

From Food Crisis to National Security: Why Foreign Aid is a Moral and Practical Necessity

On August 30th, 2011, nearly 150 people gathered at the University of Washington for *Reforming Aid, Transforming the World*, a powerful panel on U.S. foreign aid sponsored by Global Washington. The event featured Congressman Adam Smith, Paul Weisenfeld from USAID, Kent Hill of World Vision, and Sophia Belay of Oxfam America. Carol Welch, a Senior Program Officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, moderated the discussion. These diverse panelists from the public and private sectors approached the topic from different angles, but ultimately the panel agreed that foreign aid stabilizes the world and supports U.S. national security.

Several panelists mentioned the moral imperative to provide aid to struggling nations, with the current famine in the horn of Africa as one example of a situation where assistance can mean the difference between life and death for those who are starving. However, even beyond moral reasons for aid, Congressman Smith noted that foreign aid—less than 1% of our budget—does significantly impact us here at home. In fact, unstable states can have a dramatic negative effect on our economic interests and security. When people’s basic needs are not met by their governments, they might look for radical alternatives. For this reason, Smith and each of the other speakers suggested that foreign aid for development is of huge importance. He also reminded everyone that the budget for aid has already been cut significantly and is going to be cut more unless people who believe in its value speak up.



Global Washington Panel on Foreign Aid Reform



Congressman Adam Smith

Smith stated that foreign aid would be most effective when used for a specific purpose. Currently there are 37 government agencies trying to meet 33 major objectives, 75 priorities, and 247 directives. Creating a development department with the single focus of reducing poverty would provide a clear purpose that all other foreign aid programs could look to for direction.

Though the National Security Council recognizes development as part of its strategy, Hill suggested that of the three D’s which are supposed to be the pillars of national security (defense, diplomacy, and development), only one (defense) is really a pillar. The other two are merely “toothpicks” given the amount of support provided to each.

Furthermore, while defense and diplomacy each have a cabinet department, development is not yet treated with that level of importance. It does not have a leader who has direct access to the President, nor does it have control over its budget.

Smith reported that USAID Administrator Raj Shah and USAID are doing an effective job to make the case for funding foreign assistance. He noted that “the quality and effectiveness of foreign assistance” have improved and gave credit to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for showing “how to do it better.” Even so, constituents need to do more to prevent further dramatic cuts in development and foreign assistance.

Although it is common now to question the value of foreign aid, Hill reminded everyone that 30 years ago, 20 million children were dying every year from preventable causes. Now, that number has been reduced to 8 million, even as the number of children in the world has increased. He suggested that U.S. foreign aid is responsible for a good part of that reduction. He used South Korea, which was once a struggling developing nation, as an example of success. They went from famine to an economy so robust that the country can now provide aid to other developing nations.



All of the speakers agreed that aid is most effective when there is support from the host government. Where panelists disagreed is what strategy to take with corrupt governments. Weisenfeld urged “we need to invest in places where we’ll see demonstrable results,” while Hill argued that “you’ve got to deal with the immediate crisis. The only humane thing to do is to put politics aside.” Belay supported Hill's viewpoint, stating that “as long as a program is sustainable and measurable [you] should still invest, even if there is a problem with the government. It’s about the people, not the government.”

“The three-legged stool of foreign policy: Defense has its department, diplomacy has its department, but development doesn’t.”

- U.S. Representative Adam Smith

Panelists also discussed of the importance of focusing on women and agreed that providing aid for women will improve the lives of their children. Microfinance is one of the programs making a big difference for women and their children.

In comparison to what is spent on defense and other government programs, the amount invested in this aid is tiny but has huge benefits. Weisenfeld made the point that “development programs are central to national security.” Development aid contributes to the stability of foreign governments, making war less likely. Development improves the economies of developing nations, benefiting not only that country, but also our own economy as those countries become consumers of U.S. goods. Additionally, this approach has long term benefits; as developing economies improve, those countries will no longer need aid from the U.S., but can help provide it to other nations still in need.

Washington NGOs, individuals, and other entities supporting development aid contribute in a significant way to this state's economy. Smith commended Global Washington for its work, calling it a "huge positive force" for educating people about the importance of development aid and the key part that many Washington state citizens and organizations play in making it successful.

In terms of foreign aid, Smith stressed that we need to "relentlessly" show efficacy for the development programs we support. Smith emphasized that Congress is vastly more expressive of the public's opinions than people think. He said, "We respond to what our constituents want." It is important for those who want change to lobby their Representatives and Senators--whether in person, by phone or by letter. His call to action for people concerned about foreign aid for development was for those people to spend time letting their elected officials know. Members of the government who already support development want to know that they have support. Members who do not currently support foreign aid need to know that their constituents care about this issue. Everyone has an opportunity to take action to support development and foreign aid by contacting their Congressional Representative.