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Picturing development

The World Bank Group Archives photographic collection

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The World Bank Group (WBG) Archives stores over 217,000 feet of records created—or received—by the WBG since its establishment in 1944, making it one of the largest collections of development-related records in the world. Its holdings consist of a variety of media such as textual documents, photographs, maps, moving image and audio records. Within its mission to protect the institutional memory of the WBG and to provide public access to its records, the archives offers online access to a variety of information via the World Bank external website.¹ This paper will focus on the WBG Archives' photographic collection, and the ongoing efforts to make the photographs publicly available online. The collection holds over half a million images documenting field operations in member countries (projects funded through loans or grants), official loan signings, as well as other historic events and personalities. In addition to providing a brief overview of the photographic collection and its uses, this paper will address the challenges the archives encounters in managing and digitizing our still images.

Current uses of the collection

Historical photographs are in high demand, requested both by Bank staff and external clients for use in

communications, commemorations, presentations, and publications. The WBG Archives, with the long-term goal of providing access to the photographic collection through a self-service online platform, launched the online

Photo Catalog² in 2018. It was decided that the first series to be digitized and made available would be the historical project-related images, since this series provides documentary evidence of project sites, workers, local communities, and progress of economic

development in WBG member countries—those images that are most frequently requested. Mostly comprised of black and white images, this series offers a record of the World Bank's work in countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, between the 1950s to the 1980s. The images record the impact of World Bank projects on people in different countries around the world. Most were taken by photographers hired by the Bank; many were commissioned for promotional purposes to be used

in internal newsletters or reports prepared by the External Affairs Department. The External Affairs department was charged with maintaining relations with external groups and shareholders, such as the media, the public, the development community and member countries in order to broaden appreciation of the mission and work of the World Bank Group. Because these images were provided

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1. 'Tranquilino Flori and Felix Moreno, Ecuador, 1957' by World Bank Group/Paul Sanche is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

with captions and contextual information from the External Affairs Department prior to their transfer to the WBG Archives this series has offered a good starting point for digitization and cataloguing because it can be useful for metadata cataloguing and filtered searches.

To date, approximately 8,000 images—spanning 79 countries from Afghanistan to Peru—are available online for public access and download. On the site, photos are searchable by keyword, country, project number, topics, region, and decade. In addition to the WBG Archives' Photo Catalog, photographs are also linked to the Bank's Projects & Operations site,³ which provides information on the Bank's operational work: listing and providing contextual information about every development project in all member countries dating back to 1946. By linking the historical photos⁴ to the Projects & Operations site, project-related photographs can be viewed with the corresponding textual records and other financial information about the loan, or grant, providing a better picture of the project and its impact.

For the photographs, we use the Creative Commons NonCommercial ShareAlike (CC-BY-NC-SA) license⁵ in the spirit of the Bank's Open Archives⁶ and Open Development Agendas (Access to Information,⁷ Open Access⁸ and Open Data⁹). It is important to note that, although the majority of our photographic holdings include images taken by photographers hired by the Bank, a number of images may have been taken by other photographers, or other organisations and institutions, and we have not added a Creative Commons license to those. These photographs are found within our holdings and are included on the site for reference and research. Client requests for these photographs are referred to the creating or issuing institution. As the Photo Catalog is a work in progress, anyone searching for images not yet available on the site can contact the WBG Archives.¹⁰ The most recently digitized series of photographs, ranging from the 1950s to the 1980s, which are currently in the cataloguing queue but not published yet, feature images of annual meetings, staff activities, as well as portraits of former senior staff and executive directors.

Practicality of managing a collection

As the WBG Archives photographic holdings have never been catalogued and described in their entirety the strategic planning and budgeting for this initiative has posed

challenges. The total number of prints, slides, negatives, and albums is estimated to be over a half a million, accounting for the possibility of duplication. Examples of duplication are the print versions created from negatives, plus the negative strips themselves, which include near-identical shots, either of a sitter or of a scene. The strategic planning for a collection of this scope and size considered: the frequency of request; the conservation of vulnerable

formats such as the negatives; and resource requirements (human, financial, and technical). Beginning with the project-related photographs, since they are most in demand and available as negatives, was an obvious choice for the first selection. As we do not have in-house capability to digitize

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negatives in large volumes, a strategic partner aligned with our off-site records center services and who is an expert in digitizing older media formats was contracted to perform the digitization. They undertook this task within the secure space of the WBG Records Center and full custody of the materials by WBG staff has been maintained. The digitized versions were returned to us on hard drives, and were uploaded onto the network and the Archives' content management system (CMS), which links to the external site through an application program interface (API). Initially the metadata cataloguing was conducted by various contractors and staff when time permitted, but we soon realized that scaling-up this process with a defined workflow would increase the volume of catalogued material and improve consistency and quality through a built-in quality control step. Leveraging the data entry skills of our colleagues in the off-site WBG Records Center, further training was provided for cataloguing images. A four-day training session was delivered for five cataloguers to ensure they would be up-to-speed to work on this series. In addition, a cataloguing manual was created, which is regularly updated.

Once the digitized images are loaded into the CMS, the cataloguers can add the metadata via free text fields and drop-down menus. The International Press Telecommunications Council (IPTC) standard fields are already available in the CMS; however, customized fields were added to reflect the WBG taxonomy and a more robust keyword search and discovery capability. Cataloguing images related to the Bank and its development projects requires good knowledge of the institution's activities and the people who work there, as well as the vocabulary of the institution and the types of images in the collection.



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2. 'Man working on bridge, Gabon, 1961' by World Bank Group/John Moss is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



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3. Metal cylinder and worker, Austria' by World Bank Group is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



4. 'Meter reading course, Busan, Korea, 1980' by World Bank Group/Keum Yong Choi is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.
5. 'Learning how to weave, Bangladesh, 1978' by World Bank Group/Kay Chernush is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



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6. 'Acacia market, Colombia, 1974' by World Bank Group/Edwin G. Huffman is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



7. 'Woman carrying wheat, Damota, Ethiopia, 1975' by World Bank Group/Ray Witlin is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



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8. 'Train, Australia' by World Bank Group is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



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9. 'Loan Signing for Belgium Industry Project, March 1, 1949' by World Bank Group/Gretchen Van Tassel is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



10. 'Man pumping water, Lilongwe, Malawi, 1972' by World Bank Group/James Pickerell is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



11. 'New bridge construction, Mikongo, Gabon, 1967' by World Bank Group/Alain Prott/CIRIC is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.
12. 'Automobile manufacturing plant, Italy' by World Bank Group is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

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A considerable amount of time was spent on developing a thesaurus which would be helpful for the cataloguers to describe the photos when adding metadata and keywords. Although the taxonomy is still a work in progress, a basic set of terms has been added to the CMS which allows for more accurate and consistent description and search capability. The language inherent in the photograph captions is always considered when cataloguing, as well as the time and context in which the image was taken and originally captioned. The approach we use for the captions is to type them verbatim into the caption field, while creating a new title paraphrasing the information from the caption. Since most of the photos in the collection are untitled, we can create new titles using defined language, while allowing for the original caption to describe the photograph. Fortunately, it is not often that we come across terms or descriptions that would be deemed inappropriate today, considering that this series was described through the 1950s to the 1980s. But it is something that we are very mindful of in the cataloguing process within the context of an international organisation and the issues of equality, justice, diversity and inclusion. As we continue to develop the website, we are considering the addition of an explanation for the origin of the captions to clarify that they have not been written by the Archives team, but by External Affairs Department at the time the photograph was taken and processed.

Future uses and goals

The success of this ongoing digitization and cataloguing project has prompted us to consider further digitizing and cataloguing the significant audio and moving image holdings of the WBG Archives. This would include keyword search and downloading of sound clips and moving image for both Bank staff and the public via the site as well as internally through the CMS. Artificial intelligence and machine learning tools are currently being investigated in various use cases as well: metadata tagging via image recognition; auto-transcription; etc. As we continue to explore these use cases, we are also considering several questions such as: what out of the box tools are available for this purpose and how accurate and reliable are they? Can such tools be easily customized to meet our requirements and integrate with the CMS? What is required from subject matter experts to customize and train the application? Other considerations are understanding the need for human quality control to catch erroneous tagging, and what is needed to maintain and customize the tool in the future to address different series of materials and new categories of images.

We are also thinking about how to add metadata to photographs lacking contextual information and are considering a crowdsourcing approach. This would be an engaging way to add information to unidentified images; and could encourage public participation with

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photograph-related projects and with the WBG Archives. We recently took part in two social media activities on Instagram¹¹ and Flickr¹² for International Archives Week¹³, and we hope to promote social media engagement to boost awareness and sharing, especially in promoting WBG historical milestones and events.

How can the collection help member countries and the public at large in the future?

We continue to explore ways in which this incredible collection, together with public access to the Bank's archival holdings,¹⁴ can boost knowledge and research in development. Many of these images portray extreme poverty and hardship, but also economic development, community engagement and improvement to peoples' lives; they offer a reminder of the people and places that were (and perhaps still are) ultimately affected by the Bank's work. Providing online access to this collection can inform research on gender,¹⁵ social development¹⁶ and climate change:¹⁷ key themes and challenges being faced world-wide that are captured through images of people, communities and their land, and provide the visual language of the Bank's history and its contribution to the story of economic development. As archivists at the World Bank Group, we have an incredible and unique opportunity to open this documentary evidence to the world and offer a full picture of the Bank's work to eliminate poverty and promote shared prosperity worldwide.

Author's profile

Shiri Alon, a Canadian national, has an MLIS from McGill University (Montréal, Québec, Canada) and currently works as an Archivist in the World Bank Group Archives in Washington DC, USA. Shiri is part of the Access to Information team and manages the historical photo collection project.

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