

Cascadia Leverages Seattle Climate Work Internationally

Q&A with Nora Ferm, Director of Climate Planning Programs, Cascadia Consulting Group

Cascadia Consulting Group is a 50-person environmental consulting company with a growing climate change practice domestically and internationally. The women-owned, Seattle-based firm states in its company brochure that it has produced average annual revenues of \$6.5 million over the last four years, with contracts ranging in value from \$15,000 to \$1.8 million, according to its SOQ.

Cascadia was a subcontractor to Engility on USAID's four-year Climate Change Resilient Development (CCRD) project, which provided guidance, technical assistance and capacity building to three regional USAID bureaus and eight missions, as well as national and local governments and communities. The project, which wrapped up last year, operated in 33 developing countries to integrate climate change concerns into development policy, planning and implementation. CCBJ spoke with Nora Ferm, Cascadia's director of climate planning programs.

Prior to joining Cascadia in 2014, Ferm was a climate adaptation specialist at USAID, managing grants and contracts focused on urban resilience and agricultural weather index insurance.

CCBJ: What's the history of Cascadia's work in climate change and international development?

Ferm: Cascadia has been in the sustainability and resource conservation busi-

ness since 1993. We began growing our domestic climate practice, focused in the Pacific Northwest, in the mid-2000s with carbon footprint tools and climate mitigation plans, and we later added vulnerability assessments and adaptation plans.

When we started working on CCRD, Cascadia had developed a climate impacts decision-support tool for the city of Seattle. It's designed for use by planners and project developers, to help them evaluate how project designs or land use plans may need to be changed to accommodate the changing climate. For a bridge, for example, there could be different decisions about materials given the future temperatures and other stresses that might be put on the structure.

USAID was interested in seeing how that tool could be adapted and applied in a developing country context. USAID requires that adaptation programs be based on vulnerability assessments, but a lot of times those are long documents that just sit on the shelf. The agency's staff saw our tool as a way to turn those assessments into living documents that can be applied for long-term decision-making and to continue to be useful over time as data changes.

CCBJ: Your tool was first used in Vietnam. Can you describe that project?

Ferm: In Vietnam we worked with urban planners at the Vietnam Institute for Urban and Rural Planning (VIUP) who were looking at zoning and planning decisions particularly in areas on the coast that are urbanizing quickly. That's when you have a window of opportunity to think about how you want to develop given the changes in sea level and climate.

We started in Hue, building on a recent vulnerability assessment done by the

Institute for Social and Environmental Transition-International (ISET) through another USAID project. As we've done elsewhere, we built into the tool a custom set of recommendations for that region that had been pre-vetted by stakeholders and the relevant authorities. After testing in Hue, we developed a version of the tool that could be broadly applied across Vietnam's 63 provinces.

It's important that the local urban planners using the tool know that the tailored recommendations that it presented were things that the authorities were comfortable with. Staff at the Hue Planning Institute who applied the tool integrated several new resilience features into their plans, including softer infrastructure along coastlines, conservation of natural floodplain areas for flood storage services, and introduction of more saline-tolerant agriculture.

CCBJ: Aside from urban planners, who are the users of this tool?

Ferm: This is an Excel-based tool that works with existing systems; we intended to use a platform that would be readily useable in a developing country context, and not rely on consistent Internet connectivity. It takes all the information available in climate change projections, vulnerability assessments and spatial data for the geography in question, compiles it in one place and filters the information depending on the kinds of decisions the user is trying to make.

Depending on the kinds of decisions the user is trying to make—including the sector and location-- the tool only shows the time frames of interest to them, producing a couple of pages of information about anticipated climate impacts and recommended adaptation measures.

CCBJ: What percentage of your firm's work is international and how do you see that evolving in the future, especially in light of the Paris Agreement?

Ferm: Our climate work is about 75% domestic, 25% international. In addition to Vietnam, we've recently done climate work in Peru and Jamaica.

As a small business, we have the ability to be nimble and responsive without the restrictions of a large government agency or large firm that would constrain what we can and can't go after. Our subcontract for the CCRD project was probably too small for some larger firms, but for a small business, it was meaningful.

Given Cascadia's size, however, on large USAID projects we are in most cases going to be a subcontractor, not a prime. We're often called and asked to be on teams for USAID proposals as a subcontractor.

In addition to USAID, I tend to focus on RFPs from UNDP, but in terms of our relations with larger firms, I've realized that a lot of them have separate departments to focus on different clients, such as USAID, Germany's GIZ, the UK's DFID or UNDP. At large consulting firms, it seems that the staff going after USAID projects are not the same people tracking and going after GIZ and UNDP projects.

Regarding the Paris Agreement, for our domestic work, we were already seeing more local and state governments in the Pacific Northwest being proactive and thinking about adapting to climate change. We expect that will continue. But given that the Pacific Northwest is a leader on adaptation already, the momentum from Paris might give organizations from here more opportunity to collaborate with regions that are starting to be more active.

Internationally, COP-21 is likely to have a much bigger impact with increased

momentum and funding, including the \$800 million financial commitment for adaptation for vulnerable countries that Secretary Kerry announced in December.

CCBJ: In addition to the prime, Engility, the CCRD team also included ICF, the International Research Institute for Climate and Society (IRI) at Columbia University and Stratus. Are you teaming with any of those firms for other USAID work?

Ferm: We have teamed with large firms on other proposals, but those are all covered by NDAs.

CCBJ: Without spilling too much proprietary information, what can you tell us about your business development activities for international climate projects?

Ferm: I definitely keep an eye on the Devex listserv. That has a lot of international development RFP opportunities. For our firm, there's a big difference in the timeline and process for going after domestic projects vs. international ones.

When I first started at Cascadia, I saw RFPs and reached out to potential primes to see if we could team. What I quickly learned is that the way these firms develop intel and do their capture work, they put

together teams a year before the RFP comes out. A small business like ours can't just wait for the RFP and get on it. It's important to develop these relationships with primes so they think of us when they're doing their planning.

We're going through a certification process now to be become a certified women-owned business. I'm curious to see what difference that makes. It's supposed to be helpful, but I think a lot of RFPs that come out don't necessarily award any extra points for this. Unless it's in the evaluation criteria, that's not necessarily going to further motivate large firms to team with us. That's a decision that's made individually for every contracting process. ⚙️

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