

Portland Press Herald

Opinion: Maine's economy depends on smart foreign aid

The dismantling of USAID could have devastating consequences for the state's businesses, farmers and families.

March 29, 2025

By Jim Settele

<https://www.pressherald.com/2025/03/29/opinion-maines-economy-depends-on-smart-foreign-aid/>

As the northeastern-most state, Maine may seem far removed from Washington politics and the decisions being made on global trade, but the truth is our economy is deeply connected to the broader world.

While there is an ongoing debate on the role of government in international affairs, one thing is clear: Maine businesses, farmers and families rely on international assistance programs. These programs do more than just help those in need overseas. They create real benefits for Maine's economy, from job creation to long-term financial stability.

As the executive director of the School of Policy and International Affairs at the University of Maine, I've spent years learning how interconnected our state is with the global community. And having served in the U.S. Navy for more than 27 years, I've also seen firsthand the value of strong international relationships, not just for our national security but also for economic prosperity.

For those skeptical about the need for international assistance programs and foreign aid in general, it is essential to understand how reducing these programs has directly harmed and will continue to harm our state.

U.S. international assistance programs, at their core, are about building partnerships that make our economy stronger. A little-known fact is that more than 80% of companies that hold contracts with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are based in the United States, including several in Maine.

One standout example is Planson International, a small business in New Gloucester that provides IT and communications services to USAID recipients. The founder of Planson International has warned that the company's revenue could be halved if international assistance programs are dismantled. For a small business like Planson, this could mean layoffs and lost opportunities, contributing to the potential devastation of Maine's economy and its hardworking individuals.

When companies like this struggle, so do Maine people. We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to these local consequences. In fact, Maine could lose up to \$15,888,282 if foreign aid programs are reduced, a sum that supports our businesses, agricultural industry and local communities.

For our farmers, particularly those who export Maine-grown products like lobster, blueberries and dairy, international markets are essential, and international assistance helps to open and sustain those markets. For example, when food security programs or agricultural development projects succeed in other countries, they build a demand for American products. This translates into Maine businesses finding new customers and supporting local agriculture.

This type of assistance also builds resiliency in global markets, reducing the potential for instability abroad that can affect our communities here at home. Instability, whether caused by natural disasters, political upheaval or economic collapse, often leads to fewer international customers for Maine businesses, higher prices for everyday goods and even job losses.

The reality is that these investments in foreign aid pay dividends for our communities. Contrary to popular belief, international assistance doesn't just send money abroad — it strengthens relationships that open the door for American businesses and creates jobs here at home.

Maine families benefit, too. Many Mainers work for companies that are part of this interconnected global economy, such as Medical Care Development Global Health in Hallowell and Konbit Sante in Falmouth. By supporting international assistance, we protect these jobs and preserve the economic opportunities that come with a stable, prosperous world.

In short, the imperative for U.S. international assistance programs is about securing Maine's future. Cutting these programs would jeopardize the very industries that keep our state's economy strong. Foreign aid, when done smartly and strategically, creates long-term benefits for American businesses and communities, including those right here in our backyard.

Supporting international assistance is an investment in Maine's prosperity — one that we can't afford to ignore.

Jim Settele is executive director of the School of Policy and International Affairs at the University of Maine.