News
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Social Justice



A woman holds a placard outside the U.S. Agency for International Development building in Washington as it sits closed to employees Feb. 3, 2025, after a memo was issued advising agency personnel to work remotely. (OSV News/Reuters/Kent Nishimura)



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February 10, 2025
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Sisters active in ministry at the grassroots, as well as advocacy work at the United Nations, say they are alarmed by the Trump administration's draconian gutting of U.S. foreign aid funding, calling the action shortsighted, unjust and an affront to ethical and moral values.

And, they say, lives are in the balance.

"It's an absolute disaster," said Sr. Dee Smith, a Maryknoll sister active in HIV and health ministries in Pajapita, in southwest Guatemala near its border with Mexico. "It's causing chaos; it's increasing poverty."

"Lives are definitely under threat, especially people living with HIV," Smith told GSR Feb. 7.

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Sr. Barbara Bozak, United Nations representative for the Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph, said "there is nothing about justice here," and that "this will not help the marginalized."

"President [Donald] Trump calls himself the 'common sense president,' " said Adrian Dominican Sr. Durstyne "Dusty" Farnan, a representative to the U.N. for the Dominican Leadership Conference. "But what's behind the common sense here?"

"Do we want the people of South Sudan to die?" she said, citing one example of a country struggling from years of war and conflict and which depends on U.S. foreign assistance for a host of services, including food aid.

The main target of the Trump administration is the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, which provides most of the humanitarian and foreign assistance by the United States. Following plans for most of the agency's staff to be laid off, Trump on Feb. 7 demanded that the agency be shut down, citing unspecified fraud and corruption, The New York Times reported.

Read this next: Exclusive: Catholic Relief Services lays off staff, cuts programs after USAID shakeup



A woman carries home her rations of wheat, yellow split peas and cooking oil following a distribution of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) food in a rural area of Ethiopia's Oromia region Feb. 9, 2019. (OSV News/Courtesy of CRS/Will Baxter)

Earlier in the week, on Feb. 3, the White House said that for decades "the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been unaccountable to taxpayers as it funnels massive sums of money to the ridiculous — and, in many cases, malicious — pet projects of entrenched bureaucrats, with next-to-no oversight."

The elimination of USAID funding is having a grave ripple effect, with numerous Catholic humanitarian agencies bracing for cuts that could imperil their work, including Catholic Relief Services, which might see a 50% reduction in its overall budget, NCR reported earlier this week.

In one example of specific programs being affected, Annemarie O'Connor, director of Passionists International at the U.N., said USAID cuts will immediately affect hundreds of people receiving HIV and tuberculosis screening treatment at one hospital in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, which has ties to Passionists congregations.

However, O'Connor later told GSR that she was told by a hospital staffer that the hospital was granted a waiver to continue work during a 90-day review of USAID programs, and that all hospital employees are "back attending patients."

On Jan 28, Secretary of State Marco Rubio had declared a waiver for "life-saving humanitarian assistance" which applies "to core life-saving medicine, medical services, food, shelter, and subsistence assistance, as well as supplies and reasonable administrative costs as necessary to deliver such assistance."

Even so, CNN reported that USAID staffers say "that's not reflective of the situation on the ground" and that almost "all USAID humanitarian assistance programs remain stopped in their tracks, they said."

Calling the sudden decision to gut USAID a "capricious act," O'Conner said it is disturbing how little thought was put into "how this will affect human lives."



Maryknoll Sr. Dee Smith, right, helping with the lunchtime program for resident HIV-positive people at the Hospicio Santa Maria/Proyecto Vida in Pajapita, San Marcos, Guatemala. She is seen with Sara, who is not HIV-positive but has lost relatives to HIV. (Photo courtesy of Dee Smith)

Smith said the Guatemalan government has received "tremendous support" from USAID, especially in services treating HIV and tuberculosis.

But the cuts to USAID services "are being felt immediately with two of our local HIV clinics losing staff overnight," said Smith, trained as a teacher and HIV counselor.

She told GSR that one clinic has had to lay off its community outreach educators who are responsible for following up with those who have abandoned their

treatments or are too poor to pay transport costs to the clinics to pick up their medicines. "These are people in remote villages who rely upon the educators to take their antiretroviral medicines to their homes," she said.

The drastic actions by the U.S. will roll back years of gains on HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention among other impacts, several sisters and others interviewed said.

In addition, the U.S. is jeopardizing its economic and security interests, Liz Schrayer, president and CEO of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, warned in a Feb. 5 statement. The organization has a "Take Action" page on its website, urging people to write to their members of Congress. "While it makes sense for any new Administration to review U.S. foreign policy and national security programs to ensure alignment with its agenda and priorities," the Take Action introduction says, "the non-surgical freeze and dismantling of USAID is already jeopardizing America's safety, strength, and prosperity."

America's rivals — including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea — will "fill the vacuum" that the U.S. leaves behind, warned the coalition, which brings together more than 500 businesses and non-profits from around the country. Already, food and medical aid is being allowed to spoil, threats from disease monitoring for ebola, bird flu and other outbreaks are stopped and stopping partnerships with Pacific Island nations is ceding ground to China, it said.

Among sisters at the U.N., Trump's actions have "really set off alarm bells. The outreach for USAID is enormous," said one sister representing her congregation at the global body who is originally from southeast Africa and who has decades of ministry experience in the region.

Efforts being funded in Africa include health and HIV/AIDS programs. "This raises horrors for me," said the sister who, because of the current political climate, did not want to be publicly identified.

Like her sister colleagues at the United Nations, the sister is worried about the impact the cuts could mean for the U.N.'s' ambitious Sustainable Development Goals which U.N. officials and others, including Catholic sisters, have warned are already endangered in part because of economic and social setbacks caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.S. decision to pull out of the World Health Organization is also alarming, the sister said, and seems to suggest that the Trump administration believes health care is a commodity rather than a universal human right.

The New York Times on Feb. 7 carried a spirited defense of the besieged agency from its former director, Samantha Power. In an op-ed piece, Power wrote: "Out of the $38 billion that U.S.A.I.D. spent in fiscal year 2023, nearly $20 billion was for health programs (such as those that combat malaria, tuberculosis, H.I.V./AIDS and infectious disease outbreaks) and humanitarian assistance to respond to emergencies and help stabilize war-torn regions."



Filipinos are seen in a 2013 photo showing their gratitude and waving to the crew of a U.S. Navy aircraft after receiving aid from U.S. Agency for International Development in the remote village of Guiuan, Philippines, following one of the most powerful typhoons ever recorded. The future of USAID has been called into question amid reports President Donald Trump had agreed to "shut down" the agency, which could have dramatic impacts on the poor and on the groups assisting them. (OSV News/Reuters/Wolfgang Rattay)

A monthly global health networking call on Feb. 5 organized by the Catholic Health Association turned into a session of lament and worry as participants shared the impact that the Trump administration's actions in gutting foreign aid, dismantling USAID, freezing federal grants and muzzling federal health care agencies are already having on their organizations and the people they serve.

Fearful of retribution, some asked to not be identified or quoted.

Even those not directly affected by the drastic cuts are gravely concerned because the impact is widespread. A four-part blog published Feb. 4 explains the importance of USAID on global health, foreign aid and what is happening now.

"Foreign aid — 91% of which is administered through USAID — is a key strategy to fight terrorism and protect Americans and our allies," part of the blog said. "It also alleviates poverty and saves the lives of people living amid war and the aftermath of natural disasters, and builds economic development in low-resource areas."

The blog was published to give people a background on the situation, said Erica Smith, executive director of Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, on the call.

"Our role is to be a supporter, to be an advocate and a place where there can be calm and rational discussion rooted in our values of compassion," she said. "It's a time when we work together, stick together and really work as a community for the betterment for everyone in this world, particularly those who don't have the voice or resources that we happen to have."



Workers unload food commodities from Catholic Relief Services and USAID in the village of Behera, near Tulear, Madagascar, Oct. 22, 2016. (CNS/Catholic Relief Services/Nancy McNally)

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> — Erica Smith, executive director of Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach
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Some participants on the call noted that the changes were being portrayed publicly as "reasonable" when the full ramifications are much more devastating.

The halt in grants, suspension and furloughing of USAID and health care agency personnel means that waivers for humanitarian need being publicly touted are

meaningless since there is no one to authorize the payments.

There are questions if work already performed will be paid for. Critical programs, such as a vaccination partnership with faith leaders that was nearing completion, are now halted. "There's a lot being set in motion that's going to be hard to reverse," said one participant.

"Every day that relief doesn't happen, lives will be lost needlessly," said Walter Ulrich, president and CEO of Medical Bridges, a Houston-based nonprofit that provides medical equipment and supplies to 106 countries. The organization doesn't receive U.S. funding or grants, but that doesn't mean it's not impacted, he said.

In addition to the huge humanitarian impacts, the actions are jeopardizing the interests of the U.S. in competing with China and other adversaries. "One of the things our country has been consistent with is providing aid around the world," he said in an interview. "That offsets some of the work China is doing, which is both very clever and much less beneficial."

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Assessing the effectiveness of U.S. foreign aid is understandable and desirable, several participants on the call noted. But the speed and scope of the administration's actions are causing chaos and confusion.

For example, ships with medical supplies cannot be unloaded. Vaccines ready to be distributed can't be administered.

"I would never disagree with reforming and improving U.S. foreign aid," Ulrich said. "Only one needs to do it in a thoughtful way and not in a way that undermines the health care and livelihoods of people around the world without giving time for an alternative."

Amplifying the impact of faith-based health partners is one way to counter the misinformation and "spurious comments" about the contribution of faith and development organizations, one participant said. Finding ways to speak around the administration's "hot button" verbiage is another. An organization may not be able to talk about climate change, but they can cite how weather patterns change disease and service demands.

Another shift will be from a "values-based" approach to aid to "transactional development," one participant said. "We're thinking of what might emerge in the development sector is more transactional development — if you want a project, what are you giving, what are you asking for, what is in the deal. So a shift from values-based to transactional is something we'll talk more about," he said.

Several participants closed their remarks noting that it was important to stay spiritually and emotionally grounded in tumultuous times. "In the heart of it, in the darkness, we have to be light. So I would like to encourage all of us to remember: When confronting darkness, do not forget the power of the light that we hold."

This story has been updated to include more information on waivers for life-saving humnitarian assistance.