USAID IN KENYA: DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLIENT STATE

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Abstract

This essay explores the workings of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Kenya, focusing on the role of various global actors in development projects. To illustrate the variety of priorities at play in USAID programs, the paper has three sections, highlighting the agency's role in military, political, and economic interests, respectively. Through examining various USAID initiatives in Kenya and their implications within larger global processes, this paper suggests that the agency is used as a tool to subordinate the Kenyan state to global capitalist interests. The organization thus promotes and perpetuates a client state relationship between Kenya and a powerful global network of financial institutions, corporations, and governments that consolidate their interests in U.S. development aid.

Today, USAID staff work in more than 100 countries around the world with the same overarching goals that President Kennedy outlined 50 years ago – furthering America’s foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets while also extending a helping hand to people struggling to make a better life, recover from a disaster or striving to live in a free and democratic country. It is this caring that stands as a hallmark of the United States around the world.

-- United States Agency for International Development, 2013

When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?

-- Lila Abu-Lughod, 2000

Introduction

THE UNITED STATES AGENCY for International Development (USAID) is the world’s largest bilateral aid donor, providing over ten billion dollars in foreign assistance throughout the world each year (U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants 2011). This massive budget allows USAID to carry out more than 12,000 projects in more than 100 countries, playing a huge role in the flow of transnational capital funneled through development projects. These projects are complicated, as many of them are funded by and carried out in conjunction with a range of global entities, including multilateral lending institutions, governments, corporations, and non-governmental organizations (USAID 2014). USAID and its partner institutions are global actors with their own separate priorities, who use development projects to strategically influence local political economies in their favor.

This essay examines how such actors shape the work of USAID in Kenya. Kenya is currently the sixth largest recipient of USAID program funds, receiving $296 million from...
the agency in 2011 alone (USAID 2014). USAID’s interest in Kenya is not a recent development – the country has been a priority since the Cold War, when its market-friendly policies and proximity to communist-leaning countries made it a particularly desirable political ally to the U.S. (Shipton 2010; Mosley 1986, 118). As a country highly relevant to USAID’s operations, both past and present, Kenya provides a good case study from which the workings of the agency, and the interests of its partners, can be examined up close.

I look at several different USAID-related projects in Kenya and the broader political circumstances in which they are entangled, focusing on how capitalist interests are pursued through these projects. These circumstances include war, foreign affairs, and transnational flows of capital. At stake are U.S. national security, corporate profits, and priorities of large international organizations, all of which play a part in the formation and execution of USAID programs. To illustrate the variety of interests at play in USAID programs, I divide the paper into three sections, each highlighting different aspects of the agency’s role in the political economy.

The first of these sections focuses on the American state’s use of USAID in promoting national security during the Cold War. The second considers how USAID, in collaboration with other global entities, was able to exert political control over Kenya through mobilizing popular discourses of “freedom” and “democracy” immediately following the end of the Cold War. The last section examines USAID as a funnel through which the financial interests of American-based agribusiness and multilateral lending organizations are extended to new potential markets. Through examining various USAID initiatives in Kenya and their implications on larger global processes, this paper suggests that allied networks of financial institutions, corporations, and governments shape and perpetuate dominant global distributions of power and capital. In this global context, USAID functions as one of many entities which enforce a client state relationship between Kenya and the U.S., in which Kenya is rendered politically, economically, and militarily subordinate to the interests of the American state as well as those of multinational corporations and financial institutions.

**Historical Overview**

When USAID was established in 1961, its activities focused on allocating direct military, economic, and food aid to so-called Third World countries. Development was articulated both as an altruistic goal in itself and as a means to boost the U.S. economy, especially through creating markets more receptive to American exports (Essex 2008, 235). Perhaps the most important legitimation of the new agency, however, came in the form of its role in the Cold War: Development was conceived of as a means by which to prevent the global spread of communism (Butterfield 2004).

In the 1980s, USAID became even more explicitly tied to more general U.S. foreign policy goals. In addition to bolstering the military links that were established during the Cold War, novel ideologies manifested themselves in the agency through a new focus on “trade capacity building” – an overarching strategy of the State Department – which focused primarily on liberalizing trade, promoting international flows of capital, and furthering U.S. political and security objectives (Butterfield 2004, 199; Natsios 2004, 88; Essex 2008, 229-230).

In this context, understandings of the nature of good development shifted from direct aid to more complex projects focusing on building infrastructure, promoting institutions, and network expansion (Essex 2008, 239). Along with this strategic shift
came the idea that providing free goods to aid-receiving countries is not enough: that, for humanitarian-based work to succeed, it was the responsibility of more affluent countries like the U.S. to implement entire systems in economies, political systems, and social structures that could be vastly different from their own.

Before proceeding, I want to highlight the complexities embedded in the notion of international development. The idea that some nations can and should “develop” others is a contentious one. It should be emphasized that the idea of development as a moral endeavor, separate from a nation’s overarching political strategy, is crucial to the operation of USAID, along with many other international organizations whose operations focus on humanitarian or other aid-related causes. For these organizations, the use of the term “development” provides a moral backdrop from which to contextualize various types of international interventions that otherwise might be viewed as inappropriate or even invasive. Lila Abu-Lughod’s essay, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” is particularly relevant to this topic, as she illuminates the need to acknowledge the structural transformations of political systems, economies, and social relations that are carried out under the banner of international development (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789). This is certainly the case with USAID, which for decades has been associated with programs that actively promote the implementation of projects designed to serve American security and free market economies.

**Security and Development – USAID’s Strategic Deployment During Times of War**

Promoting national security has always been a priority of U.S. development agencies. In 1951, ten years before the establishment of USAID, the creation of the Mutual Security Agency (MSA) linked development activities with Cold War military strategy. Operating under the then-common belief that desperate economic conditions in the so-called Third World would lead to the proliferation of Soviet-style communism, the MSA was designed to carry out aid programs to strengthen the U.S.’s position in the Cold War (Butterfield 2004, 35-37).

In 1961, the Foreign Assistance Act was passed and USAID was created, subsuming all other existing national development entities (Butterfield 2004, 59). Like the MSA, USAID has continually promoted American security interests and military strategy, particularly during times of war. The agency was especially relevant during the Cold War, when many projects were carried out in conjunction with broader military interests.

USAID programs were prioritized in Vietnam during the war years, and while some of these initiatives fell under the conventional scope of development, involving work in areas such as industry, education, and agriculture, others were directly related to counterinsurgency measures and involved collaboration with the CIA and U.S. military (Butterfield 2004, 86-93). Significantly, in 1968, the number of direct USAID employees peaked alongside the intensity of U.S. involvement in Vietnam (Butterfield 2004, 10). Later, during the ‘80s, President Reagan deepened the link between international aid and foreign policy aims, focusing programs around economic liberalization and security measures (Butterfield 2004, 199). Thus, through the conflation of security and development, USAID used its development mandate to participate directly in the Cold War.

USAID’s operations in Kenya were no exception to the U.S. Cold War political agenda. Here, the agency pushed development initiatives as a way to forge a political alliance with the government as well as to establish a
physical presence in the country. From 1976 to 1981, USAID funded the World Bank's Integrated Agriculture Development Programme (IADP). The IADP was a microfinance-based initiative with the stated goals of promoting economic and agricultural development in Kenya through the provision of low-risk loans to small-scale farmers. However, for reasons that will be addressed later, the program’s impacts in these areas were negligible if at all existent. Nevertheless, the IADP was fruitful in at least one way: it solidified American influence in a country of high strategic value in the Cold War, by virtue of its proximity to Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Somalia, all of which were considered threats to U.S. interests (Shipton 2010).

Anthropologist Parker Shipton draws attention to the importance of the IADP in negotiating American docking rights and capitalist free-market policies in Kenya, highlighting the ways in which USAID programs can be considered “part of the price of a political alliance” (Shipton 2010). So while the IADP failed to bring positive development to small-scale Kenyan farmers, it succeeded in furthering American geopolitical interests tied to the Cold War, a point that will be argued in the third section of this paper.

The notion of international development as a means to national security has outlived the Cold War, and in the context of the War on Terror, it remains an integral part of USAID's operations today. Andrew Natsios, former Administrator of USAID, has advocated development as a means to improve U.S. security and mitigate terrorist threats. Boasting that defeating terrorism “is this generation's 'calling,'” Natsios goes on to claim that “[t]here is a simple reason for the renewed prominence of foreign assistance: the recognition that national security ultimately rests on spreading prosperity and democracy to the rest of the world (Natsios 2004, 88). More recently, USAID's current Administrator, Rajiv Shah, has made analogous comments about the agency’s role in fighting terror. In introducing a policy brief which refers to development as “one of several tools of U.S. national power,” Shah reiterates the point that “successful development is essential to advancing our national security objectives,” drawing attention to the fact that nearly 60 percent of State Department and USAID foreign assistance funds are allocated to countries that are either experiencing or at risk for violent conflicts (USAID 2014; USAID 2011, ii-1). Both Administrators elucidate and advocate a strong connection between USAID and military priorities.

Along with echoing Cold War-era logic of strategically deploying aid funds to further military goals, both Natsios and Shah frame the role of USAID in a manner that is eerily similar to contemporary Department of Defense-sponsored development initiatives aimed at winning the “hearts and minds” of local populations (Prestholdt 2011, 3). Such military-led initiatives, including controversial Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as similar development-oriented projects in Kenya and other countries in East Africa, have been central to the War on Terror (Kandiyoti 2005, 23; Katzman 2009, 21-34; Prestholdt 2011, 3-19; USAID 2011, 11).

In the context of Kenya, the War on Terror's impact on USAID activity is clear when comparing the agency’s changing response to Nairobi-based terrorist attacks before and after the plane crashes of September 11, 2001. In 1998, the American embassy in Nairobi was the target of a massive truck bombing that killed 224 people, 12 of which were U.S. citizens (Swedberg and Reisman 2013, 13). In response to this crisis, USAID was allocated $36.9 million for the purpose of disaster recovery, the vast majority of which was spent on immediate assistance, including addressing medical needs, repairing
infrastructure, and providing mental health services (Abdallah, Heinzen and Burnham 2007, 418-422).

However, in the years following 9/11, the 1998 bombing received heightened attention and led to a subsequent prioritization of counterterrorism initiatives in Kenya. Accordingly, as War on Terror rhetoric became steadily more integral to USAID’s operations, responding to terrorism took on a new meaning for the agency (Hills 2006, 637). Thus, USAID has begun carrying out anti-terrorism initiatives driven by its own “countering violent extremism” theory, many of which are related to community engagement with ethnic Somali youth in Kenya, a population the U.S. government perceives to be at-risk of succumbing to extremist ideology (Prestholdt 2011, 9-10; Swedberg and Reisman 2013, 15-19). More important, however, is the fact that USAID has been designated as “the interagency lead for development components of counterterrorism programs in East Africa” (Ploch 2010, 35). Thus, the agency works in conjunction with the State Department, and even, in some cases, the Department of Defense itself, to address terrorism. In Kenya, this entails funding programs that train and equip the Kenyan military, in addition to strengthening the country’s police force (Ploch 2010, 35-51).

The U.S. is concerned about terrorist activity in East Africa backed by Al-Qaeda and carried out by its Somalia-based partner, Al-Shabaab (Nantulya 2013, 11-13). Kenya’s border with Somalia and proximity to Yemen make it one of several focal points for U.S. security presence in the region; the Department of Defense has the U.S. Africa Command at Camp Lemonnier in nearby Djibouti and maintains camps along the Kenya-Somalia border. Yet with all its regional infrastructure, the U.S. was not able to provide intelligence to prevent Somali militants in September 2013 from attacking a major mall in Nairobi and killing 67 people, many of whom were wealthy international expatriates, bringing up the question of whom the various anti-terrorism projects are truly designed to protect.

The logic behind USAID’s role in counterterrorism is two-fold: for one thing, the agency has a long history of explicitly allying itself with American security objectives; for another, achievement of security in target countries is seen as an essential condition for good development. However, it is not clear to what extent U.S. security initiatives, including those funded by USAID, actually improve the lives of Kenyan target populations. On the contrary, African historian Jeremy Prestholdt has argued that “ordinary Kenyans with no perceptible link to terrorists regularly bear the cost of counterterrorism” (Prestholdt 2011, 20; University of California San Diego 2014). Kenya’s police force, for instance, is infamous for its corruption and human rights abuses, yet has received support from the Anti-Terrorism Assistance program, which is funded in part by USAID (Hills 2006, 637-638; Ploch 2010, 23-51; Prestholdt 2011, 9). Particularly vulnerable to police brutality have been ethnic Somalis and other Kenyan Muslims, who seem to be considered potential threats to American national security (Swedberg and Reisman 2013, 11-19; Prestholdt 2011, 4). Given the problematic nature of the program’s implementation, then, it is no surprise that while combating terrorism is important to many Kenyans, it is secondary to other, more pressing issues, such as the “high incidence of murder, manslaughter, rape, armed robbery, carjacking, drug trafficking and corruption, and of the proliferation of illegal small arms” that serve as constant impediments to development (Hills 2006, 637).

Thus, while USAID-affiliated counterterrorism measures in Kenya align with post-September 11 U.S. foreign policy goals, it is questionable to what extent they promote
Kenyan development. American security interests are strategically coupled with development goals linked to the Kenyan beneficiaries of USAID initiatives. As with the IADP, USAID's counterterrorism efforts in Kenya provide a means through which American military presence can be established in an area prominent to war-related security concerns.

**Donor-Induced Democracy – The Role of Contingency Measures in Kenyan Politics**

USAID's impact in Kenya extends beyond the promotion of American military interests to political coercion. In 1991, the United States pushed other international donors to support the implementation of contingency measures to international aid as a means to exert control over Kenyan politics (Cohen 2001, 103). USAID, together with other international donors, had a decisive impact in pressuring President Moi's one-party administration to reinstitute a multiparty political system in Kenya. This was achieved through the application of conditionality to development aid – in this case, the withholding of funds as long as Moi retained a one-party system. Kenyan dependence on foreign aid was so high that once the contingency measures went into effect, it was only a matter of days before Moi announced the return to a multiparty system (Brown and Kaiser, 2007: 1137-1138).

USAID continued to be an important “democratizing force” even after its success in pushing a multiparty system, with its implementation in 1994 of the multi-million dollar “Kenya Democracy and Governance Project.” The program, which Moi's government only agreed to because of the pressure of further threats to withhold development funds, took measures to promote democracy through strengthening civil society (Cohen 2001: 104).

While it is easy to welcome such democracy-spreading initiatives as positive developments in international politics, the application of politically-motivated conditionality to international aid can hamper its effects on the development projects being funded. This is especially true when contingency measures do not bear a direct relation to the initiatives to which they are attached, and when the effectiveness of aid is time-sensitive. For example, in an unrelated instance of conditionality, USAID's implementation of contingency measures to agricultural programs resulted in disruptions in the fertilizer market in the early 1980s.

In 1980, USAID started providing large fertilizer shipments to Kenya as components of various aid packages. At the time, the Kenya Farmers Association (KFA) controlled almost 75% of the country's fertilizer market, and one of USAID's goals was to break up its virtual monopoly (Moseley 1986, 113; USAID 1983, 5). In attempting to open the market to the private sector, USAID implemented contingency measures designed to weaken the KFA's grip on the market. However, since conditionality entails withholding aid until an agreement is reached, and agricultural endeavors are time-sensitive, the contingency measures resulted in delays that prevented imported fertilizer from reaching Kenyan farmers when it was most necessary, and thus had a negative effect on development (Moseley 1986, 113-117).

Returning to the contingency measures of 1991, it is worth noting that the Kenyan government was largely supported by international donors before and after Moi declared a one-party system of politics. 1989 and 1990, the two years preceding the international outcry, the Kenyan state received a combined total of over $2 billion in development assistance, much of it from the U.S. (Brown and Kaiser 2007, 1137). Alarmingly, 1982, the year that Moi declared
Kenya to be a one-party system, was also the year that the United States became the largest bilateral aid donor to Kenya (Cohen 2001, 102; Mosley 1986, 113). It was only with the end of the Cold War that Kenyan politics began to receive heightened international attention (Brown and Kaiser 2007, 1137). So what made the U.S. change its stance on Moi so abruptly? Here the circumstances attached to the aid and contingency measures are highly relevant. Seemingly contradictory goals in policy are better understood when USAID’s priorities in the Cold War are taken into account, for Kenya was a state of high geopolitical importance in Cold War strategy (Butterfield 2004, 199; Shipton 2010).

The IADP, mentioned above, was allegedly designed and carried out as a means to forge a political alliance with Kenya (Shipton 2010). Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that only in 1991, the formal end of the Cold War, did the American-driven international outcry against Moi’s repressive regime begin. Both before and after Moi’s announcement of a multiparty system, political motives were highly relevant to the actions that USAID took or decided not to take. These geopolitical motives were arguably more important to USAID’s behavior in Kenya than stated project goals.

USAID acts as an extension of both the State Department and the Department of Defense. Nevertheless, while USAID has delivered concrete gains to U.S. interests, the American state is far from the only institution invested in the agency. The next section explores the vested interests of international organizations, such as the World Bank, and global corporations – specifically, American-based agribusinesses.

The IADP – Nongovernmental Financial Interests in International Development

Again, the question arises of who really benefits from USAID projects. And indeed, there is a strong case to be made that USAID’s operations function more to further American interests than to implement stable “development,” be it agricultural or democratic. American political interests are not the only ones at stake, though. This much is clear in examining the myriad of international organizations that USAID partners with – global entities with interests of their own.

One such partner organization is the World Bank. Created in 1945, the World Bank provides loans to the governments of less-wealthy countries with the stated strategy of alleviating poverty and promoting development (Shipton 2010). The World Bank is USAID’s largest vendor; USAID provided over $2 billion to the organization in 2012 alone (USAID 2014). This section draws from Parker Shipton’s ethnography, Credit Between Cultures, and his in-depth analysis of a microfinance project carried out by the World Bank in conjunction with USAID.

USAID partnered with the World Bank and several other institutions in 1976 to implement a microcredit project in Kenya called the Smallholders Production Service and Credit Project, which later merged with its sister initiative, the Integrated Agricultural Development Project (IADP). Spearheaded by the World Bank and funded jointly by USAID, the Kenyan government, the Arab Bank for East African Development, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and the Bank itself, the IADP provided low-risk, low-interest loans to small-scale Kenyan farmers. The IADP was terminated in 1981 because of increasing rates of loan default, a steeply declining number of participants, and a
negligible impact in terms of poverty reduction (Shipton 2010). I want to focus, however, on the various entities involved in this microcredit program, their motivations for participating in it, and how they used the program to influence the economic situation of small-scale Kenyan farmers.

Goals of the program included developing the rural landscape in terms of poverty reduction and increasing agricultural output. The loans were also intended to serve as a means by which to integrate the target population more fully into the national and global economy. The idea was to get poor farmers, who had been previously ineligible for credit of any kind, accustomed to the ways in which loans worked, so that they could take out larger loans in the future, many of which were provided by other bilateral and multilateral institutions. While offering the promise of access to a greater amount of capital, these bigger-scale loans were much riskier and in some cases involved land mortgaging as collateral for debt, meaning that farmers who failed to repay could potentially lose their land to lending institutions. In this regard, The IADP appears as a mechanism through which to provide large-scale lending organizations, such as the World Bank, with new markets of borrowers (Shipton 2010).

Multilateral lending institutions were not the only organizations that stood to gain from the IADP’s goals of promoting loans in Kenya. The program also provided agribusiness with a tentative new market for their products, as most loans were provided in-kind, by supplying farmers with inputs rather than money. The rhetoric of the IADP emphasized a “whole farm approach” through attempting to address various aspects of farming. In following with this logic, the program offered farmers loans in the form of direct access to seeds, pesticides, and fertilizer.

These products often worked best in combination. In the case of maize, for instance, foreign hybrid seeds were promoted by the program because their yields were higher than their local counterparts. However, the hybrid seeds were more expensive than local ones and they needed a more controlled environment than those indigenous to Kenya. They were also more vulnerable to pests than indigenous varieties of maize. While they may have had the potential to increase a farmer’s capital, then, high-yield hybrid maize was a relatively high-risk investment for an indebted farmer to make. Furthermore, through the use of hybrid maize inputs in the loan program, the program encouraged farmers to invest not only in seeds but in chemical fertilizer and pesticides as well, as a hybrid seed’s profitability would be seriously compromised if not used in conjunction with the former two products (Shipton 2010).

Since loans were provided in-kind instead of in cash, Kenyan farmers had no choice over what kinds of seeds to buy. Thus, a commitment to taking out a loan through the IADP was not just a decision relating to debt, it was also necessarily a decision about what kind of commodities one would farm with. And because of the nature of the hybrid seeds provided, a commitment to one commodity also meant a commitment to other commodities that were not formerly as prevalent or necessary (Shipton 2010).

In this sense, the IADP allowed the corporate financial interest of agribusinesses to access a new set of consumers. Had the program been successful, it would have arguably set up a strong demand and even dependency on the part of Kenyan farmers for products of already powerful global corporations, as chemical fertilizer seems to degrade soil quality over time and may have a negative impact on yields when its use is discontinued (Nature World News 2014; Philpott 2010; Schiermeier 2013; Shipton 2013). Through the IADP’s attempts to ease Kenya’s rural poor into an international market...
economy, then, agribusinesses were able to increase their exposure to a new demographic of consumers (Shipton 2013).

Shipton’s analysis of the IADP gives a close-up of the multitude of interests at stake in the operations of a USAID-related program. The program not only offered benefits to its official beneficiaries, the small-scale Kenyan farmers, but it was also designed to bolster U.S. security and restructure local economies in favor of international lending organizations and global corporations.

More recently, reporters have been drawing attention to the vested agribusiness interests inherent in some of USAID’s projects. Food for Peace (FFP), for example, is a USAID-USDA program that distributes humanitarian aid in the form of American-produced food to countries including Kenya (Essex 2008, 245; USAID 2013). It is important to note here that the agency is required to purchase from American companies (U.S. Food Aid and Security 2010; Dugger 2007). In each of the past four years, from 2009 to 2012, FFP has provided well over one hundred million dollars worth of food aid to Kenya (USAID 2013). This means that USAID pays American agribusinesses over 100 million dollars per year so that it can distribute food aid under FFP in Kenya.

The impact of this strategy on the Kenyan economy has provoked controversy internationally. A 2011 New York Times article written by Samuel Loewenberg notes the shortcomings of this type of food aid in the case of Kenya. Kenya underwent a serious drought that has exacerbated rates of malnutrition for many of the nation’s poor. USAID was able to anticipate the effects of the drought well before its peak, but unable to make the desired impact in terms of managing the crisis. In large part, this was because aid was sent to Kenya in the form of foreign food shipment, rather than money that could be used to buy local food. The effect of the drought was not so much a lack of food but an increase in the price of food that many Kenyans could not afford (Loewenberg 2011). USAID’s reliance on American agribusinesses for the provision of food aid in Kenya did not address this issue at all and had the negative effect of undermining local markets (Dugger 2007).

Conclusion

From the case studies explored above, it is clear that governments, corporations, and international agencies all have something to gain from their participation in USAID’s activities. The American government has used contingency measures to push for “democratic reform” in Kenya, bolstering America’s national image as a promoter of democracy in addition to amplifying the amount of control that could be exercised over its client state with the threat to withhold funds. Juxtaposed against this coercive image, the idea of American bilateral aid as a “helping hand” comes into question.

But, while the United States certainly improves its own standing through the operations of USAID, it does not do so as a completely sovereign, all-powerful entity. We saw in the case of the IADP that it was the World Bank that planned and implemented the project – USAID simply provided the funding. And, arguably, the World Bank and other multilaterals stood to benefit just as much from the IADP as did the American government, as the program, had it been successful, would have qualified a new set of low-income borrowers for more serious and potentially harmful loans. We also see potential benefits to agribusinesses, as USAID was able to open markets previously closed to Western-style fertilizers, GMO seeds, and pesticides. Through its funding of the IADP, USAID acted in the interest of multiple global, nongovernmental entities.
USAID mobilizes various global actors by means of its aspiration to develop other economies. Through the coalescence of these entities, the nature of the agency and its impacts on the targeted political economy are at once a politico-military extension of American sovereignty, a means by which international organizations can create indebted citizens, and an access point through which agribusiness can reach new markets and profits. USAID is a channel of authority through which global actors coalesce, influence and shape the political economy in their interests so as to maximize their own benefits.

Many of these vested interests undermine the very development they claim to prioritize. While it would almost certainly be an exaggeration to state that USAID’s projects have had absolutely no positive impact on non-elite Kenyans, what is clear is that U.S. military and economic interests have been shaping forces to such a degree as to render much of the development work itself secondary or even ineffective. In many cases it is easier to see program benefits flowing to the American government and multinational corporations than to stated program beneficiaries. USAID promotes a client state relationship between Kenya, the U.S. and major capitalist powers like international lending institutions and agribusinesses.

I want to conclude by citing the essay by Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” Her inquiry is particularly relevant to this topic and is worth quoting, for she illuminates the need to acknowledge the structural transformations of political systems, economies, and social relations that are pursued by nations under the banner of international development (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789). I think, in the spirit of Abu-Lughod, we can ask: What exactly are USAID and its affiliated institutions saving Kenyans to? We need to be critically aware that USAID, as an open supporter of implementing free markets worldwide, has interests that go beyond alleviating human suffering and involve the intentional replacement of one system of order with another, a theme that has its roots in colonialism. It seems that the concept of development, by its very nature, can never be free from unequal relations of power and ulterior motives.

Acknowledgments
I am very grateful for all the advice and feedback I have received during the course of this project. In particular, I would like to thank my adviser, Stefanie Graeter, who not only gave me the benefit of the doubt despite time management issues, but also spent hours with me outside of our scheduled class time meticulously going over multiple drafts before I submitted the final. Her class, “Cultural Dimensions of Globalization,” was critical in determining my theoretical approach. My editor, Emily Meehan, cut out the paper’s major redundancies, flagged an important mistake, and helped me bulk up the text with more relevant evidence. Emily, Sharon Knox, and Gigi Ryan did a lot of helpful copy editing and standardization. Professors Liisa Malkki and Jim Fergus pointed me in the direction of Parker Shipton’s work early in the research process, and their daughter, Aila, stayed up late helping me organize the paper’s structure. My father, Larry, pointed out readability issues and my mother, Stephanie, helped me time and again with editing throughout the entire process. Thank you so much to all of you, I would not have been able to finish this project without you.

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