

**TESTIMONY OF CARE USA CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER HEATHER
HIGGINBOTTOM
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
FEBRUARY 27, 2019**

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Zeldin and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify, as you work to make the State Department and USAID more effective and more efficient.

For the last six years, first as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources and most recently as the Chief Operating Officer of CARE USA, a global humanitarian and development organization working in over 95 countries that reached 56 million people last year, I have had the privilege of seeing American diplomacy and development in action, and the responsibility of thinking about how to strengthen it. I can say categorically that, with just 0.19 percent of gross domestic product to fund development aid and a State Department budget that is less than 5 percent of the military's, the United States gets no better return on its investment than the work of our diplomats and development professionals which saves millions of lives, builds more prosperous and stable economies and as a consequence creates a more safe and secure world.

Mr. Chairman, I know that it has never been popular to invest money overseas. President Reagan acknowledged that "foreign aid suffers from a lack of a domestic constituency." But stamped in the very DNA of CARE USA is a daily reminder that Americans have always stepped up to address global challenges, since after all we were founded 73 years ago when a small group of Americans joined forces to create the first-ever CARE packages for starving survivors of World War II. They made good on the audacious notion of an America that would help feed those we had only recently defeated on the battlefield, and in so doing help secure a stable and prosperous Europe as an ally and partner. Today, instead of delivering aid in a box, we work with partners, including governments, to tackle at the roots of poverty, with a focus on empowering women and girls, using sophisticated tools and resources to help entire communities create long-term prosperity, stability, and resiliency.

We are here to focus on what we can do better, but we should not lose sight of what the United States already does better than any other country in the world. I saw it firsthand in 2014 as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa threatened whole countries and governments. American leadership made the difference. Working with partners in a coordinated, rapid, and agile way, the United States brought every tool we had to bear, including deploying our military, experts from the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, diplomats at the State Department, development professionals from USAID, and Customs and Border Patrol agents screening passengers entering the country. The Obama Administration worked with Congress to provide resources, with pharmaceutical companies to accelerate vaccine development, with manufacturing companies to swiftly develop Ebola protection suits for health workers and we galvanized a group of partners to build the first aircraft specifically designed to evacuate patients with infectious diseases.

As a result, Ebola was contained in West Africa. I cannot tell you precisely how many tens of thousands of lives this effort saved. But I can tell you that this year, when I joined Chairman Bera and Congresswoman Torres on a trip to Sierra Leone, we visited a tiny village which had endured the deaths of a third of the population and where complete collapse had once seemed inevitable, and there I heard the most powerful endorsement I could ever imagine for American leadership in the world. The village is named Kombrabai, but we met many residents who now call it something else: “Sierra Leone’s American Village.”

Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member, I regret enormously that the current Administration has proposed to rescind funding for the Global Health Security Agenda to combat infectious disease around the world, and has not marshalled an effective response to the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In today’s interconnected world, where disease knows no boundaries, we should be doubling down on, not weakening, effective, modern, and innovative implementation of diplomacy and development. History tells us, we pay a little now, or we pay a lot later.

The United States has always been a catalytic leader. Our actions and responses encourage other countries to act and provide their own support. It is why, over the past 25 years, we have cut in half the number of people worldwide living in extreme poverty and with it slashed in half the number of women dying during pregnancy and children dying before their fifth birthday. It has been a bipartisan consensus, most notably through President Bush’s efforts to combat HIV/AIDS through the Global Fund and PEPFAR. But despite these clear and well-documented results, the President’s budgets for FY18 and FY19 – and we fear once again in FY20 – have proposed slashing foreign assistance by 30 percent, cutting to the bone and even amputating programs that provide emergency food aid, alongside dramatic cuts to the Global Fund, PEPFAR, and efforts that build resilience, like Feed the Future.

We are grateful that Congress has rejected these cuts, but damage has already been done. Uncertainty around funding levels and funding timelines is setting us backwards. Whether through proposed budget cuts and rescissions packages, multiple government shutdowns, or prolonged finalization processes in both Congress and the Administration, planning by both NGOs and USAID Missions can only progress so far and funds have sometimes had to be transferred on-the-fly to “keep the lights on” while waiting for Congressionally approved funds. Critical development programs have come within days of closure due to funding interruptions and delays.

Does it have a real impact? Absolutely. Earlier this month, more than two weeks after the end of the shutdown, critical funds for some Food for Peace programs were stuck in the pipeline, jeopardizing food assistance programs around the globe, including for CARE’s Kore Lavi program in Haiti, which provides food and nutrition assistance for one hundred thousand chronically poor households and hundreds of local businesses, many of which are women owned. We were almost forced to halt this vital program, putting vulnerable families at risk and incurring significant wasteful stoppage costs, just as several urban centers around Haiti were plunging into a state of political unrest. Our USAID colleagues managed to release the needed funds at the 11th hour, but when lives are on the line, we can all do better than this kind of “close call” crisis of our own making.

None of this is to say that the State Department and USAID are perfect institutions that should not change. The biggest demands for innovation and reform I heard while I served at the State Department came not from the outside, but from within --- from talented, committed foreign service officers and civil servants who wanted to see their institutions modernize. They want to see structures and support evolve over time to accommodate changes in demographics, technology, and to make adjustments based on analysis and evaluation of the organization's performance.

I would suggest three big priorities stand out the most.

First, the currency of the State Department is information and relationships, and yet, there is no enterprise-wide system for organizing, collecting and sharing information. Particularly within an organization that depends on staff rotating assignments every two- to three-years, this is inefficient and wasteful. As complicated as it may be, implementing that reform should be an urgent priority for this Administration, as it was for Secretary Kerry.

Second, better utilization and expertise in data analytics, science and technology is essential. The siloed nature of the State Department and USAID mean that cross-sectional analysis and engagement, as well as cross-cutting data analysis, is often unavailable. Both agencies should deepen data transparency and more effectively use data and analytics, including piloting the use of new technologies, to help identify trends and better integrate data into strategic thinking and planning through scenario-based and predictive models.

Third, performance management and strategic planning at both agencies should be strengthened and, in particular, joint planning should occur between relevant bureaus to guide priority setting and resource allocation and enhance collaboration and communication. Currently, State and USAID have separate strategic planning processes, which operate on different timeframes, leading to confusion and inefficient use of resources in country. While there are necessary distinctions between the missions of each agency, there is no reason representation and resources cannot be better coordinated, planned and executed in any given country.

There are many more recommendations in the 2015 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review which I oversaw and that I would be happy to speak to, but these three recommendations are among the most critical.

I would be remiss if I did not share one other perspective which mattered to Secretary Kerry and was shared by his successors, albeit implemented in very different ways: the answer to every problem is not a special envoy. We eliminated a number of these positions that had outlived their use or better belonged in bureaus. Sometimes envoys are a good idea, to lift up new priorities or to galvanize whole of government action, as it was to destroy ISIL. But all of us, including Congress, serve our long-term interests by thinking about how to solve problems not just how to create new offices that pull expertise and resources out of the bureaus that need them, and too often pull responsibility away foreign policy career professionals in perpetuity.

This is a difficult moment in the world. More than a quarter of the world population lives in fragile states, the places that too often spiral into civil war and chaos, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to become refugees.

As the history of the CARE package shows, often the best way to combat fragility, address poverty and prevent mass displacement is by harnessing the generosity and talents of the American people in partnership with communities around the world. This work, focusing on women, girls, and other vulnerable populations, and backed by continued American engagement in diplomacy and development, is essential in building a future worth having for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors around the world. We retreat from this work at our own peril.

Thank you very much. I look forward to answering any of your questions.