



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 16: AMALHIN SHEK – ADVOCACY AS A PROFESSIONAL ENDEAVOR

Amalhin Shek

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Phil Wagner

Hello, from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome listeners again to another episode of Diversity Goes to Work, the podcast where we center real, human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity, equity, and inclusion work. I'm joined today by an alum of the College, somebody who's doing diversity, equity, and inclusion work in a different way than what you might suspect. Amalhin Shek has spent the last eight years working for U.S. aid in a variety of different capacities, working on everything from COVID-19 response to Malaria response in Latin America and the Caribbean, which is her current role. She was a student at William & Mary, and she got her B.S. in public health here. Along with an MPH at George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health. She brings an impressive background in research, in planning, in strategy. Amelia, welcome to our podcast and thank you for joining us.

Amalhin Shek

Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Phil Wagner

So my first question is probably a little bit simplistic to you, but you bring such impressive experience. Can you break down for us a little bit more of who you are and the work you do day-to-day?

Amalhin Shek

Yes, absolutely. So I finished up at college with a degree in public health. I really dove into that by virtue of being a member of SOMOS, a Student Organization for Medical Outreach and Sustainability, where I had the opportunity of traveling to the Dominican Republic at least once or twice a year and really getting a sense for what fieldwork in the global health field

actually entailed. That led me to decide maybe I don't want to stay on the pre-med route, maybe I don't want to be domestic and do just the clinical work, and drove me really in the direction of global health programming, design, and management, which is where I am now. And so I will caveat that I am here in my own capacity as an alumna of the College, and any of the opinions or views that I express are my own and not necessarily those of USA. So that brings me to where I am now, which is currently where I serve as a Malaria advisor for Latin America and the Caribbean at the U.S. Agency for International Development. And so, in my current role, I work with a range of our implementing partners, foundations, other U.S. government agencies, including the CDC, truly design and implement activities that are aimed at controlling and eliminating malaria in the Americas. As a member of our Bureau health team, I also backstop our South America regional health programs with a primary focus on our work in Bolivia and Venezuela. And so we are a tiny team. So as an umbrella over each of our scopes is really the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before moving into this role, I worked on our Emerging Pandemic Threats program, where we were implementing the president's global health security agenda and our Bureau for Global Health and doing everything from Ebola, Yellow Fever, and obviously, most recently, COVID response to also really instilling a sense of a one health, a planetary approach to emerging stenotic disease prevention, detection, and response.

Phil Wagner

Just such an impressive background, and Amalhin, I know that you bring experience in research and in policy. I mean, you worked in research here at William & Mary. That was one of your professional roles. I'm curious what drove you to do this work? You know, today, we're thinking about casting a much wider net on what diversity, equity, and inclusion work looks like. And of course, of course, this isn't you being a D&I officer, but what you do certainly has an inclusion-focused, that planetary approach. I'm wondering if you can speak to what drives you to do this work.

Amalhin Shek

Yeah. So I could say; personally, I'm the child of two professionals who, in their roles in the U.S., were primarily educators, but also my dad worked in the health field as a clinical psychologist for a public school system. My mom's first career was an optometrist. I think that both education and health are kind of just in my blood. As a child of immigrants, however, though, I also just have this desire to learn, meet, understand, and interact with as many different cultures and backgrounds as possible. And just by virtue of the experiences I've had in traveling in my William & Mary experience, meeting so many peers from just all over the world and really learning about just the diversity of backgrounds, not just ethnic and cultural, but also in terms of just lived experiences, I would say a lot of that just kind of drove that desire to make sure that in my career I could work globally, and I could address the moments in situations where I saw issues of inequity and where I could really say what I felt needed to be said about social injustices. And by virtue of having this interest in health and a science background at the College, have been able to more or less combine those two interests when it comes to designing our programs and really working with the array of implementing partners,

but also multilateral agencies and donors that are, in essence, trying to collaborate to solve a lot of these big challenges in global health.

Phil Wagner

You set up perfectly for where we're going next. You've been on sort of the front lines of some strategy and planning on really important global health initiatives. Of course, we're talking about COVID-19, but also malaria, other global health crises that have fleshed out. I'm wondering in that capacity, science background, research background, policy background. But what have you learned about diversity, equity, and inclusion in your work?

Amalhin Shek

Yeah. So one of the biggest pieces and something that I would say all international development and donor agencies are still grappling with and will continue to grapple with for at least a little bit longer is that solutions cannot be made and designed in our little Ivory towers of the agency and headquarters. The solutions have to be local because, at the end of the day, problems, yes, are local, but they do not respect boundaries. They're generally regional in nature. And so you need to one learn from the local experts, learn from the lived experiences of the communities that you're serving, and making sure that you have that multitude of voices at the table so that you can both learn from colleagues from across different regions, but also help promote, again, that trans boundary. I don't want to call it south to south, which is what we say generally, but country to country and partner to partner collaboration, teaching, and learning. One big example of this from my partner portfolio, the president's initiative, is that recently a group of African scientists wrote an open letter to PMI, essentially calling us out on an approach to just the way that a program was designed in a manner that it did not really tap into the voices of local leaders, local experts. And the response was one of acknowledgment, one of humility, and one of ensuring that we moving forward, can create those equitable and dignified partnerships and really making sure that we really tap into the ideas of those who share these lived experiences of the communities that are most affected by the diseases that will strengthen all of our collective work.

Phil Wagner

This is so good because it speaks to so many of the themes that we've explored with our other guests. I love how you talk about the Ivory tower solution, and I think so much of D&I work, even in sort of the Western organizational frame, follows that approach. Right. A bunch of academics or consultants got together, pull up a plan or a blueprint, make an acronym, send it out as the package to be adopted. But this is contextual. And certainly, on the global framework, there's context, there's humility. There are so many great themes on the list. I appreciate you really speaking to those as well. And to that point, I think so much of our D&I work specifically is really Western-centric. And I think I'm guilty of that even on this podcast or sometimes even in the way that I teach because we work with so many students here in Williamsburg. We're going to go out to typically organizations in North America. But your work has taken you global. What I love about our programs here is there's a strong global footprint. I'm wondering from your perspective what that global picture of inclusion tells us

about the modern landscape of diversity and inclusion work. Can you speak to the global clarification that might come from your work?

Amalhin Shek

Yeah, I would say kind of following this theme of really decolonizing development and global health. And just again, that Western approach to our problem solving, it does have to be grounded in a bit of self-reflection and introspection in terms of our role in problem creation. And so one piece of it really is taking that step back and thinking about the power dynamics when we're thinking about the development of the solutions, considering who the experts are and how we view that, but then also really becoming aware of our biases, admitting them and making sure that we are inviting the local experts who for generations in most places have been the ones doing the biodiversity conservation work, have been working on matters of land rights and really protecting their environments. But I think the other piece of it is making sure that in our own Western coordination of the work, making sure that we are inclusive, that we're flexible of the different lived experiences, the different types of degrees that people come with, and making sure that we're not limiting these dialogues to just the folks with the Ph.D. or the bench research experience, and that we are including folks from all countries of origin, from all walks of life and levels of experience. It doesn't just have to be the person with the multiple titles, multiple degrees. You can learn as much from somebody who has been a community organizer as you can obviously from somebody who has been in the research mix for a long time. And I think really, at the end of the day, we do have to consider who it is that's in control of the design of implementation and who's getting credit and take into account that this Western-centric approach won't work everywhere. It's not the most sustainable approach either. And really, ultimately, what we need is that community-based understanding of the power dynamics. And it's not just at the international level. It's really sub-national levels, even just the household levels in our work. We have to consider that sexism, racism, classism, the just caste systems playing out differently across different regions of the world has to be considered. And again, really, at the end of the day, acknowledging our own role as the Western world in all of this and really reconciling with the fact that many of the inequities we see, for example, right now in my current role, a lot of the inequities we see across Latin America and the Caribbean are rooted in colonialism and both in that original Spanish conquistadores but also recent interventionism. We do have to kind of consider what are the ramifications of these efforts and how we move forward from that, and again, are humble in admitting and reconcile and improve our work moving forward.

Phil Wagner

I'd think that you speak to so many things, again, that many of our past guests have spoken to as well, particularly as it relates to taking up space or dominating space in this conversation. These problems are complex, multifaceted, and span the entire globe. So there's room for everybody. But it's about being mindful of role and power and space and voice. It's really powerful, Amalhin. Part of our goal in this episode, as I mentioned to you, is to really cast a wider net on what it means to do D&I work. I teach a lot of students at the College, but I teach a lot of graduate students across almost all of our graduate programs. And I'm seeing a

real hunger, a professional hunger, to do diversity and inclusion work. These are deeply held convictions that students have. And so, I think your work is a great sort of snapshot as to where inclusion passions can drive you towards professional endeavors. And so, I want to toe that fine line between employment and advocacy. You work in a field where your professional experience is, at least in some capacity to me, activism. Right. I mean, you're active on behalf of communities who need assistance. Do you see this as activism? Does USAID see this as activism? I'm just wondering what your sort of lens is as it relates to diversity, equity and inclusion, and activism as it relates to the work that you do. Can you clarify for us?

Amalhin Shek

Yeah. So again, that personal capacity, and I guess just thinking about the definition of the word activism and something in considering this, is that at its root and in the most basic of senses, you can look at activism as campaigning for some kind of social change. And when we think about USAID versus, obviously, the personal perspective of the agency's employees and why those of us who go into development go into it. I think we kind of find this middle ground because we might have on one end of it, the technical advocacy, and then on the other piece of it, professionals who are, like, extremely passionate about their technical roles to a point of being activists on them. At the end of the day, as an agency, we're working on this ongoing social change. And so that's obviously something that is both internal to the place of work within our agency. We have employee resource groups. We have our Hispanic employee Council and foreign affairs agencies, where part of our work really is looking at how we shift policies to make sure that we are recruiting, retaining, and promoting members of the Latinx community within the agency. Our women at aid group does the same for making a workplace that is more women supportive, friendly. And so, there is quite a bit of that inside of the workplace. I think that it's something obviously that 2020 drove home for so many industries and for so many workplaces. But I guess when we think about it externally facing in terms of the work that USAID as a technical agency does, is that we, at the end of the day, have a role in implementing U.S. foreign assistance using that sound technical evidence. So we have experts in fields ranging from agriculture and biodiversity conservation to HIV AIDS to veterinary science, to world-renowned economists who are working in their respective technical areas and in their regional bureaus and missions to essentially design programs that are addressing the key development challenges of our partner countries. And so because we have this technical approach, I don't think that we can call it direct activism, but rather the fact that we are motivating social change by enabling citizens of our partner countries to not just come to us and tell us and help us identify the problems, but ultimately collaborating with them and our host country governments to really create those enabling environments to address those challenges.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think that fits perfectly with the interest of many of our students. Right. That there is, again, this deep-seated hunger to drive forward positive social change and to marry that with a professional skill set. And I think your work is a great example of how that can be done to truly impressive and impactful professional endeavors. So thanks for toiling with the nuances

of language there for us. Amalhin, we talked about this a little bit earlier, and I want to circle back because I think it's an important question. You talked about being mindful in your approach and how even USAID and development as a whole very mindful of context and location sell to sell. I'm wondering how you reconcile working in foreign assistance with an understanding of the colonial impacts that foreign policy can have, sometimes in well-intentioned but unhelpful ways. How does that play out, particularly the personal level, somebody involved in those development efforts?

Amalhin Shek

I will be totally honest. It's difficult. There are days when I may be hearing a conversation, hearing an anecdote, and really have to go through the mental gymnastics of understanding the history and the rationale from one perspective while considering the foreign policy piece of it. Right. And kind of the various ethos of agency of where I'm working. And so I think that for anybody who is again, a child of immigrants and our parents came to the U.S. for opportunity and for whatever reason, parents and family leave their countries of origin, I think that we do have to and have to take advantage and get the opportunity and take advantage of the privilege that we have in having had the experience of going to a University that allowed us to explore what we were interested in and that really developed those technical skill sets that then in our professional lives, empower us to think critically about these issues and also come to solutions, whether it is in the specific way the project is designed or the way in which we're empowered to ask our implementing partners or ask the folks on the ground to do the work in a way that is inclusive and in a way that is responsive of those potential unintended consequences as I speak to just our role in admitting our wrongs or failures and reconciling those. One example of that is through our current environmental and natural resources management frameworks efforts, where we're really looking at addressing environmental justice as a social justice issue. And so this means inviting diverse voices that we haven't traditionally brought into these discussions and making sure that those voices are included in the hiring decisions for our technical leadership roles, for our implementation roles, and really making sure that when we are thinking about the design of these initiatives, the design of these programs, we're making sure that all voices are at the table. I think it does take a lot of self-reflection. It can take an emotional toll. And so I think that is a place where for folks wanting to do activism and wanting to enact social change, I think we do have to remember to take care of ourselves and to really establish our boundaries so that we are able to play the long game because it is, I think, a multi-generational set of challenges that we are going to be working to change and turn around. So a lot of self-reflection. A lot of self-care.

Phil Wagner

For sure, and the same holds true in even Western extensions of D&I work, albeit to a significantly different capacity. Right. That you have to always be mindful that what once worked or what was well-intentioned may not play out as we had intended. You've got to pivot in the moment. Such great advice there, Amalhin. I have one more question for you, and I really appreciate you being willing to come on and share. One of the true benefits, I think, of this podcast is to get the opportunity to speak directly to leaders in the making. We hope to

develop them, so they become people like you. And so, I'm wondering what advice you might have for those who are coming through their undergraduate or graduate experience, even just getting started in the world of work listening to this podcast. What advice do you have to those folks who want to dedicate their future to advocacy in some way? Any lessons learned from your journey?

Amalhin Shek

Yeah, I definitely would say try as many different things as possible and become exposed to as many different disciplines as possible because it is in that ability to think multi-sectorally interdisciplinarily, which is something that we get at William & Mary, but something that you don't want to lose. A skill that is going to be so critical to being able to empathize with folks of different types of industries from different sectors. Because half of this is, I would say, getting in the head of your audience and communicating to your audience in a way that emotes with them, obviously, while still remaining true to yourself. And so I definitely say don't say no to new opportunities once you get into the workforce, attend as many of the brown bags side sessions and meetings on topics different from the one that you work on so that you have at least that exposure and can speak to different thematic areas in their languages. And I would say the other piece too is really don't be afraid of reaching back both to those students that are younger than you because, within the College itself, things are changing every year. The research is evolving. And so I think staying in touch with what's happening in higher education is super helpful, just as much as reaching back to those peers and colleagues that are older than you and really getting a sense of the different opportunities that are available and obviously the different paths required to get to those. And at the end of the day, I think making sure that you take that time to slow down and not let yourself be burnt out because there are so many issues to solve, so many issues to address. And really, again, it is a long game. I don't know if we can go into if you want more development specific.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I mean, I would love to go there, at least in part because, again, we try to mint our students with a significant focus on the global experience. And so we have many who come from sustainability, who are interested in development. So if you have any takeaways, that'd be great.

Amalhin Shek

Yeah, for sure. And so I'd say when it comes to the international development sphere, we are so grounded and mired in like, oh my gosh, I need to have the international experience, I need to have volunteered or done like students helping under some of us or what have you. But at the end of the day, working in international development, it's less about where have you lived and can you handle living in a resource-limited setting? And more about how effective are you at that cross-cultural communication and dialogue? How effective are you at understanding the real situation on the ground and, where needed, communicating on behalf of your partner on the ground? And so, if it is AmeriCorps Vista or whatever domestic resource-limited setting, volunteering, or work experience, you can apply that to an

international career. Obviously, having a second, third, or fourth language is really helpful. Myself I'm bilingual. I grew up speaking Spanish in my household, and having that kind of ability to dialogue with partners and ministries of health in a second language is really helpful. So if you are able to learn a second language, definitely do recommend that. But I think really, at the end of the day when we think about the international development sphere, it is just how can you speak to multiple cultures? How can you speak to different backgrounds, socioeconomic, neurodiverse backgrounds? I don't want to say be a chameleon, but really your ability to be a person for all and really drive obviously your technical understanding with your just being a human of the world.

Phil Wagner

Yes, I love that. And humanity is sort of the central theme and core value of this podcast. We're trying to cut past all of noise and get right back to those real human, lived experiences. Thank you, Amalhin, for sharing yours and for doing the work that you do. It's always so inspiring to follow our alum, but what a great example you are, and thank you for coming on and making time. Such a pleasure to speak with you.

Amalhin Shek

Thank you. Likewise.

Phil Wagner

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