Institute for Youth in Policy

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How Should the United States Balance Humanitarian Needs and Strategic Interests?

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Abstract:
This paper examines how the United States should balance humanitarian need and strategic interest in foreign assistance, especially now that USAID has been dismantled and the early costs of abrupt aid cuts are becoming clear. After weighing a Principle-First, a Strategic-Partnership, and a Tiered Model, it recommends the Tiered Model. That model gives lifesaving aid its own protected category, allocated by need, and pursues strategic assistance openly under clear criteria and transparent reporting.

Keywords **— Humanitarian aid, development assistance, strategic interests, foreign policy, tiered model.**

I. Executive Summary

With the dismantling of USAID in 2025, a central question has become more urgent: when humanitarian need and strategic interest conflict, which should guide U.S. aid? Early evidence shows that abrupt cuts have disrupted health services, increased unrest in regions that relied on U.S. support, and hurt local economies abroad as well as American farmers at home. This paper weighs three approaches: a Principle-First Model that directs aid by need alone, a Strategic-Partnership Model that treats aid as a tool of economic statecraft, and a Tiered Model that separates the two under distinct rules. This paper recommends the Tiered Model, which would ring-fence lifesaving aid, allocate it by need, and deliver it through NGOs and multilateral organizations, while strategic assistance is pursued openly with clear criteria and transparent reporting. Notably, this approach best protects young people in crisis settings while preserving the partnerships and credibility that young people in the U.S. will inherit.

II. Overview

The United States provides more foreign assistance than any other country, even though that assistance only makes up about 1% of the federal budget and an even smaller share of national income than most other wealthy nations (Ingram, 2024). However, Americans consistently overestimate the U.S. contribution, as they believe it accounts for roughly a quarter of national spending (Ingram, 2016). This misunderstanding leads to a bigger question: how and to whom should the U.S. give aid when humanitarian needs and strategic interests come into conflict? Notably, U.S. aid has rarely been purely humanitarian. This can be seen through the Marshall Plan and PEPFAR which helped recipients while also advancing American security and economic goals (Ingram, 2024; Savoy, 2026). While self-interest has been involved, evidence shows mixed motivations for foreign assistance.

Kevlihan et al. (2014) found that need shaped U.S. disaster aid decisions more than self-interest, while Raschky and Schwindt (2009) found that strategic interests made donors more likely to give bilaterally and in cash. Crucially, Willitts-King et al. (2018) note that governments tend to struggle to balance humanitarian principles of impartiality and independence with wider foreign policy goals.

Recently, the foreign assistance debate has intensified as the Trump administration dismantled USAID, cancelled grants and contracts, and moved remaining assistance into the State Department to align it more closely with its foreign policy (Savoy, 2026).

III. History

A. Current Stances

Current Policy: "America First"

In his second term, President Trump dismantled USAID beginning with Executive Order 14169 on January 20, 2025, "Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid." It paused all foreign development assistance for 90 days and required a reassessment of how programs contributed to the U.S. This move was part of President Trump's broader "America First" agenda that promotes non-interventionism abroad. As outlined in his National Security Strategy, President Trump's goal is to narrow the country's core national security interests, "organize a burden-sharing network" so that allies also fund aid, and to prioritize strengthening the Western Hemisphere in the future (White House, 2025). In line with this strategy, USAID gradually terminated programs over the course of several months. On July 1, 2025, USAID was formally shut down and certain responsibilities were transferred to the State Department (Daniel, 2025).

The America First agenda is embodied in the Trump administration's creation of the Bureau of Disaster and Humanitarian Response in March of 2026. With 200 staff members and an initial budget of $5.4 billion a year, it is drastically less influential than USAID. It was designed to focus on "life-saving" assistance rather than "social causes." With hubs in only 12 other countries, the Bureau will employ a much more selective approach to aid that centers around American national interests (Reuters, 2026).

Criticism of the Trump Administration's Actions

Critics argue two main points in defense of USAID. Firstly, it establishes soft power for the U.S. across the world. Some argue that other actors may fill the gap left by the USAID withdrawal, notably China through its Belt and Road Initiative. However, it is unlikely that other actors will fill the gap: European nations have made their own cuts in recent years, and non-governmental organizations simply lack enough funds to do so (Cooper & Perri, 2026). Secondly, other arguments are morally grounded. The administrator of USAID from 2021 to 2025, Samantha Power, noted that many initiatives were lifesaving, and health initiatives constituted most of the agency's spending (Power, 2025). Negative impacts are already tangible in the countries that experienced USAID cuts: one study analyzed African countries and found that conflict became more frequent in areas that had received the most support (Rohner et al., 2026). It will be difficult to rebuild a program that grew over decades.

B. Tried Policy

The Marshall Plan

Modern American foreign policy began with the post-World War II period. The United States emerged with a booming economy, whereas

Europe had been ravaged by the world's worst human conflict to date (The National WWII Museum, 2020). This unique position of power encouraged American legislators to adopt a more interventionist approach to integrate nations and hopefully avoid similar conflicts in the future. To this end, the Marshall Plan was signed into law on April 3, 1948. Over the following three years, the United States provided $13.2 billion in aid ($180 billion today) to Europe. This assistance was offered to the entire continent, including nations that had been enemies. Each nation designed its own recovery program, and the money funded infrastructure, basic needs, and industry. It was a huge success that revitalized Europe's economy and strengthened nascent democracies in the region. It also supported U.S. national security interests by encouraging nations to adopt democracy and resist the Soviet Union's communism (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

Although the Marshall Plan is widely considered a hallmark of American foreign policy, assistance since then has been more selective. During the Cold War, President John F. Kennedy signed the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. Kennedy described the post-World War II programs as "awkward and slow" with too many departments to function efficiently. At a time when many nations were coming into being, the Act held that "a principal objective of the foreign policy of the United States is the encouragement and sustained support of the people of developing countries" (Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, 1961/2019). It also combatted short-term financing issues by lengthening the authorization time frame to five years (Rennack, 2023).

This Act was the preliminary step to the creation of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Established by executive order in 1961, it carried out the policy of the Foreign Assistance Act. As decolonization occurred and the Soviet Union also sought to win over other nations through aid, supporting developing countries was crucial.

This vision began with the Alliance for Progress, a $20 billion USAID program that sought to modernize Latin American countries. It made some gains in improving quality of life, but largely failed because funding was handed to these countries' leaders and easily abused. By the end of the 1960s, USAID was unpopular among the public and had a smaller budget (McVety, n.d.).

The Foreign Assistance Act of 1973 revived the failing program. It highlighted the key focuses of future aid: "food production; rural development and nutrition; population planning and health; and education, public administration, and human resource development." Crucially, it stated that future aid would be carried out through "the private sector, including those institutions which already have ties in the developing areas, such as educational institutions, cooperatives, credit unions, and voluntary agencies" (Foreign Assistance Act of 1973, 1973). By shifting from a top-down approach to more connection with non-governmental organizations, the program was better able to accomplish its original intent.

Over the coming decades, USAID expanded and became a major player in fighting global challenges, most notably in health: it helped fight polio, disseminate treatment for HIV/AIDS, and offer aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. In its most recent years, it distributed tens of billions of dollars in humanitarian aid, supporting other nations while granting the U.S. soft power on the global stage (Roy, 2025). In other instances, USAID was mobilized to strengthen developing countries despite the absence of an urgent need. It

supported agricultural research systems across the world to propel the Green Revolution, when agriculture was transformed through new technology. This both boosted food production and created new jobs in the sector (U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID], n.d.). In other cases, USAID spearheaded the world's response to a crisis. In 2003, President George W. Bush asked Congress to appropriate $15 billion over 5 years to address the global HIV/AIDS crisis. The result was the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, also known as PEPFAR. USAID was key in implementing the strategy in countries that were not well-equipped to handle the epidemic. The program allowed millions of people to receive diagnoses and treatment (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2013).

Despite these successes, in the decades after the Cold War, USAID gradually declined. Unlike the Cold War period when key threats were clear, the United States faced a plethora of international challenges, including Ebola outbreaks, the Syria conflict, the Russo-Ukraine conflict, and many more. From 2010 to 2017 alone, the U.S. invested 12 percent less funds in development assistance abroad (Ingram, 2016).

Across this history, long-term programs tied to mutual interests have proven the most effective. Short-term programs that seek to only help the United States have proven less durable (Savoy, 2026).

IV. Policy Problem

When emergency funding is limited, the United States has to decide how much weight to give to the severity of a crisis and how much to give to its own strategic interests. One country may have more people in immediate danger, while another may be a close U.S. partner whose stability matters to American security. The funding constraint is real. When the United Nations launched its 2026 humanitarian appeal, it sought to reach 135 million people but identified 87 million people with the most urgent needs as its immediate priority (United Nations, 2025).

For organizations delivering emergency relief, impartiality means giving aid according to need, neutrality means avoiding taking sides in a conflict, and independence means making relief decisions separately from political or military objectives (Willitts-King et al., 2018). The tension arises when the same government funding that relief also wants to strengthen an alliance, protect a trade relationship, or gain cooperation on security. If those goals point to different places, the choice determines which communities receive help first and which may have to wait.

A. Stakeholders

Those living through a crisis have the most immediate stake in how the United States allocates aid. A family that has fled a conflict may need food, water, and a safe place to stay at the same time. Its options can depend as much on where it finds refuge as on the severity of its needs. In April 2026, the UN Refugee Agency reported that available resources allowed it to provide basic assistance to only four in ten refugees in Chad. Chad's government had kept its border open to people fleeing Sudan, and communities receiving new arrivals were already under pressure. For those communities, a funding shortfall means more people relying on the same limited services. For displaced families, it can mean going without shelter or having less access to clean water and medical care (UNHCR & World Food Programme, 2026).

Furthermore, local nonprofits, international relief agencies, and other organizations have a stake in both how much aid is available and how it

reaches them. Brookings found that most U.S. humanitarian and development assistance went through organizations and businesses, with relatively little going directly to foreign governments (Ingram, 2024). This is relevant because the organization receiving the funding helps determine where and how services are offered. In Sudan, for instance, local volunteer groups organized community kitchens and distributed food and cash in areas where formal aid agencies had limited contact with residents. Researchers found that Sudanese organizations could draw on relationships and knowledge that outside agencies often lacked, but that complicated grant applications and limited reserves made it harder for them to sustain their work (Carter & Satti, 2026). A funding decision can therefore affect whether an existing kitchen stays open or whether a community has to wait for another organization to reach it.

Recipient governments have a stake in the choice of delivery partner because it affects how much control they have over the response. Donor governments have their own reasons for making that choice. A World Bank study found that donors with trade or oil interests in a country were more likely to provide disaster aid directly to its government (Raschky & Schwindt, 2009). That finding matters here because strategic interests can influence who is put in charge of delivering relief. A public agency with the staff and supplies to respond may be an effective partner. In a conflict, policymakers also have to ask whether that agency can reach civilians in areas its government does not control.

B. Risks of Indifference

Humanitarian consequences

In many cases, a delay in emergency funding can change whether a patient reaches care in time. In April 2025, Save the Children reported that five children and three adults with cholera in South Sudan died while walking to the nearest facility that could treat them. The organization had closed seven local facilities after foreign aid cuts, and some of the remaining facilities could no longer transport severely ill patients (Save the Children, 2025). Disruption can also take less visible forms. In one South African province, 15 of the 36 clinics surveyed reported an interruption to services, operations, or staffing following the U.S. funding cuts. Among the services affected were HIV testing, treatment, and efforts to contact patients who had missed care (Filiatreau et al., 2026). These examples therefore illustrate why the timing of a funding decision is crucial. Patients will still need treatment while officials review a program or arrange for another provider to take over.

Regional stability and displacement

A 2026 study in Science found that after the U.S. aid freeze, armed clashes, protests, and riots increased in African areas that had previously received more USAID support. The effects were smaller in areas with more inclusive local institutions, suggesting that communities differ in how well they can absorb a sudden loss of support (Rohner et al., 2026). When violence spreads, more families may have to leave their homes, and neighboring countries may face additional demand for shelter and public services. Additionally, a study of refugee flows found little evidence that aid reduced departures in the short term, with reductions emerging over a much longer period (Dreher et al., 2019). The immediate issue for U.S. policymakers is whether a funding decision adds pressure in a region where governments and aid agencies are already struggling to respond.

Local economic costs

Aid programs can also support economic activity around the places where they operate. A 2026 working paper used satellite data to study what

happened near USAID project sites in Africa after the cuts. Nighttime light levels declined close to the sites, and the effect weakened farther away, suggesting that the economic slowdown was concentrated in the surrounding areas (Nicolini & Sabatini, 2026). The study measured light levels as an indicator of economic activity, so the number of jobs or the amount of income lost remains uncertain. For a local supplier, the practical risk is straightforward: if a relief organization stops buying food, hiring drivers, or paying for transport, the households and businesses that supplied those services can lose income as well.

Because most farm bill food aid programs are required to buy U.S.-grown commodities, cutting that aid also affects farmers and businesses in the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2026). After foreign aid was frozen in January 2025 and USAID ended its shipping contracts, Edesia, a Rhode Island company that makes peanut-based paste for malnourished children, had to rent an extra warehouse to hold 5,000 tons of its product worth $13 million (Donati et al., 2025). Farmers then saw the effect in their prices. Merrill Nielsen, who farms in north-central Kansas, explained that buyers knew the wheat and sorghum meant for aid would sit in storage and weigh on the market, which lowered the price he could get for his harvest (Morris, 2026). Food for Peace has since been revived under the Department of Agriculture, but the administration's 2027 budget would cut it from $1.2 billion to $97 million, with the administration arguing that it undermines local markets abroad where the food could be grown for less (Clayton, 2026). For farmers and suppliers who plan months ahead, each stop and restart changes the prices and contracts they depend on.

Diplomatic ties and soft power

The way the United States ends an aid commitment can affect the views of those abroad. In a survey experiment in South Africa, respondents who saw news about the funding freeze expressed less favorable views of the United States. The study found no clear shift toward viewing China as a better economic partner (Nagao, 2026). A U.S. withdrawal can still give other governments an opening to build relationships, especially where they already have trade or infrastructure ties. Much of China's engagement, for example, takes the form of development loans, which serve a different purpose from emergency food or medical assistance (Cooper & Perri, 2026). A partner country can look elsewhere for investment while the people who relied on U.S. relief are still waiting for another provider.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

A decision to reduce foreign aid funding should account for how much money the United States would free up and whether the people who rely on the program could still get the services they need. Congress should be able to ask whether a program is meeting its goals, whether other donors or partner governments could cover more of the cost, and whether the money could accomplish more elsewhere. Those questions become especially important when funding is increasingly limited. The same review should account for the people who rely on the program and how quickly another provider could serve them. For instance, asking a partner government to take on more of the cost of operating a clinic is reasonable. The timing should depend on whether that government can keep staff paid and medicine available when U.S. funding ends.

The debate also depends on knowing what foreign aid actually costs. Brookings documented the public's tendency to overestimate aid spending years before the current debate (Ingram, 2016). A 2025 KFF poll illustrated its significance: the share of adults who said the United States

spent too much on foreign aid was 58 percent when initially asked and 34 percent when asked after hearing that aid was about 1 percent of the federal budget (Kearney et al., 2025). A broader Congressional Research Service count put fiscal year 2023 foreign aid obligations at about 1.5 percent of the federal budget, including supplemental funding for the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (McCabe & Brown, 2025). The overall cost matters when Congress sets the aid budget, and the purpose of each program matters when it decides how to spend that money. A decision about military support, for example, should be evaluated against its own purpose and cost, just as a decision about emergency food assistance should be evaluated against its own results.

Lawmakers considering whether to renew PEPFAR could ask whether U.S. funding for HIV prevention and treatment helped reduce deaths in the countries the program served. It began under President George W. Bush with bipartisan backing, and Congress renewed it across multiple administrations (U.S. Department of State Office of Inspector General, 2023). A study comparing 90 recipient countries with other countries found that PEPFAR was associated with lower death rates over its first 15 years. The estimated effects varied by country and by how intensively the program operated (Gaumer et al., 2024). Those differences matter when Congress considers changing funding, because the same cut can have different consequences depending on what the program provides in each country and who else can deliver those services. Congress can ask where funding has produced the strongest results, what those programs have in common, and which services would be hardest for local providers to replace.

Applying that standard consistently requires information that agencies can share with Congress. In September 2026, the Government Accountability Office reported that the State Department could not provide documented guidance showing what standards its staff used to make changes to foreign assistance programs (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2026). Without a clear record of those decisions, Congress has less basis for judging whether a cut saved money at an acceptable cost or disrupted a program that was working. Any funding model should make clear what the program is meant to achieve, what it costs, and what would happen to the people it serves if that funding were redirected.

V. Policy Options

Principle-First Model

Through the Principle-First Model, humanitarian assistance would be delivered solely according to need via impartial channels. There are a few reasons why this would be a good option. Public support for humanitarian assistance is especially high (Ingram, 2024). Additionally, need is able to drive U.S. decisions, as evidenced by Kevlihan et al. (2014), who found that need shaped U.S. disaster aid more than self-interest did. In order to ensure principles are upheld, the channel through which assistance is provided matters. This is because multilateral and in-kind transfers help control misuse, unlike bilateral and cash transfers, which can signal strategic interest (Raschky & Schwindt, 2009).

However, there are two limitations to this option. Firstly, even when intentions are neutral, political effects still happen. Lischer (2003) argues that humanitarian relief can have political and even military repercussions; thus, conflict-sensitive design is integral. Secondly, a purely humanitarian approach does not account for the development and economic relationships through

which most U.S. assistance advances its interests. Development is an afterthought when it comes to U.S. policy (Ingram, 2016).

Strategic-Partnership Model

In contrast to the Principle-First Model, this option frames assistance around U.S. economic and security interests, making aid a tool of "economic statecraft" (Savoy, 2026). Partnerships built on shared interests have lasted, meaning this is a historically sound option. For example, the Marshall Plan and aid to Cold War allies are instances of assistance that have delivered tangible benefits to the United States (Savoy, 2026).

However, there are significant weaknesses that come with this option. Notably, a purely transactional engagement, which extracts short-term wins without building durable partnerships, would weaken long-term influence (Savoy, 2026). Past support for Mobutu and Marcos, for example, showed the cost of subordinating governance and development goals to short-term alignment. Crucially, when a partner sees that U.S. engagement is mainly extractive, they are likely to pivot elsewhere. Evidence shows that development and humanitarian programs produce considerable results, while programs driven by foreign policy and security purposes show weaker results (Ingram, 2024). There is also an important ethical consideration, as applying a transactional logic to lifesaving aid is problematic and would subsequently undermine diplomatic relations and credibility (Savoy, 2026).

Tiered Model

This model would operate through the separation of U.S. assistance into distinct categories with distinct governing logics. Through this model, U.S. humanitarian aid would be determined by need and delivered through NGOs and multilateral organizations. Additionally, strategic assistance would still be pursued openly, while taking into account benefits for partner countries. Notably, current State Department officials describe humanitarian, strategic, and security assistance as three separate categories (Savoy, 2026). This model would then add a firm rule that these categories must be kept separate. Savoy (2026) argues that humanitarian assistance must stay governed by need, not by a country's willingness to grant mineral access or align with U.S. positions.

This model is built on existing strengths: the fact that U.S. humanitarian and development funding already flows primarily through middle parties, namely NGOs, the private sector, and multilateral organizations, rather than directly to governments, and is subject to monitoring and oversight (Ingram, 2024). Under the separation of categories, the open acknowledgment of strategic interests would help humanitarian actors engage governments more effectively, since understanding political motivations allows more nuanced engagement (Willitts-King et al., 2018). When implemented government-wide, it would give the separation coherence across agencies (Ingram, 2016), and Congressional backing would make commitments more durable (Savoy, 2026).

However, a notable risk is that this boundary could erode under pressure. For instance, the U.S. requesting preferential access to critical minerals during negotiations over health funding demonstrates how the lines between the categories can blur easily (Savoy, 2026). To address Lischer's concerns over these blurred lines, the Tiered Model should include clear criteria for each category, transparent reporting on how funds are classified, and conflict-sensitive delivery.

VI. Impact on Young People

The way in which the U.S. balances humanitarian needs and strategic interests would impact two different groups of young people: young people in recipient countries and young people in the U.S.

Young People in Recipient Countries

Children are substantially affected by disrupted aid. A Lancet analysis of 133 countries found that USAID programs were associated with a 32% reduction in under-five mortality. If 2025 funding cuts persist through 2030, there could be more than 14 million additional deaths, including over 4.5 million children under the age of five (Cavalcanti et al., 2025). Notably, these are modeled projections based on cuts persisting, not recorded deaths. However, this figure still shows the potentially devastating impact on young people in recipient countries. Additionally, education is at risk if cuts persist. International education funding may fall by $3.2 billion by 2026, leaving an estimated 6 million more children out of school, around one-third of them in humanitarian settings (UNICEF, 2025). This projection reflects cuts by several donors, not just the United States. However, U.S. reductions play a major role in this.

These findings support the central argument of this paper. In crises, young people have the least say over the decisions that impact their lives, making assistance governed by need instead of a country's strategic value or willingness to cooperate absolutely crucial (Savoy, 2026). Based on this, a Tiered Model that ring-fences lifesaving health, nutrition, and emergency support gives children the most protection from shifts in foreign policy.

Young People in the United States

Foreign assistance contributes to national security by promoting stability and addressing transnational threats such as pandemics, and it builds markets abroad. U.S. exports to the 11 European and Eurasian countries that graduated from assistance rose from over $2 billion in 1995 to over $10 billion in 2015 (Ingram, 2024). Crucially, underfunding development can worsen outcomes; military leaders have argued that cutting development and diplomacy ultimately increases the demand for military solutions (Ingram, 2016).

Young people in the U.S. also have to face the consequences of the U.S. losing its credibility as a consistent partner, with allies hedging as they no longer assume that U.S. commitments will last across political cycles (Savoy, 2026). A country that cannot staff a processing facility or maintain a power grid is not a viable partner, meaning healthy and educated workforces are a precondition for successful economic partnerships. Therefore, humanitarian assistance by need can also be strategically sound.

VII. Conclusions

Policy choices made now will shape the health, education, and opportunities of young people abroad and the stability, trade, and reputation that young people in the United States will inherit. In this case, a Tiered Model would serve both groups, protecting children in need while serving the long-term interest of the U.S. Of the three options, the Tiered Model keeps the strengths of the Principle-First and Strategic-Partnership Models and limits their weaknesses: humanitarian aid stays governed by need, and strategic assistance is pursued openly under clear criteria.

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