

Why did foreign aid lose popular support? By Anna Gawel, *Devex Newswire*, 31 July 2025

Lost in translation

When asked whether they support helping others — with food, for example, or vaccines — most Americans say yes. But when you throw in a politically fraught term such as “foreign aid,” many balk. [Where is the disconnect?](#)

There’s likely **no perfect PR or communications strategy that would’ve prevented** USAID’s demise given how laser-focused President Donald Trump and his ally Elon Musk were on killing it. Musk’s boasts about feeding [USAID](#) into the woodchipper weren’t exactly subtle.

But that doesn’t absolve the agency completely. Some say **USAID was too silent about its successes** — and the smear campaigns routinely hurled at it. Others argue USAID’s supporters focused too heavily on lobbying lawmakers instead of **making their case to average Americans**. They point out that an alphabet soup of off-putting acronyms didn’t exactly help make that case clear.

Regardless, somewhere along the way, hearts and minds were lost.

“I wonder to what extent we — the humanitarian and human rights community — need to look back at whether we screwed up, whether we lost our constituency,” The New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof said in May. **“This used to be a bipartisan issue, and we lost a lot of America.”**

Part of that loss, however, is rooted in law, writes Devex contributor Lauren Evans. In 1948, Congress passed an act that prohibited materials produced by the U.S. government for foreign audiences from being distributed domestically.

That squelched the agency’s ability to, well, brag.

“There was a culture of not blowing your own horn,” explained longtime USAID official Patrick Fine.

That silence allowed Trump and Musk to grab the bullhorn and blast USAID as bloated and corrupt — **using cherry-picked information or, in some cases, outright lies**.

So now what? It’s not too late to tell USAID’s story, its supporters say, in the

hopes of changing the narrative.

As William Herkewitz, a former USAID comms chief, pointed out, **the agency forestalled the deaths of at least 2 million people** during a drought that ravaged the Horn of Africa in 2022. The tax burden on each American household to save those lives was about \$6 a year. And yet, Americans were in the dark about what they just accomplished.

“Though America had just completed one of the most successful humanitarian responses in modern history, **we didn’t even attempt a victory lap**,” he wrote. “We merely shared some ineffective social media posts and moved on to the next disaster. It is baffling in hindsight.”