

The casual cruelty of USAID's demise

by Bob McMullan

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After the 2021 earthquake in Haiti, the US Navy and Marine Corps in coordination with USAID delivered aid to hard-to-reach areas quickly.

Photo Credit: Twitter/USNavy

Too many commentators are looking at the administrative changes Donald Trump is making at USAID rather than focusing on the tragic human consequences of the underlying policy changes.

I don't agree with the decision of the Trump administration to abolish the independent international aid agency, USAID, and fold its remaining activities into the State department.

It undervalues the skills required to administer aid programs efficiently and effectively.

However, Trump's initiative is a conventional conservative government policy. It was implemented by Stephen Harper in Canada and has subsequently been adopted by New Zealand, the UK and, of course, by Tony Abbott in Australia.

I think it is a stupid conservative triumph of prejudice over good governance.

But it is essentially a bureaucratic fight. It is perfectly possible to run a sound aid program in a combined foreign policy and aid department. If the funding and the will is there, good results can be delivered.

The real crisis with what is happening to USAID relates the drastic changes to its funding and personnel.

Of course, I expected Donald Trump to cut the US aid program. Such an essentially narcissistic man would always find it difficult to understand the humanitarian roots of the aid program which has been supported by every US president since Truman. It is also unlikely that the subtle diplomatic and strategic benefits of a modestly generous aid program such as that of the United States before Trump would appeal to the transactional character of the current US president.

Any new government is entitled to review programs and expenditures to ensure that

they are consistent with the government's priorities and values.

But to suspend lifesaving expenditures while the review is conducted is entirely unacceptable and that should be apparent to anyone with a modicum of compassion.

It may make business sense to stop everything and rebuild from the ground up, but to do so in government in this indiscriminate manner will inevitably mean that the poorest and neediest will suffer while the review is undertaken.

It is the casual cruelty of this approach which I find difficult to stomach.

It is far too early to gain a comprehensive assessment of the damage to lives, health and economic opportunities which will flow from the disastrous cuts already outlined.

But even the early signs are sufficient to justify genuine alarm at the damage which the changes have already made and will continue to make.

The Washington Post reports that "...in the besieged capital (of Sudan) more than two thirds of soup kitchens have closed in the last week". And further, "It means that over eight million people in extreme levels of hunger could die of starvation."

And this is only one of the dozens of countries which will be losing life-saving assistance.

In Mali, a school that served 500 students was told to suspend classes.

Clean water, food, health, education and employment are all in jeopardy.

It is difficult to credit that the world's richest man, Elon Musk, can take actions which will have such a devastating impact on the world's poorest people.

The cuts will have consequences for Australia's region as well.

There are already reports of a halt to mine clearance in Laos, a legacy of US carpet-bombing of the country as an ancillary to their war in Vietnam. I have seen the consequences of such bombs and mines on people from the elderly to babies. How anyone could think it is good policy to stop funding the removal of unexploded ordnance for which your country is directly responsible is beyond my comprehension.

The reported death of a woman from Myanmar who was in the border refugee camp and died when her essential oxygen supply was unavailable is just the tip of a very

large iceberg.

While the US is not a major aid provider in the Pacific, its contribution is important in such an aid-dependent region.

It is too early to assess the consequences of the budget cuts for the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank which are so important to countries in our wider region, from India and Pakistan to Samoa and Kiribati. What we know is, it can't be good for the funding of either institution or the other multilateral institutions which play such an important role in our region.

We may never know the total human cost of this inhuman approach to governance.

But we can be sure that the poorest and neediest will suffer the most.

As noted earlier, there are profound strategic and foreign policy implications of this abandonment of US responsibility in international development issues. These are important but we need to focus also on the profound human consequences of the proposed cuts to USAID.

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