society voices into policy debates on issues from gender equality to the environment and public access to information. The Foundation builds CSO capacity to carry out rigorous research, conduct public consultations on key policies and laws and engage in policy dialogue with the National Assembly and government agencies at national and local levels.

**SUPPORTING ECONOMIC POLICY DIALOGUE AND PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT**

Policy reform pursued by the Vietnamese government over the past two decades has led to sustained high economic growth and remarkable success in poverty reduction. However, explosive growth has been accompanied by increasingly complex social and economic challenges. The growing gap between urban and rural areas is an increasingly prominent debate in Vietnam. Harnessing the resources and expertise within society to generate innovations and informed responses to opportunities and risks in this new phase will be critical to achieving sustainable development and global competitiveness.

The Asia Foundation supports research into key economic issues, transparency initiatives, and policy dialogues engaging the business community and policymakers. Our work has gathered business concerns about the regulatory environment and documented best practices in transparency and access to information in provincial economic governance. The Foundation works to strengthen Vietnamese business and cooperative associations’ capacity to work effectively with their members to support improved policymaking and equitable growth. The Foundation’s sustained assistance to the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, for example, has established respected tools and databases supportive to economic growth and private sector development, from the well-known Provincial Competitiveness Index to the Vietnam Business Insight Survey. Our work with the cooperative movement has assisted dynamic rural co-operatives to improve their management structures, business development and connections to markets, leading to improved income generation for their members.

**ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGES**

Rivers dying from industrial pollution, worsening air quality in cities and industrial zones, untreated solid waste and biodiversity loss, and the effects of natural disasters and climate change are all highly visible in Vietnam. They are increasing public anxiety, damaging public health, and impacting socio-economic development.

International and domestic efforts to address environmental degradation and climate change in Vietnam have increased markedly in recent years, but issues that undermine effective governance in other sectors such as excessive reliance on centralized, top-down approaches, weak
enforcement, and inadequate civil society and community participation are also long-standing challenges in the environment field. The Asia Foundation supports capacity building for environment agencies and CSOs, and supporting CSOs to carry out policy research, public consultation, and communication initiatives on issues related to the environment and climate change. This includes working with the Vietnam Association for the Conservation of Nature and Environment to consult over 80 environmental organizations and advocate for changes to the Law on Environmental Protection. We also sponsor community-based environmental management initiatives, environmental education in schools, and youth environment initiatives.

Vietnam is highly vulnerable to natural disasters and the effects of climate change. In the past, disaster risk management (DRM) has tended to focus on government capacity or vulnerable populations. However, local businesses are critical players in community resilience and an important part of the socio-economic life of communities. The Foundation's work in DRM creatively links SMEs with government and community groups to improve disaster preparedness and response. The program has trained over 700 individuals from 450 small and medium-sized enterprises in vulnerable provinces across Vietnam as well as supporting public private dialogue and innovative corporate social responsibility initiatives on disaster resilience.

**EMPOWERING WOMEN AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**

Vietnam's transitional political economy and changing social norms present new opportunities, but also generate new risks and deepen existing vulnerabilities. The Asia Foundation works to support vulnerable populations across Vietnam, to ensure greater opportunities for women's participation in the country's social, political, and economic spheres, to improve provision of critical services to migrant workers and the urban poor. We cooperate with Vietnamese CSOs and government institutions to develop critical services including legal and employment counseling services for migrants and other vulnerable populations.

As the pace of export-led, market-oriented economic growth intensifies, women, in particular, are a significant source for low-wage labor in the cities, in factories, and for labor export, informally to nearby countries such as China and Cambodia or through official channels to other parts of Asia and the world. Demand for employment far outstrips legitimate opportunities putting many at risk of being exploited or trafficked. The Asia Foundation's anti-human trafficking program works with schools and educators in the Mekong Delta to increase awareness of safe migration and labor and sexual exploitation. We work with government and CSOs to improve the quality of support to victims including through the development of National Minimum Standards for Trafficking Victims' Support and Protection.

Ultimately, empowering vulnerable and at-risk women means providing them with educational and employment opportunities. The Foundation's scholarship program for disadvantaged girls has provided over 1,000 scholarships to deserving young women in Nam Dinh, Can Tho, An Giang, and Hau Giang to enable them to complete high school. Since 2011, the Foundation has supported 100 deserving young women from difficult backgrounds with full support to achieve their university degrees in technical fields, such as engineering and the hard sciences, where women are often underrepresented.

**REGIONAL RELATIONS AND HUMAN RESOURCE CAPACITY**

The Asia Foundation has long supported efforts to improve U.S.-Vietnam relations through educational exchange activities, research fellowships and grants, and
bilateral conferences. A network of American Studies scholars has been established through the Foundation’s support and meets annually to share teaching innovations and research results. We have a long-term partnership with the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam and support foreign policy capacity building and regional cooperation initiatives. In recent years we have developed an increasingly close relationship with Korean academic and governmental institutions conducting dialogues in Vietnam on issues from economic development to climate change.

As one of the most literate developing countries in the world, there is a great demand for publications in Vietnam. Through a long-term partnership with the National Library of Vietnam (NLV), The Asia Foundation’s Books for Asia program has shipped approximately 320,000 volumes of high-quality educational materials to more than 100 institutions throughout Vietnam since 2000. Since 2005, the Foundation has worked with the NLV to strengthen the capacity of public library institutions creating a more welcoming and accessible library environment and extending partnerships with school and university systems.

**Program Highlights**

- **National Assembly**: Assisting the National Assembly to train more than 200 deputies in public consultation techniques and strategies. Support for the development of duthaoonline, a website for public comment on draft laws.

- **Civil Society**: Training on organizational development, public participation, and policy advocacy for more than 350 CSOs across 32 provinces and cities

- **Disaster Risk Management**: Training in disaster risk management techniques for more than 700 individuals from over 450 businesses in disaster prone provinces

- **Environment Education**: Piloting integration of environmental themes into school curricula and activities for 6,000 primary school children in Hanoi

- **Anti-trafficking**: Conducting safe migration education for more than 55,000 vulnerable children and young people

- **Scholarships**: Year-long scholarships for over 1,000 disadvantaged girls

- **Books**: 320,000 books distributed to more than 100 institutions throughout Vietnam since 2000

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