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Cutting USAID: A Bad Idea for America

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In over fifteen years of working with USAID, I've seen firsthand how our efforts abroad create profound and lasting benefits for those we help and for America itself. USAID has long operated from an altruistic framework that emphasizes improving lives, fostering global security, and promoting democracy. Abandoning this approach would not only jeopardize humanitarian progress but would also harm our nation's strategic interests.

A Legacy of Impact

Throughout my career at USAID, I witnessed countless examples of positive change:

- **Yemen's Poultry Project:** In the early 1980s, when children in Yemen were starving due to a lack of protein, USAID supported a poultry initiative that provided chicks to villagers, schools, and businesses. Through training programs, this project evolved into a thriving poultry industry, even amid conflict.
- **Empowering Afghan Women:** In Afghanistan, USAID worked closely with women to launch small businesses that enabled them to feed their families and gain financial independence.
- **Health Initiatives in Nigeria:** By collaborating with local communities, including outreach among vulnerable groups, USAID played a key role in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Nigeria, we worked with prostitutes to help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS by providing testing, medicine, and condoms. Thousands of lives were saved.

These examples illustrate the mission of USAID: to uplift impoverished communities and stabilize regions that are critical to global security.

Mutual Benefits and Global Learning

One of the most enduring lessons from my time with USAID is that aid is not a one-way street. Despite our Western expertise in medicine and agriculture, the people we assisted often had much to teach us in return. For example:

- **Learning from Nepal:** The sophisticated medical practices and advanced farming techniques developed over thousands of years in Nepal have influenced modern Western systems. This mutual exchange enriches both sides and reinforces the importance of international cooperation.

I learned that people could have as much to teach us as we had to teach them. The current administration's use of arrogance, disrespect, and humiliation cannot lead to cooperation and will prevent us from learning from each other.

The Risks of a Transactional Approach

Recent policy shifts toward a more opportunistic, transactional model of foreign aid are alarming. If we dismantle USAID:

- **Humanitarian Crises Could Escalate:** Cutting critical funding for health, food security, education, and disaster relief may trigger or worsen humanitarian emergencies.
- **Threats to National Security:** A weakened global stability can have indirect effects on U.S. national security. The absence of USAID's soft power diminishes America's ability to foster goodwill and influence abroad.
- **Erosion of Diplomatic Influence:** As America retreats from its commitment to global welfare, other nations or rival powers will seize the opportunity to fill the void, potentially shifting the balance of power on the world stage.

Changing our foreign aid policy from one of altruism to one that prioritizes short-term gains for the wealthy undermines the long-term benefits that have made USAID a cornerstone of U.S. global leadership.

Conclusion: A Strategic Misstep

Eliminating or significantly cutting USAID is not simply about reducing government spending, it's a strategic misstep with far-reaching consequences. Our engagement with the world through USAID has not only saved lives and empowered communities but also enriched America's own society through the exchange of ideas, culture, and technology. As we face an increasingly complex global landscape, abandoning the principles of cooperation and mutual benefit could ultimately weaken America's position as a leader on the world stage.

Susan L. Coleman, Ph.D., spent over two decades fostering sustainable progress in diverse global communities through the Peace Corps, USAID and other organizations.