

POLICY *Analysis*

Center for Family and Human Rights

Problems with USAID's 2024 Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Policy

INTRODUCTION

USAID's 2024-2034 Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Policy ostensibly outlines a strategy to promote democracy and human rights globally. Ironically, it promises to undermine democracy through programs that promote social engineering, censorship, and interference in internal politics.

The new ten-year policy focuses on four strategic "pivots." These are:

- a) Expanding "resilient, rights-respecting democracies";
- a) Reversing "democratic backsliding" by supporting norms and values that build social cohesion and cultivate democratic political culture and processes;
- b) Deploying Digital Democracy principles; and
- c) Forging partnerships to modernize democracy promotion approaches.

The strategy also establishes a "democracy review process,"¹ for countries to find "democratic openings."² Follow-up to review findings is left for USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) to develop.³

Top Five Problems with the Policy

1. USAID includes radical LGBTQI+ policies as an essential component of Democracy, Human Rights, and Good Governance

Multiple USAID policies already emphasize gender equity, women's empowerment, and inclusion based on sexual orientation and gender identity as a core pillar to accelerating democratic development. This particular strategy states that the inclusion of historically "marginalized populations,"⁴ and specifically populations labeled LGBTQI+, "is essential for the strength of democracy."⁵ It frames them as vulnerable populations in need of protection and safeguards from the spread of "information manipulation that uses misleading narratives to discredit, silence, or harm women and girls, LGBTQI+ persons, and human rights defenders."⁶ This is consistent with USAID's recent LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy, which makes "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people and all people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) as integral parts of every society."⁷

Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc., are protected from violence and discrimination to the same extent as any individual under the equal protection principle in human rights law. However, they are not entitled to special protections based on their sexual preferences and subjective gender identity as such.⁸

Despite this, the policy brings an expansive and progressive definition of inclusive development priorities and human rights into democracy programs.⁹ As part of pivot 1, USAID will have "other development sectors deliberately "promote sustainable, inclusive development."¹⁰ As part of pivot 2, USAID plans to expand the use of political economy, gender, and inclusive development analyses.¹¹

Countries that do not implement LGBTQI+ policies, including homosexual marriage, transgender policies, and hate crimes laws are expected to be scored negatively in the democratic review. It is still unclear if this will affect their ability to receive funds, make them the target of blackmail, or interfere in their internal affairs through controversial programs. However, this is expected, given that the DRG policy will be implemented throughout all of USAID, as an effort to "not reinforce norms and values that [...] have historically and culturally marginalized certain communities."¹²

The policy will also affect USAID's Rule of Law policy.¹³ The policy pivots USAID toward "transforming" justice institutions with an eye towards those "marginalized by the justice system and have the least access to justice." It vows to Advance Diversity, Inclusion, Equality, Equity, and Accessibility by "transforming" justice systems and integrating the mandates in USAID's Global Development: Food Security, Climate Change, and Public Health portfolios.¹⁴

There is a history of USAID weaponizing Rule of Law initiatives to promote "woke" policies abroad alongside the Departments of State, Justice, Defense, the Treasury, Commerce, and the U.S. judiciary.¹⁵ This recent strategy shows no sign of change.¹⁶

2. Using USAID to promote LGBTQI+ policies undermines sovereignty, authentic human rights, and democracy

The approach outlined in the USAID policy for promoting democracy and human rights, particularly social issues like gender and sexual orientation, risks conflating these with universally recognized human rights. This not only muddles the distinction between fundamental rights and evolving social norms but also suggests an imposition of Western cultural values under the guise of human rights and alienates partner countries where such norms are not culturally or politically resonant.¹⁷

The policy's framework is a blueprint for a top-down imposition of social change, undermining the sovereignty of nations.¹⁸ By linking aid or support to the adoption of specific social policies,¹⁹ it will be viewed as coercive, generating resentment instead of goodwill toward the American People.²⁰

There's a documented history of USAID's promotion of policies that align more with progressive liberal values than with the immediate needs or cultural norms of the countries they assist.²¹ This trend continues unabated, with no indication of policy shifts towards more culturally sensitive approaches. The application of a uniform strategy for democracy promotion disregards the rich cultural and historical contexts across different nations. This could lead to destabilizing local governance or even fostering the already growing anti-democratic sentiments.²²

By aligning itself too closely with a particular socio-political agenda, USAID risks losing goodwill, which is crucial to advancing U.S. interests abroad. It also risks a pushback by nations where stiffer laws are passed that will directly affect people with diverse sexual orientations. This has already been seen in Uganda, Ghana, and Bulgaria.

3. The Policy Promotes U.S.-Backed Censorship and Propaganda Regimes

The strategy premises that [autocratic] governments exploit information ecosystems to foster division, propagate hate speech, and target marginalized communities.²³ This "manipulation of information" is claimed to be not only effective but to destabilize societal cohesion and trust in democratic institutions.²⁴

The strategy proposes combatting content deemed as misinformation "using social media, pliant media outlets, and proxies."²⁵ There's an inherent risk of overreach, where legitimate speech could be silenced under the guise of combating falsehoods.²⁶ The policy will lead to a chilling effect on free speech, where individuals and media might self-censor to avoid potential repercussions. The use of proxies and pliant media outlets to effect social control is an endorsement for government or state-influenced entities to control information flows. This is inherently anti-democratic. This social engineering scheme will not only limit diverse viewpoints but also skew public discourse towards a narrative that aligns with governmental or autocratic interests, at the expense of a free and open exchange of ideas.

The focus on combating misinformation will narrow the spectrum of public debate. It will create an echo chamber where only approved viewpoints are amplified, potentially marginalizing minority opinions or alternative facts.²⁷ What constitutes misinformation will be manipulated to serve political ends.²⁸

4. The policy will censor anyone who opposes transgender policies and other aspects of gender ideology under the guise of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

The policy introduces the concept of "technology-facilitated gender-based violence" as a new threat,²⁹ suggesting it disproportionately affects women and girls in public and political spheres.³⁰ This framing has already been used to justify censorship and restrictions on free speech under the pretext of combating gender-based violence. The concept and standards are being developed by the U.S. State Department, UN agencies, and other Western governments to monitor or censor online content under the guise of protecting against gender-based violence.³¹

The idea for such standards was first launched at the Summit for Democracy in 2022 in partnership with Denmark. The State Department initiative is geared towards addressing a wide range of conduct, and not just criminal conduct against women.³² "Some forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence are criminal; others are not, but are nonetheless harmful," according to an update on the initiative from the State Department during the Summit for Democracy.³³

The standards would require the government and the private sector to proactively censor criticism of gender ideology as a form of "hate speech." They would also require online platforms and internet providers to enforce feminist orthodoxy through automated algorithms and artificial intelligence, according to what is being dubbed a "safety by design" approach or "rights-respecting digital ecosystem."³⁴

Last year, the State Department published a report³⁵ with the first State Department use of the term "anti-rights."³⁶ The State Department's concept has already been used to investigate, intimidate, and silence opponents of abortion and transgender policies, even for things like "misgendering" and stating the negative health effects of gender-affirming care.

5. USAID is Ossifying the Promotion of Controversial Topics into Redundant Programming

The core mission of USAID should be to advance U.S. interests while cultivating trust in and goodwill toward the American People globally. However, when USAID is weaponized for political or social engineering, especially in promoting ideologies around gender and sexuality that aren't universally embraced, it risks alienating potential allies. Manipulating societal norms under the guise of aid directly undermines the objective of building trust and can result in a backlash against America.³⁷

The purpose of USAID must be to promote US interests and to build trust and goodwill toward the American People. These two goals are related and complimentary and must be pursued pragmatically. Promoting LGBTQI+ ideology is a political and social engineering goal that is incompatible with these objectives. USAID's success should be gauged by its genuine developmental impact, not by its ability to export specific social policies. A more pragmatic strategy would prioritize economic development, health, education, and infrastructure—areas less prone to controversy and more universally beneficial.

Recommendations

The USAID DRG Policy Guide presents several concerning elements that risk undermining democracy through programs that promote social engineering, censorship, and interference in internal politics:

- The policy should emphasize respecting national sovereignty and diverse governance models. It should acknowledge that democracy promotion efforts must be tailored to local contexts and preferences.
- Human rights definitions should be grounded in universally accepted principles rather than progressive interpretations that may not align with the values of many partner countries.
- The focus on LGBTQI+ issues should be reconsidered, as it may be seen as imposing Western ideologies on societies with different cultural norms.
- The policy should avoid any and all language that could justify censorship.
- The concept of "technology-facilitated gender-based violence" should be rejected

Endnotes

- 1 The democracy review would find metrics to determine which countries are experiencing a "democratic opening," which is an opportunity for USAID to increase democratic demand in a country. (pg. 24) While An [unclassified Action Plan](#) (pg. 4) specifies the metrics used in the democracy review.
- 2 This initiative rushes support, resources, and attention to countries experiencing "promising windows of democratic opportunity," in line with USAID's [Democracy Delivers Initiative](#), launched by Samantha Power and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the UN General Assembly in September 2022.
- 3 However, the strategy repeats multiple times that USAID will adopt a whole-of-agency approach to democratic renewal "to drive meaningful change." (pg. 10) In fact, the policy calls on all USAID Operating Units to make the four strategic changes, or "pivots," to accelerate democratic development.
- 4 Multiple USAID strategies add that the term is not a "monolith," and it will evolve, making it harder to understand the scope of the programs it will implement, who will be prioritized, and by what parameters. However, sexual orientation and gender identity are understood as characteristics of marginalized populations. ([2013 DRG strategy](#), pg. 15)
- 5 Pg. 7
- 6 The implementing partners of the Strategy may not be an unbiased representative of American foreign policy. The [Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy](#) is expected to play a role in the selection of implementing partners. The Network is composed of intergovernmental institutions like [UNFPA](#), [UN Women](#), and the Inter-American Commission of Women of the [OAS](#) which have increasingly promoted a pro-abortion reproductive justice framework, discouraged using the word "women" (though it is in their name), and accused of extortion on abortion and gender ideology. The national governments of Iceland, Finland, and Canada, members of the Network, have been among the most aggressive promoters of controversial policies within the UN system. These are the ones who "will work with local partners and support initiatives to counter the spread of manipulated information that uses misleading narratives to discredit, silence, or harm women and girls, LGBTQI+ persons, human rights defenders, anti-corruption champions, and other democratic actors." Pg. 13
- 7 See C-Fam, "[New Biden Policy Ties Foreign Poor to Gender Ideology](#)" on USAID's release of its [Inclusive Development Policy](#) for a brief overview.
- 8 C-Fam, "[Written Submission of the Center for Family and Human Rights on the report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity](#)"
- 9 The Annex of USAID's [Inclusive Development guidance](#) (pg. 26) lists the strategies, internal guidance, and some awards supporting inclusive development. One of them is the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance strategy. While the guidance deserves an analysis of its own, it makes clear that USAID promotes Inclusivity as a Core Development Strategy. USAID's commitment to "inclusive development" emphasizes the integration of all individuals, including those from the LGBTQI+ community, into development programs. For instance, USAID's [Inclusive Development Policy](#) (pg.4) states, "USAID supports the enactment of robust protections, inclusion, and human rights for all LGBTQI+ individuals through 'inclusive development.'"
- 10 Pg. 10.
- 11 Pg. 14
- 12 Pg. 12
- 13 The United Nations defines the rule of law as "a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions, and entities, public and private, including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards." [The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General \(United Nations, 2004\)](#). USAID's Rule of Law Policy adds to this and distinguishes between the rule of law and the rule by law. [USAID's Rule of Law Policy, Pg. 14](#)
- 14 [USAID's Rule of Law Policy](#), Pg.27
- 15 [USAID's Rule of Law Policy](#), Pg.20
- 16 The Daily Signal, "[Biden Admin 'Grossly Misusing Foreign Aid' to Push Radical Agenda, Former USAID Official Says](#)"
- 17 C-Fam, "[C-Fam Investigation Reveals Lack of Agreement and Nefarious Connections in UN Human Rights Mechanism](#)"
- 18 C-Fam, "[U.S. Angry that Traditional Countries Blocked Consensus on LGBT Issues](#)"
- 19 C-Fam, "[New Biden Policy Ties Foreign Poor to Gender Ideology](#)"
- 20 C-Fam, "[U.S. Angry that Traditional Countries Blocked Consensus on LGBT Issues](#)"
- 21 C-Fam, "[African Leaders Ask Congress to Cease Abortion Funding in HIV/AIDS Programs](#)"
- 22 In fact, the strategy points out that there is less appetite for democracy abroad. The Pew research study USAID cites reports a median of 78% across the 38 nations polled said that "a democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law" is a very or somewhat good way to govern their country. (Pew Research Center, "[Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety](#)") The policy does not

clearly list possible policies to ensure that the remaining 22% are not coerced in any way into democratic forms of governance.

23 Pg. 15

24 Pg. 12

25 Pg. 7

26 C-Fam, ["Biden Back Global Censorship Regime"](#)

27 C-Fam, ["Biden State Department Launches Global Campaign Against Pro-Life/Family Groups"](#)

28 The [Declaration for the Future of the Internet](#), the [NIST Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework](#), and the [U.S. Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights](#) all include elements on combatting misinformation but lack protections against its possible abuse or recourse if it were to happen.

29 C-Fam, ["Statement during the Informal consultations on the Global Digital Compact"](#)

30 White House, ["FACT SHEET: Release of the 2023 Women, Peace and Security Strategy and National Action Plan"](#)

31 C-Fam, ["Biden Administration Calls Upon UN to Stop Pro-Life Conservatives"](#)

32 State Department, ["2022 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse"](#)

33 State Department, ["2023 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse"](#)

34 C-Fam, ["Biden Backs Global Censorship Regime"](#)

35 State Department, ["Equity Action Plan"](#)

36 The action plan instructs the State Department to "consult and partner with foreign governments, multilateral and regional organizations, and civil society through events, statements, and institutional mechanisms, like the Istanbul Process 16/18, to combat the rise in global antisemitism, Islamophobia, religiously, racially, and ethnically motivated violent extremism, homophobia and transphobia, and other regressive anti-rights movements."

37 C-Fam, ["The Development Deep State: Sexual Progressivism in USAID"](#)