

A Life in Development: Advice from Development and Humanitarian Practitioners

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By: Caitlin Mittrick, AAD Program Intern

The buzzword for international studies students all across the country: development. But what does a career in international development truly entail? What sacrifices are required in order to dedicate oneself to advancing economies and civil societies around the world? These seasoned development practitioners reflect on their experiences throughout their careers. The challenges they faced, the people they encountered, the goals they set and exceeded empower students to envision themselves in this field and share lessons learned for anyone hoping to impact a lasting difference.

Following long careers in the foreign service, working extensively in the fields of development and humanitarian assistance, American Academy of Diplomacy members share their vast depths of knowledge to promote understanding of this career path. For some, the choice to follow an international career was clear; Ambassador Dawn Liberi, former U.S. Ambassador to Burundi, developed her interest following travels in high school.



ALONZO FULGHAM



ANNE AARNES

After traveling around the world throughout high school and seeing how U.S. policies were implemented abroad, she decided she “wanted to be on the designing end” of these policies. This decision jump-started her tenacious career with USAID, and ultimately, with the U.S. Department of State. Former Acting Administrator of USAID Alonzo Fulgham, having grown up in a relatively isolated community in Massachusetts, relied on the evening news to provide exposure to all parts of the world. This is what inspired him to join the Peace Corps following college and serve in Haiti. For other Academy members, including President of Refugees International Eric Schwartz, the path to development was not as clear. Graduating from NYU Law, he says, “I knew I didn’t want to practice law, and I didn’t want to join the Foreign Service;” however, following a series of internships throughout

graduate school, he came on as a Program Director at Asia Watch. For him, he says this first job was the most important in shaping his career path. Similarly, Ambassador Mike Klosson reflects this uncertainty. Following graduate school, he recounts that “I was not clear on what I wanted to do.” After passing the Foreign Service Officer Test, he expected to stay in the Foreign Service “for 4 or 5 years.” This earlier prediction turned into a 30-year-long career. The common thread in their stories: career plans will naturally grow and evolve over the course of one’s formative years.

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From their time spent abroad working with NGOs and grassroots organizations and trying to implement changes on-the-ground, U.S. Foreign Service Officers encounter challenges on both sides. “If you’re in the U.S. government, working with grassroots organizations can engender a lot of suspicion,” recalls Klosson. Specifically, he notes that people in different countries may be less likely to “throw open their arms” to the U.S. government or an organization with strong



MICHAEL KLOSSON

perceived ties to the U.S. government. He suggests that working with an NGO in some cases may help circumvent this issue, but in the case of Save the Children, where he worked as the VP for Policy and Humanitarian Response, he says, “to the extent that Save the Children is perceived as a U.S. NGO affects their ability to get things achieved on the ground.” Similarly, coordinating with Washington to obtain oversight causes problems when trying to work with grassroots-level organizations. Ambassador Dawn Liberi mentions that one of the challenges in USAID is funding these organizations directly because, she argues, in many cases they are more focused on performing the work at-hand rather than “giving us the kinds of records that we need” in order to obtain congressional oversight. Part of the problem, says Anne



DAWN LIBERI

Iarnes, former Career Minister with USAID, is that Capitol Hill is “much stricter with the budget [for USAID] than for the military” and that “[US]AID has been grossly understaffed for the last 20 years.” A common theme throughout these discussions is the importance of establishing strong relationships across both sides of the fence in order to overcome these challenges and accomplish mission goals.

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For example, Aarnes recalls “making very close friends with NGOs and government counterparts.” Similarly, during her time with USAID, former ambassador to the Gambia and Haiti Pamela White says that she personally made it a priority to “get to know the people in Washington pulling the purse strings.” She further emphasizes that “human relationships are everything.” These lessons serve as an important reminder to those seeking a career in international development that person-to-person connections are a useful diplomatic tool to be employed to overcome challenges that may be faced throughout your various posts.

Many who have built careers in international development have cross-cutting experience in both the public and private sectors. Notably, Fulgham’s experience in the public sector with USAID “made [him] more empathetic towards the private sector” and vice versa, he states. Schwartz, having been Assistant Secretary for Population, Migration, and Refugees within the State Department



ERIC SCHWARTZ

and now president of a humanitarian refugee NGO, states, “I’ve never had a single idea with how to most effectively make a difference.” While there are numerous benefits to working within the federal government, including “having significant and substantial influence in the actions you can take,” there are also downsides, such as feeling “compelled to take positions that don’t reflect your view.” Here, Schwartz specifically refers to the fact that U.S. Foreign Service Officers are sworn to promote U.S. interests abroad as defined by the administration at the time. At an NGO, Schwartz mentions that “you have much greater license and liberty to reflect where your heart is.” Ambassador Klosson reflects similar views, saying that, at the Department of State, the “policies are set above your pay grade,” but within the NGO world, “you’re part and parcel of shaping what the policy is.” This isn’t to say that NGOs are free of bureaucracy; in fact, Ambassador Dawn Liberi emphasizes the fact that “no matter

where you go, there is bureaucracy, but you have to decide what your tolerance is.” In truth, both the public and private sectors are big players in international development, and anyone seeking a career in development should feel comfort in knowing that lasting change can be implemented in a variety of approaches, usually with collaboration between the two sectors.

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Another important topic shaping several of these discussions was the importance of fieldwork and the role it played in members’ careers overseas. Ms. Aarnes recalls meeting a young boy while visiting an oral rehydration center in Pakistan and “seeing his eyes slowly reopen” after being fed spoonfuls of the rehydration solution. “It was one of my absolute best experiences,” she says. Similarly, Ambassador Pamela White recounts building strong relationships with the women in the countries she worked in. Working on a vaccination program in Mali, she discusses one trip out to the main village and meeting with the mothers. These women described their hesitancy to vaccinate their babies, saying “last time we let our babies get vaccinated, they got sick,” and conveying an overall sense of distrust for the male USAID vaccinators. After discovering that these vaccinators distributed French-language pamphlets, a language unspoken by the community, to outline the side-effects of the vaccines, White reorganized the program, employing female vaccinators and distributing culturally-appropriate pamphlets.

As a result, the program reached a 75% vaccination rate within a short period of time. Of course not everyone in the development sphere focuses on the fieldwork and, as Ambassador White notes, many get "bogged down by bureaucracy." However, her experience and the experiences of other interviewees show the importance of leaving the office and conversing with communities to achieve mission goals. For anyone seeking a career in international development, Academy members have a wealth of advice to offer. Fulgham advises to "always be honest in collaborating" and to "operate with a level of integrity," while Aarnes recommends to "travel and see stuff on the ground" throughout your future career. Similarly, several members recommend having a diverse skillset avoiding tunnel vision with one specific role or organization.



PAMELA WHITE

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“Ambassador Liberi says, “the more cross-cutting you can be, the better,” and Ambassador Klosson recommends “casting a broad net.” It’s important to “reflect on what motivates you, what you like to do, and the kind of people you like to do it with, instead of thinking about a particular position,” Klosson elaborates.

Another common theme that was revealed through these discussions was the importance of establishing a strong network of supportive individuals and mentors. Schwartz, having held several internship positions throughout undergraduate and law school, emphasizes the importance of “having networks of people to support you in your effort.” For young women seeking a career in the foreign service, and especially in development, Pamela White suggests to “be buddies with all the women.” From her experience, establishing these connections helped her to navigate the foreign service. She also recommends “try to find the best mentor,” as having someone to help guide you through your professional development journey makes all the difference. Overall, members at the American Academy of Diplomacy have a positive outlook on the contributions of future generations to international development projects, and they wish those seeking careers in international development the best of luck in future endeavors.