

FOREIGN AID EXPERTS SEETHING AFTER KEY STATE, USAID MEETING

FOREIGN POLICY

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A recent meeting between U.S. officials and NGO leaders to discuss the future of foreign assistance quickly devolved into disarray, according to several participants.

On Aug. 11, officials from the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development convened NGO leaders — including former USAID employees — to update them on the two bureaucracies' ongoing reform efforts kick-started by the Trump administration.

Some 90 to 110 experts were in the audience, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to provide feedback on how best to reform and streamline the U.S. foreign aid and diplomacy arm.

What they got instead was a bare-bones PowerPoint presentation that left them with more questions than answers, a brief and awkward portion in which attendees answered five questions by text with preselected answers, and a heated Q&A session.

“The redesign is an on-going, employee-led process, and we continue to engage with external partners as we examine how to best achieve USAID’s mission. State and USAID have conducted multiple stakeholder engagements, of which the August 11th meeting was one,” a USAID official said in an email to [Foreign Policy](#). “The Department of State and USAID are taking questions and feedback from stakeholders into consideration as this process moves forward.”

The meeting unveiled growing tensions over Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s plans to overhaul the State Department’s management structure, which has faced mounting resistance from diplomats, lawmakers, and outside experts alike. It also raised questions of how organized the process really is, given a tight timeline and no clear publicly available answers on what the redesign will actually entail.

Experts asked the officials leading the meeting — Jim Richardson of USAID and Caroline Espinosa of the State Department — questions on the specifics of the administration’s reforms, budget issues, and the overall goals of the redesign process.

Each time, the officials refused to directly answer the questions, attendees said. They were instead met with vague platitudes like “this is an employee-driven process” and “we have no preconceived outcomes.”

Holding a meeting with no substance was not useful, one attendee remarked. “It seemed strange to do this. It seemed to just generate anxiety or animosity.”

A participant who asked about the rumors that the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration will be dismantled and moved into the Department of Homeland Security was told that no decision had been made. “Everything is on the table,” was the answer.

“People began to get up and leave,” one attendee told FP. “People in the audience were loudly guffawing, calling out and cutting off Caroline and Jim as they spoke, and yelling out questions, pushing back on statements made by both of the co-leads.”

The officials didn’t provide clear answers. Several attendees described their demeanor as “patronizing” and the meeting setup as “artificial.” Another compared the meeting to a “1950s sex ed class.”

One expert, fed up with what they felt were non-answers, went to the microphone during the Q&A and told the U.S. officials, “To be honest about this entire meeting, this audience deserves more respect. We have immense expertise, and we all know what is really going on here. This process is a joke.”

Many U.S. officials say streamlining the unwieldy bureaucracies is a step long overdue, but the way in which the administration has gone about it has unnerved diplomats and foreign aid experts, who see it as an excuse for the Trump administration to defang U.S. diplomacy.

The State Department is expected to present its redesign plan to the Office of Management and Budget by Sept. 15, a nearly impossible timeline, several officials familiar with the process told FP.

From there, the OMB, under executive order, has 180 days to decide what to do within the context of the budget and present a government reorganization plan. But that plan is based on a proposed budget that is considered by Congress as dead

on arrival; Democrats and Republicans alike lambasted Donald Trump's steep cuts to the diplomacy and foreign aid budget and said they'd never let it pass as is.

"State and USAID remain in close consultation with each other, and the Hill has been briefed on the process," the USAID official said.

From the OMB, the recommendations get shuttled over to the White House, where they meet an uncertain future. "There's a real question about when this gets to Tillerson, then the White House," one foreign aid expert involved in the consultation meetings told FP. "What are they going to do with it?"