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U.S. aid, global poverty, and the earthquake/tsunami death toll

Even as the tragedy in Asia elicits an outpouring of charity from Americans, it has sparked controversy over whether America is in fact generous. President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) chief Andrew Natsios have all asserted that America is generous. What are the facts?

Facts from the Center for Global Development (CGD):

According to the Commitment to Development Index, which ranks 21 rich countries on how much their policies hurt or help poorer countries, when it comes to giving money, America is less generous than most other rich countries. (See coin chart below.)

- The U.S. gives 13¢/day/person in government aid, roughly one cup of Starbucks' coffee a month.
- American's private giving—another 5¢/day—is high by international standards but does not close the gap with most other rich countries. Norway gives \$1.02/day in public aid and 24¢/day in private aid.
- President Bush was right Wednesday when he said that the U.S. gives 40% of relief aid, but this is about 2 cents per day per American, ranking the U.S. 9th among 21 donors.
- ***“It's true that the U.S. gives a lot of money in absolute terms but that's just a reflection of our size. In terms of aid given per person, the U.S. is one of the least generous rich countries. Privately Americans are generous, but our generosity as a country is definitely not what you would expect from the leader of the free world,”*** says David Roodman, a CGD Research Fellow who oversees the preparation of the Commitment to Development Index.

When all policies and types of support to developing countries are included, the U.S. is tied for seventh place with France, Germany, and Norway. (See scorecard below.)

- The U.S. ranks 19th on aid because it gives little compared to the size of its economy.
- The U.S. ranks last on environment because its rapid fossil fuel consumption contributes to global warming, which will have devastating effects on low-lying poor countries. Much of Bangladesh, for example, could be inundated by sea level rise, forcing poor farmers off their land.
- But the U.S. ranks #1 on trade because its borders are relatively open to food, clothing, and other goods made in developing countries.

- And it ranks #2 on migration because it is comparatively open to people from developing countries coming to the U.S. to work and send home money.

Overall support to development matters because the earthquake did not cause all these deaths. Poverty deserves as much blame.

- A similar-magnitude quake in the Northern Pacific would have cost fewer lives, because the Pacific is rimmed by rich nations such as Japan and the United States, which maintain a high-tech tsunami detection and monitoring system, and have stronger buildings and better infrastructure.
- The difference can be seen in the death tolls from tropical cyclones and hurricanes. Hurricane Mitch killed 10,000 in Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador in 1998, and a “supercyclone,” which is like a hurricane, killed 50,000 in the Indian state of Orissa in 1999. Deaths from similar storms in Florida can typically be counted on two hands.
- ***“Most of the people killed by the tsunami died because they are poor,”*** says Michael Clemens, a research fellow at the Center for Global Development. ***“Even with improved warning systems, little can be done to prevent natural disasters from becoming massacres as long as people’s livelihoods, infrastructure, and public health conditions are precarious. To minimize the death toll in future disasters we need to do a much better job of supporting long-term economic development in these countries.”***

Big disasters like the tsunami grab attention while larger, silent tragedies are ongoing. Yet there are proven ways to overcome these tragedies. It is in the best interests of the U.S. to do more to support development.

- Estimated deaths from the earthquake and tsunami: 70,000–100,000 –once a century.
- Deaths from HIV/AIDS: 240,000 a month. (Of which in rich countries: 1,776)
- Deaths from diarrhea in developing countries: 136,000 per month.
- And yet...a river blindness control program supported by 22 donor countries prevented 600,000 cases of blindness in west Africa and made 25 million hectares of arable land safe for resettlement—enough to feed 17 million people.
- A USAID anti-diarrheal disease program in Egypt helped save the lives of 300,000 children in 1982–89.
- A donor-backed campaign to eradicate guinea worm in many poor countries in Africa cut the number of cases 99%, from 3.5 million cases in 1980 to 35,000 today.
- ***“The U.S. is not doing enough in terms of development assistance to meet our own goals of creating a more stable and democratic world,”*** says CGD senior fellow Steve Radelet. ***“It’s not so much a question of generosity as doing what is best for the U.S.”***



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Rank	Country	Aid	Investment	Migration	Environment	Security	Technology	Trade	Average
1	Netherlands	11.2	6.7	5.9	5.3	6.4	5.5	5.9	6.7
1	Denmark	12.3	4.8	6.1	5.7	7.1	5.0	5.8	6.7
3	Sweden	12.4	3.8	5.1	5.8	4.5	5.7	5.8	6.1
4	Australia	2.9	6.5	8.8	3.3	9.0	6.4	4.4	5.9
4	United Kingdom	4.8	6.4	4.4	5.8	9.1	4.7	5.8	5.9
6	Canada	3.6	6.3	11.2	2.9	4.3	6.6	5.7	5.8
7	United States	1.9	5.6	10.5	2.3	4.9	5.5	6.7	5.3
7	Germany	3.9	6.7	6.1	6.1	2.9	5.6	5.8	5.3
7	Norway	10.6	5.3	4.9	4.0	9.3	5.5	-2.7	5.3
7	France	6.0	4.7	2.7	5.9	5.6	6.1	5.8	5.3
11	Finland	5.0	5.1	2.6	5.0	6.7	6.3	5.7	5.2
12	Austria	3.7	4.4	2.9	6.1	3.1	6.9	5.8	4.7
13	Belgium	6.0	4.3	2.6	5.9	4.0	3.4	5.8	4.6
14	Portugal	2.3	5.6	2.8	5.4	5.2	4.5	5.8	4.5
14	Italy	2.8	5.3	3.6	5.5	3.6	4.7	5.9	4.5
16	New Zealand	0.8	2.9	5.0	4.7	6.7	4.1	5.9	4.3
17	Greece	1.8	4.1	6.2	4.7	4.0	2.5	5.8	4.1
18	Ireland	3.0	2.7	5.8	2.8	5.5	2.0	5.8	3.9
18	Switzerland	5.8	4.7	3.6	7.9	0.7	4.5	0.3	3.9
20	Spain	2.0	4.5	2.3	5.5	2.0	4.0	5.8	3.7
21	Japan	2.4	4.6	1.9	4.5	0.4	5.4	3.4	3.2

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