

USAID launches Global Development Lab

By Ashlee Betteridge and Robin Davies

Earlier this month, USAID [announced](#) the launch of its [Global Development Lab](#), which aims to harness technology and science-based solutions to work toward ending global poverty.

The Lab describes its highly ambitious mission as ‘to discover, test, and scale breakthrough development innovations to solve development challenges faster and cheaper in support of U.S. foreign policy and development goals and to accelerate the transformation of USAID as the world’s premier development agency.’

The Lab’s work will focus on six areas: water, health, food security and nutrition, energy, education, and climate change. This is a broad research agenda—perhaps too broad for a single entity. It will [have an initial staff](#) of 150, 65 of them scientists, with others seconded from large companies and development NGOs. Some of those involved include Intel, the Gates Foundation, Walmart, Coca-Cola, Cisco and many more.

The Economist reports that USAID will [fund](#) the Lab to the tune of \$600 million and implies that this will be the annual spend (because it compares this figure to USAID’s roughly \$20 billion annual spend). This number appears to have come from the [press release](#) on the launch, which says that USAID is spending \$611 million on research, innovation and applied solutions in science and technology in total this year—though it does not say all of this will in future be channelled to or through the Lab. Meanwhile, other sources are reporting that USAID is spending anywhere between [\\$100 million](#) to [a billion a year](#) on the initiative. In short, the

numbers are all over the place. Perhaps the best indication of the ball-park figure is the [FY15 budget request](#) for USAID, which allocated \$146.3 million to the Lab. USAID says it hopes to [leverage](#) a further \$30 billion in support from its partners.

The Lab will presumably be warmly welcomed by Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, given her often-stated determination to increase the engagement of the private sector in the Australian aid program. In the Q&A following her speech at The Australian National University earlier this year, she [indicated](#) that Australia would consider joining the US-UK [Global Development Innovation Ventures](#) (GDIV) initiative, or else set up an Australian equivalent. GDIV and other US public-private partnership initiatives such as USAID's [Global Development Alliances](#) appear to be linked into the new Lab, but how the linkages work isn't yet easy to discern.

It will be well worth watching how the Lab progresses as it could be a model that Australia looks to replicate on a smaller scale—probably very much smaller given the contraction of our aid budget—or else join. The numerous voices [advocating](#) for the Australian aid program to invest more in medical research for development can be expected take a particular interest.

The Lab has reportedly taken more than four years to launch, owing to Congressional foot-dragging. On a related note, President Obama's Global Development Council, another innovation floated four years ago, [held its first public meeting](#) after several stalled attempts. The Council [will look at](#) the aid architecture in the US and also has a goal of supporting public-private partnerships, so watch this space. In the meeting this week, the Council [emphasised its intention](#) to 'leverage American innovation' for development and to 'catalyse private sector investment'.

It's more than a little difficult for anybody outside the Washington DC Beltway to penetrate the publicity material surrounding all these big, swirling, interlocking US initiatives that seek to engage the private sector and promote innovation. But

at least the Lab should have one rather clear performance metric: it will either invent some useful things or not.

About the author/s

Ashlee Betteridge

Ashlee Betteridge was the Manager of the Development Policy Centre until April 2021. She was previously a Research Officer at the centre from 2013-2017. A former journalist, she holds a Master of Public Policy (Development Policy) from ANU and has development experience in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. She now works as a development consultant.

Robin Davies

Robin Davies was appointed Head of the Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security at the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in September 2017. Previously, from 2013, he was the Associate Director of the Development Policy Centre and from mid-2014, concurrently an Honorary Professor at the Crawford School at ANU.