

What Americans lost in the dismantling of USAID

By J. Brian Atwood and Andrew S. Natsios, opinion contributors – *The Hill*, January 8, 2026

The new year is a time to reflect and hopefully correct the mistakes of the past. None has been as consequential as the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Trump administration has taken many controversial actions, but none may prove more consequential over the long term to the health, safety and prosperity of the American people than the destruction of USAID. It was an action that caused White House Chief of Staff Susan Wiles to say: “I think anybody that pays attention to government and has ever paid attention to USAID believed, as I did, that they do very good work.”

As a Democrat and a Republican, respectively, we served as administrators for USAID, an agency that enjoyed bipartisan support for 63 years. With less than 1 percent of the federal budget, the agency delivered important, largely unrecognized benefits to Americans’ health and diet while reflecting internationally the humanitarian values that most Americans hold dear.

Much has been written about the costs of dismantling USAID: Conservative estimates suggest that more than 700,000 people in developing countries died last year, two-thirds of them children. A widely reported study by The Lancet suggests nearly 14 million people will die by 2030.

These figures are devastating, but many Americans do not realize how profoundly the loss of USAID will affect us here at home.

Few Americans are aware, for example, that USAID funded important seed research that protected our food from crop diseases. Twenty years ago, a fungus called wheat rust threatened nearly 90 percent of wheat cultivars worldwide and caused a worldwide nutritional crisis. USAID resources funded the development of rust resistant wheat seed with other donors.

The agency historically provided nearly 40 percent of the budget for the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center that developed the seed, which is part of a network of agricultural research centers to institutionalize the “green revolution” for which American agronomist Norman Borlaug received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The innovation in seed technology saved the global wheat crop. Sadly, USAID’s dissolution eliminated its funding to the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center. USAID-funded seed research benefits also accrued to American farmers.

USAID's investments also helped American ranchers feed their cattle. Striga, also known as witchweed, once threatened the world's sorghum crop. Sorghum can be a food source to American cattle in areas of the country where water is scarcer and is an important grain for human consumption in Africa and Asia. The U.S. is the largest producer of Sorghum in the world, valued at over \$1 billion annually.

Dr. Gebisa Ejeta, whose research was funded by USAID and who now teaches at Purdue University, developed a Striga-resistant Sorghum seed that stopped the spread of the parasitic weed. This inspired a group of American cattle ranchers to come to Washington to thank USAID.

USAID protected Americans' physical health as well. Starting in the Reagan administration, for 40 years, USAID developed and managed the Demographic and Health Surveys Program: a health statistics reporting system in 90 developing countries. It tracked death rates, birth rates, disease incidence and novel disease outbreaks.

This was our early warning system for novel diseases; its destruction could lead to a new pandemic. We cannot stop a new disease at our borders — by that time it's too late. The dismantling of USAID shut down the systems' management and funding.

USAID created a Famine Early Warning System, using satellites and ground-level information that helped developing countries anticipate and stop famines. When this system detected a drought in East Africa putting some 20 million people at risk, President Clinton organized a global response using USAID's many partners. Millions of lives were saved and the chaos of famine avoided.

No one asked what the cost would be in lives lost both in America and around the world from dismantling these systems.

As is true of every government agency, USAID needed constructive reform. The agency was heavily earmarked and constrained by Congress. However, transferring what little is left of USAID into the State Department is not the answer. This will lead to a clash of organizational missions and time horizons.

The State Department is a policy-planning organization with much shorter time horizons. USAID is a program management agency that manages international supply chains and development projects with time horizons of five to 10 years.

These past few weeks have revealed the loosening grip of the Trump White House on congressional Republicans. It may be the right time for Congress to reassert its prerogatives and fix the void the dismantling of USAID has created.

USAID should be reconstituted as a new cabinet level U.S. Department for International Aid transferring foreign assistance programs from a dozen departments and agencies a new body. An independent Department for International Aid will restore assistance to its proper role in the U.S. government's national security apparatus.