Strengthening American Global Leadership Through Development and Humanitarianism: An Affirmative Vision for U.S. Foreign Assistance

October 2026

This paper is Aid on the Hill's answer to the open-ended questions about the future of foreign assistance that have dominated the debate in the sector since the dismantling of USAID in the spring of 2025. Countless organizations and individuals have already provided their own answers to those questions, including a vast array of specific visions for what foreign assistance should look like going forward. Few of these proposals mention development or needs-based humanitarianism, although there are some notable exceptions. Rather than supplying another blueprint, Aid on the Hill argues that the policymaking community has been asking the wrong question. This paper proposes an alternative, higher-level question and lays out a democratic process for answering it.

Bottom line up front: The question after USAID's dismantling isn't what the future of foreign assistance should be, but what role America should play in the world. Aid on the Hill believes that development and humanitarianism should be at the center of American foreign policy, that our capacity to do sustained and principled development and humanitarian work is currently under existential threat, and that sustaining this capacity likely requires a standalone agency. **We call on Congress to lead an evidence-based and democratic process to determine an optimal institutional structure before any of the current transfers of functions are codified as permanent.**

Strategic Landscape

In the wake of the dismantling of USAID, the "future of U.S. foreign assistance" has emerged as the central question. As an organizing principle, however, it's deceptively narrow. Some of USAID's former functions have been transferred to the State Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the U.S. government is still providing foreign assistance through bilateral agreements, multilateral institutions and macro awards to preferred partners. In many ways, the future of foreign assistance is unfolding now; the administration is leveraging it as a tool to promote reciprocal commitments, including access to critical minerals, country-level health data and cooperation on third-country deportation arrangements. The U.S. government is instrumentalizing humanitarian assistance to benefit the administration's political allies and prioritizing the preferences of American farmers above the needs of hungry people worldwide.

What was lost in 2025, and what is under existential threat now, is the United States' capacity to conduct sustained and principled development and humanitarian work: the long-term, specialized project of helping countries build stronger economies, democratic institutions, health systems, infrastructure, human capacity and resilience, while upholding human rights and centering human dignity. Whether America intends to continue to pursue those goals and maintain the capabilities to support them is currently unclear.

America's Role in the World

Instead of asking what the future of foreign assistance should look like, we should ask instead: ***what should America's role in the world be*?** Once we answer that question, we can determine the structures needed to support that role, and how foreign assistance should be used to advance it.

Aid on the Hill believes that America should contribute to a just global peace, advance international security and growth, invest in shared problem-solving and uphold human rights and our own American values including liberty, equality and opportunity. Recent public opinion polling continues to demonstrate widespread and bipartisan support for America to play a highly engaged and constructive role in the world. America's foreign policy is uniquely global and extensive; we have a vital interest in fostering strong relationships in every region, expanding economic opportunity, preventing crises before they become more devastating and costly, and contributing to an international system that supports human wellbeing and dignity, free societies and shared prosperity. With these as our guiding principles, **development and humanitarianism are more than just transactional categories of foreign assistance; they must be understood as central components of American foreign policy.** This is non-negotiable, and this values-based approach is the foundation upon which our foreign assistance – and our broader foreign policy and national security apparatus – should be organized.

Current Context

Countries are navigating conflict, economic disruption, public health threats, climate pressures, rising authoritarianism and rapid technological evolution – compounded by shrinking aid budgets. They also have more choices in terms of partners to work with than ever before. In the wake of recent policy decisions that have undermined U.S. global standing, credibility and security, the United States must demonstrate the value of partnership and rebuild trust. **But in the new multipolar world order, American influence can no longer be assumed; it must be earned.**

Defining Development and Humanitarianism

Global development is a long-term effort to reduce poverty, improve human wellbeing, and build sustainable economic, social and political systems worldwide.

Development gives America a way to engage countries around what they are trying to accomplish, not simply around what we want from them. It helps support the economic, institutional and human foundations for durable and mutually beneficial partnerships. It strengthens relationships that endure beyond individual diplomatic transactions, meaningfully expands economic opportunity and helps countries become more capable of addressing shared challenges.

Humanitarianism is an ethical commitment to saving lives, easing suffering and protecting human dignity during crises like natural disasters and wars.

Humanitarianism must be needs-based; the U.S. should provide impartial and effective humanitarian assistance determined by the severity and scale of human suffering, and prioritize the most vulnerable without discrimination, political influence or transactional benefit. We should prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it is found and protect human life and dignity.

Development and humanitarianism function as essential instruments in our national security toolkit: serving our interests *and* reflecting our values.

A New Vision for American Foreign Policy

Centering development and humanitarianism in U.S. foreign policy means that we cannot view foreign assistance simply as a tool to advance our own diplomatic gains. The next generation of American foreign policy should move beyond an outdated concept of "foreign aid" to address 21st century problems, build global solidarity and advance shared prosperity. We must work toward a world in which:

- All people and communities have the conditions and opportunities to thrive, living with dignity and the health, education, security, rights and economic opportunities needed to shape their own futures.

- Countries are resilient and equipped to withstand crises, prevent conflict, govern effectively and accountably, and deliver lasting improvements in the lives of their people.
- Prosperity is shared and sustainable, driven by productive economies, open and dynamic markets, scientific and technological progress, climate resilience and responsible stewardship of natural resources.
- International partnerships deliver mutual benefit and collective progress, enabling countries to cooperate on shared challenges, strengthen global stability and create a more peaceful future.

Principles that should guide this work include:

- **Human rights and dignity -** responding to people's needs, protecting fundamental rights, respecting their agency and doing no harm.
- **Impartial and needs-based humanitarian action** - providing assistance according to need and maintaining independence from political and strategic objectives.
- **Local ownership -** respecting partner-country priorities, strengthening local capacity and building on locally defined pathways to enduring progress.
- **Collaboration and partnership** - working with allies, multilateral institutions, civil society and the private sector.
- **Evidence, accountability, and sustainability** - measuring results, adapting based on experience, building durable capacity and stewarding public resources responsibly.
- **Integration and coordination** - drawing on the full range of relevant U.S. government capabilities to advance coherent, mutually reinforcing objectives.

Designing the Right Institutional Structure

What structures, tools and capabilities does the United States need to fulfill this role? Should the United States rely on the current institutional arrangements in which USAID's portfolio is scattered across the State Department and USDA – in addition to the many other agencies with a stake in this work prior to 2025, like the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) and others? Or should America simply restore USAID as it once was?

Form should follow function. The structural questions undergirding the current debate are paramount because the architecture will ultimately determine whether the United States has the capacity to execute this vision. The discourse has become trapped between two unsatisfying alternatives: restore the institutions of yesterday or accept the transfer of functions now underway as inevitable. Neither proposal is sufficient for advancing a bold and principled foreign policy vision in the decades ahead. The current reorganization should therefore not be treated as the final destination of U.S. foreign assistance.

Development and diplomacy are deeply interconnected, but they are not interchangeable. A modern foreign policy needs both. Development must be understood as a distinct but complementary function, and not subordinated to diplomacy or instrumentalized toward short-term political outcomes. **Foreign assistance should be used to advance sustainable and needs-based development and humanitarian agenda.**

Available evidence of aid mergers in other countries points toward **a standalone agency as a key part of the broader national security and foreign policy apparatus**. Rather than preserving institutional independence for its own sake, the United States must maintain the institutional focus, specialized expertise, professional capabilities, interagency coordination and accountability necessary to do both diplomacy *and* development and humanitarian work well. Aid on the Hill believes that principled American foreign policy likely requires an independent successor to USAID – not USAID as it once was, but renewed and reinvigorated to advance America's values-based foreign policy and meet the needs of a rapidly changing world.

A Process for Determining What the Future Should Look Like

Aid on the Hill believes that **Congress should lead the process for determining the future, and refuse to codify major changes to U.S. foreign assistance structures and authorities before their consequences have been fully understood**. This leaves the door open for a wider variety of options in the future, including the possibility of a standalone, fit-for-purpose development and humanitarian agency. **Congress should establish a transparent, accountable, evidence-based process to determine what the future architecture of American development and humanitarian engagement should look like.**

That process should:

- **Examine the lessons learned from aid mergers in other donor countries**. Study countries that have integrated development and humanitarian functions into foreign ministries, including both benefits and tradeoffs on diplomatic, national security, and development and humanitarian outcomes. Consider those mergers in the context of the U.S.'s ambition of being a principled global leader, scale relative to the U.S.'s foreign assistance budget, and scope of countries that the U.S. wants to engage. Examine mergers based on evidence of execution, not assumptions about coherence and alignment.
- **Evaluate the past and current U.S. models on their merits**. Assess how development and humanitarian programs are performing under their current institutional arrangements – including programs transferred to the State Department and USDA – against USAID's past performance. Examine the entire apparatus of agencies implementing foreign assistance, including DFC, MCC, USTDA and many others. Consider implementation capacity, staffing, expertise, partner relationships, convening power, program quality, accountability, outcomes, and progress against development and humanitarian objectives. Determine whether the transfer of USAID's former functions has supported or hindered diplomatic and national security objectives in addition to development and humanitarian goals.
- **Consult broadly and democratically, including proactively soliciting input from development practitioners.** Congress should convene a wider variety of stakeholders than the ones currently being consulted, including executive branch agencies; development and humanitarian professionals – including local experts from partner countries and experts from other donor countries – diplomatic and national security experts; partner-country governments; implementing organizations; private-sector actors; researchers; civil society; program beneficiaries; the American public; and others with relevant experience.

Conclusion

The dismantling of USAID in 2025 by executive fiat forced major structural changes to America's foreign assistance ecosystem and national security apparatus. The ramifications of those decisions have not yet been fully realized, understood or litigated in court. Congress now has an opportunity to methodically scrutinize those changes rather than prematurely treating them as settled.

The United States should enter the next era of international engagement with a clear mission: to use American capabilities to help build a world in which more countries benefit from economic growth, are capable of meeting the needs of their people, and are able to contribute to solving shared challenges. That vision reflects what Congress and the American people continue to support: an America that lives up to our values, remains engaged with the world, uses our resources responsibly, builds partnerships that serve mutual interests and addresses shared challenges before they become more costly and difficult to solve. Aid on the Hill advocates for development and humanitarianism as central capabilities of American leadership, and aims to be a constructive partner to Congress in building an institutional architecture capable of advancing that ambitious vision.

About Aid on the Hill
Aid on the Hill (AOTH) is a nonpartisan movement of aid professionals, advocates and engaged citizens working to keep international development and humanitarian aid at the center of U.S. foreign policy. We connect on-the-ground field experts with lawmakers to protect lifesaving global programs that safeguard national security, foster economic opportunity and reflect American values. Learn more.

Copyright and Attribution Rights
All content, materials, and publications produced by Aid on the Hill are protected by copyright law. No part of this publication or any work published by Aid on the Hill may be reproduced, distributed, or otherwise used without the prior express written permission of Aid on the Hill. Citation does not imply endorsement of the citing organization or its recommendations. Aid on the Hill is nonpartisan and does not permit the use of its name or logo in materials for candidates, campaigns or political action committees.

Contact Us
Have questions or comments? We are happy to help! Reach out to our team anytime at info@aidonthehill.org.

This publication is prepared by Aid on the Hill.
Copyright © 2026 Aid on the Hill. All rights reserved.