

Bill Gates Is Right, USAID Is Not Just Foreign Aid, It Aids the U.S.

Contributed March 18, 2017 to Forbes Magazine by Bruce Y. Lee

Which would make you safer and healthier? Being the neighborhood hermit, locking and bolting your doors, not helping your neighbors but instead threatening them, and allowing trash, sewage, rats, and cockroaches to accumulate around your house? Or actually caring about your neighborhood and neighbors and pitching in to keep your surroundings clean and safe?

Many are labeling President Donald Trump's recently proposed 28 percent cut of the State Department's and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) budget as drastic cuts in foreign aid. But the term *foreign aid* is inaccurate and may be misleading. It suggests that what USAID does is all charity work. Nothing could be further from the truth. USAID began in 1961 (with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 by Congress) when our nation's leaders at the time had some foresight. President John F. Kennedy explained that "There is no escaping our obligations as a wise leader and good neighbor in the interdependent community of free nations...and our political obligations as the single largest counter to the adversaries of freedom." This all sounds good as a sound bite, but there's also plenty of selfish motivation behind helping other countries. Doing so creates economic opportunities for the U.S. and makes the world safer for U.S. businesses and Americans. When considering USAID, the focus should not be just on the "AID" but the word development.

Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and Co-Chair of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, summarized the dangers of cutting USAID in his Op-Ed for *Time* opening with:

Foreign aid is often in the hot seat, but today the heat is cranked up especially high. The United States government, one of the world's most influential donors, is considering dramatic cuts to health and development programs around the world. I understand why some Americans watch their tax dollars going overseas and wonder why we're not spending them at home. Here's my answer: These projects keep Americans safe. And by promoting health, security and economic opportunity, they stabilize vulnerable parts of the world.

He went on to explain that USAID work helps prevent and control epidemics such as the Ebola outbreak and the spread of HIV/AIDS, create jobs for Americans and people around the world, strengthens markets for U.S. goods, and protect Americans such as our military members. In other words, foreign aid actually helps improve the health of Americans.

This is the same reason you try to make friends with people around you, put trash in garbage cans, don't randomly spit and yell insults at work, and actually attempt to improve your neighborhood and workplace. This is also why smart companies make efforts to engage and improve the communities around them. Such work elevates their standing in the community, strengthens their businesses, and creates more opportunities. Do the opposite, make enemies, fail to build relationships, and let health and other threats fester around you, and you risk seriously hurting yourself.

No country, organization, or person will ever be powerful enough to succeed or even remain healthy without cooperation or assistance from others. Throughout history, countries have shown that isolationist policies eventually lead to the downfall of kingdoms, dynasties, and powerful countries. As an example, China was once the world's most advanced civilization for a much longer period than the entire history of the United States. But complacency, arrogance, and refusal to deal with countries that they felt were inferior (basically every other country in the world) deprived China of opportunities to further grow and strengthen itself, leaving it susceptible to health problems such as opium addiction and foreign control.

The challenge is that not everyone may realize the far-reaching benefits of USAID's programs because its programs involve such complex systems and a plethora of direct and indirect effects (e.g., improving health systems in low and middle income countries in Africa reduces the risk of a disease outbreak that could eventually lead to a global pandemic that otherwise would affect all Americans). The world is truly global now, highly interconnected by complex systems (e.g., linked economies, trade, food systems, travel). Perhaps there is a need to better demonstrate to the public and other decision makers the far-reaching value of USAID's programs. For instance, our SPACES (Strategic Program for Analyzing Complexity and Evaluating Systems) consortium has been working with various USAID programs and missions via Sophia van der Bijl of the Global Development Lab to bring new methods and approaches (such as systems mapping, computational simulation modeling, narrative-based

approaches, and indicator based approaches) that help better understand and address complex systems as well as the ramifications of changes and decisions. Such approaches can better "connecting the dots" so that everyone can see how USAID efforts benefit different Americans.

If Trump's proposed USAID cuts go through, they will not make America Great. In fact, quite the opposite may happen. Being more isolated will allow other countries to assume world leadership. According to a Brookings Institute report, from 2001 to 2013, China more than doubled its foreign aid. Since 2005 and its launch of its "Go Global" strategy, China's foreign aid totals "have grown at an average rate of 21.8 percent annually." As *The Guardian* reported, U.S. foreign aid, before the proposed cuts, already lags that of numerous countries (in terms of percentage of the gross national income) such as Sweden, Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark, the U.K., Germany, France, and Switzerland.

The myth that the U.S. does not need other countries and just gives foreign aid as handouts is a dangerous one. Complacency and unrealistic self-images are our country's biggest enemy. I've already mentioned the many signs that a major pandemic may be on the horizon. Add to that the risk of war and other major problems that could affect your health.

Gates plans to meet with Trump on Monday, presumably in part to deliver in person his messages about the importance of funding global health and development. This may include his concluding remarks in his Op-Ed:

Protecting Americans, preventing epidemics, strengthening markets, saving lives: aid delivers phenomenal benefits, and for a bargain. It represents less than 1 percent of the federal budget, not even a penny out of every dollar. It is some of the best return on investment anywhere in government. This money is well spent, it has an enormous impact, and it ought to be maintained.

In the end, USAID is an investment, and the emphasis should be on the word development. Not investing in America's established place in the world will eventually make America sick. Let's not be the neighborhood hermit who isn't seen until an ambulance arrives to take the weakened and ill hermit to the hospital.