

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

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## **Patience and Perseverance** By Goli Ameri

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## Patience and Perseverance

What it takes to make change in the U.S. State Department **BY GOLJI AMERI**

AS A FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT, I've always said that it's difficult to know Americans and not fall in love with them. I know this from personal experience. On my first day at Stanford University in September 1974, my freshman roommate gave her only blanket to a lost, drenched, and freezing foreign student. I still hold a very special place in my heart for her.

Fast-forward almost 30 years, and my job as U.S. assistant secretary of state at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) was to bring about many happy introductions between Americans and people from all over the world. Through its prestigious Fulbright scholarships and other programs, ECA has facilitated training and exchanges for more than 300 current or former heads of state, 1,500 cabinet-level ministers, 50 Nobel laureates, and 1 million other community leaders. Although ECA's annual budget of \$520 million seems sizable, it turns into a trickle when divvied up between 165 countries. I decided to stretch our dollars by forming partnerships with the many private corporations that could potentially benefit from ECA's programs.

I thought my strategy was logical. But I quickly learned that just because something is logical doesn't mean that a government bureaucracy will move forward with it. Instead, launching this public-private partnerships initiative at the U.S. Department of State required the patience of Job, the ingenuity of Thomas Edison, the perseverance of Mahatma Gandhi, and the drive of Henry Ford. But over time, I learned that the way to get things done in government was to ease the minds of risk-averse people, build alliances, and encourage participation with incentives and gentle promotion.

### THE SLOW ROLL

To my knowledge, no one seeks employment at ECA because he or she wants a government job. Instead, people flock to the bureau because they want to have an impact around the world. They soon learn, however, that the State Department has a low tolerance for risk. This caution is not without cause: Government cannot afford to make mistakes, and no one wants to see his or her name in the newspaper the next day. After a few years on the job, State Department staff members learn that it's best to fly under the radar and not champion untested initiatives.

Meanwhile, political appointees like me blow in with all sorts of flashy ideas.

**GOLJI AMERI** was the U.S. assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs in the George W. Bush administration. A native of Iran, she is a former U.S. representative to the United Nations and recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor.



But after we leave—either midterm or with the change of an administration—the civil servants and Foreign Service officers have to hold down the fort and continue the non-sexy work of the government. And so the solution for some is to “slow-roll” political appointees: They salute us in our presence but sit on our requests, hoping that we will forget about them or get tired of waiting.

This pattern played out for my seemingly straightforward wish: Get the U.S. government to collaborate with the private sector legally and properly. When I first arrived in my position, I had a hard time getting a clear answer about how to execute my idea. Instead, I got an earful of a new, nebulous language I called “governmentese.” Answers were often in the form of circular arguments peppered with “it depends” and “on the other hand.” A task as simple as creating marketing materials for the program

required the slow, laborious, and often begrudging drafting and approval of multiple offices.

Once I figured out how to go about building more public-private partnerships, I spent a lot of time reassuring the skeptical. For example, I soon realized that to smooth the path for more of these partnerships, I needed to change processes so that private sector funds would flow directly to NGOs rather than through the State Department. But to make this change, my team had to secure the full-time attention of several departments to transform many time-consuming, one-off, country-specific practices into a standardized procedure that would work anywhere. We then had to conduct dozens of individual and group meetings to convince staff that this change would not make more work for them, but instead would help their beloved programs.

Then we had to reach out to all the field offices, many of which were loath to take the plunge into novelty. For example, a Fortune 500 company was keen to set up a partnership in the Philippines to teach English to under-served children. But the Foreign Service officer on the ground dragged her feet because she did not understand the value of the partnership and feared that it would create more work. To get her and other Foreign Service officers on board, we developed a toolkit of Washington, D.C.-vetted policies and procedures for working with the private sector. I later promoted these practices and public-private partnerships on every foreign trip and at regional meetings of Foreign Service officers in Washington, D.C.

Despite these efforts, the agreement in the Philippines almost fell apart because the president of the company's overseas division told me point-blank that his company did not have the time or the patience to work with government. We had to handhold on both sides to convince both parties that collaboration was worth their while. In the end, thanks to the perseverance of a handful of staff and the company's country representative, a group of dynamic and disadvantaged young girls got the opportunity for a better education.

### THE RIGHT REWARDS

To encourage people to try public-private partnerships, we instituted a reward system. Every year, we would recognize one embassy that had demonstrated outstanding achievement in creating partnerships with the private sector. The first recipient was the U.S. Embassy in India, which had joined forces with Intel Corp. to create a dynamic teacher-training program with the potential to scale globally. The embassy was also instrumental in bringing in Infosys Technologies Ltd., the Indian information technology company, as an ECA partner to explore options to develop a free online English-language learning tool. (It took ECA more than a month just to establish the legality of working with a foreign-owned company.)

One of the obstacles to public-private partnerships is that the U.S. government is so large that often the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and turf battles can become debilitating.

In retrospect, for instance, we could have learned much from the U.S. Agency for International Development and its challenges in establishing the Global Development Alliance public-private partnership program. But staff turnover and reluctance to share information held us back. (For more about this program, see "Public-Private Alliances Transform Aid" in the fall 2009 *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.)

In contrast, although we were eager to share how ECA had attracted half a dozen corporate partners in only six months, others were not as eager to hear our story. For example, in May 2009 (a year after the launch of ECA's public-private initiative), the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) report on public diplomacy stated: "In 2003 and 2005, we recommended the secretary of state develop a strategy to engage with the private sector. ... These efforts have not yielded significant results." By the end of my tenure in late January 2009, the GAO still had not approached ECA for any information or reviewed the scope of its activities.

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Many of the obstacles that the government faces in reaching out to new partners are legitimate. Entrepreneurs can be entrepreneurial because they don't have to respond to lots of bosses. Government, in contrast, must answer to a cacophony of public interests. For instance, in exploring the possibility of developing the online English-language training initiative, I approached multiple high-tech companies, including Google Inc., to bring them in as partners. Some refused, and many required time to review. But Google accepted a first and then a second meeting.

The project was time-consuming and expensive, so boosting reputation or meeting a social responsibility objective was probably not going to be enough incentive for Google to join. So I conferred with our legal office to see if we could offer Google ad space next to the English lesson plans. This time the response was not in governmentese, but in plain English: "The State Department cannot promote one company over another." Even though at the time no other company had raised its hand, the government could not give the impression that it was playing favorites. By the time I left office, it had become very clear to me that some aspects of U.S. public diplomacy are best done by an independent organization, not weighed down by all the restrictions of government.

The good news is that the State Department finally has a strong centralized office of private sector outreach, headed by a senior political appointee who can give these partnerships the attention they deserve. And I'm glad that she has a strong foundation to build on. For people considering partnerships with the government and particularly the State Department, I above all suggest applying perseverance and patience, as the results are worthwhile. The convening power of the U.S. government is tremendous, its global reach is vast, and its funds complementary to private sector initiatives. ■