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CAMERON BONNER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Wednesday, March 9, it is two pm. I am interviewing Ron Bonner. This is our first interview, and I am Marcia Birnbaum. Ron, welcome, I am delighted that you have agreed to do this interview and I know you've planned very carefully. And so of course, let's start at the beginning wherever you want, like in terms of your childhood and your upbringing that is useful for the audience to know in general, but I think is particularly relevant in your case.

BONNER: For the record, I think I should be referred to as Cameron Bonner because that's my official USAID (United States Agency for International Development) name. My nickname was Ron from the last three letters of Cameron. You can just call me Ron, anybody can call me Ron, but officially I should be Cameron. I was born in 1944. I was a preemie; I was born two months early so I'm actually two months older than I should be. I was born in southwest Philadelphia in a working-class neighborhood of row houses, which was very convenient for a young kid because I could jump over porch banisters and be friends' houses in fifteen seconds.

When I was growing up in Philadelphia, my father was attending a theological seminary in Philadelphia. He was also working as a nightwatchman, so I didn't get a chance to see him all that much, being a full-time student as well as a full-time night watchman. But he was doing that to study to become a minister, which he eventually did—a Presbyterian minister. While he was studying, he had an assistant minister's job at a local Presbyterian church. But when he graduated, he got a church in inner-city Newark, New Jersey, a very small Presbyterian church. And so, I and my four siblings, and my mother and my father, moved up to Newark, New Jersey, where he, my father, served as pastor, preaching the

gospel as well as on various social issues of the time, particularly around civil rights. These were the real formative years of my life. We lived in Newark from the time I was about seven till the time I was thirteen or fourteen.

My father, and my mother but especially my father, was always very socially conscious. He was a very kind person, a very honest person, and always concerned about the people around him and the conditions in which they lived. That was the environment that I grew up with. I remember that in, I think it was 1954, he came home one day extremely elated that the Supreme Court had just ruled in favor of school desegregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. And, of course, as a nine- or ten-year-old, I had no idea what that meant at the time. But I remember how pleased he was and how he tried to explain to me the importance of this Supreme Court decision. Maybe I understood, maybe I didn't, but I remember the incident made him so happy and that those kinds of revelations occurred throughout my formative years.

These experiences had a strong impact in forming my own values. While we were in Newark, at this small, all-white church, he hired a young black organist to play every Sunday in front of a very conservative, working- and lower-class congregation; undoubtedly the first black face the congregants saw in that church. Because of his social concerns, he moreover endeavored to integrate African Americans into the church, which in the 1950s, was quite an incredible thing to try. I don't think he met a lot of overt resistance but it's hard for me to remember for sure the overall success of his efforts, but slowly the congregation became more and more integrated.

In the late 1950s or so, my father was appointed to be pastor at a much larger church in the neighboring town of Kearny, with a much different demographic. Kearny, New Jersey is probably the largest diasporic community of Scottish people in the United States, with probably 80 percent or more Scots living there at the time. This was a very conservative—perhaps not politically, but certainly tradition-bound and socially conservative—congregation. Again, it was 100 percent white. His first controversial move was to bring his African-American organist with him. Once again, this young black fellow was likely to be the first black person that had ever entered that church. The point I'm making is his concern for social justice and other humanitarian issues continued throughout his career and had a positive, powerful influence on me. I remember in 1963, I went to the March on Washington, where I heard Martin Luther King give his "I Have a Dream" speech, as well as those of other powerful speakers, such as the late Rep. John Lewis.

Throughout those years, my father—and I at times, with my folk guitar singing Kumbaya, et cetera—would meet with other congregational groups (principally made up of African Americans) in churches or even in parishioners' living rooms, just to try to get establish some linkages between his church and other church groups in the northern New Jersey area. This was all happening during the early years of the Vietnam War while I was attending Rutgers University (Newark campus). During this time, around 1965, when rumors of a widening Vietnam conflict were starting, my father, mother, brother, sisters, and I became very engaged in the anti-Vietnam War movement, to the extent that my

brother and I both applied for and received, after some difficulty and public humiliation, status of conscientious objectors. And that was basically the foundation of our values and how we acted on those values throughout my early years and into my college days.

Q: May I ask you a question? When you were at Rutgers, two questions: one was, what was the social menu at Rutgers, did it coincide with your philosophical approach that you'd been raised with, and what did you major in?

BONNER: Good questions. Again, I went to the Newark Campus of Rutgers so I could commute from home. It was an inner-city campus and environment with a very racially mixed student body. I started as a physics major at Rutgers. As an aside, I always thought that I would have made a good engineer because as a kid and in later years I was very interested in taking things apart and figuring out how they worked and trying to get them back together, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. I now think I probably would have made an excellent engineer, but at the time, in the early and mid-'60s, engineers were not looked favorably upon by the anti-war crowd because they were seen as, how should I say, too tied to the "military-industrial complex" and to other issues with which I did not agree.

So even though my aptitudes aligned with engineering, and even though there was the excellent Newark College of Engineering nearby, I refused to consider it; instead, I chose physics as my major, which I studied for a year. But I changed course for my sophomore year; I had decided that I really wanted to get back into more of an engineering related career. I left Rutgers and went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York to study architecture. That way, I didn't have to become an engineer, but I could still play with stuff and design things that interested me.

Well, that too lasted only a year. My idol was Frank Lloyd Wright, and I thought as an architect I could become another Frank Lloyd Wright. But I soon discovered that architecture, except for the very few, is not Frank Lloyd Wright architecture, but rather a lot of drawing windows and reshaping rooms and sizing back porches and things like that. It just didn't have the same attraction to me that I thought it would. So, again another change: after one year at Pratt Institute, I left and went back to Rutgers/Newark. I did this because I found out during my study at Pratt that I really enjoyed math and was good at it. Back at Rutgers, I majored in mathematics, finally graduating in 1965 as a math major in 1965. I did quite well.

Now, I need to back up a bit. I met Marge, my current wife of fifty-five years, in high school. I should have mentioned this before, because that certainly had a big influence on my life and the decisions I was making at the time. I went back to Rutgers/Newark in part because of her. By that time, she had just finished one year studying in California, but had returned to Kearny, New Jersey—I like to think—because she missed me. She enrolled at Rutgers/Newark, also as a math major. Since she was two years behind me. By then we're talking seriously about marriage and deciding what I was going to do until she was due to graduate in 1967. I decided to attend graduate school at the City University of New York, where I entered a MA program majoring in mathematics. Again,

it was a very personally rewarding experience. In fact, I found myself so good in math, I was promised a place in their PhD program. I was taking courses here and there at the PhD level, thinking I would go on to earn a PhD in mathematics. But then Marge graduated and we started firming up our marriage plans.

Q: I just can't resist asking: Do you believe your bachelor's and master's in mathematics in any way helped you in your career in international development?

BONNER: No. It was probably a detriment, as I'll talk about in due course, because I want to talk about our mutual interest in the Peace Corps as Marge and I were planning our future together. It was at a time when the Peace Corps was very much in the news and growing in popularity among socially-conscious youth. Both of us were influenced by Kennedy's speech about "doing for your country…," and so forth and introducing the Peace Corps as a concept and then as a promising developmental program. And we were intrigued by that. I had never been overseas—although Marge spent one summer touring Europe—but neither of us had any exposure to the developing world. But we were intrigued with the idea of the Peace Corps, so when I was about to graduate with a master's degree in mathematics, and Marge was graduating from Rutgers/Newark, also a major in mathematics, we said, we're not going to go any further with college life; let's join the Peace Corps. And that's what we did. So, I never pursued my PhD program but instead we applied to the Peace Corps and planned for our June 17 wedding.

We were originally assigned to Nigeria, and the training was scheduled to start sometime in late June, early July of 1967. But then, in early June, we got a letter saying, well, "Due to circumstances in Nigeria" —the Biafran war—"we're not going to send you to Nigeria, but instead you're going to Ethiopia. And, by the way, training starts on June 19," i.e., two days after our wedding. Needless to say, this was quite a shock, and we had to make some quick adjustments in terms of our honeymoon plans. But we did it. We had a two-day honeymoon in New York City and then both went up to an apple orchard in Massachusetts to start our Peace Corps training. And they decided they were going to make us into math teachers even though we had zero teacher training experience. They were going to make us teachers and decent Amharic speakers all within eight weeks. And we did that in Massachusetts, and then we were shipped to Addis Ababa for a final four weeks of language training and teaching math in a local summer school program. For me, this was my first time ever on a plane, which was terrifying. After training, we were assigned to a small rural town in eastern Ethiopia, which already had two other volunteers posted there when we arrived. We spent only one year there teaching. I'll explain why in a moment. Do you have any questions to fill in any blanks in my story? It's quite a bit.

Q: Not at all. I'm looking forward to hearing about your Peace Corps experience.

BONNER: We arrived in Asebe Teferi, a small town in eastern Ethiopia. They only needed one math teacher, and since I had a master's in mathematics, they assigned that slot to me and they made Marge an English teacher and a librarian at the junior-senior secondary school. As I mentioned, we stayed there only a year and thoroughly enjoyed it.

It was such a wonderful experience and pleasant, simple life, getting used to having no electricity or running water. I had never seen a live chicken until I went to Ethiopia, all the chickens I'd ever seen were pre-dressed and wrapped in plastic. Anyway, that's a funny anecdote, I'll relay to you.

We had hired a woman to help us with cooking and so forth, and one day we asked her what she would like to make for us. She said "what do you want to eat?" I said, "It's been a while since we had chicken." She said, "I'll get a chicken from the market and cook it for you." We were all day teaching, looking forward to coming home to a nice baked or roasted or fried chicken, we didn't know what. But when we got home, we saw a chicken running around on our little outside porch, and we said, "Mimouna, what happened to the chicken? Why aren't you cooking the chicken?" She said, "I can't as somebody else has to kill it. As a Muslim woman, I am not allowed to slaughter an animal. You have to do it." And I said, "You've got to be kidding me; I've never seen a live chicken until I just saw this one running around my porch." She said, "Don't worry, I'll show you how to do it." She then pretended to slaughter the chicken in the Muslim way, and then she gave me a knife and said, "Now you do it." Since I was so hungry, and so anticipating chicken, I did it. And to this day, if I have to kill a chicken, I will do it halal, in the Muslim way.

But with many such incidents and the enjoyment of living a simple life, and enjoying teaching our learning-hungry students, it was a wonderful, wonderful life for both of us. Just being so immersed in rural living, amongst great people, delicious food, exotic cultural practices, and a challenging work environment, was amazing. But, after about nine months there, we got a call from the Peace Corps director, who said, "You and Marge are going to be transferred," and we asked, "Why?" We love it here. Absolutely love it here. He said, "No, because of both of your math backgrounds—and perhaps because Marge wasn't being used as a math teacher—we need you back in the capital to work in the Ministry of Education." And we said, "Okay." We were sorry to leave, but the new assignment sounded very challenging to us. And so, after one year of being a teacher in this village, we went to the capital and were assigned tasks in the Curriculum Department of the Ministry.

Ethiopia was just introducing the so-called "new math" at the time. Do you remember what that was? It was a new self-discovery guided method of teaching mathematics. It was an exciting and challenging time. The ministry was not just trying to translate existing imported math books, but rather developing a whole new series of texts starting in the seventh and eighth grades based on a series that was developed in Entebbe, Uganda. We were tasked with converting those into math books that had Ethiopian examples and images and so forth, rather than Ugandan examples and images; it was fascinating work. At the same time, they asked us if we would help produce a series of educational TV programs based on the new series. These were to be broadcast to Addis Ababa and other nearby schools. We began writing math lesson scripts, not to be delivered by us, but by a skilled Ethiopian woman presenter. And at the same time, they also asked us to be supervisors of teachers who were just being introduced to "new math." For my territory, I was assigned to the region of Shewa, which was a large province in the area surrounding the capital. (Shewa no longer exists; it has since been

renamed and boundaries redrawn.) I was tasked with visiting all the junior secondary schools to answer teacher questions and hold workshops for teachers who were having any problems with the new math. Marge did the same thing for the Addis Ababa schools. It was a very busy and physically challenging year. But I think, in retrospect, it was a year of fun and professional growth. It helped groom us to what came later in terms of working in development and working with people who, on their terms, needed our help.

Q: Wow. So, I'm sitting here listening to this and two things come to mind. First of all, how amazing that you eventually came into USAID, having had the experience of being out there working with the Ministry of Education on curriculum development, and we'll see later on how that influenced you. I wanted to ask you another question. This was your first time outside of the United States in a very different cultural environment, and with very different cultures because of the many and varied ethnic groups. What did you take from that as you were learning about being exposed to these cultures that might have helped you in your career?

BONNER: I'd have to think about that a little bit. One thing I do remember very clearly—I don't think I'm by any means the first person to have experienced this—as a newcomer to a foreign culture and environment that's so different from what I was used to, the thing that strikes you first is how different everything is. Everything looked different, everything tasted different, everything smelled different, everybody looked different, everybody spoke differently. And what intrigued me were all of these differences. I wasn't upset by them but I was puzzled by them. And as a new observer, those feelings lasted quite a while. It was fascinating, it was confounding, and it was there all the time. After being in Ethiopia for two years, and then our follow-on three-year tenure in Uganda, gradually, I realized that I didn't focus on the differences anymore, but rather on the similarities; similarities in people's feelings, and their emotions, and things that make them happy, things that make them laugh, things that make them sad. And that, realization, fostered tremendous personal and professional growth. I know I'm not unique in saying this or experiencing this. But for me personally, it was very comforting and it made me feel part of something larger, to be part of humanity, as opposed to something separate and apart from the others. So, I don't know if that answered your question because it doesn't directly relate to what influenced my USAID career, which were mainly formed by other factors. I'll get into these later.

Q: Well, personally, as your interviewer, I do believe these were influential factors because they gave you an introduction into how you think. I won't go on here, but the points you made are very, very relevant to interacting with other cultures. So yes, please continue with your story.

BONNER: Okay. So, Marge and I were nearing the end of our two years in Ethiopia, asking ourselves, "What are we going to do next?" And we were convinced that we wanted to continue our work in the developing world. At the time, the Peace Corps would circulate what they called the "green sheet," which was a list of overseas job openings to link people like us to post-Peace Corps opportunities. But the green sheets that we were getting at the time, and this was 1969, were mainly filled with Vietnam-based positions:

Peace Corps assignments, USAID internships, contractor jobs, and the like. And since we were both so anti-Vietnam war, we didn't even pay much attention to those; we were looking for something else.

Close to giving up, I happened across a green sheet solicitation that said: "Wanted: Math Teacher for Uganda." Wow, I met the minimum job requirements, but was skeptical as we didn't know anything about Uganda, or have any details of the position. But I sent in the application expressing interest. Marge and I said privately, "Yikes, we'll do almost anything to stay in Africa and continue living the kind of experience that we're having right now in Ethiopia." We said to each other, "How much? What would be an appropriate salary if I get offered this job? How cheaply can we live? We're getting a Peace Corps stipend so we know we're able to live comfortably but simply on little money." I forget the exact number but we agreed: "Well, maybe we can accept five hundred dollars a month if the job is offered." Then, after some more budget-trimming, we said to each other, "That sounds like an awful lot. Maybe we can live on three hundred dollars a month. Yes, we could do this for three hundred dollars a month, maybe even less."

We were elated when we got an encouraging response. And in fact, they said, "We like your résumé so much we're going to send the person in charge of recruiting to Addis for an interview." The recruiter flew to Addis and met us in a hotel, a very nice hotel. As she was interviewing me and talking all about the job and how I would be heading the Mathematics Department at this newly built all-girls Senior Secondary School in Tororo, Uganda, located on Uganda's eastern border with Kenya, she then got around to salary. We were taking a deep breath, and she said, "Of course, we can't offer all that much. But we can start you at twelve hundred dollars a month." We were so flabbergasted; I think we were about to fall off our chairs. And this woman looked at us and said, "But!"—she thought we were totally shocked by the paucity of the offer—she added, "but, but, but that doesn't include the fact that it's going to be US tax-free. And we will ship two thousand pounds of your household effects from the U.S., and you'll get an R&R (rest and relaxation) every other year and home leave after completing a two-year contract, and we'll also arrange for Marge to be hired to teach math, but on a local (Ugandan) contract." I mean, this was all a blur: she talked about all the additional benefits, e.g., free housing and furnishings. Then Marge and I looked at each other and said, "We have to leave the room for a moment to talk this over privately." We stepped outside, hugged each other and said, Okay, Uganda's next on our list.

And that started another phase of our career, one that presented us with our first exposure to the workings of USAID. Tororo Girls School (TGS) was a spanking-new school that USAID had built, with the intention of it becoming the premiere institution for educating girls in Uganda. The University of Massachusetts, as the lead contractor for the project, was recruiting a lot of American teachers, while it was sending a large cadre of young Ugandans—lots of women, some men—to the U.S. for master's degrees to improve their teaching and academic skills and then be assigned back to Tororo Girls' School to replace the Americans.

Q: Can I ask you what the political situation was at the time? Who was in power and how that affected you, if at all?

BONNER: During our Peace Corps days in Ethiopia, Haile Selassie was the emperor. The trappings of his regime were seen everywhere, from his ornate palace in Addis, to his ever-present security forces, to the domination of his feudal-like administration in the outlying provinces. As volunteers, teaching in the small town of Asebe Teferi—which interestingly translates as "*Think of Teferi*," a reference to Haile Selassie as a young regent, known as Teferi Makonnen—we were isolated from the politics and governance of the day. But when assigned to the capital, we encountered more evidence of his ever-present influence and would hear rumors of dissent among various ethnic groups—the Oromo, Tigrayans, Gurages, Afaris, et cetera—who felt under- or mis-served by the emperor's favored Amhara governing elites. The winds of change were growing, but it took another five years and a severe drought before he was deposed in a military coup, bringing to power the much worse and horrific regime of self-proclaimed communist, Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

But let's get back to Uganda. While we were having a thoroughly enjoyable experience there, we stayed two and a half years, only leaving because of the rapidly deteriorating conditions and rising levels of ex-judicial killings under the brutal regime of Idi Amin. (Sadly, the young woman who was earmarked to take over my position at the school was among those who he butchered.) When we arrived in Uganda, Milton Obote was the (fairly?) elected president. He was perceived as having socialist ideals, which were articulated in his "Manifesto for the Common Man." He was a devotee of president Julius Nyerere of neighboring Tanzania. I don't recall how popular he was among the Ugandans, but strife among the various ethnic groups was evident, even to the extent that at our school, fights would occasionally break out between feuding tribal groups. After two years of our arrival, Obote was overthrown by a military coup led by General Idi Amin. While his coming to power was initially met with excited crowds parading the streets, it didn't take long for his true colors to show. The social and economic conditions seemingly changed overnight. It was a horrible, horrible time. There was a river by our school, and it was not uncommon to hear stories of, though we never witnessed any, stories of executed bodies flowing down the river. There was a lot of nervousness about whether things were going to rapidly become much worse, both economically and politically. In fact, Idi Amin visited our school (by helicopter and with his personal dance troupe in tow) because TGS was such a showcase school, he wanted to take some credit for it in the eyes of his minions. He staged a performance at the school, went around and introduced himself to all the teachers. I actually shook his hand, a crushing grip since his was about three times the size of mine. But it was a horrific time overall. Marge and I could have stayed teaching in Uganda for another couple of years until the USAID contract with UMass would expire. But we decided we had had enough, that the situation was just too uncertain, and so we left.

And, we didn't just leave, we actually embarked from there for another adventure. The idea for this germinated when we were still in Tororo. We met a couple of guys in a Land Rover, looking for a place to stay overnight. They stayed with us, just camping out on the

front lawn. During dinner with them, they asked, "Do you want to do what we're doing?" To which we replied, "So what are you doing?" They said, "Well, we just drove from England to Uganda, on our way to Kenya and then on to South Africa. You might want to do the same thing. They explained about the challenges and hardships of driving across Africa, but also the adventurousness as well as the risks (this was 1971!). Based on that, Marge and I, along with another couple who were also leaving Uganda at the time, said, "Hey, why not? We're young. We're foolish. Let's do it."

To prepare for a three-month overland journey, we located a used, ten-year old, hundred-thousand-mile Land Rover being sold by a missionary couple who were departing the country. We bought it and outfitted it as a camper. When the conversion was complete, we could sleep in it and cook from it, et cetera. To be able to travel large distances between rural sub-Saharan towns, we had an extra gas tank installed and extra jerry cans fitted for gasoline and water. When all was loaded up, including a detailed workshop manual and a large supply of spare parts in case of breakdowns, we left Uganda for our three-month odyssey. So, in January 1972, we said our goodbyes and headed east across Africa; roads or no roads, maps or no maps. It turned out that the driving conditions were very, very difficult, complicated by several militia-style, drunken soldier interactions in Zaire and elsewhere. Nevertheless, we eventually made it across to Western Africa and then through the Sahara, ending up in Morocco, and eventually (by ferry) to England. It was a thoroughly enjoyable trek which cemented our love for traveling, our love for interacting with other people, and our love for being exposed to other cultures. Those three months, we still consider to be the most rewarding and fun times of our young lives.

Q: What were some of the highlights of those three months, again, that might be relevant as we get into your time with USAID?

BONNER: The "Red Beret Episode": I will relay this story because it informs how I learned the value of calm determination and the inherent weakness of power symbols. Well, we entered the Democratic Republic of Congo from Rwanda, which was Zaire at the time and led by Mobutu Sese Seko. It was a very, very uncertain time: a politically uncertain time. There were a lot of independent militias that were operating throughout the country. And as we were driving through Zaire, we had quite a few encounters with militia, most were benign checkpoints. But other times, the soldiers would be holding rifles up as we approached in the car. And because we didn't want to stop, we would pretend they were just being friendly by waving their rifles back and forth, and we would wave our hands out the windows and just keep kind speeding by. At the time that didn't sound foolish. Now, as I say it, that sounds very foolish, but I think mainly, they were looking for small bribes and cigarettes.

But overall, we never really felt threatened, except as we were within days of leaving Zaire. We were stopped on the road by the commander of a local militia, a very imposing figure with his rifle, bandoleers and bright red, medal-bedecked beret. He carefully looked over our beautifully outfitted Land Rover, and we later learned, mentioned to others, that he wanted to commandeer it. He asked us for a ride out of town, and we said,

"Where are you going?" He replied, "Just a couple miles up the road." I said, "Okay, but I need to fill up with gas first," and promised to meet him at the gas station. Fortunately, we had enough fuel to the next destination, so Marge and I, using back roads, tried to sneak out of town to avoid this guy.

But he had confused us with a British couple who was also trekking eastward across Africa in the same model and color of Land Rover we had. This other couple was also trying to avoid the militia and left a bit ahead of us. But they were caught leaving by the commander, who stopped them at gunpoint, got in their car, and drove off ahead of us by several minutes. We didn't learn about this until we reached a road repair crew several hours up the road, when one of the workers waved us down and shoved a scribbled note in our window and walked off. The note said, "He's with us, has a gun, and keeps talking about wanting to take your vehicle."

We decided to make a beeline for the border with the Central African Republic, still many hours away. Our usual practice was to camp overnight missionary compounds, when we could find one. If there was a mission in town, we would ask if we could park in their field, fill up with water and, if possible, get a shower. Up until that evening, this had always worked out nicely. We did this at a mission station near the border with the Central African Republic. The border was closed when we arrived so we had no choice but to stay overnight at the mission. At the mission compound, we unexpectedly met up again with the British couple, who relayed the whole story of their car-jacking and the whereabouts of the commander: at the militia's encampment just a few kilometers away. Our plan was to depart while still dark and get to the border by the time it opened.

This is what we did, but as we were quietly leaving town, the Commander was standing in the middle of the road, pajama-clad wiping sleep from his eyes, without his gun or the symbol of his power: the red beret. He waved us down. We were petrified. But all he said was, "Just give me some cigarettes. I'm very tired and need to sleep, just give me some cigarettes," and we said, "We don't smoke." I think we found some small items to give him like matches and candy bars, and to our great relief he let us pass. We drove as quickly as we could to the border of the Central African Republic (CAR). We were dismayed to find that it didn't open till eight a.m., but were quickly processed out of Zaire and got on a river raft that was capable of handling our and the Britishers' land rovers and crossed over to CAR. We were finally able to breathe a deep sigh of relief. We had the last laugh, however, for in the back seat of the other couple's Land Rover was the Commander's symbol of power: the red beret.

That was our most frightening experience. There were other tense situations: for example, in Nigeria, which at that time was just emerging from the Biafran war and still experiencing civil unrest and extra-judicial atrocities. Farther westward, as we crossed into Ghana, the guards detained us looking for a bribe, but we weren't prepared to give them any money. So they decided to completely search our vehicle and take everything out. Knives and forks and food and clothes, and it took hours and hours. But we said, Okay, we're not in a hurry, go look through whatever you want. But they got tired of that, and eventually let us go.

From Ghana, we went farther west and started heading north across the Sahara Desert, transiting Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Algeria and Morocco. We finally arrived in England, sold the Land Rover, bought plane tickets and came back to the U.S. to start another phase of our life. All in all, it was a fantastic, life-changing experience. We met many wonderful people of all cultures, customs, faiths, and economic status. This sojourn greatly informed our views on cultures, poverty, and the environment.

When we were teaching in Uganda, we became friends with a teacher of economics. And through our friendship and our discussions, Marge became interested in economics. As a math teacher, she had the right background, but she had no training in economics. I, on the other hand, who had a very strong math background, became much more interested in the art of teaching. This is most relevant to future discussion on my career with USAID. I have found that the challenges of effective teaching were at least as complicated as any of the math problems I had ever faced, and I wanted to learn how to be a better teacher or at least to know what makes a good teacher, beyond what is conveyed through the six weeks of Peace Corps training. I yearned for a more solid academic footing.

So even as we were driving across Africa, we had agreed that we would try to go on to graduate school when we returned to the U.S. We spent the summer of ’72 in New York, in the town we’re living in now, in the Catskill Mountains. After being forced from his church because of his anti-war and racial-equality sermons, my father ended up running an adult camp in the Catskills for left-leaning, socially minded people, mainly from New York City. It was an adult camp offering seminars, lectures, and presentations by notable progressive thinkers and artists from New York City. Anyway, he was running that kind of a camp, and he needed a maintenance person. So, for the summer, I did all the maintenance work at this camp.

But when the summer ended, I had to decide on which of three graduate program assistantships in education to accept. I chose the University of Illinois (UI) at Champaign-Urbana, entering their PhD program in secondary math education on a research assistantship. I was most impressed with their offerings, as they were, in my judgment, leading the way in computer-assisted learning. This fit nicely with my mathematics and computer programming background. Interestingly, Marge was unsure of her next steps. When she arrived in Urbana, finding only minimum-wage job openings at retail shops and fast-food joints, she went cold-calling on professors in UI’s graduate school of economics. They were so impressed with her background, especially her math background, they said, We hardly get any applicants here with strong math backgrounds; rather, we get applicants who we have to teach math to before we can teach them economics. She was offered a teaching assistant position on the spot. We both became PhD students at the University of Illinois. I graduated in 1974 and Marge in 1975.

Then in 1975, we had a son born in New York’s Mid-Hudson Valley, where we settled thinking we would “homestead” on some land we had recently purchased jointly with my parents and siblings. We had our degrees, but no jobs. This was a tough period for us economically and the pipe dream of surviving off the land in upstate New York proved to

be fantasy. We had dearly missed our previous experiences in Africa. We would do almost anything, create any opportunity, follow any career path to get back overseas and do some more traveling and just living among “the others.” Marge got offered a job with the United Nations, she got offered a job with the World Bank, and she got offered a job by USAID.

She interviewed at each of those organizations. She was offered a job at the UN, but was unimpressed; a job at the World Bank, but it was based in Washington, DC; and she was offered a job at USAID as an International Development Intern (IDI). She took the job with USAID, with the promise of being assigned to Ethiopia. And that started us on our USAID career path, Marge first, me to follow a couple of years later. When she accepted, I had no idea of what I would do, but felt confident I would find something in Ethiopia. Being able to speak the language, having had a couple of years there, and having traveled throughout the country, it seemed there was lots of potential. I said, “I’ll take care of our infant son until I find something to do.” I first applied for a teaching job in the Mathematics Department of Addis Ababa University (at the time called Haile Selassie the First University) and was accepted. I said, “Okay, I can go back to teaching math at the college level.” And that became our plan. We left in December of 1975 to return to Ethiopia. I was going to be teaching at the university; Marge was going to be an intern with the USAID mission. Then, things fell apart.

The coup against the emperor had taken place, civil unrest was increasing, strict curfews were imposed, and the university was shut down due to student protests. So I didn’t have a job after all. But I still had a job taking care of our young son, fortunately with household help. Within a few months, I got a job teaching math at the Sanford School, a private school catering mainly to children of British and other expatriates. I taught high school math there for about a year, but it wasn’t professionally rewarding. But good fortune returned: I was offered a USAID-funded contract to work for the Government of Ethiopia’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) to help establish a country-wide early warning system to monitor and report on the preconditions of drought. Ethiopia had just gone through the horrible 1974 drought and famine, which was viewed as one of the proximate causes of the emperor’s overthrow, so the new government was very keen to deal with future food insecurity issues in a more effective way. RRC needed somebody to do statistical analyses and technical report writing, all of which had to be in English to be sharable with the foreign donor community. So, I got a contract with RRC, funded by USAID. I worked directly with the Ethiopian government and did that for a year and a half or so. But then, the opportunity came along for a direct-hire USAID position; they were hiring and I was interested. I applied. I was accepted.

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Q: Today is Monday, March 14, and I am interviewing Cameron Bonner for the oral history interview. This is our second session, and this is Marcia Bernbaum. So Ron, the last session we had, our first, you gave me an excellent background of your childhood and up to the point in which you entered AID and we stopped when you entered as an intern. So now we are going to get into each of your posts, I guess starting with your

intern period. So please—

BONNER: Actually, Marcia, I would first like to back up a little bit.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: I just wanted to set the scene in Ethiopia. I mentioned that I was working for the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission under a USAID contract. The situation in the country was bad and getting worse weekly. In front of my office block at the RRC, which was separate from USAID offices across town, there would occasionally be extrajudicial killings during the night, and when I would show up in the morning, there would be a dead body or two lying not so far from my office. It was a very, very scary time, Haile Selassie had been overthrown by a military coup, led by Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was a devoted communist-socialist. He felt very much threatened by the possibility of a rebellion to the coup, and he employed a lot of violent actions as a result. The political and living environment was very difficult, especially in the capital. The personal security situation—not directed at me as a foreigner—for all of my Ethiopian colleagues was extremely tough. And it was some of that difficulty that led to my quitting RRC and to join USAID.

The other factor was that given the problems with finding work when I arrived in Ethiopia, I was attracted to the job security that USAID would offer. I was thinking of the future. Do I really want to follow Marge around in her career and then have to scramble for a job and each new country she would be assigned to? Or should I try to become an employee in my own right, and endeavor to get joint assignments as a spouse-couple? And that's what I decided to do. But it was not an easy decision, and I'll tell you why.

Since I was abroad, I could not be interviewed in Washington, so USAID/W agreed that I should be interviewed by mission personnel. And because I had been in Ethiopia at that time for about two years, I knew most of the USAID direct-hire staff. Maybe because of this, or maybe not, this was an easy series of interviews. With one exception: there was one person in the mission, an economist, who said he was not necessarily in favor of having a spouse of a USAID employee hired, because that would take opportunity away from a household that only had one income source. To me, this was a typical economist response. But anyway, I always remember that and wondered, I initially felt a little uncomfortable, whether I am taking the job away from a more deserving, economically deserving person.

But the mission support was strong. I remember, however, one thing during the set of interviews that gave me pause, and it continued to intrigue me over my career with USAID. The interviewer said, "With RRC, you're now working directly in the field; the impact of the efforts you are making you can see on a daily basis. And right now, you are typical of the people USAID hires under contract to actually implement its development programs. If we employ you as an intern, and then you become a USAID officer, you're not going to have that direct of an involvement with the impacts of your efforts. You'll have to step back, taking a more hands-off role, acting as a wholesaler rather than retailer

of development interventions. What you're going to be doing is affecting how those programs are designed, funded, and so forth." And this was a very important distinction that he made because I had to then reflect on my true interests: Do I enjoy more being a hands-on, ground-level development professional, or do I feel I can make wider, more significant contributions to development as a designer, funder and evaluator of assistance programs? Obviously, I chose the latter for practical reasons, mainly.

I traveled to USAID/W to start training as an IDI Intern. I didn't spend a lot of time there because I was separated from Marge and I wanted to get back as soon as possible. I recall that the formal training was eight or more weeks of classroom learning to be followed by some weeks in DC rotating to various offices to learn about their roles in the bureaucracy. Well, I didn't do the rotations, except for a few weeks in the East Africa office. I was assigned to the Ethiopia Desk, working with the desk officer to prepare cables or distill and distribute incoming mission information. It wasn't a very good learning experience in that I didn't get a good feeling for what Washington did or how offices interacted because the exposure was so limited.

After three weeks on the desk, I went back to Ethiopia. The mission claimed to be so short-staffed that I couldn't do office rotations, as the IDI program intended, but rather was thrown right at the daily business of the Multi-sector Development Office that had an array of programs it was implementing. I was not classified as an education officer per se because Ethiopia at the time did not have a formal education portfolio. I was labeled "General Development Officer," which basically meant I got all the scraps of the projects that other staff didn't want to handle. I was visiting family planning clinics, vocational training operations, and NGO (non-governmental organization) activities involving integrated rural development activities. And it was fun. It was a lot of fun. But it did not involve the formal education sector by any means, nor did it involve interacting with government officials.

As I mentioned earlier, the political situation in the mid to late seventies was very bad, and rapidly getting worse. Tensions between the U.S. embassy, the U.S. government, and the Ethiopian government were very fraught. Security was a serious problem, and programs were being cut back and even eliminated because of the Hickenlooper Amendment. I don't know if you remember Hickenlooper, but he was a congressman that led through Congress a law that said if any country nationalizes U.S. properties, then that country can no longer receive USAID funding. In fact, we were under severe restrictions for new and even ongoing programs; humanitarian aid was the exception. During the early months in country, a lot of mission discussions and meetings were about how to phase out our current programs rather than developing new projects.

In spite of this highly circumscribed environment, there was one opening that I exploited involving the Ministry of Education, where I started negotiating a new program for teacher training. This was possible because I had ins at the Ministry of Education due to my previous Peace Corps work there. The hope was that the situation with the government would improve and we wanted to have a project on the shelf ready to go when it did. So that was my first program design experience in Ethiopia. And it was my

first engagement with formal education activities. But it didn't go anywhere.

When I arrived in the fall of 1978, the mission direct-hire staff had been reduced by half, affecting several high-level officers—including the mission director—who were declared *persona non grata*. And for the last year I was there, it was a complete phase down operation at the mission. We continued to have meetings with some government officials and I was able to continue probing for opportunities in case the situation improved, specifically at Addis Ababa University to see what we could do in the area of overseas scholarships and faculty exchanges; but these efforts also went nowhere. Basically, it was a very depressing time, both professionally and emotionally.

Then in October of 1979, we left. All USAID direct hire staff left. The Mission closed down except perhaps for some residual phase-out activities and humanitarian relief programs. Basically, our final role was to close up shop and attend to the future employment needs of our local staff. So that was my first USAID experience. It wasn't a terribly positive one because I was involved in phasing out programs and not doing much else.

Q: So, it's interesting to me because I went through the classic IDI training rotation, although the whole issue of navigating the challenges of a USAID tandem couple was also part of my experience. What an interesting way to begin your USAID career. Please continue.

BONNER: From Ethiopia, Marge and I were both assigned to Tanzania, but first we were to go back to Washington to get three months of intensive Swahili training, which suited us just fine. We had a little boy at the time, and we could get him into a preschool program. It was wonderful to be back in Washington to study Swahili. I'll get back to that later, because I think one of the real things I've appreciated and I think others have appreciated of my career and Marge's career is how we've always been able to speak the predominant language in our countries of assignment; Ethiopia, Tanzania, and later Indonesia. But it was an important thing for us to do and an enjoyable thing for us to do. We spent three or four months in Washington, studying Swahili, and then we left for Tanzania, each being quite fluent in the language. We arrived in Dar es Salaam in April of 1980. As a tandem couple, we were well accepted within the mission; there were no frictions because we were spouses and we were able to quickly establish a workplace relationship—she in the program office, me in project management—with good professional-personal boundaries. There was another U.S. spouse couple in the mission at the time, so we weren't the oddity that we were in Ethiopia.

In Tanzania, the living situation was certainly not bad. It was nothing like Ethiopia at all. But economically, it was a disaster. Julius Nyerere, the president at the time, was a declared socialist, but a very human, decent, and honorable figure. To meet him, which we did, one was immediately taken in by his charm and sincerity. He was very popular among Tanzanians and very popular across Africa. While he was an impressive and genuine individual, under his version of socialism, the economy was tanking, and the effects of that were evident on a daily basis. Anywhere you went in downtown Dar, there

were long lines for food. Prices were spiking for commodities and fuel, and shortages grew daily. It wasn't bad for the U.S. official community; we are well-treated: We had a small commissary that offered many imported goods. But for our Tanzanian colleagues, and Tanzanians in general, it was very, very hard for them to live. Now, I don't know why that's important because our colleagues in the Tanzanian government were professional, committed individuals, with great integrity, but their home lives and living conditions were quite hard.

When I arrived there, again as in Ethiopia, the mission did not have a formal education portfolio, per se, but was funding non-formal and village training activities as well as a large overseas scholarship program. On arrival, I was first rotated to several mission offices in order to fulfill a requirement of my as yet uncompleted IDI internship. I found these experiences quite helpful to my understanding of various mission functions and procedures. For instance, I spent about a month in the controller's office, which was so useful for learning the processes and importance of budgets, procurements, and accountability. My rotations to some of the other offices were not quite as extensive, nor as impactful for me. After my rotations, I was assigned to head up a newly-formed Human Resources Development (HRD) Office, which combined the functions of the participant training office with the project oversight of the large and innovative Training for Rural Development Project. TRD was an integrated community empowerment project with a lot of training for village leaders and stakeholders. It sent scores of Tanzanians to U.S. Title XII land grant universities and historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) for graduate degrees—mainly master's degrees, but also some PhDs—to study in various agricultural disciplines.

A part of my job, which was very rewarding, was to interview the participants prior to their departure. I wanted in particular to find out what they were looking forward to, what problems they anticipated and what caused them anxiety. It was kind of an orientation program for them, and a very useful learning experience for me. I would then interview them when they returned, and it was very rewarding to see how changed these individuals had become after a year or two or three of training in the U.S. It was a good program; the mission didn't select the participants—that was the role of the Ministry of Manpower Development—but we had veto power over the candidates. And the other part of the program was—

Q: Can I intervene? So, what did you learn from them? What were the insights you got from that, from their experiences in the U.S.?

BONNER: My general feeling, and I haven't reflected on this specifically, is that the Tanzanians came back not just with wider technical knowledge, but much matured, and often exhibiting very "American" habits and behaviors. As mentioned, there was a strong agricultural bias to the programs we were sending the participants to, so of course they came back with those technical skills, whether in soil science, plant breeding, or whatever. As important as these were, I was more struck by their sense of self confidence and assertiveness, just how changed they seemed by being exposed to life on a U.S. campus and life in America in general. I wasn't in Tanzania long enough to see most of

these graduates progress in their careers. But I did hear anecdotally that they were doing extremely well. In general, I always believed that participant training in the U.S. is a very valuable intervention for USAID and important to continue supporting.

Q: One other question, reflecting from my experience in Kenya and participant training: How long had Tanzania been doing participant training when you arrived? Was this something that'd been ongoing for many years? Or was it relatively new?

BONNER: I don't know the answer to that. They had a functioning participant training office with a Tanzanian training officer and an assistant when I got there. The TRD project, with its large participant training component, was just starting when I arrived in country, which was the impetus for assigning me as the project officer and to head up the newly configured HRD office. I think it had been established several years before I arrived. But how long ago? I have no idea.

Q: Okay.

BONNER: The mission was sending not just people from the TRD project, but also sending participants in the health sector, in family planning, for example. The other part of the TRD program was village-based and was trying to train in-country leaders of local training centers that would invite villagers into the centers to teach them participatory development skills, how to hold a meeting, how to prioritize development needs, and how to accommodate the interests of the community. It was a very good program. In fact, it was so well received that when I was there, we developed a larger, follow-on project.

Let me cycle back a bit to Ethiopia. During my first experience with USAID when I was an IDI, I learned how critical mission management was to program effectiveness and operations. The management of the mission, which was one of the areas you said I should touch on, went from excellent to mediocre to quite bad over a matter of months. I don't know if you know the name Princeton Lyman—he's part of the Oral History Project—a very wonderful person who was singularly impressive within USAID and the State Department. When I started in Ethiopia as an IDI, Princeton Lyman was mission director, with both excellent management and social skills; a smart guy, a kind guy, and he led the mission very well. But when USAID was basically cut in half, and he was declared *persona non grata*, he was replaced by another director, who was experienced but lacked the skill-set of Lyman. As the political situation worsened even further, this director also had to leave, and his deputy became acting director. The mission was then stuck with an acting mission director who was not experienced, effective, or pleasant. From the series of abrupt leadership changes, I realized the importance of strong mission management.

And now I'll relate this to Tanzania. I just wanted to provide that background which provided a good reference point to my Tanzania experience. Marge and I arrived to a mission director, who seemed more interested in schmoozing diplomats and frequenting cocktail parties than actually managing a development portfolio. After a short time, he was followed by a man who came up through the controller ranks, and as you'd expect from a controller—I shouldn't stereotype—but he was a "bean counter" and he didn't

have much interest in the “big picture” stuff. He was a pleasant enough person, but I don’t think he was an effective manager. He didn’t know how to use his staff and he was too focused on nuts-and-bolts issues that should have been left to his project and program staff. He was then followed by another director—a third director in three years—that resulted in unnecessary turmoil and uncertainty. Again, this director was a nice enough man, but he wasn’t a terribly effective or engaged manager. In fact, one anecdote is that during our weekly staff meetings he would often fall asleep. Such an environment influences how you approach your interactions with mission management. Anyway, those are my main reflections on my three years in Tanzania.

From Tanzania, we were assigned as a couple to Indonesia. We left Tanzania for our home leave, and in mid-1983, we arrived in Jakarta. I went there as a “real” education officer (Backstop 60), no longer a general development officer as I was in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Marge was assigned first as the assistant program officer, and we arrived to a mission director, Bill Fuller, who, like Lyman, was an excellent manager; smart, personable, just a wonderful person. He ran a very effective mission.

Just before we arrived in Indonesia, many of the direct-hire USAID positions were designated as “language required” to the FSI 3 level. But then due to budget cuts this requirement was changed by USAID/W, and it was left up to the mission to determine how and for whom to provide Indonesian language training, and to pay for it. Marge and I had learned from our experiences in Ethiopia and Tanzania the importance of being able to speak the local language, not necessarily fluently, but enough to be able to communicate basic thoughts and desires. So, on our own, we started learning the language. We did this using FSI learning materials; taking every spare moment, armed with flashcards, to learn Indonesian.

But this self-learning approach only took us so far. We asked for a more structured, intensive program, to which the mission agreed. This allowed us to spend half-time at home with a language teacher for about 4 weeks, getting us to the FSI 3 level and 3 plus levels. But because of that experience, and because of how much I valued knowing the language, I decided that the mission should establish its own in-house language training program. In my office, the Education and Human Resources Development Office (EHRD), we started an in-house Indonesian program. We hired a language program coordinator, who along with three other Indonesian teachers implemented our own mini-FSI. I don’t know what’s happening now, but up until the time I left, and I think for a long thereafter, this program had become institutionalized within the mission.

In terms of my project portfolio in Indonesia, I was handed responsibility for university development projects located in the outer islands. I had two major projects to supervise. One was in the eastern islands of Indonesia, the other in the Western islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan. Both focused on strengthening the faculties on agriculture using both structured in-country training, overseas scholarships, and expatriate long- and short-term technical assistance. The programs also used a consortium approach—with stronger faculties charged with assisting weaker or newer ones through exchanges, seminars, and the like. As project manager, they gave me the opportunity to visit a lot of Indonesia; I

was on the road a lot traveling from island to island visiting universities, interviewing students, evaluating effectiveness of the interventions. Both programs had large participant training components, and we sent dozens of Indonesians to U.S. universities for graduate degrees. Now these were Indonesians who already were university faculty members, but in general didn't have solid academic backgrounds in the agricultural sciences; so this was a major investment in the faculties' professionalization.

To get back to your question about how long had overseas training programs been going on in Tanzania—which I wasn't sure of—in Indonesia it was a well-established program that was running for years. In fact, while I was there, we celebrated the departure of the ten thousandth participant from Indonesia to the United States, for both long-term and short-term training programs. U.S.-based training was a very important priority for the mission, and it was an important responsibility that fell on me as head of the Education and Human Resources Development Office, which oversaw the activities of all our participant training programs.

Q: May I stop you there and ask you, I can't resist asking—during the time you were there, or afterwards, did the USAID mission in Indonesia attempt to do a follow up or an impact assessment?

BONNER: Not to my knowledge; I really don't know. When I first arrived, I had an office director, but he only stayed for less than a year of the five years I was there. When he left, I was promoted to office director, which at that time had a staff of three U.S. direct-hire and about fifteen Indonesian staff. I also inherited quite a large portfolio; at one time, our office was handling twelve or more discrete projects, some small, some quite large, as well as managing all participant trainee processing and the in-house Indonesian language program. And we are also tasked with developing new education projects. As mentioned, this was my first USAID experience in the formal education sector. This sectoral work, from project concept, to contracting, to evaluation and everything in-between became the foundation for my later work with USAID in formal education.

A particularly challenging but rewarding project that I was tasked with developing was an education policy analysis and capacity building effort. It was called the Education Policy and Planning project (EPP), which had at its core the objective of strengthening the research, planning, and policy formulation capacities at the Ministry of Education, including establishing a standalone research unit in the Ministry of Education. EPP also had a large education decentralization component, with the objective of getting more of the planning and administrative functions of education out into the far reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. My involvement with EPP was very rewarding because it got me to brainstorm sector related issues with some very highly educated Indonesians, many of whom were educated in the United States to the PhD level.

In general, the manpower base I was working with in Indonesia was at a much different level of competence than in my previous posts. But, of course, Indonesia at the time was at a different stage of its own development than either Tanzania or Ethiopia. So, a more

highly skilled labor force was to be expected. In terms of the kinds of interactions I was able to have with project counterparts, it was on a different plane and thus professionally more rewarding.

In sum, Marge and I thoroughly enjoyed our time in Indonesia. We stayed for five years, partly because of the challenges of finding an onward assignment for a tandem couple, but also because Indonesia was such a rewarding place to work, fascinating place to travel and interesting culture to experience.

Q: So, you had a significant boost in responsibilities in terms of the value of your portfolio, the number of projects, the staff. This was the time when the Training Resources Group (TRG) was involved in management training for the agency. Did you receive any TRG management training at that time?

BONNER: I did. Quite a bit, as I recall. I remember going to Thailand for some management training. I went to Swaziland and Kenya for others. I also participated in USAID's premier Development Studies Program during my rotation to USAID/W, and this also was led by TRG. In my estimation, TRG was an excellent management training outfit, as was Management Systems International (MSI), a couple of whose programs I also attended.

Q: So, in Indonesia you were in a good situation where you had a strong mission director, at least in the beginning, a well-functioning project portfolio, and counterparts who were very capable and trained. So, it sounds like this was a wonderful opportunity for you to grow and apply your skills, right?

BONNER: That's excellently said; yes! Now, the mission director I mentioned before was not there during my entire five-year tenure. I think he left after about three years and was replaced by someone who was not quite as effective, and for whom I didn't have the same respect. He seemed to be more interested in making his way up the USAID and State Department career ladders than in managing the mission's strategy and program. But I think I was biased because we had such a positive experience with the previous mission director. I don't think that's so unusual. Unless it has changed as an organization, I think new people coming into USAID can expect a lot of variation in leadership and management styles, starting from the top political appointees on down the management stream to the mission level. And this variation affects a lot of what you do, how you do it, and how you report on it. At least it did for me.

One example of this comes from my time in Tanzania, when a new politically-appointed assistant administrator for Africa had just been confirmed. He was a real lightweight regarding sub-Saharan Africa and development in general. I recall vividly that one of his bureau-wide directives was to demand that adverbs should never start sentences, especially in the cables and memos that reach his desk. Fortunately, he didn't last long, nor did his directive.

Q: Excellent points. Let me ask about your next assignment. Washington, correct?

BONNER: Let me admit that at the outset that I wasn't excited about my posting to Washington. I don't think Marge was either but I can't speak for her. It was this big unknown, again because as an IDI, I had hardly any exposure to USAID headquarters. My impression, up to that time, was this is an unknown force that determines our budgets and policies, and how it does that I wasn't sure; it reads our cables and sometimes reacts in very confusing ways which I didn't understand. And so, I wasn't looking forward to Washington, even though I was offered two high-level positions: head of the education division for the Asia Near East Bureau and head of the education division for the Africa Bureau. I chose the latter, which organizationally fell under the bureau's Office of Technical Resources. I soon found out that my previously held notions of USAID/W were indeed seriously wrongheaded.

Q: Now, may I stop you one moment? You said you came back to Washington, which you hadn't been to previously. So, during your time in Indonesia, you didn't come back to Washington to defend project papers or PIDs? You were designing a number of projects at that time, at least in my experience in Latin America, we were coming up to present our projects, our project papers and have formal reviews in Washington. Did you do that or not?

BONNER: I did, but at a different level than what you mentioned. The Indonesian mission had been given a lot of decentralized authority by the Asia Near East Bureau. This was perhaps due to our physical distance from Washington, but more importantly because the mission had a full complement of direct-hire support staff, for example, a contracts office and an engineering office, and we were well-served by the nearby regional support office in the Philippines. Any trips to Washington were more or less to get agreement on the country development strategy, project concepts and broad parameters regarding program and mission budgets. You'll recall the agency requirements for project identification documents (PIDs) and project papers (PPs) but, at least when we were in Indonesia, the mission had final approval authority for the PP after the PID got Washington approval. So, I did travel to Washington from Indonesia several times, but I went back to defend PIDs and participate in program reviews, but I don't recall having to go back and get approval for any project after the PID. The point I'm making is, except for a few brief visits to Washington regarding specific project ideas, USAID/W was basically an unknown to me. And I wasn't looking forward to getting back there. But once I got there, I found that to be a tremendously important learning experience, just to figure out, and to be exposed to, the way Washington works; why its role was important, when it was important, and when it didn't serve any value-added purpose.

We stayed there for five years. I went from being the head of the Division for Education and Human Resources in the Technical Resources Office of the African Bureau, to—after a bureau-wide reorganization—becoming the head of the Education and Health division in the same office. And then—after another reorganization—I became the deputy director of the office of Analysis, Research, and Technical Support (ARTS) in the Africa Bureau. The bureau wanted to get more analytical strength into its strategy and program priorities

decisions, as a way to base more of its decisions on analysis rather than whatever happened in the past or was currently trendy. So it was a new role for the bureau and the office, with much more emphasis on analytics than on mission backstopping. The office was headed by a very smart and thoughtful Jerry Wolgin, who was a chief economist for the Africa Bureau when I arrived. He was then promoted to be the director of the ARTS office. I learned a lot during my tenure in the ARTS office. I was able to attend some congressional hearings, serving as the resource person sitting behind those testifying. I also wrote a speech on education for our assistant administrator to give to an international audience at a large World Bank gathering. For me, Washington was quite an ego trip, not just the exposure to Congress and confabs at the World Bank and visits to other multinational organizations, but more generally in playing a key role in shaping how education programs could and should be funded throughout sub-Saharan Africa by USAID and other funding organizations. My five years in Washington were totally amazing and fulfilling.

Q: So, tell me about the portfolio you had and the kind of program and financing, et cetera.

BONNER: Well, importantly, there was a strong movement in Congress in favor of improving access and quality of basic education in sub-Saharan Africa. I believe it arose from the World Bank's and UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Fund) Education for All initiative. I forget who specifically in Congress was championing this, but the result was a special basic education earmark for Africa. My office was responsible for implementing this mandate.

When I first arrived, there were very few countries in sub-Sahara with existing formal education programs, maybe a half dozen at most. Under the impetus of the earmark, this number rose to a dozen or more over the five-year period I was there. A lot of technical support from my office to the field missions had to be provided, offering advice on how to staff up missions for implementing such programs. There was a lot of travel on my part, first to convince missions of the importance of getting involved in the sector, then preparing them for the organizational implications, and finally assessing the state of the sector and identifying opportunities for providing funding support. Now, while I was heavily involved, I didn't do all the prep and assessment work myself; I had amazing staff support, both direct-hire and contracted, to do most of the design work. But I had a decisive role in terms of what programs the bureau should support, how to configure that support and at what funding levels.

Importantly, at the same time in Washington, and particularly in the Africa Bureau, there was a move afoot to rethink the standard "project" mode of assistance; so-called non-project assistance (NPA). The bureau wasn't alone in this re-think, but in the education sector we took on the NPA assistance modality aggressively. In my view, NPA was an unfortunate misnomer, as it appeared to be something that demeaned past project-based efforts. Later we called these approaches "policy-oriented" assistance or "budgetary support programs." Because that's basically what it was; its focus was to shape programs and their inputs *viz-a-viz* an existing or negotiated program or budget

policy agenda of the host country. This was very different from the usual input-output formulation of the typical project. ARTS director, Jerry Wolgan, was instrumental in getting this new approach launched. And then, I was tasked with getting it off the ground for the education sector in the context of the basic education earmark.

In the end, many of the programs we designed were a hybrid of both NPA and project modalities, i.e., NPA linked with project-related inputs: expatriate technical assistance, long and short-term training and commodities. The Africa Bureau, and particularly with its education programming, was pretty much in the lead on this; I think the Asia Near East Bureau was doing some NPA, but I don't recall that the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau (LAC) was. We went from zero NPA to about six in the five years I was there. In fact, during the last three years of my tenure, we programmed non-project assistance almost exclusively: in Guinea, Mali, Malawi, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Benin.

Q: In another context, when did you leave Washington? What years were you there?

BONNER: My assignment to USAID/W was from 1988 to 1993. This was long enough time to learn how Washington worked, appreciate how it worked, and how to work around things when necessary. In fact, this brings to mind something I meant to mention earlier. I'd like to relay an important guiding principle that I learned as an IDI. Do you recall the name Gordon Ramsey?

Q: I do.

BONNER: I believe Gordon Ramsey was part of the LAC Bureau. At that time, when I was an IDI, about the time you were also, he was behind the development of new policy and operations handbooks for the agency. This was a big deal, involving volumes and volumes of handbooks. I forget how many, maybe thirty or more volumes were produced. These were thick binders full of regulations and procedures. And so, a lot of our IDI training was learning about these handbooks, how to use them, how to reference them. I remember Gordon Ramsey came to talk to our group about the effort. During his talk, he said something very important. He said, and here I'm paraphrasing: "If you want to do something, anything and it's the right thing to do, something you are convinced is right, you can almost always find a way to do it, irrespective of what the handbooks say." Now, he wasn't saying ignore the handbooks, but he said, and again I'm paraphrasing: "If you run into obstacles, be inventive, be clever, seek a waiver. If a waiver is not possible, think of a way to change the regulation. Even if you can't do that, look for another creative way to do it as long as you're convinced it's the right thing to do morally and developmentally." This was something that stuck with me throughout my career: don't let the regulations throw up barriers, examine them for escape routes when necessary. Maybe later on I can try to cite some examples of where I applied the Ramsey principle: if it's the right thing to do, there's likely a way to do it. Okay, that was my Gordon Ramsay anecdote.

Q: Okay, so you dramatically expanded the number of missions with education programs during the period you were in Washington. Tell me about the capacity of the people in the

field who were implementing those programs. Did you have direct hires? PSCs? How were they managed out in the field in light of this dramatic expansion?

BONNER: We had gotten an okay to hire more direct-hire education officers, which we did. Where we couldn't find candidates, we used Personal Services Contractors (PSCs). Sometimes we got people seconded from other offices to take on this as part of their portfolio. Every country was so different so we just had to do whatever we needed to do. We were under a congressional earmark obligation, so we just had to get it done. (The "Ramsay Principle!") As a result, the top levels of leadership in the African Bureau, including most of the geographic office directors, were in favor of what we were doing. And so, we got lots of support and not a lot of second-guessing.

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Q: Today is Thursday, March 24, 2022. And we're having our third zoom conversation with Cameron Bonner. This is Marcia Birnbaum interviewing Cameron, or as I call him, Ron. So we are going to start, and I will turn it over to Ron right now. Go ahead, Ron.

BONNER: Okay, so nice to be back with you, Marcy. Last time we spoke, I pretty much summed up my experience in Washington. It was in early 1993 that we started exploring options for our next overseas assignment. But there were events going on in Ethiopia that particularly interested us. A year or two before, there had been an overthrow of the communist government of Mengistu Haile Mariam by a coalition of rebels, mainly from the northern Tigray and Eritrean regions. We were very much encouraged by what was happening and the prospects of positive change. Marge and I were particularly excited given our previous six years in Ethiopia, and our bad, very bad most recent experience: living there for four years under the brutal communist rule in the mid-'70s. So, as the situation there was solidifying around a new, more democratic, western-leaning regime, and the prospects of USAID reentering with a robust development assistance program, we lobbied hard in Washington to be part of the new order.

We were outspoken about our wanting to be more involved in Ethiopia. Marge and I both lobbied Peace Corps, directly and through Congress, to get ready to send volunteers back into the country when the government did change, or when the times were right to do that, because we witnessed so much positive influence that Peace Corps volunteers, hundreds and hundreds of them over the years and years, had made in the country. Separate from that, as I mentioned, Marge and I were both looking to end our tour in Washington, even though we were very much enjoying it and were both in relatively high-level positions. We knew we would want to go back overseas, and for us, ideally, that would be to go back to Ethiopia. This wasn't so easy, because, of course, as you may know, getting a directorship, which is what Marge wanted, is not an easy job, especially in a country that was on the brink of building up a new development assistance program. This is a situation in which high-powered USAID careers are built. But she lobbied for that, and she got that, to our and USAID's credit and benefit.

But then the question was, “What am I going to do?” Well, I was prepared to do anything involving Ethiopia. I approached the Peace Corps to see if they were going to establish a presence in Ethiopia, and maybe they would consider me for the country director job, a position that was very attractive to me. But this didn’t go far, as there was a lot of concern on Peace Corps’ part, because Marge was going to go as the mission director, and if I became the country director for Peace Corps, there would be, in their view, potential for conflict of interest, and so forth. So that really didn’t pan out. Also, concurrent with this, USAID was exploring the possibility of posting an AID representative in Eritrea, which, at that time, was still a part of Ethiopia, but was expected to become a separate, independent country within a year or two, which it did. So, USAID started the planning to establish a presence there, and they would start with an AID representative, not a full mission. I expressed my interest in that initially, but then as I thought about it, I decided I didn’t really want to be separated that much from my daughter and Marge.

The other option was then to fill a technical officer position in Ethiopia, ideally as an education officer. That appealed to me for several reasons, but first it required a sector assessment to judge the conditions for assisting the sector. Before I left Ethiopia on assignment, I visited Addis to explore the sectoral needs and possibilities, specifically in primary education in keeping with the basic education congressional mandate. While there, I saw what was going on. I was able to talk to lots of people in the education sector and in government about their plans and hopes for revitalizing the education system. I was very encouraged by my conversations. So based on that visit, interest grew in Washington for trying to get an education program established and I said I would be very interested in being part of that. And that’s how Marge and I both got assigned to Ethiopia in 1993, she as mission director and me as education officer, with a program yet to be defined and developed. It was a very exciting time for me, not just because of the change in the government and the positive things they were saying, but also it represented an opportunity to put into practice what I have been advocating in Washington. That is, to develop an assistance program, not just with technical, commodity and training assistance, but also to leverage system-wide change by providing some budgetary support, that is, non-project assistance.

When I was in Washington, as mentioned, I was instrumental in getting a lot of non-project assistance programs started in sub-Saharan Africa. From my USAID/W vantage point, NPA was more of a concept that was being piloted, and one that I had no direct experience implementing in the field. I was anxious to get the NPA model applied to Ethiopia, where I thought there was real promise for doing conditioned policy-based programming coupled with some conventional project assistance. It was exciting for me to try that out. And when I got there, I received strong mission support. We wanted to be big and impactful with USAID support. I was very encouraged with what the government was promulgating for the education sector.

At the time we arrived, and, of course, long before that, the education system had been decimated. The schools had been used as conscription centers by the previous government. Communities felt that their schools were being used, not for educational purposes, but for propaganda, teacher indoctrination and to draft young men. There was

real distrust and distancing of the communities and the people from the education system, particularly at the primary and junior secondary levels. The relationship between villagers and government administrators needed some serious mending. At the time—I forget the exact number—the primary school participation rate was about 14 percent; that is, only one in seven age-eligible children were actually attending primary school throughout the country, even fewer in the rural areas. So, there was a great need to improve the participation rate, especially of rural children and girls. Therefore, clearly the need was there. The opportunity was also there, with very encouraging policies being formulated by the new government, parliament, ministry staff, and especially the minister of education.

I should mention here that the minister of education at the time was a woman educator. She had been educated in the United States; a very strong woman, a real visionary. She and her staff had produced a blueprint for improving the education system in Ethiopia. The new education policy document was clearly articulated and well targeted, with emphasis on the lower grades. It was presented in a document that anybody around the world would support; it stressed improvements in access, gender equity and quality. It was particularly focused on revitalizing the primary system, but as well paying attention to the upper levels. However, these priorities were only written on paper. To implement the policy framework took a lot of work. And it took a lot of budgetary support, because the new government, as you can imagine, was struggling with how it was going to pay for all the improvements that were necessary after decades of neglect: infrastructure, social services, the health and agricultural sectors, as well as the education sector.

In my judgment, the opportunity was just perfect for us to go in with a policy-based, budgetary support intervention. As a result, I designed—with the help and support of a lot of others—an eighty-million-dollar program, the scale of which was unique, at least for the Africa Bureau. We named it the Basic Education System Overhaul (BESO) program. It was to run initially for three to five years, three for conditioned policy and budgetary support, and five for conventional project support. Of the eighty-million-dollar package, fifty million was for budgetary and policy support, thirty million for technical assistance, training and commodities. We put BESO together in what I think was record time, maybe about three to five months. It was a very expensive undertaking with very aggressive goals. I had long learned that in USAID you should always ask for more than you expect, but in Ethiopia's case, I got the eighty million dollars that I had budgeted and that was definitely needed.

It was probably a year before we actually could get the project components underway, due to lengthy contracting requirements. But in the interim, the government moved aggressively in meeting the first set of policy and budget conditions needed to trigger release of the first tranche of USAID NPA funds. Under the project contract, BESO had a huge technical assistance component; I think there were eleven or twelve long-term technical advisors assigned, both to work at the ministry as well as in the regions to strengthen education administration and teacher training institutes. The major contract was with the Academy for Educational Development (AED), which had the lead role, supported by World Learning, Inc, and the Education Development Center. These

contractors' technical advisors focused on policy and planning strengthening, teacher training, and materials development.

I should have mentioned earlier that the staff in the ministry and in the regional and district offices had been decimated; many people had left, morale was low. Not only that, but psychologically, because of so many years under a central-command and central-planning structure, priorities and targets were dictated from the top. The staff at the central ministry were mere "lemmings." They weren't used to thinking for themselves and were totally risk-averse. As a result, they really needed upgrading in their technical skills, in their confidence, and in their ability to manage against objectives. So, we worked on this: we put technical assistance into the Ministry of Education for strengthening the policy and planning sections. We put planning experts into the regional offices with which we were working—I'll come back to the targeting issue later. We assigned curriculum developers to help revamp a politicized curriculum and skilled teacher trainers to work at the targeted teacher training colleges.

Choosing the regions for targeting our efforts outside of the ministry itself was a complex issue. It was difficult politically—with a small p—and operationally. This required a lot of discussion with the central and regional governments. (Ethiopia, under its new constitution was constructed as a federation.) The reason for this was because the new central government was dominated by the people from the northern Tigray region. While the government came into power through a coalition of forces from the Tigray, Eritrea and Oromia regions control was really in the hands of the Tigrayans. (Unfortunately, things have taken a bad turn recently, but these were the conditions that existed in the early '90s.) As we were exploring promising environments for launching our new education initiative, we prioritized where we were most likely to have quick success. We had selection criteria for determining the target regions, but it came down to this: we wanted to work in a region that had strong local government support and relatively strong staff. And that region was Tigray. And a lot of people said, "Oh, the USA chose Tigray because it was the lead force in the new government, and was coerced to work there." But that was not the case: we were looking at the conditions on the ground, and we saw that the leadership in that region was relatively strong and very motivated to improve its education system. At the same time, we wanted to work in a second region, one that would present a more challenging environment. We chose to look south, to the Southern Nations and Nationalities People's Region (SNNPR), a region made up of dozens of different ethnic groups and languages; a far-flung region with areas of difficult access and low participation rates. Infrastructure there was terrible in terms of roads, electricity, and, of course, schools. So, in the end it was SNNPR and Tigray as the two geographical areas of focus for the decentralization objectives of BESO.

In addition to the large component of residential technical advisors, the program also called for a lot of short-term technical assistance, with the intention of having consultants come in and out of the country to provide one-off or recurring visits to work on specific problems. BESO also had a participant training component to get people overseas for master's degrees, or in some cases, PhD degrees; and it offered short-term training as well. In terms of commodities, we didn't provide that much. We had some vehicle

support and the like, but we weren't in the business of building or even repairing schools or trying to improve the physical infrastructure, i.e., teacher training colleges, district offices and so forth.

Q: May I ask a question? At that time, and during the time you implemented this non-project assistance program, were there other donors working in education? And if so, what were they doing and how was it?

BONNER: Good question, Marcy. Yes, there were. It was one of the reasons we stayed away from physical infrastructure. The World Bank was coming in big with funds for capital improvements in the school system. UNICEF was working there, and several of the European bilateral donors were also working in the sector, in particular Swedish SIDA (Swedish International Development Aid). In fact, because there was so much donor interest in the education sector, one of the things I started and continued to lead during my four-year tenure was an education donor's forum; the idea being to get all donors who were involved in education together to share information and coordinate efforts. We met monthly. Purposely we met in the Ministry of Education, because we wanted the ministry to see what we, as a group of donors, were planning and discussing. In fact, there was an open invitation to ministry staff to participate in the meetings. The vice minister would occasionally participate. As a group, we would talk about what we were doing, what we saw as problems, and what improvements were being realized—it was a very positive force. Because we were all pretty much working from the same page, the ministry's own policy proclamations—albeit in different geographical areas, and in different parts of the sector. At least we all knew what each other was doing, and in some cases, we were actually cooperating in our implementation efforts. This was particularly true with UNICEF.

Q: So, you had, in many ways, an ideal circumstance: you had a very competent minister of education, who had a clear idea of what you wanted to do. You had the funds that you needed, and clearly, a lot of leadership on your part. And you had an excellent relationship with donors. So, your one challenge at that point was that the education system had been decimated from middle levels down, right?

BONNER: That's correct. But I'd say all levels of the system needed major improvement.

Q: At all levels, okay.

BONNER: Our focus, properly I think, but also motivated by the basic education earmark in Washington was to work at the primary level. This was the right decision irrespective of the earmark, given the particularly low participation rates, especially of girls. I must say, going back to technical assistance, that was a difficult part of our negotiations with the ministry. I knew that the ministry and the regional offices badly needed some strengthening and training in skill areas that they did not have, and were not even aware of. For the ministry to agree to a twelve-person, long-term residential technical assistance intervention was unheard of at the time in Ethiopia. I learned from my many years there

that Ethiopians, in general, are a very proud people, rightfully so. But this pride can at times lead to unrealistic notions of their technical competence and difficulties in admitting the need for outside help. If they want to do something, they think they can do it themselves, and often they're correct. Generally speaking, the idea of having technical assistants come in, look over their shoulders, advise on how things might be done differently, and to help them with tasks they think they can do themselves, now that was a difficult landscape to navigate.

Moreover, once they learned the cost to the project of technical assistance (TA)—as much as a quarter million dollars a year just to support one person in the field—this also became a major obstacle. The Ethiopians' position was they would rather have that quarter million dollars and build schools or use it for something else on their long list of priorities. They thought they could make better use of those monies. I'm just mentioning that because the negotiations on that point were very protracted; I wouldn't say contentious as we and our counterparts were always professional and respectful of each other's position. But it was hard for the Ethiopians initially to swallow that piece of the program.

But it worked out: we ended up with a full complement of TA under a good contract, and an effective chief of party. Not every long-term TA assigned to the country was ideal or 100% effective, but in general, I think the team was good and proved its worth. In fact, several of them stayed for years and years, even through the follow-on BESO II program. I left in 1997 (year four of the five to seven year program) while things were going quite well, but before I could truly see many of the indicators of systemic change; that was hard for me to discern. It was clear at that time, however, that the program was popular in the ministry, and also popular in the target regions.

But other regions, the non-targeted ones, were asking "When can we get BESO to assist us?" By the time I left, BESO, as a program, was known widely throughout the country; people countrywide had heard about it. Regional education administrators had visited neighboring regions and said, "Hey, look, what's going on there. Why can't we have that?" So, there were some jealousies building up because of the name recognition and the changes that other regions were seeing in BESO target areas. When I left in 1997, there was already talk of developing a BESO II which would spread activities to other regions. Soon after I left, within a year I think, I was asked to come back and scope out ideas for a follow-on program. I produced a concept piece which I believe the mission used as a basis for the BESO II design. In fact, BESO II was approved and the same contractor won that award as well, notably with similar levels of technical assistance. Their presence—as much as ten years in the country—was long-lasting, and was strengthened by years of trust.

Q: May I ask another question? Continuity, as we know, is obviously very important in leadership. So, I assume you came back to do the concept paper after you had retired, or was it before you retired?

BONNER: I retired from USAID in 1997; Ethiopia was my last assignment as a direct-hire employee.

Q: Okay, so you came back as a retiree. One last thing, how long was the minister of education in that position?

BONNER: When I arrived in 1993, I think she had just been appointed minister, maybe a year or six months before I arrived. She was the minister during my entire stay and we developed a strong partnership based on mutual respect. In a way, she viewed me as an insider, given my previous Peace Corps work at the ministry; in fact, the office I occupied then was just down the hall from her current office suite. Sometime after I left, but I'm not sure how long, she left to become the ambassador to India, and I don't know what happened to her after that. When I returned to write a concept piece for BESO II, I met with the new minister, and he struck me as a very capable person. His priorities were very similar to what BESO was trying to accomplish, and so the program continued to enjoy strong support at the top. I also should mention that the vice minister at the time was a very strong professional educator. He had a PhD from a university in England. He was from Tigray himself, but he was a very strong leader and a capable administrator. So, leadership at the top was very good. But below that level, staff quality varied quite a bit. There was quite a bit of turnover. The planning person, who was actually quite good—the key person we negotiated the project with—unfortunately died very young of cancer, and he was replaced by somebody who was not quite so skilled nor as committed to primary-level improvements as his predecessor.

Q: So, now we're going to move on to your post-USAID period. You had a very rich career in very different countries. And we'll be looking forward to your reflections on lessons learned from your prior experiences. So, are we ready to move on to retirement, or do you have something more to say?

BONNER: I would also like to say something more about the BESO program. We wanted to get the communities more directly involved in their schools. As I mentioned earlier, there was a lot of distancing, a lot of distrust at the community level for the whole education system. That affected participation, girls in particular, and affected how much the communities are willing to engage in conversations about schooling. So, we came up with what I think was a very innovative intervention; we called it the Community Action Grants program. Initially, this caused some conniptions among our lawyers and procurement people, because we were proposing to just give "blank-check" grant money to communities and see how well they would spend it. We said the funds must be used to "improve primary education," but we would let them decide what "improving education" means.

To qualify, interested communities would have to form a committee to decide priorities for spending the funds. We'd give them maybe three hundred dollars and see what they would do with it; we'd come back to see how they spent it, then maybe we'll then give them more, perhaps five hundred dollars, perhaps a thousand dollars. But at the time, our contracts office and our lawyers said, Wait! You can't just give money without knowing

how it will be used, without monitoring and evaluating its use. But I said, Let's find a way to do this, and we did. (Again, the Ramsay Principle!) We devised a scheme whereby community members would meet to decide how to improve their school and then produce an action plan to achieve this. Our solution was to treat these plans as products which we were buying from the community group: the "School Improvement Action Plan." This satisfied USAID's procurement requirements, and gave us license and an opening to talk to parent groups about school quality. We gave the community grants without any strings attached, except the requirement that a plan be produced, and they gave us a receipt for buying the plan from them. We were very flexible in the kinds of plans that we would buy. As I mentioned, school infrastructure had been neglected or devastated during the previous regime. We anticipated that the communities would first want to get roofs on their schools, or a cement floor, or perhaps put in windows, or whatever. Which was fine, even though I said before BESO wasn't into infrastructure building, this was a worthwhile exception: it led to formation of nascent parent-teacher associations, which in itself was a giant leap forward. After the first-round action plans—as expected, mainly involving facility improvement—follow-on schemes focused increasingly on quality and equity inputs such as books, teacher upgrading, girl-friendly latrines, et cetera.

The important point of this was to get the communities talking about education and talking about what they think education should be doing for their kids, and if they started with a new roof, fine. But we found over the years, the communities became more involved and engaged in the education of their children. Community gatherings would include perhaps hundreds of parents with the meetings attended by Ethiopian facilitators; often, this was the first time parents got together to talk about schools in a positive way. And they were producing these plans. The second generation and third generation plans were dealing with things like books and materials, and the kinds of things more related to quality.

I should have mentioned earlier that our emphasis in BESO was on quality improvements. We thought that you can't improve access without improving the quality of education. So, BESO was known as the quality project. We knew that we had to help expand access, but the World Bank and others were also there trying to get more kids in schools by building more schools. We were saying, we don't want more kids in the school if it's not a school. We asked: "What constitutes a school, what inputs are basic beyond the physical structure?" A health clinic is not a health clinic without medicine. A school is not a school without books, without effective teaching. So that was our schtick, that was our contribution to improving primary schools.

In our Community Grants Program, we would talk to the communities about this. We said, "We're about quality, what's going to improve the quality of your school? Okay, maybe a new roof, but then what after the new roof? And we would have good facilitators go and talk about what it means to be a quality school. What does it mean to have an effective teacher, one who shows up every day, prepares lesson plans? And what does it mean to have an effective curriculum, and access to books? What does it mean when the storekeeper locks up the books and goes away with the key and nobody has

access to the books?" These were the kinds of conversations we had with the community and these were very enlightening and positive. That was a very important part of our program at the community level.

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Q: Yes, please continue.

BONNER: Before we leave Ethiopia, a couple of additional points I want to make. I have always been a strong proponent of girls' and women's education, starting with my teaching and curriculum work during Peace Corps, followed by my tenure at the all-girls school I taught at in Uganda. More specifically in Indonesia, I started some innovative efforts to foster training opportunities for spouses of U.S.-bound male participants. If you'd like, we can go into that in more detail later, but now we're talking about Ethiopia. In the policy agenda we had in Ethiopia, a very strong plank was girls' education and what we can do to encourage and incentivize parents to get more girls into school and more women into the teaching corps. In fact, one of our policies was to increase the percentage of women attending teacher-training colleges from X to Y; I forget what that number was. Again, because we had a very strong (female) minister of education, it was a very gender-positive policy environment. That was an easy plan to put into place, and it produced some significant outcomes. I wanted to make the point that I have always been a very strong believer in girls' education, in the fact that, when you educate a girl, you're educating all her brothers and male cousins, and (chuckles) so forth. So, affirmative girl-oriented programs have tremendous drawing power.

The other thing I wanted to mention about my time in Ethiopia was I got to work quite a bit with NGOs and PVOs (private voluntary organizations). In my previous postings, and even in Ethiopia, programs were essentially government-to-government, and often this gives you blinders in terms of what others are doing. But in Ethiopia, I became very aware of what the NGOs were doing and what they were attempting. And I got to appreciate their efforts and innovations. Some of them were U.S. PVOs working with local NGOs, others were U.S. PVOs working on their own and doing their own thing. A few were indigenous NGOs who were independently piloting interventions in the education sector. But all this led me to a new appreciation for the role—the unique role—that NGOs can and do play in the development context. And I didn't appreciate that as much until I got to Ethiopia. And I learned to appreciate it much more when I started doing some of my post-retirement consultancy work, which put me more face-to-face with many of the NGOs that were working in development.

The other point I wanted to make—and this has also been true throughout my career—I've always put a lot of emphasis on staff development. I've believed and hopefully practiced bringing staff along with me, not using them as gophers or aides, but using them as sounding boards and idea generators and all that. And I really practiced this, especially in Indonesia and Ethiopia. One anecdote I can relay is that a woman I worked with in Indonesia for five years started out as a very timid, self-conscious person. And over her years at USAID—I think she had twenty-five years with the Jakarta

mission, and I was part of those early years—she grew into a consummate professional, leading huge projects and operations in the democracy and governance area. Just a year before she retired, she was voted FSN (Foreign Service national) of the year for USAID, worldwide. I like to think I served as a stepping stone in this by playing an important mentoring role early in her career.

Q: Wow.

BONNER: I mention that only because, as she was about to receive that award, I was communicating with her. And she told me—she said, "Ron, you were the best supervisor I ever had, and you put me on this path, and I really value that." And that probably meant more to me than whatever other accolades or compliments I was getting, because knowing that my grooming efforts and seeing her succeed was personally so rewarding.

One other anecdote, and this goes back to Ethiopia; I had very good staff there. We had an Ethiopian staff member who had gotten a PhD in education from an Indian university. I had another Ethiopian guy I hired, who was the country representative for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). I had both of these fellows in my office, and we worked very closely together. I, of course, left when I retired; there was another American that came in behind me. But after that, this one fellow, the previous UNESCO country rep, was promoted to head up the Education Office for the entire mission. He was Ethiopian—this was kind of unheard of, since up to then it had been a US direct-hire post—but he headed up the office and did a fantastic job. But then when he chose to retire from that job, he was replaced by another American direct-hire, but he was doing the work successfully until he retired.

The other fellow in my office that I was mentoring went on to become the regional representative in East Africa for Creative Associates, Inc., leading their programs in South Sudan, Kenya, and elsewhere. I only mention this because it was proof to me that working on staff development is a very worthwhile and rewarding endeavor. In fact, another anecdote I will relay comes from them. When I went back years later, on a consultancy to Ethiopia, I met with both of them for lunch, and to themselves—well, not out of earshot, but they were speaking quietly in Amharic, which I could still understand—they said to each other "It's because of Ron that we're both in the positions we're in; we both succeeded professionally in the lives we've now living." That really stroked my ego.

Just one final thing on staff development. I recall in Indonesia we used to have "one-on-one" meetings every week or two with the mission director. Indonesia was a huge mission. I forget how many direct hires there were, maybe forty, maybe fifty. Whatever the number, it was a huge mission and a huge program. Every week or two, we had a meeting intended to keep the director informed of progress and problems. These were meant to be between the office chiefs and the mission director. With the director's agreement, I would invite to these meetings my key staff members, including the woman who I mentioned earlier, each of whom had an important role to play in managing our program portfolio. I had them join me to bring some transparency to the happenings in

the front office. Not only did I have them join me, I had them contribute to the meeting's agenda; I asked them to decide what to bring to the director's attention. At first, they found that to be somewhat nerve-racking; that I would put this kind of a question to them and responsibility on them. But in fact, it became a pattern for other offices in the mission. This is supposed to be a very private, one-on-one thing, a bit confidential with the mission director. But I wanted it to be a learning and staff development exercise.

And I carried that practice through for our regular meetings with senior Africa Bureau management as well as during my time in Ethiopia, where Marge was very receptive to the idea of having staff join the one-on-one meetings. By that time, they were on a bi-weekly basis, so every other week, I'd go to my staff, I say, "Okay, what do we want to talk to Marge about?" Again, the staff came up with their own agenda items, we would sort through and prioritize them. It was as much their meeting as it was my meeting; it was a very good experience. And very much a baked-in part of my staff development and mentoring efforts.

Q: Lessons learned! Now let's discuss your post-retirement.

Marge and I both retired from USAID in October '97. My first post-retirement job as a freelance consultant was in February 1998. I was invited to come back to the Ethiopian mission, not to work on education, but to work on the health sector. The mission at the time was so taken by what I had done under the strategic objective for education, they wanted me to reformulate the health program's strategic framework and indicators. You'll remember those days, when we had to articulate results indicators for all programs within the mission's approved strategic objectives (SOs). We had a solid one for the education program, but apparently the one for health just wasn't seen as robust enough. The mission brought me back to work on it with the health staff. And that's how I started my post-retirement consultant career.

I went back to Ethiopia a couple more times after that, once for a vision exercise on what should follow BESO. The mission wanted to design a bridge program to go from BESO I to BESO II, but they didn't have time to put a contract in place in time. So, I came back to help them think through what they should focus on, how they should think about a redesign, and how to bridge the expected gap between contracts. So, I did that. The next time I visited Ethiopia—and it turned out to be the last time—was in 2010, when I participated in an impact assessment of USAID's fifteen-year support to education under the post-Mengistu era. I worked in-country for three weeks, along with two U.S. and three Ethiopian consultants. (I recently sent you a copy of that impact evaluation.)

This was actually my last consultancy. When I came back from Ethiopia, I said, this is a nice capstone to my career. I'm getting tired of the travel, and I'm getting tired being a consultant with its eighteen-hours and stressful deadlines. I decided at that time to stop. Oh, the phone calls asking for my services didn't stop right away, but after I rejected about six of them, the consultant firms stopped calling me, which was good.

Q: Over your post-retirement years, you had many consultant assignments. So, besides your return trips to Ethiopia, what else did you do? I'm not sure I saw those jobs listed in your resume.

BONNER: In January 1999, I did a rather comprehensive study for USAID/Washington of the worldwide education officer staffing levels and future needs. I worked with one other U.S.-based consultant for this analysis. First, I developed a questionnaire that was sent to education officers, to mission directors, and to others in Washington and field missions, essentially asking, "What do you think about education officers? Are they needed? Are they effective? Are they well trained? Can others serve in this role?" It was a very comprehensive survey, resulting in a report that was well-received in Washington.

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Q: Today is Tuesday, March 29, 2022. This is the fourth interview of Cameron Bonner. And this is Marcia Bernbaum speaking. Now, I'm going to turn it over to Cameron. Ron?

BONNER: As I mentioned earlier, Marcy, I want to go back a little bit. I've had a week or so to reflect on what I've told you about my experience in the missions and in Washington. And I'd like to make a few general observations. First of all, I have found that the Foreign Service and Government Service, the FS and the GS, staff in the agency, overwhelmingly, have been professional, conscientious, and dedicated people. I say that, because in the previous administration, there was a lot of bad-mouthing of government and a lot of distrust of government workers that has arisen in the public's mind. And I have felt very hurt by that, because in my experience, uniformly, the people we worked with were really good, honest, hard working people, and dedicated to their jobs. There were a few exceptions, of course; there were some political appointees with whom I didn't see eye to eye. But even so, most of the political appointees that I had to work with, and some of those who I supervised, were good people and were trying to do the best job they could.

The other point is that a lot of the people I worked with, both in the missions and in Washington, had previous overseas experience outside of USAID, for example, Peace Corps, or NGO/PVO experience. And they brought to the job insights and experiences that were so helpful in terms of appreciating the challenges of development, the realities of development, and the important sensitivities required when working with different cultures and different peoples. And that was so important to the fabric of the agency. My hope is that the composition of the new staff that are coming into USAID have the same diversity of work and living experience, because in my judgment it is so essential.

So that was number one. For me, my experience with USAID—now, I don't think I said this before—was totally rewarding. I did mention in an earlier session that when I was being interviewed for my first USAID job, I was asked by a very observant person, "Is this really something you want to get into? Do you want to get into wholesaling projects for USAID, or you want to get into implementing projects for USAID?" He asked this because I had just come from implementing a project with the Ethiopian government that

was funded by USAID. So, he was pointing out the real differences between experiencing on-the-ground development impacts, and working for USAID where you're two or three steps back from the action, trying to conceptualize, plan, and fund activities to be carried out by others. That was a tough question for me to answer at the time, but I decided to go with USAID. And I have no regrets. Though, having said that, throughout my career, I did miss the on-the-ground experience and I was a bit jealous whenever I would go to the field and visit people implementing projects. I wished I could be part of that. But as I step back, I believe that whatever contributions I made, whatever those impacts were, for me they were better made at the management level or at the wholesale level rather than the retail level.

Being with USAID exposed me to issues/sectors/programs that I never would have been aware of or otherwise involved with. I was involved of course in education at all levels, from primary school, secondary, university, non-formal education, vocational education, literacy: all aspects of the sector that no matter what other job I may have chosen for my career, it could not have exposed me to that breadth of experience. Not only that, when I was in my final deputy office director assignment in Washington, I was involved in other sectors as well, including agriculture and health. In particular, I oversaw the combined education and health office at the time when HIV-AIDS was spreading rapidly, and the agency needed to formulate a quick and effective response, especially for sub-Saharan Africa. It was a fraught yet critical time for the Africa Bureau to be engaged. I was also involved in family planning programs, in integrated rural development and community leadership training programs, and several other pilot efforts, such as developing solar powered food preservation ovens, low maintenance water pumps and high efficiency wood stoves, improved hygiene stations and latrines for primary school students. I'm only saying this because the mosaic that I was exposed to and learned from was much more varied than I could have gotten with any other career choice I might have made. So, all in all, I was very happy with my experiences and with my career choices.

The other area I want to dwell upon is project management. It sounds simple. And to some people, it is simple. But in fact, in my opinion it's an art rather than a technique or a process. In a way I fault TRG (Training Resources Group) in this regard. I have a lot of respect for the company, at least based on my exposure to it from the several TRG training courses I attended. I think you're quite familiar with TRG. Overall, they did very good work, but I think they failed us in their project management and implementation training courses. I felt these were too process-oriented, technique-oriented, but they weren't really well conceived to provide customized tools for effectively managing a USAID-funded project. So much of what we do in USAID is involved with projects, whether directly managing them or evaluating them or designing them. I saw such a variety of approaches to project management. And as I said, I really saw it more of an art than as a technique.

When I left one mission, I won't mention the specifics here, I handed over project management to a person who practically destroyed the project because he started micromanaging it. We had a very good relationship with the contractors up to that point. And once he came in and started micromanaging and second-guessing, and stepping on

people's toes, even though he was a very smart guy, his approach to management was so different from mine that it practically torpedoed the project. I think that the way projects are managed takes special skills, and I'm not sure that developing those skills is given enough attention. My approach was, you've designed the project, you've contracted it out to people who are going to implement it, and now's the time to step back. A project manager's job is to assess how it's progressing: Is it meeting the targets? Is it achieving what it's supposed to be achieving from a contractual point of view? But when you impose your views and start saying, "Why did you do this this way," and "Why didn't you do it that way?" That's stepping on the toes of our contractors and our implementers. And I think it should, except for egregious violations, be out of bounds. This issue needs to be explored further. So, I'll repeat, effective project management is not a cookbook, it's an art.

The other thing that was a personal bugaboo for me—throughout much of my overseas assignments—was the need to spend so much time editing other people's work, the wordsmithing requirements of producing the perfect memo or cable. A cable would come to my desk—it would have some grammatical errors, particularly those written by our FSN colleagues—and depending upon the mission management, and even for Washington, this had to be made into a perfect document. I always objected to that. But people would come back and say, "Well, here you got a split infinitive, or here you have a poor construction of a sentence. It's going to reflect poorly on the mission, and we can't have things going into Washington that reflect poorly on the mission." So, a common view was the quality of mission submission would be judged by its written submissions, say containing split infinitives or preposition-ending sentences, or something similar.

I mentioned an anecdote the other day, when I was talking about my experience in Tanzania when we had an assistant administrator, a political appointee, who would come back and comment on the grammar used in cables. In fact, I think once he sent back a cable to our mission director saying, "I can't accept cables that have sentences that start with adverbs or have split infinitives or dangling modifiers," or whatever, rather than commenting on the content and the substance of the communication.

As I said, I spent inordinate amounts of time editing other people's documents simply because there was a standard being set, and if it didn't meet that standard, then it had to go back for some editing. I found that a real pain in the butt, frankly, and spent too much of my time making grammatical corrections. Now, I'm encouraged by the fact that—and I think I was exposed to this during my consultancy period—with so much reliance now on spell-checkers, text messages, and emails, I think the emphasis has come off of grammatically perfect communication and rather on quick, timely communication. I think that's a positive thing. Now, and I'm only speculating there, I have observed the way people are now using the tools of technology to communicate back and forth. It seems to me it's a real sea change, and a positive one, for the way USAID should be working. Enough about that, I just feel that too much of my time was spent and other people's time was spent on grammar. It certainly varied by mission. I mean, some mission directors and others would say, Yeah, I get what you mean, okay, let's send it in. But for others it would have to be word-perfect.

Let me say more about my management style. I was very influenced by a book that came out in the late '80s. It was entitled, *Managing Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?*, by William Oncken. I don't know if you're familiar with that management book, but it struck a chord with me. Basically, the concept was, when a staff member comes into your office with a problem, don't put the monkey for solving it on your back; you make sure it stays on their back, assuming they have the tools to deal with it. So, your approach should be, Oh, that's a real problem. I'm sorry you're facing it. What ideas do you have for solving the problem? And, is there a way I could help you? But the problem, the monkey, stays on that person's back. I liked that book so much that I circulated it among my Ethiopian staff, who read it and also found it helpful in terms of taking responsibility. The inside joke for all of us became, "Who's got the monkey?" It was a very interesting, enlightening, and growing experience for me and my staff in terms of how to assume responsibility and how and when to delegate. It's all about delegation.

The last thing I want to reflect on right now, Marcy, is another thing that was a bugaboo of mine, and that was the clearance process in a mission—and to an extent, in USAID/Washington as well—but clearances were often an unnecessary set of hurdles in the mission. This had a bit to do with the wordsmithing requirement I mentioned before. But the clearance process, at least back in the day, when you drafted a cable (or memo, or letter), it usually had to go through two or three or six clearances before being sent out. This was time-consuming; it would delay communication and it was not always easy to follow the clearance trail and find out who or what was delaying it.

I have another anecdote I want to relate. I was in Tanzania at the time. I had an order for a participant training program (a document called a PIO/P, project implementation order for participants). This document was an order to approve and fund the U.S. training of an individual. Well, it reached the comptroller's office to ensure that the funds were available, and he refused to clear off on it. I asked, "Why? Why are you not clearing, we've got the money?" He said, "I just don't believe that we should be funding PhD students in the United States." And it wasn't cleared. I had to take the problem to the mission director and say, "Wait a minute, this is part of the project. This has been agreed to. What right does the comptroller have to say he doesn't believe in PhD-level training, so he's not going to clear the PIO/P?" The director agreed with me, and the PIO/P was cleared.

Now, that was an anecdote. I don't know that such problems were rampant throughout the agency or the mission, but it did point to a problem in our communications channel: often it slowed things down unnecessarily. In fact, it got me so angry in Indonesia that I lobbied for, and was successful in getting established a set of clearance blinders, so that when a communication went to an office for clearance, that office had a well-defined set of criteria it was to apply to that document. And if it met the criteria, it had to be cleared. The clearing party was allowed, even encouraged, to note thoughts or objections separately, but he or she could not refuse to clear it based on concerns outside of their functional responsibilities. That one change sped things up quite significantly once that

was implemented throughout the mission. I felt that was a real step forward. Okay, that's about all I have to say on managing in a bureaucracy.

Q: Thank you. Thank you for those insights. You certainly have me thinking of some of those issues, and you're right, the clearance process was terrible, and the focus on grammar and everything else. Maybe now with text messages, one doesn't have to go through that. So, thank you. We are now going to move on toward your post-AID career, which clearly built on your extensive experience before and during AID. And it will be interesting to see how you applied what you learned in your follow-on consultancies, as well as any challenges you might have faced. So please go ahead.

BONNER: Okay. Thank you, Marcy. First of all, let me just summarize what I did. I retired in October 1997. And in January 1998, I started my consultancy career. I had never planned to do that. When I retired, I was going to retire to the country and pursue some of my hobbies—woodworking, antique car restoration, and so forth. But then I started getting calls: well, Ron, can you do this? Ron, can you do that? And in January of 1998, I started my freelance consultant gigs and continued for about twelve years—to my surprise, because I never thought I wanted to be a consultant. But in fact, a lot of it was professionally rewarding and built upon my development knowledge and experience. I really felt I had something to contribute. And it was hard for me to turn down assignments, particularly interesting assignments as they came along. Over that twelve-year period, I actually did twenty consultancies; I probably turned down at least twenty more. It was a very good position to be in: to be able to pick and choose the ones I wanted and reject others. I didn't have to do it for financial reasons, but I wanted to do it for professional reasons. And so, I was in a position where I could kind of pick and choose those I found particularly interesting.

Over that period, I did ten consultancies in India. I'll get into more detail on that because they were by far my most rewarding set of consultancies. I did four back in Ethiopia, drawing on my years of experience there. I did three for USAID/Washington, mainly around the issue of staffing of education officers: the need for them, how they were being used, and whether their work was appreciated or not appreciated. I had two in Ghana, rather routine USAID-type consultancies. I had one with UNICEF in India, and I had one in Macedonia, now called North Macedonia, which was a fascinating one, an especially challenging one.

What did I learn from all that? I learned that as a consultant, I could do all the "fun" stuff that I couldn't necessarily do as a USAID direct hire. I could conceptualize new projects, I could lead brainstorming sessions, I could do sector studies, I could do project designs, I could do interim and final project evaluations, I could do long-term impact assessments. It was wonderful work. It was hands-on work. Upon completion, I would report my findings back to the mission staff and leadership, but I would be thinking at the time, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if these direct hire people could do this work instead of being so desk-bound?" It was the work that I loved doing when I was a direct hire, and I did a lot of that kind of work as a direct hire. My field trips to projected sites were especially enjoyable. But over the years USAID was getting away from that and becoming more of

a contractor and overseer of those kinds of activities than the creator of them. So, becoming a consultant and being able to do that work was a wonderful hands-on experience and thoroughly rewarding.

I don't know if you remember this, but I think we were both in Washington about the same time and there was a paper that was circulating. It got a lot of play at the time. It was—I don't remember the exact name of it—it was something like, "Is USAID Contracting Out Its Brains?" Does that ring a bell to you, Marcy?

Q: No.

Anyway, as I remember, it was quite controversial because, exactly what I said, that USAID was contracting a lot of the interesting work out and so what was left for USAID direct hires? In particular, what was often left was the niff-naff or the bureaucratic side of the business rather than the actual fun stuff. I was influenced quite a bit by that paper. I wish I could remember its exact name. Anyway, several years later, when I was consulting, I saw in fact, that I was doing the interesting stuff, the brainy stuff, and the people in the mission were reading my reports and saying, "Yeah, that's good. Yeah, let's do that." They should have been the ones saying, this is what we should do and here's why. Anyway, enough of that.

One of the most challenging consultancies I had was in Macedonia. I led a team of four consultants to review the education sector for assistance opportunities. This was a few years after Macedonia's breakup from socialist Yugoslavia in 1992. So, my work was done in the early 2000s. My team was brought in to look at the education sector, which was very top-down, command driven, and answer the question, "How can and should USAID help reform Macedonia's education system? It was a review of the education system from bottom to top. And we produced, I think, a fairly sensible report. I believe a lot of the ideas that we proposed were actually turned into projects and activities.

But from my reflections on that work—and I want to mention this, because it was similar to the experience I had in Ethiopia after the overthrow of its socialist government—I found that the professionals in the sector, from the teachers up to the principals to the people at the Ministry of Education, were very timid, risk-averse people; they were not big-picture people, they were not used to having ideas or questions put to them like, "What do you think is the best way to do this?", because it was so top-down. And it was hard to break through that reticence or lack of risk-taking attitudes. That was an eye-opener for me, both in Ethiopia and in Macedonia. I guess it says a lot about top-down systems. So, we had to go in and try to find ways our ideas would work given that kind of an environment. And as I said, I think what we proposed eventually was at least partially implemented.

I had only one consultancy that was not with USAID; it was with UNICEF in India. And it also reminded me a bit of the exposure I had to UNICEF in Ethiopia. I found them very committed to the ideals of childhood and girls' education, to childhood health and nutrition. But I found that there was a lack of engagement in field-level activities.

They're only two examples, and I don't want to generalize beyond those two examples. I was in India for UNICEF designing phase two for a girls' education and school sanitation project. This was a fairly successful project, but they didn't know where to go from phase one, so they wanted me to design phase two. It was a very interesting consultancy; I was able to visit a lot of rural schools in India and talk about health and sanitation and latrines and hand washing and the like. But the environment in the UNICEF mission in Delhi was very fraught with, I think, jealousies, turf issues and distrust among or between offices. And it was a difficult situation to work in, one that I had never experienced in USAID. I'm only throwing that out to contrast it with my pre- and post-retirement USAID experiences.

Now I'll get to USAID/India, which I said was by far the most challenging and the most rewarding set of consultancies that I had. I was there ten times over a period of maybe eight or so years. I was able to monitor and evaluate ongoing projects. I was able to look at the mission's results framework for education and set up new results criteria. While these were interesting, the more fascinating jobs were working with the indigenous NGOs, local foundations, and corporate social entrepreneurs that were quite active in the formal and non-formal education sector. India has a very rich indigenous NGO sector and movement. They have a lot of independence. They have a lot of insight into ground-level conditions and dedicated, innovative leadership. It was a real pleasure to get to know them and their programs.

I mentioned earlier that my work in USAID did not provide me with significant exposure to the work of NGOs, neither US-based nor local. In my experience, such activities were often considered the orphans of a mission's portfolio. They were not as widely or as heavily funded as the bilateral projects. We were basically a government-to-government operation. And we saw NGOs as doing, yeah, some interesting community-based stuff, but it really didn't have the scale nor the impact or the durability that was going to significantly affect a mission's development objectives. And so, I came out of USAID a bit skeptical of the importance to development, at scale, of the work that the NGO community was doing.

That completely changed when I went to India. And I don't think it's necessarily unique to India, I was just that my own blinders that came off. When I was in India, I met many NGO leaders and workers who were totally dedicated to their jobs and doing important work. The mission portfolio in India at the time, did have some government-to-government programs, but a lot of the programs were mission-to-NGO, either individually or to NGO consortia. And that was a different set of intervention modalities that I was exposed to. When I was there, I worked on issues of girls' education; I started with an evaluation of a girls' education program implemented by local NGOs. In that work, I visited lots of schools in many different Indian states. From that effort, my work broadened out to study the issues of other vulnerable children. I was able to look at child labor issues and child trafficking issues. I witnessed young kids who were earning a few rupees a day picking recyclable debris out of trash dumps. I looked at the sex trafficking side of things. I was exposed to NGO programs that were working with street kids, working to educate the children of sex workers, working to get dialogue

going between local police and madrassa leaders to tamp down street crime and facilitate early grade learning, that kind of thing. And they were doing wonderful work.

In fact, I remember being outraged—maybe that's too strong—but saddened to witness the popularity in the U.S. of the 2004 film, *Born into Brothels*. I don't know if you recall that documentary, but it got good reviews and was widely screened in the U.S. It was about a U.S. NGO that went to India with the intent of exposing the situation of children of sex workers living in brothels, and introducing them to photography, eventually resulting in some international exposure to their plight and the problem of India's sex trade industry. And it was a decent film, but I was outraged because it gave no mention or no recognition to all of the work that indigenous Indian NGOs had been doing in the exact same area, over many years. It was like the U.S. had invented a solution to a problem that others in India didn't know existed and weren't doing anything about. That was a total distortion of reality.

I was particularly mad because the movie, if I remember correctly, was set in Calcutta, now Kolkata. And I was working at the time with an NGO based in that city, that was doing exactly the same kind of work and quite effectively working with trafficked kids and offering education to the brothel-based children of the sex workers. This NGO was not using photography as an entry point, but it was working with child prostitutes and children of prostitutes, providing shelter for them, providing food, providing education, just as a way to get them off the streets. It was quite a successful intervention, in my view. Anyway, enough about that specific case. But the broad point I want to make is that my exposure to the NGO community and the ways they were getting funding, not just from USAID, but from a lot of other organizations, including India's corporate sector, was absolutely remarkable to me.

As part of that work, I was exposed to a lot of philanthropic organizations in India. These are Indian-based foundations, Indian-endowed foundations, and the NGOs were aggressively drawing on their expertise and financial generosity. And it was eye-opening to witness how India's corporate sector was engaged in and committed to helping these NGOs on social issues. Part of one of my last consultancies in India was to explore a new concept, new at the time, of development assistance via public-private alliances, as a way to open up alternate channels of financing for the NGO sector. I remember being able to gather the first group of key players in the private sector together with NGO leaders and USAID staff to explore this new modality of assistance.

These were people that were high-level officers in banks, pharmaceutical companies, and the technology sector. A key spokeswoman for the NGOs in attendance said, "Let's talk about how you can help what's going on regarding India's critical social problems." At the time, there was growing interest in India in what was being called the Corporate Social Responsibility movement. I'm not sure whether it started there. But anyway, it was getting a lot of play in the press, a lot of talk among the CEOs and high-level officers of these high-powered corporations and private firms. So, I got them together, and not just me, but others within USAID, to facilitate a discussion on getting NGOs and the companies to talk about what can be done together to solve social problems. I think these

talks came to some fruition. I spent two or three consultancies working on strengthening these public-private partnerships. My involvement stopped after this, so I'm not sure what eventually emerged.

Also in India, I helped to develop another NGO-based program called Quest: Quality of Education and Skills Training; I'm not certain but I think it was finally approved and funded after additional design work. The intention was to put the intervention into the hands of a private sector-NGO consortium for implementation, and for USAID and the corporate sector to fund it. It was very rewarding to get that started and to actually put into play something that USAID in Washington was promoting quite a bit. At first, I had no idea what this new partnership was all about. But when I got engaged in it, it seemed like quite a promising new modality of implementing and fostering development in places like India. How well that's working now or how widespread it has become in other countries, I have no idea, I haven't kept up.

Q: My next question to you, Ron, is about your extensive time in Ethiopia, first as a Peace Corps volunteer, and then returning as an intern, and then of course, when you designed the BESO (Basic Education System Overhaul) project; then you returned in 2009 to take a broad look at the education portfolio. So, I'm curious what insight you have that might be useful to others?

BONNER: When I first went back for a couple of design efforts, it was personally very satisfying to me to see what I had planted—I and my staff had planted—the seeds of improvement, the activities we had innovated in the early stages of BESO, which had actually taken form and shown some positive effects. When I left, it was going well, but it was only being implemented in two regions of the country and at the central ministry. When I came back a couple of years later, the activities had spread to a couple other regions; the approach, even the name BESO, had spread throughout the country. It had good brand recognition throughout the country. Mention to education folks around the country about BESO, and they would know what you were talking about, even though it was limited geographically. So, the mission knew it had to decide if and how BESO should spread to other areas. It never was implemented throughout the country, but it did spread to additional regions and teacher training institutes (TTIs). The ground-work for this was a result of "study-tours" BESO arranged for staff from education offices and TTIs in non-affected regions to observe what was being innovated in the two targeted regions. BESO also arranged school-to-school exchanges as well, so a group of parents of one village could share BESO experiences with others. To see these kind sharing exercises having positive effects was very rewarding.

What was also positive was when I went back to see how much my former staff had grown in terms of managing the project. There were two people in particular that I groomed to manage the project. And they had taken the projects to new heights. One anecdote to relate concerns one of BESO's key objectives: getting more girls into school. An unfortunate but common practice among a specific ethnic group in the Southern Region was that girls could be "kidnapped" by a potential suitor in order to force them into marriage. This was not kidnapping for ransom, or kidnapping viewed as a crime; but

it was a cultural practice of the area that once a girl reached adolescence, at around twelve or fourteen, it was totally within a boy's and his parent's right to snatch her up and say, We're going to force-marry her into our family. I don't think this was terribly widespread, but it was not unheard of within these particular ethnic groups. And my former project manager assistant—I had left the country by that time so I can't to take credit for it—came up with the idea using BESO to engage affected communities in discussions of how this was discouraging girls' from attending school especially as they got older, since coming and going was a prime danger point. The parents devised a public awareness campaign with flyers to spread the word, and it took hold, according to reports I received. I heard of several cases where the families were talked to, and the girls returned to their original families and schools. So, this was a problem that was entrenched in cultural practices, but it was confronted head-on thanks to BESO and mission staff.

Changing cultural practices is often viewed as difficult to accomplish if not totally out of bounds for outside engagement. We say, you can't do this because it's of cultural importance to that community or to this area. One of the things I've learned with BESO is that cultural change is not as impenetrable as at least as I believed it to be. An example of this was in discussions with leaders of a certain ethnic group, we learned that in their areas when there was a death, community members were expected to chip in to offset the cost of their elaborate funerals and celebrations. Well, under our project, we started talking about this practice, highlighting how these expenses were negatively affecting the ability to send more kids to school. We argued, "Won't it be a better use of money if you could scale back your funeral ceremonies and put some of that money into education?" There was lively discussion on this point among village leaders, and in the end they agreed that they were spending too much money on the dead, and not enough on future generations. And that practice turned around, almost overnight.

This taught me that maybe culture isn't such a sacred thing as I had believed it to be; that's not to say it's to be disregarded, but it's not a given that you can't work on changing attitudes and long-established practices. So, if you're working in societies where cultural practices are a real detriment to progress, you have to face it head-on and seek opportunities for change. Certainly, a strong argument can be made concerning female genital mutilation, a practice that is widely practiced many areas of sub-Saharan Africa, including Ethiopia. And it's an issue that just has to be worked on because it's such a horrible thing that is destroying the lives and school participation of many young girls.

Let me just say one more thing, Marcy, because I've been reflecting on things I learned when I went back to Ethiopia after I retired. The last time I went back there was for the education impact assessment. I did face certain disappointments because BESO and its successor iterations were coming to an end, or had come to an end. Our team was to explore the future needs and opportunities for continued assistance to the sector. There was a lot of interest in the mission in focusing on improving English language instruction at the primary and secondary level, and for literacy. Now, both of those things are very important. But it was at the expense of trying to grow the progress that had been made

under BESO in the formal education sector, foreclosing the opportunity for spread to other areas and levels.

A particular missed opportunity, in my view, concerned addressing the special needs and alternative delivery systems of the many nomadic peoples of the country. I was a bit disappointed in that there was such strong mission interest, especially on the part of the newly arrived direct-hire education officer in focusing on English reading skills. To me, this seemed so parochial, especially given the more comprehensive, systems-based approach that had been the hallmark of the BESO program and its successors. But in the end, it was the mission's call. They said they were particularly interested in this area, so we explored it as an opportunity for assistance. Consequently, several of the team's recommendations related to upgrading English language and literacy skills. But personally, I was disappointed to see that BESO was being shunted aside. Maybe it was time for it; I don't know. But in my view, there was a lot more work to be done by spreading its efforts more widely throughout the country, especially capacity building for greater decentralization. In addition, the quality influencing approaches had demonstrated many successes, but needed more attention. Ethiopia's is a massive education system, and the BESOs were only scratching the surface.

Q: Ron, I'd like to mention here that I think this is a very important point. Education change, especially when you're dealing with institutional capability, is a long-term process. And in the ideal circumstances, you have continuity both on the host government side, and on the USAID side that are able to look toward the future. This is perhaps one of the challenges of an agency that comes up with new strategies and approaches and decides to move in different directions. I don't know what your views are on that.

BONNER: My view is the mission needs to be in the driver's seat, not USAID/W nor the consultants it hires; they know what's going on in the country much better than we as outsiders. So, of course, they have a right to design any program they want to. I was speaking personally, because I had so much vested in this BESO activity and the approaches we were taking, but I don't have any animosity nor will I make any judgment on whether we're doing the right or wrong thing in moving away from the BESO approach. It was just not the thing I would have done.

Q: No, I wasn't speaking specifically, I was talking generically about the advantages of continuity on the host country side and the donor side to take something that's working well and proceed forward.

BONNER: I think there is some continuity of outlooks and strategies among the Ethiopians, and these are no doubt being applied by those who were affected by and trained in the BESO philosophy.

Q: Alright. Well, great. Well, thank you. Before we close this oral history, are there any other insights, thoughts, recommendations that you'd like to share with the reader?

BONNER: One of the attractions of the approach you take in constructing these oral histories, is that I get a chance to add detail and edit out unimportant or poorly articulated responses to your questions. So, if over the next month or so I get some really wonderful idea while sleeping and I want to put it to paper, I guess I can add that into the transcript, is that correct?

Q: Absolutely. Absolutely. That's the joy of having a transcript and being able to do that. Well, Ron, this has been a fascinating experience, not just for me as a generic oral history interviewer, but as somebody who like you came up through the education ranks, and so looking at your experiences and contrasting them with mine. It's been a lot of food for thought. So, thank you so much for your time, Ron.

BONNER: It's been fun recollecting and reminiscing on all this and trying to resurrect all of these old memories, and to reflect on what I learned from them.

Q: Right, well, thank you so much.

End of interview