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Dismantling the United States Agency for International Development Costs Lives and Threatens Global Stability

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 See also *Government Efficiency of Public Health*, pp. 1287–1338.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was an independent agency of the United States government, authorized by the US Congress under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (Public Law 87-195). USAID, working with multilateral, government, and nongovernmental partners, provided humanitarian aid and development assistance globally that reduced poverty, protected the public from infectious diseases, reduced food and water insecurity, and promoted democracy to support US interests.

Dismantling USAID imperils human health and security globally as well as

domestically. USAID complemented “hard power”—national security efforts of the US military—with “soft power”—assistance that guides and supports rather than coerces—substantially alleviating human suffering while promoting stability and economic prosperity worldwide.¹ In an increasingly interconnected world with growing global and ecological health threats, USAID is needed more than ever. Here we describe how USAID’s work in global health and infectious disease prevention, agriculture, food and nutrition, and water security made the United States and the world safer. We also

identify challenges and consequences of a world without USAID and describe priority actions and institutional changes that could be implemented to reform foreign assistance.

INFECTIOUS DISEASE PREVENTION

The work of USAID was pivotal in understanding and combating infectious diseases around the world to limit local spread and, by extension, manage the risk of diseases reaching the United States.² An example is the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which provided HIV treatment to more than 20 million people across 55 countries and allowed more than 7 million children to be born free of HIV/AIDS.³ It strengthened health care systems, and without it an estimated 14 million people will die from HIV/AIDS by 2030.⁴

Infectious diseases and pandemics operate irrespective of international boundaries, and the One Health approach recognizes connections between humans, animals, and our shared environments that are integral to combating disease spread.⁵ Training on disease detection and response and vaccine expansion for polio, measles, malaria, COVID-19, and other vaccine-preventable diseases were the global focus for USAID.⁶ The USAID One Health Workforce Next Generation Project trained more than 60 000 students and professionals in recent years on the One Health approach to disease prevention and control.⁷ Closing USAID comes at a time when avian influenza, Ebola, and mpox, quintessential One Health diseases, are spreading. In the face of climate change, the need for globally connected adaptive responses and tailoring what works to local contexts is greater than ever.⁸

AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND NUTRITION

USAID was the world's largest humanitarian food assistance donor for decades through its Food for Peace and Emergency Food Security Programs. Humanitarian food assistance is critical to protecting lives and limiting malnutrition during conflicts and natural disasters.⁹ Expanding food security reduces conflict and migration.¹⁰ Promoting longer-term food security through USAID agricultural development programming was essential for reducing diet-related diseases. USAID projects improved agricultural productivity, enhanced agricultural research on plant disease and drought-tolerant crops, and fostered crop diversification. These efforts provided income for people living in low-income and rural settings and made healthy diets accessible and affordable.¹¹

Sustainable agricultural intensification also lowers the risk of future pandemics through habitat conservation and reduced chemical overuse.¹² Expansion of cultivated areas into forests and wetlands and agricultural nutrient leaching account for roughly half of the zoonoses emergent among humans since World War II.¹² USAID's high-return investments in research and development to boost agricultural productivity and food security globally generated roughly \$10 in benefits for every \$1 spent.¹³

USAID maternal and child health and nutrition projects improved nutritional outcomes by providing nutritional supplements and education to pregnant and lactating women and their children, with long-term benefits in terms of those children's educational achievement and subsequent adult economic productivity.¹⁴ These programs strengthened the effectiveness of primary health care systems by promoting their use for

services such as early screening for preventable diseases, access to vaccinations that can prevent outbreaks, and treatment of acute malnutrition. The availability of nutritional supplements incentivized participation in the range of primary health care services offered.

WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE SECURITY

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) access is critical to human survival and dignity and infectious disease prevention and control. USAID invested in water and sanitation infrastructure and hygiene promotion to improve health, promote economic development, increase educational access, and build climate-resilient communities. USAID collaborated with local governments and organizations to provide immediate lifesaving relief during disasters, disease outbreaks, and conflict.¹⁵ Reduced WASH services through dismantling of USAID increased diarrheal diseases and neglected tropical diseases such as cholera.¹⁶ USAID programs promoted climate-resilient WASH infrastructure that focused on engineering systems that withstand drought, flooding, and rising salinity; scaled delivery in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and South Asia; and provided essential, safe WASH services to emergency-affected populations.¹⁷ For example, a USAID-funded program in Ghana providing water and sanitation to 250 000 to 300 000 people was among the projects terminated.¹⁸

In addition, the United States' loss of soft power is substantial. WASH programming offers an example of how the United States loses soft power with the dismantling of USAID. A hygiene kit provided to an earthquake-affected family in Vanuatu branded with "USAID, from the American people" provides

goodwill and American connections, favorably positioning the United States when negotiating future security access there. WASH, fundamental to human life, is an ideal avenue for soft power.

IMPACTS ON THE UNITED STATES

USAID improved the health and well-being of the world's poorest people while protecting people living in the world's wealthier nations from the spread of disease, conflict, migration, and terrorism. Dismantling USAID, with the abrupt halt of programs, reversed decades of global health progress with widespread closures of HIV, nutrition, immunization, and disease control services.¹⁹ Missed vaccination campaigns and antiretroviral treatments, interrupted nutritional supplement deliveries, and the lack of WASH services spread disease and destroyed lives. In addition, contract breaks and lack of payment harmed partner organizations' ability to sustain operations and retain skilled staff, eroded sustainable change, and disincentivized aid from other donors.

There were also costs to more than 10 000 jobs, many of those Americans jobs,^{20,21} and likely costs to the United States in economic investment, national security, and reputation as an international partner. In addition, cuts to disease surveillance and health and food aid fueled instability and infectious disease spread that placed lives at risk, including American lives.^{4,19} Indeed, the loss of USAID's global health infrastructure will be acutely felt as public health responds to concurrent outbreaks of hantavirus, mpox, Ebola, and avian influenza both at home and abroad.

USAID accounted for 0.3% of US federal government spending, whereas

other high-income countries spend a larger share of their gross national income on development assistance.²² A range of thoughtful proposals for improved efficiency and reduced influence in internal politics of other countries exist^{23,24} and demand thoughtful debate and discussion. A reformed USAID could focus investments more tightly on global public goods—for example, surveillance and control of infectious diseases and neglected tropical diseases, agricultural and tropical health research, WASH, conflicts and emergencies, and climate change mitigation—that demonstrate high returns per taxpayer dollar.^{6,13} Also, it could enhance efforts to further local priorities and ownership, community participation, and local capacity building that promote program sustainability in collaboration with local government and nongovernment organizations.²⁵ Without USAID programs, United States citizens are less safe and the world is hungrier, poorer, less healthy, and more unstable. **AJPH**

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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