■ In Profile – Claudia Buentjen and Hanif Rahemtulla, Asian Development Bank (ADB)

Until retirement in May 2020, Claudia worked as the Principal Public Management Specialist at the Asian Development Bank. Claudia is a macroeconomist / public sector reform specialist with more than 20 years of experience in project management, advisory services and research in more than ten developing countries in the Asia & Pacific region. Claudia holds a Dr. rer pol. in international economics and a Diploma in business administration and economics from the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany.

Hanif works as a Senior Public Management Specialist at the Asian Development Bank Manila. Hanif is internationally assigned specializing in public financial management, public investment management, fiscal decentralisation and service delivery in East Asia and the Pacific. Hanif Rahemtulla is a national of the United Kingdom. He obtained his Doctoral degree from University College London (UCL) and Postdoctoral from McGill University, Canada.

Dear Claudia, dear Hanif, it is a pleasure to interview you today. Thank you for taking the time, particularly considering your recent retirement Claudia and the great challenges COVID-19 currently poses to all of us.

Claudia, for many years you have held the position of Principal Public Management Specialist at the Asian Development Bank (ADB). In addition, you also served as ADB's Focal Point for DeLoG and were a very active member. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your extraordinary commitment!

Hanif, you are now taking over from Claudia as ADB's Focal Point for the DeLoG Network. We are excited to welcome you onboard and to benefit from your insights and your new perspective.

Claudia, the DeLoG Network has existed for over ten years now. You got to see the Network grow and develop over time. Therefore, we would like to start our interview today by asking you what benefits the DeLoG Network provided for your work at the ADB? What were your personal highlights and what will you miss most regarding your role as DeLoG Focal Point?

Let me first thank you for your kind words. I have greatly enjoyed the cooperation with DeLoG and have developed lasting friendships with colleagues from other organizations. The interaction with experts from other organizations during the DeLoG annual meetings and several ADB hosted Asia and Pacific-focused events have been wonderful opportunities to step back from the day-to-day work and jointly reflect on emerging global trends related to decentralisation and local governance and their impact on the Asia and Pacific region.

We have also used DeLoG knowledge platforms to share ADB knowledge products and accessed the knowledge products of other organizations. We have coordinated the participation of ADB staff in the DeLoG online course on decentralisation and co-operated with DeLoG in the development of a new online course that focuses on the Asia region and the SDGs. It was a pleasure to represent ADB as a member of the DeLoG steering committee and I hope I have been able to contribute to making the network sustainable and able to contribute to the challenges of the future.

Claudia, your career at ADB spans over 20 years. What developments did you observe regarding the field of governance and what advances were made concerning local governance and decentralisation during this time? What trends do you think we should be aware of currently and how should the DeLoG Network respond?

In the mid-90s, governance was a very recent field that wasn´t even taught at universities. Since then, the understanding of governance concepts, key governance indicators, and the importance of institutions has greatly improved. The COVID-19 crisis has reconfirmed one of the key lessons of the past 20 years, that the quality of governance of a country and the level of trust in its government impacts on the effectiveness of government policies. For instance, in South Korea and Germany the highly decentralised nature and the strong trust in government has allowed governments to respond to local outbreaks in a targeted way, thereby giving space to lift restrictions on the economy in less affected regions. DeLoG could contribute to a better understanding of how multi-governance systems have contributed to effective COVID-19 responses. This could help design responses in developing countries that are very much needed to ensure that the development gains of the past decades will not be wiped out by the current crisis.

I have been involved in several policy-based loans and technical assistance operations designed to support decentralisation and local governance reforms in countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Similar to other public sector management projects, decentralisation projects have proven to be "high risk, high reward" undertakings. In ADB, about 50% of public sector management projects fail, while suc-

cessful reforms have resulted in lasting social and economic improvements. The understanding of success factors has improved and over the years there has been greater awareness of the importance of open and accountable government and evidence-based decision making. This was greatly facilitated by digitalisation and the emergence of networks such as the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, the Open Government Partnership and the subnational finance and investment initiative of OECD. There seems to be scope for engagement of DeLoG in these important fields of work.

Let us now turn to you Hanif. You have just recently started your position as ADB's Senior Public Management Specialist. Like Claudia, we would like to ask you what challenges you believe that local governance and decentralisation efforts are currently facing and how does this apply to the Asia Pacific Region in particular?

Asia has seen many decentralisation efforts since the early 1990s, and overall subnational levels of governments see a much higher degree of acceptance and appreciation. But then we also need to acknowledge that for many nations in Asia the notion of a centralised locus of power is quite strong. I am confident that the ongoing debate on the 2030 Agenda and on how to localise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) helps to bring local governments back into focus as national governments do realise that many of the targets of the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved without the sub-national level. The ongoing discourse on Localising SDGs has clearly an impact in Asia: Indonesia has developed an elaborate legal and institutional framework for bringing the regions into the national SDG strategies, we see local government associations becoming more vocal on this issue, Nepal is taking part in UCLG's effort to facilitate the creation on sub-national reports on SDGs. Especially in Asia with the high rates of urbanisation, but also with the high vulnerability of countries to the effects of climate change, sub-national governments must fully take part in efforts to realise the 2030 Agenda.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has had and will have a grave impact on the world for some time. The Asia Pacific region has been hit particularly hard. How is ADB responding to the crisis Hanif and what role will local governments have to play to overcome the crisis in the region? How has the crisis impacted and changed discussions concerning decentralisation and local governance?

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, ADB has tripled its response to the COVID-19 pandemic from the initial $6.5 billion to $20 billion and has approved measures to streamline its operations for quicker and more flexible delivery of assistance. The ADB is working hard with its Developing Member Countries (DMC) to programme new support initiatives, or to re-programme ongoing operations so that they can adequately contribute to national response strategies. Like elsewhere, the crisis is a test for the functionality and effectiveness of the legal, fiscal and institutional arrangements within a multi-level governance system: Which level has the legal mandate to respond, and how? Are the fiscal and human resources where they should be to make responses effective? Are channels of communication and coordination from local to national level functioning? It is probably too early still to have a good understanding what the crisis

will mean for the discussion concerning decentralisation and local governance, because countries are still in the phase of responding to the immediate effects of the outbreak. But once the immediate health threat is contained, I am sure countries will evaluate their response mechanisms and see where public health systems, but also the system for public policy making can be improved.

Currently, ADB is cooperating with DeLoG to revise DeLoG's E-Learning Course on Decentralisation and Local Governance. In addition, we are playing with the idea of organisation a joint webinar on the role of local governments for responding to the COVID-19 crisis with a special focus on the Asia Pacific Region. Why do you believe that these type of online learning formats are necessary and how do participants benefit, not only in times of Corona?

Digital tools and instruments for learning, but also for working, have been around for quite some time now. I think the current crisis just forces us, like everybody else, to actually use them on a much large scale. ADB staff has been on home office mode for some weeks now, and it is only with those digital tools that we are able to continue the work. To a large extent, there is simply no alternative. Using digital tools consistently now and for an extended period of time will allow us to appreciate their value but will also allow us to see their limitations. ADB has been setting up e-learning courses on different subject matters for some years already, and I am confident the instrument will expand further because it gives flexibility to participants, is cost-effective and time-effective. It will not become the only form of learning, but it will become much more prominent. Regarding this specific e-learning offer on Decentralisation, Local Governance and Localising SDGs in Asia, I hope that we can expand access by ADB staff, but also by Government officials working with us, to up-to-date knowledge and expertise on these issues, which are closely inter-related. We try to make it also practical in the sense that we use a lot of country and ADB experience to illustrate the different aspects e.g. of fiscal decentralisation, or functional assignment. And in terms of methodology, we want to make it inter-active and encourage participants to share among themselves, to learn from each other's own experiences.

We would like to close our interview by asking you Hanif what expectations you have for your work with DeLoG and how you hope to profit from the Network?

It seems to me that DeLoG is a unique network and platform, because it brings together a wide range of stakeholders dealing with local governance issues. It is not an advocacy group (such as UCLG and its regional chapters), it is not a formal organisation with a Chapter and a formal structure. I like the focus on sharing of knowledge and joint learning because we know that while there is some common ground in the concepts of decentralisation and local governance, the application in each country is different. And understanding these differences and their implications are important and require this kind of horizontal exchange between the like-minded. So, I hope to benefit from the access to knowledge and information which the network offers and will be happy to make such knowledge and information from ADB's work accessible to the other members of DeLoG.

Before we conclude, is there anything you Claudia or Hanif would like to add?

For ADB, it would be great to benefit from experiences that other members of DeLoG have made in supporting Localising SDG efforts. Being a financing institution, ADB focuses a lot on fiscal issues and issues of public financial management – here, learning from good examples on local (and participatory) planning and budgeting would help us to inform our regional departments and make them aware of such examples. We have also been supporting open government initiatives in the past - again, transparency and open data are important elements of good local governance and are part of public sector management reforms where we can learn from each other.

Thank you, Claudia, thank you, Hanif. Your answers have been very insightful.

Claudia, it has been great working with you. We wish you all the best for your upcoming endeavours and will miss your valuable inputs and contributions. Please make sure to think of us from time to time!