

Farewell & Thank You from Asia Catalyst as We Wind Down Operations After 15 Years

Pandemic shows public health & human rights challenges can and must be met with strong local responses. Asian civil society groups need global support.

(Bangkok, October 18, 2021) – After 15 years of groundbreaking work to strengthen community-based activism and train Asia-based activists on health and human rights advocacy, Asia Catalyst will close its doors in late 2021.

While the decision comes with some sadness, we are extremely proud of those who have completed our rights documentation and advocacy trainings and what they have built. They have sparked local movements to stop police violence against sex workers and transgender people. They have organized women living with HIV, LGBTQIA people, and people who use drugs to demand no one be denied healthcare and harm reduction.

Across Asia, there is an infrastructure and energy devoted to serving marginalized people today that simply did not exist 15 years ago. We see this in the throngs of activists who filled the streets for months early this year in Myanmar and last summer in Bangkok. It is evident in the number of globally recognized Asian leaders in public health, as well as the new community groups, and regional networks devoted to empowering people living with HIV, sex workers, LGBTQIA people, people who use drugs – and all those unfairly criminalized, denied healthcare, subjected to violence, and targeted by police.

“Asia Catalyst was founded with the idea that we could support the emerging civil society in China so it’d be robust and ready for the fight ahead,” said Karyn Kaplan, Asia Catalyst’s executive director. “We embrace evolution and change. Our work is rooted in the belief that change need not come from the outside. It can and should be led by those on the frontlines of the local and global public health crises we’re trying to address.”

Decolonizing movement-building and directly investing in leaders in Asia have always been at the heart of what we do. Across Asia, there are brilliant activists who continue to lead the charge for equality and justice, and who are fighting for a seat at the table for vulnerable communities. The Asia Catalyst board and staff continue to stand in solidarity with all those who have inspired us, including:

- The activists in China who took part in the first ever Transgender Leadership Program and are fighting to make trans people more visible and accepted;
- Empower Foundation-Thailand, leading the movement to decriminalize sex work; and
- The ethnic minority opium farmers in Shan State, Myanmar, who have banded together to demand fair and just drug policy;
- The students in Yangon engaging university administrators to create a school culture that embraces people of different gender identities; and
- The women in rural Myanmar pushing local officials to take complaints of gender-based violence seriously and make sure survivors get legal support.

The activists we have worked with are lifelines in their communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic they have stepped up courageously and effectively. They will continue to carry the torch.

Asia Catalyst’s work – training and connecting grassroots activists, teaching organizational management so innovative ideas continue to thrive, making sure Asian NGOs have an audience at the United Nations and with global funders – will be carried forward by civil society leaders themselves. With the rise of authoritarianism and repression in Myanmar, Thailand, China, and other countries where we’ve worked, this work remains vital. Asia Catalyst encourages global funders to ensure activists have the financial support they need to work intersectionally, across issues and borders, to raise their voices for justice.

“I believe, as my colleagues in China often point out, that people will never give up demanding their human rights, however they can and wherever they can,” said Meg Davis, who founded Asia Catalyst in 2006. “The desire for equality and accountability can never be suppressed. And as we’ve seen with COVID-19, issues of transparency, the rights to freedom of association and expression are critical to upholding everyone’s right to health, globally.”

Over the next few months, Asia Catalyst will put our energy into making sure our partners are as well-positioned as possible. We will talk with the foundations that supported us and make sure they remain dedicated to groups on the ground. And we will launch our Asia Catalyst Legacy Project, a health and human rights online platform where all the lessons, resources and tools we have developed over the years will live on.

Working in partnership with Drexel University’s [Jonathan Mann Global Health and Human Rights Initiative](#), we are turning our signature *Know It, Prove It, Change It* grassroots human rights curriculum, developed alongside Asian activists courageously fighting for change, into an online course and video library, free to anyone around the globe.

We are so grateful to everyone who has contributed to our global rights activist family. And we are deeply excited to watch new leaders define the path forward to a world with less suffering and more justice. Thank you.