

U.S. Agency for International Development: An Overview

Background

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is the lead international humanitarian and development arm of the U.S. government. Its programs support U.S. political and strategic aims by providing assistance to strategically important countries and countries in conflict; leading global efforts to alleviate poverty, disease, and humanitarian need; and assisting U.S. commercial interests by furthering developing countries' economic growth and building these countries' capacity to participate in world trade.

USAID is responsible for the implementation of more than \$20 billion in combined annual appropriations, representing more than one-third of the funds provided in the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriation and international food aid provided in the Agriculture appropriation. USAID's annual appropriations come from 12 budget accounts—most “solely owned” and some programmed collaboratively with the Department of State (State)—making any calculation of its current budget imprecise. (For more on SFOPS, see CRS Report R46367, *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2021 Budget and Appropriations.*)

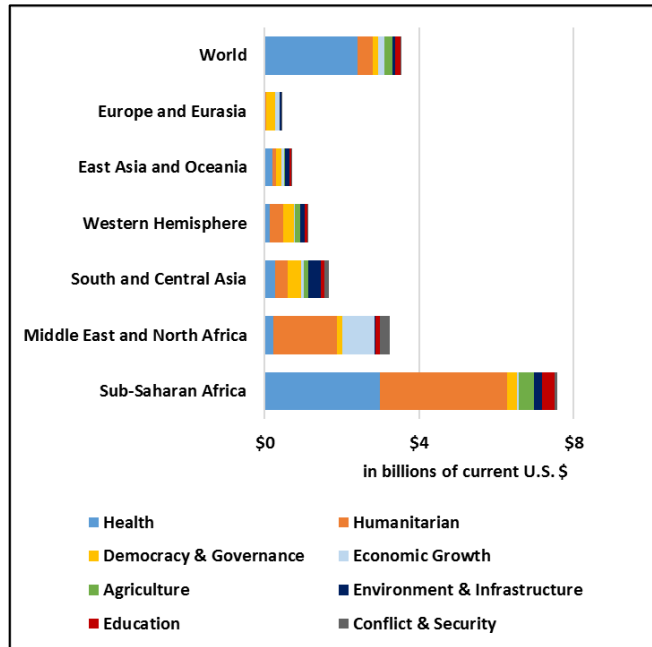
“On behalf of the American people, we promote and demonstrate democratic values abroad, and advance a free, peaceful, and prosperous world. In support of America’s foreign policy, the U.S. Agency for International Development leads the U.S. Government’s international development and disaster assistance through partnerships and investments that save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance, and help people emerge from humanitarian crises and progress beyond assistance.”
— USAID Mission Statement (2019)

USAID maintains more than 60 country and regional missions that design and manage a range of projects, most intended to meet specific development objectives as outlined in a Country Development Cooperation Strategy. Most projects are implemented, through a grant, cooperative agreement, or contract, by one of thousands of foreign and U.S. development partners—such as nonprofit private voluntary organizations and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), for-profit contractors, universities, international organizations, and foreign governments.

In FY2019, the most recent year for which detailed estimates are available, USAID provided assistance to more than 120 countries. Foreign aid allocations reflect both recipient needs and U.S. foreign policy priorities. The top 10 recipients of USAID-implemented funds in FY2019 were, in order of funding, Jordan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Syria, South Sudan, Kenya, and Iraq. Reflecting USAID's poverty reduction mandate, 72 of the 79 World Bank-determined

low- and lower-middle-income countries received assistance in FY2019, with nearly 39% of USAID funds programmed in sub-Saharan Africa (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. USAID-Implemented Program Funding, by Region and Sector: FY2019 Estimate



Source: Foreign Aid Explorer and CRS calculations.

Notes: World accounts for programs that span multiple regions.

Since the early 1990s, health has consistently been the largest USAID sector, bolstered since 2004 by billions of dollars in transfers from State's President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Humanitarian assistance has also increased in recent years, particularly in response to both the emergence of new natural and human-induced humanitarian crises, and ongoing protracted crises. (For more information on U.S. responses to humanitarian crises, see CRS In Focus IF10568, *Overview of the Global Humanitarian and Displacement Crisis.*)

USAID Under the Trump Administration

Under former USAID Administrator Mark Green (who served from August 2017-April 2020, after which John Barsa was appointed Acting Administrator), and in response to Administration directives aimed at making federal agencies more efficient, effective, and accountable, USAID began a series of internal reforms, branded as *USAID Transformation*. Reforms target three areas—process and programs, organizational structure, and workforce management—and many build on past efforts, including those of the Obama and George W. Bush Administrations. Underlying the proposed *Transformation* is the “Journey to Self-Reliance,” the ultimate goal of

which is ending the need for foreign assistance by building country capacity to plan, finance, and implement solutions to address development challenges without foreign assistance. While most *Transformation* reforms are not contingent on congressional approval, Congress has shaped the reform's implementation through other oversight functions and funding requirements and restrictions. (For more information on *Transformation*, see CRS Report R45779, *Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)*.)

Issues for Congress

USAID faces numerous challenges in the process of fulfilling its mission, in part due to how the institution has had to adapt to changes in U.S. foreign aid priorities over time. According to authors Kopp and Naland, “The constant battles in Congress and within the administration over how much to spend on foreign aid and how and where to spend it make the agency vulnerable to sharp swings in funding and frequent reorganization.” The challenges that observers have noted and Congress may track include the following:

Budget. Each year, the Trump Administration has proposed cuts of more than 20% to the agency's annual budget. As Congress has repeatedly not accepted the proposed budget cuts, the disparity between what is requested and what is appropriated has posed a challenge to USAID's planning and program implementation. The appropriation of significantly more funding than requested—often months into the fiscal year due to Congress's use of continuing resolutions—can require offices to program large sums of money in relatively short time periods.

COVID-19. USAID has led U.S. foreign assistance efforts to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to” Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) abroad. Focus areas include health assistance in coordination with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, humanitarian aid, and economic development. Congress provided supplemental funding for USAID's work and monitors implementation through oversight mechanisms. For more, see CRS In Focus IF11496, *COVID-19 and Foreign Assistance: Issues for Congress*, and CRS In Focus IF11606, *COVID-19 and Foreign Assistance: Congressional Oversight Framework and Current Activities*.

USAID and the State Department. The Administration's *Transformation* effort renewed a long-standing debate about the USAID-State relationship. In crafting the reform agenda, USAID solicited input from stakeholders, which led to multiple reform proposals. These include making USAID the coordinator of all government humanitarian and development assistance, absorbing USAID into State, and creating an entirely new aid agency, among others. As of now, no firm plans exist to drastically modify the institutional relationship, but the debate may continue. USAID was never established in statute; its status in relation to State has been largely shaped by executive order and could feasibly change without congressional action.

Sustainability and Effectiveness. Congress remains interested in how USAID ensures that project efforts are maintained by local governments and organizations after U.S. support ends. USAID's “Journey to Self-Reliance,” country development plans, and new financing efforts—

including greater private sector engagement—are meant to address this challenge. Further, in this Administration and the last, USAID has increased its project monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) requirements for both staff and implementing partners to measure project progress. USAID indicates that its MEL agenda is an iterative process, evolving to incorporate best practices.

Human Resources. USAID staff are hired and managed under more than 20 mechanisms. These include direct hire staff (e.g., civil and foreign service) and nondirect hire staff (e.g., personal services contractors and institutional support contractors). USAID has stated that this structure does not give enough flexibility to meet the agency's evolving needs. Further, some experts are concerned that the agency's increasing reliance on nondirect hire positions has led to a lack of institutional knowledge and higher staff turnover. The USAID Office of Inspector General also found in 2019 that staff responsible for award and contract management often felt overworked, without the time to conduct adequate program oversight. USAID maintains that it is factoring these issues, among others, into its workforce development plan; Congress provides input into USAID workforce issues in annual appropriations legislation.

Employee Diversity. In June 2020, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that USAID was not fully successful in its efforts to increase the agency's workforce diversity from 2002 to 2018. Further, GAO found that “promotion outcomes at USAID were generally lower for racial and ethnic minorities than for whites in early to mid career.” USAID outlined a number of steps it would take to address these findings, including revising its operational policy, updating the agency's *Strategic Plan for Diversity and Inclusion*, and analyzing workforce data to inform future diversity and inclusion work. Congress has signaled its support for USAID's diversity efforts through annual appropriations legislation, among other avenues.

Program Flexibility. Congressional funding mandates, specifying amounts for health, biodiversity, and other sectors, account for as much as two-thirds of USAID's annual program budget. These, plus any presidential initiatives, may limit USAID missions' capacity to advance the objectives of their Country Development Cooperation Strategies. Some critics believe that legislative conditions further stymie flexibility and cost efficiency.

Security. Security concerns in nonpermissive environments raise obstacles to successful project implementation. Following the 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Congress required the co-location of USAID personnel in extremely secure U.S. embassies, even in seemingly stable, safe countries. Some observers raise concern that this arrangement can discourage the interaction with local government and private sector stakeholders that many consider necessary for successful development programs. In 2018, USAID joined with the Departments of State and Defense to conduct a Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), which offers lessons learned and best practices for working in conflict-affected areas.

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