

JENNIFER “VERN” LONG

2006-07 AAAS Fellow at the U.S. Department of Agriculture
Foreign Agricultural Service Office of Scientific and Technical Affairs

Since receiving her PhD in plant breeding and genetics in 2002 from Cornell University, Jennifer “Vern” Long has served as a Fulbright Scholar in western Africa’s Republic of Senegal, where she collaborated on a food systems project looking at the linkages between community food production, child nutrition, and cognitive development. Prior to that, Jennifer (who goes by her college nickname “Vern”) was a postdoctoral scholar at the School of Public Health at the University of California in Los Angeles, where she examined the relationships between dietary diversity, nutrient interactions, and outcomes of child growth.

Yet a AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowship was always on her mind. “A graduate school friend and former AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow spoke so positively about the program and the opportunities that the fellowship opened up for her,” says Vern. “I didn’t want to completely leave the academic research world, but I felt that the AAAS Fellowship would allow me to access the policy world to get a better understanding of how issues on child nutrition and agricultural biodiversity in the ‘Global

South’ are conceptualized among policymakers.”

Vern chose her placement in the Foreign Agricultural Service’s Office of Scientific and Technical Affairs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) because she wanted to see the agricultural landscape from the U.S. perspective and learn more about working with U.S. agricultural trade interests. “I’ve worked with subsistence farmers in Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Kenya. I needed to see a completely different side of the issues that I’ve worked on,” she says.

Part of Vern’s fellowship assignment involved working with the Commission on Genetic Resources at the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN). She spent six weeks in Rome, Italy, as an Embassy Science Fellow working with the U.S. Mission to the U.N. on plant health capacity-building activities and genetic resource issues with the FAO. A follow-up report on the importance of genetic resources to various sectors of U.S. agriculture led to Vern submitting a recommendation to the Foreign Agriculture Service on how it might enhance the USDA’s involvement in the international forums in which agriculture and food-related genetic resource issues are addressed.

Vern credits her fellowship with opening up a whole range of perspectives that informed the issues she worked on in academia. “I’ve gained a better understanding of other sectors’ concerns and now know how to advocate for science-based regulations,” she says. Vern has continued working with USDA from Chicago, where she relocated with her husband at the end of her fellowship year. She serves as visiting assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at University of Illinois-Chicago, where her responsibilities as a professor include working as a scientific technical advisor to USDA on the multilateral negotiations on access and benefit sharing for genetic resources of relevance to food and agriculture.

