



Spotlight

Interview with Ms Shinjini Mehta, Infrastructure Specialist,
Pacific Liaison and Coordination Office, Pacific Department
at Asian Development Bank

PUB: Please tell us about yourself and your company / organisation.

Shinjini: I have worked on the planning, design, and implementation of infrastructure projects across South Asia, Vietnam, Africa and Vanuatu. With a background in architecture and urban development planning, I first got interested in water supply and sewerage infrastructure when I visited Delhi's largest water treatment plant as a part of our University group project. I remember looking at the inlet and the giant clariflocculators and dreaming about working in water supply provision for large cities one day. My dream came true when I worked in the UK on the planning of water supply and sewerage infrastructure for 4 African before finally, moving to Mozambique to work on an AusAid funded water supply and sanitation program in Maputo, Mozambique. I joined ADB as a Young Professional in 2014, where I was assigned to the South Asia Urban and water team, where I got to work on complex water and sewerage projects across Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and India. I now work in the Pacific Department and will be relocating to Vanuatu shortly to work on infrastructure projects in the country. Super excited about the in-country role which will see me building closer client relationships and working hands on, on different infrastructure projects in the field.

About ADB: The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is committed to achieving a prosperous, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable Asia and the Pacific, while sustaining its efforts to eradicate extreme poverty in the region. Established in 1966, it is owned by 68 members —49 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries to promote social and economic development are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance. ADB maximizes the development impact of its assistance by facilitating policy dialogues, providing advisory services, and mobilizing financial resources through co-financing operations that tap official, commercial, and export credit sources. Our work encompasses infrastructure development, assistance to social sectors, policy development, budget support, regional cooperation, trade finance, and private sector operations, among others.

PUB: The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to economies and societies. What is ADB doing to address such disruptions in Asia?

Shinjini: We are supporting our developing members in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak through a full suite of finance, knowledge, and partnerships support. In 2020, ADB committed \$16.08 billion to address the pandemic in our developing member countries (DMCs), part of a \$20 billion package announced in April 2020 to help our DMCs to mitigate the severe impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and address the urgent needs of the sick, the poor, and the vulnerable. Of the \$16.08 billion commitment, \$12.9 billion is helping support government budgets in about 35 countries to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, with a focus on boosting safety nets for the jobless and helping the poor and vulnerable groups including women and children, while \$2.95 billion is supporting private sector projects and \$0.2 billion financing is for emergency COVID-19 assistance through the Asia Pacific Disaster response fund and Technical assistance. Of this total figure, \$10.19 billion is in quick-disbursing budget support from the COVID-19 Pandemic Response Option. ADB also committed \$2.3 billion for trade finance, supply chain finance and microfinance programs. Technical assistances of \$134.17 million is being used by 41 countries to address their most urgent needs, including the procurement of personal protective equipment, and diagnostic and medical equipment. Front line workers are also receiving training, while hospitals and laboratories are being strengthened. ADB is closely coordinating activities with partners including other IFIs, bilateral institutions, and the UN system. Building on our extensive knowledge work, ADB has been delivering up to date assessments of the pandemic's economic impact, providing policy advice and other resources to tackle many pressing development challenges. (ADB COVID-19 Policy Database- webpage link <https://covid19policy.adb.org/>). In our home base of Manila, ADB's management team joined in to deliver critical food supplies to struggling households.

To continue the fight against the pandemic the ADB has also launched a \$9 billion vaccine initiative—the Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility (APVAX)—offering rapid and equitable support to its developing members as they procure and deliver effective and safe coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccines. The APVAX provides a comprehensive framework and resource envelope for supporting developing Asia's vaccine access, using two complementary components. The Rapid Response Component will provide timely support for critical vaccine diagnostics, procurement of vaccines, and transporting vaccines from the place of purchase to ADB's developing members. The Project Investment Component will support investments in systems for successful distribution, delivery, and administration of vaccines along with associated investments in building capacity, community outreach, and surveillance. This may include such areas as cold-chain storage and transportation, vehicles, distribution infrastructure, processing facilities, and other physical investments. The component may also be used to develop or expand vaccine manufacturing capacity in DMCs. ADB financing for vaccines will be provided in close coordination with other development partners including the World Bank Group, World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX), GAVI, and bilateral and multilateral partners.

ADB is also making available a \$500 million Vaccine Import Facility to support the efforts of its developing members to secure safe and effective vaccines, as well as the goods that support distribution and inoculation. The facility is part of ADB's Trade and Supply Chain Finance Program. AAA-guarantees available through the program's vaccine import facility will mitigate payment risks and facilitate import of these goods. This will employ the same eligibility criteria on vaccines as COVAX. Cofinancing with private sector partners could result in the Import Facility supporting \$1 billion in vaccine and related imports within a year.

As circumstances evolve, ADB will continue to meet the needs of our developing members and work together to building back better for a long-lasting recovery.

PUB: Are there any shifts in ADB's areas of focus in recent years? Would you be able to share about these shifts, especially in the areas that you are responsible for?

Shinjini: The focus under our new corporate strategy called Strategy 2030 has aligned our development work to providing integrated and holistic solutions, stepping away from traditional models of siloed sector-based infrastructure delivery. We are piloting nature-based solutions in our projects, exploring synergies between water production, wider resource management and pollution protection issues and harnessing opportunities to leverage blue and green finance for infrastructure development. In the water sector, we are piloting innovative approaches like smart water management and water utility reforms coupled with traditional project loans. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on social protection and social sector projects (such as health and education) has been heightened and is expected to continue in the coming years. In recent years, ADB has also dedicated itself to enhancing Innovation in our workplace and our operations, which includes the use of high-level technology interventions. An Innovation Hub is currently being set up at our headquarters in Manila to facilitate collaborative innovation across teams and will also aim to bring in cutting edge solutions from global thought leaders.

PUB: ADB aims to strengthen the capacity of its member countries to solve development problems using innovative solutions. How can global solution providers partner with ADB to improve access to water and sanitation in the countries that ADB is active in?

Shinjini: ADB hosts an annual business opportunities fair inviting the participation of service and solutions providers, consultants and contractors who are interested to be involved in ADB projects. The fair provides a good overview of ADB operations, opportunities for bidding for contracts and provides a platform for networking. ADB Ventures was initiated in 2020 as a venture capital investment and technical assistance platform, to help highly scalable early-stage technology businesses expand in the emerging markets of Asia and the Pacific so their solutions can help meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

The vision is to build Asia-Pacific's largest technology platform, crowding in \$1 billion of commercial investment by 2030 and adding value to invested companies by facilitating access to Asian Development Bank expertise, operations, and networks. High tech companies are encouraged to apply for funding from the Investment Fund and Seed Program.

In addition, my advice is to keep a look out on our website for recent opportunities and apply to our tenders and consulting opportunities via our consultant management system.

PUB: The Singapore Water Academy has a broad alumni network, which presents opportunities to co-create solutions that address the world's water challenges. How can the SgWA alumni collaborate with ADB in this regard?

Shinjini: ADB has a very active urban and water sector peer groups which meet regularly to share knowledge, discuss best practice, and brainstorm on solutions. We often invite experts to deliver talks on their technology, company profiles or any other interesting work that they are doing so that this facilitates a wider dialogue in the bank. SgWA alumni can reach out to the Water Sector group (WSG) and Urban Sector group (USG) if they would like to hold a brown bag for the ADB audience. We also frequently organize (virtual) conferences and webinars, for which we are on the lookout for speakers and resource persons. Being in touch with the USG and WSG (based in our Sustainable Development and Climate change department) can help open opportunities for knowledge dissemination and collaboration.

We also advertise latest consulting assignments on our website, which alumni can apply to through the Consultants Management System (CMS). I would encourage alumni who are keen to provide consulting services to ADB to register an account on ADB's CMS. Reaching out to the wider ADB community is also a good way to keep engaged and hear of any opportunities. Our IT department also frequently launches global technology hackathons- in 2020 ADB and AIM launched a Global Hackathon for Digital Ideas to Respond to COVID-19 Crisis. In short, there are several opportunities to collaborate. These can be found on our website - although I must warn that it is an absolute minefield of information and can take hours to go through. My advice- optimize the keywords in your searches! Looking forward to opportunities to collaborate with SgWA alumni on solutions that address the world's water challenges.