Rajiv Shah, president of the Rockefeller Foundation at the Overseas Development Institute. Photo by: Hanna-Katrina Jedrosz / ODI / CC BY-NC

LONDON — Speaking to a small crowd gathered at the Overseas Development Institute in London, the new head of the Rockefeller Foundation, Rajiv Shah, offered some discouraging math: If the top 15 foundations in the United States pooled their annual giving, their collective contribution still would not fill the gap left by U.S. President Donald Trump's proposed 30 percent cuts to foreign assistance.

“This is not the kind of problem philanthropy can step in and solve, nor should it,” he added.

Former USAID chief Rajiv Shah lays out his advice for Mark Green

Mark Green is more than qualified in this era of crises, said his predecessor Rajiv Shah. But the new U.S. Agency for International Development chief might benefit from insight into Shah's own hard-learned lessons.

During an onstage conversation with ODI Executive Director Alex Thier, Shah said that U.S. foundations, including the century-old Rockefeller Foundation, should instead focus on finding an innovative way to pool other, non-fiscal resources in order to influence the global economy, climate and community for good. This is particularly important at “a time when our federal leaders are stepping back from being the innovators or problem solvers.”

Shah — previously head of the U.S. Agency for International Development — suggested that this kind of “collaborative philanthropy” will be the way forward for foundations working in global development, particularly as the sector tries to rally tech and data corporations around the Sustainable Development Agenda. His own aspirations for
the Rockefeller Foundation seem to reflect this holistic push toward using science and technology for inclusive growth, and Shah offered a glimpse of his plans for leveraging the foundation’s influence for more impactful public-private collaboration.

**Rockefeller returns to its tech roots**

For starters, Shah has said he hopes to get the Rockefeller Foundation — whose founder, John D. Rockefeller, sought to spearhead the concept of “scientific philanthropy” — back into science and technology “in a big way.”

He asked how technology and innovation can be used to supply “not only immediate needs, but applying science and innovation in the long term to lift up the most people.”

For example, he said, a core part of his first four months at the foundation has been focused on access to power — improving and growing power grids for the world’s poorest.

“Countries who have big discrepancies can experience rapid growth, but don’t have the same powerful outcome of reducing poverty with their growth. So we think power access enables much more inclusion along the growth path,” he said.

To think more innovatively around power access, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals, he “sees lots of opportunities for philanthropic partners to come together and help bring transparency and visibility in particular to certain types of behaviors we’re seeing in country after country.”

He added that things such as biometric technology, and tools to harness agricultural data, will play a big role not only in improving accountability and providing economic metrics, but in advancing the rights of the individual.

**Rajiv Shah on Rockefeller Foundation priorities, multilateralism and philanthropy**

Shah is urging philanthropic organizations to help rebuild public trust, partner better together and take big risks on change. Amid a global mood of institutional distrust, that work will be more difficult, and more important, than ever.

“Collecting data and having information on consumer behavior, on power consumption, incidence of disease, epidemiological spread of certain pathogens, all of that is going to become a bigger part of allowing us to be more effective,” he said, pointing to an “Africa-owned” Rockefeller program, which supports tech entrepreneurship for inclusive economic growth.

“If you believe, as many do, that large-scale data collection combined with machine learning will offer a new set of tools that greatly enhance the efficiency and efficacy of this work, I think we want to really understand that and be a part of it — be a trusted partner,” he said.

Shah added that another benefit of increasing development and humanitarian ownership of these tools will mean “not all of the data on the world’s emerging populations and the world’s poor [will] sit in private hands,” but will instead go toward a “public good that can be leveraged for our goals of ending poverty, under-5 child death, hunger and malnutrition.”

**A future in partnership**

Shah admitted that the future he envisions for the Rockefeller Foundation is in many ways a call to action to other development players, and potential players, to find more innovative ways to work together. Asked how he hopes to distinguish the foundation from the rest of the philanthropic landscape, he said: “I don’t know that we necessarily
Philanthropists have a new way to partner on the SDGs

The SDG Philanthropy Platform aims to coordinate foundations and draw them into national conversations to advance progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals.

In order to do that, however, foundations, donor governments and development organizations need to rethink how they do development and how they work together.

For example, he pointed to USAID and the U.K. Department for International Development’s strong focus on results-based development as an important way forward, particularly in fragile and humanitarian contexts.

“We why do we always have to say you can’t be results-oriented in Somalia and Yemen or somewhere like that?” he said.

The advice grates with growing doubts about results-oriented development — namely, that such a focus on measuring impact leads to only short-term gains and creates a greater divide between the immediate humanitarian response needs in a crisis and the long-term development goals. Shah admitted that “sometimes people are too focused on the short term and too focused on the processes of forcing groups to get data back. And he added that “funding institutions like Rockefeller or USAID don’t always help with that.” For these large-scale donors, he suggested it is time to rethink what is a worthwhile investment, long before crises strike. Pointing to the Ebola epidemic, he said that the most effective organizations on the ground had the deepest connection to the community, with long-rooted relationships.

“We need to understand how to be results-oriented and understand that building long-term community trust and community contacts is part of getting results efficiently — and not the problem,” he explained.

Unable to articulate the precise balance, Shah said we don’t have much of a choice but to learn by doing: Impact must come with robust results. “We have to figure out how to do our work better and be rigorous about results, and frankly even more so in fragile settings,” he said.

Shah also pointed to large-scale philanthropic, public and private sector projects as the future gold standard for development. As one example, he highlighted Rockefeller’s 100 Resilient Cities, which creates a global network of mayors to share problems and solutions across the spectrum of urbanization, climate and poverty needs.

He added that partnerships between Chinese development banks and African governments that aim, for example, to recreate Chinese textile manufacturing hubs in rural Ethiopia — by capitalizing on lower trade tariffs and an advantageous labor cost differential — will define the types of programs that serve a global economy, rather than playing to a traditional mode of philanthropy or development.

“Make it more about trade and investment, more about results in fragile states and national security hotspots,” he said. “Do the work with philanthropic institutions like Gates and Rockefeller foundations and the partners in the Giving Pledge community that want to use their private capital to make the world a better place.”

Finally, Shah told Devex after the discussion, when traditional aid donors appear to retreat — as they are doing now — the time is ripe for foundations and other development players to take advantage of having more flexible program design and more thoughtful timeframes, in order to “demonstrate to those other players that these problems are
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