



## May 2020

**In this issue:** COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence during Covid-19, InAsia Podcast, ASEAN Microbusinesses, Afghan Disability Survey, Books for Asia in the Pacific, Myanmar, Nepal, and Rohingya Refugees.

### [Addressing the COVID-19 Crisis](#)

As [COVID-19](#) continues to spread, The Asia Foundation is responding. The pandemic poses significant challenges for public health and safety, economic security, governance, and political stability across Asia, and the Foundation is refocusing its work to respond to these multiple threats. The challenges of COVID-19 are severely impacting the communities the Foundation serves, and we are pursuing creative responses to urgent needs—especially for women, the poor, and other vulnerable communities for whom COVID-19 poses exceptional risks.

Read about how The Asia Foundation is [Funding the Frontline: Rapid Response to the Gendered Impacts of Covid-19 in Asia](#) and [Coronavirus Dispatches](#) for updates on school systems across Asia and from Afghanistan.

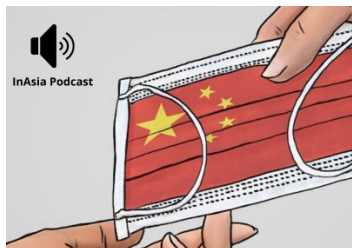
## Recent Events

**VIRTUAL EVENT – May 20 – [The Hidden Pandemic: Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Asia during Covid-19](#)** provided insight on the rapid increase in [domestic violence](#) as extended lockdowns and fear, anxiety, and economic uncertainty exacerbate gender inequalities and disrupt services for survivors. The Asia Foundation’s Senior Director of Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality, [Jane Sloane](#), moderated the webinar with more than 120 attendees. Expert panelists [Ramani Jayasundere](#), the Foundation’s Director of Gender and Justice Programs in [Sri Lanka](#); Anna Yang, Team Lead for the *Nabilan* program in [Timor-Leste](#); and [Paula Uniacke](#) and [Priya Dhanani](#), Senior Program Officers for [Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality](#), led an interactive discussion on the need to prioritize inclusive violence against women prevention and response strategies and to support long-term programming in partnership with local organizations.



## Technology and Development

### [The Asia Foundation Launches InAsia Podcast](#)



The Asia Foundation launched its new InAsia podcast series that provides insights and analysis on Asia’s development. This month’s episodes feature robust discussions on [Covid-19 and China’s Soft Power Ambitions](#), [A Survey of Disabilities in Afghanistan](#), and [Tannery Troubles in Bangladesh](#). [Stream the InAsia Podcast online](#), or download it to your phone from the [App Store](#) or [Google play](#).

## Southeast Asia's Microbusinesses Go Digital to Compete



*The Asia Foundation's Go Digital ASEAN initiative builds digital literacy among underserved microentrepreneurs.*

As the ten [ASEAN](#) member states move towards greater economic integration, they remain severely constrained by a growing digital divide. This is more pressing as economic shocks of the [Covid-19](#) pandemic reverberate. Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are the lynchpin of Southeast Asia and are situated at the center of the digital divide; they account for 99 percent of businesses in several key sectors, employ 80 percent of the workforce, and contribute 50 percent of the region's GDP. While many men in urban hubs are connected, women and youth in rural communities are trapped on the fringes of the digital economy. This divide between the under-connected and the hyper-digitalized will only deepen during the pandemic, exacerbating inequalities and sapping the potential for recovery and growth. It is essential to mobilize digital tools to secure a foothold for underserved MSMEs in the digital economy. To this

end, civil society organizations must leverage existing networks to quickly reach microentrepreneurs. It is also essential that governments, businesses, and NGOs pool resources and experience to shrink the digital divide. The Asia Foundation's [Go Digital ASEAN](#) initiative is an example of such efforts. In partnership with Google, the project will train up to 200,000 rural MSMEs and people in marginalized communities, 60 percent women, with the skills and tools to expand [economic opportunities](#) and minimize the negative impacts of the pandemic. With economies temporarily crippled across the globe, digital literacy training has the potential to [bridge the digital gap and ensure inclusive growth](#) and resilience as Southeast Asia confronts Covid-19.

## **Notes from the Field**

### Disability Survey is Afghanistan's First in 15 Years



*An enumerator collects data for the Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan.*

Four decades of war and continued legacies of political instability, conflict, and fragility in [Afghanistan](#) have resulted in one of the world's largest populations of [people with disabilities](#); these Afghans are uniquely vulnerable. In this context, policymaking is hindered by the lack of reliable empirical data and has failed to result in tangible improvements for Afghans. In 2019, The Asia Foundation moved to fill this empirical void with the [Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan](#) (MSDA). The MSDA is the first such survey in Afghanistan in 15 years, and the first ever to collect representative data on the prevalence and distribution of disabilities across the country as well as capture the broader context. The MSDA surveyed 14,290 households, representing 111,641 Afghan adults and children. Findings exposed that almost 80% of adults have some form of physical, functional, sensory, or other impairment. The prevalence of severe disability increases with age and varies across ethnic groups and geographic regions. However, marginalized groups are disproportionately affected; women, divorced or widowed adults, and uneducated or unemployed persons experience higher incidence of disability. Physical

disabilities and mental health problems among adults are more likely to be caused by the ongoing conflict and warfare in the country. These sobering findings illuminate unprecedented healthcare challenges and the importance of peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan. The MSDA provides up-to-date, objective, and comprehensive data that should be used to [inform policy](#) and interventions that account for the needs of the most vulnerable when working to address the myriad of challenges in Afghanistan. Listen to The Foundation's new [InAsia Podcast: A Survey of Disabilities in Afghanistan](#).

### Books for Asia Partners with the U.S. Embassy in Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu

The Asia Foundation's [Books for Asia](#) program recently donated 2,384 books as part of a new partnership with the US Embassy in Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu. The books arrived in March and will be distributed to over 30 institutions including libraries, schools, learning centers and government offices, as Covid-19 precautions allow. This shipment is only the latest in an ongoing effort to promote education, literacy, and skills building in the [Pacific](#). The Asia Foundation's Books for Asia program currently delivers a quarter million books a year to thousands of institutions in 18

countries. Beyond donated books, The Asia Foundation's [Let's Read](#) free [digital library](#) provides children's books in nearly 30 languages and is the only one of its kind in the region.

## Program Highlight

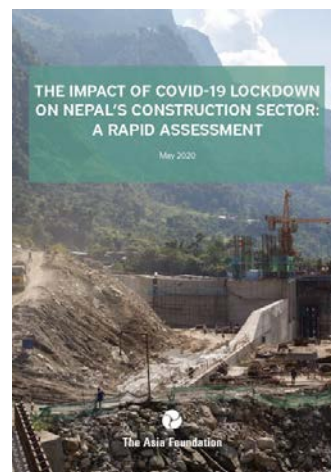
### [Smart Peace Roundtable Discuss Myanmar's Conflict and Reforms in Civil Governance Sector](#)

This month, the [Smart Peace global initiative](#) convened its first virtual roundtable of policy, practice and research experts in its effort to address the challenges of building peace in some of the world's most fragile states. The Asia Foundation's Director of [Conflict and Fragility](#), [Adam Burke](#) and Program Advisor Tabea Pauli contributed their expertise on [Myanmar's](#) recent conflicts and necessary reforms in the civil governance sector. Burke and Pauli discussed The Asia Foundation's applicable research that assesses failed peacebuilding efforts and identifies specific opportunities to support future peacebuilding initiatives. UK government officials, representatives from embassies, and various international organizations joined the roundtable, during which the global initiative premiered a short film "[Smart Peace: collaborating for adaptive peacebuilding.](#)" that highlights the consortium's work in three contexts and features Adam Burke discussing the Foundation's work in Myanmar.

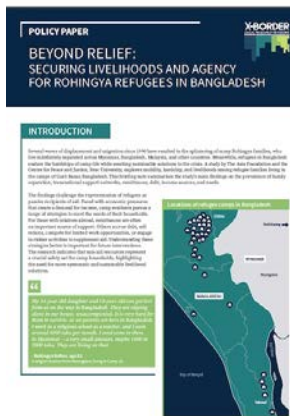
## Publications of Interest

### [The Impact of Covid-19 Lockdown on Nepal's Construction Sector](#)

The nationwide [lockdown](#) ordered by the Government of [Nepal](#) on March 22 left an estimated 4.4 million daily wage earners and their employers with roughly one day to plan their next move. As close to two hundred thousand migrant workers began journeys home from Kathmandu and surrounding areas during this 24-hour period, construction sites in Kathmandu and other urban centers came to a sudden halt. This paper assesses the challenges faced by the construction sector in Nepal since the lockdown and provides recommendations for a [path forward](#).



### [Beyond Relief: Securing Livelihoods and Agency for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#)



Several waves of displacement and [migration](#) since 1990 have resulted in the splintering of many Rohingya families, who live indefinitely separated across Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and other countries. Meanwhile, refugees in [Bangladesh](#) endure the hardships of camp life while awaiting sustainable solutions to the crisis. A study by The Asia Foundation and the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University, explores mobility, hardship, and livelihoods among refugee families living in the camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Research findings challenge the representation of refugees as passive recipients of aid and provide insights to the range of strategies camp residents employ to meet the needs of their households. This policy paper highlights the crucial safety net non-aid resources provide and identifies the need for more systematic and sustainable livelihood solutions. Learn more about the Foundation's work in [conflict and fragile conditions](#) and the [X-Border Local Research Network](#).

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Informed by six decades of experience and deep local expertise, our work across the region addresses five overarching goals—strengthen governance, empower women, expand economic opportunity, increase environmental resilience, and promote regional cooperation.