

Donald Trump's War on Global Development

Written by Marianna Karakoulaki, Mia Hyun, Scarlet Vass, and Thomas Bobo

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MARIANNA KARAKOULAKI, MIA HYUN, SCARLET VASS, AND THOMAS BOBO, MAY 31 2025

In April 2023, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in the US, published a 900-page document titled "2025 Presidential Transition Project", which became known as Project 2025. Project 2025 set a list of several broad conservative objectives that would reassert presidential power, reshape the Federal government, consolidate executive power in favour of right-wing policies, and re-establish American traditional values. Donald Trump vehemently denied that he would adopt Project 2025 during his presidential campaign. It soon became clear that he fully embraced it. Donald Trump's inaugural speech set the tone for the policies that were to come. For Trump, America was under attack and American citizens had to be protected: "From this moment on, America's decline is over". From stricter border controls and an attack on migrants to reversing climate initiatives in order to battle the USA's "energy emergency", Trump set the stepping stone for a more isolationist and nationalist American era.

On the day of his inauguration, he signed 26 executive orders, 11 presidential memoranda and repealed 67 executive orders signed by his predecessor, Joe Biden. Part of these 26 executive orders, drafted from the Project 25 playbook, was the executive order that targeted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) which are described as "radical and wasteful", an executive order on 'protecting women from gender ideology', and the "re-evaluation and realigning" of foreign aid. The impacts of these executive orders go beyond the US borders. In this short article, we will look at how these orders have impacted global development by discussing the dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the targeting of gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the broader impacts on migration and the environment. Although these issues may seem disconnected, we argue that Trump's hostile approach to Global Development is part of a broader, long-standing process of reversal of such policies by Western liberal democracies.

DOGE and the Dismantling of USAID

Following Elon Musk's endorsement and financing of Donald Trump's campaign, Musk's plan to take over the US bureaucracy started taking form. Elon Musk first mentioned the creation of a "government efficiency commission" during a podcast on 2 August 2024. A few days later, Donald Trump and Elon Musk held a discussion on X on issues that ranged from climate change and energy policy to immigration and nuclear warfare. Days following Donald Trump's re-election, Trump, Elon Musk, Vivek Ramaswamy and others gathered at Mar-a-Lago, where Trump announced the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Musk and Ramaswamy were initially in charge of the organisation. DOGE took shape with an executive order on 20 January 2025. A day later, Ramaswamy quit, leaving Musk as the sole leader. The organisation's own identity is abstract, as it is not a formal department of the US Government – for this to happen, it needs to be approved by the Congress. Its purpose is "modernising federal technology and software to maximise government efficiency" and its mission is to "end the tyranny of the bureaucracy".

As DOGE moved to pause all foreign aid, which for the US includes both development and military funding, USAID became its primary target. By 2023 the US was the world's largest contributor of foreign aid having spent \$68 billion in foreign aid, more than \$40 billion of which were USAID's. The Agency had a significant presence in Europe, especially Ukraine, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. As soon as DOGE announced the dismantling of USAID, its projects froze, and its staff were put on administrative leave. This triggered a series of repercussions in sectors where the organisation was active. Specifically, in 2023, USAID was mostly involved in economic development,

Donald Trump's War on Global Development

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humanitarian assistance, program support, health, governance, peace and security and the environment. For example, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Somalia and the Congo topped the chart for foreign aid through USAID, with Ukraine receiving \$16.43 billion in aid. Soup kitchens in Sudan closed within a week of the announcement, healthcare services in Sudan and elsewhere were stopped, and millions are projected to lose access, HIV clinics throughout Africa shut down, leaving thousands without medicine.

Despite DOGE's aim to tackle bureaucracy, it soon became clear that the agency was targeting DEI. An article published on the White House website singled out USAID and accused it of "WASTE" and "ABUSE". The article lists twelve projects and their funding: "\$1.5 million to 'advance diversity equity and inclusion in Serbia's workplaces and business communities'"; "\$70,000 for production of a 'DEI musical' in Ireland"; "\$2.5 million for electric vehicles for Vietnam"; "\$47,000 for a 'transgender opera' in Colombia"; "Funding to print 'personalized' contraceptives birth control devices in developing countries" among others. At the same time, Elon Musk and others were sharing debunked claims related to USAID's spending on social media. It became clear that for Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and their "war on woke", the USA's soft power and international objectives were starkly different from DEI- and USAID-related practice.

Gender and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

Among the executive orders Donald Trump signed on the day of his inauguration, one focused on gender. Its primary aim is to defend women from what was framed as "gender ideology extremism", orders that "federal funds shall not be used to promote gender ideology." The order's primary target is transgender rights by insisting on a biological definition of sex, and denying the existence of trans people as a group:

Accordingly, my Administration will defend women's rights and protect freedom of conscience by using clear and accurate language and policies that recognize women are biologically female, and men are biologically male.

The executive order on gender cannot be seen separately from the executive order on DEI, which is titled "ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing", as well as the dismantling of USAID. The DEI executive order programmes that were implemented during the Biden Administration were framed as "illegal and immoral discrimination programs". Taken together, these executive orders have been used to eliminate all gender and DEI advisors and programs from USAID, even before the entire agency was dismantled by DOGE, and used to threaten other UN agencies, international contractors and even the private sector and force them to "scrub" gender and DEI from their work. DOGE's use of language, time and sequencing is important to note. First of all, regarding the language DOGE has used and specifically the use of the word "scrub" implies that gender and DEI were dirty stains that had to be vigorously removed. In addition, regarding the timing and sequencing, the scrubbing of gender and DEI came first, well before the full-blown dismantling of the entire agency by DOGE. So while the elimination of USAID seemed swift, the foregrounding of the public erasure of progressive approaches such as gender and DEI was a deliberate move to make a statement about what will no longer be tolerated by the MAGA administration and to instil fear and compliance.

Furthermore, the Trump administration has flagged a list of hundreds of words that should be avoided in official discourse, including: equity, female, black, social justice, multicultural, socio-economic, trauma – to name just a few. By doing so, they are exposing their strategy of using language and discourse to spread neo-patriarchal ideology, or more specifically, to silence and repress progressive, inclusive policies and programs both domestically and internationally. Using the language of gender ideology, Trump's administration aligns itself with a broader movement that opposes not only trans rights but also progressive gender norms. Although relatively recent in the United States, references to gender ideology have been a prominent part of far-right and religious rhetoric in Europe and Latin America for over a decade. Progressive political shifts related to gender have challenged the patriarchal structures favoured by the far right. In both regions, the term has been used to justify extensive attacks on women's rights and LGBTQ rights, often claiming to defend the "natural family." Instead of genuinely protecting women, efforts to eliminate gender ideology from federal policies and programs reflect a broader goal of reinstating traditional gender roles and hierarchies.

Donald Trump's War on Global Development

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Trump's attack on gender has directly impacted the USA's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework. In 2017, the USA, under Trump's first administration, became the first country to pass a national WPS law. The WPS Act was passed in order "to ensure that the United States promotes the meaningful participation of women in mediation and negotiation processes seeking to prevent, mitigate, or resolve violent conflict". As part of the 2017 WPS Act, the Department of Defence (DoD) published its *WPS Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan* in 2020.. The *Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan*, included: training military personnel on WPS principles; supporting women's participation in peacekeeping; and embedding Gender Advisors and Gender Focal Points in several combatant commands, including the US-Africa Command training missions and United States European Command. The plan was updated in 2024 to also include international cooperation on WPS.

For analysts, the USA's WPS is crucial for US foreign and defence policy. On the one hand, the USA's commitment to WPS puts it ahead of its current adversaries and on the other, it gives the US an operational advantage in conflict zones. Beyond its strategic utility, the WPS agenda plays a vital role in advancing sustainable peace. Decades of feminist research demonstrate that peace processes are more likely to produce durable and equitable outcomes when women are meaningfully included. By mandating women's participation, WPS enhances the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. It is also essential as the only binding international framework that directly addresses conflict-related sexual violence, establishing obligations for prevention, protection, and accountability for victims and survivors, including women, men, and children.

Despite the strategic benefits of the USA's WPS framework, key figures within the DoD are openly working to dismantle the program. Pete Hegseth, a political adviser and media figure with significant influence inside the DoD, posted a tweet declaring that he had "proudly ENDED the 'Women, Peace & Security' program" inside the DoD. He called WPS a "woke" and "social justice" distraction that "troops HATE" and said warfighting should be the priority. While the WPS Act of 2017 has not yet been repealed in its entirety, the DoD has since confirmed that it will now implement only the minimum legally required, which risks undermining the program. It is important to note that the design and implementation of WPS by the US has, and continues to, for now, involve multiple agencies. The DoD implements WPS through military partnerships, gender training, and support for gender advisors in peacekeeping contexts. Meanwhile, the former USAID supported WPS through aid to women-led civil society, peacebuilding, and humanitarian response. With the closure of USAID – and the pushback on programmes that are deemed to promote 'gender ideology' – many programmes, including those related to WPS, and gendered peacebuilding more widely, have been dissolved, or quietly defunded, whilst others are being absorbed into the State Department.

As follows, what we are seeing in 2025 is not isolated to DoD, USAID or the State Department; it is a coordinated retreat across both defence and development from WPS and gendered peacebuilding more widely. By portraying gendered peacebuilding as a 'woke' distraction from warfighting US policymakers are undermining two decades of consensus that women's participation is essential to sustainable peace. This signals a troubling return to a realist logic, where military power and state dominance define security, and anything outside that frame, such as WPS, becomes expendable. This puts various major WPS related programs that the US is involved in, at risk, for example: "The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund – backed by a \$10 million U.S. contribution in 2023; the Women Lead initiative, for which the US pledged \$150 dollars earlier this year; and the SHE WINS initiative, a \$10 million USAID program set up in 2024 which works to build the capacity of women-led civil society in conflict zones.

The US's retreat from WPS has implications that go far beyond the contexts in which the US is involved. WPS programs depend on international alignment – shared norms, coordinated funding, and political momentum. When a global power like the US not only withdraws support but recasts WPS as a 'woke' and unnecessary agenda, the consequences are profound. It discredits feminist foreign policy frameworks like WPS and CEDAW, it emboldens authoritarian regimes by legitimising backlash against progressive gender norms, and it fractures international cooperation, making it harder to build the trust, funding, and coordination needed to implement WPS principles.

Wider Impacts: Migration and the Environment

Donald Trump's anti-migration and anti-environment politics have been known for years. His first electoral campaign was based on building a "big, beautiful wall" along the US-Mexico border and on eliminating Barack Obama's

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environmental policies. Thus, a similar, if not stricter, stance during his second term was not a surprise. The executive orders issued on 20 January frame migrants as invaders, suspended refugee admissions, framing them as a national security and public concern, promise to secure the US border under the guise of the US opioid crisis, declare a national energy emergency, vow to “unleash American energy” and puts America first in environmental agreements. Despite their domestic impact, these executive orders and especially the dismantling of USAID, have a clear effect in terms of global development politics and are related to the previous executive orders discussed earlier in this article.

USAID has played an important role in supporting migration-related projects globally, including in Europe and the Mediterranean. The withdrawal or reduction of its support is likely to have a ripple effect, not only on directly funded organisations but also on migration assistance more broadly. Foreign aid is used to address the causes of migration and prevent irregular migration by funding organisations and projects in low-income countries. The reduction of financial support could lead to reduced services for migrants and asylum seekers, potentially increasing their vulnerability and reducing available pathways for integration and mobility within the workforce. In April 2025, civil society organisations that work within the refugee support sector within the EU called on the European Commission to consider and revise its approach to funding. According to their letter:

The European asylum sector, which in many countries is heavily dependent on funding from institutional or private donors, is directly affected. Many civil society organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees through services, legal aid, and support to inclusion have been hit by the end of US funding either through direct cuts or because intermediary donors or partners, such as UNHCR, have ended or reduced their support. The significant reduction in UNHCR's budget will mean that the majority of civil society organisations working on asylum in Europe will be affected.

At the same time, the reduction or cessation of USAID funding is likely to affect migratory routes, especially in regions where USAID has historically supported host country infrastructures and services for refugees and migrants. The loss of such support diminishes local capacity to provide basic services, creating conditions that may prompt displaced individuals to seek stability elsewhere, including through irregular migration routes toward Europe. Although refugee movements are not the same as they were in 2015-2016, there are signs of a notable increase in 2024 globally. While it may be premature to determine the full scale of this shift, such trends highlight the importance of sustained international support in mitigating forced displacement and onward movement.

Even prior to USAID's structural changes, a tightening of migration policies has been observable across Europe. In recent years the European migratory landscape is similar to the USA's. In Greece for example, which is one of the gateways for the EU, current migration policies are characterised by securitisation, militarisation and deterrence. Reports of pushbacks, substantiated by evidence presented in European courts, suggest that those attempting to enter or transit through Greece face heightened risks. If these trends continue, the Mediterranean is likely to witness increased fatalities and humanitarian crises, as safe and legal routes become even more limited. For the global civil society, reduced aid presents increasing operational challenges, legal risks, and shrinking civic space. For migrants, it results in greater precarity, diminished protection, and fewer safe options.

Gender, WPS and migration seem to have been operationalised by the US so that Trump reaches far and wide into the political spectrum yet the impact of his policies are far and wide. The environment is operationalised in a similar way. The declaration of a national energy emergency puts the environment at the forefront of Trump's policies:

This active threat to the American people from high energy prices is exacerbated by our Nation's diminished capacity to insulate itself from hostile foreign actors. Energy security is an increasingly crucial theater of global competition. In an effort to harm the American people, hostile state and non-state foreign actors have targeted our domestic energy infrastructure, weaponized our reliance on foreign energy, and abused their ability to cause dramatic swings within international commodity markets. An affordable and reliable domestic supply of energy is a fundamental requirement for the national and economic security of any nation.

Trump seems to recognise that the environment is a global matter; however, by declaring a national emergency and

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insisting on prioritising the USA's interests over international environmental policies, he exerts America's hegemony over the environment. For Trump, the Paris Agreement is detrimental to the USA's power and economic stability; for this reason, he withdrew for the second time. The executive order on environmental agreements states:

It is the policy of my Administration to put the interests of the United States and the American people first in the development and negotiation of any international agreements with the potential to damage or stifle the American economy. These agreements must not unduly or unfairly burden the United States.

The impacts of Trump's environmental policies, however, can be extensive and will last well beyond his Presidency. Combined with the cuts in the aid sector, the environmental future seems unclear. Similarly to USAID, DOGE has eliminated thousands of positions that focus on environmental research, which is likely to impact innovation, setting the USA behind its competitors. At the same time, policies that were adopted during previous administrations were scrapped while the focus shifted towards deregulation. Within the first 100 days of this administration, Trump's deregulation impacted environmental governance to an unprecedented degree, affecting biodiversity, clean air and water policy, and increasing the use of fossil fuels.

However, the specificity of the USA's involvement in the environmental sector has always been unstable due to its neoliberal approach towards nature; for this reason, the consequences of global aid reductions are not necessarily the same everywhere. Environmental cooperation and aid, as a relatively 'new' sector, is very dependent on the political recognition of those challenges, and national, regional and international politics can pivot within the sector. At the UN level, for example, the United Nations Environment Programme supports 193 countries in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. Political visibility, however, can quickly decrease in the same way it increases.

As international aid reduces or shifts in focus, such projects can be eliminated. In 2023, US foreign aid provided almost \$1.53 billion to biodiversity and other environmental programmes, which is a 69.7% increase compared to 2013. Such programmes were halted as aid froze, shattering not only environmental efforts but also relations between project implementers and locals. In the context of mounting climate denialism, post-truth discourses and the USA's unstable policies, the already fragile sector of environmental aid and cooperation is increasingly exposed to instability in funding and political backing. Potential impacts of these changes in aid architecture are complex in a siloed sector where, for example, regarding biodiversity, the channelled funding is limited and inconsistent. Strong aid dependency, unequal power relations between donors and recipients, and uncertainty in continuity, put that fragile equilibrium to the test, with sometimes irreversible consequences such as the loss of biodiversity and extinction of species. In addition, despite an apparent 'scientificity' in addressing ecological challenges, environmental aid is not just about nature or climate. It can impact socio-economic realities when funding is dependent on certain types of environmental performance, or social exclusion and violence in areas targeted by conservation efforts. As a contested field where political preference and other priorities affect the operationalisation of environment-related funding, challenges such as the one posed by the dismantling of USAID, while unsurprising considering broader movements of eco-scepticism, further weaken a sector highly dependent on long-term engagement for its functioning and improvement.

Conclusion

In this short article, we have tried to make sense of the wider impacts of the Trump Administration's policies by looking at part of the 26 executive orders he signed on the day of his inauguration. At first glance, these executive orders related to gender, security, migration, the environment and the dismantling of USAID may seem disconnected. However, as we have discussed, their impact is far-reaching and goes beyond the US border despite Trump's attempts to isolate the USA and prioritise "America First". Trump's policies show, and the events that have taken place within the US since his election, highlight the USA's turn towards authoritarianism, as several political scientists have argued. Indeed, the attack on people's right to self-identify, the withdrawal from important defence policies, the framing of vulnerable populations as a threat and the attack on the environment show a not-so-subtle attempt to normalise policies that are popular within far-right circles. Trump's policies highlight a far-right backwardness that impacts the global development world exponentially; whether those in power will be able to sustain the impacts remains to be seen.

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Thomas Bobo is a Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK). His research focuses on the intersection between internal violence and the environment from the political and discursive perspective. He studies how environmental discourses within internal violent conflicts emerge, evolve, and are utilised as environmental politics gain prominence in international, national and local agendas. Thomas's research examines the construction of competing ecological visions and how these become political vehicles for belligerents to affect the conflict's power balance. His work currently focuses on the case of the Zapatista conflict (Chiapas, Mexico). Before starting his doctoral research, he worked at the French Agency for International Technical Cooperation and in the United Nations System.