

Engaging Bangladeshi Youth for Social Change

The Asia Foundation supports youth to play an active role in building a more inclusive and tolerant future for Bangladesh.



Bangladeshi youth have a significant role to play in setting the tone for the future of the country. Since 2002, The Asia Foundation has tapped into this potential by empowering youth to actively participate as responsible citizens in social, political, and economic life. The Foundation builds leadership skills, experience, and civic consciousness among youth so they can effectively participate in electoral and political processes and social development activities, and be catalysts for building social trust within communities and between citizens and the government.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICE AND YOUTH

Recognizing the adversarial and often destructive relationship between youth and police, The Asia Foundation developed a replicable model to build the capacity of these groups to communicate effectively, work together to address social challenges in their communities, and increase cooperation in order to strengthen public security. Working in partnership with the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and students at Dhaka University and North South University, the Foundation trained and fostered a core group of Police and Youth Ambassadors, who developed and implemented joint action plans to reduce crime, and initiated formal and informal activities to bring police and youth together.

Among the most meaningful activities were informal “tea stall meetings” between on-duty police and students, and student visits to police stations, organized for the first time in Bangladesh by the Foundation. These opportunities helped overcome negative stereotypes and fears by both groups, and enabled youth and police to see each other as individuals and to better understand each other’s perspectives.

Losing mobile phones is very common in the Dhaka University campus area. Generally students do not report this to the police because of the hassle of filing a case and because they are afraid to go to a police station. When Nakib, a Political Science student, lost his phone, he sought advice from DYCS Youth Ambassador Sajib. Sajib advised him to file a report and accompanied him to Shahbag Thana police station. Nakib found the officer-in-charge to be very helpful and courteous in filing the report and promptly informing a detective branch officer. Before this incident, Nakib believed that police charge fees for filing reports and misbehave with civilians. Through this experience, his perceptions of police changed. He became a regular participant in DYCS activities and began to promote pro-police ideas among his family and friends.



BANGLADESH

Since 1954, The Asia Foundation has been working in Bangladesh to bring together government, the private sector, and civil society groups to address critical issues.

Through an integrated approach informed by local context and voices, we address critical issues of governance and law, economic development, women’s empowerment, environment, and regional cooperation.



“This is a great initiative and can be incorporated in other police activities, like the police-community monthly meetings in which community members and police come together to discuss crime problems. [Youth] leaders like you and your team, who are willing to reduce the gap between police and youth, must participate in these meetings and, if you need any support, I am here to gladly help you. You should carry on these activities.”

— Lalbag Thana (Dhaka) Officer-in-Charge

BUILDING CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Civic consciousness among Bangladeshi youth is impeded by a number of factors, including a lack of meaningful opportunities and support to identify and address development issues in their communities; inadequate knowledge and skills about how to be responsible citizens; and increasing social tension and instability. To overcome these constraints, the Foundation supported an independent Youth as Agents of Social Change (YASC) network of 745 young people from Dhaka and Mymensingh, including persons with disabilities and indigenous and other minorities. Through training workshops and regular meetings, the YASC network changed attitudes and behaviors among youth, and encourage innovation and creativity in tackling community challenges, raising civic consciousness, and promoting good governance. YASC members initiated 15 social action projects that addressed topics ranging from capacity building for reducing social stigma about transgender individuals, training to empower underprivileged women, promoting universal human rights in schools, and raising awareness to increase the use of emergency numbers.

PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE

Through several pilot initiatives, The Asia Foundation has worked with students from higher secondary-level schools and *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) to help them understand the concept of good governance and how they can put it into

practice in their everyday lives. The initiatives have fostered leadership, tolerance, accountability, and transparency, and encouraged increased participation in community and social development. Through training and support to practice these values within their families, schools, and communities, the Foundation’s initiative has also helped reduce social exclusion by bringing together *madrasah* and secular school students, who rarely interact in their everyday lives, in training workshops and community development activities. After receiving training, trained students formed clubs within their schools, with support from teachers and school leaders. The clubs became platforms through which they identified challenges facing their communities, built connections with local government and civil society actors, and developed workable solutions.

After participating in The Asia Foundation’s training on good governance, Marjana Moni from Aminia Kamil Madrasa in Jessore realized her responsibility to society: she started supporting an 8-year old orphan girl named Mitu to continue her education at the same madrasah where Moni is a student. Mitu’s father left the family when she was one year old. Mitu’s mother admitted her to the madrasa, but died two months later. Moni mobilized friends to raise funds every month to pay for Mitu’s tuition. They are working to make a change.

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

In Dhaka city, approximately 2,000 schools and other institutions are used as polling stations. Before Dhaka city Corporation elections in 2015, The Asia Foundation mobilized youth volunteers to collect the geo locations of all polling stations (by collecting the longitude and latitude of the individual locations, along with a photo) to create a database and mobile mapping application to aide citizens in finding where to go to vote. The information has since been used to inform mapping projects such as the www.citycorpelections.org website. The polling station data has also been used to visualize election results and reported cases of electoral violence and fraud.

The Foundation has also engaged youth in two elections-focused “hackathons” during which young programmers

competed to provide useful and exciting online/mobile applications to assist voters in accessing information about elections. DHAKATHON, the first-ever hackathon for youth on elections in Bangladesh, held immediately prior to Dhaka and Chittagong City corporation elections in 2015, increased the awareness of participants about the city corporation elections, while they developed online applications to provide free and transparent information to all voters. The Foundation’s second hackathon was held in December 2015 for the municipal elections. Through these initiatives, the Foundation is demonstrating ways that youth can be aware of the electoral process and their civic rights and responsibilities, while contributing to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh using the latest technology.



25 women receiving training from TNTR handicrafts

These four youth created TNTR Handicrafts (named by combining their initials), a training center in Mymensingh for underprivileged women to train them on making handicrafts. The first group of 25 women were selected for a three-month training on handicraft production based on their financial situation, whether they had been victims



Bags produced by women trained at TNTR Handicrafts

of violence, and their eagerness to work. After the initial training, these motivated young leaders connected with retailers in Dhaka and Chittagong, where they are now selling the products produced by women trained through TNTR Handicrafts for 150 taka per piece. Looking toward the future, the creators of TNTR Handicrafts are now working to get the initiative registered directly under the Women Affairs Department of Mymensingh, with a long-term goal of creating a better platform for underprivileged women to work with dignity and honesty and become independent and self-reliant.



The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

BRINGING DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES TO SCHOOLS

Under a five-year program with the National Parliament, The Asia Foundation piloted the Parliament in Schools initiative, a civic education course grounded in the curriculum titled, *Amader Desh, Amader Shangshad* (Our Country, Our Parliament), to teach 14-16 year old students about the democratic process in Bangladesh. As part of the course, students from three schools in Dhaka participated in mock elections and established mock parliaments. Students from five schools also visited the National Parliament where they participated, for the first time in Bangladesh, in interactive sessions with members of parliament and observed parliamentary sessions.

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