

# YSEALI Professional Fellow: From Malaysia to White House

THE WATER RESOURCES TECHNICAL DIVISION



reported by  
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The Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Professional Fellows is a vocational exchange programme organised by the US Department Of States for young professionals aged 25-35 from ASEAN countries, who are leading change and innovation in civil society, the public or the private sectors.

Launched in 2013, YSEALI is US President Barack Obama's signature programme to strengthen leadership development and networking in Southeast Asia. Through a variety of programmes and engagements, including US educational and cultural exchanges, regional exchanges and seed funding, YSEALI seeks to build the leadership capabilities of youth in the region, strengthen ties between the United States and Southeast Asia as well as nurture the ASEAN community.

I was privileged to be selected for a six-week YSEALI Professional Fellow programme in the US and to connect with other participants from ASEAN countries in spring, 2015.

The programme's main area of interest was related to four main thematic groups. Participants had to select one of given topics and address any local challenge. The thematic groups were Civic Engagement, Education, Economic Empowerment and Environmental Sustainability.

My choice was Environmental sustainability, specifically addressing erosion and sedimentation issues in Malaysian waters.

I was stationed for a month in the city of Dubuque, Iowa, located along Mississippi River in the US Midwest, to learn about the local government system and to grasp the knowledge and initiatives taken to reduce the erosion and sedimentation in local water bodies.

Mostly, I learnt about the day-to-day operations of the planning and engineering division of City Manager's office in dealing with



River Assessment and construction site inspection on water quality violation with Water Quality Inspector

new developments, planning approvals and environment violation management especially on the reduction of erosion and sedimentations issues. Water quality inspections, monitoring and enforcement of local by laws and Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) laws in terms of water quality control, fell under the responsibilities of city's water quality inspector.

Working together with the Water Quality Inspector gave me the opportunity to conduct river assessments. This was done by literally walking in the river to study the current conditions and to identify possible erosion and changes in the river.

Apart from that, the routine work to inspect on-going developments and attend to complaints of erosion and sedimentation violations or any other form of pollution, was done with the utilisation of online Geographical Information System (GIS) in my tablet. To further ensure that the water quality of rivers and other water bodies were within the safe zone, monthly tests were conducted at various water quality stations with mobile portable instruments and lab devices.

Upon completing my assignment in Iowa, I travelled to Washington DC for the Professional Fellow Congress, attended by 230 professional fellows from 45 countries.

The most memorable part of this programme was when President Obama hosted YSEALI participants at the White House.



*River Assessment and construction site inspection on water quality violation with Water Quality Inspector*



*President Barack Obama welcoming YSEALI delegates at The White House*

After a brief introduction to us all, Obama gave a short speech and opened the floor for a question and answer session. I was among the 10 participants selected for the session and I took the opportunity to ask him about the leadership skills learned through his presidency.

His advice was that we should listen carefully to the judgments and during the decision-making progress, we ought to constantly revisit the outcome of the decision and be accountable for it. If it is crucial, then we have to make amendments to make it better.

The YSEALI Professional Fellow programme is certainly an excellent opportunity for young leaders to learn about the customs and vocational knowledge from US and other ASEAN countries. As the alumni of this programme, we will gain open access to a bigger network of professionals from ASEAN and other countries.

Various opportunities for grant funding are also available to be tapped to address local community challenges. I strongly encourage young engineers, especially IEM members, to join the programme and other exchange opportunities to bring a difference to the work and community we are associated with as well as promote world peace. ■

*(Editor's Note: Footage of Mr. Seedaran Raman's question and answer session with President Obama can be viewed at <http://youtube/gkFZAROaZho>. Information on YSEALI programme is available at <https://youngsoutheastasianleaders.state.gov/>).*