Finance, Trade and Development

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For me, 2010 will always be an extremely memorable year. In June of that year, I received the news that I was selected as a Mansfield Fellow. In September, two weeks after I began Japanese language training, I got married. Since then, my life's experience, both personally and professionally, has grown exponentially. I will be forever grateful to the Mansfield Foundation and to my ever-patient husband for supporting me through what has proven to be the most important personal and career development experience I have ever had.

As an employee of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), my interest in the Mansfield Fellowship stemmed from the opportunity to intensively study Japanese, and then to have the opportunity to live and work in Japan. Although USAID is the U.S. government's major foreign assistance implementing agency, as a civil servant based in Washington, D.C., opportunities for long-term overseas work assignments are relatively rare. The U.S. and Japan are in the top five in terms of Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding to developing countries; however, information sharing, coordination and collaboration occurs with more regularity at the local, field office level. Having the opportunity to work in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)'s headquarters in Tokyo, and to gain in-depth knowledge of Japan's approach to ODA policy-making and implementation and build relationships with Japanese government counterparts seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Looking back, the experience was more valuable than I ever could have imagined.

In March 2011, Japan experienced the world's biggest earthquake and tsunami tragedy in history. At that time, I and the other Fellows were in the final months of language training in Washington, D.C. and were busily preparing with our families for our departure to Japan. For several days that stretched into weeks, it was unclear what the future would hold for Japan, both in terms of the immediate disaster and the growing nuclear containment situation. After many weeks of uncertainty, the situation began to improve, the Japanese government reaffirmed our participation and we were able to resume our preparations; however, there was still some lingering uncertainty regarding nuclear safety issues. We all spent time researching the situation, consulting with family members, and in the end, all five Fellows decided

to continue with the Fellowship and come to Japan. As a result of the disaster, Japan's political, budget and policy priorities shifted; however, this also gave me the unique opportunity to focus some of my Fellowship activities on learning more about Japan's disaster response and post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts in the Tohoku region, as well as participating in volunteer activities to help the region recover from the tragedy.

My first placement was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), in the International Cooperation Bureau. In Japan, MOFA provides policy and budget direction regarding ODA, although JICA does have input into the overall policy-making and budget process. In the U.S., the Department of State and USAID submit an annual joint budget to Congress, which lays out priorities by region and country. Recently, USAID reinstituted its policy function and has also re-opened a budget office, which interfaces with the State Department regularly. In terms of broad policy and geographic priorities, Japan's focus is on economic development primarily in Asia, while USAID's development approach is couched in its diplomatic and defense priorities, with a large percentage of the budget going to African countries and the Middle East. Overall, I found USAID and JICA's priorities very complimentary in terms of sectoral and geographic focus, which could support additional opportunities for meaningful collaboration going forward.

At JICA, I had the opportunity to work in the Africa Department and Industrial Development and Public Policy Department/Governance Group. I traveled with JICA colleagues to Kenya, Ghana and Bangladesh, to learn more about JICA's projects in the field and investigate opportunities for collaboration. I also participated in a training session for Ethiopian Finance Ministry officials on local administrative budgeting and planning, held at JICA's training center in Nagoya. Through all of these experiences, I was able to experience first-hand how Japan delivers foreign assistance, see the relationships between Japan and various developing countries up-close, and understand in more depth Japan's approach to ODA. One of the most interesting things I learned was regarding JICA's training focus, which sometimes brings government officials from developing countries to Japan for study tours with Japanese local government officials to learn about various public administration topics, such as implementation methods of tax collection, long-range planning, and budgeting. This approach has its roots in Meiji Era Japan's focus on gathering knowledge from developed countries and integrating best practices from around the world. By providing representatives from developing countries the opportunity to experience Japan first-hand and learn from the experience of Japan as well as to share their own experience, the training truly becomes a joint venture and two-way in nature.

After completing my placement at JICA, I had the honor of working in Diet Member Itsunori Onodera's office. Representative Onodera is from Kesennuma city in Miyagi Prefecture, an area that was devastated by the recent tsunami disaster. A very important fishing and port city, Kesennuma is rebuilding with the help of local NGOs and other partners. During my placement, I was able to travel with Representative Onodera to Kesennuma and Minami Sanriku, visit with local officials and residents and witness the resilience of the Japanese spirit in the face of trauma and adversity. It was a very humbling experience.

In my final placement, in UNIQLO (a well-known Japanese clothing manufacturer)'s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) unit, I was able to participate in a weekend volunteer trip with other UNIQLO employees in Tohoku. In addition to the generous financial support and clothing donations UNIQLO provided to Tohoku residents immediately after the tsunami disaster, the CSR unit has entered into long-term partnerships with five established non-profit organizations to provide ongoing community development support to the region through 2015.

I returned to Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2012 and am hopeful that I can utilize the substantive knowledge, networks and cultural as well as work-related experiences I have gained as a Mansfield Fellow to further the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship, especially in the area of international development cooperation. I look forward to having the opportunity to share my experience with my USAID colleagues and working to promote closer coordination and collaboration with our Japanese counterparts in the future.

Amanda J. Van den Dool participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Agency for International Development from 2011–2012. During her Fellowship year in Japan, she served in full-time placements in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Fast Retailing/UNIQLO Co. LTD., and the office of the Honorable Itsunori Onodera, LDP Member, House of Representatives. She currently is a Development Assistance Specialist in the Office of Donor Engagement at the U.S. Agency for International Development.