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## Sasha Gallant is making US foreign aid spending smarter

Leading USAID's small social innovation fund, Gallant prioritizes evidence and evaluation.

by **Oshan Jarow**

Nov 29, 2023 at 6:00 AM EST





Lauren Tamaki for Vox

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### The 2023 Future Perfect 50

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*Oshan Jarow was a staff writer with Vox's Future Perfect, where he focused on the frontiers of political economy and consciousness studies. He covered topics ranging from guaranteed income and shorter workweeks to meditation and psychedelics.*

Last year, the US spent about \$69 billion in foreign aid trying to make the world outside its borders a better place. While that's just above 1 percent of the US government's budget, it makes the US the single largest provider of foreign aid in the world by total dollars spent, focusing on areas like poverty reduction, humanitarian assistance, and investments in health and education.

The main steward of that giving is the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which manages about \$42 billion in aid spending annually. But most of that budget is spent without collecting the necessary evidence to say whether it's doing much good.

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That is, except for a small program within USAID called Development Innovation Ventures (DIV). Led by Sasha Gallant, DIV is something of a cross between federal grantmaker and venture capital firm. It injects money into fledgling ideas with the potential for big upside, but instead of making decisions based solely on financial returns, its targets are development outcomes — a category that ranges from governance innovations to basic sanitation. Despite accounting for just a small fraction of USAID's overall budget (0.1 percent as of 2022), DIV is well on its way to shifting how the

entire agency works.

DIV was founded in 2010 by economist Michael Kremer and former USAID chief innovation officer Maura O'Neill; Gallant joined the program in 2015 (as a consultant at first, though she's now division chief). Gallant's background is in evidence-informed policy across public and social sectors, and her work has helped advance ideas like tiered funding and cost-effectiveness, which have come to define DIV's approach. Gallant has also spent time at Evidence Action, a nonprofit working on effective ways to alleviate poverty. There, she helped prototype and scale low-cost interventions for millions across Africa and Asia.

## **Our methodology**

To select this year's Future Perfect 50, our team went through a months-long process. Starting with last year's list, we brainstormed, researched deeply, and connected with our audience and sources. We didn't want to overrepresent in any one category, so we aimed for diversity in theories of change, academic specialities, age, geographic location, identity, and many other criteria.

To learn more about the FP50 methodology and criteria, go here.

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When Gallant joined DIV, it was already capturing the core indicators and outcome metrics that allowed the organization a deeper understanding of what works and what doesn't. "But we weren't really standardizing those," she said. "It was hard to have a portfolio-level view of what DIV was doing as a fund." In her time at DIV — Gallant spent three years as a portfolio manager from 2015 to 2018 and has led the program since 2021 — she has focused on continuing its core mission as effectively as possible, while also building a blueprint that can spread the best ideas and practices incubated by DIV across government agencies.

So far, its portfolio includes things like road safety stickers, water treatment dispensers, and one of the highest-impact learning interventions globally. Another example is Apopo, a DIV-funded organization whose trained rats can sniff out tuberculosis and have prevented 154,000 cases through early detection (tuberculosis is the 13th leading cause of death worldwide). Its rats can also be trained to smell the explosive chemicals inside landmines and have been helping to detect and remove landmines for decades (rats are too light to set off the mines).

Since its inception, DIV has given 277 grants across 49 countries, reaching 100 million people. “There’s both experience and evidence that suggests social innovation funds can deliver tremendous returns on investment,” Gallant said.

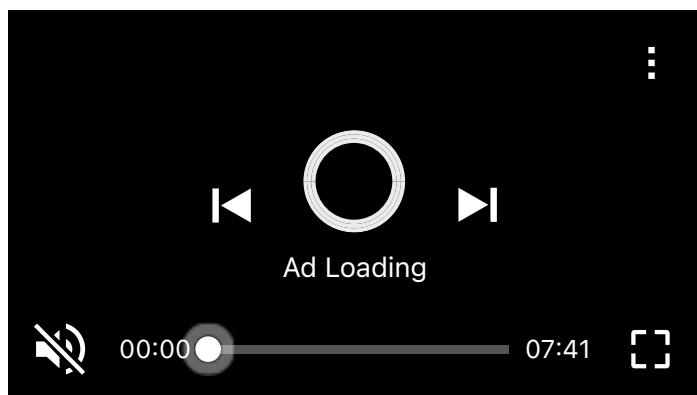
Earlier this year, DIV received a \$45 million donation from Open Philanthropy, allowing it to launch a new tier of grantmaking intended to scale up the most promising programs across DIV’s portfolio. Beyond investing more in promising ideas, Gallant told me that the funding will help internal efforts to diffuse what DIV is learning across USAID.

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Any shift toward greater effectiveness in US foreign aid will go a long, long way. On its present course, USAID will spend over \$300 billion by 2030. Even small shifts in the efficacy of that much development spending can make a huge difference in millions of lives. But making evidence and evaluation the

pillars of how the US government invests in development? That stands to make worlds of difference.

“It’s not enough to do it big, we have to do it well,” said Gallant. “And the demand is outstripping the capacity right now, which is a really cool place to be.”



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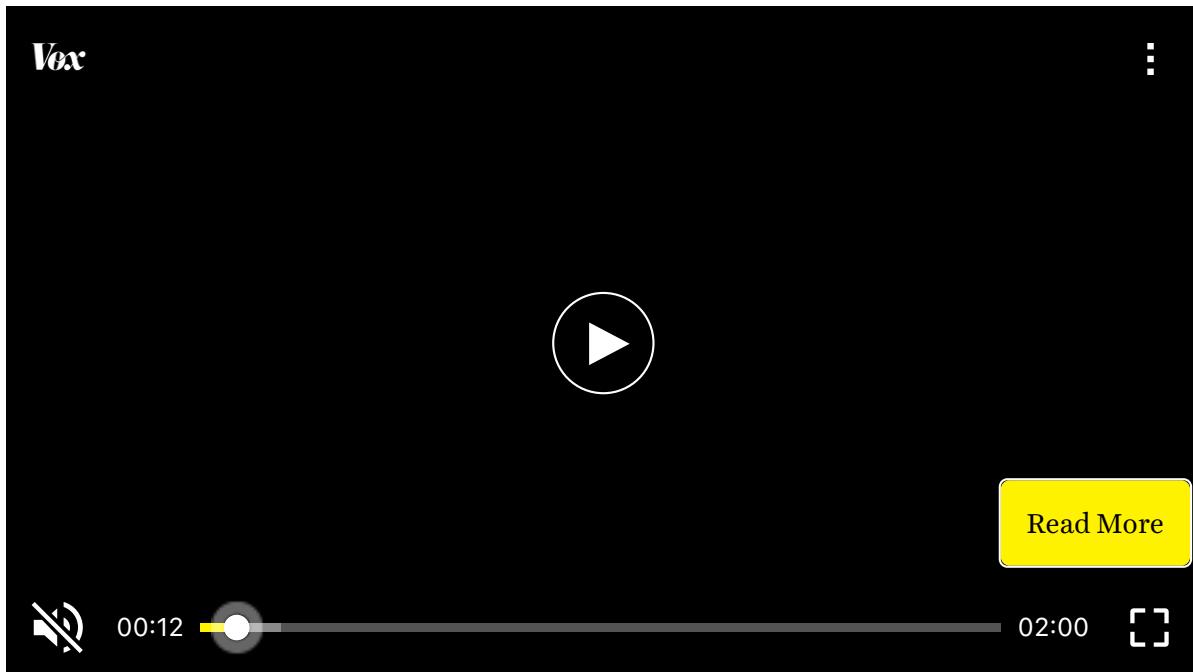
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Welcome to our third annual celebration of the thinkers, innovators, and changemakers who are working to make the future a better place.

By BRYAN WALSH and IZZIE RAMIREZ

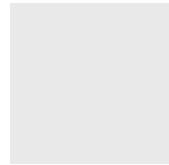


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By IZZIE RAMIREZ

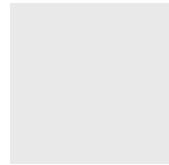


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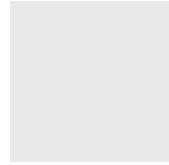


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