

# An Open Letter on THE FUTURE OF U.S. FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

This Open Letter offers non-partisan recommendations intended to inform the development of America's next generation of foreign assistance. Its signatories are the senior career development diplomats and humanitarians who, until September 2025, led the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In early 2025, we welcomed what could have been a credible foreign assistance reform effort. Instead, a rushed and opaque process dismantled one of America's foreign policy tools and denied elected officials the opportunity to receive data-driven, expert advice from career public servants. This is our contribution to America's discussion about the future of foreign assistance.

For eight decades, American leadership helped to forge a vision of international cooperation that made America and the rest of the world safer, healthier, more prosperous, and resilient. No country has done more than the United States to invest in the extraordinary potential of humanity, while at the same time ensuring substantial U.S. influence in global matters. An important element of American leadership has been the willingness to use its enormous wealth to help shape the development trajectory of its partners and, when humanity has faced particularly devastating challenges, to save lives with unprecedented generosity. U.S. international development and humanitarian programs have saved millions of lives, contained and eradicated debilitating diseases, lifted millions out of poverty, prevented and shortened conflicts, and catalyzed technological innovations that accelerate and sustain these gains. U.S. leadership and resources have been instrumental in building the global institutions that share the enormity of this work, distributing responsibility and increasing accountability in ways that strengthen collective action and advance U.S. interests. Throughout American history, elected leaders and public servants have taken a step back to reconsider the values the United States champions, its approach to partnering, and the scale and impact of its investments in the global architecture it helped to build.

The United States is in the midst of one such moment now. Americans overwhelmingly support investing in countries in need. They want to invest in both poor countries as well as those with less need. However, Americans perceive they are spending much more on foreign aid than they actually are. On average, about one percent of the federal budget funds foreign assistance, with very little of it going to foreign governments. It aligns largely with the areas Americans most strongly support - peace and security, economic development, health, and food aid. International development investments have been a small but prominent tool of U.S. foreign policy, contributing to three of the four pillars of the U.S. national security community's framework of instruments of national power: DIME (diplomatic, informational, military, economic).

Looking forward, the U.S. can remain highly influential but must recognize that it has become one voice among many shaping humanity's collective future. As the world saw in Davos recently, America must now acknowledge the sand is shifting beneath its feet. Partners, allies, and competitors feel they must make decisions and form alliances that may or may not include the United States. In this new dynamic, the U.S. should elevate and invest in the interests of its allies, partners, and, at times, even competitors when U.S. strategic interests align. A modernized foreign assistance approach will underscore the U.S. is not abandoning its

leadership role, rather it is sharing it and encouraging others to lead when and where it serves shared interests. How the United States behaves toward its partners in the coming years will be as important – if not more – than the specific policies and issues American engagement seeks to address. If done with an understanding of and appreciation for partners' interests and perspectives, an America that prioritizes its own strength, prosperity, and security has and will continue to be a welcome global partner.

The following **ten recommendations** reflect support for a strategic realignment of America's foreign assistance and the need to modernize America's assistance relationships. These recommendations reflect lessons learned from decades of successes and failures by America's senior development diplomats charged with delivering assistance under both Republican and Democratic administrations in the world's most complex contexts.

## Save Lives

No element of foreign assistance speaks more to the enduring commitment and generosity of the American people than life-saving humanitarian assistance in the world's most devastated and desperate places. Of all the types of foreign assistance, it is among the most visible and appreciated support the American people provide. A 2025 analysis in [The Lancet](#) estimated that almost 92 million deaths were prevented by USAID-supported programs over two decades. U.S. capabilities were unrivaled in the world, the impact undisputed and measurable, and the moral case strong. Timely and immediate emergency food, medicine, shelter, and personnel are often the only things sustaining families when they need help most. It must continue.

## Support American Engagement Globally

The engine of American prosperity has been its private sector and private financial flows. The United States could be more intentional in linking its assistance investments to U.S. private efforts that are also engaging globally. The greatest number of poor and marginalized people in the world are no longer living in poor countries, but rather in emerging and middle-income countries where American companies and other organizations want to invest and operate. Assistance should leverage a whole-of-society partnership model that aligns federal resources to catalyze the innovation and capital of American civil society and industry. According to Brookings, each dollar of USAID funding for [partnerships leveraged another \\$3.74 from the private sector](#). Even greater collaboration overseas between private industry and the U.S. government will [further boost U.S. jobs at home](#) in important industries like agriculture, technology, services, and manufacturing. Similarly, America's non-profits, universities, faith-based organizations, and citizens already send over \$100 billion overseas annually. Greater collaboration among all U.S. entities investing overseas would deepen the impact of American resources while improving global development outcomes.

## Invest in America's Comparative Advantage

America's greatest moments of strength have come when it acknowledges that global challenges are too interconnected and complex to address with a single foreign policy tool or by doing things alone without partners. *America's comparative advantage lies in its intentional, strategic use of resources, leadership, values, innovation, and institutions to advance global prosperity, security, and stability.* Foreign assistance often acts as a force multiplier for leveraging international relationships and deepening the impact of some of the world's most game-changing ideas. The [Power Africa Presidential Initiative](#), one of the world's largest public private partnerships, mobilized over \$55 billion with just over \$1 billion in U.S. government resources, funding more than 150 power projects, creating thousands of U.S. jobs, exporting American ingenuity and technology overseas, and bringing economic prosperity and stability to allies. Similarly, the [Feed the Future Presidential Initiative](#)'s investments with U.S. universities and the CGIAR network resulted in over 1,000 agricultural innovations that improved food production at home and abroad despite population growth and warmer, drier weather.

## Protect Americans'

For decades, the U.S. championed global investments in public health and food security that resulted in unprecedented gains in prosperity, well-being, and security. Diseases and pests do not know borders, and the international response to another global pandemic will

## Health and Economy

rely heavily on foreign countries' health and early warning systems. Monitoring the nexus between animal and human health and preventing the spread of communicable diseases abroad directly protects American lives at home. Under the [PREDICT](#) investment, for example, scientists detected nearly 1,000 novel viruses, including a new ebolavirus and several SARS-related coronaviruses, which found new wildlife "hotspots" abroad that gave the U.S. critical lead time to understand and prepare for potential outbreaks before they reached American soil. Investing in other countries' human, animal, and plant health systems and responding to outbreaks remain critical to national security.

## Invest in Champions

The United States once had the largest number of higher education scholarships for foreign scholars in the world. It is a model that has been emulated by America's competitors even as the U.S. discourages foreign enrollment. This must be reversed, and America must again welcome the world's best and brightest to study, teach, and research in U.S. universities. The benefits of past higher education investments in over 500 U.S. universities are all around us. It is still common to find multiple graduates of American universities among foreign countries' cabinets of ministers, parliaments, corporations, NGOs, and universities. Graduates of U.S. universities are lifelong, like-minded future ambassadors who shape their countries in ways that assistance programs and foreign policy initiatives cannot. Educational investments in future generations of global leaders establish enduring networks of influence and shared values that offer unmatched returns-on-investment.

## Insist on Commitment & Accountability with a Clear Endgame

Assistance should be conditioned on shared commitment. American assistance is not philanthropy. It is an *investment* in a partner's future. The United States must demand that its partners commit to and be held to account for meaningful progress. When partner countries and institutions are committed financially, politically, and operationally, they are more accountable and the return on shared investment is more likely to be transformative and timely. Conditions can include reforms and tangible actions that both countries agree should be prioritized. In some countries, the more effective U.S. partner may be a country's private sector, civil society, and faith-based organizations, as was often the case in the early days of PEPFAR when governments were skeptical of the priority given to HIV/AIDS. Every foreign assistance program must create exit strategies on day one that define what success looks like and which local partners will sustain the gains.

## Make Targeted, High-Impact Investments in Fewer Countries

Over the course of decades, America's foreign assistance was directed to address too many challenges in too many places. The scale of the accumulated goals made the impact and results, at times, superficial and intangible. U.S. assistance should instead serve *clear, long-term, strategic* foreign policy objectives focused on defined expected outcomes. U.S. funding priorities should be based on clear evidence of cost-effectiveness and measurable results. Importantly, the U.S. also must be courageous enough *not to invest* in places where progress is unrealistic and cannot be achieved. Targeted, robust investments in fewer countries and issues will result in a positive return-on-investment that will lead to global improvements in human well-being, transparency and governance, economic prosperity, security, and stability.

## Partnerships Should Reflect U.S. Interests, Not Self-Imposed Constraints

America's diplomatic reach and convening power remain unparalleled in the world today. Ceding political, ideological, and economic influence, therefore, is an unforced error. In a multipolar world, U.S. foreign assistance must continue to be an agile tool that counters the narratives and initiatives that do not contribute to global prosperity and peace. The U.S. must not fall victim to self-imposed political and ideological constraints that prevent global cooperation and undermine America's security and prosperity. Robust, pragmatic partnerships with bilateral and multilateral partners must continue. At times, to maximize resources and achieve U.S. priorities, partnerships may even include targeted alliances with America's global competitors whose interests align on particular global and regional development and humanitarian matters. U.S. leadership and influence will be strengthened by prioritizing collective action over political litmus tests and by combining resources and collective action for global good.

## Focus on Desired

For more than five decades, Congress shaped America's foreign assistance architecture and priorities more than any other actor in the U.S. government. Each Administration also championed their own priorities through new directives and initiatives. With 100% of USAID's budget subject to earmarks and directives, the sheer weight of the accumulation of

## Outcomes, Not Earmarks

decades of well-intentioned earmarks and directives ultimately reduced foreign assistance focus, undermined the likelihood of transformational change, fragmented strategic cohesion, and hampered efficiency and flexibility. Moving forward, foreign assistance must be guided by an articulation of desired strategic outcomes rather than a proliferation of rigid, input-based funding mandates. Assistance should be driven by data, neutrality, and shared interests rather than domestic political or cultural cycles. It must acknowledge the complexity of a new, multipolar global context and evolving priorities while not being subject to self-imposed constraints that limit effectiveness and fail to make the best use of America's comparative advantage.

## Eliminate Barriers to a Whole-of- Government Approach

People and countries experience crises and recovery on a continuum, and humanitarian responses are multi-dimensional, complex, and recurrent. In recent years, interagency competition, resource grabs, and overlapping government agency mandates have handicapped the full potential of America's assistance programs. Forward-leaning presidential initiatives like PEPFAR, Prosper Africa, Feed the Future, and Power Africa all elevated whole-of-government collaboration and private sector partnerships over parochial agency interests. America's next generation of foreign assistance investments must be able to work more easily together under a single banner while utilizing the full weight, talent, and influence of the entire U.S. government. Further, breaking down programming and funding silos between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts would be a strategic and efficient use of U.S. resources that would ensure dollars go where, when, and how they are most needed.

The signatories of this Open Letter dedicated their careers to representing American values and interests around the world, serving across administrations and appointed with bipartisan Congressional support to the senior ranks of the U.S. Foreign Service and the Executive Service. While we reject the recent dismantling of America's development and humanitarian capabilities, we embrace the opportunity to provide recommendations that will align the generosity and grace of the American people with the future of U.S. foreign assistance.

Respectfully,

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