

## News

## The Future of Global Health

## State Dept grants \$150M to Zipline to triple African drone operations

The U.S. State Department will grant up to \$150 million to drone company Zipline to expand health supply operations in five African countries, highlighting the Trump administration's new approach to global health aid.

By [Michael Igoe](#) // 25 November 2025



California-based robotics company Zipline uses drone technology to save lives in Rwanda. Photo by: [Sarah Farhat / World Bank](#) / CC BY-NC-ND

The [U.S. State Department](#) has approved a grant of up to \$150 million over three years to [Zipline](#), the American robotics and autonomous drone delivery company, to significantly expand its health care operations in five African countries.

This grant is one of the first major new U.S. global health funding announcements since the Trump administration's foreign aid funding freeze, dismantling of USAID, and release of its new "America First" global health strategy. State Department officials have [portrayed the partnership](#) with Zipline as an early example of the new direction of U.S. global health assistance.

“This partnership is an example of the innovative, results-driven partnership at the core of the America First foreign assistance agenda,” said Jeremy Lewin, undersecretary of state for foreign assistance, humanitarian affairs, and religious freedom, in a press release.

“With modest U.S. capital investment support, these five countries will become responsible for maintaining and continuing to invest in a transformative American-built health commodities supply chain network,” he said.

The funding will be released on a pay-for-performance basis, with initial payments to Zipline unlocked when participating governments sign contracts committing to pay for ongoing logistics services. The five governments will pay up to \$400 million in utilization fees, according to the release.

The first government expected to sign one of those contracts is Rwanda — where Zipline first began its operations in 2016 — which will seek to double Zipline’s daily deliveries through the construction of a new distribution facility. The other four African countries where Zipline currently operates are Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Côte d’Ivoire.

Zipline currently operates at cost on the African continent, while its U.S.-based operations are for-profit.

The State Department grant will fund the construction of new Zipline hubs — which the company calls “nests” — that form the basis of a permanent drone delivery infrastructure that can be tapped for a wide range of commodity deliveries. If the full amount of State Department funding is disbursed, the partnership could triple the number of hospitals and health facilities Zipline serves in Africa from 5,000 to 15,000 — while providing more than 100 million people with access to blood and medications, according to the press release.

In an exclusive interview with Devex, Caitlin Burton, the CEO of Zipline Africa, said that the company’s centralized, on-demand drone delivery system offers many countries a better alternative to health supply chain systems that have struggled to deliver.

“The health systems don’t serve most people well. That’s not fair, and it’s not solvable with the technology you have. You can’t just pave every road, and electrify every site, and get everybody a working refrigerator that never breaks, and make sure nobody ever steals fuel or ever diverts drugs. You can’t do all those things,” Burton said.

“We don’t expect people to take this giant leap and adopt a disruptive technology because we said so, or because it’s less administratively complex than your big trucking and warehousing system. It’s because it’s going to actually cause patient outcomes to change,” she said.

The U.S. government has funded the procurement, transport, and distribution of lifesaving health commodities around the world for more than two decades, through multibillion-dollar contracts managed by large development contractors and NGOs.

Trump administration officials have been explicit about their plans to [shift funding away from those organizations](#). The new global health strategy

calls for more direct partnership with American technology companies and funding arrangements that place greater responsibility on partner governments — both of which are reflected in this grant.

“The governments themselves are in the driver’s seat,” Burton said.

It was not immediately clear whether the grant to Zipline is part of a broader effort to restructure that global health supply chain, but Burton said the company is eager to expand beyond the five African countries where it currently operates.

“This is the kind of model that would allow a lot of other countries that are willing to pay for this to get it,” Burton said.

When the Trump administration froze U.S. foreign aid funding earlier this year, independent experts warned that disruptions to the supply chain could lead to stockouts and shortages of lifesaving health commodities. That also appears to have created an opportunity for Zipline to make its case as a viable alternative.

“When USAID shut down in January, it was not a big stretch at all for us to be able to partner with the governments to take on more of the supply chain,” Burton said.

The government of Ghana [turned to Zipline](#) to sustain its health supply chain. That example found an audience on Capitol Hill.

“Legislators had been hearing for months about how grave everything was and how bad everything was, and I think to hear a positive message about where something was going well was refreshing,” Burton said.

“We’re sort of like a tsunami that comes into your system and will stop at nothing to make it effective,” she said.

#### **[US health strategy aims to position African governments as customers](#)**

Under the ‘America First’ global health strategy, African governments “won’t be aid recipients, but customers who recognize value,” said the State Department’s Jeff Graham.

Burton told Devex the U.S. government grant is necessary to make Zipline’s expansion affordable in the five participating countries. Without this funding, Zipline would have had to charge the governments more to operate the delivery system, she said.

Zipline bills its infrastructure as a platform that can be adapted to a wide range of commodities and needs, both within and beyond public health. In Africa, the company sees opportunities for both.

“I think we have two options. We can build on that logistics infrastructure and make money, or we can build on that logistics infrastructure and use that money to continue to reduce the cost of the public health system. I think both of those would be considered a win to Zipline,” Burton said.

“We’re focused right now on creating incredibly responsive health systems that are going to save a lot of lives, and they’re going to create a lot of jobs,” she said.

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## About the author



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Michael Igoe is a Senior Reporter with Devex, based in Washington, D.C. He covers U.S. foreign aid, global health, climate change, and development finance. Prior to joining Devex, Michael researched water management and climate change adaptation in post-Soviet Central Asia, where he also wrote for EurasiaNet. Michael earned his bachelor's degree from Bowdoin College, where he majored in Russian, and his master's degree from the University of Montana, where he studied international conservation and development.