The Big Picture: Careers in International Development
https://www.netimpact.org/careers/international-development/big-picture

International development professionals work to reduce or eliminate poverty in developing countries. Practitioners in this vast field target issues ranging from global health to emerging market investment opportunities, at scales ranging from village-based enterprises to country-wide financial and government infrastructures. With momentum around the UN Millennium Development Goals, high-profile foundation efforts, and many innovations and new models emerging across sectors, it’s a great time to step into this field and make your mark.

- Over three billion people – almost half the world’s population — live on less than $2.50 a day.
- 40% of the world’s population – that’s 2.6 billion people – lives without access to “improved” sanitation facilities like pit latrines or a public sewer.
- 10% of children worldwide have no access to even basic primary education.

The lowdown

What can you expect if you decide to go into international development?

Embrace the unfamiliar
Because international development often means spending time in developing countries, you might just find yourself immersed in unfamiliar environments and cultures. If you’re not adaptable in these situations, this might not be the career for you.

Grow a thick skin
No matter how hard you work and how great your ideas are, you’re going to encounter situations that are emotionally challenging and roadblocks that seem senseless...sometimes even infuriating. Resilience, dedication, and the ability to roll with the punches are essential to making a lasting impact.

Humility moves mountains
Because international development often requires immersion in other cultures, professionals need to be careful they don’t swoop in thinking they know all the answers. The most successful solutions stem from genuine collaboration with local communities, so if you’re often sure you know what’s best for others, you might want to consider a different line of work.

Meet the players

Who’s addressing international development issues, and how?

Funders
These guys may write the checks, but they also provide advice, assistance, research, and project direction.

- Multilateral agencies like the World Bank and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) provide policy advice, technical assistance, and financing to developing countries.
- Bilateral and national government agencies like USAID provide humanitarian relief and development services consistent with their foreign policy agendas.
- Foundations like GlobalGiving can also be major players, funding nonprofits or specific projects of their own. Read more in our Philanthropy overview.
Support services
These organizations support the implementation and management of solutions on the ground.

- **Nonprofit organizations** like Partners in Health and CARE may specialize in subfields like HIV/AIDS or agriculture; run immense operations with programs in developing nations; or engage in advocacy in developed countries. Check out Nonprofit Management for more.
- **Development consulting firms** like DAI and Louis Berger Group (and freelance consultants) provide specialized expertise and services to multilateral, bilateral and national agencies.
- **Think tanks and academics** like the Center for Global Development research the underlying issues and/or policies affecting sectors or regions, offering policy advice and other expertise.
- **Corporations** like SC Johnson often engage in countries where they source materials or manufacture products. They run projects, enter into public-private partnerships, and facilitate short-term volunteer projects for employees. Read more in our Corporate Impact overview.

Other
Representing a smaller but no less significant part of the field, these players are finding incredibly innovative solutions:

- **Social enterprises** like Sanergy use a business framework or revenue model to support their activities, and usually address a specific issue, such as sanitation in slums or girls’ primary education. Check out our Social Entrepreneurship overview.
- **Microfinance and banking organizations** like BRAC provide small loans and other financial services to low-income clients who usually lack access to traditional banking, thus building up local economies.
- **BoP (base of the pyramid) and emerging market investors** invest in a wide range of industries, businesses, and social enterprises in development countries. They can have a development mission (e.g. Acumen Fund) or simply see opportunity for higher returns in exchange for higher risk in developing economies.

Options within the field

- **Food security and agriculture** are big for many organizations, with much debate around the relative merits of sustainable agriculture, traditional practices, and GMOs.
- **Economic development** attracts many donors and organizations, and includes job creation, microfinance, trade and investment.
- **Democracy and governance** focuses on developing infrastructure, good governance, and civic participation from the local to national level.
- **Health** – including population, water, and sanitation issues – involves both medical and social solutions for healthier societies.
- **Education, women’s empowerment, and other human rights** are often seen as fundamental steps toward sustainable development.
- **Sustainability** is a growing and increasingly popular field that cuts across issue areas to include natural resource management, water, agriculture, and climate change mitigation.