

The United States: The challenges and opportunities of US Foreign Assistance under Trump

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Overview

- The Trump administration has successfully shifted some aspects of US foreign assistance towards a more self-serving agenda. Fortunately, the “America First” rhetoric has not completely devastate the poverty fighting potential of US Foreign Assistance. A number of key initiatives remain intact or are gaining support.
- Congress rejected the administration dramatic foreign assistance cuts.
- Efforts inside development agencies hold the promise to increase attention towards ownership, more transparency, and to better mainstream a focus on gender.
- There are also promising efforts to increase the link between US foreign assistance and other forms of development finance, including a strengthened focus on aid for domestic revenue mobilization (DRM) and congressional introduction of a bill that would consolidated and expand the US’s development finance institution.

Introduction

During the 2015-2016 presidential campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump consistently returned to a familiar sentiment, that the United States should “stop sending foreign aid to countries that hate us.” This anti-aid mantra sent chills down the spines of anti-poverty activists who understood what a weakened US foreign aid profile meant for the global fight against poverty. Many foreign policy experts worried what these statements meant for US security interests.¹

Once Trump became president, his administration successfully shifted aspects of the US’s foreign assistance towards a more self-serving agenda. But the aid supporters in Congress have, so far, effectively blocked some of his more audacious proposals. As a result, the US continues to be a leading aid donor and has taken strides towards linking its aid to other forms of development finance. Yet, the administration continues to beat the anti-aid drum, and this may ultimately lead to regressive aid practices.

US Foreign Assistance

Given that the US is a significant actor in the fight against global poverty any changes to US foreign assistance will have major consequences. . Although the US only spends 0.18% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (ODA), which represents less than 1% of the US federal budget²it is the world’s largest bilateral donor.³In addition, the US is still the largest provider to least developed countries, responsible for 37% of all DAC ODA provided to LDCs in 2016.⁴

While it still requires congressional approval, the administration’s proposed State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) for fiscal 2019, gives indications as to future

geographic allocations for US foreign assistance, which includes more than traditional ODA.⁵ Nearly 45% of all foreign assistance would go to the Middle East and North Africa region, 34% to Sub-Saharan Africa, 8% to South Central Asia, 7% to the Western Hemisphere, and the remaining 6% to Europe/Eurasia and East Asia and the Pacific.⁶

In its foreign assistance, the US tends to prioritize countries where it has a strategic interest. In that regard, Israel would continue to be the largest beneficiary of US foreign assistance (\$3.3 billion), followed by Egypt (\$1.38 billion,) Jordan (\$1.28 billion), Afghanistan (\$663 million,) Kenya (\$624 million,) Tanzania (\$553 million,) Uganda (\$461 million), Zambia (\$440 million), Nigeria (\$352 million) and Pakistan (\$336 million).⁷ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the country's primary development agency, accounts for the largest share (39%) of US foreign assistance, followed by the Department of Defense (31%), the State Department (12%), and a host of other agencies and programs spanning from the Department of the Treasury to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁸

The US Administration's Anti-Aid Push

During his campaign, candidate Trump promised to implement an "America First" foreign policy. He used the term without irony, even though it meant adopting the slogan of groups considered anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi in the run up to World War II.⁹

Upon taking office in January 2017, Trump has moved to implement this pledge. By December, Trump issued a new National Security Strategy that fleshed out the America First approach.¹⁰ The policy included a decidedly reduced commitment to multilateralism,¹¹ including reduced US funding for the United Nations.¹² In 2018, the Administration doubled down on the approach, imposing retaliatory trade sanctions for alleged unfair trade practices on traditional US allies such as Canada and the European Union.

The Administration has shifted to an emphasis on defense over diplomacy and development. This approach is in contrast to the Obama administration's calls for balance among these three pillars of foreign policy. This change is apparent in the lack of formal policy-making officials at USAID (presidentially appointed and Senate confirmed) other than administrator Mark Green, 17 months into the administration.¹³ These posts remain vacant or in the hands of career officials who hold them on an acting basis, with limited authority. At the same time, political appointees who do not require Senate confirmation (with titles such as "special assistant") wield outsized policy authority. A similar situation exists at the State Department¹⁴ and the Millennium Challenge Corporation,¹⁵ where the Senate has yet to confirm the nominated CEO.

The administration has threatened to cut off aid to governments that fail to vote with the United States in the United Nations.¹⁶ It has also revived and broadened the so-called Mexico City policy, severely restricting the use of US aid funds for family planning and women's reproductive health.¹⁷ This policy has significantly limited local health organizations' abilities to perform their activities or access funds, even if the finances for their family planning activities are not obtained from the US.¹⁸

In April 2017 Trump issued an executive order requiring government agencies to “buy American and hire American”¹⁹ and ordered compliance by September. For USAID, the move contrasted sharply with the approach of the Obama administration, which passively supported special exemptions²⁰ and permitted procurement from developing-country firms.²¹

President Trump’s clearest anti-aid signal is demonstrated in his annual budget proposals, which have called for steep cuts in the FY18 and FY19 budgets. Fortunately, these cuts were blocked by congress. For example, in fiscal 2018, the administration proposed a cut of 32%.²² If these cuts had been approved, they would have disproportionately affected anti-poverty and gender equality programs. In FY18 details, the administration put forward a 40% cut for low-income countries, deeper than the proposed 32% reduction to the entire international affairs budget. In these budgets, rule of law and human rights, water and sanitation, and education would have been cut by approximately 45%.²³ Programs that protect vulnerable populations would have been cut by over 80%. Global health programs fared a little better in the proposed budget with a 26% cut, still a devastating blow that would mean that thousands of people who struggle to meet basic needs would lose access to critical health services such as HIV treatment or maternal health care.²⁴

The President’s proposed budget would have had a disproportionate impact on women. The FY18 proposed budget contained severe cuts (and in some cases eliminated) funding for accounts that address the needs of women in the developing world and drastically cut poverty-fighting programs. Both would have had a disproportionate effect on women.²⁵ Programs with an exclusive focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment were to be cut by 61%, another clear sign that women would be hurt most.²⁶ While these cuts were blocked by congress, the administration tried again in their proposed FY19 budget calling for a 30% cut from the approved FY18 budget.²⁷ As discussed later in this chapter, congress again blocked these steep cuts.

The administration has also demonstrated a lack of support for US foreign assistance by failing to elevate the role of development as a pillar of national security. The Obama administration began to rhetorically prioritize development alongside diplomacy and defense as part of a broader national security strategy.²⁸ But these ambitions fell short of elevating the USAID administrator to the National Security Council or the President’s cabinet, or to grant the development budget parity with diplomacy and defense. The Obama administration did, however, propose a single coherent US global development policy, the Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development,²⁹ something the current administration has not done. Without a single coherent policy, US implementation of foreign aid suffers from duplication, political competition and varied implementation of good donor practice, including compliance with development effectiveness principles.

Shortly after assuming the office, the new administration called for a reorganization of the State Department and USAID.³⁰ The call sparked concern and strong engagement from the CSO community, fearful that it signaled intent to subsume USAID under the State Department and thus further debilitating USAID’s ability to fight poverty.³¹ In response, aid advocates offered

proposals to strengthen development and prioritize the developmental purpose of US foreign assistance.³²

Reasons to be hopeful

While the picture on US development investments may seem bleak, there is reason to be hopeful. The drastic cuts proposed by the administration were essentially blocked by Congress, even with that body under the control of Trump's own party. The approved appropriation bill for FY 2018, essentially, congress's response to the administration's proposed budget and which was ultimately enacted, indicated only a slight 6% cut to the International Affairs Budget compared to 2017. While still a cut, it is far from the administration's proposed 32% reduction.³³ Congress has also maintained spending on key anti-poverty accounts, especially global health programs, including \$6 billion to combat HIV/AIDS. The most recent reorganization proposals keep USAID independent while creating internal efficiencies.³⁴ While the lack of an overall development strategy inhibits a consistent approach consistent with aid effectiveness principles and support for gender equality, internal bureaucratic pressure exists to improve the poverty fighting potential of US aid.

US aid and development effectiveness

The current USAID leadership intends to reform USAID operations, offering opportunities to build on the Obama administration's efforts and to improve transparency, ownership, and locally led planning. Former USAID administrator Raj Shah had introduced a series of internal reforms, known as USAID Forward. These aimed to strengthen USAID's approach to building local partnerships, through the fostering of innovative development approaches, being more results oriented, and allowing for more in-country based strategic planning through a Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS).³⁵ A number of these reforms, especially an effort to provide more US aid directly to local organizations,³⁶ were codified into USAID's operational guidance.³⁷

Current USAID Administrator Green has embarked on his own reform agenda, entitled Journey to Self-Reliance (JTSR).³⁸ This proposal focuses on supporting countries' own ability to solve development challenges, and includes a set of self-reliance metrics measuring a country's commitment and capacity. While initially the metrics were to identify countries ready for a changed bilateral relationship with USAID, with less focus on bilateral ODA, the metrics are now intended to guide country level strategy and programmatic choices through the CDCS process.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) continues to embed the development effectiveness principle of ownership in its operational model.³⁹ However, many of these efforts are threatened by understaffing and implementation challenges because those appointed to prominent positions lack development expertise.⁴⁰

USAID⁴¹ and MCC⁴² have both adopted gender policies to inform their work. However, these agencies face operational challenges,⁴³ and need to ramp up gender spending. In 2015, only 6%

of US aid was spent on programs with a primary purpose of addressing gender inequality, leaving the US at 11th place among other top donors.⁴⁴ Even expanding the scope to include projects that consider gender issues but not as the primary objective, the figure only rises to 20% of US aid, which put the US in 21st place in 2015.

Congress has joined efforts to improve US foreign aid, passing the Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act (FATAA) in 2016.⁴⁵ The bill ensures that all US aid providing agencies measure and report their activities and their impact to determine what is and is not working in US foreign assistance. In compliance with the Act, an increasing share of US foreign assistance is regularly reported to the US Foreign Assistance dashboard and relatedly, more US agencies are reporting their activities through the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI).

MCC consistently ranks in the top 10 on Publish What You Fund's Aid Transparency Index.⁴⁶ USAID, the Department of State, PEPFAR, and the Department of Defense have steadily improved their scores on the index since its inception in 2013. Despite this progress, a number of challenges remain. According to Oxfam research, for example, it was only possible to verify (through IATI) that 7% of US foreign assistance provided to Ghana arrived in the country between 2013 and 2015.⁴⁷ One significant reason for this situation was the US Government's failure to require all of its implementing partners to report their activities to IATI, similar to requirements at UK DFID. The US also does not currently report its activities against the IATI gender policy marker, making it harder to track the quality of its programs marked as working towards gender equality.

Aid for Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM)

Domestic resources are a long way from replacing the need for ODA, considering the rate of DRM growth and the amount of finance required to achieve the SDGs. Still, DRM is a critical aspect of sustainable financing for development though DRM activities encompass less than .02% of ODA. The US seems to be moving in the right direction in terms of pushing for more ODA commitments towards aid for DRM by both increasing its own activities and championing aid for DRM efforts in global arenas. According to Administrator Green, DRM is a means towards "passing the baton" to partner countries⁴⁸ and has integrated DRM into the Journey to Self-Reliance.

USAID currently spends approximately \$29 million per year on aid to DRM in over 30 countries.⁴⁹ In addition, the MCC spends around \$12 million and the US Department of the Treasury spends around \$4 million. While aid for DRM is provided through multiple agencies, the US is the largest aid contributor to DRM activities.⁵⁰ The US is also a founding member of the Addis Tax Initiative (ATI), and is currently a co-chair of the ATI Steering Committee. One of the three ATI commitments is for donors to double support for DRM from \$223.7 million in 2015 to \$447.5 million by 2020.⁵¹ Most donors are not on track to meet this commitment, but the US Congress recently endorsed more DRM spending by approving \$75 million for DRM specific line items in the FY19 budget request.⁵²

Yet, for DRM activities to be a force against poverty, aid for DRM must go beyond technical assistance and software development to an integrated focus on how revenues are collected as well as expenditures. The quality of aid for DRM must also be improved consistent with development effectiveness principles. It should also help support governments to adopt pro-poor/equitable DRM strategies with a stronger focus on gender-responsive budgets.

US and private sector

The US has a history of supporting the private sector in development, and with the Trump administration there is a renewed focus and greater attention on this front. USAID has emphasized projects that contribute to building local private sectors and⁵³ has fostering more private sector finance through initiatives like the Development Credit Authority (DCA.)⁵⁴ Private sector growth is embodied in the MCC's mission "to reduce poverty through economic growth."⁵⁵ The MCC puts this mission into practice by assessing all proposed MCC compact activities against a rigorous economic rate of return metric.⁵⁶

In February 2018, Congress introduced bipartisan legislation to revamp and expand the US's development finance institution, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). Created in 1971, OPIC provides loans, guarantees, and risk insurance to US firms that invest in developing countries. The Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act of 2018 would replace OPIC with the US International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC) at double the level of capitalization, with authority to make equity investments. It would roll the DCA into the new agency. The IDFC would continue to give preference to US firms, but would also have the ability to provide resources to non-US companies. One motivation of the bill's sponsors is a desire to enhance the US's ability to compete with China as a source of global development finance.

The initial text of the BUILD Act weakened OPIC's environmental and social safeguards and was vague in ensuring that IDFC projects would advance sustainable development. The legislation would have drastically watered down a 33-year-old prohibition on investments in countries whose governments fail to take steps to uphold labor rights. The House of Representatives took steps to improve the bill in committee, although it did not fully return to the level of standards in the current OPIC authorization. The House passed its version of the bill. In committee the Senate further built upon the improvements in the House bill so that the human rights, labor, and environmental standards in OPIC would remain in the BUILD act and it also included improved transparency requirements. The Senate bill has passed out of committee but has not yet passed the full chamber (August 2018).

Progress in an unfriendly environment

While the signs of an anti-aid agenda from the Trump administration remain mostly signals there is still reason to be concerned. It may only be a matter of time before the anti-aid drumbeat has tangible, adverse effects. Efforts to provide more locally implemented ODA may succumb to the administration's emphasis on its "buy American" mandate. The push to provide

aid to countries that vote with the US at the UN may ultimately create more politicized aid practices. US aid is already highly correlated with UN voting.⁵⁷ This may become even more pronounced, depending on the strength of the mandate outlined in internal guidance from US UN Ambassador Nimrata (“Nikki”) Haley.⁵⁸ The current administration still has some time to fully implement an anti-aid agenda. US organizations advocating for accountable and effective US foreign aid will need to be vigilant and ready to push the administration in the right direction.

¹ Francis, David et. al., “Will Foreign Aid Get Cut on Trump’s Chopping Block?” Foreign Policy Report, November 2016, accessed August 2018 at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/23/will-foreign-aid-get-cut-on-trumps-chopping-block/>

² Ibid.; Oxfam America, “Foreign Aid 101: A Quick And Easy Guide To Understanding Us Foreign Aid, Fourth Edition, 2017, accessed July 2018 at <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/foreign-aid-101/>

³ The next four largest bilateral donors are Germany, the UK, Japan, and France. See OECD, “Development aid stable in 2017 with more sent to poorest countries,” 2018, accessed July 2018, at <http://www.oecd.org/development/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/ODA-2017-detailed-summary.pdf>

⁴ Data calculated from OECD DAC CRS, ODA Disbursements, constant prices, to LDCs, 2016

⁵ There are a few caveats to mention here. “US foreign assistance” is defined differently from the OECD DAC definition of ODA. The US will measure the parts of US foreign assistance that comply with the OECD definition during their DAC OECD reporting. Second, because of this reporting difference, these figures presented here provide a snap shot of aid that will ultimately be counted as ODA but also includes other types of foreign funding such as Foreign Military Funding (FMF) typically provided to countries with US security and strategic interests. These figures represent the administration’s proposed budget and in recent years, have not specifically aligned with what is ultimately provided or spent in the countries and regions. Because of these caveats, the data presented here can only offer a speculative glance of US foreign assistance funding. To learn more about the distinction in the US foreign assistance, please see Oxfam America, “Foreign Aid 101: A Quick And Easy Guide To Understanding Us Foreign Aid,” Fourth Edition, 2017, at https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/ForeignAid_4thedition_FINAL_o5YMAbX.pdf.

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⁷ Ibid, Table 7, these numbers do not include MCC funding.

⁸ Calculations based on <https://explorer.usaid.gov/agencies>.

⁹ Wayne S. Cole, Charles A. Lindbergh and the Battle against American Intervention in World War II, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.

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¹¹ Goodman, P., “Trump Just Pushed the World Trade Organization toward Irrelevance” The New York Times, March 23, 2018, accessed June 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/business/trump-world-trade-organization.html>; Lardieri, A., “United States Announces \$285M Cut in U.N. 2018 Operating Budget,” U.S. News, December 26, 2017, accessed July 2018, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-12-26/united-states-announces-285m-cut-in-un-2018-operating-budget>; Krugman, P., “Donald Trump’s G7 debacle heralds collapse of Western alliance,” Financial Review, Jun 11, 2018, accessed July 2018, at <https://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/donald-trumps-g7-debacle-heralds-collapse-of-western-alliance-20180611-h118i8>.

¹²Lardieri, A., "United States Announces \$285M Cut in U.N. 2018 Operating Budget," U.S. News, December 26, 2017, accessed July 2018, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-12-26/united-states-announces-285m-cut-in-un-2018-operating-budget>.

¹³See <https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/leadership-listing>

¹⁴ See <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/title/index.htm>

¹⁵ See <https://www.mcc.gov/about/leadership>

¹⁶ Lynch, C., "Haley: Vote with U.S. at U.N. or We'll Cut Your Aid," Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018, accessed July 2018 at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/15/haley-vote-with-u-s-at-u-n-or-well-cut-your-aid/>

¹⁷ The White House, Presidential Memorandum Regarding the Mexico City Policy, January 23, 2017, accessed July 2018 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-regarding-mexico-city-policy/>; Siddiqui, S., "How has Donald Trump's first year affected women?," The Guardian, January 18, 2018, accessed July 2018 at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/18/how-has-donald-trumps-first-year-affected-women>; Anapol, A., "Trump official claimed US is a 'pro-life nation' in UN meeting: report," the Hill, April 17, 2018, accessed July 2018 at <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383579-trump-officials-claimed-us-is-a-pro-life-nation-pushed-for-abstinence-based>; Riley, J., Trump Appoints Transgender Rights Opponent to USAID Post," Metro Weekly, June 30, 2017, accessed July 2018 at <https://www.metroweekly.com/2017/06/trump-appoints-trans-rights-opponent-usaid-post/>; Frey, B., "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda Under the Trump Administration: Undercutting Advances with a Return to Masculine Militarism," University of Minnesota, September 27, 2017, accessed July 2018 at <http://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-under-the-trump-administration-undercutting-advances-with-a-return-to-masculine-militarism/>; Sharman, J., "Donald Trump to strip all funding from State Department team promoting women's rights around the world," Independent, April 25, 2017, accessed July 2018 at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-budget-2018-state-department-cut-office-global-womens-issues-oxfam-ivanka-a7701631.html>.

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²⁴ Grabowski, A., "Will the US abandon the world's poorest?," Oxfam America, June 2017, accessed July 2018 at <https://politicsofpoverty.oxfamamerica.org/2017/06/will-the-us-abandon-the-worlds-poorest/>

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