

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF WATER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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As a volunteer teaching high school in Belize, Allegra da Silva learned first hand the tragic consequences of lack of access to reliable, clean water. She was a godparent to a Belizean baby who died of a diarrheal disease due to contaminated water and malnutrition. This unnecessary death launched her on a career aimed at ensuring clean, sustainable water sources around the world.



Allegra pursued a PhD in environmental engineering, assessing waste water treatment technologies. As a postdoc, she focused on methods to disinfect drinking water in developing countries. A desire to explore challenges affecting access to clean drinking water and sanitation and to learn how the U.S. government sets policy for development objectives led her to pursue an S&T Policy Fellowship.

As a AAAS Fellow at USAID, first in the Bureau of Economic Growth, Agriculture, and Trade, and now in the newly created Bureau for Food Security, Allegra experienced how USAID achieves its foreign policy objectives and learned how agencies weave together varying

priorities toward a common purpose. She helped coordinate an interagency project for a Middle East and North Africa Water Center Network (WCN) to support exchanges and collaborative research, maintaining communications on the WCN between a large network of federal agencies, including the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The fellowship also allowed the flexibility and opportunity to contribute her experience when the Haiti earthquake struck in January 2010. Allegra participated as a water and sanitation expert on a nine-person Haiti Earthquake Rapid Environmental Assessment

(REA) Team. The REA results were circulated in Haiti and to U.S. federal agencies to develop appropriate short and long-term response strategies.

Being at USAID helped Allegra understand how a federal office makes decisions and how scientific information influences government programming.

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“When U.S. tax dollars are going to be spent in the development arena, scientific evidence is critical,” Allegra stressed. She noted that as an S&T Policy Fellow, she was free to creatively engage in dynamic new agency programs and a range of interagency roles, creating a task portfolio to match her interests.

“This opportunity brought my understanding of water full circle. For my PhD I looked at waste water, during my postdoc I examined drinking water, and at USAID I was able to look at water from the perspective of food production and security with an ecological standpoint,” she explained.

What was most surprising to Allegra about transitioning to the government sector was realizing that USAID and other agencies are grappling with many of the same issues being addressed in academia, but there are often missed connections. Her career aim is to work at closing that gap to foster productive collaboration for global water resources.