



POLICY BRIEF | September 2026

The Cost of Walking Away: Why Development Matters to America's Future

As the Trump Administration makes investments in humanitarian and global health assistance, one critical piece of U.S. international engagement remains largely absent: development.

Humanitarian assistance saves lives during emergencies. Global health programs fight disease and strengthen health systems. Development does something different: it helps countries build the capacity to solve problems themselves.

Without development, humanitarian crises become recurring emergencies rather than temporary setbacks. Health gains erode. Economic growth stalls. Communities remain dependent on outside assistance instead of becoming stable trading partners and investment destinations.

For decades, US development investments helped countries strengthen education systems,

improve food security, expand access to electricity and clean water, improve public institutions, and grow local economies. These investments produced measurable results: lower poverty rates, stronger markets, reduced humanitarian need, and greater self-reliance.

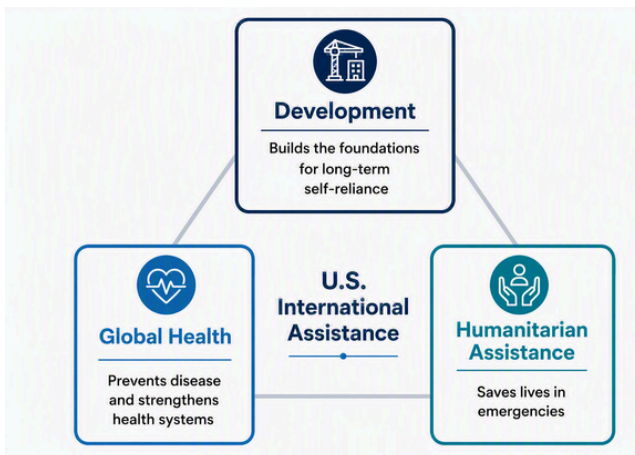
The bipartisan FY 2026 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriations Act preserved important development programs and funding.

The question now is whether these tools will be fully implemented as Congress directed to achieve the Administration's goal of helping countries move from aid dependence to self-sufficiency.

The Missing Piece of US International Assistance

The United States has long relied on three interdependent tools:

- ▶ **Humanitarian assistance** can keep families alive during a drought.
- ▶ **Development programs** help farmers increase productivity and better withstand the next drought before it becomes another emergency.
- ▶ **Global health programs** can support nutrition in the first 1,000 days ensuring mothers and children receive the right nutrients at the right time for growth and brain development.



Development Has Delivered Results

Over the last two decades, development investments have driven significant progress to reduce global poverty through targeted interventions while also advancing U.S. foreign policy interests.

These gains were not achieved through emergency assistance alone. They were made possible by investments that strengthened institutions, expanded economic opportunities, and enabled countries to build greater capacity to withstand shocks and support their own growth.

Trade Needs a Foundation

The Administration has rightly emphasized trade and private investment. But trade does not

emerge on its own or at the expense of development assistance. Businesses invest where there is reliable infrastructure, a skilled workforce, functioning markets, and accountable and effective institutions.

Development helps build those conditions, creating the foundation for stronger trading partners and future markets for American goods and services.

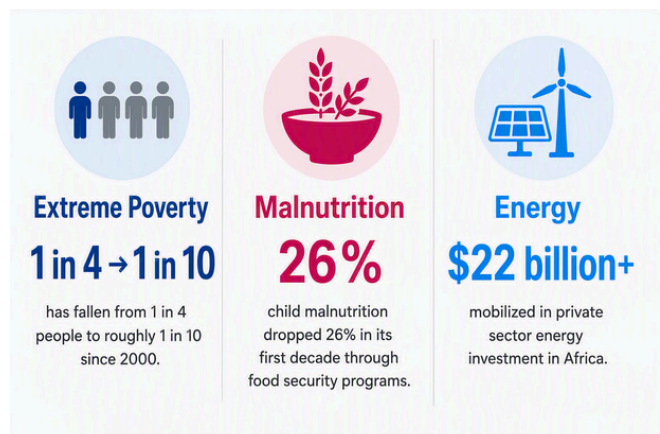
Development Reduces Future Costs

An often-overlooked benefit of development is that it reduces future humanitarian needs. Investments in water systems, agriculture, education, effective public institutions, and economic opportunities help communities better withstand shocks before they become crises. When countries can manage droughts, disease outbreaks, food shortages, and economic disruptions on their own, fewer people require emergency assistance.

Development complements humanitarian assistance by helping countries become better prepared for future shocks. Without it, crises are more likely to recur and require repeated, costly emergency responses.

Foundations of Success

Congress has repeatedly recognized that development investments support both economic growth and broader U.S. interests. Most recently, the FY 2026 National Security, Department of State, and Related Programs Appropriations Act preserved key authorities and



funding streams that support long-term economic growth, self-reliance, and stronger partners.

Several existing authorities provide a strong foundation for this work:

The Global Food Security Act (Public Law 114–195)

Funded in FY 2026, the GFSA demonstrates how development investments improve agricultural productivity, strengthen food systems, increase farmer incomes, and reduce vulnerability to future crises while supporting American agricultural innovation. Food security programs from the U.S. and other donors helped mobilize \$2.4 billion in private investment in agriculture and nutrition.

Electrify Africa Act (Public Law 114–12)

Congress has supported initiatives that expand access to electricity, strengthen trade, and attract private capital across Africa. These investments help businesses grow, create economic opportunities, and provide partner countries with trusted alternatives for financing, investment, and economic partnership.

The Global Fragility Act

The Global Fragility Act, signed into law in 2019, recognizes that preventing crises is often less costly than responding to them. By addressing the conditions that lead to conflict and crisis and supporting locally led solutions, it helps reduce the likelihood of future conflict and more costly interventions.

Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Reauthorization Act

The READ Act passed into law in December 2024 as part of the NDAA and seeks to support access to quality basic education internationally.

Today, 119 million girls are still out of school and every \$1 invested in girls' education yields up to \$2.80 in economic returns. The U.S. was reaching 40 million learners with quality education until 2025 and can again.

This work demonstrates that development is not separate from broader U.S. priorities. It is one of the tools available to help countries become more self-reliant, create conditions for economic growth, and reduce the likelihood that today's challenges become tomorrow's crises.

The Risks of Stepping Back

Recent reductions in development investments are already creating gaps in economic growth, workforce development, food security, and local capacity. These investments were designed to help countries become more self-reliant over time. Without them, progress can stall, costs can rise, and communities may become more vulnerable to future shocks.

Education and Workforce Development

For decades, U.S. investments in education helped strengthen school systems, improve learning outcomes, and equip young people with skills needed to participate in growing economies.



Many of these programs have ended despite strong evidence linking education to economic growth, with each additional year of education increasing lifetime earnings by 9%. Their loss risks slowing economic progress and limiting countries' ability to attract investment and create jobs.

Agricultural Growth and Food Security

Development investments in agriculture have helped farmers increase productivity, improve household incomes and strengthen local food systems. Over the past decade, food security programs have contributed to a 19% reduction in

poverty and a 26% decline in child malnutrition while generating billions of dollars in economic activity.

Without sustained investment, progress slows and vulnerability rises, increasing the risk of future droughts, economic shocks and food shortages that require more costly emergency responses. Development helps countries move from crisis to self-reliance, reducing long-term humanitarian needs while strengthening stability, economic opportunity and partnerships.



Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a Clear Development Strategy

Direct the Department of State to develop a practical, cohesive strategy for National Security Investment Programs (NSIP) that aligns investments across sectors and supports country graduation from assistance. The Department should also establish coordination mechanisms to ensure the NSIP work is aligned and whole of Department effort.

2. Focus Resources on Proven Results

Prioritize evidence-based programs that are scalable in education (i.e. foundational learning) economic growth (i.e. savings programs), agriculture (Innovation Labs), and direct support transition plans, and pathways to local responsibility, including working with local partners.

approaches with clear performance metrics,

3. Strengthen the Aid-to-Trade Transition

Help partner countries generate and manage more of their own resources, support local entrepreneurship, and unlock private investment through domestic resource mobilization, financing tools, good governance and accountability, loan guarantees, technical assistance, and private-sector partnerships.

4. Invest in the Staff and Expertise Needed for Results

The State Department needs to invest in sufficient staff and expertise to design programs, manage partnerships, oversee implementation, measure results, and ensure accountability.

Bottom Line

A key tool of effective foreign policy – development – is currently missing. The choice is not between aid and trade or only humanitarian and health assistance. Development is what makes trade, growth, and self-reliance possible.

Congress has preserved the authorities and resources to support that transition. Fully implementing them is essential to building stronger partners, reducing future costs, and helping countries move from assistance to economic opportunity.

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