

Interactive Stories of Sustainable Development

By Marie Christine G. Montoya and Olivier Serrat

- In early 2009, ADB embarked on a first organization-wide knowledge-harvesting exercise to collect a blend of recollections and reminiscences through storytelling. It gave birth to two much-appreciated contributions that stimulated in-house appetite for use of narrative techniques in various contexts and applications.
- In late 2010, a follow-up interactive, audiovisual project was conceptualized to promulgate further the use of storytelling to elicit, capture, store, and share knowledge.
- The potential of the new multimedia platform to energize staff recruitment, induction, and training; add color to conferences and other events; enrich education; and boost ADB's profile externally was immediately recognized.

Setting

In March 2009, long tables covered with blank sheets were laid out in ADB's library, beckoning staff to record special memories and mark out ADB's crossroads over the years. The intention was to (i) draw out and package tacit knowledge of struggles and triumphs working for development in the Asia and Pacific region, and ADB's evolution as an institution, to help others adapt, personalize, and apply it; (ii) preserve institutional memory; and (iii) build organizational capacity. A blend of staff recollections and reminiscences formed and became the basis for the well-regarded publication titled *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* (also referred to as "The Yellow Book") and its audio companion *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*.

The two products marked ADB's first endeavor at knowledge harvesting through storytelling. ADB took time to listen to itself and staff liked what they heard. In short, the Yellow Book and sound composition whetted ADB's appetite for storytelling in various contexts and applications.

Then, in August 2010, ADB mapped out sector and thematic milestones in its journey toward sustainable development—the ADB Sustainable Development Timeline. The brochure framed a select record of progress by ADB and its member countries across



The ADB Sustainable Development Timeline landing page



The ADB Historical Milestones page

the many dimensions of sustainable development, e.g., social, economic, and environmental. But it was decided from the onset that the timeline should amount to more than just a sheet of paper. In fact, after the success of the preceding knowledge-harvesting exercise, it seemed natural to take things further and represent the timeline in a more versatile medium—an interactive, audiovisual platform that would allow users to browse not just data and information but also, more importantly, evocations of events. In December 2010, ADB initiated the long and arduous task of morphing the ADB Sustainable Development Timeline brochure multidimensionally.

Approach

Platform. The ADB Sustainable Development Timeline would host an easy-to-access and organic repository of interviews, short documentaries of projects shot on location, sounds (as in *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*), B-roll footage, animations, graphics, voice-overs, videos, statistics, photo essays, etc.

Research. With the ADB Sustainable Development Timeline brochure setting the compass for content, project staff rummaged through ADB reports and publications from 1966, archived films and stills, online research material, and sundry other references to scope the context of milestones. By the time research and writing had ended, the project's reach had grown to four timelines: the existing ADB Sustainable Development Timeline, and timelines of world events touching sustainable development since 1948, historical highlights of ADB since its establishment, and ADB-hosted communities of practice from the 1990s. (The World Sustainable Development timeline was subsequently published with an eye to Rio+20, scheduled on 20–22 June 2012.)



Rajat M. Nag, Managing Director General, speaks on 5 decades of ADB history.

Production. Then came the interviews! Some 72 ADB staff—past and present, senior and junior—were invited to a comfortable setting and their experiences of particular events or projects mined and preserved through video. This yielded 11 hours and 30 minutes of film, later categorized and tagged in multiple topics.

Location shoots inside ADB premises—both in headquarters and resident missions—followed. Visits to Indonesia and Viet Nam were also made to interface with beneficiaries and put on view associated landmarks and landscapes. The trips delivered high-quality interview and footage that made for compelling documentaries.

Knowledge Organization. The wealth of knowledge generated by the exercise demanded systematic organization. Using Adobe Flash Player to house the structure for the product, project staff arranged the material by year, theme, region, community of practice, ADB president, and more. The effect is a personal experience: each user can click or scroll through videos, pick a story of interest, and probe content in nonlinear fashion.

Challenges. A multimedia creation of 300+ videos does not come easily. In the early stages, working around rigid business processes slowed progress. Next, staff were sometimes noncommittal, which affected scheduling. Then, after transcription and tagging, hours were spent sifting through collections to showcase stimulating content.

Way Forward

In December 2011, on the occasion of ADB's 44th anniversary, the introductory video of the ADB Sustainable Development Timeline was shown to ADB staff who enthused about it.

A series of longer demonstrations took place soon after, all generating pleased responses. Many saw the potential of the videos, either used collectively or individually, for learning and development, recognizing firsts, safeguarding institutional memory, and a myriad other uses. ADB's human resources division, for example, suggested that the product be showcased during induction programs for new staff, noting that the storytelling mode eases learning and retention of critical knowledge.

Some of ADB's external partners like the University of the Philippines in Los Baños and Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) were impressed when elements of the timeline were presented to them during their field trips to ADB, and wanted to see more.

More content is being generated to expand the range of the product. Through the briefings, ADB realized that gaps need to be filled e.g., deeper coverage of subregions, even greater variety in topics, additional inclusion of women and new staff, etc.

Conclusion

The ADB Sustainable Development Timeline video sprang from creativity and innovation, method, and no small amount of work. But collaboration and open-mindedness in the organization powered performance.

For ADB to have embarked on such an initiative proves how much it values the knowledge, experience, and insights of its professionals and wants to share that. Through this, ADB hopes to better shape the future, with respect to the past.



Nessim Ahmad and Javed Mir, chair and co-chair of the community of practice on the environment, talk about recent developments in the sector. Olivier Serrat, principal knowledge management specialist, recounts the Tonle Sap Initiative.

For further information, contact

Maria Christine G. Montoya, Knowledge Management Analyst (csgarcia@adb.org), and Olivier Serrat, Principal Knowledge Management Specialist (oserrat@adb.org), Asian Development Bank.

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