

A USAID Story from Africa and Asia, A Personal View

By Edward H Greeley, Ph.D. Feb. 28, 2025

USAID. Polls generally show that Americans assume about 25% or more of the total US federal budget goes to foreign aid, and that USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) is full of waste and corruption. The same polls say Americans think 10% of the budget for foreign aid is the right amount. The reality is that USAID accounts for less than 1% of the budget. Many voters lack understanding of what USAID is and does. I want to describe my experience in USAID and thereby illustrate what foreign aid is really all about.

Peace Corps. After college, I joined the Peace Corps and met my wife-to-be in Nigeria. We both taught in remote single gender boarding schools. We first spent time together evacuating from Nigeria as the Nigerian Biafran Civil War broke out. We lived in the Southeast corner (Biafra) and each happened to be assigned vehicles – for her, a Jeep, for me, a Chevrolet van – to help drive evacuating Volunteers to Port Harcourt, on the Nigerian Coast. Before being loaded on a freighter to exit the country with hundreds of others, we two, with others, went to the market to stock up on water, dehydrated soups, bread and jam for everyone being evacuated on the ship.

East Africa. Fast forward to Uganda, where we were teaching following graduate school in the US. Due to Idi Amin's chaotic reign, we were again forced to evacuate, now with a son born in Kampala. Unlike in Nigeria, at least this time we managed to get our belongings out.

In Kenya, my wife began teaching at the international school and I worked in the Regional USAID Office. Our teams helped the small USAID offices from Djibouti on the Africa Horn to the small countries around South Africa kick-start development projects, do sectorial studies, etc. USAID had a fairly large and popular local footprint. 2/3rds of our staff in these countries were what we called "foreign service nationals", many highly qualified professionals recruited and paid locally.

The US Ambassador would often cut the ribbon on a new project, thus gaining local attention for the US. The US military was present and was featured when the 7th Naval Fleet pitched up at Mombasa, Kenya's port, for fuel and provisioning. USAID's work, and foreign aid in general, make up the category of development and humanitarian assistance. The other two Ds in the US Government toolkit are Defense and Diplomacy. While the US budget is vastly skewed towards Defense, the three Ds form an exceptionally powerful combination.

South Africa. Our USAID team couldn't work in South Africa itself, and I remember being quite discouraged when having conversations with white South Africans at that time: such hatred and fear towards "blacks" and "colored". One experience did spark hope. U.S. Government employees could stay only in the International Hotel in Johannesburg. I remember looking down at the hotel convention hall once to a very promising sight. At the

annual business meeting of the region-wide OK Super Market chain, black and white managers were talking and planning together in the same hall – all while sitting at segregated eating tables! Hopefully desire for profit was eroding fear and increasing understanding. At that time (1986-88) USAID was providing scholarships for promising South African leaders, training, and assistance for victims of violence from apartheid – totaling \$75 million over 2 years, garnering praise for the USAID lawyer who administered it.

Central Africa. I feel I was lucky to have worked in Rwanda and Burundi after the first ethnic clashes and before the terror of the lethal genocide. We in USAID and development experts from other countries saw what was looming, though. Seeing the growing scarcities of food and land – in this case with Rwanda's rapid population growth (an average of 8 children per mother) and inefficient farming, we narrowed our assistance to only food production and maternal/childcare/family planning. Of course these are, to use the jargon, medium-term solutions at best. But we still needed to help the Rwandan Government get started. Unfortunately, today's news still depicts violent conflict in Eastern Congo.

In stable Kenya, we were more successful. There we mounted innovative family planning programs that combined the resources of clinics run by the large tea, coffee and cut-flower plantations with faith-based-hospitals (many were church mission-based) with government health services to significantly cut a population growth rate similar to Rwanda's over a 15-year period. Another USAID-supported project vastly expanded the number and efficiency of women's small savings and loans groups – the kind that have been touted around the world. This one supported the gradual establishment of a large commercial bank that is still running.

One last example followed the reopening of the US Embassy and USAID office in Kampala, Uganda after Idi Amin's ouster. During his disastrous reign, most poor farmers lacked access to farm implements – most importantly, the blades of the metal hoes they used daily. We worked with a private Ugandan hoe factory to purchase quality steel from India and helped get blade production back on line and distribution (through revitalized agriculture cooperatives) into markets and deep into communities.

A career USAID employee is required to return to the home office in Washington DC at intervals. We returned from Kenya with a son, and daughter born in Nairobi Hospital, in tow. I was there as the HIV-AIDS crisis was becoming recognized. I mention it as it is such an important example of the dedication of both Republicans and Democrats at the time to addressing a global threat and need with speed, compassion and science. The PEPFAR program was conceived by President George W. Bush and it has been enormously successful, saving many millions of lives.

Our next post – following intensive local language training in DC, was Jakarta, Indonesia, one of the most important countries most Americans have barely heard of. It is ranked 4th most populous after China, India and the United States, and has by far the most Muslims of any country (230 million). If we think that the US and its allies stumbled in Vietnam in the

1960s and 1970s, the international community did a better job supporting Indonesia on its development path through the '70s until today. Huge progress has been made across the country: in food production, commercial agriculture, environment, education, health, maternal and childcare, family planning, enterprise, employment – you name it. The globe will show its importance re sea-lanes and its proximity to China and its neighbors.

USAID and other US agencies working overseas have long worked on creating family-friendly policies. Like many USAID families, we enjoyed access to excellent diverse, competitive international schools where we were posted. My wife helped run them. Once our two children left for college, however, it was my turn to move to a more challenging post familywise. I went where USAID families weren't allowed, to a Cambodia that was just opening to the world after its first post-Khmer Rouge election catered by 20,000 UN employees. Election over, USAID /Cambodia focused on critical infrastructure– rebuilding the trunk road from the interior capital to the seaport, providing technical advice to fledgling government ministries, and reaching out with agriculture, health and education programs to the various provinces in the country by funding US and international NGOs like CARE, World Concern and World Learning to implement activities in each of these provinces.

Cambodian King Sihanouk described rural provincial programs as wiping away the spots on the leopard that was Cambodia – meaning, providing viable alternatives to poor peasants who had so suffered from, and were still fearing in remote areas - the vestiges of the Khmer Rouge. The bravery and dedication of these NGO workers and their staff was unbelievable. Example: on the day of the national polio vaccination campaign, many of these workers headed out into their territory with sugar cubes and vaccines, and a toothbrush and a book in case they were captured by Khmer Rouge. Of course, many Khmer Rouge families wanted the vaccine for their kids, too.

Subsequently, following another election, the procommunist leader took over the government and USAID evacuated Cambodia. I returned to Washington, DC, and retired from my career in USAID. The point of this long personal story is to highlight the enormous progress that USAID has galvanized over its more than 60 years of existence. And yet, the unconstrained malice of actions trying to destroy USAID will profoundly impact thousands of Americans who were engaged in innumerable development programs around the world, and the people they are seeking to help. Clearly it won't stop there. We must join together and dig deep to halt this unraveling of the finest of America.

And as for foreign affairs, it is obvious to policy makers and practitioners alike that to be successful, the three-legged stool of Defense, Diplomacy and Development must operate in concert. Despite the large differential in cost, each contributes to the whole and we cannot have sustainable security if one leg is severed.

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