

CONVERSATION WITH CLARE ROMANIK, USAID

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Clare Romanik is the Lead Ocean Plastics and Urban Advisor for the United States



Agency for International Development (USAID). She received her MPA in economics and public policy at Princeton University and, over her career, has worked in 35 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

In her role as the Lead Ocean Plastics and Urban Advisor for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Romanik has been the architect of USAID programming to address ocean plastic pollution, including the design of USAID's global program, Clean Cities, Blue Ocean, that works with 25 cities in 10 countries to create an inclusive circular economy under the Save Our Seas Initiative.¹ Romanik contributes to broader United States Government policy formulation and negotiations and has formed strategic partnerships with the private sector, including a \$35 million blended finance partnership with Circulate Capital to increase private

¹The Save Our Seas Initiative is USAID's new flagship initiative to combat ocean plastic pollution globally. Designed to support implementation of the Save Our Seas Act 2.0 of 2020, the Save our Seas Initiative will include \$62.5 million in initial funding and will launch 14 new country and regional programs in key geographies that represent 40% of total global mismanaged plastic waste.

sector investment in waste management and recycling.

USAID's Clean Cities, Blue Ocean program was designed to take a holistic approach to addressing ocean plastic pollution—acknowledging that there is no single solution to prevent environmental leakage. Instead of just delivering solid waste management (SWM) technical advice, the program also aims to strengthen local governance and capacity, promote social and behavior change for the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, and recycle), advance sectoral gender equality, and forge partnerships with the private sector and global associations. How did USAID come to develop the idea for this holistic program?

The history of Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO) partly comes from the agency's first focused program that addressed ocean plastic pollution: the Municipal Waste Recycling Program, or MWRP. CCBO builds off what MWRP was able to achieve and what we saw it wasn't designed to do, where we thought CCBO could do more. MWRP included a robust local grants component, and we saw firsthand how important it was to engage and work closely with local partners in the SWM sector. Local partners have the knowledge about the community and local connections that international development practitioners just don't have; they have the trust of the local community, especially with groups like informal waste collectors. CCBO brings together the best of local expertise with

technical experts from around the globe.

Personally, as USAID's project manager for the MWRP—I learned a lot about how important behavior change is in tackling the 3Rs. I was able to learn more about what was really needed for effective behavior change—which goes beyond superficial campaigns or short-term education. First, we need to gather context-specific data on people's existing awareness of the issue and their current practices. Then, we test new practices such as segregating waste or choosing single-use plastic alternatives—not in a vacuum, but alongside policy and infrastructure changes to see if they are feasible in the long term. As part of the CCBO design, we intentionally solicited a partner that had behavior change expertise in order to incorporate a more comprehensive, evidence-based approach into the program.

Another lesson that came from the MWRP was the importance of focusing on women's roles in SWM. Working closely with women grantees, MWRP clearly demonstrated gender should be a core element of any new program—not only for behavior change but in order to address fundamental economic structural change in SWM. To achieve that, you need to have waste workers on board and engaged in implementation. In many of the countries where we are working, women are integrally part of the entire recycling value chain and oftentimes are on the front lines of waste management. We learned this firsthand through our work in Vietnam under the

MWRP, where we had women-led NGOs as our partners that engaged and empowered women as community leaders and workers in the informal sector. It was clear that although women play a critical role in local SWM systems, they are often unrecognized and under-resourced. In terms of local governance and capacity, we knew that the MWRP was not designed to provide assistance to local governments—and it was such a gap, so we also wanted to make sure CCBO would bring in the specialized expertise to build local governance capacity.

We also recognized there was a lot of opportunity to partner with the private sector. The private sector realized they were part of the problem and needed to be part of the solution. Although if you are a company selling a consumer product, you may not have the expertise on SWM—you don't always know where to go for solutions. That's something USAID has focused on as a development agency: creating market-based solutions, using business models and incentives to solve development challenges more sustainably and at scale.

When we designed CCBO, I wasn't sure how much space we would have to work on policy issues. I tried to keep that open by emphasizing all of the 3Rs—reduce, reuse, recycle—which has been recognized for a long time as a guide to interventions. The “reduce” element alone is vitally important, and if we look at the waste hierarchy, it has enormous implications. It is also one of the most challenging “R's” to accomplish. How can we actually reduce waste generation? How can we reduce the use of materials like plastic that are nonrenewable—that do leak into the environment and cause so many problems? We've been in this

unsustainable production and consumption loop for decades now, and we need to change it. CCBO is very ambitious to try and change it—using a city-by-city approach. I think there is tremendous opportunity for the global community to be more creative in this space. USAID has also started convening thought leaders from civil society, the private sector, and local and national governments to identify how specific policy approaches, such as Extended Producer Responsibility, can be applied most effectively in low- and middle-income countries.

What do you see as the greatest contribution of CCBO to the 3R/SWM sector?

I think one of the greatest contributions is the intersection of approaches CCBO is employing in the SWM sector. I'm really happy that CCBO is not working in isolated areas—we've really tried to bring all of the elements together in one holistic approach that is tailored to different cities. CCBO isn't just giving grant funding to local organizations; they are really looking at systemic change—by mentoring grantees and enabling them to connect with city governments, which in turn impacts how city governments operate.

The benefits of this integrated model can be seen by several examples of tangible improvements in how cities are managing their waste and also the paradigm change of how to do it. First, there is a recognition of the benefits of long-term planning; also, the value of community engagement, where our grantees can also be of help; and finally, they are identifying reliable and diverse sources of funding.

I've been working with cities throughout my career, and they

are right to complain that they don't have enough authority to raise money or that they don't get enough support from national governments—but at the same time, within their manageable space, local governments should be able to make some improvements to address SWM. Through CCBO, we are showing local governments that if they take certain steps, it will be easier to access support from outside sources, including the private sector, national governments, and multinational development banks.

What has surprised you most about CCBO?

Women in Waste's Economic Empowerment (WWE), an activity under the CCBO program, empowers women to advance their roles in the SWM sector through business and personal empowerment, gender, and SWM training—and includes a business incubator program that offers mentorship and funding opportunities. The activity empowers women, supports green jobs, and expands waste services to underserved populations. What I had not thought of, until I attended a WWE training in the Philippines, was the connection between gender-based violence (GBV) and SWM. The Basic Business and Empowerment Skill Training, or BBEST, included the topic of GBV and, in effect, helped the women working in SWM to connect with each other and know that they are not alone. It was powerful to witness women having the chance to speak about their experiences for the first time—an important step to overcome their fears and change their lives. That wasn't designed into CCBO because I didn't have that insight; although, working closely with other gender colleagues and local organizations, we were

able to work GBV into the program. I think it really will not only improve the SWM sector but also transform so many women's lives.

We've also benefited women informal waste collectors through our grants program by finding solutions to increase worker safety, income, and living conditions for waste workers. For example, in the Philippines, CCBO grantee, Project Zacchaeus, co-designed and distributed uniforms, personal protective equipment, and new collection vehicles to local informal waste collectors, known as "Eco-Warriors," to minimize health and safety risks, and to increase collection volumes and incomes. One of the greatest gifts of this approach has been the radical reduction of social stigma that these women have long faced in their communities. By providing equipment and training—and through a participatory approach—women gained confidence and pride in their work.

Another opportunity that has emerged from the program is climate mitigation. While certainly waste production and climate change are interconnected, this relationship has really come to light under CCBO's work. Almost every opportunity we have to reduce ocean plastic pollution has related climate emission benefits.

What is the relation between ocean plastic pollution and climate change?

The way that we produce, dispose of, and manage waste—both plastics and organic—directly impacts our climate. It goes back to the unsustainable production and consumption loop that we are in. In recent decades, we've generated so much more waste, and so much of that is plastic that is not easily

recyclable. Most plastic is derived from fossil fuels—namely oil, gas, and coal. Currently, if the plastics life cycle was treated as a country, it would be the fourth largest greenhouse gas emitter—behind only China, the United States, and India. In terms of plastic's lifecycle, its production has the greatest climate impacts, but there are also end-of-life impacts of plastic being leaked into the environment or incinerated. Plastic waste needs to be tackled at so many different levels, especially in the context of climate change: from the capacity at the city level to manage waste streams, but also significant behavior change among the public to reduce consumption of single-use plastics.

The problem is incredibly challenging and beyond USAID's capacity to address plastic production from fossil fuels—but we can make a huge dent by reducing the demand for single-use plastic. There is a general consensus that plastic used in, for example, a car or a plane can have a positive climate impact by significantly decreasing the weight and improving efficiencies over the lifespan of the vehicle. However, with respect to single-use plastics, do we really need to be generating so much plastic that is only used for a minute and then thrown away? Changing that attitude for businesses and people around single-use plastics so we don't generate so much waste would really help.

Improving how we dispose of and manage organic waste also has significant climate linkages because methane is one of the most powerful greenhouse gases, with 25-34 times the global warming potential of CO₂. In fact, the waste sector accounts for 18% of global methane emissions. The United States, alongside 130 countries, has signed

the Global Methane Pledge, and improving waste management will be one of the main ways for developing countries to mitigate methane emissions. Although CCBO wasn't intentionally designed to mitigate methane emissions, we have found that much of our technical and capacity development measures also have a significant impact on methane mitigation efforts.

One example is our work in the Dominican Republic, where CCBO is providing technical assistance to the national government to remediate open dumpsites across the country. These dumpsites are known to contaminate waterways, pollute the air, and create dangerous combustion fires from the buildup of methane. Our support in remediating just two dumpsites in Samaná Province is estimated to have captured and destroyed more than 62 million pounds of CO₂e—roughly equivalent to the annual emissions of more than 3 million gallons of gasoline. With our support, the government installed an emissions control system to decrease, capture, and use methane as a clean energy source.

The flow of plastic into the ocean has seemed inexorable; realistically, what do you think can be done to stem the flow of plastic? What are the greatest challenges now and for the future?

As long as we keep using materials and disposing of them without thought, we will likely always have this problem. The more we throw out, the more chance for leakage into the environment. It is inexorable in that way. Although, if we can reduce the amount we are using, I think we will be able to manage it better—both at an individual and household level, but also from a systems, city level.

Right now, we are doing targeted measures under CCBO in identified hot spots. For example, when you think about areas with large concentrations of people—either recreating or living—are there proper trash receptacles that are close by and convenient? Are they getting emptied often enough? Right here in Washington, D.C., I see it every weekend on the National Mall, with many of the garbage cans overflowing and not being emptied frequently enough to accommodate the crowds. There are more policy choices that governments can take given that certain items, like plastic bags or styrofoam, are more likely to escape in the environment and waterways. For example, Washington, D.C. decided to ban expanded styrofoam food take-out containers because that is something that easily escapes into the environment, which was

based on evidence on what was floating in the Anacostia River.

Another example in Washington, D.C., and something we are also employing in CCBO, is educating the people who live around the waterways. Many people, because of certain socioeconomic conditions, have other day-to-day challenges and are dealing with economic survival—they may not realize or have time to think about the natural environment and what it can do for them. Bringing people closer to the environment, to appreciate what nature has to offer, is a way to bring awareness and change that perspective. Our grantees are doing this too—talking with the local community and working with them so they want to be protectors of the waterways and natural environment. CCBO has purposefully been very inclusive in our approach, including different groups like women and

youth, but also people with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

One of the greatest challenges of our time is addressing the climate crisis—and there is a clear connection between plastics and climate change. Anticipated growth in plastic production and waste—particularly in low- and middle-income countries—far outpaces efforts and commitments to mitigate plastic pollution. Plastic packaging use alone is expected to quadruple by 2050, and emissions from plastic could account for 10-13% of the entire remaining carbon budget set to avoid overshooting the 1.5°C target. CCBO contributes to USAID's Climate Strategy and similarly takes a holistic, systems-wide approach to reduce the amount of plastic entering our oceans. I think CCBO is ambitious in its plans, and I'm proud of what we've accomplished so far, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. ■

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