

# **A Proposal for Compiling and Publishing a History of USAID**

## **USAID Alumni Association**

### **Summary**

This paper seeks additional financial contributions for the compilation and publishing of an independent, objective and concise history of USAID's 55 years of support for development. This history will be designed to reach an audience of policymakers and practitioners who wish to learn from experience and apply these lessons to future programs. The estimated cost of this two-year-long project is about \$300,000, of which about one-half has already been raised in pledges from USAID alumni. The project has an ideal institutional home at the Center for Global Development (CGD), which has offered to publish the book, consistent with its normal high standards. This paper describes the proposal.

### **Background and Purpose**

There is growing recognition that an independent, objective and selective history of USAID can be an important tool for explaining the value of development and the achievements of foreign aid. Its primary and most important purpose is to capture lessons learned – both good and bad - that will help USAID continually improve the effectiveness of its work. Such a written history of USAID can also serve as a resource for better telling the story of development as a key instrument of U.S. foreign policy. It can also make an important contribution to the USAID section in the new United States Diplomacy Center. Such a history should have meaning to the American people and their elected representatives, to the international development and foreign affairs communities and to those whose careers are committed to development.

The USAID Alumni Association (UAA) is uniquely positioned to champion this effort to create a succinct history of development as practiced by USAID and the countries with which it has worked for over 50 years. The UAA has recently prepared a bibliography of books written by USAID retirees, many of which capture their USAID experiences and the challenges they worked to overcome. The UAA is also delighted that USAID has just agreed to support the renewal and expansion of the existing oral history program for USAID retirees. Both are

important complements to this proposal for a published history of USAID experience.

A serious and major undertaking of this kind will require substantial financial resources, adequate time, sound judgment and broad knowledge of USAID and the environment in which it has operated over the past five decades. It will require the support of many partners, both to finance it and to ensure it is researched and written in an objective and easily accessible fashion. The end product should be a substantive and readable book with links to other sources for readers interested in digging deeper.

### **The Audience for the Book**

This book is not intended to be a technical guide to project development and implementation. Nor is it meant to be a comprehensive review of the entire USAID record. Rather it is to provide a broad overview of the policy and program lessons learned in USAID's 55 year history, drawing on key country and issue-focused cases and reinforced by reference to the very human stories of USAID's career development professionals. Development policy-makers and practitioners confronting similar problems and issues now and in future years should find it helpful to learn from that experience. Other members of the foreign policy community, Congressional oversight committees, the media and interested members of the general public could make better assessments of USAID's strengths, weaknesses and lasting contributions based on this well-documented and reasoned history. The book would serve as well as the basis for videos and other methods of reaching various audiences using social media (see below).

### **Structure of the Book**

While final design must await the assurance of adequate funding and selection of the author(s), the book would likely need to present a combination of chronological and theme or country-based chapters. The opening chapters should describe the long historical background leading to the creation of USAID and provide an overview of the special focal points which describe each of AID's five decades. A dozen chapters would then likely be devoted to a selection of country/regional programs of significance, and to the major issues on which AID involvement played an instrumental role, drawing out successes and failures and

both positive and negative effects – e.g., the green revolution in agriculture, disaster preparedness and recovery, education and training, and health, nutrition and family planning. A separate chapter would bring together lessons learned from these cases, and a final chapter would indicate how this history applies to the work of the development agency in the future. Boxes scattered throughout the text could highlight the special contributions of selected individuals or groups.

### **Source Material**

A history of USAID has never been written. Unfortunately, USAID – unlike the State Department, CIA, the Pentagon and other agencies – does not have an Office of the Historian. There are, however, many sources on which to draw, and a problem for the author will be to sort through the massive amount of material. Among the more obvious sources are USAID’s own files, including its evaluations, to which this historical study should have access; recent USAID historical reviews; oral histories of retired USAID staff and other interviews to be conducted by the history’s author; books and articles written over the years by USAID staff and retirees; and published research by others on aid history, much of which is critical. We can also count on USAID alumni to respond to requests for analytical and factual background on development issues involving USAID (and related United States Government agencies).

### **Advisory Committee**

An Advisory Committee would help the author select the most significant country cases and issues for the lessons they offer and the impact they have had. The Committee should include interested USAID Alumni with a strong background and interest in this subject as well as several development practitioners from outside USAID who could help achieve the objectivity such a history requires. A professional historian or two with development experience should also be included to help insure balance and objectivity and to help ground the study in the intellectual evolution of development thinking and American history.

### **Independent, Balanced and Objective**

In doing this work the temptation must be avoided of seeing USAID’s role through rose-colored (and/or magnifying) glasses. While USAID’s activities clearly have

diplomatic implications and results, the book's primary focus will be on development outcomes. The author must be prepared to be critical – including both of what was done right and then dropped (e.g., due to Congressional, public or Administration pressure) and of what was not done right. It is important that the history draw on source material addressing major criticisms of USAID. The study will need to explore the tensions, challenges and opportunities that have influenced USAID's staff and their work since its inception.

### **USAID Influence on other Donors**

The history should also recognize and reflect on the leadership role USAID has played – or not played - with other development agencies in promoting closer alignment of policies and building international consensus on best practices to support more effective development cooperation.

### **University Link**

While not essential to proceeding with this history, we have also been encouraged to think for the longer term about building on and multiplying the results of this work through a link to a major academic institution. Inevitably, the proposed historical study will not resolve all issues and controversies – thus, the growth of follow-on research is much to be encouraged. A university link would complement the CGD role as the home for this initiative (see below) and would provide opportunities for many spin-offs from the basic work – e.g., PhD dissertations and Masters theses on specific issues raised by the history, introduction of the findings and challenges into the design of development studies courses and in other areas of study, establishment of library facilities focused on development and related research, and so forth.

### **Follow-on Activities**

In addition, there should be many opportunities to draw upon the history and its findings to develop informative videos and other forms of easily accessible social media to demonstrate the lessons learned that should influence future development activities by USAID and others. For example, the history could be used to promote a series of PBS American Experience Videos on Foreign Aid and on the American effort to promote development and democracy around the world. Such videos

could be used to better communicate with the American people and host countries and to better train USAID officers, most of whom now have little sense of what USAID accomplished in the past and what lessons have been learned. Such an effort would require different authors and additional funding, but it is important to keep these supplementary benefits in mind as we proceed on the first stage.

### **Budget, Author and Home**

Once underway, we estimate that the project should take about two years to complete at a total cost of about \$300,000. This would cover the cost of an experienced author who can make the story compelling, interesting and readable, as well as of additional research assistance and other ancillary and publishing costs. It will be a demanding job to synthesize and use existing studies while incorporating into them the real world experiences of UAA members and USAID staff. Finding the right person to lead this study is of paramount importance. We have several active and interested candidates but cannot proceed further until the necessary funds are assured.

The project must also have a credible and respected institutional home, and we are deeply grateful that Nancy Birdsall has offered to house the project at the Center for Global Development (CGD) and to publish the book, consistent with its normal high standards. This very important step is a highly significant contribution.

With the advice and enthusiastic support of Nancy Birdsall and several former USAID Administrators, including most prominently Peter McPherson and Henrietta Holsman Fore, we are reaching out to potential sources of financial support. Pledges of generous financial support received from several former USAID Administrators, members of the UAA Executive Committee and from the broader USAID alumni community now total over \$170,000. An additional \$150,000 is still needed from AID alumni and other sources.

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The USAID Alumni Association is a registered 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

For further information please contact UAA History Committee Chair Alexander Shakow at [ashakow@comcast.net](mailto:ashakow@comcast.net).

10/16/16