



International Association of Impact Assessment 2026 Annual Conference
19-22 May 2026 | Quebec City, Canada.

IAIA 2026 Proceedings Paper: USAID's ESIA Legacy and Looking Forward

Abstract #709 / Theme Forum (Panel) Session held 22 June 2026

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Publication Date (Web): July 2026

Summary: *With the dramatic changes in the U.S. Federal Government's Foreign Assistance in 2025, notably the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), a moderated panel of six Environmental and Social Impact (ESIA) professionals representing over 100 years of collective experience shared perspectives on USAID's legacy and lessons for the future.*

Introduction (Erika J. Clesceri, PhD)

Since the dismantling of USAID on July 1, 2025, there has been an abrupt loss of US foreign assistance programs and multilateral representation globally in the development and humanitarian space, putting both people and nature at risk. In a space of a few months, the architecture of USAID was broken apart from the disappointing spread of misinformation, tearing apart a venerable 64 year old organization that has previously been supported equally by both political parties in the United States.

While losses from direct programming will be assessed for years to come, decreased engagement also brings direct and indirect risks to these spaces' people and environments now. However, the gains from the historical, systematic integration of environmental and social safeguards globally can not be underestimated. These gains include the integration of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) regulations into country governing mechanisms, the incorporation of ESIA practice into private sectors projects, and the

consolidation of human rights tenets into development planning and activities. It is critical that experts and practitioners in this space work to preserve the gains from these efforts and prepare for the future development and humanitarian assistance - whether that be through a reengagement of traditional bilateral government approaches, increased engagement by the private sector, or other means.

This theme forum brought together former USAID environmental officers, regional advisors and other practitioners to discuss examples of USAID's successes and challenges as well as to offer recommendations for the future: What should be taken with us and what should we leave behind from our experiences at USAID? This proceedings paper summarizes each of the session's segments.

USAID ESIA Lessons Available, Application Needed! (Mark Stoughton, PhD)

Over its final 20+ years, USAID significantly advanced its ESIA-based safeguards processes. Clear mitigation and monitoring (M&M) requirements were introduced and staff/partner capacity built; M&M and associated reporting became significantly more consistent and robust. Multiple regions/bureaus deployed safeguards compliance and compliance capacity "soft audits" to identify and address consequential gaps in ESIA processes over the program cycle.

Persistent challenges remained, including: limited integration of site-specific information (80%+ of USAID ESIA was at the programmatic level), ambiguous language in the enabling regulation re: social impacts, a pesticide regulation almost unimplementable as-written, no formal guidance for determinations of significance (i.e. level of risk), the intrinsic challenges of being at once both implementer and regulator, and a highly manual safeguards documentation review process.

At the time of the global stop-work order issued in late Jan. 2025 and follow-on termination of 80%+ of the its portfolio, USAID was rolling out first-ever social impacts screening requirements at the project design stage; on the cusp of a major update to its safeguards operational policy intended to address some of these persistent challenges; and scoping the automation of its safeguards documentation system.

The retained portion of the USAID portfolio includes significant intrinsic risks to life, health, and environment. Acknowledging these risks is not a criticism of this programming nor a reason to abandon it: addressing the underlying serious development needs entails these risks; the challenge, moral responsibility, and enlightened self-interest is to anticipate and manage them.

Neither the US Department of State nor the US Department of Agriculture (now the home of “Food for Peace” food aid programming) has publicly available environmental and social policy/safeguard procedures, and this seems to reflect an actual lack of such procedures at this time. (At least some legacy awards have reportedly continued under USAID environmental requirements, but technical capacity and bandwidth for government oversight has been much-reduced.)

Sometime—very hopefully sooner rather than later, and very hopefully NOT driven by a multi-fatality incident as USAID was—these institutional successors to USAID will need to develop/adopt/adapt environmental and social procedures in some form. Of necessity, any such procedures will be substantially ESIA-centered. USAID’s experiences provide ample lessons learned regarding effective control of these risks—both practices to adopt and pitfalls to avoid.

Plastic Waste & Disaster: US Embassy Engages with USAID in Thailand (Marissa Jablonski, PhD)

Environmental impact assessments come in many forms. Economics and social reform can be the catalyst required to call for environmental work. In 2018, the US Embassy of Thailand, in collaboration with local governments, the Phuket Hotels Association, and other community-led and private organizations determined that ocean plastics pollution was causing an economic crisis in tourist communities, including the entire island of Phuket. Daily waste washed ashore bringing choked animal and plant species with it– and required municipal waste dump trucks to carry the waste away from highly visited beaches. Misinformation and poor communication spread rumors around the island and the world that prevented local governance from taking action. None of the stakeholders knew the action to take, and any small actions were not changing the fact that the tourism economy was declining to levels unsustainable for the local people. The US Government was able to pull together resources through the US Embassy of Thailand and USAID’s Office of American Hospitals and Schools Abroad (ASHA) to send a US Embassy Fellow, an engineer with community engagement and systems thinking experience to Phuket to work with stakeholders to create an environmental impact assessment complete with mitigation actions.

Despite the relative size of the problem described, this work includes vital collaborations that realized a decrease in single-use plastics across the island (reduced by a yearly use of 6-million pieces) and an improvement in environmental education and waste services efficiency and understanding. This environmental work led to a change in culture, rebuilding public trust in local and international political systems, growing scientific understanding behind waste,

pollution, economics and environment, and increased effective communication among stakeholders who had previously been isolated and confused.

USAID's ESIA Capacity Development Legacy: Lessons learned

(David M. Kinyua, MSc)

USAID's environmental compliance and ESIA capacity development programs have left a lasting legacy across Africa. Through sustained investments in environmental reviews, EMMP development, monitoring, reporting, training, and oversight, USAID helped build a critical mass of environmental professionals and strengthened national environmental management systems.

These efforts supported the integration of environmental sustainability and, more recently, climate change considerations into development planning and project implementation. USAID-trained professionals now serve governments, development agencies, consulting firms, and international organizations, contributing to stronger ESIA practice and greater convergence of international standards. However, reductions in USAID resources risk slowing capacity growth, underscoring the need for continued investment in environmental and social safeguards across Africa.

USAID's ESIA 2024 Audit: Lessons for an Uncertain Future

(Elisa Perry, MA)

In 2024, USAID commissioned a comprehensive review of the adequacy, suitability, and effectiveness of its environmental procedures. The review identified Agency-wide trends in implementing its environmental procedures, including good practices and deficiencies, and recommended opportunities for strengthening the procedures and their implementation. The goal of the Review was to contribute to improved processes where needed and, ultimately, improved environmental outcomes. The Review also serves to establish a baseline against which Agency environmental procedures can be assessed in subsequent reviews.

One identified need during the review was to clarify and widely communicate the USAID's policy on social safeguards and their treatment within U.S. regulatory requirements. At the time of the global stop-work order issued in late Jan. 2025 and follow-on termination of 80%+ of its portfolio, USAID was rolling out its first-ever social impacts screening requirements, focusing on developing benchmarks for important social impact considerations; ensuring engagement with stakeholders was at the forefront of safeguarding action; and providing clear procedures that are both responsive to need but flexible for the operating environment. The requirements were grounded in the longstanding U.S. foreign policy tradition of promoting human rights. The

Agency developed a set of principles to follow when conducting social safeguarding and a checklist to map safeguarding efforts based on need and context. While the Agency is no longer, these approaches and tools provide a framework for thinking about future social safeguarding efforts in the international development space.

Scaling up Lessons from USAID Investments in Community-Led Waste Management in Haiti (Abdel Abellard, MSc)

In the current context of escalating gang violence and internal displacement, mistrust in public institutions is at an all-time high. Haitian cities, marked by fragility, such as Cap-Haïtien, face intensified challenges in waste management. The country is confronting a sanitation crisis that threatens public health. A UNDP 2022 publication reveals that only 12% of solid waste is effectively collected. Key obstacles include weak institutional capacity, lack of resources, inadequate waste collection systems, and constraints posed by violent insecurity. Nevertheless, there is room for hope by meeting Haitian people where they are, in an inclusive and more effective manner. USAID support to the Delmas municipality through the LOKAL + project, aimed at improving local governance identified key paths forward. A critical step forward: a former USAID ESIA officer authored an article, in Haitian Creole, in the main Haiti francophone news press to help more people understand environmental issues. This Lenouvelliste article highlights pathways to strengthen municipal institutions, leveraging local practical solutions, promoting decentralized governance, and seeking civil society support. Through strategic planning, enhanced governance, community participation, and targeted investments, improvements remain possible. Decentralization, domestic resources mobilization are key to the financing solutions going forward. The case of Haiti underscores the importance of ESIA practice in waste management that is integrated and context-sensitive in settings of multiple overlapping crises.

Reimagining ESIA from Two Decades of USAID Humanitarian Assistance (Erika J. Clesceri, PhD)

Significant improvements in environmental policy implementation were made in the last 20 years of international humanitarian assistance with USAID. Established in 1961 by US President John F. Kennedy, USAID was the largest donor (1961-2025), and the first to require ESIA. With the dismantling of USAID on July 1, 2025, humanitarian awards now managed by the US State Department face an unspecified future for ESIA. USAID staff oversaw an ESIA business practice of well established protocols and responsiveness. This consistency created a broad capacity within NGOs working with communities in lower income economies necessitating disaster assistance. NGOs and the UN humanitarian operational partners partnered with community

members across Africa and the Caribbean to implement USAID humanitarian assistance informed by ESIA. Principles of ESIA in the humanitarian context are well rooted in the emphasis on localization, putting the sovereignty of affected communities at the center of response. USAID led the way to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian assistance, with three top lessons in the professionalization of ESIA: 1) systematic partner institutional capacity building, 2) steadfast commitment to equity and conflict sensitivity, and 3) strategic multilateral engagement for more coordinated global greening practices. In doing so, communities bettered their own lives and enhanced the global standing of the US through the generosity of the American people.

Panelist Short Biographies

Abdel Abellard, MSc, has 23+ years in international development, leading environmental safeguards, climate-smart agriculture, biodiversity conservation in housing, health, ports, and energy sectors.

Erika J. Clesceri, PhD, with over 34 years in international humanitarian assistance and academic research specializing in practical nature-positive solutions using a multilateral approach. (erika.clesceri@gmail.com)

Marissa Jablonski, PhD, with 20 years of international development experience, supported USAID as an Environmental Advisor engaging with global communities, now runs the Freshwater Collaborative of Wisconsin, a Universities of Wisconsin initiative. (jablons5@uwm.edu; marissajablonski@gmail.com)

David M. Kinyua, MSc, is a legacy USAID ESIA expert with over 20 years with USAID, where he was based out of Nairobi, Kenya providing ESIA expertise to the East and Central Africa region. (dkinyua67@gmail.com)

Elisa Perry, MA, focuses on assessing social and environmental impacts on conflict communities, women, and other vulnerable groups. She has worked in over 30 countries with USAID, the World Bank, GIZ, Sida, other international aid agencies, and private clients, implementing projects related to environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA), democratic governance, climate, and energy. (elisaaperry@gmail.com)

Mark Stoughton, PhD, supported USAID as an ESIA/safeguards expert for over 20 years and led three of the Agency's four global safeguards support contracts. He holds a doctorate in sustainable industrial development. (mdstoughton@yahoo.com)