

## Empowering ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice

By Maria Christina S. Dueñas and Olivier Serrat

- **Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.**
- **Officially introduced in 2002 after a bank-wide reorganization, ADB-hosted CoPs were empowered under the Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011.**
- **Interventions ranging from budget increases to integration in ADB operations have helped affirm CoPs as the heart and soul of knowledge generation and sharing in ADB.**

### Background

Professionals working in a particular field often converge, hoping thereby to both impart and enrich their knowledge. This is also true also of staff in the Asian Development Bank.

**First CoPs.** Informal peer groups emerged in ADB in the 1990s but only in 2002 did they find their footing in ADB's organizational structure. That year, a bank-wide reorganization gave birth to 19 sector and thematic networks intended to promote cross-fertilization of knowledge across departments.

In the first few years of their operation, the committees and networks were hampered by many factors, which included the following:

- **Non-voluntary membership**—departments nominated staff and required them to devote 15% of their time to the networks.
- **Mixed responsibilities**—the networks not only provided think-tank type services in their respective fields but also performed executive functions such as trust fund management.
- **Restricted committee chairmanship**—while they may not have been recognized champions in their field, representatives were sometimes appointed as committee chairs.
- **Inadequate Resourcing**—the networks were not resourced with adequate budgets and the work of members was not recognized in staff performance reviews.

In 2005, the recommendations of an independent panel commissioned to assess the effectiveness of ADB's reorganization prompted a consolidation of the networks. Their number was reduced to 10, and the term "community of practice" or CoP entered the picture.

**Reconstituted CoPs.** The new batch of CoPs fared better. Membership became voluntary, chairmanship of committees was based on technical expertise, and their functions focused



To celebrate World Water Day 2011, the Water CoP organized a walking tour of the Pasig River Environmental Rehabilitation Project in Metro Manila, Philippines.

mainly on sector and thematic work. Naturally, the 10 CoPs progressed at different speeds, and the more sophisticated among them began to feed into debates on sector or thematic directions, offer advice on staff skills mix and competencies, and conduct knowledge generation and sharing activities. The CoPs as a group also started receiving an annual budget of \$100,000, shared equally among them and spent on strategy review activities, conference participation, and conduct of studies.

A 2008 review of the CoPs revealed that they had travelled far, but not far enough. Clearer roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis ADB's operations were called for. Interchangeable use of the terms "committees," "networks," and "CoPs" had led to considerable confusion about the meaning of each. Resources were still meager.

Things turned for the better, and at a much faster rate, when the empowerment of CoPs was specified as a key pillar of the Knowledge Management Action Plan, 2009–2011.

### Approach

In July 2009, ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda approved the Knowledge Management Action Plan, 2009–2011 to ensure that ADB's knowledge remains of the highest quality and relevance. The action plan committed results in four pillars:

- Sharpening the knowledge focus in ADB's operations
- Empowering communities of practice
- Strengthening external knowledge partnerships
- Further enhancing staff learning and development

The second pillar highlighted CoPs as an instrument to promote knowledge generation and sharing in ADB. To set a benchmark for the coming years, ADB surveyed the performance of CoPs in 2009. This first-ever survey revealed that CoPs helped build relationships and benefited daily work. However, they also needed to reach out to all members, especially those in ADB's resident missions and representative offices; align their work programs with Strategy 2020, ADB's long-term strategic framework; and concretize their roles

in designing country partnerships strategies and lending products.

To address the survey's recommendations, ADB introduced interventions to boost CoP effectiveness. The main interventions are as follows:

- **Higher budgets.** In 2010, individual CoP budgets rose from about \$10,000 to roughly \$100,000. It is hoped they will increase further in 2012.
- **Streamlined guidelines for sector and thematic reporting.** Detailed guidelines formalized the feedback process of CoPs to inform ADB's annual development effectiveness reviews and work program and budget frameworks.
- **New peer review guidelines.** The guidelines legitimized the CoPs' participation in the peer review process and enabled country partnership strategies and lending products to benefit from the operations-based inputs of CoP members.
- **CoP work in performance reviews.** ADB's staff performance review templates were modified to incorporate knowledge work. Beginning 2011, CoPs also have the opportunity to provide performance feedback about a staff as an "input supervisor."
- **CoPs as partners in recruitment.** Acknowledging that subject matter experts in CoPs best understand what skills are needed in their field, ADB has, since mid-2010, arranged for CoP chairs, co-chairs, and practice leaders to participate in screening and interviewing prospective staff.

## Results

Between 2005 and 2011, four more CoPs were established, bringing the total number of ADB-hosted CoPs to 14. Over the 2 years of action plan implementation, CoPs demonstrated they have become the heart and soul of knowledge generation and sharing in ADB.

**Strengthening internal relationships.** Since late 2009, the number of collaborative initiatives between and among CoPs have been increasing. They include joint knowledge-sharing events and joint knowledge products. At year-end gatherings, introduced in 2009, CoPs highlight their accomplishments, exchange lessons, and explore areas of collaboration. The year-end gathering of 2011 will have them share lessons learned with one another.

**Building knowledge and expertise.** CoPs now help prepare key ADB documents such as the operational plans for education, food security, transport, and water. In support, regional sector studies build the knowledge and expertise of their members. The CoPs themselves also have taken an active role in developing the technical capacity of members by conducting or arranging training courses tailor-made for them.

**Expanding outreach.** Outreach to stakeholders has greatly improved with CoP members providing advice on projects managed by their peers. CoPs have also forged stronger links with ADB's development partners and stakeholders by acting as technical experts and focal points on key issues. Moreover, they have shared good-practice studies on education, tool kits for urban transport development, e-newsletters and video documentaries on water, and other engaging and creative materials.

The second survey of CoPs, undertaken in 2011, revealed considerable improvements across the board. Naturally, challenges persist. For example, CoPs might need to crystallize their functions better around filtering, amplifying, investing and providing, convening, community building, and learning and facilitating. CoPs can carry out several of these functions simultaneously but there are trade-offs: each function requires specific capacities, skills, resources, and systems. Overlooking trade-offs can drive CoPs away from their original role.

Nevertheless, however they develop, CoPs can rely on ADB's continued support; the potential from CoPs is just too great. They can more decidedly

- Promote innovative approaches to address specific development challenges.
- Develop, capture, and transfer good practices on specific topics by stimulating the active generation and sharing of knowledge.
- Link diverse groups of practitioners from different disciplines and are thus intertwined with ADB's organizational structure.
- Serve as an ongoing learning venue for staff (and outside practitioners) who share similar goals, interests, problems, and approaches.
- Respond rapidly to individual inquiries from members and ADB clients, audiences, and partners with specific answers.

### For further information, contact

Maria Christina S. Dueñas, Knowledge Management Officer (cduenas@adb.org) and Olivier Serrat, Principal Knowledge Management Specialist, Asian Development Bank.

### Related Links

ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice website  
Timeline of ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice  
ADB Resources for Communities of Practice  
Survey of CoPs  
Knowledge Management Action Plan, 2009-2011  
Communities of Practice 101  
ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice: Driving Knowledge Activities

The Asian Development Bank is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region.

[www.adb.org/knowledgeshowcases](http://www.adb.org/knowledgeshowcases)

The Knowledge Showcases highlight innovative ideas from ADB technical assistance and other knowledge products to promote further discussion and research.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of ADB or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent.