

Statement of Chairman Patrick Leahy
Subcommittee on the Department of State and Foreign Operations
Hearing on USAID's Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Request

April 8, 2014

Good morning. We are meeting today to hear testimony from Dr. Rajiv Shah, Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, who will discuss USAID's fiscal year 2015 budget request. Dr. Shah, thank you for being here.

USAID, like every federal agency, needs to adapt to a fast changing world. So does the Congress. In order to do that effectively, we need a shared understanding of USAID's core purpose.

I have always assumed it is sustainable development, and I am sure, Dr. Shah, you would agree.

But today, USAID's strength seems to be saving lives, feeding people, technological innovation, and other such things that are unquestionably important. Many of them I strongly support.

I don't want to overgeneralize, but these activities are often not the same as building institutions and organizations, owned and run by foreign governments and communities, which to me is what real development – sustainable development – is about.

And while USAID's renewed emphasis on partnership is welcome, it often seems as if USAID still tends to view NGOs or other organizations as instruments of what USAID wants to do, rather than as partners in their own right.

I was optimistic about USAID Forward, and its focus on country ownership and eventually working yourselves out of a job. Outsiders can help, but local entities, whether government or civil society or private companies, need to be in charge and take responsibility for the results.

There is a lot of talk about capacity – either the lack of it or the need to build it. Of course it is necessary to be able to set realistic goals, do the work, and keep track of money spent.

But I also know that a lot of capacity already exists – especially if we do not try to do too much, too fast. Many local organizations may not have the clout or connections that big U.S. contractors or grantees have, but they are often better at what they do.

What they lack is the capacity to navigate the reams of pages of extremely technical, incomprehensibly bureaucratic USAID applications for funding. A lot of this is government-wide and not of USAID's making, but I worry about creating a whole new industry of high-priced capacity-building consultants.

There has been progress, but after four years I suspect you would agree that USAID Forward has a long way to go. Local organizations may increasingly look for other models than USAID, if USAID doesn't make further changes – from how staff are recruited, oriented, and deployed to how USAID missions get to know and work with local organizations and institutions.

Other than responding to humanitarian crises, it makes no sense to spend money without a coherent strategy focused on sustainability. Afghanistan is probably the most egregious example of what not to do, but there are many others.

USAID has a lot to be proud of. I have seen some of those successes, and I applaud you for them. But I am worried about our foreign aid programs. I am worried that they are not as relevant or effective as we may think and say they are.

You inherited an agency that had lost its bearings. I told you four years ago that I did not know whether to offer my congratulations or condolences. There has been progress, but we need to focus on producing sustainable outcomes.

I also want to mention the recent press reports on USAID's twitter program in Cuba, and I will have a number of questions about it. But we should remember that while we debate what USAID is doing in Cuba, U.S. citizen Alan Gross remains in solitary confinement in Havana in his fifth year of captivity, solely because he was carrying out a USAID program.

Alan Gross is confined to his cell 23 hours of every day. On April 3, Mr. Gross, who I have visited twice, began a hunger strike to protest his detention by the Cuban Government and the failure – the failure – of his own government to take meaningful steps to obtain his release. As far as I can tell, USAID has all but forgotten about him.

It is long past time for the Administration and the Cuban Government to negotiate a resolution of this ordeal so Mr. Gross can return home. Whatever past attempts have been made on his behalf have achieved nothing, and I believe in some respects they have made his situation worse. There is a way to resolve it, there is ample precedent for doing so, and it is in our national interest.