Finance, Trade and Development

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Looking back on the 15 years that have transpired since my Mansfield Fellowship in the government of Japan's (GOJ) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Diet, I am thankful for the many lessons learned about collaboration between our two countries. One has proven to be particularly important. For those who work successfully on USG (U.S. government)-GOJ collaboration, you surely know it well. For those who aspire to do so, this essay may possibly be helpful.

First, a bit of background. At that time in 1997, Japan and the U.S. were the world's biggest "Overseas Development Assistance" (ODA) donors. ODA is mainly focused on supporting the sustainable and equitable economic development of poor countries. Many of us ODA practitioners believed that the relative economic strength of our two economies during that period of relative world peace could provide a great opportunity to tackle critical ODA issues like poverty, HIV/AIDS, food security, environmental destruction, etc. Many of us thought the U.S. and Japan could partner to play a strong global ODA leadership role. I believed deeply in this, and the Mansfield Foundation approved my Fellowship to promote it. I was set to learn and try becoming a bridge between the two ODA programs.

My Mansfield experiences taught me that the ODA programs were different in many ways, but I believed our governments could take advantage of complementarities to collaborate effectively. Examples of differences included "process" (less transparent approvals in the GOJ, but greater execution efficiency than the USG), innovation (less input from younger/creative people in the GOJ, but longer-term, steadier implementation of plans), and leadership (plentiful leadership in the USG, but sometimes fewer GOJ leaders led to better directional cohesion).

I also learned about transitions that our ODA programs were undergoing. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was beginning to move from a decentralized decision-making model to one more directed by headquarters. JICA was beginning to move in the opposite direction. USAID had largely uncontested authority over ODA implementation, but it was beginning to dissipate among other USG agencies, especially the State Department. The GOJ ODA program

was traditionally highly-influenced by MOFA and domestic government agencies in Tokyo, but it was moving toward greater leadership in JICA and consolidation with its ODA partner, the Japan Bank for International Construction (JBIC).

Despite the differences in character and direction of the two bilateral programs, I believed we could learn much from each other to develop a stronger partnership to improve our separate and joint ODA efforts. I tried to learn, promote mutual understanding, and demonstrate the benefits of collaboration. I worked hard on joint efforts between JICA and USAID. I wrote articles and an extensive report on this topic, and made a formal presentation to MOFA.

Let's "fast-forward" time between then and now. Some significant changes have occurred:

- Due to the tragedy of 9/11, the GWOT (Global War on Terror) seized the USG's priorities, and significantly altered our foreign policy. Combating terror trumped other priorities, and collaboration efforts prioritized a "coalition of the willing" to support GWOT instead of other goals including poverty, food and the environment.

- Resulting from the USG's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our ODA budget was dominated by the responsibility to "nation build" these two countries and support GWOT allies including Pakistan. The emphasis on collaboration was therefore mainly focused on countries working in these GWOT priority areas.

- The U.S. and Japanese government budgets have been squeezed, and ODA has become increasingly scrutinized and influenced by domestic politics. As a result, collaboration between our two programs has become more difficult.

Sadly, the "golden moment" when the world was in relative peace and our two countries had budget surpluses to invest in solving the world's critical economic and social development issues disappeared. National security displaced development. Budget surplus was replaced with debt.

The world continues to change, and our relationship with Japan does as well. These changes affect our willingness and ability to collaborate. Given this inexorable change, what lesson might there be for those interested in collaboration between the U.S. and Japan? The most recent chapter in my relationship with Japan provided a good insight.

Last year, I was requested by the USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to participate in the USG's Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to support recovery from the devastating Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami. Deeply

affected by the televised images, I jumped at the opportunity to serve, but knew that this would be very different from my previous DART experiences. Despite the massive destruction, I did not think that the second most-developed economy and the most disaster-prepared country in the world needed the food, shelter and health services that DARTs normally provide. They didn't. So instead we facilitated technical services that we believed could be helpful, including assistance on nuclear radiation health/safety, hazardous waste management, monitoring of radiation levels, diagnostics and robotics. Though well-intended, this effort was politically complicated, and the risks of creating difficulties for the GOJ were significant. To understand the best way to collaborate, I benefited from guidance provided by trusting relationships formed fourteen years prior during my Mansfield Fellowship. Language skills and knowledge of GOJ structure/operations were helpful; however, personal bonds of friendship were by far the most valuable assets.

So what lesson do I draw from this latest chapter in collaboration and the many years since my Fellowship? Simply, in a world that changes quickly, where opportunities come and go, and in which political complications exist between our two countries, one thing is particularly helpful for collaboration—durable bonds of trust and friendship. Though favorable policy and budgets may help, nothing can substitute for strong human relations. These bonds are the best support for meaningful collaboration at all levels. The USG does not make such personal relationship-building with staff of foreign governments an explicit priority. This is understandable; however, they significantly increase the chance for inter-governmental collaboration success with Japan. And on a personal note, they have also made my experience so much more enjoyable.

Alfred Nakatsuma participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Agency for International Development from 1996–1998. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. He also completed a placement in the office of the Honorable Koji Kakizawa, LDP Member, House of Representatives. He just concluded an assignment as Director of the Office of the Environment at the U.S. Agency for International Development in Indonesia.