

Transcribed interview with Nyrah and Ms. Bryn Sakagawa. Ms. Sakagawa is a senior development officer of USAID, and has over 20 years of experience in international development spanning over 6 countries.

**Although Ms. Sakagawa references her work with USAID; she is being interviewed as an independent individual, not as a representative of the organization.*

NYRAH

So I'm starting off, obviously, I know that you worked with USAID and I've done my research.

I know that you also sort of focused a lot on Global Health.

So I was wondering if Global working, global health has always been an area of interest for you growing up?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So I guess it became an interest to me around the time I was in college.

So like maybe in college and like right after college I joined this program.

It was a volunteer program in Indonesia and I was teaching English, and through that program I started working on an HIV AIDS project.

And so because I was working on that, that's when I really became more interested in public health and working internationally.

NYRAH

Right.

I also know that prior to working with USAID, you were a Foreign service officer.

So what inspired you to make the move from working with the Foreign Service to working with USAID?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So the USAID actually has a Foreign Service, so I'm a Foreign Service officer with USAID.

NYRAH

OK. I see.

MS. SAKAGAWA

And it's basically like being in the State Department.

So it's like being a foreign service officer for the State Department.

And I would say the difference for us is that the State Department focuses more on reporting and working with American foreign policy interests and supporting Americans in other countries, and the USAID focuses on the development aspect.

As you were doing your research, there's what they say about USAID and the State Department and the Department of Defense is that we're like 3 legs of a stool.

So the State Department covers foreign policy, The Department of Defense covers security and military, and USAID covers development - And so that's the part that I work in.

NYRAH

Right.

Is there anything specifically that made you hone in on development as compared to the other, the other sectors?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So for me, because of my interest in public health, there weren't as many options and like if you work for the State Department and so that's why I focus more on development.

And for me, I've always been really interested in trying to make a difference and support people, and I felt like that's really where I could make a bigger impact.

NYRAH

Thank you.

So prior to, you know, going into your career, you also attended UC Berkeley, the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy and Johns Hopkins.

May I know what you majored in during your undergraduate years?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So in my undergraduate, I majored in development studies.

So I focused on Pacific Island development, had aspects of anthropology and geography and yeah, so that was my main focus.

And then my other two programs were getting a master's degree in public health and then also in international relations.

NYRAH

And do you feel that getting your master's degree in international relations, do you feel that that helped you later on with your career?

Like, did it prepare you for the kind of work that you were getting into?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Yes. OK, it definitely did.

NYRAH

OK.

And so during and after your college years, were there any internships or work experiences prior to USAID that you took up?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Yes so as a volunteer for it was a program called Volunteers in Asia.

I was learning how to teach English and also learning more about working for an Indonesian organization.

And then when I was in Graduate School at UC San Diego, one of my internships was with Project Concern International which is the non government organization and I also worked in

Indonesia for three months and so that was really useful to be in Indonesia and working on public health.

And then I did, I also did an intensive language program in Indonesia.

So that was like another internship type thing and so I was able to learn Bahasa by like through a university program and also a homestay.

So those are just a few of the things that I worked on.

NYRAH

Right.

So how long did it take you to become fluent in Bahasa with the program you were with?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Well, so I guess I say that it was like a year and a half total.

So for a year I was working as a volunteer and I was sort of trying to learn Indonesian and then I did like this three month intensive language program and then after that I did like a three months of work experience.

So that was basically almost like almost a year and a half.

NYRAH

Awesome.

So I know in addition to working in Indonesia, you were also working in Senegal, correct, With women's and Children's Health.

So could you describe your experiences there a little bit?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Sure.

So when I was in Senegal, I was there for four years and I worked with USAID as well.

And I managed our health program, which I think like each program that we manage is about \$250 million.

And we worked on malaria, maternal child health, and family planning.

I think we also worked on tuberculosis and also while I was there, we experienced the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

And so we started up a global health security program, which is really looking at trying to address new and emerging infectious diseases.

So it was a really great experience.

I think part of it was because we had an amazing set of partners as well as a really supportive government like the government of Senegal really appreciated the US government's assistance.

And then we also had a really good health team.

And so the team who I worked with were just amazing professionals and I'm really committed to improving health in the country.

NYRAH

So would you consider your work there to have been a lot of hands on work, like working directly with the Senegalese civilians, or was it more political in terms of passing laws and health regulations or was it a mix of both, would you say?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So I think the challenge with working for a donor like USAID or even, yeah, like I would say like any partner that's like giving money to organizations, we're doing a little bit more on sort of the policy side and less on the direct hands on work.

MS. SAKAGAWA

Although I do have to say like our implementing partners were the ones that were really doing more of that, you know, direct individual support.

So, yeah, So I'd say that it's like, not necessarily me, but it was nice to know that we were supporting organizations to do that work.

NYRAH

So could you describe some of your highlights and your struggles with your work in Senegal?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So what were some highlights?

I think it was just being able to do a lot with the resources that we had.

And so some of the great successes in Senegal were really through like our support and other donor support.

It was really reducing the child's mortality rate by like a significant amount.

I think at one point it was like we decreased mortality by 12% and so that was really just extremely rewarding.

I would say on the negative or like challenging side was during the Ebola outbreak that was incredibly stressful because it was not clear if it would be able to be contained and so everyone in the region was really worried that it would spread.

And so just being able to work with a lot of people to manage that outbreak was stressful but ultimately rewarding.

NYRAH

Yeah, totally.

I can imagine.

So I mean you were in Senegal for four years as you mentioned before.

And at the time, did you know you were going to be there for that long and was it your choice to go do work in Senegal?

MS. SAKAGAWA

We knew we were going to be there for four years and it was our choice.

I mean, usually with the foreign service, you have to bid on different positions and it's a little bit more complicated because my husband also works for the Foreign Service and so we have to find positions together and so, So Senegal is like one of our only options where we both would have positions.

NYRAH

So I know we sort of were talking a little bit about language before in terms of Bahasa, and you also speak French I believe.

So in terms of foreign language, how significant do you believe it is to work in USAID?

MS. SAKAGAWA

I think it really depends on where you're working.

But overall, if I could speak every language where I was assigned, I would say that that's really important.

So I've worked in six countries now, at least like been posted in six countries, and unfortunately the only place where I was really required to speak the language was in Senegal and so, but that was really important and I'm glad I had to learn it and I'm glad I had to use it every day.

So I think the USA is a little bit different because I don't know why it is, but the language requirements are a little bit less rigorous compared to the State Department and so often we aren't required to speak the language.

And I would say that the only places where you must speak the language are in French speaking, Spanish speaking or Portuguese speaking countries.

NYRAH

OK, I see.

So in terms of the other five countries, were they all English speaking countries or where else were you posted?

So I was in Georgia, Yemen, Central Asia is in Kazakhstan, here in Singapore.

And where else were we?

I think those are the main ones.

I might be forgetting one.

So those out of those countries, like Georgia, they speak Georgian, a lot of Russian, Kazakhstan, they speak Russian and Kazakh.

And unfortunately I wasn't able to learn any of those languages.

And then in Yemen, it's Arabic.

Yeah, which also I didn't learn very much of.

NYRAH

So is there a reason?

MS. SAKAGAWA

I'm sorry, the other one was the Philippines, which means people speak English there.

NYRAH

Yeah.

So is there a reason why the USAID sort of focuses more on French, Portuguese and Spanish in contrast to other languages such as Arabic.

MS. SAKAGAWA

So I think some of it is that it takes a really long time to learn Russian, for example.

MS. SAKAGAWA

Like I think it would take at least two years to learn.

And traditionally USAID hasn't had enough staff in order to be able to like have that pipeline of people to to learn Russian for example.

So I think part of it is staffing and part of it is maybe assuming that we don't necessarily need it.

But I would say that like from being in Kazakhstan, it is pretty difficult because you would always need an interpreter.

Yeah.

So it's not quite, yeah, we're not necessarily as effective, but like that's sort of the way the system has been set up for us.

NYRAH

So then, in terms of students who are aspiring to work with the USAID, do you believe that students who have foreign language background already are provided with an advantage going into work with the USAID?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Sometimes, but I don't think that's always the only qualification because for example, if you're interested in working in public health, they would be also looking to see that you had public health experience, for example.

So it would certainly help, but it wouldn't be the only thing.

NYRAH

I see.

And what kind of qualities is the USA looking for in somebody who they're willing to hire?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So most of the time, depending on the position, it would be having a master's degree and some higher education.

They're definitely looking at communication skills, both oral and written and then also teamwork skills.

So I would say technical teamwork and demonstrated leadership. Sometimes I would say that they also are interested in seeing people who have international experience in another area.

NYRAH

OK, so I know that just sort of going back to the language aspect for a second, I know that proficiency in French had been of great importance during your time in Senegal, and you highlighted the difficulties of having to use it in a professional setting in the article "Emboldened to Make the Future Brighter" for GPS news.

So how did you overcome these struggles of, you know, not being super confident in your proficiency in French and having to use that in a professional setting?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So, in that situation you just have to use it right and you have no choice.

So, if you have to give a speech or if you have to speak in a meaning and that's really the language that's being used like you just have to do it.

So it was definitely like learning to be more resilient and to not let that, like, I don't know, sort of the, the fear of speaking hold me back.

And it was also like a lot of practice too.

Like I would, I would spend a lot of time practicing as well.

NYRAH

Would a lot of it be like independent study?

Or were you doing it at an institution?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So one of the things I did before I moved to Senegal is that the State Department has a Foreign Foreign Service Institute where you learn where they teach you language.

So I did that for six months and then when I arrived in Senegal I was doing a lot of self study and I also had a tutor.

NYRAH

OK.

MS. SAKAGAWA

So that was like probably I continued that through like the first year and then and then it was just you know through regular work I had to use it quite often.

So, I just, you know, had to use it on a daily basis.

NYRAH

Have you ever been faced with a scenario like that again in your career?

MS. SAKAGAWA

No, I haven't.

NYRAH

OK.

MS. SAKAGAWA

Yeah, I mean, I would say when I had to speak Indonesian like working for the NGO, I mean, I think at that point like my Indonesian actually was quite strong because I had spent time as a volunteer and I had studied it really intensively.

But like French, I think it was just really different because I had learned in an institution, I don't think you can learn as well.

You can learn much more if you're living with the family or if you're living in the culture.

NYRAH

OK.

So before you were talking a little bit about how jobs are assigned in the USA and you talked about bidding for certain jobs.

So in terms of just like posts within the USAID, in terms of ranking, would you say that age is a determinative factor?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Yeah, so the federal government has very strict rules about age.

And so like you would never want to be accused of age discrimination no matter what your age is.

It would be very unlikely that that would be a factor.

I think what it is at least for the USAID system, they're looking at sort of what your experience level is and when they're making those decisions.

So for example, if you wanted to be higher or like be assigned to be an office director of like you know, for health for example, they would really be looking at whether or not you have office director experience or deputy office director.

Experience and if you've had the experience of managing the size of a team that exists - and in some countries like a health team might have 50 people and you might be managing a budget of like \$500 million or more, maybe a billion dollars.

So they would really want someone who they know would be able to manage like a program of that size.

So when it comes to age, it would be more experience and expertise.

NYRAH

Got it.

Thank you.

So before when you were talking about your work in Senegal, it was a lot of sort of women's and Children's Health, you know, child mortality rates and dealing with that Ebola outbreak as well.

So in terms of the differences between the type of work you've done, like throughout the different nations, could you describe some key differences between your work in Senegal and your work in Singapore?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Oh, so Singapore is very different because the USAID doesn't have an office here.

So I'm the only person who works for USAID in Singapore.

And so my work has really been shifted from managing programs in countries to really supporting countries from here.

So, it's been very different.

Like a lot.

And then in addition, because I am officially assigned to Washington, I do have quite a bit of work that I'm doing to support USAID in the Washington headquarters.

So I'd say that the work I've been doing.

MS. SAKAGAWA

Most of the time I've been helping with staffing, helping with training and capacity building.

And then recently I've become a leadership coach.

So I've been doing a lot of internal coaching for USAID for different places around the world.

NYRAH

OK.

And so you said that you do a lot of your work is assigned to Washington.

Is that work mostly done remotely, or do you have to find yourself traveling back and forth between the two countries?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So it's mostly remote.

In fact, I haven't gone back to Washington in a very long time, but I will be soon.

But most of the time it's remote.

NYRAH

Got it.

And so throughout your career you have lived in a multitude of diverse nations that you mentioned before, such as Yemen and Georgia.

So what are some struggles and highlights of moving around and traveling so often?

MS. SAKAGAWA

I think on the positive side, like it's really exciting because every three to four years we get to move to a new place and learn a new culture.

I think what's hard is definitely having to make new friends and figure out how things work. And then for our kids, as they get older, it becomes harder for them to move around. So I think that's something that we are really conscious of. And then and then also like for USAID, often the places where we work are not the most glamorous or they don't necessarily have the best medical care schools. And so having to make choices about where we go can be a bit of a challenge as well.

NYRAH

And so, despite living overseas, you have also worked in Washington DC, if I'm correct. So what would be some key differences between working in the US for USAID and working overseas for the USAID?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Yes, that is a good question.

So when I started my career, I was in Washington.

And what I noticed about a lot of people who worked in Washington is that they would spend a lot of time going to countries to provide support.

So they could be traveling at least a couple times every few months and they would be gone for, you know, two to three weeks at a time.

And so one of the things that I was really concerned about was if I had children, I didn't want to be on the road and not with them.

And so and so that was part of the reason why I wanted to be like a foreign service officer, so I could be closer to the work and then hopefully wouldn't have to travel as much.

And then and then the other piece of that was that because the work was so far away, it was really hard to feel connected.

So often I would come home at night and I would think, what did I do to really help people in developing countries or in low and middle income countries? And it was hard to see the connection between my work and actually benefiting people.

So that's the reason why we've chosen not to live in Washington, DC.

Yeah, so that we could be closer to, you know, where we were actually doing the work.

NYRAH

And have you often found yourself caught between your career and your family?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So I haven't because I've always chosen my family first.

So being here in Singapore, for example, like it definitely is not advancing my career.

But the reason why is because we wanted to be able to support, to have our kids in really good schools and so that's why we're here.

NYRAH

So do you have any future goals or aspirations for your career?

MS. SAKAGAWA

That's a good question.

So our next assignment is Dubai, which is not where there's a USAID mission.

So I'm not really advancing so much in my career for the next few years.

So, I'd say for goals and aspirations, like I'm really excited about leadership, coaching.

And so that's really what I want to focus on while I'm in Dubai, because it's probably more doable than some of the other things I'd like to be doing.

NYRAH

Yeah.

So in Dubai, you're going to be focusing solely on leadership coaching?

MS. SAKAGAWA

No.

I'll also be working on engaging USAID missions on USAID's learning agenda.

So helping to track and monitor USA's progress across like a range of topics that they're focused on.

I'm not entirely sure what my job's going to be, but that's sort of what I understand it to be.

So it'll be a little bit different from what I'm doing now.

NYRAH

OK.

And could you describe a little bit what you do in leadership coaching?

MS. SAKAGAWA

Oh, so with leadership coaching, I'm working with individual clients who work for USAID and I'm helping them to reach their potential and address any leadership challenges that they have.

So, that idea is really helping to empower people to find their own solutions to their problems or concerns.

NYRAH

Got it.

OK.

So I guess sort of going back to a very broad question, what would you say are some of your favorite aspects about working for USAID, and what have been some of your biggest struggles overall?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So my favorite aspects are being able to have an impact at both the country and global level, which I think is incredibly exciting and can be very meaningful.

And also working with really talented professionals in a whole range of countries and forming partnerships.

So, like that has been so rewarding.

MS. SAKAGAWA

And then challenges, I mean, I think there are a whole range of challenges.

But sometimes what can be a struggle is like when there are changes of administration.

So, we are representatives of whatever government is in power.

So if you change from a Democratic to a Republican administration, your whole set of priorities and the way you do your work changes.

And so I think that those shifts can be difficult at times.

And then sometimes I have like these broader questions about, like, is development assistance really having the impact, the intended impact we want it to have? And so, that's something that I struggle with sometimes, just thinking about whether we are really having the impact that we should be and if we're doing harm.

MS. SAKAGAWA

So, I would say that can also be a challenge.

NYRAH

And so how do you face those sorts of doubts that you feel regarding your work and the impact that it has?

MS. SAKAGAWA

That's also a good question.

I think that is a very good question.

So I think because I'm working on leadership, leadership, coaching now, I'm trying to shift into new directions.

I guess the other thing is like I'm trying to find more joy at work.

So I'm finding things that inspire me.

So that's like another thing that I've been doing lately is really finding key meaningful work that I know will make a difference.

So I think being more deliberate and intentional is one of the things that I've been looking at more closely.

NYRAH

OK, awesome.

And our last question is, is there anything else you would like to inform students looking to work for the USAID?

MS. SAKAGAWA

So there's some basic sort of administrative things when you're looking for jobs.

So, so the place I would start is usajobs.gov, and that's normally where you can find a lot of these positions. And often you need to write quite a bit, like you have to write about your skills and your knowledge and your aptitudes, and so practicing that is an important approach.

And then something else that I think people don't know as much about is something called the Oh my gosh, it's a fellowship program.

It's like when you're in college, I think in your senior year of college you can apply for this fellowship where you are automatically connected to USAID so you're able to do an internship over the summer.

You're linked to a master's program.

I don't know all the details, but it's a really good way of getting into USAID while you're also doing your Master's degree.

And I think the requirement is, because I also think it's paid for through the US government.

So your master's degree is covered, but your commitment after you complete your master's degree program is you need to work for USAID for like 4 years, which is actually I think a benefit because you're able to really experience working for USAID.

So I think there are quite a few options of ways of getting in - that's just one of a few others.

So, I would just say that to not give up if you're really, if you're really committed and really interested, you can always find a way of working for the organization.