



Contemporary
Development
Practice



ON THE RIGHT TACK

Reflections on Coalition-Building Initiatives across The Asia Foundation

February 2023



The Asia Foundation



Donors know that development moves in paths that mimic sailboats, but they are forced to program for trains. Ironically, this is exactly the quandary developing countries face, suggests the crowd of researchers pushing for more political thinking.

Rachel Kleinfeld, 2015¹

[T]he importance of coalitions in a developmental context cannot be under-estimated where the central issue is that of establishing and consolidating - locally - the institutions that will promote sustainable growth, political stability and social inclusion.

Chris Wheeler and Adrian Leftwich, 2012²

Most political settlements fail to generate incentives for elites to come together and deliver equitable improvements to society. In situations like these, positive change for the underrepresented is often catalyzed by individuals and groups coming together in coalitions to wrestle with the structural barriers to action and progress.

Sam Hickey and Tim Kelsall, September 2020³

This paper was written by members of The Asia Foundation Regional Governance Team, Nicola Nixon, Peter Yates, Sumaya Saluja, Su Lae Yi, and Miranda Lucas, in collaboration with Katherine Bain and Foundation colleagues Gobie Rajalingam, Meghan Nalbo, Bishnu Adhikari, Prakriti Nepal, Sumina Karki, Parshuram Upadhyay, Sajana Amatya, Pranaya Sthapit, Rattana Lao, Gopa Thampi, Erika Geronimo, Rene Sanapo, Jaime Faustino, Marikit Castillo, Patricia Taglay, Sadat Sadruddin Shibli, A.M. Sajjad Khan, Mohammed Taherul Islam, Samiha Jamil and Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj.

PEER REVIEWED BY: Kim McQuay, Diana Fernandez, Sam Chittick and Héctor Salazar Salame.

EDITED BY: Suzan Nolan and Sarah Banks.

DESIGNED BY: Ye Htut Oo.

The authors are very grateful to Chris Roche, Professor of Development Practice and Director of the Institute for Human Security and Social Change, La Trobe University, for his astute and helpful review of the final draft.

All errors are the authors' own.

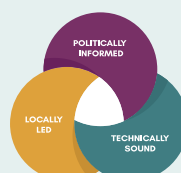


This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.



The Asia Foundation

456 California Street, 9th Floor
San Francisco, CA U.S.A 94104
www.asiafoundation.org



Contemporary
Development
Practice Series

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
INTRODUCTION	6
Aims	6
Why coalitions?	7
What is a coalition?	8
Common threads.....	9
CASE STUDIES.....	11
1. Philippines: Tactical alliances for strategic policy change	11
2. Sri Lanka: Government coalitions for reform.....	14
3. Timor-Leste: Convening the private sector.....	17
4. Bangladesh: Navigating divisions in the leather sector	20
5. Nepal: Building data communities	23
6. Thailand: Collective leadership in the education sector.....	26
CONCLUSION	20
The role of external partners	21
Endnotes	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coalitions – groups of organizations and individuals that work together to pursue a common policy goal or reform – are crucial to development. Some of The Asia Foundation’s longest-standing and most successful development programs and portfolios have used coalition-building as an implementation modality.

With the Foundation’s support as an initiator, broker, convener, facilitator, and critical trusted friend, a range of locally led coalitions have achieved their desired policy goals and institutional impacts across diverse contexts. These include a broad range of policy reforms and – most importantly – shifts in behavior and incentives among key stakeholders and organizations.

This paper examines successful initiatives in six Asian countries: policy and institutional reforms in the Philippines, subnational governance reforms in Nepal and Sri Lanka, education reforms in Thailand, and private sector development in Bangladesh and Timor-Leste. By delving into each of these, we shed light on this coalition-building modality, sharing

insights about how externally supported coalitions emerge and function and contributing ideas about how such support can be adapted to other contexts.

The Foundation’s teams initiated coalition-building efforts to facilitate locally led and sustainable change in each of these six countries. The teams achieved change by fostering relationships between powerful actors while amplifying the voices and influence of those less powerful.

The teams realized coalition-driven achievements in areas that have often eluded more traditional technical assistance efforts, because team members and the coalitions they support understand that change – whether to formal institutions or to informal norms and values – is primarily a political process that requires careful navigation, intensive learning, and intellectual and emotional adaptability.

When coalition-building efforts work, the Foundation’s teams achieve a difficult balance: managing the bureaucratic requirements of different aid agencies while providing autonomy to local actors so that they can navigate complex contexts by working in adaptive, non-linear ways. Coalition work is labor-intensive because it requires careful attention to shifting stakeholder preferences, strategies, goals, and allegiances. Characterized by many highs and lows, coalition work requires teams that are committed to achieving results and have the emotional and intellectual resilience to endure.

To support this kind of work consistently, donors need to think in decades and to work with partners who do the same. In several of the examples explored here, a coalition’s most transformational successes were realized on the second or even third project cycle, after ten or more years in some cases. These achievements stem from long-term relationships that deepened through collaboration,

We hope that this paper and these case studies contribute to innovations in contemporary development theory and help practitioners both use and move beyond some of the more formulaic and technocratic modalities. People, relationships and working partnerships can then take center stage and sustained cooperation will gain primacy over short-term outputs and deliverables.

success, and failure. To support coalition work effectively, donors must also recognize that some work must be done under the radar to evade reflexive opposition. All parties need to think and work politically.

We hope that this paper and these case studies contribute to innovations in contemporary development theory and help practitioners both

use and move beyond some of the more formulaic and technocratic modalities, such as traditional capacity development, knowledge transfer, and technical assistance. People, relationships and working partnerships can then take center stage and sustained cooperation will gain primacy over short-term outputs and deliverables.

Awareness raising rally organized on International Women's Day with female workers from the tannery industry.
(Photo: The Asia Foundation)



INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines, The Asia Foundation's Coalitions for Change program team supported several transport-advocacy groups and urban planners to initiate the Move As One coalition. As quarantine lockdowns progressed and paralyzed public transport, an opportunity arose to rethink the balance between cars, bicycles and public transport on Metro Manila's streets. The lack of public transport had a particularly deleterious effect on healthcare professionals and other essential workers who struggled to get to and from work at a time when their services were desperately needed.

Suddenly, saving lives depended on improving public transport. By aligning with advocates for better healthcare, the transport-advocacy and urban-planning groups were able to amplify their calls for better and healthier urban public transport in a way that resonated with politicians and the public.

Later in the year, Move As One used that momentum to craft an urban-mobility policy proposal that, through clever use of social media and informal networking, garnered the support of 140 organizations and some 22,000 individuals. The central government responded positively and allocated approximately US\$13 million to build networks of protected bike lanes in three large urban centers and dedicated bus lanes along some of the busiest thoroughfares. Move As One now comprises more than 77,000 individuals, giving civil society a prominent voice on mobility issues and a

position on a government working group where it influences improvements to public transport. It is, in other words, a successful example of an externally supported, locally-led coalition for change.

To our knowledge, while many international development agencies aim to take more adaptive and politically-savvy approaches to achieving outcomes, few intentionally and proactively focus those efforts on developing and using a coalition-building approach.⁴ Some of The Asia Foundation's most long-standing and successful programs and country-office portfolios have used coalition-building as a programming modality for many years in areas such as policy and institutional reforms in the Philippines, sub-national governance reform in Nepal and Sri Lanka, education reform in Thailand, and private sector development in Bangladesh and Timor-Leste. In each case, the Foundation's governance teams enable and support coalitions of local actors that have the skills, experience, and attributes needed to successfully advance a reform agenda. The team members – many of whom have extensive relationships, deep experience in various sectors, and a strong commitment to reform – recognize that policy and institutional reforms are difficult, labor-intensive, and always political. It involves, in Rachel Kleinfeld's analogy, tacking a sailboat, not driving a train.⁵

Aims

The Foundation had three main objectives in writing this paper:

- To examine who the coalitions are comprised of and how they function.
- To articulate the role of the Foundation in supporting, catalyzing and enabling them.
- To shed light on how external actors might support these forms of local collective action in other contexts.

We discuss how the Foundation teams facilitated coalitions and who comprised them, how coalition

Policy and institutional reform are difficult, labor-intensive, and always political. It involves, in Rachel Kleinfeld's analogy, tacking a sailboat, not driving a train.

and team members communicated with one another and agreed on activities and actions, and how all worked to unblock complex institutional problems and create new norms and behaviors within those institutions. Our discussion provides insights into how externally supported coalitions emerge and function and contributes ideas about how such support might be replicated.

We note that this is not an evaluation or an in-depth piece of research. Rather, it is a set of reflections that draws on a series of semi-structured discussions and feedback sessions with Foundation program staff and other development partners from February to June 2022: By sharing these reflections, we seek to contribute to broader discussions around locally-led development approaches and their effectiveness.

In the following sections, we define and discuss coalitions, and recount the coalition-building efforts of Foundation governance teams in Bangladesh, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. All teams operated very differently, depending on their context, topic, and sector. The teams strove towards a variety of goals, adapting to the interests and incentives of coalition members. Each effort the Foundation team members made – as often intuitively as explicitly – was geared towards the dynamics of the local political economy. The Foundation’s role in coalition-building varied considerably according to the length and extent of each team’s engagement. The Foundation’s involvement depended on whether the teams took on a formal role in a formal coalition, such as a secretariat function, or whether they remained at arm’s length; whether they coached and

provided capacity development, or learned from coalition members, or both; whether they initiated and convened new coalitions, or supported and bolstered existing ones; and the extent their presence was publicly visible.

Why coalitions?

In 2012, Adrian Leftwich, founder of the Developmental Leadership Program, observed that “coalitions are particularly important for overcoming collective action problems, and can both advance social change and build capacity within civil society and other organizations,” calling them “key mechanisms” for most development challenges.⁶ Leftwich, a pivotal thinker in international development theory, was one of those who inspired what became known as the practice and community of “Thinking and Working Politically” (TWP):⁷ from the early 2000s onwards, the TWP approach put politics at the heart of development thinking and practice – a welcome addition to the sectoral and technical approaches that had dominated the aid industry.

Leftwich was interested in the collective action problems at the heart of a country’s ‘political settlement.’ A political settlement can be understood as the “tacit agreement among powerful groups about the rules of the political and economic game that keeps the peace by providing opportunities for the groups to secure a distribution of benefits (such as resources, rights, and status) they find acceptable.”⁸ Political settlements are comprised of informal norms and values and the agreements that flow from them, often in the form of formally agreed and documented rules at the heart of government, such as constitutions, policies and legislation. However, as Tim Kelsall and Sam Hickey observe in this paper’s epigraph, often “political settlements fail to generate incentives for elites to come together and deliver equitable improvements to society.”⁹ In other words, the settlement process fails to generate the conditions under which coalitions of interested and influential actors would push forward with reforms. Therefore,

Solutions to key development problems must take account of both the formal and informal rules that underpin a political settlement.

in such situations – which permeate the governance processes in most of the countries where the Foundation works – solutions key development problems must find ways to overcome the lack of incentives for change at the heart of the political settlement. This is what work on informal coalitions aims to overcome.

Yet, addressing the international development community in 2012, Leftwich cautioned that little was known “about what makes for successful coalitions or what the international community can do to support the emergence of developmental coalitions, rather than collusive or predatory ones”¹⁰ A decade later, some progress has been made on that front. Contextual analyses using political economy approaches have enabled greater understanding of the constraints produced by structural factors – such as history, geography and economic conditions – and how they impede reform and change. More is also known about how development cooperation must adapt to institutional-level politics and the ‘rules of the game’ to advance developmental reforms. And the development practitioner community has broadly accepted the principles of adaptive management, while perhaps not yet always practicing them.¹¹ At the same time, support to locally-led collective action dovetails with efforts towards the greater localization of the aid industry.¹² Yet in the daily grind of program implementation, outputs instead of outcomes continue to be incentivized, to the detriment of more meaningful and sustainable results. This paper seeks to address that gap that by sharing selected insights from Foundation teams working at the micro-political level of local coalition building.

Coalition: a tactical alliance of groups and individuals pursuing a tangible social or political change that they cannot achieve by working individually.

What is a coalition?

Here a coalition is understood as a tactical alliance of groups and individuals pursuing a tangible social or political change that they cannot achieve by working individually. The coalition is a mechanism that leverages collective competencies and energy. Coalitions are convened to achieve outcomes. They may or may not be disbanded when outcomes are achieved, depending on the context and circumstances. Outcomes can be formal changes to policy or changes to incentives, ideas, or behaviors.

¹³ A coalition is different from:

- an organization because a coalition’s constituent parts are likely to retain their separate identity; and
- a movement because coalition members do not seek impact solely through their size and can move with agility as they navigate complex contexts.

Coalitions can often be distinguished from networks because coalition members share goals and are committed to joint action while networks often share knowledge or information as much as they promote collective action; when networks involve action in the interests of shared goals, they overlap with coalitions. Coalitions may be formal and members may even give their coalition a name, or coalitions may be informal yet constituted of members who recognize that they pursue a common objective.¹⁴

A range of governmental and nongovernmental actors may broker a coalition across countries, provinces, cities, towns or within villages. Often, coalitions prove most effective when they can speak to a variety of audiences because the membership is diverse and includes, for example, politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders, social and economic elites, members of social movements, religious groups, epistemic communities, academics, and others. Sometimes such actors form so-called ‘reform coalitions’ to advocate for political reforms and work together to overcome obstacles. Members, who represent different ideological or

political backgrounds and affiliations, come up with new ideas and innovative ways to push their preferred policies and legislation. Coalitions may be initiated when a range of factors coalesce: these may include a key event or critical juncture; a change in the terms of a public debate; the emergence of new actors; a different mechanism for policy debate, such as government consultations or a social media platform; or fresh opportunities for actors to meet across political or partisan lines.

Coalitions achieve results for three additional reasons:

- **Coalitions tend to be goal oriented.** Their endpoint is determined by the achievement (or not) of a goal, that is, a particular policy or institutional reform or a broader process of structural change. The pathway or the goal may change on the way to reform if influenced by a change in context or new information. Therefore, coalitions are well-suited for underpinning programs that are grounded in a contextually sound and politically informed theory of change and that are adaptable as implementation proceeds.
- **Coalitions have multiple members and forms of leadership,** which can allow development practitioners to avoid the danger of treating leadership as an individual skill or quality, rather than a collective process – a common prejudice in development theory and practice.

The need to balance different interests and approaches often forms the crux of the challenge of building successful coalitions. Different tactics may end up being complementary if members are committed to a common goal that overcomes concerns over the tactics, or such tactics may not be acceptable where the stakes are too high.

Thus, program managers also avoid the risks around supporting individual reform champions. Governance programs often suffer from investing in individual reform champions, particularly those working within government who then move on.

- **Successful coalition approaches actively seek out ‘positive deviance’¹⁵** by creating and protecting environments that encourage actors who are naturally motivated to do things differently to experiment, with the assumption that breaking down silos and building connections between similarly enthusiastic individuals and organizations will have a multiplier effect on momentum for change.

Most coalitions arise and are maintained endogenously, generated by the intrinsic interests and incentives of local actors. However, under certain circumstances, such as where the agenda is locally driven and owned, external actors may also initiate, facilitate, and support coalitions at arm’s length.

Common threads

Foundation approaches to supporting reform coalitions have evolved differently in each country, ranging from systematic methods in the Philippines to more organic muddling-through approaches in Bangladesh. Yet, they share five common threads:

Long-term local staff: In all cases, at least one if not several staff members are involved in a particular reform or cluster of reforms for five years or up to more than a decade in some cases, contributing a network, knowledge and experience central to the implementing team’s efforts. The long-term staff’s deep local knowledge provides the team with an understanding of the formal and informal institutions that sustain the status quo; it also helps to identify where change is possible and politically feasible.

Working politically: In convening coalitions, Foundation governance teams explicitly

acknowledge the need to engage directly with local politics. This means that they must be fully apprised of political dynamics beyond risk management considerations, and understand the nuances of local political contexts to find and utilize viable entry points for engagement.

Informality: Virtually all Foundation-supported coalitions are informal. Informality allows people the flexibility to join or not and speeds up decision-making, although sometimes coalitions do formalize, as we will see later in the case of a business association that arose from a coalition in Timor-Leste.

Not just ‘working with the grain’: Crucially, coalitions tend to be a mixed bag of diverse members acting in different capacities and playing different roles. For example, one member may play an activist role, working ‘against the grain’ (i.e., against the system) to engage on the social level and to draw attention to the issue. Conversely, other parties may be working ‘with the grain’ (with the system) to engage with policymakers on a more practical level in terms of the specifics of the policy reform. Foundation governance teams often seek to nudge powerful actors out of their comfort zones and maintain strong, often very personal commitments to equity and inclusion, so that the change pathway is politically salient and avoids reinforcing existing inequalities as much as possible. These tactics are essential in ensuring that

strategies for pursuing reform do not reify existing power imbalances.¹⁶ The need to balance different interests and approaches often forms the crux of the challenge of building successful coalitions. Different tactics may end up being complementary if members are committed to a common goal that overcomes concerns over the tactics, or such tactics may not be acceptable where the stakes are too high.

Prioritizing emotional intelligence: The Foundation’s coalition-building approach tends to prioritize so-called ‘soft’ skills, such as collaboration and emotional intelligence, over ‘hard’ skills, such as project management and administration, while acknowledging that both are essential to successful reform. Foundation team members must build and maintain strong, trust-based relationships, have strong intuition and networking skills, and remain agile and adaptive. They must prioritize humility, experimenting, risk-taking, learning, and adapting. Doing so enables Foundation teams to balance competing challenges: managing the bureaucratic requirements of different aid agencies while providing autonomy to local actors so that the teams can work in adaptive, non-linear ways as coalition members navigate complex contexts.

In the case studies that follow, we look at what tying these threads together meant in practice for six of the Foundation’s governance teams, beginning with the Coalitions for Change Program in the Philippines.

Cyclist uses protected bike lane along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (Photo: Jilson Tiu)



CASE STUDIES

1. PHILIPPINES: TACTICAL ALLIANCES FOR STRATEGIC POLICY CHANGE

Background

The Philippines is stuck in a middle-income trap.¹⁷ After over a decade of sustained economic growth, the country is finding it very difficult to move from simply meeting basic needs to providing more stable and inclusive development that would enable greater well-being among the population: one-fifth of the population is still considered poor.¹⁸ Several well-documented governance challenges hold the country back, including high levels of corruption, patronage and clientelism in politics; elite capture of political processes and regulatory structures; weak criminal justice and judicial systems that fail to address the most extreme legal violations; weak oversight agencies in government; and, a heavily centralized presidency.¹⁹ Limited agricultural productivity and inefficient financing and programming in infrastructure, health, and education stymie economic growth.²⁰ These factors hinder the country's progress towards greater economic dynamism and equitable, transparent, and accountable governance. Nevertheless, the Philippines has developed and maintained a vibrant, diverse and resilient civil society that champions social and political issues and supports and empowers the most marginalized.

First launched in October 2011, the Coalitions for Change (CfC) in the Philippines – a partnership between the Australian Embassy, Manila, and The Asia Foundation – rests on the recognition that

policy change amidst the myriad development challenges outlined above is inherently complex, and reforms are political by nature. Unique among the Foundation's coalition-building efforts for its breadth and portfolio approach, CfC comprises staff and activities dedicated to building and managing a portfolio of several coalitions in a variety of reform areas. For over a decade,²¹ CfC has supported locally led coalitions to enable specific policy changes. It supports leaders in civil society, academia, the private sector, and government to pursue policy reforms that will improve the lives of Filipinos by supporting inclusive economic growth, social development, governance, and peace.²² Since its inception, the program has contributed to major tax-policy and electoral reforms that have resulted in improved access to basic services and education, better roads and infrastructure, and more robust disaster-risk reduction, affecting millions of Filipinos.

The current iteration of CfC facilitates coalitions in several reform areas. The following three cases, all initiated by CfC, illustrate how coalitions of varying sizes and levels of formality can work on reforms to social and economic policies that are likely to have a positive impact on the lives of many. These cases focus on freeing up or generating government revenue to allocate greater sums to the delivery of basic services, or on changing public policy implementations to reduce or stem inequalities.

The ‘Sin Tax’ Coalition, led by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Action for Economic Reforms,²³ campaigns for restructured taxes on alcohol and tobacco products. The membership is primarily composed of fiscal experts, healthcare workers and advocates, and young people. The coalition influenced the adoption of a series of tax packages from 2012 to 2019 and the passage of the Universal Health Care (UHC) Law in the Philippines.²⁴ The Sin Tax coalition ensured that restructured tax revenues from alcohol and tobacco would fund healthcare services. The laws adopted in 2012 provided for a 2,650 percent increase in tobacco excise tax rates per pack of cigarettes over 10 years and generated enough revenue to triple the Philippine health department’s budget between 2013 and 2019. More than half of this budget was allocated to PhilHealth, the country’s health insurance scheme, allowing it to meet its goal of covering 100 percent of the population (up from 93 percent before the UHC Law) and helping it to fully subsidize health insurance coverage for the poorest 40 percent of Filipinos.

Move As One (MAO)²⁵ is a broad, formal coalition formed in May 2020 composed of 140 organizations and over 77,000 individuals drawn from local transport groups, the health sector, persons with disabilities, youth, budget transparency advocates, labor groups, and government agencies. They advocate for a safer, more humane, and more inclusive public transportation system. The vanguard of transport advocacy, MAO has been instrumental in the adoption of 14 key policy reforms since 2020, including its most significant success: the establishment of a 784-kilometer network of bike lanes across the Philippines.

Addressing gender-based violence through an informal coalition of gender advocates who worked in 2020 to include gender-based violence (GBV) services in the country’s national emergency hotline, also initiated in 2020. Concerned with the steep rise in sexual-abuse and -exploitation reports at the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns, CfC worked with government agencies and local women leaders from the Angat Bayi Program, leaders from the

Members of Move As One Coalition marshal cyclists during the #BetterbyBicycle Bike Ride. (Photo: Leandro Mangubat)



Young Feminists' Collective, and academics from the University of the Philippines Center for Women and Gender Studies.²⁶ These coalition members harnessed their technical capacity and community experience to develop a GBV referral system for relevant calls and train telecommunicators in its use. Whereas the nationwide toll-free hotline had previously only responded to police, fire, and medical emergencies, it now also responds to gender-based violence and offers survivor-centered care services through referrals to emergency shelter, psychological counseling, and legal assistance.

In each of these cases, the coalition contributes key technical reforms while using members' networks to

overcome political and administrative bottlenecks – something traditional technical assistance and capacity development programs are often unable to do. The beneficial relationship between the Foundation's CfC team and coalition members often continues even after the achievement of specific reforms. This ongoing collaboration allows CfC teams to encourage reform implementation, correct negative consequences, and identify new reforms to build on initial policy changes while enabling the Foundation to build an external network of seasoned local reformers that can support new coalitions and serve as useful contacts when the need for other reforms emerge in their sector.

Members of the #MoveAsOne Coalition inspecting on-going bike lanes and infrastructure in Metro Manila, including representatives from Department of Transportation, Department of Public Works and Highways, Metropolitan Manila Development Authority, and House Committee on Transportation. (Photo: Move As One coalition)



2. SRI LANKA: GOVERNMENT COALITIONS FOR REFORM

Background

Sri Lanka is a unitary democratic republic with three levels of government: central, provincial, and local. Nine autonomous provincial councils with wide-ranging functions²⁷ were established as part of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed by India and Sri Lanka heads of state in July 1987.²⁸ The provinces are divided into 25 districts that are further divided into 331 divisional secretariats and 341 local authorities.²⁹ Devolution of power to the provinces, however, has a contested history in Sri Lankan politics and is often subtly spoken of with pejorative overtones or as a proxy for separatism and secession. Many in the government see the constitutional mandate for devolution as a forced agreement brokered by India against the backdrop of a protracted civil war. Therefore, all leading national-level Sri Lankan political parties have consciously avoided prioritizing subnational governance in their political manifestos or through proactive legislation. Politicians on all sides have largely seen subnational governance as a terrain for electoral contestation and the consolidation of political power. Rarely has devolution been seen as a means to improve local governance and achieve more equitable resource allocation, making progressive local governance reform an uphill battle.

Creating space for decentralized governance

The Foundation has supported subnational governance reform in Sri Lanka since 2005. During

that time, the Foundation's Sri Lanka team have developed deep relationships with local government officials and have tested and piloted several models of policy reform and systemic change. Several pilot initiatives succeeded in supporting improved public financial management, citizen-centric service delivery, and inclusive and responsive planning and budgeting. Subsequently, the Foundation's Subnational Governance Program (SNGP) helped central and local governments institutionalize a series of bureaucratic reforms by setting up independent Local Governance Resource Centers (LGRCs) in 21 of Sri Lanka's 25 districts. Each LGRC houses resources that help district-level local government authorities improve technical aspects of their work, including digital data collection, legal compliance assessments, and budget analyses. The Foundation's team also helped improve financial management and service delivery by local governments by working with various government bodies, including the national Ministry of Public Administration, Home Affairs, Provincial Councils and Local Government and the provincial ministries of Local Government, to amend laws, and to draft and enact statutes and bylaws.

The LGRC units sit within the higher-level provincial council's local-government department, headed by a provincial Commissioner of local government, also within the district-level office of the Assistant Commissioner of local government. The LGRCs provide a dedicated mechanism to address issues related to improving the performance of local

authorities, a common repository for relevant knowledge products, and a platform for training to strengthen departmental research capacities. While the LGRCs' central role was to address technical, informational and capacity needs, their locations provided a physical space where stakeholders could be convened and dialogue facilitated, allowing informal coalitions to be built.

Three levels of coalition building

In each LGRC, the Foundation's governance team in Sri Lanka established a unique local resource pool (LRP), that is, a loose coalition of technical experts from within the civil service. The LRPs used analyses of local government financial data to convene and build links with and between other key stakeholders, usually through otherwise unavailable means. These stakeholders included the most-senior elected official (i.e., a chairperson or mayor), council members, senior bureaucrats, and functional department heads in engineering, accounting, and citizen engagement. The LRPs also convened frontline government workers, and seated them

as equals at the table, shifting their status from invisible cogs to instrumental actors who could usefully engage directly with more powerful government actors. This participation gave frontline workers greater institutional clout, and, as a result, they became champions for the institutional reform process and contributed to its momentum. Convenings also included members of opposition parties to sustain coalition efforts through election cycles. The Foundation's Sri Lanka governance team intentionally avoided working with individual champions because of their – often short – political tenure.

By combining technical knowledge and skills and using them to address pressing systemic and administrative issues, the LRPs worked to eliminate operational and knowledge silos that separated key stakeholders in the local governance ecosystem, thereby improving the flow and effectiveness of information essential to policy- and decision-making. In several cases, these LRPs assumed the status of a formal working arrangement, thereby building legitimacy and longevity into the LRP's work despite its sometimes sluggish progress.

*A panel discussion on inclusive governance held during the Sub-national Governance Program Learning Symposium in Sri Lanka.
(Photo: Charles Sasiharan, The Asia Foundation)*



A second level of coalition building occurred upstream at the state level, where the SNGP provided training and networking opportunities to a group of technical officers. They supported each other in deploying their technical skills in various parts of the administration. As a result, their identity as a collective gained momentum as illustrated by their increasingly frequent use of online platforms, such as WhatsApp, to share information, meet up, and lobby for change. This coalition of technical officers also contributed to the success and longevity of the LGRCs by changing incentives and norms around the need to improve local government systems and processes. The technical officers supported one another to improve legislation and policy, and to embed critical new skills and capacities in local administrations. The SNGP program used this broad ‘coalition of influence’ at the state level to scale up reforms and to leverage the coalition’s ability to ensure that changes to the system are taken up and institutionalized.

A third level of coalition building provided an enabling environment for the other two levels: the SNGP convened a high-level Provincial Chairpersons Forum that was able to safeguard the constitutional mandate of provinces in a political environment otherwise hostile to devolution. In 2016, a national good-governance agenda provided the SNGP an opportunity to convene the provincial chairs into

a formal coalition and to support agenda setting. The Forum created a strong, united voice at the provincial level and articulated an alternative narrative on devolution to update the fraught postcolonial version.

By building coalitions across three levels of government, the Foundation’s long-term investment in strengthening subnational governance in Sri Lanka has enabled participating local governments to generate higher revenues, provide more effective and responsive service delivery through the LGRCs, and amplify citizens’ voices and increase participation in public policy and decision-making. Over a decade ago, the Foundation’s SNGP team in 2010 supported the national government in drafting and implementing a national policy on local government that included reforms to strengthen the functional and financial autonomy of local authorities. Since then, SNGP-supported coalitions have achieved additional policy results, systemic and institutional changes, and changes in behaviour at several levels of government – results and changes that arguably surpass those obtained by traditional attempts to build capacity through training and skills transfer. In 2021, the SNGP’s success in delivering concrete institutional outcomes drew the attention of large donors, including the World Bank and the European Union, who have sought the Foundation’s advice on how to scale up the approach.

By building coalitions across three levels of government, the Foundation’s long-term investment in strengthening subnational governance in Sri Lanka has enabled participating local governments to generate higher revenues, provide more effective and responsive service delivery through the LGRCs, and amplify citizens’ voices and increase participation in public policy and decision-making.



Participatory budgeting through electronic Citizen Report Card (eCRC) – An enumerator recording responses of a resident through the eCRC mobile app.
(Photo: Charles Sasiharan, The Asia Foundation)

3. TIMOR-LESTE: CONVENING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Background

Timor-Leste's economy almost entirely depends on oil and gas revenues. This is a completely unsustainable situation since petroleum from the only producing field, Bayu-Undan, is expected to cease in 2023 and stop growth of the country's Petroleum Fund, currently valued at US\$17.8 billion.³⁰ Economic diversification in industries and sectors that build on the country's comparative advantages is essential to avoid the looming fiscal cliff and to help secure sustainable prosperity.³¹ Such an advantage potentially exists in Timor-Leste's tourism sector. In recent research, the Foundation found that 91 percent of all visitors intended to seek out experiences in the natural environment, on beaches and underseas, on mountains and in rainforests.³² In 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism generated US\$23.2 million.³³ In 2020, however, revenues fell to less than US\$4 million. Key constraints to growing the sector include a poor business-enabling environment,

limited access to finance, poor infrastructure, unclear land and property rights, and an unreliable electricity supply. Current government policies do not sufficiently address these challenges.

A private sector coalition

The Foundation has supported the development of the Timor-Leste tourism sector for almost a decade, beginning in 2014 with a study on tourism potential funded by the Australian government. Based on the study's findings, the Foundation's Timor-Leste governance team brought together interested government and private sector partners to foster new relationships in the sector. In 2017, the Foundation's team³⁴ collaborated with the Ministry of Tourism to develop the country's national tourism brand and an official tourism website, encapsulating the distinctiveness of the country's tourism offerings. The team



Hotel Owners of Timor Lorosae's (HOTL) chairman speaking at the ASEAN Economic Community's mission to Timor-Leste. (Photo: The Asia Foundation)

also supported the crafting of an inclusive and participatory tourism policy.

Alongside the government's recognition of the need for a national tourism policy and brand, tourism professionals who had invested their own capital into the sector recognized the need to attract tourists and generate revenue even more. They believed they could have a greater impact than that previously achieved through one-off and often poorly coordinated initiatives. Therefore, in October 2017, the Timor-Leste governance team and two prominent business partners convened a private sector working group of 15 hoteliers. This informal coalition identified shared burdens and barriers along with actions that would improve the legal and regulatory environment for tourism businesses.

After 12 months of effective collaboration, coalition members enthusiastically formalized their group as a professional tourism association, the Hotel Owners of Timor-Lorosa'e, or HOTL – a key step forward for the sector's development. The

Foundation's team supported HOTL in drafting articles, roles, responsibilities, and a strategic plan. It also acted as the association's secretariat for the first two years of operation. In 2018, HOTL took over leadership of marketing activities from the Ministry of Tourism to promote Timor-Leste at international tourism fairs in Bali and Sydney, key source markets. By 2022, HOTL membership exceeded 50 professionals and companies as it expanded beyond the hotel industry to include restaurants and tour operators, becoming the country's most prominent tourism association and providing members with marketing services, human resource development, and sector-specific education and training.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted tourism, HOTL encouraged the Government of Timor-Leste to subsidize the tourism sector's electricity and social security expenses to increase the industry's resilience. HOTL, with guidance from the Foundation and the World Health Organization, also strengthened members' Covid-19 infection-prevention controls.



First official meeting of hotel owners convened by The Asia Foundation. (Photo: The Asia Foundation)

The forthcoming Timor-Leste National Tourism Strategy recognizes the need to work more closely with industry associations under a new National Tourism Authority that will see private sector and government actors jointly develop the industry. With the expected post-pandemic increase in travel in 2023 and beyond, the Foundation and tourism professionals hope that these institutions, efforts, and partnerships will lead to a significant increase in the tourism sector's contribution to the country's economy for years to come.

The Foundation's model of building a tourism coalition from the stakeholders outwards illustrates how effective function should precede form: a group of interested and incentivized individuals and organizations collectively problem-solve to improve the sector (function), before the tourism association itself (form) evolved from the coalition. As such, HOTL should be more effective and sustainable in the future than if the Foundation had only prioritized its form.

Function before form

The Foundation's approach to coalition building in Timor-Leste is interesting from a broader development-effectiveness perspective because it illustrates the importance of prioritizing function over form. As several prominent critics of conventional international development assistance point out, a common failing has been the tendency to prioritize the form of an institution (what it looks like) over the function of that institution (what it does).³⁵ This tendency often produces donor-established or -supported government institutions and agencies with large-scale investments in staffing, offices, and internal systems that deliver limited success in achieving meaningful outcomes.

The Foundation's model of building a tourism coalition from the stakeholders outwards illustrates how effective function should precede form: a group of interested and incentivized individuals and organizations collectively problem solve to improve the sector (function), before the tourism association itself (form) evolved from the coalition.

Hotel Owners of Timor Lorosae (HOTL) members, non-hotel operators, The Asia Foundation, and other development partners. (Photo: The Asia Foundation)



4. BANGLADESH: NAVIGATING DIVISIONS IN THE LEATHER SECTOR

Background³⁶

Bangladesh is often seen as paradoxical: it tends to not score well on many quality of governance indicators and to score high on corruption, yet it has steadily performed well in economic terms for many years and made significant improvements in reducing poverty.³⁷ The paradox of Bangladesh's development can be resolved by understanding that political imperatives require popular legitimacy. Naomi Hossain argues that significant "public investments in health, education, food security, social protection and women's rights" stem from this need.³⁸ In other words, sectors and issues where significant progress has been made align with the underlying political imperatives of those in power and do not trouble the terms of the existing political settlement.

Leather production is one such sector. It is one of the oldest industries in Bangladesh. Tanneries, the dominant employer, account for 92 percent of all leather workers. As a source of national export earnings, leather is second only to ready-made garments: Bangladesh leather exports account for 10 percent of world demand. However, the leather sector has been troubled in recent years, especially the tannery subsector. While troubles stem in part from a lack of branding and modern marketing strategies, a mostly unskilled workforce, and a lack of financing, the sector's chief problems arise from exploitive labor conditions and destructive environmental practices that draw international criticism and sanctions.

Coalition building around a political deadlock

The Foundation's Bangladesh office has been involved in reform of the leather sector for almost a decade. In 2012, the Foundation's Bangladesh team joined a growing number of voices sounding the alarm about the urgent need to move the sector's main industrial site in Dhaka. This was a deeply politicized issue because there was no agreement as to who should bear the cost of relocation and very low trust between the government and tannery associations, so for several years the situation remained at an impasse.

The Foundation's team commissioned breakthrough research that shifted the terms of the debate to the economic benefits of a relocated and expanded leather sector. The team used the research findings to broker an informal coalition between five key stakeholders in the industry's expansion: the Bangladesh Tanners Association, Bangladesh Finished Leather and Leather Footwear Exporters Association, SANEM Research Institute, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industry Corporation (BSCIC), and the Leather Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Bangladesh.

For six years, this informal coalition facilitated policy dialogue with government officials and built relationships with key counterparts in two ministries, Industries, and Labour and

Employment; two government departments, Inspection for Factories and Establishments, and Environment. The coalition also established relationships with representatives of export marketing companies, trade unions, and other partners in the tannery industry. Eventually all parties reached a consensus sufficient for the relocation of the site, including an agreement between the government officials and business owners over land ownership at the new location.

During the relocation process, it became clear that the government was not equipped to deal with an industry of such scale and significance. Government officials gave little attention or priority to impacts on workers or to social and environmental safeguards needed for the tannery sector to meet international standards so that it could reenter or expand into international markets. Consequently, in 2018 the Foundation's Bangladesh team began raising awareness among officials about several priority issues through training sessions, research publications, and policy dialogues, covering occupational health and safety, including sexual harassment and women's rights; social and environmental safeguarding, including chemical use and storage; in-house waste management; and labor rights, including bargaining and negotiation skills.

As a result of stakeholder enthusiasm around these interventions, the coalition grew and a more holistic approach to the sector's development became possible. The Foundation team ensured that all relevant parties were involved in the discussions: factory owners, workers, trade unionists, export company representatives, and government officials. In 2022, the team's commitment to building stronger links between these parties paid off when the tannery sector stakeholders facilitated a larger coalition with a formal structure: the Leather Development Forum (LDF). The LDF consists of government agencies, private sector and labor organizations, sectoral experts, and donor agencies who have jointly committed to improving the sector. LDF members aim to work together under one umbrella, share information and identify opportunities for collaboration, provide the government with better and more up-to-date data, overcome the unhelpfully siloed nature of the sector, and avoid the duplication of activities.

Forward-looking LDF members envisage a secretariat that will rotate on an annual basis; members' commitment to that vision is a promising sign of the coalition's sustainability.



*Inclusive dialogue on solid waste recycling in tannery sector in Dhaka.
(Photo: The Asia Foundation)*

A 360-degree approach

The Foundation's team – which still includes some of the original members from over 10 years ago – serves as a well-recognized and respected lynchpin of the sector. Trusted by government officials, donors, factory owners, workers, and labor unionists alike, the team is relied on for up-to-date sectoral information and supportive collaboration. Its reputation is due, in part, to the team member's willingness to fully understand the – sometimes conflicting – perspectives on all sides and to help others do the same.

This demand-led approach means that rather than prescribe areas where capacity development is assumed to be needed from an external perspective, the team identifies areas where stakeholders identify gaps that they would like to fill. Since 2019, the team has supported the Tannery Workers Union (TWU) in developing formal policies and procedures to function more effectively. For example, the union now has policies for collective bargaining and negotiations, and can engage more constructively with the government through policy dialogues and by providing policy briefs. Building on that support, in 2021 the TWU approached the Foundation about improving factory inspections. The team provided the necessary technical

assistance while ensuring that the process was participatory by including factory owners and workers.

Similarly, the Foundation's team supported factory owners in the implementation of better in-house waste-management systems. It has also helped several factory owners to improve compliance with international certification regulations and other areas to improve Bangladeshi tanneries' competitiveness in the global marketplace. Overall, the Foundation's team has seen all leather sector actors show much greater interest in improving social and environmental safeguards, partly thanks to Foundation team members conducting sectoral cost-benefit analyses and subsequent dialogues.

While many issues remain at the new tannery site, the Ministry of Industries, the BSCIC and the TWU are collaborating to solve them. The ministry has assigned more engineers to the site and has brought together several government agencies and business associations to make the new industrial site fully functional. Other LDF members are working on developing sustainability reporting, human resources, and a global markets and trends knowledge base.



Observing International Women's Day 2021.
(Photo: Tanner project team, The Asia Foundation)

5. NEPAL: BUILDING DATA COMMUNITIES

Background

Government data generation and use in Nepal tends to be quite chaotic and ill-suited to the country's development challenges. On the one hand, the system of data collection and analysis is officially centralized under the National Statistical System with the Central Bureau of Statistics the main data producer, while on the other hand, many different government agencies also produce official data and statistics through surveys, management information systems, and other data registries. In addition, international development agencies, NGOs, media outlets, and the private sector produce data, little of which is shared or used beyond its immediate audience. Across the spectrum of this nascent data ecosystem, little of the data is publicly available. The situation at the local government level is even more troubling because of unclear data governance rules and agency roles and responsibilities for collecting and using data.

Yet, in Nepal's relatively vibrant civic space (compared to many other countries in the region), a civic-tech movement thrives, driven by young, enthusiastic data scientists seeking to contribute to the country's development. In addition to data governance reforms funded by multilateral and other large international agencies palpable opportunities for more bottom-up reforms to address some of these shortcomings have emerged, particularly at local government levels.

A data ecosystem

Since 2017, the Foundation's Nepal team has sought to strengthen the links between actors in the data sector to improve the availability, accessibility, and use of data by government, civil society, and private sector. To help build connections, the team leveraged the knowledge and credibility of



Meeting with Open Data Community of practitioners organized by Data for Development (D4D) team. (Photo: The Asia Foundation)

staff having data science expertise and initiated a loose coalition by convening a series of discussions between interested technology start-ups, advocacy organizations, and NGOs. At the initial meetings, the Foundation proposed the idea of a loose coalition of local actors who could find a common voice on future data policy changes. Notably, most participants did not really know each other before these meetings and only realized afterward that they were working in information silos.

The participants soon solidified into “a community of practice and knowledge hub for organizations and people that produce, share, and use data for development,” known as the Open Nepal Community.³⁹ The coalition’s ten members include Nepal’s National Federation of NGOs and a social enterprise, a media organization, several civic-tech companies, and development and human rights advocacy organizations. Over several months, the COP coalesced into a formal but loose coalition with a broad open-data agenda.

After working together for a year or so, the coalition’s members fell into a rhythm of reaching out to each other when needed, sharing data and information, and supporting each other’s advocacy efforts and their own goals. Now, when a key piece of legislation is tabled, the Foundation’s Nepal governance team convenes coalition members to discuss it, as was the case in late 2022, when members strategized how they could influence an upcoming round of amendments to national security legislation. As the coalition has matured, the team’s role as facilitator and secretariat has become less needed. The team’s initial goal of improving information flows and links between different actors in the data ecosystem has been partially achieved with the creation of a self-sustaining coalition.

*Members of Women in Data Steering committee.
(Photo: The Asia Foundation)*



A subtle art

The Foundation's work with the Open Nepal Community illustrates the subtle art of coalition building and why it is so important to fully understand what motivates each actor. Initially, the members were very enthusiastic about joining because they recognized they would learn from each other. Subsequently, they needed to get their teeth into something together – a project or some joint activities – which is fine and feasible when there is project funding available but can be more challenging between project cycles or donors. These issues of time and resource allocation also present the Foundation's Nepal team with an interesting question: Has its goal of ecosystem strengthening been sufficiently achieved through the Open Nepal Community? Is it time to withdraw support? It is not simply a question of whether or not the coalition gained its own momentum: clearly, it has gained some momentum, but the team wonders if the coalition can entirely self-sustain. As one team member put it, 'Do you need to let that bird fly?' It is a difficult question. The best answer is likely to be seen in hindsight.

Women in STEM

Informed by these experiences, the Nepal governance team in 2020 supported the creation of the Women in Data Steering Committee with the broad goal of promoting women's leadership in data and technology in Nepal. This four-member all-female coalition then identified a more specific goal: to increase the number of Nepali girls in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education (STEM). After receiving active support from the Foundation's Nepal team for a year, in September 2021, the Committee became a financially independent coalition and a member took over the role of facilitator from the Foundation. As this example illustrates, sometimes coalitions do not need to take years to get off the ground and can fly high on their own quite quickly.

The Foundation's work with the Open Nepal Community illustrates the subtle art of coalition building and why it is so important to fully understand what motivates each actor.

women in data conference organized by members of women in data committee.
(Photo: The Asia Foundation)



6. THAILAND: COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Background

Thailand's public education system urgently needs upgrading if the country is to overcome the middle-income trap that impedes its growth and prosperity. Currently, huge performance disparities between schools have resulted in vastly differing skills among graduates, contributing to persistent structural inequalities in income and opportunity. Despite being one of the first Asian countries to provide universal primary school access, more recently the Thai educational system has consistently underperformed in international tests and in reality. The most recent Performance for International Schools Assessment (PISA) scores ranked Thai schools 56th in the world for mathematics, 66th for reading, and 52nd for sciences,⁴⁰ indicating that too many students do not gain adequate skills to meet the demands of a fast-changing labor market. Multiple factors need to be addressed to strengthen the Thai education system. Over-centralized, top-down management and rote-learning approaches undermine schooling most. A better balance must be found between centralized and decentralized functions; schools need more autonomy and school leadership needs to be strengthened. Well-intentioned top-down reform efforts have tended to impose additional burdens at the school level without raising academic performance levels.

Fortunately, the Thai government has recognized these weaknesses and has prioritized education reform, opening a window of opportunity to engage on solutions to address them. In addition,

the Covid-19 pandemic, with its months of school closures and difficult online access for thousands of students, vaulted the issue of education reform into the public consciousness. Many school principals and staff also want to see change, even in some of the country's poorest regions.

Using a coalition approach to open a policy window

In 2019, the Foundation's Thailand office hired a well-respected education specialist who led a study that culminated in a major diagnostic report on the challenges of delivering quality education in the country. The Foundation's team in Thailand convened a small coalition of 15 school principals committed to key policy reforms to brainstorm and collaborate on the research; in this joint effort, they found they shared a goal. The research report, published in February 2021, explored the failure of previous reforms and charted a practical and politically feasible path towards improved educational leadership at elementary and high school levels. The publication launch, attended by five secretaries of government departments and 40 leading education specialists, was welcomed by the Office of Basic Education (OBEC) and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), both of which committed to implementing several report recommendations. Ultimately, the report and its launch succeeded in bringing a wide range of

stakeholders together around a common vision for education reform.

Building on the advice and input from the coalition of school principals, the Foundation's team implemented a communication strategy to establish a broader public dialogue on education reform. Over the next 12 months, team members facilitated policy dialogues and networking between coalition members and 12 high-level policymakers in the Ministry of Education, around 100 media outlets, and the 300 schools where the research had been carried out. Through these activities, coalition members gained a direct link to policymakers and could make their voices heard in reform discussions, particularly where the complexity of the situation for disadvantaged schools needed to be considered in order for suitable reforms to be implemented.

For example, the Foundation's team pitched the idea of documentaries on education reform and inequality to film producers at MCOT, a television network. MCOT subsequently broadcasted 24 short, highly relevant documentaries on prime-time TV over 18 months. The team had linked up network producers with leading experts and educators to discuss multiple education reform topics: small schools in rural areas and their lack of resources, the need for school autonomy, successful cases of school autonomy, why school autonomy

matters, issues of poverty and education, and why decentralization is so important. The MCOT documentaries provided a platform for school principals, researchers, and key government actors, many of whom first met through the coalition, such as the OBEC president, BMA education department secretary-general, and Jomthong District governor. In a short timeframe, with support from the Foundation's governance team, the coalition has helped to create the discourse on educational leadership that underpins new reform priorities within the Thai education sector. Sources inside the Ministry of Education have told the team that concepts promoted by the coalition – particularly the importance of school leadership – have emerged as priorities and have found consensus among policymakers. Governance team members and school principals regularly provide policy advice to key decision-makers, whose questions largely focus on themes covered by the Foundation's research report. The coalition has seen some immediate results in behavioural changes at the school level. In early 2022, for example, the Office of Teachers, Civil Service and Educational Personnel instructed principals to spend five hours per week in classrooms to better understand the complexity of students' learning needs. Meanwhile, media coverage of education topics has firmly established the importance and feasibility of education reform in the public's mind.



Team meeting at Puranavas School
with Dr. Choltawan Kumpetch, the school principal.
(Photo: The Asia Foundation)

CONCLUSION

With the Foundation's team members acting as brokers, conveners, facilitators, trusted advisors and critical friends while seeking out thought leaders, influencers and sector leaders, locally-led coalitions in six countries have achieved policy goals and institutional impacts across diverse contexts, resulting in a broad range of policy reforms, and – importantly – significant shifts in ideas, behavior and incentives among key stakeholders and organizations.

In areas that often elude more traditional technical assistance efforts, externally initiated coalition-driven efforts have achieved their goals because the Foundation's teams understand that change – whether to formal institutions or to informal norms and values – is primarily a political process that requires careful navigation, intensive learning, and an ability to adapt. Coalition work thrives in offices and programs where program teams are sufficiently seasoned to provide the right balance of autonomy, facilitation, and cover; where they receive encouragement to be creative and support to stay the course; and where they have or can build broad networks and relationships due to their reputation as credible and respected change agents in the country's development. Coalition work is labor-intensive because such navigation requires seemingly endless iterations and pauses to regroup and reposition. Characterized by highs

and lows, coalition work requires emotionally and intellectually resilient team members with political nous who are committed to persevering and achieving results.

Sourcing individuals with sufficient humility, emotional intelligence, and patience to deal with these challenges is not easy in a field dominated by technical experts paid to deliver so-called 'quick wins'. Given the internal constraints and compliance requirements prevalent in all donor agencies, coalition work depends on donors finding the right partners with teams of people who can work within systems to foster institutional change, even when those systems are designed to minimize risks, maintain upward accountability, and ensure compliance.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Think in decades

At various points in their life cycle, the initiatives described here have been funded by the Australian, New Zealand, British, and United States governments through their aid programs, with the Australian government the largest donor. In some cases, funding has come from the same donor over several consecutive project lifecycles. In other cases, one donor picked up where another left off. Where there were gaps, each of the Foundation's in-country governance teams described how difficult it was to maintain momentum and manage relationships among multiple stakeholders without funding for their efforts.

To support this kind of work consistently, donors need to think in decades and to work with partners who do the same. Timeframes are important. In most of the cases explored in this paper, the coalition's major and most transformational successes were realized on the second or even third

Characterized by highs and lows, coalition work requires emotionally and intellectually resilient teams with political nous and who are committed to persevering and achieving results.

project cycle, some after a decade or more. These successes stem from long-term relationships that have deepened through collaboration, success, and failure.

Create and protect space

Creating an enabling environment for coalition-building work is not easy, particularly when doing so involves providing local coalitions the autonomy and space they need to experiment with and establish viable pathways towards their goals. At the same time, information needs must be met, risk management requirements observed, and budgets predictability maintained. To create an enabling environment, implementing teams must pay attention to compliance-based systems to ensure they are fit for purpose and that all parties understand the boundaries and their flexibility. This means donors and partners must recognize that some work must be done ‘under the radar’ to be effective, and that branding all activities with foreign government logos is likely to be counterproductive. Importantly, national actors must be able to decide when donor visibility is a help or a hindrance to achieving their reform aims: they must also avoid any inference that their work is being influenced,

or worse, dictated by a donor. In other words, all parties need to think and work politically.

The success of several of the Foundation’s coalition-building efforts can also be attributed to non-financial support from its partners, including the many long-term, highly skilled, and empowered senior national staff in diplomatic missions. In some cases, one or more individuals from donor agencies have assumed the role of critical friend to the local governance team, working closely with the Foundation’s team without causing it to lose its stride.

These necessarily tentative conclusions are offered even as we continue to investigate the ways the Foundation’s coalition-building efforts have supported local actors to achieve sustainable development outcomes. We hope our future reflections might shed additional light on the conditions under which coalitions like these emerge and help readers understand, for example, why coalitions are successful and, just as importantly, why they are not; how they are sustained during periods when funding dries up; what role research has played in coalition building; and how coalitions foster internal and external links and relationships.



*A staff member of the Department of Local Government is explaining the LGRC and its functions .
(Photo: Charles Sasiharan, The Asia Foundation)*

Endnotes

- 1 Rachel Kleinfeld. (2015, 2 December). '[In Development Work, Plan for Sailboats, Not Trains](#)', Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- 2 Chris Wheeler and Adrian Leftwich (2012, April). "[Coalitions in the Politics of Development: Findings, insights and guidance from the DLP Coalitions Workshop, Sydney, 15-16 February 2012.](#)"
- 3 Sam Hickey and Tim Kelsall (2020, 30 September). [The Three Cs of inclusive development: Context, capacity and coalitions](#). Effective States and Inclusive Development.
- 4 We may well be wrong and would like to learn more. Notable exceptions we are aware of include the Australia-funded Pacific Leadership Program; the United Kingdom-funded Pyoe Pin Program in Myanmar, and PROKAS in Bangladesh.
- 5 Rachel Kleinfeld. (2015, 2 December). '[In Development Work, Plan for Sailboats, Not Trains](#)', Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- 6 Chris Wheeler and Adrian Leftwich. (2012, April). "[Coalitions in the Politics of Development: Findings, insights and guidance from the DLP Coalitions Workshop, Sydney, 15-16 February 2012.](#)"
- 7 [The Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice](#), UK.
- 8 Tim Kelsall and Sam Hickey. (2020, 14 September). "[What is political settlements analysis](#)," Effective States and Inclusive Development.
- 9 Sam Hickey and Tim Kelsall. (2020, 30 September). [The Three Cs of inclusive development: Context, capacity and coalitions](#), Effective States and Inclusive Development.
- 10 Adrian Leftwich, "[Coalitions in the Politics of Development](#)", p.7.
- 11 Thomas Aston, "[\(Re\)making the case for adaptive management](#)", Medium, June 6 2020.
- 12 See for instance Gillian Fletcher, Tait Brimacombe and Chris Roche (2016, December). "[Power, Politics and Coalitions in the Pacific: Lessons from Collective Action on Gender and Power.](#)"
- 13 Adapted from Strøm, K., & Nyblade, B. (2007). "Coalition theory and government formation". In C. Boix & S. Stokes (Eds.), (2010). The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics (pp. 782–802). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Fox, J. A. "[Coalitions and Networks](#)", UC Santa Cruz Working Papers.
- 14 Although in some cases they may also be constituted by members who are not aware they are part of the coalition. See, for example, Denney, L. & McLaren, R. (2016). '[Thinking and Working Politically to Support Developmental Leadership and Coalitions: The Pacific Leadership Program.](#)' Research report 1. Developmental Leadership Program, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.
- 15 Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, Salimah Samji and Michael Woolcock. (2015) '[Building capability by delivering results: Putting Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation \(PDIA\) Principles into practice.](#)' A Governance Practitioner's Notebook: Alternative Ideas and Approaches. OECD.
- 16 As Jane Lonsdale and Mark Pruden (2022) point out on page 5 in [Guidance Note: Practical Introduction to Adaptive Management](#), working with the grain' on gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) issues can be challenging in many contexts. "The grain is male dominated, as are the spaces in which to influence policy."
- 17 Kalalang, R. J., Laorenza, E. V., & Canto, D. M. A. (2022). "Stimulating Global Competitiveness: An Economic Analysis of the Middle-Income Trap in The Philippines". Journal of Economics, Finance and Accounting Studies, 4(1), 359-382.
- 18 As per World Bank (2022). [Poverty and Equity Brief](#).
- 19 As discussed extensively in [BTI 2022 Philippines Country Report](#)
- 20 Detailed in [Philippines Economic Update: Regaining Lost Ground, Revitalizing the Filipino Workforce \(December 2021\)](#)

- 21 The evolutions, successes and challenges of the Coalitions for Change program are extremely well-documented. The full archive of CfC publications [can be found here](#).
- 22 Details about the program's entrepreneurial approaches to selecting policy reforms and convening coalitions to pursue them may be found in John Sidel and Jaime Faustino. (2020). [Thinking and Working Politically in Development: Coalitions for Change in the Philippines](#).
- 23 [Action for Economic Reforms](#) (Facebook page)
- 24 [Universal Health Care Act 2019](#) (Republic Act No. 11223)
- 25 [Move As One Coalition](#) (Facebook page)
- 26 Hygeia Chi and Kathline Tolosa. (2022, March) [Call for Help: Gender-Based Violence and 911 in the Philippines](#). InAsia.
- 27 Full text: Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka. Provincial Councils Act, No. 42 of 1987
- 28 Full text: [Indo- Lanka Accord 1987](#)
- 29 [Country Profile: Sri Lanka 2017-18](#)
- 30 Banco Central (2022), '[Petroleum Fund of Timor-Leste, Quarterly Report](#),' Volume 17, 30 June 2022.
- 31 International Monetary Fund (2022). 'Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste: 2022 Article IV Consultation – press release; and staff report,' IMF Country Report No. 22/307, 22 September 2022
- 32 The Asia Foundation (2020). '2019 Survey of Travelers to Timor-Leste.'
- 33 The Asia Foundation (2020). '2019 Survey of Travelers to Timor-Leste.'
- 34 Through the Foundation's Tourism Development Program, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand
- 35 Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock (2017). [Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action](#). Oxford University Press.
- 36 With minor changes, this Background was previously published in Shibli, M.S.S. & Islam, M.T. (2020). "[In Bangladesh, Tanneries in Trouble](#)"
- 37 Anna Webster et al. (2017) "[The Bangladesh Paradox: Why has politics performed so well for development in Bangladesh](#)." ESID Briefing Number 27, February.
- 38 Naomi Hossain (2021). "[Reflections on Bangladesh at 50](#)." Contemporary South Asia. Volume 24, Issue 4.
- 39 For more information, see [Open Nepal Community](#)
- 40 Dumrongkiat, M (2019, December 4). "[Poor grades for Thai students in PISA tests](#)" The Bangkok Post.



The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives and expanding opportunities across Asia and the Pacific. Informed by decades of experience and deep local expertise, our work across the region is focused on good governance, women's empowerment and gender equality, inclusive economic growth, environment and climate action, and regional and international relations