

OPINION | Guest Column

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Will the foreign policy failures in Haiti and Afghanistan mark the end of foreign aid? | Column

Foreign aid programs that achieve public goods, including basic health care, education, sanitation, food safety and access to water, can be incredibly effective.



Police clear burning tire road blocks set by protesters upset with growing violence in the Lalue neighborhood of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Wednesday. Haitian President Jovenel Moise was assassinated on July 7. (AP Photo/Fernando Llano) [FERNANDO LLANO | AP]

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The brazen assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise this month shocked the world. The international community has poured \$13 billion in aid into Haiti over the last decade to try to stabilize and rebuild the nation. Despite the country's widely acknowledged despair and staggering poverty, the hope remained that this large-scale assistance could help Haiti reform and restore after a lengthy period of instability following a devastating earthquake in 2010. Yet in the end, to many observers, the aid not only failed to rebuild the country, but primarily served to prop up a corrupt government allowing violence and political paralysis to metastasize.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan the United States has been engaged in a 20-year battle to eliminate Taliban control throughout the country. The international community has provided over \$2 trillion in assistance since 2001 in the hope of not only eliminating the Taliban threat but also to establish a strong Afghan government and military. Yet, as the U.S. withdraws from the country, the *New York Times* reports that the Afghan military has abandoned their bases or surrendered to the Taliban en masse as the United States withdraws its troops.



William Felice [UNKNOWN | Photo: Courtesy]

While these “nation-building” exercises may have temporarily achieved a degree of short-term stability, they have clearly failed to create long-term functioning states. Is it still possible to argue that significant foreign aid be dispersed to poor and developing nations after these spectacular failures? There are at least two important points about the administration of foreign aid relevant to such an assessment.

First, corruption and good governance are factors that can't be ignored. Leaders receiving substantial foreign aid must be held accountable for the violence and corruption permeating the society. Haitian civil society leaders argue that the U.S. consistently propped up corrupt strong men who did little to enact essential reforms nor create systems that work. Haitian politicians use of gangs to sway elections resulted in further corruption and violence. In Afghanistan, scholars and journalists documented how U.S. reliance on warlords and strongmen to achieve short-term objectives politicized and undermined institution building and deepened corruption. Vice President Kamala Harris was correct when on her recent trip to Central America she linked controlling corruption to the improvement of the region's economies and reducing migration. Harris stated: “We must root out corruption wherever it exists.” As tragically seen in Haiti and Afghanistan, foreign aid efforts that ignore this high level of corruption for short-term stability are doomed to fail.

Second, foreign aid programs to achieve public goods, including basic health care, education, sanitation, food safety and access to water, can be incredibly effective. Probably the most effective foreign aid programs have been in the area of health care. Global health efforts have historically saved millions of lives from helping to control tuberculosis in China to preventing deaths from diarrhea in Egypt. Former President Jimmy Carter's extraordinary work as a global leader in the fight against “river blindness” is a clear demonstration of an effective foreign health intervention. Reporters in West Africa recorded how this preventable disease led to blinded middle-age men being led around by their granddaughters begging for money. Due to Carter's efforts, this debilitating disease has gone from a major threat in Africa to a minimal problem. In addition, the UN led effort to combat tuberculosis has been spectacularly successful. The UN reports: “Between 2000 and 2013, an estimated 37 million lives were saved by TB prevention, diagnosis and treatment interventions.”

It is thus important to balance our just criticisms of the foreign aid programs in Haiti and Afghanistan with the outstanding counter-examples of success in the provision of essential public goods, especially in the area of health care. As the saying goes: Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

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