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STEPHEN WINGERT

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Wednesday, May 11, 2022, and I'm interviewing Steve Wingert for his oral history. This is our first session, Steve, welcome. It's wonderful to at least see you over the screen after so many years. I'm so excited to hear your story.

Today I believe you will be covering your background up through your assignment as a USAID contracted Project Manager in Guatemala from 1971 to 1974,

WINGERT: Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I'd heard about this program and oral histories for some time and had never gotten up the gumption to volunteer for it until you gave me a cause. This will be fun. What I thought I'd do is start off with talking about how and why I joined USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] and some of my early memories that kind of associate me with this theme.

When I was in junior high school, I was quite interested in the world and was influenced by the Kennedy period. I was a strong advocate of Kennedy, very early on. But in junior high school, one of the unusual things I did was, just for my own interest, I took out the Communist Manifesto from the library. It was kind of strange back in that period of the late 1950s, that they even had a copy of it in the public library. But I was curious about this thing called Communism. So, I read the Communist Manifesto, and I was like in eighth or ninth grade. I got to the part of it where Marx argued that all children should be taken away from their parents at a very, very young age and put into a state-run institution so that their allegiance would be to the state and not to their families. And at that point, I became an anti-communist. I thought that was a horrible, horrible proposal.

In my senior year in high school in 1963, I wrote a paper about foreign students in the United States, the issues they were confronting, and the importance of their participation and presence. That's one of the things that really sparked my interest in all things foreign and things that I might do. But I also as a young person had quite a wanderlust. I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. And I can remember going by the Greyhound bus stations and seeing buses with Los Angeles and New York on the front of them as their destination, and just feeling "Oh, wow, I'd love to go there." My favorite TV program was about adventures in the South Pacific. I really wanted to get out of Iowa and that was a strong motivation during that period of my life.

In 1964, my freshman year at Iowa State University, I joined an organization called People to People that was working with foreign students on campus. I immediately joined it and participated in a variety of events and became friends with foreign students from Egypt, Israel, Ireland, Africa, and Latin America. I agreed to welcome a Panamanian person coming to Iowa State at the start of my sophomore year. I met him at the Des Moines airport and helped him get to Iowa State in Ames, Iowa. I was taken aback when he snapped his fingers at somebody to pick his bag off the carousel. I didn't have too much to do with him after that. He seemed to be a rich, arrogant guy. But I had great experiences with the other foreign students.

By the fall of my sophomore year, I became President of the People to People chapter at Iowa State, and this had a significant impact on my personal development and life story. People to People held their annual meeting in Kansas City in late 1965, where they were based. I left Iowa State for one week to attend the meeting, with all my expenses paid by Iowa State University through its funding of the People to People chapter activities. I got into my trusty 1956 Pontiac and drove from Des Moines down to Kansas City, my first excursion by myself to any place. It was a very large event highlighting People to People activities all over the world, and it was attended by former President Dwight Eisenhower, Bob Hope, and Walt Disney. It was a lot of fun for a boy from Iowa.

There was a very small group, five or six representatives of the college chapters, at the start of the meeting. One of the People to People officials clued us in that later in the week People to People would announce the closing of its college chapter program. Our small group met every evening to discuss what to do. In fact, we drove across the bridge from Kansas City, Missouri, which is a large part of Kansas City, into Kansas, where the drinking age was 18. We'd sit and drink beer and talk about what we could do to head off or respond to the closure of the college program.

People to People held a separate meeting of representatives from the college chapters, where they announced the closure of the college program. Our small group was prepared with a proposal to meet and investigate creating our own organization. I was the one who drafted it, and all the college chapters voted in favor of it. The idea was that we would come up with a proposal for an organization that would be self-supporting and continue the work we were doing with foreign students on college campuses.

Over the next two or three months, our group met two or three times, usually in McPherson, Kansas, and put together a proposal for creating Collegiate International [CI]. Then we held a meeting in St. Louis with all the former People to People chapters and representatives and formally agreed to create the organization. I was elected National Vice President. But the organization really didn't have much in the way of funding, only a few grants.

The CI President asked me to drive through Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois to visit People to People chapters to convince them to join Collegiate International. But it turned out that the organization didn't have any funding, so I couldn't get reimbursed for travel costs. I was putting myself through college, so this was a crisis. Happily, the friend who volunteered to make the trip with me in his car told me not to worry about the travel cost.

I also was invited to attend a North American conference in Des Moines with a program sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] of the United Nations. It was part of an effort to deal with countries that couldn't produce enough to feed themselves and avoid world hunger.

I attended a meeting of the conference attendees from Iowa, and after listening to the discussion, I wrote a proposal to create the Iowa Council on World Hunger. It was voted

on and approved. I helped to organize the non-profit organization, and we planned a series of initiatives to seek funding from Iowa civil society groups to assist with small projects internationally. The FAO officials were very happy with this initiative, and invited four of us who were leading the effort to the worldwide UN meeting dealing with world hunger held in Toronto, Canada, in the fall of 1967. This was shortly before my senior year at Iowa State, and the FAO paid for our travel costs.

It was the first international conference of its type I attended, and we wore headphones to get a simultaneous translation to English, French, or Spanish. The representative from Cuba lambasted the US, which made the experience quite thrilling. One evening, we didn't have any activities and I found that one of the two major political parties in Canada was holding their convention to nominate their candidates to become Prime Minister. I took a subway to where it was being held, walked in and enjoyed watching the Canadian version of a political convention.

All the college students attending the FAO meeting got together one evening, and the head of the US National Student Association (NSA) proposed that we create a new organization. Vice President Hubert Humphrey's sister was there, and she promised strong support from the White House if we did this. By this time, I was getting disillusioned with creating new organizations, and I argued against it. I stated that college students were focused on Vietnam, with little interest in anything else. I later learned that the NSA received funding from the CIA.

While at the FAO meeting, I was invited to an event in Madison, Wisconsin, where Werner von Braun gave a talk about how the NASA program was helping solve world hunger. He described how satellites would be able to map out areas where drought or other problems were limiting food production, arguing the NASA program could make a big contribution to solving world hunger. Four of us were on a panel to ask him questions. The question I asked was, "According to the FAO (I had learned this while at the conference in Toronto), we already have enough scientific knowledge to increase food production exponentially, the problem is getting the information out to small farmers, and getting financing to them so they can take advantage of this technology. How could NASA have any impact on world hunger?" He basically said, "Why, that's a good question." This was 1967, and the end of the first phase of my life's focus on international development.

As I was walking through the Student Union, there was a desk staffed by Peace Corps talking about joining the Peace Corps, and I thought, "Wow, this sounds great." I filled out an application and submitted it. On the application at that time, you had to indicate what your preference was in terms of placement. I picked South Pacific Micronesia, remembering those TV programs when I was a kid. I next talked to my draft board to be clear what the implications would be of my joining the Peace Corps on my potential to be drafted and sent to Vietnam. The draft people said, "We think it's great if you want to give an additional two years of your life to serving the government. But you should realize you will be drafted either just before or just after your two years are up. You're going to be exempted for two years."

Anyway, I still thought, yeah, two years. Postponement is better than being drafted right after I graduated. Eventually, Peace Corps sent me an invitation to be a volunteer in Nepal. In the meantime, I found out that Iowa State had established a relationship directly between the University and the Peace Corps office in Guatemala, and they were recruiting students to become Peace Corps volunteers through that program. In Nepal, I would have been an agricultural extensionist. Although I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, I had what I call a Des Moines complex, where comedians on television would tell a joke and say, "Well, I wonder if the folks out in Iowa got that."

I couldn't stand being associated with agriculture, so becoming a Peace Corps volunteer to work as an agricultural extension wasn't appealing. That attracted me to the Iowa State Program was that our resumes were sent to Peace Corps Guatemala, and they found potential assignments that were associated with our background. I was getting a degree in Industrial Administration, with minors in psychology, anthropology, and English Literature. Peace Corps Guatemala found there was a Central American Institute of Technology that did feasibility studies for new activities, and new opportunities.

They invited me to work for this institute as a volunteer and help them do economic analysis and prepare proposals. I thought, "Wow, this is going to be fun." So, I signed up for that program. In June 1968, I graduated from Iowa State, though not with great grades. But at that point, what I learned in college was much more about managing and dealing with organizations than anything academic. That served me well for the rest of my life.

Just before we left to get on the airplane, I was told the economic analysis activity had been canceled. Instead, I was going to be the business adviser to an agricultural cooperative near Puerto Barrios, on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. The rice cooperative was funded by USAID. When I arrived in Guatemala in late June, there were only five of us in our Peace Corps group, because Iowa State had a hard time finding people to join the program. I went to the USAID building to talk to them about their funding of this rice cooperative, so my first contact with USAID was in late June 1968.

When I started working with the cooperative, I soon learned it was an absolute disaster. It was poorly planned and poorly structured. USAID got the government land institute to allocate a five-acre plot of land for building a rice processing plant and four big silos to store rice until it could be marketed. The land was in a swamp. In fact, the guy that USAID contracted to do the architectural design wrote the design sitting in a bar in Puerto Barrios. He must have visited the site at some point, but it didn't show up in the design.

The structure was poorly built; there was an auger that from above would put the rice into the silos, and then there was one embedded in the concrete of each of their four floors to remove the rice and take it back out to the processing plant. There it could be put into bags to ship out. The problem was that as it was built on a swamp, the silos started

sinking at different rates, and the auger at the bottom became twisted and never worked. What rice entered the silos rotted there.

USAID created the cooperative by meeting with farmers and different groups around the community and asking, “How much rice are you producing now?” And they'd write down the information and then say, “Well, how much rice would you produce if we gave you very cheap loans, and provided you with fertilizer and seeds, etc.” Everybody just doubled their figures. Therefore, the cost-benefit analysis showed that this cooperative was going to have an enormous return.

However, what the USAID consultants didn't realize was that the only land available to expand rice planting was on the edges of the Río Motagua. For the first three years of the cooperative, two before I got there, and one while I was there, the Río Motagua flooded and took out all the plantings. The farmers didn't increase production, which had the advantage that there was little rice to put in the silos that were sinking. The project was clearly a failure. What I did was write a cost analysis of the cooperative, which showed that its failure was not due to the cooperative’s directors running off with the money. I documented that it failed because it was poorly designed and implemented. The Peace Corps translated what I wrote in English to Spanish and sent it to the head of USAID, the Minister of Agriculture, the Guatemalan government bank that funded the coop, and others. The cooperative became a non-project that everybody wrote off and forgot about. At least I succeeded in keeping the cooperative’s leaders from being blamed for the failure.

The head of the Guatemalan government bank liked my analysis and asked the Peace Corps to assign me to the bank to do a study of their cooperative financing all over Guatemala. I moved to Guatemala City and ended up sharing an apartment with another volunteer above a bar half a block from the Terminal Market, in a very sketchy part of Guatemala City. I started doing the analysis of cooperative financing and spent about seven months on the task. I would take a bus to different places around Guatemala and interview the banks' representatives about their dealings with coops, before visiting the cooperatives and gathering information. I came to the conclusion that these cooperatives were too small to really have any benefit to their members.

Most of them didn’t even have twenty-five members. If you put 25 subsistence farmers together, they still don't have enough buying power to get discounts on the fertilizer, or their combined output isn't enough to really get any great advantages in the market. I recommended that the emphasis should be on creating larger organizations that would have enough volume to get economies of scale and be able to employ professional managers and extension agents.

About that time, USAID brought in a new ag cooperative and credit unions advisor named Dan Chaij. He had been working previously for USAID in Honduras on the same topics. He arrived in Guatemala, read my analysis of cooperative finance, and invited me to meet with him. He liked the idea very much. Then he wrote a proposal to create a new cooperative project in Guatemala, as well as a project to fund the Guatemalan national

credit union federation. He talked about contracting me to manage these projects and I thought that sounded good.

After I finished the cooperative study, Peace Corps in Central America was working with the FAO on a fisheries program, trying to improve artisanal fishing. The Peace Corps Director asked to do an analysis in Guatemala of the marketing of fish. I did that for about four months, traveling to different sites. There were several Peace Corps volunteers under this activity that were working on the Pacific coast of Guatemala and on the Caribbean coast, trying to improve the fishing techniques of artisanal producers.

I went to the markets throughout Guatemala and visited the ports on both coasts. When the fishermen came in, I'd look at the quantity of fish they brought in and walk with them to where they sold them. On the Pacific coast in San Jose, a large woman would buy the fish, and I wrote down the prices they got. I would then get on the bus with the fish in canister baskets on the roof, and travel to Guatemala City. The fish were sold in the wholesale market where again I'd mark down the prices, before following them through the different markets and continue to track quantities and prices. I did the same thing with major markets in the countryside. Finally, I analyzed all the data I had gathered.

The most interesting thing was that if I took the margins that were received at each stage of this very, very long marketing chain, multiplied by the quantity of fish that the people at each point of the process were handling, everybody was earning basically the equivalent of the daily wage of a poor person in Guatemala. They were all earning about the same amount. This showed it was a perfectly efficient market in terms of economics. However, the price of fish to the final consumer was high, because there were too many steps in the market chain. That impeded the overall economic efficiency. That was a study I did as a Peace Corps Volunteer, which the Director of the Peace Corps called my master thesis, but I did not use it for that.

Eventually, USAID offered me a contract. By then I was close to the end of my two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and a lottery based on birthdates had been established for the draft. In the summer of 1970, during the very first drawing of draft numbers, my number was two hundred thirty-eight. I was sufficiently down the list that I was not going to be drafted that year, and you only had to be exposed to the lottery for one year. I was suddenly free of the draft. That dramatically changed my attitude toward the future.

Nonetheless, it was going to take a long time for USAID to process the contract for me. So, I extended a third year as a volunteer with Peace Corps, which then assigned me to USAID, and I worked for Dan Chaij, as his assistant as a cooperatives advisor. In about six months he was promoted to be the head of the agriculture office at USAID, and I was then in charge of USAID's support for cooperatives and credit unions while still a Peace Corps Volunteer.

It took a year for USAID to process my contract. As a Peace Corps volunteer, working in the USAID building wearing a suit and tie, I was an anomaly. Some of the other Peace Corps Volunteers made fun of me and said I was selling out. This was during the Vietnam

period when the idea of working for the government was not popular. But I felt it was an important task, and I enjoyed it. I feel Dan Chaij was one of the most innovative USAID officers I ever knew. He worked very, very hard to make his programs work. I was on contract managing the coop activities for three years.

The agricultural cooperatives project I managed was stimulated in part by my study of financing of cooperatives by the Guatemalan government. We planned on creating six or eight very, very large coops with the idea of having 3,000-4,000 farmers in each coop. Each cooperative would have a board of directors, which would hire and supervise a manager. The individual farmer members were organized in local base groups, where a lot of the cooperative activities would be carried out. It was a good design, but the way it was structured gave too much power to the General Manager of what became the Federation of these regional cooperatives. In addition, too little attention was paid to educating the members of the cooperative on what their responsibilities were. Instead, there was a push to get a large number of farmers signed up as quickly as possible.

This was a significant USAID problem, which I also felt later in my career. Projects only had a five-year life span, which is too short to do the things needed to create sustainable local organizations. We wanted these organizations to be self-sustaining when the project ended, so that the impact would go on forever. Too little attention was given to the long process of training people and creating base-level organizations that were viable, and the focus was entirely on empowering the national federation.

I was more committed to the credit union project. The credit union Federation had already been in existence at that point for five or six years. It had probably 30, maybe 40 credit unions around Guatemala that were members, and a board of directors that represented the interests of these credit unions. There were about 9,000 members of these credit unions, and it was an interesting base upon which to build. As the USAID project manager supporting them, I was invited to attend their executive committee meetings and board of directors' meetings, which were held virtually every Friday night.

Before the meetings, the board members and key staff of the Federation and I would go to a scuzzy restaurant in front of the Federation's building named Sangre Caliente del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus (Hot Blood of the Sacred Heart of Jesus). We'd have dinner and a beer and then return to the Federation's office, and often the meetings would last until one or two in the morning. At that stage of my life, I smoked cigarettes and so between cigarettes and coffee, and later cigarettes, coffee, and aspirin, I made it through these sessions, which were sometimes quite argumentative. But I felt I was making a contribution with the board members and Federation people, and we became friends. It was a great experience, and I learned a great deal.

One such night, when I was walking back about one in the morning to my house, a car went by and someone yelled, "*Gringo, vete a la casa*." ("Gringo go home"). As the car raced down the street, I thought, I <u>am</u> going home. But as I walked, I realized that Guatemala would never be my home, I would always be a foreigner, and it's something I'd have to accept. During that period, I had identified myself with Guatemala, and I was

committed to the objectives of the projects I managed and the Guatemalans I worked with. But I realized that I was always going to be a foreigner.

By the time I left Guatemala, the agricultural cooperative project met its goals, but it was not really all that viable. The credit union federation had grown from 9,000 to 100,000 members and was very viable. In late 1973 I started applying to graduate schools. Then, a couple of months later, I met a woman named Marilee, who was working for UNICEF in Guatemala. She came for a barbecue, a dinner with about nine different types of sausages, to the house I was sharing with, at this point, three other guys. We all climbed one of the active volcanoes of Guatemala the next night. We saw each other every day from then on. I was to leave Guatemala in August to go to Stanford, where I'd been accepted into the MBA Public Management Program.

In June, I proposed marriage and after considering it for a few days Marilee agreed. I got a USAID project vehicle to visit credit unions in the department of Huehuetenango, and Marilee went with me. We decided at some point on the trip to exchange vows and marry ourselves (which we did) and then told our parents that we had eloped and that the minister in the town had married us. A month later we were legally married in Carson City, Nevada.

I learned that I could get a Masters in Agricultural Economics from the Stanford Food Research Institute at the same time I got the MBA. I had little in common with most of my business school classmates, but the Food Research Institute was focused on international agricultural development issues, and I found a group to which I could relate.

A USAID recruiter came to the business school, and I applied to become a Foreign Service Officer. Dan Chaij was then the head of the agricultural development office for the USAID Washington Latin America and the Caribbean Bureau. He sought to get me hired. But in the Spring of 1976, the US government had to abandon Vietnam, where about half of the USAID Foreign Service officers were working. USAID had to cut back on its worldwide staff, and USAID hired very few people. However, the Agency had a shortage of agricultural economists, so my Food Research Degree enabled me to be hired for an assignment to Bolivia. I first worked under an agreement between USAID and the Department of Agriculture while my security clearance process was completed.

All our belongings were in a moving van crossing the US when the moving van caught fire and we lost everything. When I returned to Washington in early October 1976 to complete the hiring process, Marilee traveled to California, and we both spent days buying things we needed to replace our loss. As I already had four years of experience working in USAID, my training program in Washington was to watch a two-hour movie about the USAID project development process, which I already knew. After I was sworn in as a USAID Foreign Service Officer, Marilee and I returned to Bolivia.

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Q: Good morning. Today is Wednesday, May 18, 2022. And this is the second oral history interview with Steve Wingert.,

Today, Steve, I believe that today you will focus on how you decided to join USAID as a Direct Hire and your first assignment to USAID/Bolivia from 1976 to 1979 where you began as a Community Development Officer; quickly moved up to be the Deputy Director of the Agricultural Development Office; and the first year of your assignment to USAID/Honduras in 1979 as Deputy of the Rural Development Office.

WINGERT: I'll pick up where we left off and talk about my assignment to Bolivia. My wife Marilee and I were very excited about this assignment, one because it was a career that I had always dreamed of. But also, we had met in Guatemala, where she was working with UNICEF [United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund], and I was a USAID contractor.

We fell in love with the Mayan population; I had been working with them, when we met, for five and a half years in Guatemala, and the indigenous population for us was such a core of our love of Guatemala that we thought going to an Andean country with a large indigenous population would be equally as rewarding and enjoyable. And so, we were really excited about it.

We arrived there right after the Fourth of July 1976. As I described previously, my first three months were under an agreement between USAID and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which enabled me to be sent to the post pending completion of my security clearance and being sworn in as a Foreign Service Officer [FSO]. We spent three months there under this arrangement, but we were immediately moved into USAID housing. And I was treated as if I was a USAID FSO.

There was a bit of a problem in that I was to be paid by the U.S. Department of Agriculture; I had to send a monthly report on everything I was doing. And then they would process my payment. But the secretary, when she received this report, just put it in a filing cabinet. It wasn't until I'd been there two and a half months that I realized I wasn't getting paid—it was three months. And so, heading back to Washington to get sworn in and buying all of the stuff that had been burned up in the moving band in the States, we didn't have any money, and we were bouncing checks. That was a little bit of an unpleasant welcome to USAID. But eventually, it got worked out; I got the security clearance, and I got all the USDA payments at the end of October. And then I started getting my payments from USAID put in my bank account. So then we were living civilized again.

Although we expected to absolutely love the indigenous population of Bolivia, they were different from the Mayans. There are Aymaras and Quechuas in Bolivia. The Quechuas are more in the lower elevations, and the Aymaras are in the upper elevations. The Aymaras were a fairly cold and not welcoming indigenous population. They're not at all like the friendly Mayans, which was a disappointment and a bit of a challenge. You go into the public market, with a person sitting on the ground with their produce on a blanket in front of them. There were tomatoes, and you reach down to pick up a tomato and look at it, you get scolded because the vendor says you're going to turn it into tomato juice. Anyway, other than that, we liked Bolivia.

And we also met—fairly soon after we got there—several other USAID employees and their wives and children and became extremely close to them, from then on and up to today. They are among our closest friends. One of the things that I've observed over time is that in hardship posts—and Bolivia was considered a hardship post because of the elevation and the lack of medical attention and very unstable governments—the bonds between Foreign Service Officers grow extremely close. You find your best friendships in that type of environment. Whereas, when you're in a more cosmopolitan environment, there are a lot of things for you to do, and you aren't as focused on your coworkers. You don't necessarily create such close, long lasting friendships as we created in Bolivia.

Q: What year are we talking about?

WINGERT: 1976.

Q: So you spoke about your colleagues and their wives. At that point, were there any USAID Foreign Service Officers there who were women? Or was it all men?

WINGERT: There were a few women, not very many, in the health and education office; in the agriculture office, we did not have any female Foreign Service Officers. There was one before I was assigned there, but she had moved on.

Q: Thank you.

WINGERT: The Bolivians are very, very complex. And as I mentioned, the government was unstable. Its different indigenous populations, and the fact that the more direct Spanish descendants were the elites who ran the business community and ran the government, contributed to the instability. In the 1950s there was a major land reform, which didn't work out very well. The people who were the big landowners, before the reform, ended up getting land in the lower elevations in eastern Bolivia, in tropical forests that were uninhabited. They proceeded to cut down the forests and plant cotton and raise

cattle and other things. And they became very wealthy down there. The poor farmers in the highlands who took over the prior owners' property didn't necessarily know how to farm it and didn't really have the capital to do so. And they continued not to do all that well.

The different segments of Bolivia have always talked about splitting off and joining other neighboring countries. There's a really good book, *Guano Maldito*, about the history of Bolivia, and how they lost the coastal part of Bolivia on the Pacific Ocean to Chile and Peru during a war. The president of Bolivia, instead of being in La Paz and being able to send reinforcements to their garrison on the coast, was a circuit rider that moved around from department to department in Bolivia to show the government's presence and keep these different parts of Bolivia from splitting off and joining Argentina or Chile, or Brazil or Peru. It was a very fractured country that really lacked a homogeneous sense of nationality. That contributed to the fact that different factions would rise within the country and radically overthrow the presidents and replace them.

In the history of Bolivia up to that point—and I think it was true, at least for another twenty years—there were more presidents in Bolivia's history than there were years of independence, which is a clear indication of the instability of the government.

I found in Bolivia, and I later found it also in Honduras, that I really had to be careful when I made recommendations in meetings with my host government counterparts, with whom I'd become friends. If I made an off-the-cuff comment, expressing my thoughts to a counterpart, and some of the counterparts were fairly high-level officials, they would sometimes immediately agree to implement the idea. An impromptu comment by a USAID officer carried more weight than I expected. I had to caution them that this was just something that occurred to me in conversation. I hadn't really researched or thought it through and encouraged them to hold off on implementing my off-the-cuff suggestion.

I was assigned to manage USAID projects with agricultural cooperatives and community development activities. My counterpart was the Director of the National Community Development Service, who reported to the Minister of Agriculture in the Government of Bolivia. My office was in the National Community Development Service building, which was six or seven blocks from the Ministry of Agriculture, where my boss was, and maybe ten blocks from the Embassy where the USAID mission had its offices. We were kind of dispersed around the city.

The building I was in was several centuries old—an absolutely chaotic building. I had across my desk on the wall at least fifty wires that were bringing electricity in from the street to each office and each place within this building. I was working in pretty basic

circumstances. It was very cold, and there was no heating. In Bolivia, the airport's at 14,000 feet elevation. The main part of town is about 13,000 feet elevation; the best housing and where we had our place and the other USAID people had their houses, was about 12,000 feet. So, every day we would go up about 1,000 feet in elevation.

At the airport people often suffered from a lack of oxygen. It was one of the most difficult airports in the world. Planes would take off only at nighttime when the air was cooler, and they could get more lift than they could during the midday. It was a very, very long runway, because the thin air didn't help the planes get off the ground until they reached a high speed—anyway, a fascinating country. When I was there, there really weren't many community development projects. They'd all been pretty much closed out. I got there and designed another one a bit later. But there was a new agricultural cooperative project approved before I arrived.

But as I described in my experience in Guatemala, these cooperatives in Bolivia were extremely small. Therefore, they really didn't have any economies of scale that would enable them to get better prices when they negotiated sales for their products or for buying fertilizer and things like that. And they couldn't have any professional managers. So, when I assumed responsibility for this project, I convinced the USAID Mission to let me redesign a project that was just beginning, and where a contract had been signed to help implement it. I worked with my counterparts at the National Community Development Service on the redesign, and I took a group of them to visit ag cooperatives in Ecuador, Panama, and Guatemala to show them the advantages of working with large numbers of farmers in a cooperative. They were convinced and accepted the redesign.

Then we basically relaunched the project in the spring of 1977. We ended up creating four very large cultural cooperatives in different parts of the country. I'm saying large, as they had maybe 2,000 or 3,000 members. Three of those eventually failed during the economic collapse of Bolivia after I left in 1979. But one of them is still alive and functioning today. I'm proud of that.

When I look back on my career, the things that make me most proud, or what I consider my legacy, are organizations in the countries that I've helped build and made sustainable. Unfortunately, the sustainability of local organizations has received less attention from USAID during the last several decades. Also, my initiative to redesign and structure the ag cooperative project in Bolivia in 1976 would not have been possible with the project design, approval, and contracting processes in the current era.

In the fall of 1976, Jimmy Carter won the presidency and became president in February 1977. Carter adopted what he called the "poorest of the poor" strategy for USAID, that

USAID should focus all its efforts on providing benefits to the poorest of the poor in a country. And while in concept that's really good, in practice, it has a lot of problems. The poorest of the poor have no resources, and most of them don't have any education. They don't have any training. They don't have any skills. They certainly don't have any capital. And so, the difficulty of raising those people to become productive self-sufficient farmers is extremely complex. And that's one of Bolivia's problems with its land reform. These ag cooperatives offered an opportunity to work with really small farmers in organizations that could be sustainable and could achieve benefits for them.

So, this project suddenly became very, very popular. And USAID Washington was very happy with it. They sent delegations down, and the head of USAID for Latin America came to visit, along with six or seven other people out of USAID Washington and traveled around, and we took them to a milk cooperative—a regional cooperative that we created—in Punata, near Cochabamba. We set up a luncheon for them there with the cooperative's farmers drinking chicha, which is a fermented corn drink with a very high alcohol content. The Washington delegation was very impressed. The milk cooperative was still functioning at least a few years ago.

Q: I joined USAID when that strategy was in effect. I think what I'm hearing from you is that, indeed, the group you're working with fell into the target group of the poorest of the poor. Is that correct?

WINGERT: Yes, that is correct. The delegation from Washington was quite happy with the project. I'd arranged the luncheon, and the mission director told me I'd get reimbursed out of his representational funds. Well, with the eight members in this delegation, I think there were fifty people having lunch. And it was a full spread of potatoes, of course, in Bolivia, and different types of meat, all sorts of stuff. Anyway, the total cost, if I remember correctly, came to $38. You can eat quite well in the countryside in Bolivia for not very much money.

Just one other comment about chicha. I would travel out to visit these cooperatives fairly frequently. And one time, when I was in Cochabamba, after we went around and inspected everything, they had us drink chicha. They served it in a gourd. And it's fermented; it's got bubbles inside of it. And there's only one gourd, and so, you have to drink the whole thing because then they refill it for the next guy. Then they pass these things around three or four times. So, you get pretty mellow. And then, they drove me to the airport and I got on a plane to fly back to La Paz. Well, Cochabamba is about 8,500 feet in elevation, and La Paz' airport is at 14,000 feet. And I had the fermented chicha in my stomach and gut with the bubbles. As the air pressure got less, the bubbles got bigger. It's an example of the complications of being an USAID officer.

While I was still at the Community Development Service, I designed what was called the Village Development Project. And it was to build upon the National Community Development Service's history of working with villages. And it was, again, a very attractive project for Washington because it definitely was working with the poorest of the poor in the country.

But the problem was that Washington kept adding money to it as the design process progressed. I think we started off with a target of about $6 million that we were asking Washington for, and there was to be a Bolivian government counterpart to the project of about $4 million. Well, as we were getting close to ending the design, Washington said let's add resources, we'll fund the part the Bolivian government was going to cover because we've got extra money that we're trying to put in projects like this. All of a sudden, it became a $10 million budget. I thought, well, okay, if that's what they want to do, we can do that.

We got to the final stage of preparing the document to be sent to Washington for approval, which was before word processors, we had to type up all these pages. And if you made any changes, you had to retype the page and sometimes the whole document. Well, suddenly, Washington dictated that it's going to be a $15 million project. I said the National Community Development Service cannot successfully manage that many resources for this project. And the USAID Mission director said yes, they will. I objected as strongly I could within the mission, and I got overruled. But then I went to the head of the National Community Development Service, Colonel Ramirez, and explained to him why I didn't think his organization could manage $15 million. And he just leaned back in his chair and looked at me and said, "Sometimes, Steve, we just have to go along with stuff like that." Obviously, he wanted more money. So, it was approved for $15 million.

Before the project started implementation, I moved into another position in the ag office, and I wasn't directly responsible for it. The project began very slowly and was far behind expectations for disbursement of the funds. Then there was a coup d'état, and USAID stopped providing funds to the government of Bolivia. I think, in the end, USAID disbursed a little over a million dollars out of the $15 million, and the rest had to be de-obligated. It's a sign that sometimes you can overfeed an organization, and it can create more problems than benefits.

After two years, we went on home leave, which you get every two years at USAID, and it was nice to be back in the States. Our son Jeremy was born during those first two years, and we brought him to meet my parents and Marilee's mother.

When I returned to Bolivia, I became the deputy director of the agricultural development office. I moved from the National Community Development Service offices into the USAID ag office in the Ministry of Agriculture and began working there. But about this time, the Carter administration had been pushing all countries that had military governments to become democracies. And Bolivia's ruler General Banzer [Hugo Banzer] resisted it for quite a while. But eventually, he agreed and there were free elections, and a new government was elected. But it only lasted about three or four months. And then there was another coup. Within about a month or so, Congress appointed a triumvirate of three people who were then serving as president jointly. They lasted about four or five months, and when they were kicked out, somebody else was appointed. So, we had these rotating governments.

We really didn't have a stable government to work with. We just kept trying. And we had a series of large posters that were designed to describe what the Ministry of Agriculture did because even more frequently than the presidents were replaced, the ministers of agriculture were replaced. We basically briefed the minister of agriculture on what his ministry is supposed to be doing.

One minister of agriculture said that what they needed, what Bolivia was going to do, was buy a bunch of blimps. And because years before Bolivia lost its territory on the Pacific Ocean, to avoid all the delays and costs of bringing things into Bolivia from the port in the southern part of Peru, they would have this fleet of blimps that could lift all the freight and bring it up to Bolivia. It was a challenge to keep a straight face, and of course they never got the funding. This is an amusing anecdote that really happened, but as a caveat, most of the Bolivian officials we dealt with were cognizant of the country's realities.

But we had this chronic instability. And I coined a phrase of that time, which, fortunately, I didn't have to use anywhere else in my career. It was that I could succeed being an agnostic priest, but it was difficult being an agnostic bishop. The meaning of that is that as a project manager, where I had kind of a self-contained thing that I was doing, I had resources from USAID to manage and counterparts I developed a rapport with. I could continue to feel successful in implementing my program because I was working within a certain sphere of influence where I could make a difference.

Suddenly, I was not just the deputy head of the agricultural development office, I was the acting head of the office (the bishop) for about a year, because my boss Dan Chaij had become the Acting Deputy Mission director. All of a sudden, once a week, I had to assemble the eight or nine staff in my office and try to encourage them and make them believe that we were going to be able to make a difference without a national government

that was viable, that could serve as an effective counterpart. There was really little hope for a lot of our activities to be successful.

Q: You had seven or eight staff. Were they direct hires? Contract? FSN?

WINGERT: There were, I think, five of us that were Foreign Service Officers, plus a long term staff member under our PASA agreement with the Department of Agriculture. And then FSNs were another four? So, the total number may have been a little bit larger. I didn't include the secretarial staff in that. I'm talking about the meetings with the people who were managing budgets.

Q: Can you reflect on the role of the FSNs that you worked with and their capabilities.

WINGERT: The FSNs were really good, outstanding, and better than some of the Foreign Service Officers. As head of the office, each year I had to prepare a written review of all the Foreign Service Officers, which is quite an elaborate process.

A newly hired USAID officer in our office was horrible. The only way I can describe it is I would ask him to do something, and he would bring a pad of paper and sit next to my desk and ask me basically to dictate to him what it was he was supposed to write. So, I gave him extremely poor rankings, which was appropriate. The only time in my career I did that to a Foreign Service Officer. And he lasted in the agency for only about another year after that. When you're new to the agency and you're in sort of a trial period, that's a period when it's possible for somebody who's not going to be a good officer to be weeded out. It's much more difficult once they become tenured, as it were.

There are a couple of other things I'd like to add about my experience in Bolivia. While I was assigned to work with the National Community Development Service [NCDS], I went on an inauguration tour with the minister of agriculture, Coronel Alberto Natusch Busch, and the head of the NCDS, Coronel Ramirez. We flew from La Paz to Sucre and went to a restaurant called Las Bajos [Bajos was the last name of the women who owned and ran the restaurant] for a mid-morning snack of sausages and beer, and then headed out in vehicles to inaugurate NCDS activities, a bridge that had been built, rooms added to a school, potable water system for a village, etc. Just one inauguration after another. And at every one of these inaugurations, we would be served enormous plates of food, and different things to drink. It was an inauguration binge, I called it. Anyway, it was a chance for me to meet the minister.

In October 1979, Coronel Alberto Natusch Busch led a coup de état and took over the government. There had been a number of coups in the previous year and a half or so

during this unstable period. I'd be riding a bus up to town to go to the office, and I'd look up from reading something and see a tank outside the university. And I'd think, oh, there's a tank outside the university again, it must be another coup. So, we didn't really think much about it.

But the Natusch Busch coup was a very serious matter. There was a curfew placed on everyone where you couldn't be out at night. And in front of our house, there was a teenage soldier with a gun about as big as he was guarding the intersection of the street in front of our house. He obviously wasn't there to protect us. And so, we didn't go out because you could be shot if you were seen on the street at night. There was a group of young people meeting on a soccer field getting ready for their game, and a helicopter shot them because there weren't supposed to be gatherings of more than two or three people anyplace out on the street. So, it was a bloody affair.

In the fall of 1979, I had been offered the opportunity to bid to become the deputy chief of the ag office in Honduras. Because Bolivia was a hardship post, we were required to be there for two years. I was extended for a second tour but was allowed to bid on another position during that period, and I was assigned to Honduras. However, the Bolivian mission wouldn't let me go until they obtained somebody to replace me. And so, I was kind of in a holding pattern. We didn't know where to send Christmas presents.

With the violent Natusch coup, Washington decided that all nonessential personnel would be authorized to depart post. And since I'd already been assigned to a position in Honduras, I was considered nonessential. So, the Bolivia mission's insistence that a replacement be assigned before I could leave was vetoed, and we were on very short notice to pack everything and put it in a moving van.

Given that the previous time we had done that, the moving van caught on fire, and we lost everything, we had some trepidation. But we shipped everything off. Although I wasn't supposed to have any contact with Bolivian government officials, I attended a small, informal going away party with a few of the NCDS staff that I had worked with most closely. I was very happy to have the chance to see them and say goodbye.

We got in an Embassy vehicle for the long drive to the airport at 14,000 feet, several thousand feet above our home. The Embassy vehicle did not have bulletproof protection like all official vehicles did later. Along the way, people started throwing rocks at the vehicle because they were protesting the coup and trying to stop traffic. Anyway, we got to the airport, got on the plane, and held our breath during the long run down the runway before the plane took off. Finally, we were up in the air, and we gave a sigh of relief that we were now on our way to Honduras.

I was assigned to be the deputy head of the ag office. There was a military government in Honduras, and General Policarpo Paz García was the de facto President. The agriculture program was functioning pretty well, and my boss, Bill Janssen, the head of the ag office, and I got along quite well. He was kind of a wonderful character, and very knowledgeable about agriculture. They later lived in Sebastopol, California, about twenty minutes from where we now live in Sonoma County, and after I retired from USAID we saw them frequently until they passed away.

The Sandinistas had taken over Nicaragua about four months before we arrived in Honduras, in November 1979. A lot of wealthy Nicaraguans had moved to Miami but some of them moved to Honduras. We had wanted to live in the El Hatillo part of Tegucigalpa, high above the city. We searched and searched for a house there, but everything had been rented by the Nicaraguans. We eventually found a very, very nice house along the main river that goes through Tegucigalpa. It was a beautifully designed house. The only problem was when, during the dry season, the river got very low, and as it carried sewage from upstream, it became rather stinky. Other than that, it was a nice place to live.

After the Sandinistas had taken over Nicaragua, there were active civil wars going on in El Salvador and Guatemala, but Honduras was quite peaceful. Several years before that, the military leader of Honduras adopted a way to accommodate protests by the people who lacked land. Small farmers—campesinos---invaded a property that wasn't being farmed. Then, the Honduran government would negotiate with the landowner and come to an agreement, where they would sometimes be paid in Honduran government bonds, sometimes in cash, and sometimes promissory notes, and the campesinos promised to pay for the land sometime. The prior owners weren’t using the land, and the Honduran military didn't want a civil war to start by going in and kicking these people off the land.

They had gone through a process that took a lot of steam out of the pressure within the country during that period. And so, Honduras did not face later the same type of insurrections that were going on in its neighbors. Before the Sandinistas took over, the president of Nicaragua at one point publicly said that if the Hondurans didn't stop this process of letting people take over land, he was going to send his troops and solve the problem. He was later kicked out by the Sandinistas and eventually they assassinated him where he was hiding out in Paraguay.

With relative peace, we could work and design new projects. I designed a project to help the coffee sector deal with the coffee rust—it was threatening the ability to produce coffee on small farms in Honduras.

I went on a trip to visit an agricultural school in Olancho, a department in the eastern part of Honduras, where USAID was funding some construction at the school. It was a forty-five-minute flight to get there, and we could fly because USAID had leased a plane for trips like this. For a long time, the Honduran road system was so weak that the idea of getting out and visiting the USAID-funded activities was extremely difficult, so you could schedule the plane to go on field trips. And there was room on the plane, so my wife Marilee flew with me and a USAID engineer. We left our son with some Honduran friends. We flew out, visited this ag school, and I did everything I needed to do.

And then we got back to the plane, ready to take off. The engineer was off in the bushes peeing while the pilot grabbed the propeller of the plane and threw it down in order to start the engine. He didn't realize he had left the throttle when he parked the plane partly open. Once he got the engine going, the plane started moving forward with Marilee and me strapped in the backseat with no pilot. The pilot grabbed the wing and tried to hold it. Meanwhile, the guy came running out of the bushes, zipping up, and he grabbed the other wing. The pilot jumped up and slammed his hand down on the throttle to back off the gas. When the plane stopped, we were about twenty feet from crashing into a couple of vehicles that were parked in front.

I thought about trying to do something with the throttle, but I didn't know anything about flying. I didn't know if he moved it forward or back. And so, I was reluctant. And we thought about unstrapping and jumping out, but if we hit something, we were better off if we were strapped in than if we were in the process of moving. It is an example of things that can happen in a USAID life. And after that, I knew in which direction the throttle of an airplane should move.

President Carter sent a mission to Central America and the Caribbean to look at what the U.S. government could do to improve the economies of the region by increasing agricultural exports to the U.S., raising rural incomes, and addressing the problems that were causing guerilla conflict in Guatemala and El Salvador, and the pro-Soviet Sandinista government in Nicaragua. It was led by University of Florida President E.T. York, and I provided support to the team. I accompanied them to the Pan American Agricultural university in Zamorano, about 30 kilometers from Tegucigalpa, where they were briefed by leaders of farmer organizations and the school's professors.

While we were there, we received a call on the enormous radio phone that could communicate with the Embassy indicating that a terrorist group knew about the Presidential Mission, and the hotel where they were staying. The embassy couldn't send anyone to accompany us back to Tegucigalpa. We got into two vehicles, and we weren't

supposed to tell anybody on the Presidential mission what was happening. The drivers were to take us directly to the Embassy, and the members of the mission would then stay in the ambassador's residence. But there was a possibility that the terrorists would ambush the cars. We raced to get back to Tegucigalpa. I was in the lead vehicle with E.T York, and he asked, "What's happening?" I disobeyed orders and told him. We got back to the embassy, and they were taken care of. Other USAID staff went to the hotel to collect their belongings, and the next day they flew out. This was late in the Carter administration, and by the time they produced their report they delivered it to President Reagan It eventually became the Caribbean Basin Initiative, and created many new opportunities for non-traditional agricultural exports to the U.S.

The final thing for me to tell you about our first year in Honduras was that we bought an island. I knew about the Utila Cays from my time in Guatemala in the early 1970s. Indira, the daughter of the de Beausset family that had lived in Tegucigalpa for many years, told me that her parents had a house, the only house, on Sandy Cay, a small island off the west end of Utila. It was available for rent whenever they didn't use it. The arrangement was based on a handshake between the fathers of the two families. The de Beaussets financed the building of a house and dock, but they didn't own the cay; the owner of the cay was a native of the Cays, and he got to rent the house and cay to get some income when the de Beaussets weren't using it. It all worked out nicely for everyone.

We rented Sandy Cay in August of 1980, went out for a week, and fell in love with the environment and the Cayans. On a little boat on the way down from the airport to Sandy Cay, Marilee noticed all undeveloped beach properties. She asked, “I wonder if we could get some property here.” George Jackson, who took care of Sandy Cay, visited us every day, and we asked him if there was any property available on the cays. He said, "Well, there's two cays that are for sale, but one of them is not very active. But I understand the guy wants to sell the other one." And so, he took us there. It was called Morgan's Cay. It was about an acre in size and overgrown with Caribbean vegetation. The owner lived in Tegucigalpa, and when we got back home, we called him. He told me he had just shaken hands with a guy he was going to sell it to. But we asked if we could come by and meet him and his wife, since we loved the Cays so much. He was born in Utila. A few nights later we drove to his house, and on the way there, we told two-year old Jeremy to be as nice as he possibly could. The man and his wife fell in love with him and said they always wanted to sell it to a young family. But he had to wait because he had given the other guy his word, although that sale wouldn’t close until the man took his wife to see the cay.

We waited through the next couple of weekends when the guy was supposed to take his wife out there because his purchase was contingent upon her agreeing with it. And he

didn't take her out there. The owner finally told him, “I have somebody else interested. If you don't go out next weekend, I'll have to back out of the deal.” And that's what happened. And so, we bought a one acre island in the Caribbean and then went through a two-year process of building a house on it. And it's been part of our family since early 1981.

I think this is where I'll stop. I became the head of the ag office in Honduras. And I'll continue with that description, I think, the next time. We'll finish a few minutes early, but I think that's a good stopping point.

Q: Thank you. I've really enjoyed the way you tell your story and the wonderful anecdotes that bring it to life. So, thank you.

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Q: Today is Wednesday, May 25, 2022. I am interviewing Steve Wingert for his third oral history session. Steve, Welcome.

My understanding is that today you will focus on the remainder of your assignment to USAID Honduras (1979 – 1985) where you were first assigned as Deputy Director of the Rural Development Office and then moved up to become Director of the Rural Development Office.

WINGERT: Thank you. I left off the previous recording after pretty much our first year in Honduras. I'll pick up in the fall of 1980 and proceed. It was an incredibly exciting time. I considered that my time in Honduras the most productive of my career. I spent close to six years assigned to the Honduras mission. Reagan was elected in November of 1980. He placed a strong foreign policy focus on Central America, because the Sandinistas had just taken over Nicaragua. The Republicans were adamant that they should be contained. Meanwhile, war broke out, civil war broke out in El Salvador and Guatemala and created a lot of difficulties within the region. So, the U.S. pumped up its financing, for foreign assistance, and for other activities to try to counter this change in Central America, that I'll talk about as I proceed.

We had an awful lot of money to play with at that point, as Honduras was one of the countries that received more assistance. Certainly, Israel received a lot more, and Egypt, but Honduras received a very high per capita assistance level during this period. It was also exciting because there was a change of leadership in the mission. Then there was also a freely elected president in Honduras, Suazo Cordova, after a whole series of military governments. The Carter administration pushed to try to get the Latin American countries to become democracies, and that was paying off in that period.

But just as the duly elected president was to be installed, and a new US Ambassador arrived in Honduras, the Mission director suddenly had to leave post. He was kidnapped, taken from Tegucigalpa to San Pedro Sula, where he managed to jump out of the car and

escape. The security people in the Embassy decided, two weeks later, that he had to leave Honduras because he was at risk. The Deputy Mission director Ruelas was a political appointee. With the shift from the Carter administration to the Reagan administration, all political appointees had to resign. So, he too had to leave Honduras.

The regional legal adviser then became the acting Mission director. He knew all the legal aspects of USAID activities, but he had absolutely no program knowledge. That was the status for about three months until a new Deputy Mission director arrived and became the acting director.

During that period, a group of the office directors basically ran the mission. We would meet for lunch at a great Spanish restaurant about a block and a half from the USAID building at least once a week and talk about the things or decisions that needed to be made. Then we basically told the regional legal adviser what to do. As a relatively young officer, and first-time office chief, this was really heady activity. Also, not to brag, but my Spanish was better than any of the other office chiefs. So, I was tapped by the group to attend high level meetings with the Honduran government. I had three or four meetings with the president. Met with the minister of finance and the head of the central bank. Again, for a relatively young officer, it was quite fun and a great opportunity.

A couple of weeks after Reagan was elected, we had been working on a new project idea, called the land reform services and titling project and all concept papers for new projects had to be sent to Washington and somebody from the mission had to go up and defend them. So, I showed up in Washington, a couple of weeks after Reagan was elected.

This is kind of an interesting story about how USAID adjusts its activities with change in the political leadership in Washington. An official named Irv Levy, who was an official within the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, called me into his office after I got to Washington to get ready for the big meeting, at which the concept paper would be judged and hopefully approved. He said, “You know, Steve, your project looks like a good activity, but we want you to change its title.” Instead of being the land reform services and titling project, it suddenly became the small farmer services and titling project. The bureau thought that the incoming Reagan administration, although it was still a couple of months before Reagan would be sworn in, would not be happy with having the Bureau launching such a project with the term land reform in the title. We weren't going to do any land reform, the idea was that the recipients of land in the previous land reforms needed help, including titles to their land and services to be productive. Basically, changing the title didn't make any difference other than that in the world before word processing programs, we had to retype this entire concept paper to change the title. Anyway, the concept paper was approved.

When we got into discussions with the new government, when Suazo Cordova became president, they really wanted the titling project. They were also interested in the services aspect, being able to get technical assistance and loans out to land reform recipients, but what they really saw as important for Honduras was in the land titling aspect. The design process for the services activity was taking a long time. So, I proposed in a meeting with

our Honduran Government counterparts that maybe we should just separate the initiative into two projects, which is what we did. The titling project was approved in Washington, in the spring of 1991.

It was exciting. The design was to give 40,000 small farmers titles to their land. Land ownership in Honduras dates to colonial times, when the lands were given to Spanish large landowners. They would sell pieces of land, but nobody got a legal document. Within the community, neighbors would say so and so owns this piece of land. But they didn't have a legal title that they could use to get a loan from the banking system or to deal with inheritance when the owner died. It was just all by word of mouth that everybody knew who had a title. So, getting a formal title of the land was really a big deal for people and all they had to do was to pay the processing costs of sending somebody out who would use GPS markers to figure out the land size, print that, do a few legal documents, get some signatures, and with a small amount of money the title would be processed.

In 1981, my USAID colleagues and I briefed newly arrived Ambassador John Negroponte about the project. When we explained to him what this project was, he kind of sat back in his chair, and said, "You mean, the US government is going to get land titles to 40,000 small farmers in Honduras, at the same time that there's war going on in El Salvador and Guatemala about the issue of access to land? This is brilliant."

John Negroponte was a very difficult ambassador, he often chewed out embassy officers and USAID officers in meetings, verbally in front of other people. But from that point on, I could do nothing wrong. When the project ended in five years, more than 40,000 farmers got titles, 20% of the titles went to female heads of household. Then the government of Honduras continued the process after USAID finished the five-year project. In later evaluations, 370,000 more farmers got titles. I was proud of this project, as I went to the inaugurations where farmers with their families would cry as they got their titles.

1981 was also exciting because we had an enormous increase in funding and staff. The agriculture office staff tripled in size, and the amount of our funding tripled. I recruited some close friends for some of these positions. Some were USAID officers, and some as contractors. Three or four of them had been Peace Corps volunteers with me in Guatemala, and our families became extremely close. There were five couples all together, with their kids. Our kids considered the other kids to be their cousins, because they didn't have any actual cousins. Some management gurus and some officials in USAID now frown upon having an office chief be close socially with people that work for him or her.

But I really felt that this was something that contributed to our team's commitment to success and gave us all a sense of community, which in the Foreign Service is sometimes difficult. You change posts every two to four years, you usually don't end up at the same post with people you've been with previously, and you have to make new, often short-term friendships. Whereas with this group, we all worked together in Honduras, and

later we were together in Guatemala, which I'll describe. Some of the people in the Guatemala mission accused us of having a “Honduras old boys club”, although it was previously known as the Guatemala old boys club from the time we were in Honduras.

In 1981, my mother came to visit. She was supposed to fly from Des Moines to New Orleans, then to El Salvador and then to Tegucigalpa, but when she got to El Salvador, the flight to Tegucigalpa had been canceled. She was put up for the night by the airline in a hotel in San Salvador. I was at the airport in Tegucigalpa to meet her plane and she didn't get off the plane. Where is she? I called my brother in Iowa. He tried to track her down with the Des Moines departure and the connection in New Orleans. I called a friend in the USAID mission in El Salvador. The El Salvador mission found her in a hotel in San Salvador, so I was able to call her. By the time I called her she had been called by the deputy director of the USAID Mission, Bastian Schouten, to see if she was okay. Then Ambassador Pickering, the US Ambassador to El Salvador, called her to express his concern and hope everything was fine. At that point, she was 71 years old, and everybody was concerned about this elderly woman. When I was finally able to reach her, she said, "Geez, Steve, I never knew you were so important." This demonstrates that the Foreign Service really does help its families.

In my work from 1982 to 1985, when I left Honduras, we started a number of really fascinating new activities. I mentioned at the end of the previous recording, we had purchased a small key in the islands of Honduras off the island of Utila. We proceeded to build a house which was completed by December of 1982. Anytime we had a three-day weekend, we would head there.

As for my work, we had a second presidential agricultural task force. I mentioned the one that we had in 1979-1980. But Reagan came up with the idea of sending high level executives from the US government and private firms to countries to advise them on creating a policy environment that would enable development. Honduras was the second country selected to receive such a task force. We had the senior vice president of Bank of America, and a man with a similar position with Weyerhaeuser lumber company. Managing the forests in Honduras was one of the issues we were looking at. The head of the Winrock Foundation led the high-powered task force. When they arrived, we'd have an embassy car move them from point A to point B.

I went to the hotel to meet them one morning and for some reason, the car didn't show up. I was calling and trying to get a car and they said, "Steve, how did you get here?" I said, "Well, I've got my little pickup truck," and they said, "Let's all go in that." It was not very far from the hotel to the USAID building where we were headed. So, in my little Mazda 1000 cc pickup truck, which is the smallest pickup truck made outside of India, I had these guys, vice presidents of major US corporations, and other important people. One of them could fit with me on the only seat. The others stood in the back, holding on to the roll bar. Each one of their suits was many times more costly than my pickup truck, but they absolutely loved the ride. In the US, it would be illegal to have people riding in the back of a pickup truck.

We started a whole series of new projects; I won't go into a lot of detail. I had previously worked with the vice minister of agriculture. Then he became the minister of agriculture when Suazo Cordova became president. I had been meeting with him once a week and when he became minister, he said he wanted to continue that. So, I was able to carry out negotiations, create the presidential ag task force and lots of other things with him.

One time I went to his office, and he was kind of flustered. Shortly before I got there the head of the United Fruit Company operations in Honduras had called him to indicate that they were going to close their laboratory and they wanted to give it to the ministry. He sat back in his chair and looked at me, and I sat back in my chair and looked at him. We both knew that if the ministry became the owner and operator of this very modern agricultural laboratory, it would fail within a very short time. They wouldn't have the funds to have the chemicals on hand needed to do testing. The whole operation would rapidly decline. The government in Honduras wasn't structured to do something like that.

We decided to pursue creating a private, non-governmental organization that would take over this beautiful laboratory. Normally USAID projects are limited to five years, but Peter McPherson, USAID Administrator in Washington, during that period got Congress to approve, for about a year and a half, maybe two years, that USAID missions could do 10-year projects. We proposed a 10-year project to have a long period of time to get this non-governmental organization established, fully operational, and self-sufficient. It is still active today and is doing wonderful things for Honduran farmers. It's one of my legacies. I designed its organizational structure. I helped the minister of agriculture figure out who was going to be on the initial board of directors and the members of this organization, mainly from the private sector. The minister of agriculture would be the president of the foundation's Board for a period of five years, but most everybody else on it would be from the Honduran private sector. After five years, the private sector members decided it was in their interest to continue to have the Minister of Agriculture play that role. And that also helped keep the organization going.

We had a number of other projects that focused on helping small scale coffee farmers deal with the coffee rust virus, creating a livestock financing mechanism, and supporting the transition of the Pan American Agricultural School in Honduras into a four year university. The titling project and the creation of the private agriculture research foundation were, for me, the biggest accomplishments we had in that period.

It was also a period when the US government was putting in large amounts of what were called economic support funds into Honduras, which in those years USAID managed. In some countries like Egypt and Israel, the Embassy had a stronger role. But in Honduras, it was USAID's responsibility. The Honduran government would get these funds, and they were 50- or 100-million-dollar annual donations not loans, if they adopted policies that were thought to be important to solidify their economy and democratic governance.

The problem was that this was the same period when the Reagan administration was funding the contra operation in Nicaragua. Most of them were based in Honduras, some out of Costa Rica, and were trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

We didn't know too much about that or what was happening because we were so caught up in our day-to-day activities, and it was off in the jungle someplace. We just didn't know too much about it, frankly, until '84 or '85 when it became public knowledge. Suazo Cordova was adamant that he would not devalue the Honduran Lempira. So, the Lempira became overvalued. The U.S. government would not use the leverage it had with this ESF [Economic Support Funds] funding to force the Honduran government to devalue. That hurt a lot of things we were trying to do in agriculture because when the currency was overvalued it made Honduras less competitive in its exports.

I also dealt with the ESF in Guatemala, which I'll describe later, and I came to the conclusion that using these types of resources to force the government to adopt a policy is a way of renting a policy. You can rent a policy, but you can't buy it. In order to get policy changes, it has to be done through dialogue, convincing the government officials, and by providing training opportunities to bright local officials; long term training at good universities, so they get the knowledge of what they need to do to make the country prosperous. To try to force them to adopt things that they don't understand or don't accept, is a very short-term solution.

After Honduras, we moved to Washington. I spent the first year in Washington starting in August 1985, as Deputy Chief of the Office of Rural Development for the Latin American Caribbean Bureau. After one year, I became the chief of that office for three more years. Altogether, four years in Washington. We bought a house in Virginia, about an hour away from the State Department, where I had my office.

I joined a vanpool with 14 other people to go from home to the office and back. Those of us who would drive periodically would pay one rate and those who didn't paid another rate. So about one week out of eight, I would spend the week driving the van to and from the office. The entry into Washington was disorienting. You know about culture shock. If you're living overseas, you often have culture shock when adapting to a new culture. Well, when you return to the United States after being out for a long period of time, you also go through a type of culture shock.

My wife Marilee and our two children flew to California and spent a few weeks with her sister and brother-in-law. So, I arrived by myself with our cat, and found our house, left the cat there, and went to a grocery store to get something to eat for dinner. I walked into the grocery store and got a cart and began putting things into it. I decided I wanted to get some mustard. I'm sure I'm exaggerating, but my memory is that half of one side of this long aisle in the grocery store was mustard. It was just too much for me to pick a type of mustard with these enormous options. I just left the cart there and walked out and found a fast-food restaurant to have dinner. I'd have to try shopping again the next day. After living nine years in Bolivia and Honduras, except for short visits back every two years, I was just overwhelmed by the adjustment.

Another disorienting thing was getting on the metro. This was when I first got there when I wasn't yet in the vanpool. I took the metro from the office to a car dealership in Virginia where we had ordered and paid for a Honda Accord. In Honduras, you smile and say

hello to everybody you meet on the street or on a bus, everybody is so open and greets everyone.

On the metro, I was looking around ready to say hello to people and everybody was just sitting there reading their books or staring out the window and zoned out. I realized if I started saying hello to everybody, I was going to scare people and they were going to wonder, who is this guy? Within a few months of being there, I also got on the subway and would not look at anyone. I certainly wouldn't say hello to anybody.

Most of the vanpool riders worked in the Veterans Administration, but two of us worked in the State Department building, and we would be the first ones to get off. There was a woman that worked for the State Department, and we would walk up to the building. I would try to open the door and let her go in. She would frown at me, and she would open her own door. It was like, okay, there are different things I must get used to. I'm not supposed to open doors for women, like I do in Latin America or in Iowa. Anyway, eventually I adjusted.

One of the first things I did in my new job was write a memo on restructuring the Rural Development Office. I also applied for and was approved to attend a one week seminar on the Hill on executive congressional relations on foreign affairs. I felt that it was important for me to understand and then to be able to help the ag officers in the field understand the relationship of USAID and Congress. Congressional authority over our programs was something that we needed to understand particularly in countries like Honduras and other countries in Central America that were receiving very large budgets during this period.

It was a fascinating experience. I met George Ingram, who was the chief staff officer for Representative Dante Fascell on the House Appropriations Subcommittee for Foreign Assistance. Later he worked for USAID for a period of time, and he is now with Brookings. I met Cokie Roberts, who was a well-known commentator for NPR, and later for ABC, and an expert on the Congress. Her father had been a congressman. Attending this seminar was a great experience. and I learned a great deal and made contacts that were useful later.

In the fall of 1985, I had a three-week TDY, temporary duty assignment, to El Salvador, where the mission was going through a redesign of its support for land reform. Although land reform was unpopular with the Reagan administration, it was something that the President of El Salvador was committed to, and USAID had to find how to make it work. It was difficult because El Salvador had taken over large farms and given them to organizations of landless farmers as collective farms. Members of the farmer organizations did not receive their own individual plots, but instead the entire group worked collectively on the large farm. This system has not worked anywhere, and it didn't work very well in El Salvador. Other aspects of the USAID agriculture program did work well.

In the summer of 1986, I became chief of the Rural Development Office for LAC [Latin America and the Caribbean]. One of my biggest responsibilities was to manage the assignment process for agricultural officers in the region for each of the open positions. We had more officers in the ag offices in the region than in any other part of the missions. At that point, USAID put tremendous emphasis on agriculture among its development activities. Those ag officers completing their current assignments were looking for information about opportunities at other posts.

The USAID Mission directors wanted to get the right person to fill their upcoming vacant positions. I would have multiple long distance phone calls before international phone calls became basically free. It was an extended process to figure out who should go to each mission, and it was like a chess board. And every time I'd get everything lined up, all of a sudden, some officer would have a family emergency, have to leave post, and then the whole chessboard had to get shifted around again. I spent a lot of time on that, and surprisingly I found it to be something I enjoyed; trying to help get the right person in the right job.

I think this task is one of the keys to success in an organization like USAID. If somebody is assigned to a mission for four years and turns out not able to do the job, it is very, very difficult to do anything about them. He or she can be curtailed and sent back to Washington, but the Mission may then have a vacancy for as long as a year. Often, I think the key to success is, if they don't have the skills for the job as defined, then redefine the job and make it something they can be successful at, rearranging responsibilities if that's what's required.

The LAC bureau was criticized during that period because it was considered to be very insular. We would move USAID officers from one post in Latin America and the Caribbean to another post in the region, rather than bring in people from another region. I could understand that concern, but the reality is that in Spanish speaking Latin America, the host country officials and people in the private sector were used to working with USAID officers who are quite fluent in Spanish.

If you bring in a mid-career person from another post who doesn't speak Spanish, they first must spend six to nine months learning Spanish and then arrive at post with still basic Spanish abilities. If you're trying to negotiate, as I did, macroeconomic agreements with the host government, you have to be able to understand all the subtleties of the conversations. If you don't, if you're not really fluent in the language, that puts a lot of limits on what you can achieve. I think USAID is doing better now and sharing the Latin American experience with more officers. One of the reasons why a lot of officers wanted posts in Latin America was the schools in the countries in Latin America tended to be better than those in Africa and some of the Asia posts. So, if they had children of school age, they really wanted to come to LAC.

Another TDY that I did, which was a lot of fun, was to Barbados. In January of 1987, I went with two USAID colleagues in the LAC Bureau, Aaron Williams and Patty Buckles. We were to do an evaluation of an agribusiness project managed by the regional USAID

office in Barbados for the Eastern Caribbean region. The company contracted to implement the project had not met the targets for new agribusiness ventures established. I ended up going to St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominique, and St. Kitts to see about some of these project activities, while Aaron and Patty visited other locations. In the end we recommended that the contract not be renewed.

I did many other TDYs, I think I was the person in the LAC bureau that had more trips to the field than anybody else, because the missions wanted support for their agricultural programs. Of course, when I traveled, I left my wife Marilee with two very small children, and that put a big burden on her. Also, Marilee was working on a master's in counseling while we were in Washington, and so that put extra pressure on her.

One of my big activities in 1987 is what I called the medfly war. The U.S. Department of Agriculture wanted to eradicate the Mediterranean fruit fly all the way through Central America down to the isthmus of Panama, to prevent them from damaging crops in the U.S. To do that they they'd first spray malathion from airplanes to reduce the population of medflies, and then release sterilized fruit flies, which could not produce any offspring and eventually reduce the population to a level where it could just be eliminated.

USAID environmental officers had a problem with spraying pesticides over large rural areas. The Department of Agriculture wanted to have some of the USAID managed Public Law 480 Title One funds to cover the host countries' required counterpart funding for this program. PL 480 is a program to finance US exports of agricultural products to developing countries, which are then sold on the open market, with the proceeds raised through those sales used to finance development activities. USAID during that period had control over those resources and USAID environmental officers said that the Department of Agriculture had to do environmental impact analysis that would meet USAID's environmental rules. The Department of Agriculture argued they had met the EPA requirements. However, in the late 1970s USAID had been sued by environmental organizations concerning a project in India, and the resolution of that suit was that USAID had to adopt environmental regulations that were more stringent than any other federal government organization. To comply with USAID's environmental regulations, USDA would be required to make a major investment, and it would cause a substantial delay for their program.

As the President of Guatemala was scheduled to soon visit Washington, and wanted this issue resolved, the issue was raised to the National Security Council. Dwight Ink, who was the head of LAC bureau at that point, asked me and the head of the environmental office in USAID to go with him to the meeting of the NSC, and an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture represented USDA at the meeting. He was not as prepared for the meeting as Dwight Ink was, and my colleague and I were able to succinctly explain the issues. In the end, the head of LAC activities for the National Security Council told USDA that they had to meet USAID's environmental requirements.

The medfly program was run by the Secretaries of Agriculture of the US, Mexico, and Guatemala, and there was a meeting of three governments scheduled in Hawaii in

December 1987. I was asked to go to Hawaii to attend this meeting. In that meeting, USDA said, "We're going to start this off by explaining that we have decided that USAID is right." Their spraying was killing off bees and other beneficial insects, because of the way it was being done. So, USDA announced that they were not going to try to move the barrier against medfly all the way through Central America. Mexico would adopt requirements to assure that agricultural products from Guatemala did not introduce medfly into Mexico, and similar requirements would be established for vegetables and fruit exports to the U.S. So, we won the war. But then shortly after that, Congress changed the authority for managing Public Law 480 Title One resources from USAID to the Department of Agriculture. But the aerial spraying of pesticides over wide areas of rural Guatemala was never renewed.

The final thing I want to talk about today is something that George Ingram, who I mentioned earlier, got me into. In March 1988, the Florida Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association was having its annual meeting in Orlando, Florida. They had asked Dante Fascell to have somebody from USAID explain the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which was a US government program that included promoting the export of fresh fruits and vegetables from Central America and the Caribbean to the US. Florida fresh fruit and vegetable producers were worried the program was going to take away their market and ability to be competitive.

I was charged with flying to Orlando and giving a speech to what I expected to be a very hostile audience. I explained that Central America and the Caribbean couldn't compete during the period when Florida was producing, because Florida could produce much more and at a lower cost. Central American and Caribbean producers were focused on the offseason winter market for these activities. I also explained to them that one of the advantages of keeping the product in the grocery stores 12 months out of the year was that they would keep shelf space in the stores. So that they would be able to immediately get their product into that space once they were able to produce and sell it at a lower cost.

I'm not a very good public speaker and it was a large crowd. We had a good set of slides that laid out the key points and data, which were projected on a large screen. It was a fairly darkened room and that made it easier for me. I could refer to the slides everybody was looking at instead of me. I got through it nervously, with my voice quivering a lot. There were a few questions, but not a lot. People thanked me and for the rest of the time I was there people came asking how they could invest in production in Central America and the Caribbean, so their businesses could keep active during that period. It also turned out that their interest was shifting more towards the beginning of discussions about the North American Free Trade Agreement, which they considered more of a threat than the Caribbean Basin Initiative.

In April 1989 I learned that the Deputy Mission director position in Guatemala had become available. That was the ideal next assignment for me, and I will describe in our next session that I was assigned to the position, and we moved to Guatemala at the end of July.

Q: How did things work out with ag exports under the Caribbean Basin Initiative in Honduras, as well as other countries, to your knowledge?

WINGERT: Honduras did quite well with a broad range of products, as did Guatemala. In Honduras, the major new exports were cucumbers, melons, snow peas, and Tabasco chilies. The Tabasco company started sourcing their chilies out of Honduras in that period. The Agricultural Research Foundation, FIA, that I helped create, was a major actor in helping teach the Honduran farmers how to produce efficiently, and also introducing them to other crops that they could export. Guatemala had a wider range; I'll talk about that in the segment on my years in Guatemala. But it has been quite successful and it has been predominantly a small farmer activity.

Q: So, this initiative, which extended even beyond the five years of the Caribbean initiative, has been successful in cementing the ability of the Central American countries to find export venues in the United States. Is that correct?

WINGERT: Yes, and it's not just agriculture. There was also a new manufacturing industry based on what was called the drawback program. Textiles that were produced in the U.S. would be shipped to Central America, cut and sewn into garments, and then shipped back to the U.S. No import duties were charged in either country. This activity did quite well, although it has had more problems recently. Mexico can in some ways do better at it than Central America as its transportation costs are lower. Southeast Asia has gotten very, very big in this business. One of the problems in Central America is that the gangs have infiltrated the production lines, and to get a job you must deal with the gang leaders. There are many issues now that we didn't have back when I was working on these activities.

Q: Very interesting. Well, the advantage of interviewing you, Steve, is that since you retired from USAID, you continued for a long time. So, you have undoubtedly kept in touch with what's been going on through your own personal interests in the work you've done. Thank you.

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Q: Today is Wednesday, June 1. And I am speaking with Stephen Wingert. And this is our fourth oral history session.

Today you will be covering your assignment to USAID/Guatemala from 1989 to 1993 where you served as the Deputy Mission Director. You will also cover your last assignment with USAID from1993 to 1995 to USAID/Costa Rica where you served as Deputy Mission Director and then quickly served the remaining time as Mission Director.

Welcome.

WINGERT: I mentioned at the end of the previous session that I had just been assigned to Guatemala. And we arrived there in late July of 1989. I was to be the deputy mission director there in a mission that had over 200 employees scattered through four buildings.

I think at that point it was the fourth or fifth largest USAID program in the world. So, it was a major post.

The mission director was Tony Cauterucci, who I had worked for in Honduras when he was director there and I was the head of the agricultural development office. The ambassador was Jim Michael, who left post in December of '89 and shortly after that became the assistant administrator for USAID's Latin American Caribbean Bureau. That began a long-term relationship, which continues today because he's very active in the USAID Alumni Association, as am I. It was a great team to work with.

Just as we arrived, the Embassy published an announcement asking for applicants to manage the post's mental health program, a new activity in US embassies to provide support for the Foreign Service's officers at post—from State Department, USAID, Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture, etc. It was to provide not direct person to person counseling but organize groups of officers to discuss topics like culture shock, raising children in a third world country, and a variety of other issues.

Marilee had just gotten her master's in counseling from George Mason University. She applied and was chosen. So, we both were starting new jobs. Our kids were enrolled in the Colegio Maya, a small school that had 250 students in kindergarten through 12th grade and with children from twenty or thirty different countries, about a third of them were the children of wealthy Guatemalans, about a third were children of official Americans or USAID contractors. And the other third was from a large number of other countries. It was a wonderful school, and that same fall of '89 I was elected to the school's board of directors, which became another full time job. I won't go into all the details, but we had a major revolt from some of the parents who wanted to change the fee structure and expand class size. It was more of a battle that I need to go into. The international school system in countries around the world where USAID has missions has fantastic schools. It was wonderful for our kids to be able to go to those schools.

The first task that Tony Cauterucci assigned me was to solve the problem the mission was having with the executive officer. The executive officers in USAID control the hiring of local staff, building maintenance, the office carpool, all sorts of administrative tasks. And the executive officer in Guatemala, had earned the reputation of being Dr. No. Any time anybody asked him to approve something, he would always say no. Tony asked me to try to solve the problem, so I decided to do a survey asking for the staff's evaluations of the executive office, the controller's office, and the contracting office, as a way to somewhat hide the fact that we were going after the executive officer. The survey asked how Mission staff felt their requests were being responded to, and the support they got from these three different staff offices. Of course, all comments about the executive office were very, very negative.

I had a session with the executive officer and laid out expectations for change on things that needed to be done. I also scheduled frequent meetings with him to review how he was progressing. He, of course, didn't like that. About that time, a new USAID mission was opening in Nicaragua, which I'll also touch on in a few minutes. The executive

officer immediately bid to be transferred to Nicaragua, to get out from under the horrible thumb of Steve Wingert. That's what happened, and we got a great new executive officer and operations and staff morale improved.

The second thing that happened was Tony left to take his son to start college and help him get situated. Before he left we had lunch together, and he told me about an investigation concerning corrupt activity by a USAID officer in USAID/El Salvador, who was receiving bribes from a contractor. Another contract employee in the Guatemala Mission had previously worked in El Salvador and had reported the issue to the USAID Inspector General' office. When I learned the name of the contractor providing the bribes, I told Tony that the man was a good friend of mine. He had been the CARE director when I was in Bolivia. We would get together and play chess and listen to reggae music and drink wine, and our wives were friends. It just blew me away.

The Guatemala mission created a fake procurement, where the Mission's contract employee was to receive a bribe from the contractor, while wearing a hidden mic so the transaction could be recorded. If my friend, the corrupt contractor, tried to contact me, I would have my secretary tell him, "I'm sorry but Steve's on a field trip." I'm a horrible liar, and I didn't want to have any direct contact with him, even though I was the one who was authorizing this fake procurement. The attempted transaction was recorded, and the contractor was arrested, as was the USAID officer in El Salvador, Sad, sad story.

We found a nice house in Guatemala, and we had very close friends there. They had also been our close friends in Honduras. It's rare in Foreign Service life, where USAID officers move from post to post, that they are assigned to the same post with a group of friends. In Honduras, our kids had been friends with the children of my co-workers. I knew one of the co-workers since he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala at the same time I was. He married a Guatemalan lady from San Antonio Sacatepéquez in San Marcos department, near the Mexican border. We spent Christmas holidays with our friends in San Antonio, with the extended family for a traditional Guatemalan celebration, making tamales to be eaten at midnight on Christmas eve.

Around that time, the guerrillas, who were still active in Guatemala, blew up a power station and we didn't have electricity. And since our water came from a well, without electricity we didn't have water. We spent about a week until the government got power back. Our kids would go to friend's houses to take showers before going to school. They lived in an area where they had houses with a generator to keep power going. It was part of the life we dealt with in that period.

In early March 1990, Washington designated me to be on an economic mission to Nicaragua for two weeks, with only a few days' notice. I was to report on the agricultural sector in the country. In late February, Violeta Chamorro surprisingly won the presidential election. The Sandinistas lost that election, and, surprising everybody, they agreed to step down. The U.S. suddenly had to decide how to support a new government in Nicaragua. It would require support, and we were tasked to find out what was needed.

In looking at agriculture in the country, the biggest question was whether the Soviets would come through with their promised assistance to buy fertilizer for the agricultural sector, and petroleum to run the tractors. I said to our team leader, Fred Schieck, Deputy Assistant Administrator of USAID's LAC Bureau, "Why don't we go meet with the Soviet Ambassador and see what he says, maybe we can find out something?" It was a big question mark; if they suddenly withdrew that support, the US was going to have to come up with millions of dollars to get fertilizer and petroleum. We got special permission from Washington to go meet the Soviet Ambassador.

The Ambassador was quite friendly. He told us that the fertilizer was being loaded at a port and in Europe (he told us the name, but I don't remember it), and when it will reach Nicaragua. As far as the petroleum, Nicaragua can't use Russian petroleum, as it requires a different time of refining. So, Russia was selling its petroleum on the world market and will buy petroleum from Ecuador. He assured us that Nicaragua didn't have to worry about either fertilizer or petroleum. He turned to Fred Schieck, and said, "So how do you guys provide USAID's assistance?" Fred sensed what he was after and talked about all of the processes we use to track the money and make certain that funds are not misused. And at that point, the Soviet Ambassador sat back in his chair and smiled and said to us, "*Buena suerte*," good luck. The implication was, the Russians knew that the Sandinistas were ripping them off. They were providing things to Nicaragua that were mysteriously going across the border into Costa Rica and being sold. For me, that was the moment when the Cold War ended. The Soviet Ambassador to Nicaragua just said, "Okay, it's your problem now." It was fascinating.

Tony Cauterucci finished his tour and left in the summer of 1990. I was acting Mission director for several months until Terry Brown arrived as the new Director.

In the spring of 1990, the new Ambassador, Tom Stroock, arrived in Guatemala. He was a political appointee who had been the chief fundraiser for George H. W. Bush's campaign in the western states to the US. Soon after he arrived, he reached an agreement with the Minister of Communications and Transportation for American Airlines to be granted access to the Guatemalan market. But the minister backed out on it, even though they had shaken hands on it.

So, the Ambassador told USAID, told Tony Cauterucci, to turn over to him all the checks to the Government of Guatemala for a large USAID program. He would hold them in his office safe until the Minister gave American Airlines landing rights. Tony consulted with Washington and basically, they said, "Well, just try to finesse it. For now, you know, don't try to go head to head with him." So Tony agreed. A month after I became the acting Mission director, the Ministry told USAID that it would have to suspend the program, as it had reached the point that it was running out of money. They were going to have to lay off, fire, hundreds, if not thousands, of Indian laborers because most of these roads were just being built with pick and shovel.

I went to the Ambassador and said, "Is there any way that you can release these checks? Because if not, all these people are going to lose their employment and the roads aren't

going to be built." The Ambassador just nodded and turned around, opened up the safe, got all the checks out and handed them to me and said, "No, I wouldn't want that to happen." I became a hero with the USAID staff at that point because I broke the logjam.

Terry Brown and his family arrived shortly before Labor Day weekend. A group of us were heading to Panajachel, a beautiful Guatemalan town on Lake Atitlan, a few hours driving from Guatemala City. Terry and his family were going to join us there. But Terry wasn't aware that the road that they were traveling on, which he traveled on when he had been in El Salvador and he and his wife would come up to Guatemala on leave, was one of the "don't drive there" roads on the Embassy list, because the armed guerillas would stop cars. Well, they stopped Terry's car. He and his family had to get out of their car while the guerillas searched through it and stole all sorts of things. But happily, they didn't harm them and finally let them leave.

They arrived in Panajachel and were clearly upset by the ordeal, but they tried to put it behind them and enjoy the weekend. Because of that incident, and the fact that there were carjackings going on in Guatemala City, Marilee and I decided to sit down with our son and daughter and explain to them our instructions on what they should do if something like that happened. We assumed that whoever wanted the car would point the gun at me, the driver. We told them that, if possible, the two of them and Marilee were to exit the car, preferably on the side of the car away from where the person was holding the gun, and quietly maneuver away from the car going backwards along the street and not forwards. In other words, if the car started up, it wouldn't catch up with them. And meanwhile, I would be talking to whoever had the weapon. We went through this kind of training session with our 12-year old son and 9-year old daughter. It's an example of the sort of things USAID officers had to deal with.

We purchased our car, an Isuzu Trooper, from a vendor in the Washington, DC, area, and USAID shipped it to Guatemala. Unfortunately, Isuzu Troopers turned out to be the car of choice for car thefts there. They especially targeted females driving with small children in the car. So, we decided to get a second car. A former Peace Corp friend who lived in Harlington, Texas, on the border with Mexico, found this horrible old car, a Ford Tempo, with paint peeling on the roof. And it was an automatic transmission, which Guatemalans hated, and just a terrible car, but with a good engine, It was exactly what we wanted. I hired one of the USAID drivers, who took annual leave, and I paid him to take the bus up to Mexico and drive the car back. I then got it registered in Guatemala. The family called it the Ford Thingo. Felt that we could leave it unlocked on any Guatemalan Street and nobody would bother it. Marilee felt safe driving it.

Around the end of 1990 we found that people in the Ministry of Health were falsifying seminar records and claiming a bunch of people attending training sessions that didn't attend. They then pocketed the money that USAID would give to the ministry to cover these costs. We decided we had to suspend the child survival program that funded vaccination of children and provided oral rehydration salts to protect them, if they had diarrhea, from dying. We did an extensive audit of the program and came up with about

two and a half million dollars that could not be adequately accounted for. We issued a bill of collection to the Government of Guatemala for that amount.

Shortly after that, there were elections and a new President of Guatemala took office, with a new Minister of Health. I took the new Minister to lunch in a nice restaurant and explained this whole situation to him. I had been tagged by Terry Brown to be the spokesperson and explained to him that, "We can't provide any support until the Guatemalan Government reimburses the funds that aren't accounted for." It wasn't that we were claiming that all those questionable costs were stolen, but if they couldn't account for what they were spent on, we had to get the money back. Anyway, the Minister talked with the Minister of Finance, and the Government of Guatemala repaid the Mission the full amount, and we got the program going again. I calculated at one point that during the year the program was suspended, how many children probably died because we had to suspend that program. It made me feel extremely bad. But I knew that it wasn't USAID that killed those children. It was the thieves in the Ministry of Health. It is another example of things you have to deal with when working in the Foreign Service.

We had home leave in the summer of 1991 and went to Arkansas, Yellowstone, and California. Mandatory home leave every two years was a policy that the State Department has had going back to the days when Foreign Service Officers were traveling on large sailing ships or steamships. They wanted the Foreign Service officers to return to the US every two years so they wouldn't "go native." We visited my parents, we met up with some friends and saw Yellowstone, and then we went to California to be with Marilee's sister and brother-in-law.

In my third year in Guatemala, there was an enormous cholera epidemic. The Minister of Health, with whom I had negotiated the repayment to USAID of unaccounted health project funds, and I flew in a Ministry rented helicopter to the south coast of Guatemala to visit health posts and hospitals. We wanted to review their preparations and their actual dealing with people who were suffering from cholera. Cholera is not something that should kill a healthy person. If you can keep yourself hydrated, during the worst stage, your body will eventually get rid of that disease. It's not something that should lead to death. But if the person is already weak, if they're malnourished, they're much more at risk of dying, especially if they don't get the right treatments and antibiotics if needed.

During our visit we walked with health workers through the area's villages and saw how they were tracking new cholera cases, isolating people who had it as well as people who had been in contact with them. The Ministry of Health had done an excellent job preparing for it. When we got back to Guatemala City, I met with the USAID health office team, and we agreed on things to do to accelerate getting the Ministry the supplies it needed to implement its plans. Ambassador Stroock decided to give me an award for my bravery in saving the lives of thousands of Guatemalans against this horrible cholera epidemic. I made the point that it wasn't me it was the Guatemala Ministry of Health, and the USAID Mission's health team that had done the work. He claimed I had put myself at risk of this deadly disease. Sometimes you get blamed for things that you didn't do, and sometimes you get praised for things you didn't do.

There was a CNN freelance reporter that wanted to look at the things USAID was doing in the Petén region, the northern part of Guatemala, near the protected Mayan biosphere. USAID's support sought to create sustainable income options for people in the area, so they didn't chop down the forest and cause other problems. I flew with the USAID environmental team to Petén to accompany the reporter, but I was disturbed because in all the videos, she made certain that none of us were included. And she never made any mention of USAID or U.S. government involvement in this program, which was our program. When she wasn't recording, I asked her about that. She said, well, if she did include us, if she made any plug for USAID or the U.S. government, then her report would never be shown; CNN would reject it. I was very upset. It's an example of the fact that the news can be subject to a filter that keeps you from being informed.

In the fall of 1991, Jeremy and I took scuba classes. We did our final dive in the ice cold waters of Lake Atitlan, which was a challenge for Jeremy because he didn't have a lot of body fat to keep him warm even though we were wearing wetsuits.

Ambassador Stroock created a special meeting of country team members that became known as Devil's Night, because it happened on the night the Guatemalans burn the devil by burning their trash on the street in front of their houses. It's a long story and I won't go into it. But anyway, he invited the key senior staff in the Embassy and USAID, about 10 or 12 of us, to meet at the residence, have a drink, and have an open discussion about what's working and what's not for U.S. policies in Guatemala. He said, "You can criticize the ambassador, I want a completely open discussion." Of course, we were still cautious with what we said. But it was a way to get the whole team focused on topics that any country team member thought was not getting adequate attention.

In the second of these sessions, I and Hilda Arellano, who was the head of our democracy and governance office, attended the meeting, and she described USAID's Administration of Justice Program. I made the pitch that improving the justice system in Guatemala was critical for everything the Embassy was pursuing, whether it was helping US businesses or dealing with criminal activities and migration. In the end everybody agreed, and the Ambassador stated that it was his policy that we do so. After that, Hilda organized and chaired a country team working group to coordinate what USAID was doing with what was happening throughout the Embassy. It was an important undertaking.

At that time, we were also drafting a new five year country development strategy, which had to be approved by the Ambassador before USAID could send it to USAID Washington for review and approval. In the Embassy, there's a large country team that meets once a week led by the Ambassador, and then a small country team with just a few of the different agency heads that meets with the Ambassador. The smaller group met three times a week in what is known as the bubble, where you carry on a conversation without any fear of what is said was going to be somehow recorded by some other entity or government. I went to one of these meetings to defend our new country development strategy statement. Before the Ambassador got into the room, the head of the DEA lambasted me, saying, "I can't believe you have over 200 employees. There's only six of

us, and we're struggling to do all these major tasks. How can you possibly justify having all that staff?" And I smiled and said, "Well, you know, if I could hand out money in brown paper bags, like you guys do, we wouldn't need all the staff." Everybody laughed, but the DEA guy was a little put out.

The Ambassador came in and plumped the whole strategy document, which was quite long, in front of him. He turned to me and smiled and said "Steve, do I have to read this whole thing?" And I said, "Mr. Ambassador, we just need you to nod your head and say, send it to Washington." And that's what he did. So, we got the required authorization. This is an example of the complexity of the USAID-Embassy relations.

Peace negotiations were underway at this point between the guerillas and the Guatemalan government, via a three-person team that were not part of the government. The government and the guerillas mutually agreed on the selection of the intermediaries for the negotiations. The three-person team had to fly to Mexico City, where the *comandantes* (commanders) of the guerillas lived, with their costs funded by European governments. The guerillas wouldn't allow the government to fund the travel costs of the intermediaries, as they thought that would compromise their independence, but they thought USAID was sufficiently independent that we could do that. So, we agreed to do so.

However, we ran into a problem, because the three negotiators had to stay in the same hotels the guerilla commanders were in. And because the Europeans were funding housing costs for the guerillas, they were staying in the finest hotels in Mexico City. And the hotel rates were above US government per diem rates. So, we had to send a cable to Washington to get approval for the USAID mission to pay higher than the US government rates. It was one of the ironies, while the guerrillas were sleeping under horrible conditions, in the countryside of Guatemala, their *comandantes* (commanders) were living a very good life.

In my final year in Guatemala, there was an *autogolpe* (self-coup) in the spring of 1993. The president of Guatemala decided to suspend Congress, take over total control of the government, and ban the Supreme Court from meeting. I was the acting director then, as Terry Brown was at a meeting in Costa Rica. I got a call from Bambi Arellano at about 4:30 in the morning. A man who knew Bambi was a neighbor of the president of the Supreme Court, and he had heard and seen tanks out in front of the house of the president of the Supreme Court.

As I was the acting Mission director, the Mission director's driver was going to pick me up that morning, I told Bambi to be ready, and we'd swing by and pick her up, and both go to the Embassy. Enroute to the Embassy, we heard on the radio about the President suspending Congress and banning the Supreme Court from meeting. I called the USAID controller and told him if he had any checks ready to be given to any part of the Guatemalan government, if somebody showed up to pick them up, his staff was to tell them that they couldn't find the checks. They'd have to come back another time. So, I cut

off the USAID program to the Government of Guatemala on my own without getting authorization from anybody to do that.

Bambi and I went to the embassy, and I called Stacy Rhodes, who was the acting Assistant Administrator at that point for the LAC Bureau. I had to insist with his secretary to be put through to Stacy, as he was leaving to attend a senior staff meeting with the top people in USAID Washington. I quickly explained to him what was happening, as no one in Washington appeared to know about it at that point. Shortly after that, we were told to suspend the USAID program. I next reached Terry Brown, who was leading a meeting of USAID regional staff in Costa Rica, and he arranged to fly back to Guatemala as soon as possible. I canceled all travel within Guatemala by the Mission staff. Some of our contractors had offices in Government of Guatemala buildings, and I ordered that they not go into those offices but instead to work in the USAID building or at home. We then waited to see what was going to happen.

Later that morning, the President of the Supreme Court called the Embassy and asked if somebody could come to his house and meet with him. Since USAID worked with him, I was designated and went in a bullet-proof USAID vehicle. I hoped the tanks were no longer there, and happily they had pulled away. He asked for assistance in getting his family out of Guatemala. He had to stay, but he wanted to make certain his family was safe. I called the consular office, and they immediately arranged to get them out and into the U.S.

I had given the President of the Supreme Court my home phone number, we didn't have cell phones then, and later that afternoon he called my house, and my daughter took the call. The instructions in the family were that if somebody asked for me, they were not supposed to tell them where I was. But our daughter, Anya, understood that this guy really needed to talk to me, so she told him where I could be reached. When I called him back, he told me the tanks had come back. I went back to his house, but when I got there the tanks had again left, as had his family. We discussed what was going to happen next. I continued to be involved in the crisis.

One of my neighbors was the brother of Gabriel Biguria, a prominent private sector businessman. He was leading a group with representatives from the Guatemalan universities, non-governmental organizations, business and union associations, religious leaders, and others that was trying to reverse this *golpe* (coup). My neighbor came to our house several times with a list of questions for me about U.S. Government policy, especially concerning the impact of the coup on Guatemala's trade privileges with the U.S. I explained that under U.S. law, these would be suspended, and told him the name of the law, which he immediately passed to his brother. It was quite an exciting, very worrisome time. Eventually, the Guatemalan military told the president he had no support within Guatemala, and he had to leave. He flew to Panama, where he went into exile and he's still there. The Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman, with whom USAID had worked for some time, was elected by the Guatemalan Congress to be the President. It was a very, very exciting time, and happily it ended well.

The USAID Mission in Guatemala then received an award for management excellence, one of five or six US government entities that won the award that year. Vice President Gore managed that process. The USAID Administrator, Brian Atwood, flew to Guatemala to present the award, and to also meet with the new Guatemalan President, who he knew from prior associations.

I was assigned to be the Deputy Mission director in Costa Rica, with the agreement that I would become Mission director when the incumbent retired in January. In August, as our household effects were being packed up to leave Guatemala, the Administrator chose Terry Brown to be the new head of policy and budgeting in USAID Washington. The Ambassador's secretary called and told me I should have the packers not pack everything, because my family could move to Costa Rica, but I was going to have to stay in Guatemala and manage the USAID Mission until there was a new Mission director.

I called my contacts in Washington, and finally what we worked out was I would go with my family to Costa Rica. And I'd start working as the deputy Mission director, but I'd only be there for two weeks, and then I'd go back to Guatemala for two weeks to be the acting director in Guatemala. And then I'd be two weeks in Costa Rica. And then two weeks in Guatemala. This was not the arrangement that my wife or I thought was very good, but that's the best we could do.

About that time, also, in that fall, the announcement was made that the Costa Rica USAID mission would close in 1996. This was the fall of 1993. So basically, we had three years to get everything ready and close the mission. And I was responsible for planning and implementing that closure.

Carol Lancaster was the Deputy Administrator of USAID, and she visited both Guatemala and Costa Rica during that period. I was in Guatemala when she was in Guatemala, and I was in Costa Rica when she was in Costa Rica. In Guatemala, we spent a day traveling around visiting USAID projects. On the way back to town, she said, "You know, Steve, I've been in Guatemala a couple of days now, I haven't seen any poor people." She knew Africa really well, but didn't really know Latin America, didn't know Guatemala. And I kind of flippantly responded "Well, Carol, one of the problems Guatemala has is poverty is pretty here. So, it's not as visible as it is elsewhere, even though Guatemala has amongst the highest malnutrition rates in the world." I didn't feel she appreciated my making this observation.

In Costa Rica, when she was there, the man who was still the mission director lambasted her for closing the USAID mission in Costa Rica, and the meeting was going very poorly. I finally said, " Carol, we understand the Mission is going to close and we will do everything we need to move in that direction." When we finally had the plan for closing the mission, I took it to Washington, and one of the things I did was buy a nice red ribbon with a bow and I got an appointment with Carol Lancaster. I presented it to her and said "Carol, we are going to close the mission." She laughed and said "Steve, I knew you would do that. But I didn't think your predecessor would."

We had a retreat with all our staff to plan how we would manage moving toward Mission closure. A woman from an organization that provided support to USAID Missions throughout the world facilitated our retreat. The meeting started off with a lot of discord, and the next morning I proposed I sit in the middle of the group, with everyone scattered around me, and open myself to all questions. Some of the group's complaints were appropriate, and I responded with a willingness to find solutions, asking for volunteers from the Mission to help. Other issues were clearly beyond anything I could help with, and when I explained that the group listened. The session lasted a couple of hours, but it was the best investment of time we could make. After that we all had a sense that we were working together. The group came up with the slogan: We want the last two years of USAID presence in Costa Rica to be as successful and productive as the previous fifty.

In September of 1994, I was notified that I had not been promoted, I was approaching my seven year time limit at my level within the first of three stages in the Senior Foreign Service. I was ranked eighteenth out of 188 officers, but they were limiting promotions during that period, and I really didn't expect to be promoted. When I opened the window to be considered for the Senior Foreign Service, I knew I had seven years to be promoted to the next level or to be "involuntarily retired." My wife didn't want to continue moving all the time, post to post, and we agreed that at the end of the seven years, whether or not I was promoted, I would retire from USAID. I really wanted to finish the closure of the Costa Rica mission, but I had to leave a year before that process ended.

The main thing I did in Costa Rica was create the Costa Rica United States of America Foundation (CRUSA), which I was able to establish as an endowed successor organization to USAID. When we started the process to close the Mission, we had something like $350 million invested in ongoing agreements that USAID had control over. There was a continuing management role from which we had to extricate the mission. We managed to channel about $47 million of that into an endowment to create this binational foundation, with half of the Board of Directors appointed by the US Ambassador and the other half appointed by the President of Costa Rica. I designed the management and legal structure of the Foundation, negotiated its creation with the Costa Rican Vice President and the Minister of Planning, and got their agreement. And happily, CRUSA is alive and continuing to support technical cooperation between the United States and Costa Rica. The size of their endowment has grown over these years, from what USAID initially provided.

I finished my service in Costa Rica in the summer of 1995 and went into a retirement program in USAID Washington. In fact, my interviewer Marcy and her husband hosted me for a week and a half or so of that four-week program. And then I moved into the house of some other friends, and then a third place, before finishing the training program at the end of July. I still had another month before I would cease to be a Foreign Service Officer. But I was able to move to California to spend my last month doing a job search to find onward employment. That's when I ended my U.S. foreign officer career.

And I will talk about the twenty-three years I worked as a consultant to USAID in the next session, not talk about all the 128 assignments I had on contract in twenty-nine countries. I'll select a few and generalize others in one session.

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Q: Today is Wednesday, June 8, and I am interviewing Steve Wingert for his oral history. This is our fifth session.

You will be addressing today your post-retirement period between 1995 and 1998 where you're going to be focusing on your post-USAID over 125 assignments and your role as founder and director of Wingert's Consulting.

You will complete this Oral History interview reflecting on lessons learned from your 50 years working in international development first as a Peace Corp volunteer and then with USAID.

Again, this continues to be fascinating.

WINGERT: August 31, 1995, was my last day as a Foreign Service Officer [FSO]. In the retirement program, I was thinking that in my post-USAID life I could be working on private sector trade and investment activities in Latin America. At that point, the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA] had been recently signed. I was involved in negotiations for the Central American Free Trade Agreement [CAFTA]. I knew a lot about United States trade policy. And I had contacts throughout Latin America, which was a focus for a lot of new investments by US firms. I thought this would be my chance to leave the public sector and start working in the private sector. A fellow student friend from when I got my MBA [Master of Business Administration] at Stanford was treasurer for Bank of America in San Francisco. I drove down from our new home in Sonoma County, California, and met with him. I wanted his insights about my future career ideas. He told me investment activities in Latin America, for Bank of America, and as far as he knew for everybody else, were run out of Miami and New York, not out of San Francisco. The focus on trade and investment in San Francisco is toward Asia. Basically, he told me, "If you want to work in the private sector in those areas, you're going to have to move." And that wasn't in our plans.

He tried to set me up for an interview with one of the leaders in this area for Bank of America in New York. But in the meantime, I started getting calls from consulting firms that were doing work with USAID, or making bids for work with USAID, offering me consulting work. I, of course, found that interesting, and I started accepting consulting assignments with different companies. I never got around to talking to the guy in New York. I'm not certain why I thought I would be really interested in working with trade and investment work with private firms. When I was working on my MBA at Stanford, I didn't even interview with firms working on activities like that. I knew that what I wanted to do was work on the development of third world countries.

Anyway, I got out of that fantasy, and started just doing lots and lots of consulting work. And eventually, about a year and a half after I retired from USAID, I created my own consulting firm, and ended up with a roster of about 30 USAID retirees that I could call upon for different consulting contracts. I kept doing work with other firms while this got underway. From about 2000 until I retired in 2018, I did all the work through my own company. So I know both facets of consulting, both as a consultant and as somebody who negotiated and managed contracts with USAID missions.

I was absent from home quite a bit during the next 23 years doing these assignments. I had 125 consulting assignments in 29 countries during that period, and I earned almost 4 million miles with American Airlines and its partners. So, I could get free upgrades and be treated well by American Airlines, British Airways, and the other partners. I could use their premium lounges in London and elsewhere. Take a shower between flights and relax. But my work life changed. Before, while I was a USAID Foreign Service Officer, I would be at a post for from two to six years. The norm is usually about four years unless it's a hardship post, which is then two years. I would be working for an extended time and be able to delve into the country in depth and be able to establish relationships with host country partners and do the type of work that USAID does very well.

As a consultant, I would parachute into a country for two or three weeks, sometimes longer. I think my longest assignment was about 10 weeks. But the norm was more like about three weeks. And in those three weeks, I would have to produce a country strategy or project design, evaluation, or find solutions to specific management challenges that the USAID mission was struggling with. And in those three weeks, I would have to learn and understand the basics of the country's history, geography, economy, its legal system, its government structure, its cultural and societal norms. And the specific issue I was contracted to resolve. It was really an amazing process to just quickly try to learn about a country in a way that I could come back with and produce a document that the mission would find helpful, had some sort of intelligent relationship to what they were trying to do in a country.

The other problem with this is that usually when I would turn in my product, other than a few comments from them, saying, "Yes, this is what we were after, we like this," I would never hear after that anything about what happened with what I did. I didn’t know if the strategy was approved as I drafted it, if the project design I drafted was approved and implemented, or did they do anything with the evaluation I wrote. Sometimes I was pretty convinced that in at least some missions nobody even read my reports.

However, this was a good time to become a consultant. USAID had decided to downsize and was not keeping its senior management around for an extended period. And it was even cutting short the careers of its FS [Foreign Service] grade one level employees. Because of that, the agency lost a lot of its management capabilities. And at the same time, it was suddenly expanding its posts, creating USAID missions in the former Soviet Union countries and in Eastern Europe, where USAID had never worked. These were generally staffed with relatively junior people at the FS two levels as the USAID representatives in the countries. The reason that they had junior officers was the State

Department did not want USAID to become entrenched in those countries on a long term basis. They felt that if USAID had a Mission in a country, it would try to find reasons to keep it there. They wanted USAID's presence to be time limited. These countries did have trained human resources, and the task was to change how they saw the opportunities to build their economies. As a result, those of us who had a lot of experience and had recently retired were in high demand. It was a good time for me to switch and start doing consulting. I got a lot of phone calls, a lot of emails asking me to go to places I never thought I would go to.

Some of the consulting assignments were kind of mundane, like writing USAID Mission annual reports to Washington about what had been achieved. It was a sign that USAID staff were reduced to the level that they would contract out normal in-house tasks. I also went into countries to develop monitoring and evaluation plans, which would then contribute to the reports. Some of these tasks weren't all that exciting to do. But they took me to some really neat places. I developed the monitoring and evaluation plans for USAID Missions in Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, and West Bank, Gaza. When I was an USAID officer, I never dreamed I would be going to most of those places. And my wife started traveling on some of these assignments, she went with me to Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, and other places. I had an assignment in the Philippines where she had been a Peace Corps volunteer, and she joined me there. By that time, our kids were graduating from high school, and were off to college. However, I feel that much of my work had a clear, positive impact.

There are four countries where I feel my work was particularly meaningful: El Salvador, Guatemala, South Africa, and Egypt. I had many assignments in the last three of these, but in each of the four I had specific tasks that I felt were important. I'll provide information about each.

I led a team to evaluate USAID assistance to help implement the Peace Accords in El Salvador, and it was really a fascinating assignment. It was initially to be for four weeks, but one of our team members turned out to be an alcoholic. After about two weeks, it became apparent he wasn't going to produce anything for the evaluation. So, I proposed that one of the other consultants and I extend our stay for two more weeks to complete the work that this other guy hadn't done. The consulting firm in Washington and the USAID mission agreed to that.

Our team visited about two thirds of the municipalities in El Salvador, which are equivalent to US counties in size. After the peace accords had been signed, the Salvadoran military demobilized a lot of its soldiers. And the guerrilla groups also turned in their arms and stopped fighting. The Government of El Salvador offered the former soldiers and ex-guerillas a choice of either getting a plot of land, along with a loan to buy fertilizer and other agricultural inputs, or they could get training to be carpenters or electricians and funding for the basic tools of the trade that they would need to have a profession in that trade. Most of the former soldiers and guerillas chose to get a plot of land and a loan from a bank. They wanted a big chunk of cash, and they really had no intention of ever paying it back. Most of these former soldiers and guerrillas had been

forced into or recruited into the army or their guerrilla groups while they were still relatively young. They may have grown up on a farm, but they were too young to learn farming from their fathers or their mothers. They lacked the knowledge of how to farm and they really weren't very interested in doing it. Farming is extremely hard work, and it doesn't pay very much. El Salvador implemented a major land reform during the war years, in an attempt to get the guerrillas to stop fighting, and the land still available to give to the former soldiers and guerrillas was of low quality for farming.

The former soldiers and guerrillas ended up keeping the cash they'd been given for loans and then settling in towns and cities or joining the gangs. There was a big gang movement in Central America, which actually was started by a group of Salvadoran refugees that were in the Los Angeles area that formed the gangs there, the *Salvatrucha* and the MS-13 gangs, who always fought each other. After the war ended in El Salvador, the US government expelled these gang members. They had criminal histories that didn't allow them to stay in the US. They went back to Salvador, and they created the gangs in Salvador, and then eventually in Guatemala, and Honduras and elsewhere.

Our group visited many of the farms and met with the former soldiers and guerrillas. On one of these trips, I had the opportunity to travel with a woman who was the number two leader of the largest of the four groups that formed the *Farabundo Martí* guerrilla movement. She was well known to the different guerrilla groups, and they would all praise her and welcome her with big smiles and lots of hugs. She had been captured by a US Green Beret at one point, and they turned her over to the Salvadoran army, which tortured her. Eventually, the guerrillas captured the daughter of the President of El Salvador and negotiated a trade to get the Salvadoran Government to send this former guerrilla leader to Cuba, and then the guerrillas would release the President's daughter. We discussed the medical treatment that she received in Cuba. As I traveled around with her, we had a fascinating conversation. It was incredible to have the opportunity to get to know her and the life she lived. But now and then she would just kind of zone out. I felt that what was happening as we were discussing these terrible things that she had experienced was that it revived all sorts of nightmares and things in her mind. She just had to step back from them before we continued chatting. Although our conversation was relaxed and friendly, I was clearly a gringo, as were those she had fought against.

Doing the evaluation was really interesting work. And our team felt we were able to understand what USAID’s objectives were, what it did, and what the impact was. Our final conclusions were that the assistance to help implement the Peace Accords was a political success. It helped keep both sides from returning to fighting. But it was an economic failure, because the good land had already been distributed under the land reform that the President of El Salvador enacted during the war. And the guerillas and the soldiers were too young when they began fighting to know how to farm. We ended up predicting what would happen would be expanded membership in the different gangs, and increased migration to the United States by these former guerrillas and former soldiers. And that is what happened. They were good candidates to be gang members, because the only thing they learned to do when they were young was shoot a gun.

Q: So that was pretty prescient, indeed. I'm just curious, what impressions did you get while you were there about the role of the US military, and–in the war and to what extent the military, US military have, either on purpose or inadvertently promoted some of the violence that took place?

WINGERT: We didn't look into the role of the US military, so I can't say much about that. Their role was mainly to provide training to the Salvadoran military, and the US provided military equipment.

I did have an interview, just by myself as team leader, with the head of the Salvadoran military. He had been involved in the peace negotiations and wasn't happy with how the process ended. He made a comment to me that was quite striking, and we put in our report. He said, in Spanish, "*Nosotros siempre pensamos que éramos los hombres con sombreros blancos, y los guerrilleros eran los con sombreros negros. Ahora, todos dicen que fue atreves.*" (We always thought that we were the guys with the white hats, and the guerrillas the ones with the black hats. Now everyone says it was the other way around.) In the old cowboy movies, the guys with the white hats were the good guys, and the guys with the black hats were the bad guys. In fact, the army did a lot of cruel things. The analysis of the conflict done by the Roman Catholic Archbishop concluded that the Salvadoran military had committed most of the atrocities in the war. Some of the guerrilla groups did also, but it was more by the military.

My work in El Salvador was in the spring of 1996. And then in the fall of 1996, a firm asked me to lead a team to draft a new country development strategy for USAID Guatemala. The focus was to assist implementation of the Peace Accords in that country, which were in the final stages prior to being signed. They asked for my advice and assistance on who should be on the team and, and Marcy Bernbaum was one of the people we recruited, along with another woman who worked in the education sector in Guatemala, Julia Richards, who eventually then became an USAID personal service contractor, then a Foreign Service Officer. Other consultants helped with the strategies for other sectors. Anyway, it was really an interesting task and a country that I knew very well, first as a Peace Corps volunteer, then working on a contract for four years in the '70s, and then returning as deputy mission director. I had contacts throughout the country.

I was very familiar with the issues to be addressed in the draft Peace Accords, including the large number of Guatemalan refugees living in Mexico who would want to return to their land or some land in Guatemala after the accords were signed. When I was deputy mission director, I organized four different field recognizance teams made up of a USAID Foreign Service Officer, one or two Foreign Service Nationals and in some cases a Personal Services Contractor. They went out to the different regions where the refugees were expected to return to evaluate what were the types of issues that were going to have to be dealt with. This gave us the background we needed when we started doing this new strategy.

In the final strategy, I wrote a cautionary statement that the mission needed to set benchmarks against which the Guatemalan Government's actions to live up to the

commitments they'd made in the Peace Accords could be judged. This would be used by the Mission to determine whether USAID should continue with the support for different segments of the program. From my prior experience in Guatemala, I knew that the Guatemalan government would often promise things and then just never comply with them. In the following years, I returned to Guatemala to work on consulting assignments at least once a year and sometimes five or six times a year. Although the Mission adopted our strategy of setting performance benchmarks, when the strategy was being implemented, the Guatemalan government backed out on a lot of its commitments or were just not complying with them. Yet, the money kept flowing. I think that it was partly because at that time, the US government's foreign policy focus shifted from a strong emphasis on Central America for a number of years, to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The US basically stopped paying attention to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. After that, there was a lot of political instability in Guatemala, and it hasn't really progressed a lot.

It's been a great disappointment to me, after all the work I've done over the years, that the Government of Guatemala is serving the interests of the wealthy elite and corrupt officials, not the public. The USAID program is now mainly implemented through US contract firms or International Non-Governmental Organizations, with some funds directed through local non-governmental or private sector organizations. Almost no funds are channeled directly through the Government of Guatemala. The US taxpayers' dollars are kept out of the hands of the corrupt. But this approach impedes the nation building objective of US foreign assistance, and no country can develop and prosper without an effective national government.

The next specific case I want to talk about is South Africa. Another consultant and I were contracted by USAID South Africa in February 1997 to produce project designs for activities that were already underway. During apartheid, USAID basically didn't have a relationship with the apartheid government. It signed agreements directly with a large number, maybe over 100, local organizations, and gave grants directly to these local organizations for community development activities, civic programs, all sorts of different areas of interest. It was a very flexible program not following USAID's normal project design and approval process. However, with the end of apartheid, Washington decided in 1996 that South Africa had to follow USAID's normal procedures, and the other consultant and I were hired to write the documents to make this happen. I was working on activities at that point that were shifting from just grants to local organizations to programs with the government.

Q: What year were you doing this? And how far was this after apartheid ended?

WINGERT: I went there twice in 1997. The South African legislation that supported apartheid was repealed in 1990, and Nelson Mandela was released from prison that year. A new constitution that enfranchised blacks and other minorities was adopted in 1993.

Q: Was Mandela president?

WINGERT: Nelson Mandela was elected president in 1994. A second project activity I worked on was the Mission's administration of justice project with the South African Ministry of Justice. The project started in 1995, with the direct support of President Mandela. It was trying to do a lot of good things but wasn't being implemented very quickly. It became clear that the project was designed on the assumption that South Africa had a world class justice system that was only serving the interests of the 7% of the population who were white. The problem was, how do you expand this world class system so that it served everybody in the country? That was the challenge the administration of justice project targeted. There were issues in how both the USAID Mission and the Ministry of Justice were trying to implement the project.

My task was to facilitate getting the project moving. USAID worldwide was going through a process to redesign all its systems, the way that the agency worked, and in the process, it basically had done away with the role of a project manager. The projects were being run by committees, where nobody was specifically responsible. The idea was, "We're all going to work together and be harmonious", but with no one in charge with defined authority, nothing was really happening. So, I basically got the Mission to recreate the role of the project manager. I drafted a Mission Order delegating to the FSN [Foreign Service National] who up until then was nominally in charge of the project, the specific authorities for what he could approve and what he had to refer back to a committee.

Within the Ministry of Justice, an Afrikaner, a white South African, had continued to be the leading civil servant within the Ministry. Mandela, contrary to what had happened in many other African countries, insisted that they would not fire the Afrikaners that had worked in the government and had previously repressed the blacks, because those people knew how to get things done. Mandela felt they had to keep them there, while the black Africans and the Asian Africans in South Africa learned enough of how the government works so they would be able to take over these authorities. He appointed ministers who, of course, were not Afrikaners, but they had to deal with these senior civil servants that were still in place. In the Ministry of Justice, the senior Afrikaner used his knowledge of the bureaucratic rules to impede change.

I proposed that the minister approve the creation of a council within the ministry that would make decisions, changing the existing rules if needed, and not have the Afrikaner making all the decisions. That worked, it got the project underway.

USAID South Africa contracted me again in 1999 to design a new criminal justice strengthening project. The mission's idea was that South Africa really has a world class cadre of justice sector experts and there was sufficient knowledge within South Africa about what needed to be done to strengthen the justice system. They didn't have to bring in outside experts on justice systems. They wanted to bring in somebody who knew how to take all the knowledge from the South Africans and put it in a document to meet USAID's requirements for project approval. And so that was my role. I had worked on justice sector issues when I was the USAID deputy director in Guatemala and director in Costa Rica. I knew a lot of the concepts and issues, but I was not in any way an expert on

the subject matter. But I was an expert in writing USAID documents. And since I'd had the experience with the justice sector in 1997 and knew many of the leaders, I was the logical candidate.

The man I had worked with who was Minister of Justice in 1997, was still the Minister when I arrived in 1999. He had been Nelson Mandela's personal lawyer and defended him when he was arrested and accused of terrorism, Mandela, of course, lost that trial and was sent to Robben Island for 27 years. I made four trips to South Africa in 1999. First to design what the whole process would be to produce this project design. And then to prepare a concept paper, and then to attend a session with key stakeholders in South Africa, to review the concept paper. And finally, to produce the final program design. I met everybody that was involved in the justice sector, the head of the Judges' University, a lot of leaders in civil society and in the government that were working on justice issues.

We learned that the South African justice system was not a world class system, that during apartheid, the judges were often local white community leaders or politicians who never studied law and didn't really know the laws. The prosecutors didn't know how to gather evidence and present a case that would meet the standards of a modern justice system. If a crime was committed, the police would find a likely suspect and get a confession, often by mistreating that person, The police would then take the confession before a judge and the person would be sentenced. It really was not a very good justice system.

One person I met, and was incredibly impressed with, was Boko Majiwane. She was the head of a new South African Government program to address sexual violence. About one in three South African women had been sexually assaulted, so it was a significant issue. Boko was very, very intelligent and also easy to get along with. She was so knowledgeable and had so many creative ideas of what needed to be done to address these issues. Everything from having courts where the person who had been violated did not have to sit in the same room with the person who had violated her, and with that person's family members. She would feel intimidated and at risk.

Instead, Boko created a system where the violated person would be sitting before a camera in a different building. In the courtroom, the violated person would be present via video and sound only. To be physically there would be too much for that person. Boko convinced me that USAID should fund her program, and I included it in the program design as one of the major things that USAID should fund. While I was not supposed to have a role in deciding what the project should consist of, because I was just to be a document writer, this is one place where I said, "This is something you guys really need to fund." And they did.

I returned to South Africa in 2011, when the South African government asked USAID to do an overall evaluation of its entire program in South Africa during the previous five years against the standards of the Paris Accord on USAID Effectiveness. I worked with another consultant, a man from Zimbabwe, contracted by the South African Government. I was happy to learn that the USAID assistance to the sexual violence justice program

was a great success. Boko Majiwane was still running the program, which had been visited by Hillary Clinton and other high officials from the US and other countries. I had breakfast with her one morning along with the other consultant. Boko remembered me and gave me an enormous bear hug, even though we had only met briefly 14 years earlier. It was really touching, she's a large woman that just enveloped me. A great memory.

Anyway, in 1999 my design of the USAID Criminal Justice Strengthening Project was approved. And the Mission director, Stacey Rhodes, said it was one of the best project designs he'd ever seen. I feel that wasn't because of the way I wrote the design; it was all of the great minds that went into producing it. It was really an exciting thing to participate in. And it was an example of how USAID projects can be designed relying on local actor input.

The final activity I'll talk about before going into the lessons learned from my 50 years working in international development was in Egypt. In February 2001, I was contracted to prepare a concept paper of what the mission could fund to create a legacy institution. When I was Mission director in Costa Rica, as I described in the previous interview session, I created the Costa Rica USA Foundation, as a legacy institution, to maintain a relationship between the Costa Rican and US Governments on development issues. It sought continuity of collaboration between the two countries. USAID Egypt wanted to create a similar institution at a time when they still had really very large annual budgets of assistance to Egypt. They wanted to endow it over several years, to create an organization to maintain the relationship between Egypt and the USA in some way after USAID did not have a program in Egypt. I'd never worked in Egypt and didn't know the country or the USAID program, so it was a challenging undertaking.

I did know about legacy institutions, and I was one of the few people in USAID that knew how to do dollar endowments. My instructions from the Mission were to interview everybody in the mission, collect all the ideas, and talk to USAID counterparts in the Egyptian Government, the private sector, and non-governmental community. Based on this information, I was to figure out what options might make sense and give the Mission three or four options to consider. I ended up recommending three options for the focus of an endowed legacy organization: 1) Provide graduate fellowships to US universities for Egyptians who showed excellent academic capacity and leadership skill, and a commitment to helping the citizens of Egypt; 2) Preserve Egyptian antiquities. Some of these archaeological treasures are suffering degradation, such as the Luxor temple dating back 3,400 years, which is being undercut by a rising water table due to the Aswan dam. Helping to conserve the antiquities seemed a worthwhile goal for a legacy US/Egyptian institution. 3) Support civil society organizations in Egypt. USAID was providing grants to these institutions, which were delivering health and education services and promoting citizen engagement. Strengthening the non-governmental sector was a long term goal in an autocratic society.

The USAID Mission director and the US Ambassador met with Egyptian President Mubarak to discuss creation of an endowed binational legacy institution, and they agreed on the option to create an endowed fund for graduate fellowships. I returned to Egypt in

October 2001 to develop a detailed proposal for creation of the legacy institution and specify how the endowment would be managed, the selection criteria for who could get the fellowships, emphasizing having them provided to outstanding candidates not just become from the elite Cairo University, attended by the Egyptian upper class but also from smaller universities, in smaller cities in Egypt. We proposed that the fellowship would include a remedial program to help less advantaged young leaders succeed in a graduate program in the US. I also developed a detailed financial plan, including the number of fellowships to be granted each year. At this point, I was fleshing out the concept.

President Mubarak's support overcame initial petty objections from people in the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Assistance which was USAID's direct institutional counterpart. The Mission approved my concept paper and asked me to return in March 2022 to prepare the formal USAID Activity Approval Document that would formally approve the new project. I recruited a woman I knew, the wife of a USAID officer I had worked with in Bolivia in the late 1970s. She had accompanied her husband when he was assigned to the USAID missions in Nepal and Indonesia, and she managed the Fulbright scholarship programs in both of those countries. She knew all about fellowship type programs. She examined the technical issues of how you provide and manage fellowships, and I looked at the financing, the structure of the organization, roles of the US and Egyptian Governments in appointing the binational Board of Trustees and the operational Board of Directors. And I drafted the Activity Approval Document, which the Mission then formally approved.

However, there was a problem. President Mubarak was scheduled to travel to Washington, DC, and USAID, the State Department, and the White House planned that this agreement for this new initiative would be signed between Mubarak and President Bush during his visit to Washington. Then suddenly somebody in the State Department realized that nobody had talked to anybody in Congress about this idea. So belatedly, officials from USAID and State went to the Hill and briefed the staffers on the relevant committees about the initiative and the plan to sign it while Mubarak was in Washington.

Then all hell broke loose. Congress was not willing to set up an endowed organization in Egypt, that would be running a program over which Congress would have any role in providing annual review and approval. Basically, they just didn't trust Egypt that much. They felt that they had to be able to control the provision of assistance in Egypt every year, they opposed the idea of having a legacy institution. Not only that, they then withdrew the legislative authority that USAID had to create dollar denominated endowments, and took away that whole authority.

Anyway, those were the four major things that I did, in El Salvador, Guatemala, South African, and Egypt, that I thought would be useful examples of how a consultant can collaborate with a mission. So now I will take a few minutes remaining to talk about lessons I learned during my fifty years working in international development.

Lessons learned

Q: I wonder if you could reflect on what you saw, as the differences in your role, the pros and cons of being a consultant versus a direct hire; whether you were listened to or not, how your feedback was seen by USAID [United States Agency for International Development], even if it wasn't positive

WINGERT: There are some obvious differences. USAID officers are at the post for an extended time, have authorities, and decision making capabilities. A consultant doesn't have those things. And they are expected to do an awful lot in a short time, which is sometimes difficult to achieve; I was almost always able to do so. But the other part of it is, after I produced a document, I often never knew what became of my product after I departed. There was also a psychological aspect. When you're a USAID officer leaving that post, there's all sorts of parties and people saying thank you, and goodbye. As a consultant, I would turn in my report and have a debriefing session, where I'd explain my ideas and why I recommended what I did. People generally would nod their heads, raise a few questions, then say thanks. They'd go back to their desks and get on their computers, and I'd pack my little briefcase or backpack, and walk out. As a consultant working within a Mission, I would identify with it and say, "I think we should do this or that," psychologically identifying myself with the Mission. But the reality obviously was that I wasn't part of the Mission, just a hired hand. It took time to get used to that.

I had an assignment in Bulgaria, which was fairly soon after I retired. The Mission was in a building stretched over three different floors, and there was no elevator. The restroom was on the floor below the one I was working on. But I couldn't just go down to that floor. I would have to get some USAID officer to accompany me down. They'd stand outside the bathroom door while I went in and then escort me back up. This was shortly after I was a Senior Foreign Service officer and had a top secret security clearance. This change in my status was kind of mind boggling to me. Contrary to that was when I was in El Salvador and had a group of six consultants working on the assignment. When we first got there, our USAID contact escorted us to the regional security officer, had our photos taken and gave us all building passes. They gave us the building passes as if we were all Foreign Service officers. Any of us could have gotten into the Embassy in El Salvador on a weekend and got into the Ambassador's office, including a citizen of El Salvador who was on our team. Anyway, missions treat you differently.

Q: You describe it all very well; the intense work and then suddenly you don't know what's happening. I would add to what you said, two of my own observations in some of the same countries that you were in.

One was that, at times as a consultant, I would be listened to more because I was coming in as an expert than if I had said it, as a Direct Hire. I don't know if you ever ran into this, I would always give feedback to USAID about what they could do better whether or not this was included in the scope of work. And sometimes it was accepted and sometimes it was no, "you're not allowed to comment on us". I don't know if you ran into those situations.

WINGERT: Not directly. I knew the limits of my authority. I probably did more project designs than evaluations. The work in El Salvador was the biggest evaluation that I did. I did a few others, but not as large. In terms of your comment about when you would make a comment and that you are the expert, and therefore people would listen to you, when I was a mission director, one of the things that struck me was that, earlier in my career, if I proposed something, I made a statement, I had to be prepared to justify it and argue why it was the right approach. But as the mission director I'd comment, "I think maybe we ought to do this," everybody would just kind of nod and go in that direction. God has spoken. You really had to work to try to create an environment where people would question what you were saying.

But anyway, let's go back to my list of lessons learned.

One of the issues I feel that USAID has is that the project and strategy time horizon is far too short. The ubiquitous five year strategy and project horizon. Working to create a viable host government or host country civil society organization takes a long time to become successful. There was a short period when Peter MacPherson was the administrator of USAID, it only lasted about a year and a half or so, where missions were allowed to propose and fund ten year projects. When I created the private Agricultural Research Foundation in Honduras, it was during that window. We were able to have a ten year project to take a beautiful, well-staffed laboratory, which had been owned by the United Fruit Company, and create a management and governing structure of a board of directors for a non-governmental organization. It then became a viable institution that is alive and strong today. But you can't do that in just a short period of time. You have to take time to do this, the institution takes a lot of time and training. To be clear, I believe that USAID's greatest task is to help create viable institutions in the countries where it works that are capable of advancing the country's development after USAID's role has ended.

I think another USAID problem is its approach to how host government policies can be changed. For example, in Guatemala, USAID agreed to provide $50 million to the Government of Guatemala, if the Guatemalan Congress passed laws increasing the tax rate for the wealthy. And the Congress in Guatemala passed that, and we dispersed the $50 million. Basically, nothing happened, they found ways around it. In Honduras, USAID provided a lot of ESF funds to support macroeconomic stability, but never got it to change to a market determined exchange rate. That hurt our efforts to develop Honduras' export sector. At the time I got the idea that you can rent a policy change, but you can't buy it. To really change policies, you have to send promising host country people to really good universities in the U.S. or in the region, so that they're able to understand the issues and then develop the political will in the country to actually enact those new policies and keep them there.

It's not a matter of just telling the country, you've got to do this, or we're not giving you a bunch of money, because they'll find a way around it. You have to invest in people and the development of organizations in developing countries. It's a long payoff, but it's a

much better payoff than you can get through short term initiatives. Unfortunately, USAID for the last several decades has been focused basically on short term impact. And that reduces the kind of scale of a program. Its monitoring and evaluation system focuses on short term achievements, but not on profound achievements.

There's a new book by John Morris that describes the history of USAID. And he argues that, when USAID was first created, the emphasis was on structural change in the developing countries. And he bemoans the fact that USAID eventually gave up on that. And it's, it's true. Many countries are focused on very specific changes, but not ones that could really transform the whole country. And so that's another thing that bothers me about what USAID has been doing.

Q: Can I ask about that? I agree with you. To what extent is that intrinsic to USAID or influenced by the exigencies of our funds from Congress and the political side?

WINGERT: First, I want to comment that Samantha Power, the Administrator of USAID now, really wants to reverse a lot of this and focus on localization and developing local partners, and investing on building their capacity, which I think is a welcome new approach for the Agency. I've been looking at this very closely as part of the USAID Alumni Association. I'm a member of the Committee planning our October Annual General Meeting, where we have a couple of sessions that are going to focus on this new initiative.

I think a lot of the pressures over this period came from Congress, but they were also internal to the different administrations. Even Kennedy, who was the one who was pushing a focus on structural change in developing countries, including pushing for land reform in Latin America, and getting the military dictatorships to adopt more democratic norms. But the fight against communism dominated foreign policy thinking throughout the '60s and later. Kennedy compromised and in effect gave up on pursuing structural change, because that might unsettle countries to the point that they might go communist, and of course the ones pushing for land reform tended to be on the left. So, I think the internal dynamics of the US foreign policy community favored risk avoidance, accepting military governments in order to avoid revolutions. Norris documents this well in his book.

In some countries, USAID doesn't have real expectations of success. The officers there are content in doing some good, but they realize that the development of the country is something they can't control. And yet, for humanitarian reasons, we keep the USAID program in those countries, because at least we're doing some good for some people. Early on, when I became head of the agricultural development office in Honduras, I suddenly felt this enormous weight fall on my shoulder. I felt I was responsible for the success of the Honduran agricultural sector and in solving poverty in the rural sector of Honduras. And over the years I was in Honduras, and then continuing later, I realized that I and the rest of the USAID mission could not be solely responsible for development in Honduras. That was the responsibility of the Honduran government, Hondurans were responsible for it. We could contribute good ideas and help build institutions that would

further the capacity of Honduras to achieve its goals. But we couldn't achieve them ourselves. And that was a lesson.

Q: During your time, were you involved in the design, implementation, or evaluation of any projects that were funded by or had joint funding from the Gates Foundation?

WINGERT: I think the only time I had that type of experience was as a consultant in Mozambique, where the mission was pursuing some collaboration with the Gates Foundation to pursue agricultural development activities. I met a few times with the Gates people. The project I was working on was related to the same objectives that the USAID mission was pursuing with Gates. So, I had some involvement in those discussions.

Q: Steve, this has been an incredible journey, both substantively and also since I followed you or was with you in a number of places and was able to go back and have those memories. What an incredible career and what valuable information to provide for somebody who was involved in development for so many years!

So thank you very, very much. This has truly been a pleasure and an honor, and a great contribution to the ADST Oral History collection.

End of interview