



Sustaining the Global Environment through the Foreign Assistance Act

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More than fifteen African nations, including Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, won their independence from European nations in 1960. Construction of the Berlin Wall began in the middle of 1961, just months after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. President John F. Kennedy signed the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) into law in September of 1961 and subsequently created the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Foreign Assistance Act, crafted in a Cold War crucible of bipolar, Soviet-American antagonism, was based on a belief that American security required international cooperation “to use wisely the world’s limited resources” and that the “traditional humanitarian ideals of the American people ... to assist people in developing countries to eliminate hunger, poverty, illness, and ignorance” should be affirmed. The five major goals were poverty alleviation, independent economic growth, individual rights, economic integration into global markets, and good governance.

Today, we live in a much-changed world: Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing economic growth after years of stagnation; the United States and Russia have cordial relations; and Brazil, China, India, and South Africa are surging ahead, joining the community of nations fueled by natural resources, often at the expense of the natural environment. These momentous political and economic changes have also created a more complex diplomatic world while placing further demands on our collective resources.

In the intervening decades, the Foreign Assistance Act has been amended; however, it is the judgment of many involved in development work—including the Chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs—that this patchwork of fixes has led to a bureaucratically fragmented foreign aid system that is inadequate to address contemporary development problems, including those related to earth systems and the environment. For example, the five original major goals of the bill make no mention of natural resources or the environment. Little thought was given to the finite nature of fossil fuels and mineral resources. Clean air, water, and soil were not given the appropriate level of importance.

Many of the omissions are quite understandable given that the first substantial federal acknowledgement of and commitment to environmental stewardship was not passed until 1970, in the form of the Clean Air Act. A requirement that any federal agency perform assessments of the environmental impacts of their own domestic projects was not in place until the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). And the watershed political moment for recognition of climate change, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, did not come to pass until 1992. There have been many subsequent amendments to address these gaps—debt-for-nature swaps to encourage conservation, mandatory environmental impact assessments, and modest funds for climate change adaptation assistance; however, the time has come for a comprehensive rewrite.

As a Congressional Science Fellow, I have been dumbfounded by the often circuitous process of crafting legislation but encouraged by a professional staff able to navigate this world without losing sight of their objectives. The diversity of concerns

within the U.S. government as it relates to Foreign Assistance Act reform is also impressive. Before coming to the Hill, I was unaware of the significance of the separation amongst Congress and each of the numerous executive branch agencies. Agencies have their own viewpoints and expertise, and we have sought input from groups as diverse as the State Department and the U.S. Geological Survey. Moreover, there are foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations, and civil society groups who all have a direct interest in our work. Through this process of reaching out to the various stakeholders, we are working out such questions as how best to encourage developing economies to mitigate emissions of greenhouse gases and how we can help poorer nations balance adaptation to substantial climatic changes, future development, and the conservation of natural resources.

In the proposed new structure of the Foreign Assistance Act, the goal of “Sustaining the Global Environment” will be elevated in importance to the level of other major goals, including poverty reduction and anti-terrorism. Within this environmental title, grand efforts will be made to broaden conservation to include fragile natural ecosystems like coral reefs, wetlands, and grasslands. Along with these efforts is a desire to make sure that there are connections between conservation and long-term economic development; between health and the environment; and between water and climate. On the horizon is a new approach to international development that understands that a peaceful world requires not only cooperation among nations, but among human beings and the earth systems in which we live.

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