

Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices in Bangladesh

Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices (PRODIP) is a five-year, \$23.2 million program funded by the United States Agency for International Development. It is being implemented by The Asia Foundation in partnership with the State University of New York Center for International Development (SUNY-CID). PRODIP is designed to improve the effectiveness and transparency of the parliament, while also increasing the constructive participation of civil society in the public policymaking and legislative process.



Working closely with the Honorable Speaker of the Parliament, leading Members, and other international donors, PRODIP will assist the Bangladesh's national parliament, the Jatiyo Shangshad (JS), to become more effective, transparent, and participatory by building institutional capacity in the areas of policy development, legislation, oversight, and representation.

In the three decades since independence, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in extending basic infrastructure, social services, and economic opportunities to a population of more than 145 million people. While the economy has grown at a consistent pace for the last decade, the benefits of economic growth have been slow to extend to the population at large. Weak governance has stood as the greatest obstacle to broad-based national development and poverty reduction, through a combination of factors that include partisan political tensions and lack of public participation in decision-making.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played an important role in national development efforts. In recent years, some organizations have demonstrated an interest in governance through involvement in election observation, voter and civic education, and select advocacy initiatives. With its growing experience and national outreach, civil society has

the potential to engage more substantively at the national and subnational level through policy research and advocacy and parliamentary monitoring and oversight functions. But while national-level business groups have begun to represent member interests on select policy issues, private sector advocacy strategies are still dominated by traditional patron-client leverage approaches, leaving more modern, more effective “win-win” approaches largely untapped. Despite significant improvements in the quality of investigative and specialty reporting, partisan political loyalties often intrude in media reporting, leaving considerable scope for improvement. Most importantly, relations between civil society, the private sector, and government are constrained by historical tensions that have undermined the prospect of good-faith working relationships and genuine public-private partnerships. Partnerships of this kind have contributed to parliamentary and other governance reforms in Indonesia, the Philippines, and other Asian countries that share many similarities with Bangladesh and where CSOs have increasingly recognized that legislative bodies matter and have found constructive ways to engage with them.

Expectations changed with the 2008 election and the convening of the present parliament. Voter and civic education initiatives challenged past



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campaign practices, while first-time candidates addressed substantive development issues and spoke of necessary changes in parliamentary practice, procedure, and substance. The new government moved swiftly to convene parliamentary committees, and many members of parliament (MPs) have signaled a commitment to political and parliamentary reform.

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Working closely with the Honorable Speaker of the Parliament, leading MPs, and other international donors, PRODIP will assist Bangladesh's national parliament, the Jatiyo Shangshad (JS), to become more effective, transparent, and participatory by building institutional capacity. This includes the areas of policy development, legislation, oversight, and representation, and focuses activities on MDG-related issues. To improve law-making, the project will facilitate colloquia, forums and public hearings; sponsor workshops on policy development and bill drafting; and develop in-house, as well as outside capacity for expert legislative research and policy support. Parliamentary committees will be strengthened with technical assistance in the areas of policy development and legislative oversight, giving particular attention to MDG-related issues. PRODIP will also work to increase opportunities for constructive constituent participation in policy development and the legislative process, while exploring innovative ways to serve constituents and open new channels of communication with parliament.

PRODIP is designed to achieve two important objectives: 1.) an effective and open parliament and; 2.) a strengthened role for civil society in political governance, by assisting both in their pursuit of a higher, overarching national objective: achievement of the millennium development goals. Under the guidance of the honorable speaker of parliament and leading members of parliament, PRODIP has joined with other international programs to assist the National Assembly of Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad in preparing and carrying out a strategic plan for parliamentary development to result in:

- Strengthened parliamentary committees.
- Facilitate the development of more effective public policy and legislative initiatives.
- Improve budget analysis capacity and better oversight of executive branch.
- Increased public awareness of the functions of the parliament and the legislative process.
- Updated administrative procedures and organizational structure.
- Improve information systems and infrastructure.

PRODIP's support in realizing these important results is focused on policy research, legislative technical assistance, and institutional strengthening activities linked to achieving the MDGs. By working in this way, PRODIP will advance the MDG agenda, while also making long-term improvements in the capacity of parliament.

To flourish, democratic governance requires an active and informed citizenry at all levels of society. To achieve this result, PRODIP is providing technical assistance and training to Bangladesh CSOs involved in MDG-related activities to improve their institutional capacity to participate more effectively in the political process, particularly as it relates to policy development and the work of parliament. Through small grants, the program is creating opportunities for CSOs to study and disseminate information on key MDG issues, participate in public hearings and oversight activities at the national and local levels, develop public advocacy skills and initiatives, and educate the public on democratic processes and practices. Women's organizations and those representing disadvantaged and marginalized people are among the first CSOs to be engaged by PRODIP, a consideration consistent with the emphasis that the MDGs place on empowering such groups and meeting their special needs

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 17 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.



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