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THE JERUSALEM POST

Jerusalem Post / Opinion

USAID bears the American identity and is bound to US's destiny - opinion

USAID promotes a more stable and prosperous world and helps alleviate immediate suffering. It also brings home vital lessons to promote the US's best growth.





COMMUNITY MEMBERS of all ages gather in Telouet, Morocco, for a participatory dialogue session during the Southern Heritage Tour, organized in October 2022 as part of the USAID-funded Dakira program. (photo credit: COURTESY HIGH ATLAS FOUNDATION)

By YOSSEF BEN-MEIR

MAY 20, 2025 03:34

What an agency, organization, or even an idea becomes will always resemble to some degree – though it fluctuates across time – the inspiration at its inception.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was born from the US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. For the first time in the short history of international development assistance, it enshrined the concept of people’s “participation” in their own change and growth.

Now, generations later, based on evaluations worldwide across cultures, we know that the local beneficiaries need to be integral to the design, management, and evaluation processes in order for initiatives to provide continued gain for the people.

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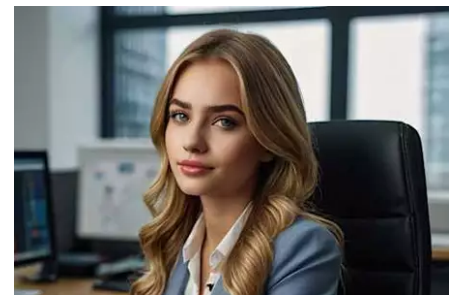
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Principle of USAID

Development today, beyond any doubt, has revealed that the longevity of initiatives is primarily determined by the measure of participation. USAID was spawned on this idea, majorly pioneering the principle that beneficiary decision-making on the projects that impact their lives drives sustainability.

The agency was also founded on a corollary, indelible concept: poverty alleviation that addresses the economic, social, and environmental conditions that oppress people and deny them livelihood, and that peace is, in and of itself, the high purpose.



THE USAID building in Washington: Reports indicate that humanitarian aid funds intended for rebuilding Gaza's infrastructure have also benefited groups tied to Hamas, the writer notes. (credit: Annabelle Gordon/Reuters)

Geopolitics is not the single or even primary factor for gaining assistance through USAID. Rather, uplifting humanity from the tortures of extreme poverty, disease, and catastrophes is its calling.

USAID delinked assistance, being only provided to contain the Soviet Union. Human suffering, wherever it may emanate, is worthy of our attention and eradication. How these central concepts of USAID unfold in those nations of the world where it is invited is particular to the situation of each host nation.

For example, the experience of the [High Atlas Foundation](#) in implementing USAID's Dakira cultural preservation program in Morocco (concluded at the end of 2024) ensured that today's young people sincerely internalize their nation's indelible heritage of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian solidarity, integration, shared experience, and partnership for survival and growth.

This is a priority held by the government and the people of this North African, Islamic country, and USAID provided the support for it.

Interfaith collaboration is essential for peace

In a world where religious-based strife, misunderstanding, separation, and even violence are ever present, worrisome, and unsustainable, the governments of Morocco and the United States together recognized that the kingdom's experience and its domestic and global knowledge-sharing provide an inspiring model for young people and policymakers.

In fact, interfaith collaboration is not only essential for peace, but our best development and growth depend upon it.

Morocco stands for intercultural dialogue and connectivity leading to livelihood, health, and education. It is not only a necessary, most viable pathway for itself, but is also an emblem for the world.

USAID not only [saves lives](#) through the provision of essential medicine, food, and support in the face of overwhelming disaster, but it is also a critical partner in advancing American ideals with nations that also strive for a more perfect union and inspire others through their journey.

There is an undeniable phenomenon among organizations and agencies as they grow and naturally change over decades. In time, it becomes increasingly difficult for any entity – including religions or institutions, be they public, civil, academic, or private – to remain absolutely true to the original vision that launched them.

How recognizable would nations of the world be to their founders? How recognizable are conglomerates to their original creators or religions to the prophecies that begot them? There may be no greater challenge for any collective body than to remain consistently true to the original mission over time.

Certainly, the High Atlas Foundation, dedicated to change driven by the people, finds it increasingly difficult to launch every action in every location with empowerment and building self-belief and confidence as the essential beginning. It is very difficult.

So, too, USAID needed to return to its community participation roots. With its necessary, admirable commitment to implementers' financial, programmatic, and reporting compliance, USAID began to heavily rely upon larger organizations to administer local actions around the world.

Those organizations, in turn, partnered with national organizations working at the local level. USAID re-emphasized that localization enacted alongside indigenous civil and private groups is critical for effective development.

The lessons in international development generated by USAID have profound implications for the United States' internal growth. For example, cultural preservation efforts in Morocco, financed by USAID, underscore the centrality of interfaith partnership for achieving sustainable benefits.

That [vital lesson](#) should be a guide for the White House Faith-Based Office, which stretches across federal agencies.

Community-managed economic projects point to how decentralized administrative systems emerge from carrying out such actions. This demonstrates ways the US federal government can strengthen the enduring core of the country, which is its federalist system.

Yes, USAID promotes a more stable and prosperous world and helps alleviate immediate suffering, but it also brings home vital lessons to promote the US's best growth.

The Farmer-to-Farmer Program, for example, enabled US agricultural experts to devote millions of hours to sharing their vast knowledge with nations of the world. What they have learned during their volunteering with communities abroad has enhanced their own work, productivity, efficiency, and opportunities at home.

USAID is a reflection or extension of the American ideal and may be retrenched for a time, but no doubt, one day, it will continue. It must, lest its expression – which rings from every true American anthem – grow silent.

It is therefore bound to the destiny of the United States, whatever its iteration.

The writer is president of the High Atlas Foundation and a sociologist based in Marrakech, Morocco.

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