

## The Ethics of USAID

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USAID is a governmental institution that provides developmental loans to foreign nations. The purpose of USAID, according to the agency's website, is to reduce poverty and save lives (What We Do, 2018). In addition to reducing global poverty, USAID explicitly expresses its interest in promoting "American prosperity" by spreading democracy, opening markets, and creating trade partners for the U.S. (What We Do, 2018). The institution presents itself as an arm of American democracy dedicated to carrying out the work of the United States. USAID's evaluative process takes a utilitarian approach to assessing the success of developmental programs that values tangible outcomes and quantifiable results. This superficial evaluation of policy often overlooks the determinants of meaningful human development as outlined by the Capabilities Approach. In taking a utilitarian approach to developmental assistance, USAID fails to secure key elements of individual well-being thereby reducing its effectiveness as a developmental institution.

USAID makes an ethical appeal to democratic values in order to justify its worthiness as an institution. USAID describes itself as an agent of American democracy that embodies and promotes American values: democratic governance, participation, fair competition, civil society, and justice. "Through its democracy, human rights and governance programs, the United States remains committed to protecting and advancing our most cherished values" (Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, 2018). USAID suggests it is a servant of U.S. democracy dedicated to carrying out the American mission. The association USAID draws between itself as an institution and the United States as a country makes a convincing appeal to deontological ethics. If Americans are loyal, democracy-loving citizens that support and are willing to defend their country's constitutional values, then they should also support, with the same vigor, an institution that carries out the good work of their nation. USAID's appeal to deontological ethics implies

that it is a requirement of any good citizen to support the mission of USAID and failing to do so, in the most extreme interpretation, is analogous to treason.

The USAID uses a utilitarian approach to developmental assistance that places value on the tangible outcomes of developmental programs. Utilitarianism is an approach to justice that focuses on an action's utility, or the good a particular action is aimed at producing. According to utilitarianism, justice is maximizing that good for the greatest number of people (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). The utilitarian approach permits sacrificing one person's interests for the sake of the majority. Therefore, justice under utilitarianism is not concerned with doing what will bring the greatest good for the individual, but rather what will bring the greatest good for the majority. The well-being of the individual is not a priority for the utilitarian, as evidenced by evaluative procedures of USAID.

The values that guide USAID's evaluation process are testimony to the utilitarian approach that informs its developmental programs. USAID uses three values to assess applicants' program proposals: "The cost effectiveness of the idea relative to traditional alternatives; the project's plan for collecting rigorous evidence of success; and the solution's proposed pathways to scale if it is proven effective." (What We Look For, 2018) A program is deemed successful if it maximizes benefits while minimizing costs, both of which are measured monetarily. USAID's utilitarian assessment privileges projects that produce quantifiable results that can be easily reduced to a single metric. This evaluative process suggests USAID is more concerned with achieving measurable outcomes for a majority than intangible, but significant, results for the individual.

Nussbaum's capabilities approach advances a theory of justice that challenges USAID utilitarianism. This contrasting approach to human development focuses on securing key

functional capabilities for the individual, rather than maximizing a monetary good for the majority. A capability, in the context of this theory, refers to a freedom that can be exercised to achieve some valued outcome (Nussbaum, 2011). Nussbaum proposes 10 capabilities that any government must secure for its citizens in order to achieve societal justice. These include, among others, being able to live to the end of a normal human life, having bodily integrity, and deciding how to plan one's life based on a self-formulated conception of the good (Nussbaum, 2011). For Nussbaum, poverty is not necessarily a lack of income, but rather a deprivation of capabilities (2011). In this way, Nussbaum's theory of justice privileges non-monetary measures of developmental outcomes that evaluate the effects of a program based on the capabilities that program secures for the individual. The capabilities approach renders GNP and GDP insufficient and grossly misused indicators of development that capture only one dimension of development: economic capacity. The capabilities approach to justice suggests that utilitarian measures of developmental policy are inadequate indicators of holistic human development.

USAID's malnourished approach to developmental assistance is evidenced by their utilitarian quantification of results. The "Dollars to Results" page begins by emphasizing the cost effectiveness of USAID as an organization. Colorful blurbs provide the reader with a quantitative understanding of the organization. The first figure reads: "142: Countries in which USAID invests" (Dollars to Results, 2018). The following figure reads: "<1% of the federal budget" (Dollars to Results, 2018). USAID uses these fun and easily digestible figures to emphasize their ability to produce millions in results for over 140 impoverished nations while accounting for only 1% of the United States' federal budget. In other words, USAID is giving the American taxpayer the biggest bang for their buck. The page goes on to translate program results into numerical figures that correspond to created sectors such as Agriculture, Health, and Trade

Policy. The results are presented in clean white boxes with baby blue lettering. The website offers the option to sort the results by value: highest to lowest or lowest to highest. The greatest quantifiable results occurred in the Agriculture sector with \$301 million-dollars in agricultural and rural loans made on behalf of USAID (Dollars to Results, 2018). The lowest results occurred in the Government and Civil Society sector: 20 civil society organizations created to promote gender equality (Dollars to Results, 2018). These figures provide quantitative information that is meant to indicate USAID's effectiveness in creating "real" results with a \$20 billion-dollar budget. However, these numerical figures fail to capture an unquantifiable factor of human development: individual well-being. USAID's utilitarian assessment of developmental results fails to acknowledge the capabilities their programs engender and, in doing so, expose a disregard for the essential role of individual empowerment in human development.

The Capabilities Approach stresses freedom of choice as an essential component of human development policy (Sen, 1992). To have a capability means to exercise freedom when selecting some proposed course of action in order to achieve a valued outcome (Sen, 1992). Amartya Sen uses the example of starving and fasting to demonstrate the importance of freedom in a definition of capabilities (1992). Both fasting and starving achieve the same outcome, but the former is a choice and the latter is not. The person that is starving lacks a capability because they did not freely choose that function, whereas the person that is fasting is exercising their freedom to choose a particular function among others. Therefore, a person's quality of life depends *not* on the functions that make up that life, but rather on whether those functions were freely chosen. The measurable components of a person's life, such as GDP per capita or number of years of education, are only superficial indicators of well-being. A one-dimensional metric cannot denote whether an individual enjoys the freedom to choose their life's functions. A

Capabilities Approach to developmental policy produces programs that empower individuals through opportunities to create their most valued life.

USAID development programs fail to achieve desired results because utilitarianism is an inadequate approach to development assistance. USAID's project "Integrating Women into Grameen Shakti's Renewable Energy Value Chain in Bangladesh" intended to integrate women into the renewable energy sector and contribute to the Grameen Shakti's target of installing 1 million solar housing homes (Hemson, 2014). According to USAID, gender inequality is "a cross-cutting issue that affects the long-term development of Bangladesh and hinders economic growth" (Hemson, 2014, pg. 6). In order to address gender inequality in the workplace, the program aimed to increase levels of female employment and generate greater levels of income. USAID conducted a 15-day training program for rural Bangladeshi women that prepared trainees for work in the renewable energy sector. USAID measured the success of the program based on the number of trainees hired and income earned. USAID found that the program failed at achieving its goal of integration: only 3% of trainees were hired by Grameen Shakti (Hemson, 2014). USAID found that integration was not achieved because managers viewed the turnover of female technicians, due to marriage, as a problem. Others said that women were not suited to lift heavy systems required for installing renewable energy technologies. Additionally, many trainees did not even apply for a job at Grameen Shakti because of "family priorities" (Hemson, 2014).

USAID's program failed to solve the complex issue of gender inequality because of its utilitarian assessment of human development. USAID defined the problem of gender inequality as a deficit in knowledge rather than a deprivation of capabilities. As a result, a narrow solution was proposed to address a multi-dimensional problem. USAID mistakenly believed that

increasing the profit-making potential of women would be enough to overcome the denial of female capabilities within a sexist society. USAID's training program could not overcome the deeply embedded obstacles that prevent Bangladeshi women from choosing their most valued life. Additionally, the desired results were narrowly defined so that meaningful outcomes were not realized. With numerical targets entitled "daily earnings" and "number of working trainees," the program aimed to produce monetary results rather than opportunities for self-determination. As evidenced by the results of the program, increased income does not necessarily mean increased opportunities for achieving a valued life. USAID's narrow definition of human development informs one-dimensional programs incapable of producing the conditions for achieving a meaningful human life.

USAID must adopt a more robust theory of justice in order to improve the lives of those they seek to reach through their development programs. USAID's sterilized assessment of human development creates utilitarian programs that fail to effect real developmental change. However, it is unlikely that aid organizations operating within a capitalist society will adopt a more holistic approach to human development that considers the many facets of a valued human life. Utilitarianism is the most appealing approach to justice in a society that glorifies profits and praises the capitalist bible. Until these constraints on development are demolished, aid organizations will remain flimsy institutions indebted to the service of empire, rather than the individual.

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