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Corporate Volunteerism Takes Center Stage in USAID Development Assistance



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June 3, 2011; **Source: Today People** | When critics suggest that the Obama administration is hard on the corporate sector, they may be missing specific elements of the Obama agenda that have lots of corporate sector promotions built into government programs. Take the volunteerism program of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

USAID just established the Center of Excellence for International Corporate Volunteerism, developed in conjunction with IBM and the nonprofit CDC Development Solutions, an organization that manages international corporate volunteerism programs. CDS does well in this deal, getting \$743,076 from USAID over two years to get the Center's website up and operational and IBM will kick in \$4.1 million in addition to in-kind donations of technology plus 100 volunteer employees.

According to CDS 21 major corporations are on tap to send 2,000 employee volunteers overseas this year compared to only six companies that sent 280 employees to volunteer overseas in 2006. One of the benefits of the Center is apparently the ability of corporations to access IBM for its extensive international volunteering expertise. IBM admits that volunteering can lead to business, as happened as a result of its volunteering activity last year in Nigeria. But what is USAID's agenda? Or the Obama Administration's?

In response to critics such as Ian Vasquez at the Cato Institute who called this program "jumping on a bandwagon a little too late . . . smell(ing) very much like a development fad," defenders such as Carol Adelman from the Hudson Institute called the program "a smart move because of the battle over the budget." In other words, with conservatives taking aim at foreign aid, it doesn't hurt to protect USAID's budget by increasing its linkages with corporate America.

Sam Worthington of InterAction described the USAID corporate volunteerism program as tantamount to "a private Peace Corps and the technical expertise that comes with it." Worthington added, "The new face of America overseas, often privately funded, can be very positive," a form of "responsible capitalism."

Contrary to the perspectives of conservative critics, most USAID assistance goes through U.S. contractors under "Buy American" contracting principles, supporting nonprofit and for-profit entities delivering development aid. Combined with the corporate volunteerism program, USAID is demonstrating the strength of its commitment to American capitalism as a primary development tool.—Rick Cohen