REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Despite relatively open electoral systems and high levels of public participation, emerging democracies in South Asia have struggled to consolidate. Institutional flaws, weak governance, and entrenched interests have prevented democracy from delivering for all citizens.

Across the region, CIPE is working with business and civil society leaders, journalists, academics, and reform-minded officials to effect needed change in a range programmatic areas. CIPE partners are providing reliable information to citizens on public policy issues, encouraging policy dialogue, building the capacity of business associations, and leveling the playing field for women entrepreneurs. Projects include strengthening mechanisms of public and corporate governance to help stem corruption, empowering women through business associations, and bringing together new and independent voices to key policy debates in the region’s consolidating democracies.
Nepal has not held local elections for nearly 15 years, due to the long-delayed process of finalizing the country’s constitution after a decade of civil war. Without local elected bodies, governance has been weak, accountability is low, and average citizens have not fully benefitted from peace and democracy. These issues were underscored by the ineffective government response to a devastating 2015 earthquake. The disaster also dealt a serious blow to Nepal’s weak economy, which is overly-reliant on tourism. In response to these challenges, CIPE has been working for the last five years with Samriddhi, the Prosperity Foundation, which has grown from a youth entrepreneurship training organization to become the country’s leading independent think tank.

With CIPE support, Samriddhi is providing fresh ideas to improve governance, boost accountability, reduce bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption, and introduce much-needed reforms to build a more conducive regulatory climate for entrepreneurship. Samriddhi has found a way to bring together voices from across Nepal’s political spectrum for honest and productive dialogue about ways to rebuild the economy. In this way, Samriddhi is building greater support for democratic policymaking.

Nepal: Samriddhi has found a variety of ways to disseminate its public policy recommendations to promote an inclusive and prosperous democratic society that respects the rule of law, including through policy papers, roundtables, conferences, and online platforms. Samriddhi holds regular meetings to discuss issues with government officials, business leaders from the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, representatives from the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and a wide range of political party leaders. In mid-2014, Samriddhi recommended that the Government of Nepal create a separate entity to develop and operate the country’s electricity grid. In 2015, the Government
responded by forming the National Transmission Grid Company (NTGC) to do just that. Complementing those efforts, Samriddhi is working with a number of stakeholders to build greater public understanding about the benefits of reforming Nepal’s state energy monopoly. Finally, CIPE has connected Samriddhi with a think tank partner in Pakistan that is helping Samriddhi build a government accountability tool to track progress on implementing long-promised energy sector reforms. In these ways, Samriddhi is fostering policy solutions to encourage economic growth and prosperity in Nepal.

South Asia Women’s Regional Network: CIPE launched a peer-to-peer network of women’s chambers and associations across South Asia to share best practices, exchange effective organization management skills, and learn advocacy techniques. As a result of that initiative, network members are generating real results for women entrepreneurs in their countries. For example, in Pakistan, the South Punjab Women’s Chamber in Multan and the Peshawar Women’s Chamber formed a coalition to advocate successfully for an increase in the commercial loan repayment period for artisans – many of whom are women – from 180 days to 360 days. In Sri Lanka, the Women’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce (WCIC) successfully advocated the passage of gender-sensitive policies to provide greater support for women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The new Sri Lankan government not only welcomed WCIC’s recommendations, quickly passing the new SME policy, but also, recognizing the need to increase the role of women in business, asked WCIC representatives to sit on a policymaking board at the Ministry of Industry. In the coming year, CIPE will provide further training, technical assistance, and small grant funding to the organizations in this network, so that they can continue to make a difference for the women entrepreneurs of South Asia.

Many women in South Asia face a range of formal legal barriers, as well as restrictive social and cultural norms, that limit their full economic and civic participation. Often, the region’s women entrepreneurs are relegated to the informal sector, due to laws that make it difficult for them to obtain finance, own or use property as collateral, or have access to markets. In response, CIPE is building the capacity of women’s chambers of commerce and business associations to be a stronger voice in demanding more supportive policies to create a level playing field for businesswomen. In 2013, building on prior work with women’s chambers in Bangladesh and Pakistan, CIPE launched a network of South Asian women’s business associations, which has grown to include 11 organizations from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Women business leaders from Bhutan have also taken part in the training and networking sessions under this program.

To date, CIPE has organized eight workshops, where participants shared best practices, exchanged information, and received in-depth training on governance, financial and staff management, communications, membership development, and advocacy. In 2015, CIPE provided these organizations with the chance to put their skills into practice, through small grants to support targeted advocacy initiatives in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, with mentorship from partners in Bangladesh and India.
The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) strengthens democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform. CIPE is one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy and an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Since 1983, CIPE has worked with business leaders, policymakers, and journalists to build the civic institutions vital to a democratic society. CIPE’s key program areas include enterprise ecosystems, business advocacy, democratic governance, and anti-corruption & ethics.

For more information, please contact CIPE at: southasia@cipe.org

The programs described in this publication are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.