

Common questions about U.S. Government International Assistance

Some Facts about U.S. Government International Assistance

The U.S. government has been involved in providing international assistance since before the first world war. There is a robust history of American communities and churches giving aid to other countries (charity). Initially international assistance was given for humanitarian reasons to those recovering from war and to prevent starvation and assist with poverty reduction.

Beginning with the Marshall Plan after World War II, Americans began to see international assistance as also important to American national security and commercial interests by restoring economic stability and containing the spread of communism.

In 1961 Congress passed the Foreign Assistance Act, which reorganized U.S. international assistance programs and mandated the creation of an agency to administer economic aid. The goal of this agency was to counter Soviet Union influence during the Cold War and to advance US soft power through socioeconomic development.^{[13][14]} USAID was subsequently established by the executive order of President John F. Kennedy, who sought to unite and coordinate several existing international assistance organizations and programs under one agency.

Aid is financed from US taxpayers and other revenue sources that Congress appropriates annually through the United States budget process. It has been dispersed through "over 20 U.S. government agencies that manage international assistance programs,"^[14] although about half of all economic assistance was channeled through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Typically, the support from the US government goes either to a government entity or to communities in that country. Such support typically falls into one of three categories: 1) humanitarian assistance for life-saving relief from natural and manmade disasters; 2) development assistance that promotes the economic, social, and political development of countries and communities; and 3) security assistance, which helps strengthen the military and security forces in countries allied with the United States. The relative proportions vary each year, but over time humanitarian assistance accounts for a bit less than one-third of the international assistance budget, development assistance a bit more than a third, and security assistance about a third.

Common Questions

Why should the U.S. Government provide aid to other countries? Why is it our job?

Sometimes it seems like Americans are on the hook for every cause in the world, that we are expected to write checks for everything that comes along. And it is true that the U.S. has been by far the largest provider of assistance to low- and middle-income countries. However, other nations step up too, and the USA has historically provided a smaller proportion of its GDP and GDP/capita than all other wealthy nations, costing US households on average \$10/week in 2023.¹ Prior to 2025 U.S. investments in international assistance accounted for less than one percent of our annual federal budget.

Is international assistance effective in substantially improving people's lives?

Yes! The global impact of the work we have supported is impressive. Just a few of many highlights:

In 2023 alone, activities supported by U.S international assistance, directly resulted in:

- Better health and health services for 95 million people, especially mothers and babies.
- Investment of \$4.8 billion in local businesses benefiting the poor by yielding jobs and increased incomes.
- Education of 23 million children who otherwise would not be in school.

Between 2000 and 2015, The President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) established by President George W. Bush reduced malaria mortality by over 60 percent, saving nearly 7 million lives, most of them children under 5 years of age. Until January 2025, PMI supported malaria prevention and control for over 500 million at-risk people in Africa.

Between 2003 and 2023, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), also established by President George W. Bush, saved 25 million lives from HIV/AIDS and enabled 5.5 million babies to be born HIV-free.

While international assistance may help some people, isn't it failing to make the world a better place overall?

Until 2025 the U.S. government regularly monitored and reported on how and whether assistance programs were working, with periodic evaluations of results. There is good evidence that development and humanitarian programs produce considerable progress.

¹ In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government spent approximately \$71.9 billion on international assistance¹ and there were an estimated 132.28 million U.S. households in 2024.

The record of global development achievements is impressive, including:

- Death among women due to pregnancy or childbirth, declined by 34 percent from 2000 to 2020 and life expectancy globally has more than doubled from 32 years in 1900 to 71 years in 2021.
- The number of people living in prosperity is growing by about 85 million every year. Extreme poverty has declined from 2 billion people (36 percent of the world's population) in 1990 to 712 million (9 percent) in 2022. If pre-2025 trends were to continue, the world would experience a tipping point in 2049 when the prosperous will outnumber the non-prosperous for the first time in human history.
- The rate at which mothers, infants, and children die have been cut in half.
- Smallpox has been defeated and polio eliminated in all but two countries.

What good does international assistance do for the USA?

Effective international assistance programs further the interests of the United States. They generate goodwill, giving U.S. government officials and businesses priority and friendly access to officials in other countries. International assistance helps stabilize countries and promotes economic development: 10 of the top 15 U.S. export markets are former recipients of international assistance². Numerous U.S. military leaders, as well as the American Legion, have publicly supported international assistance, emphasizing its importance to national security and global stability, preventing conflicts and reducing the need for costly and dangerous military interventions.

International assistance supports programs that detect and combat infectious diseases, like Ebola, before they can reach U.S. shores, and promote more effective responses when they do, by sharing research and data with other countries.

Millions of international assistance dollars go directly to U.S. farmers and companies. to buy agricultural products, medical supplies, and services from U.S.-based companies. Tens of thousands of jobs in the private sector were in some way dependent on international assistance contracts.

Wasn't USAID poorly run? Why did it take so many bureaucrats to provide international assistance?

Prior to 2025, USAID employed 10,000 staff with two-thirds working overseas in 60 countries. USAID staff took seriously the mandate that funds should be used in the most effective manner, reflect both U.S. government and local priorities, be provided by effective partners, and not be lost to corruption. This requires careful vetting of proposals and monitoring of projects and

² Mexico, China, India, Brazil, South Korea, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Taiwan

spending from beginning to end, which requires talented and dedicated workers.

This may seem like a lot of people, but the total administrative costs of USAID, including staff, was only 11 percent of the agency's budget.

Congress audited USAID every year and every year USAID, and every internal department, has passed. This is in contrast to the Department of Defense which has failed every audit since annual, department-wide audits began in 2018. As of November 2024, the Pentagon had failed its seventh consecutive audit, unable to fully account for its budget and assets and no major part of the DoD has ever passed an audit.

Was USAID really funding initiatives contrary to U.S. values?

90 percent of USAID's budget was earmarked by Congress. While USAID had some leeway in determining which organizations would be best able to effect the work or could sometimes refine specific technical aspects, USAID staff were legally obligated to carry out Congress' directives and did so scrupulously. Only 10 percent of the overall USAID budget was actually at the discretion of USAID staff. Note that USAID staff were not implementing aid projects. The money went to local and international NGOs such as World Vision, Save the Children, Project Hope, CARE, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Catholic Relief Services and many other faith-based and secular organizations. In each case, once funds were granted based on agreement between USAID staff and the NGOs on appropriate services, it was the NGOs who were responsible for the appropriate use of funds.

Despite this, USAID has come under public criticism for specific projects, but these were either not USAID projects or represented a minuscule fraction of that 10 percent and even less of USAID's total budget. In case these come up in a meeting here is a list of what was claimed and the reality:

1. Condoms for Hamas.
 - Claim: USAID provided either \$50 million or \$100 million to the International Medical Corps to supply condoms to Hamas in Gaza.
 - Fact: The International Medical Corps has stated that no U.S. government funding was used to procure or distribute condoms in Gaza. USAID's reports confirm that no contraceptive shipments were sent to Gaza; the only recent shipment in the Middle East was a small delivery to Jordan.
2. LGBTQ+ Workplace Inclusion in Serbia:
 - Claim: USAID allocated \$1.5 million to promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Serbian workplaces.
 - Fact: This funding supported a program aimed at improving the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Serbia's workforce, where LGBTQ+ rights are limited. The initiative sought to foster economic independence and reduce discrimination.

3. DEI Musical Event in Ireland:
 - Claim: \$70,000 was spent on producing a DEI-themed musical in Ireland.
 - Fact: The U.S. State Department, not USAID, provided \$70,884 for a live musical event titled "Other Voices: Dignity – Towards a More Equitable Future," to promote values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.
4. Transgender Opera in Colombia:
 - Claim: \$47,000 was allocated for a transgender opera in Colombia.
 - Fact: The State Department, not USAID, awarded a \$25,000 grant to a Colombian university to raise awareness and increase transgender representation through an opera production.
5. Transgender Comic Book in Peru:
 - Claim: \$32,000 was spent on creating a transgender comic book in Peru.
 - Fact: The State Department, not USAID, funded a comic featuring an LGBTQ+ hero addressing social and mental health issues.
6. Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Stations in Vietnam:
 - Claim: USAID invested \$2.5 million in building EV charging infrastructure.
 - Fact: USAID's Vietnam Urban Energy Security project, with a \$2.7 million budget, promoted renewable energy and energy efficiency to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support Vietnam's net-zero goals by 2050.
7. Providing College Education to the Taliban
 - Claim: USAID spent millions of dollars paying for college tuition for Afghans, including members of the Taliban
 - Fact: Congress earmarked tens of millions of dollars (on average, more than \$10 million per fiscal year for over a decade) to support higher education programs at the American University in Kabul. This is the same American University that is in Washington, DC, and which has campuses in Cairo, Egypt, and Beirut, Lebanon. The activity was intended primarily to expand women's access to higher education. It also helped spread American values in a place where that was challenging.
8. USAID official making sweetheart deal
 - Claim: "An official at USAID banned a DOGE employee from examining the books, we now know why, that official was taking under the official from somebody they were cutting a sweetheart deal to" - Quote from Sen Ted Cruz, mentioned on his podcast and other conservative podcasters such as Ben Shapiro.
 - Fact: This was not USAID corruption, this was corruption at the African Development Foundation (AfDF). The AfDF is an independent agency. The USAID provides Inspector General services to the AfDF, but the Agency is independent. The USAID OIG, also independent from the USAID itself, filed a warrant and from reading the warrant was in the process of investigating the corruption. I assume that the person would have been prosecuted but the

President fired the USAID OIG and thus I imagine the investigation died. If the person at AfDF did what he is accused of (even the Senator said it is not confirmed but I agree something seems fishy), he should absolutely be prosecuted and punished and it should be brought to light.

Shouldn't we take the international assistance money and help our people at home?

Unfortunately, the current administration has not mentioned any plans to do this. The Project 2025 document, forming the blueprint for current initiatives only mentions assistance to the poor in terms of tightening existing restrictions on domestic programs like Section 8 and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

Was the 90-day pause really a big deal? And weren't there waivers to restore many of the critical life-saving services?

Initially, the Administration stated that USAID programs would be subject to a 90-day pause while all projects were reviewed and those that were 'life-saving' or met US interests would then be continued.

There have been two major problems with this. First, even activities that received a waiver or other promise of continuation cannot continue because the organizations that carry out these activities haven't been paid for their past work and funding for their work to continue hasn't been released. The USAID payment system was shut down and there are no longer sufficient staff to operate it. This has caused many U.S.-based organizations, including religious non-profits, to incur substantial debts. Those companies have not been able to continue to operate and they have had to lay off staff and cease operations.

Second problem, USAID has since been dismantled, with only a few USAID staff being incorporated into the State Department, which is itself being broadly scaled back. So, there isn't the staff or the funding to continue most of the life-saving or otherwise critical programs. As you read this, children are being born with HIV who would otherwise have been protected if their mothers continued to have access to antiretroviral medications. Children are not being treated for infections or receiving nutritional supplements that support their current and future development. Emergency food supplies and medications that were purchased prior to the pause are now spoiling in warehouses and on docks in the USA and other countries, since the organizations that distribute them have not received permission and/or funding to do so. The freeze itself is wasting U.S. taxpayer dollars and causing loss of life.

Were there any significant problems with the pre-2025 approach to international assistance?

Yes, absolutely. Former USAID workers and those who worked as contractors and grant recipients all have recommendations for reforming international assistance to make it more effective. Those recommendations include working with Congress to reduce some of the bureaucratic requirements and increasing the focus on 21st-century priorities and U.S. interests. But these changes should happen while the U.S. continues to meet its commitments, giving advance notice to governments and other entities to make other arrangements if programs are to be shut down. As it stands the precipitate ending of funding without warning has wasted millions of US taxpayer dollars as supplies spoil and programs are left in limbo. This has left many people in need without alternative arrangements by their government or other sources.