

USAID Should Further U.S. Interests, Not ‘Safe Spaces’

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The Trump administration’s new budget outline calls for a 28% cut in funding for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Defenders of USAID insist that foreign aid is vital to advancing U.S. interests. They’re right—but there’s also plenty of waste.

On its [website](#), USAID explains that the “Purple My School” program, a joint venture with the United Nations, “encourages peers, teachers and parents to become allies of LGBTI students” in eight Asian countries. “Through teachers’ facilitation, students discuss issues surrounding homophobia, how to create safe spaces for LGBTI students, and are encouraged to wear, draw, or make something purple.” (The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.)

To [promote](#) transgender rights in Central America, USAID has “helped Guatemala’s Election Tribunal update election manuals and provide trainings to electoral officials on how to be sensitive to people whose appearances are not congruent with the birth name on their personal identification card.”

During the Obama years, USAID was prominent in sectors like LGBTI rights, abortion and “social justice”—promoting agendas that were neither supported by large segments of the U.S. population nor of clear benefit to American national interests. The agency often acted as if it were a private nonprofit organization with a liberal agenda, rather than a taxpayer-funded arm of the U.S. government.

The agency’s defenders insist that such projects are the exception—that USAID’s \$27 billion budget contains little that is frivolous or ineffectual. But it’s impossible to determine based on publicly available information if the amount of wasteful spending is closer to zero or 28%. USAID and its contractors have mastered the art of re-christening programs to appease congressmen and their constituents.

During the Obama years, for instance, USAID spent counterterrorism funds on traditional antipoverty programs by claiming that poverty is “exploited by extremist groups.” It justified sponsorship of Somali girls’ [basketball teams](#) and “community dialogue sessions” the agency said were “essential to the stabilization of regions that have suffered from mistrust, conflict and turmoil for decades.”

The next USAID administrator, as yet unnamed, will need to reassess all existing programs to determine which ones are actually advancing U.S. interests. In some instances, the answer will be clear—like programs that improve local conditions to discourage illegal immigration to the U.S. In others, the connection will be indirect, as in the case of development initiatives that promote cooperation on security issues.

Such a reassessment would open eyes among members of Congress who have not hitherto seen much need for revamping USAID. It would surely demonstrate the need for major cuts to existing programs.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the overall budget should be gutted. At least some of the savings should be redirected to programs that will advance U.S. interests in a cost-effective manner. Crafting fruitful programs will require replacing the theories and assumptions underlying much of USAID's current work—especially the dubious idea that geographic and environmental factors account for underdevelopment.

Many programs give recipients no incentives to undertake self-improvement, thereby creating perpetual dependencies. Every country that has made the transition from Third World to First World did so through improvements in public-sector governance and private-sector entrepreneurship. Those improvements were contingent upon human capital—highly educated and suitably motivated elites.

USAID resources should therefore be reallocated to areas that strengthen governance and stimulate economic growth. Activities that cultivate human capital, particularly higher education and governmental training, deserve more funding. The U.S. government pursued a similar course in the 1950s and 1960s, and to good effect, before discarding it in the 1970s out of a misguided anti-elitism.

The South Korean, Taiwanese and Chilean leaders who transformed their countries from aid absorbers into strategic allies were products of the USAID scholarship program. USAID's occasional emphasis on governmental leadership since that time has fueled further successes, as in the case of Colombia's judicial system, which helped curb cocaine shipments to the U.S.

USAID's activities must also be integrated with those of other national-security organizations, particularly the State and Defense departments. Under President Obama, USAID preferred to keep its distance from other agencies, often treating development as if it could be addressed in isolation from other elements of foreign policy. Experience has shown such segregation to be counterproductive. Corrupt officials steal funds earmarked for economic development programs and demand bribes that stifle private enterprise. Teachers stay away from schools and nurses avoid health clinics when insurgents threaten their families at gunpoint.

Effective foreign assistance requires a unified strategy that addresses development, governance and security in unison. USAID will need to collaborate more extensively with the rest of the government. Its guiding principle should be that the primary purpose of American foreign policy is safeguarding the interest of America's citizens.

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