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Vision Abandoned

Will U.S. Shortchange the Fight Against Poverty?

By *Marcela Sanchez*

Special to washingtonpost.com Friday, January 27, 2006; 9:15 AM

It's easy to forget that small but well-intentioned resources can do a lot of good.

Consider the \$400,000 in U.S. foreign aid being used to help transform a poor, gang-infested municipality south of Guatemala City. The suburb of Villa Nueva, where criminals were once abetted by the police, is now a model of community policing and administration of justice, thanks in no small part to a judicial center funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In Bolivia, thousands of poor workers, mostly from the Aymara- and Quechua-speaking Indian majority, became entrepreneurs with U.S.-backed loans. The program was so successful and the default rate so low that it evolved into a full-fledged commercial bank, Bancosol, now a model of micro-enterprise lending replicated in some 17 countries in Africa and Latin America. The cost to U.S. taxpayers before the program became self-sufficient: \$1.4 million.

This kind of U.S. assistance, some fear, may now be at risk.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last week announced that the U.S. diplomatic corps would be repositioned to more volatile countries, with foreign aid gaining new prominence and focus within the administration, all to ensure long-term U.S. security. These changes, part of her new vision of "transformational diplomacy," are based on the notion that the greatest threat to U.S. security comes from within states that have failed, not from states at war with each other.

Aid experts inside and outside the government worry that making U.S. security interests the litmus test for foreign assistance will put USAID programs at risk, particularly those in Latin America. Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), who as chairman of the House foreign operations subcommittee has long had a leading role in determining levels of U.S. foreign aid, warned that the agency could lose its policy direction as its mission changed "from one of poverty alleviation and economic development . . . (to one) much more narrowly focused on our national security objectives."

With the exception of Colombia, U.S. aid to Latin America has been declining significantly since the end of the Cold War. Under the new plan, the region would seem to be even less a priority, slipping well behind the Middle East, Southeast Asia and even Africa, which are more likely breeding grounds for terrorists.

Rice's "transformational diplomacy," however, does not necessarily spell the demise for aid to Latin America. Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development, believes Rice's plan reinvigorates development, the core mission of USAID, by making it "a national security imperative."

Indeed, Rice herself argues for development, only her emphasis is on U.S. security, not poverty alleviation. "Our foreign assistance must help people get results," Rice said in a speech last week. "The resources we commit must empower developing countries to strengthen security, to consolidate democracy, to increase trade and investment, and to improve the lives of their people."

Rice may be doing USAID a service by tying its mission to U.S. security. In that context, development programs that reduce crime or help finance micro-businesses may not appear to be simply the pet projects of idealist bureaucrats, but actually become essential components of the broader U.S. agenda. This may indeed protect those programs from further cuts and, more desirably, increase their funding.

Latin America's experience suggests that when the proponents of development assistance and the proponents of U.S. foreign policy goals are not in sync,

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development aid flounders. One might reasonably argue that Latin America's current popular frustrations with the United States might have been mitigated had proponents of a hemispheric free trade agreement backed their desires with support for development efforts in the region to help soften the impact of such trade integration.

As it turned out, development aid was never redirected to help prepare the region to become more competitive in a global economy. Economic inequalities deepened. "We had an overarching program for the region but development assistance remained scattered. . . . I never saw the connection made," said Chris Sabatini, director of policy at the Council of the Americas who has worked closely with USAID for years.

In Latin America, Rice's commitment to development will be measured in places such as Bolivia and Guatemala. In terms of security and stability, the two nations arguably deserve far more U.S. assistance. The question still remains whether they fit in Rice's new plan or whether they stand to lose the few good but limited programs they have had -- remnants of a vision abandoned.

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