

The 'How' and 'Why' of Reforming U.S. Foreign Assistance

David Beckmann
Huffington Post
April 30, 2009

Since its origins after World War II, U.S. foreign assistance has served our national interests in three ways: enhancing national security, fighting poverty and expanding global economic opportunities, and promoting American values.

These interests are mutually reinforcing, and when our government pursues them, our country emerges as a pragmatic and principled world leader. The importance of supporting development and poverty reduction abroad is understood now, as never before, as both a moral imperative and a prerequisite for sustained U.S. national security.

That said, here is the challenge we face: U.S. foreign assistance is still largely governed by a law passed in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy. Patchwork attempts to update our foreign assistance system over the last several decades have brought more chaos than clarity: 12 departments, 25 agencies, and almost 60 government offices today implement our global development policies and programs.

Despite many successful programs, the system remains badly outdated, poorly organized and generally ill equipped to meet today's global challenges.

In these difficult economic times, a more efficient foreign assistance system--with better coordination, better accountability and better clarity--will ensure that people who need help the most get it faster and more effectively. Also, it will mean less waste and more impact for our hard-earned tax dollars.

Last night, our lawmakers started the process of overhauling U.S. foreign assistance. Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA-28), chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Rep. Mark Kirk (R-IL-10), introduced H. R. 2139, the Initiating Foreign Assistance Reform Act of 2009. It requires President Barack Obama and his administration to develop and implement a comprehensive national strategy for global development, improve evaluation of development programs, and increase the transparency of U.S. foreign assistance to developing countries.

This is a good first step in making our nation's foreign assistance more effective, efficient and accountable. Coordinating and improving our foreign assistance can have far-reaching effects on reducing hunger and poverty and making the world more politically stable. In turn, a more effective U.S. foreign assistance system would make for a more secure United States, and restore our leadership around the world.

U.S. global leadership is based not only on our military clout or economic power, but on our moral stature, which derives in large measure from helping others improve their lives and those of their communities and societies. Investments in international health care, education, job creation, infrastructure and other essential services that generate economic growth and reduce poverty overseas are investments in our own future.

As President Obama said at a town hall appearance today in Missouri marking his 100th day in office, U.S. aid to other countries isn't only ethical and moral, but it's sound strategy as well. The president knows foreign aid is very unpopular with the public, especially when there are such pressing needs at home, but by showing an interest in the well-being of people in other countries, the United States can meet its national interests.

In a world where poverty anywhere threatens prosperity everywhere, foreign assistance is a vital tool for translating our moral beliefs into practical actions.

David Beckmann is president of Bread for the World.