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Relearning Locally: A Guide for Practitioners of International Development amid the Global Decline of Donorship

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The Think Series showcases the creative and scholarly work of the UVA Humanitarian Collaborative's Summer Research Cohort. Each student explored a pressing issue in the humanitarian field and developed a final product that reflects their unique perspective, highlighting the diverse ways students are engaging with global challenges and imagining new solutions. The views expressed in these projects are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Humanitarian Collaborative.

This article explores how international development practitioners can adapt amid the global decline of foreign aid and the dismantling of USAID. It highlights the importance of participatory, locally led approaches and offers insights from experts navigating this shifting landscape. Ultimately, it serves as a guide for sustaining community-driven development in an era of shrinking donorship.

I. Up to Speed: Introduction to USAID in 2025

International development aid refers to the global transfer of financial and material resources aimed at promoting social and economic progress in developing regions. In 2024, the United States was the largest [contributor](#) of Official Development Assistance (ODA), providing \$63.3 billion worldwide. It was followed by Germany (\$32.4 billion), the United Kingdom (\$18.0 billion), Japan (\$16.8 billion), and France (\$15.4 billion) (International Aid Falls, 2025). As of 2025, each of these nations—except Japan—have pledged to [reduce](#) their foreign aid budgets (Rankin 2025). Additionally, the European Union has announced plans to [cut](#) its development spending by approximately \$2.2 billion by 2027 (Cserep 2024). In a significant policy shift, the United States dismantled its primary aid agency, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), along with its budget and associated development priorities. The dissolution of USAID, coupled with the broader global decline in aid, has created widespread uncertainty among international development practitioners. This uncertainty stands as an ironic consequence of President Trump's "America First" agenda, which justified the closure of USAID by claiming to prioritize job creation and national stability for U.S. citizens.

The elimination of international aid projects and thousands of job posts interrupted what would have otherwise been generational progress in USAID. This spring, the U.S. government was set to undergo institutional changes in general aid and development

implementation, guided by USAID's Local Capacity Strengthening (LCS) Policy, finalized with broad-industry support at the end of 2022. LCS represented a strategic investment in local collaboration, giving real teeth to the importance of amplifying community voices throughout the complex process of aid with the goals of advancing significantly more [sustainable](#) development outcomes (Local Capacity Strengthening Policy, 2022). The concerted effort to meaningfully transition away from internationally exported, one-size-fits-all, and outdated solutions signified an important moment for federal institutional learning and growth.

This practice, known generally as *participatory development*, has seen success in development aid and requires experienced, committed facilitators. It [emphasizes](#) community involvement, local knowledge, and inclusive decision making processes (Wright 2015). Partnerships between policy experts and local community actors build trust and community understanding that "[cannot be manufactured or improvised](#)" (Ghosh 2017). LCS aimed to integrate participatory concepts across all USAID programs so that the result of the agency's next decade of investment equipped local actors with greater capacity to realize locally conceptualized and context-appropriate solutions.

As stated by Bridget Bucardo Rivera, a Senior Technical Advisor for Local Leadership at Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the recent and dramatic reduction in foreign assistance "has had a profound impact on vulnerable communities, local systems actors, and humanitarian and development organizations around the world." (B. Bucardo Rivera, Personal Communications, 25 July 2025). Thousands of local organizations have been devastated by the recent foreign assistance cuts, and many are struggling to survive. CRS [believes deeply in local leadership](#) and has played an [important role](#) in the development of industry policies and practices for locally led development. While CRS remains committed to delivering life-saving programs and [supporting local systems actors to lead](#), it is difficult to overstate the impact that recent foreign assistance reductions have had on the humanitarian and development spaces (B. Bucardo Rivera, Personal Communications, 25 July 2025).

This reality will also have very real and immediate consequences at home; American farmers supply roughly 40 percent of international food assistance (International Assistance Cuts Hurt American Farmers, Workers and Businesses 2025). It is crucial to begin the search for creative solutions to preserve the practice of participatory development in abandoned USAID sites and to reorient the careers of international development practitioners, whose knowledge and experiences are infinitely valuable for the world's collective growth. The collection of perspectives featured in this piece are strung together to urge individuals committed to the field to stay vigilant and not sit idly while decades of progress are reversed.

II. Evolution of Participatory Development

Participatory development emerged as an alternative development practice in the [1940s](#), but became recognized as the best practice in the field for government heads and NGOs

decades later (Ben-Meir, 2009). This paradigm shift helped to move forward the motivation behind developmental aid. As opposed to [dependency theory's](#) findings regarding the colonization of aid—which suggest that developed nations who control the flow of aid predicate the dependency of developing areas—it is now commonly understood that local problems require local solutions (Perera 2024).

Not only does the participatory approach elevate marginalized voices and increase operational capacity, but it also builds sustainable programs through ownership and more contextually appropriate solutions. In 2021, USAID Administrator Samantha Power [announced](#) that by 2025, 25% of USAID funding would go to locally led organizations, and by 2030, 50% of USAID projects would have local leadership (USAID and Localization: A Progress Report 2024).

After years of background efforts, in 2022 USAID's LCS policy made strides in articulating the vision for more equitable and effective partnership with local actors to sustain their own development efforts as mainstream. As this line of work is constantly evolving, U.S. practitioners in the field have always felt a degree of discomfort in adjusting to governmental and ideological donor priority changes. Imakando Sinyama, a consulting specialist at The Shared Trust in Zambia, shared this sentiment. According to Sinyama, USAID circles began discussing localization and “general self-resilience” around the late 2010s—a key aspect of current participatory development goals (I. Sinyama, Personal Communications, 24 July 2025).

Aid implementing partners' empowerment of local communities to maintain sustainable projects financially and administratively was coincidental preparation for the current climate.

Sinyama recounted that he valued past efforts to incorporate resilience into communities under the premise that “aid would never exist in perpetuity” (I. Sinyama, Personal Communications, 24 July 2025). In other words, all movements towards more inclusive participatory development approaches over the last few decades were invaluable preparation for the current state of affairs. Institutional barriers for donors may continue to fluctuate, but this conversation demonstrated how the style of which aid is given informs how community and civil society actors recoup in difficult times.

International Perspective

The USAID shutdown has reverberated throughout international government agencies. International embassies have not only lost partnership with one of their largest implementing partners, but they are also experiencing vacuums of specialist knowledge. Due to this loss of project capacity, non-U.S. embassies are receiving overwhelming amounts of funding requests. There are a multitude of challenges for local actors who may be tasked with more responsibility as other organizations disembed from localities in need.

In many cases, there has been a lack of expertise in engaging in the donor coordination structure, robust financial managerial systems, legal status for organizations on the ground, and representation for the diverse population in need of aid. These challenges have shown to be a reality consistent in international sites of development. The situation has been further worsened by the trending reductions in foreign aid budgets across the EU, exacerbating pressure on local NGOs and foreign ministries.

Participatory Development Meets the Private Sector

Aid agencies and NGOs who relied on U.S. government donorship (and alike governments) are experiencing a funding vacuum. International decline in donors predicates the need for the diversification of funding sources. The organizations who have seen most success in doing so began their transition from government donors far before funding cuts in USAID.

Yossef Ben-Meir, President of the High Atlas Foundation (HAF), reflected on his decision to prioritize alternative donors—private and independent foundations and non-U.S. government or multilateral organizations—and how this has made a difference to HAF in the wake of USAID funding cuts. Ben-Meir reported that while cuts were initially hard on the organization, they prompted overall improvement in HAF’s donor network (Y. Ben-Meir, Personal Communications, 10 July 2025). In the past ten years, HAF has undergone major efforts to connect with business corporations and foundations, and to grow their individual donor portfolio. This foundational work ensured that a majority of HAF funding was diversified outside of USAID grants before 2025. Such preparation allowed HAF relief in otherwise difficult times and Ben-Meir cites specific requirements organizations need in turning to private sector donors.

Most importantly, development organizations must have comprehensive financial management systems (Y. Ben-Meir, Personal Communications, 10 July 2025). While this standard is oftentimes too strenuous for smaller organizations, HAF benefited from building such financial capacity as it was integral to earning trust from new donors. Additionally, Ben-Meir determined that organizations must spend this time diversifying, researching, and acquiring donor connections (Y. Ben-Meir, Personal Communications, 10 July 2025). Following these steps comes the necessity for good story telling, a tested and proven methodology for community engagement, trust in the donor community, and last of all, luck. Ben-Meir noted that practicing participatory development in HAF’s work is a key aspect, as it helped the organization stand out (Y. Ben-Meir, Personal Communications, 10 July 2025). This includes acquiring a committed team of native Moroccan facilitators to communicate missions to villages and/or aid sites, and prioritizing input from community members when implementing tree planting and solar projects. This work galvanizes people with vested interests in the organization's mission and cultivates good will within donor relations because donors can be sure that their funds will be programmed according to the best practices of participatory development.

III. Recovery Steps

Practitioners of international development should continue looking to the future, at how they can channel their experiences and talents and continue facilitating positive impact. Many individuals in areas unable to compromise on aid must press-on and find ways to continue to distribute help. Others within the development community must anticipate USAID's (or a version of USAID's) return by reforming the system from within and be prepared to re-enter the field when the possibility exists again.

NGOs Take the Lead

Local practitioners must be nimble in triaging and searching for new ways to put their resources to use. After touching on the evolution of self-reliance in community-led development, Imakando Sinyama discussed how individuals in the field can remain involved and most critically, employed. At the Share Trust, an American-based NGO, Sinyama focuses on shifting power from international intermediaries to local ones and highlighting opportunities that the USAID funding gap has left. A [study](#) from the organization suggests that local intermediaries could deliver programming that is 32% more cost efficient than external handling, equating to \$4.3 billion reduced costs annually (Venton 2022).

At the Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF), Sinyama is aiding in building capacity to facilitate bilateral partnerships within embassies who have open grants. This work directly counters “donor fatigue,” a phenomenon describing the slowdown of funding opportunities in the wake of mass demand (I. Sinyama, Personal Communications, 24 July 2025). At ZGF, donors apply to donate, and NGOs have room for negotiation. This rearrangement of power is spurring more energy into partnerships and is challenging previous donor norms that often-presented administrative barriers for small NGOs.

Individuals who are looking to continue their impact in this field should explore similar growing opportunities to work together. Local aid groups are facing immense pressure to respond to the array of crises exacerbated by the mass pullout, and urgently need personnel. Sinyama stated that individuals must “bend their beliefs, understandings, and objectives” to proceed in this climate (I. Sinyama, Personal Communications, 24 July 2025). Diversifying stakeholders to recoup lost funding and using collective action to leverage new opportunities can increase an NGO's chances of obtaining funds. The community should capitalize off group knowledge and define a shared vision to seek new funding opportunities wherever they may lie. Sinyama furthermore points to consultancy conducted by smaller organizations as an avenue for potential success, as U.S. practitioners are so experienced in financial monitoring.

Opportunity for Systematic Progress

While the international development community is on its back foot, an opportunity to repair an imperfect system presents itself. Experts in and out of the field believe that

USAID—in some shape or form—will return. As affirmed by Elizabeth Mohan, a former employee of the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives, there exists a false narrative that development aid is charity (E. Mohan, Personal Communications 25 July 2025). Rather, it is an integral set of systems which promote U.S. foreign policy and the betterment of the international community. When this return occurs, a hope is that the agency will do so in a stronger, equitable, and more accessible form.

Mohan determined that project programming should be more responsive and nimble (E. Mohan, Personal Communications 25 July 2025). This entails reducing administrative barriers and the burden of meticulous requirements and procurement standards. Many NGOs are unable to facilitate their essential programs due to not meeting certain financial management requirements, which are often exclusionary and unnecessary. The barrier to simply apply to transit aid must be lowered. Recalling Yurtaslan's perspective, the current crisis has damaged human-relation standards, to allow the firing of more employees (A.S. Yurtaslan, Personal Communications, 18 July 2025). Individuals who play a role in the reconstruction of USAID must revisit these regulations to protect the practitioners who have committed their lives to improving the experiences of others.

III. Looking to the Future

The most poignant conclusion following each conversation with the practitioners featured in this piece is their honest desires to continue to serve others. Multiplied by those facing unemployment due to USAID funding cuts, there is a definitive cause to continue the mission to improve the field of international development. While the LCS policy was never properly enacted, the prioritization of local-decision making will be present in future iterations of development policy. The promotion of participation is key in decolonizing aid, amplifying local voices, and ruling out the necessity for aid groups in developing areas. This era marked by grief for those in the field must also be filled with community-recovery learning and ambition for the start of the future.

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