



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

“Foreign Assistance and the Revolution of Rigor”

Data and evidence don't lie—but for too long, our policy makers haven't paid them nearly enough attention. In 2014, an all-star team of leaders and thinkers from across the political spectrum came together to propose an exciting new vision for the country—one where policymakers base decisions not on politics or expedience, but on the hard evidence of what really works. The first edition of Moneyball for Government did more than just spark conversations; it spurred meaningful action.

Now, in the second edition of the book, Michael Gerson, former Assistant to the President for Policy & Strategic Planning under President George W. Bush and Raj Shah, former Administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development under President Barack Obama, join together to write a new chapter explaining ways to apply this revolution of rigor to foreign assistance.

DATA AND EVIDENCE AT WORK

Gerson and Shah draw on their experiences in government to highlight successful humanitarian programs, as well as ongoing challenges – both at home and abroad – to implementing results-oriented initiatives designed to improve outcomes and save lives. With foreign policy and national security concerns dominating public debate, they emphasize the critical role of effective foreign assistance in doing good, while advancing U.S. interests and security. They describe what is working, what is not and what should be done moving forward to continue to transform the way our country provides foreign assistance.

Gerson and Shah explain how the historical dual mission of U.S. foreign assistance, where it was used as both a political tool to reward or punish foreign governments and as a vehicle for aiding the needy, has harmed the effort and undermined both its credibility and support. They note that, for too long, success was defined by whether the United States provided assistance rather than by whether that assistance produced meaningful outcomes. The lack of measured success—of any real evidence that aid was working—created a backlash that exists to this day.

The authors believe that foreign assistance should be measured in lives changed, not dollars distributed. They emphasize that making friends with other countries should be the by-product of a really good aid program rather than the mission itself. And they call for evidence and data to drive foreign assistance policy and practice.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING: BEST PRACTICES

To inform the foreign aid reform process and inspire a generation of new leaders committed to a bold new way of thinking, Gerson and Shah lay out seven best practices to be followed, including:

1. We must build and maintain a strong political consensus for results-driven outcomes.

Within the realm of foreign assistance, political parties are actually moving closer together on foreign assistance, not further apart. Achievements over the past fifteen years were made possible by unprecedented alliances between Democrats and Republicans and between faith-based organizations and development advocates, such as the advocacy on behalf of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS relief (PEPFAR) during the George W. Bush Administration. These efforts demonstrate that to be successful there must be a willingness to keep divisive issues off the table. And the U.S. must remain pragmatically focused on delivering a results-based aid program while also placing appropriate expectations on partner governments.

2. We must creatively and relentlessly employ technology and innovation to drive measurable outcomes and save lives.

There is simply no greater tool to save lives than investment in basic research. We know that if we wait until emergency strikes to begin research on some matters—say, pandemic flu vaccines—we may be too late. And we know that if we depend on private markets alone to drive R&D, profitability will always be a prerequisite for innovation. The importance of the federal government's role in encouraging research is hard to overstate. And development leaders need to resist scientifically baseless objections to new technologies whose poverty-fighting power is irrefutable.

3. We must appoint people to lead international development efforts who believe in the power of data and evidence.

To make further progress in improving foreign assistance, it is critical to choose people for leadership roles who fully embrace the need for a results-oriented aid strategy. These leaders will need political sophistication, expertise, relentless consuming passion and conviction of purpose.

4. We must design strategies that focus on measurable outcomes.

A demand for results must be at the very heart of aid policy, weaving measurement and accountability into the fabric of aid programs. Development leaders must be able to confidently say that it was the aid program, and not some other factor, that caused the effect being measured. The successful response to the 2011 drought in Ethiopia, after which no humanitarian crisis emerged, demonstrated the power of a well-executed results-oriented aid program.

5. We must resist the pressure to revert to old practices that don't rely on data and evidence to achieve results.

Pressure on policymakers, from the national security community and from representatives of foreign governments, to backslide into old practices can be relentless. Development leaders cannot allow competing political priorities to compromise their mission of improving lives.

6. We must protect spending on results-oriented aid and assistance.

Despite funding constraints, results-oriented aid programs should not go unfunded or underfunded. Programs offering proven, measurable outcomes should be given the space and resources to continue. And by the same token, the U.S. ought to be sure that money spent on ineffective programs is reallocated so that the impact we want is the impact we actually achieve.

7. We must develop effective conflict-zone strategies using the best data and evidence available.

There are limits to the policy of rewarding good governments with aid. To be successful at reaching the sustainable development goals the world has set forth, foreign assistance organizations are going to need to figure out how to drive success in fragile states and conflict zones where poverty is most rampant. We must create a new set of tools, strategies, and capabilities to achieve development goals in difficult environments. We must continue innovating and experimenting in this area—to build the data, analyze the evidence, and help devise strategies and capabilities that can work reliably—even in the world’s most broken places.

A NEW ERA OF AID

Gerson and Shah conclude that what is required is not just a transformation in the way we approach foreign assistance, but a different way of thinking and talking—from leaders on both sides of the aisle. We need Democrats to acknowledge that bad aid policy has failed in the past, and we need Republicans to acknowledge the power and importance of smartly run, data-driven aid programs.

But even more important, we need to see beyond our traditional party politics, to understand that on these issues, our common ground is vast. This is an issue where evangelicals and atheists can hold hands in common cause. Smart aid is smart politics whether you’re a Democrat or a Republican. It’s smart policy whether you’re a liberal or a conservative. It’s smart diplomacy whether you’re a hawk or a dove. With so much work still to be done, it’s best we do it together.

Results for America (RFA) improves outcomes for young people, their families, and communities by shifting public resources toward evidence-based, results-driven solutions. RFA is working to achieve this goal by building a strong bipartisan “Invest in What Works” coalition; developing and advancing the next generation of evidence-based, results-driven practices, policies, and programs; and supporting leaders at all levels of government to invest in what works.

For more information about Results for America, visit www.results4america.org.