



Duncan Green

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Two lessons from Trump's attack on Aid

*Professor Duncan Green draws two lessons from the Trump administration's move to close the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). As of Friday 7 February, 2025, at all USAID direct hire personnel will be placed on **administrative leave** globally.*

Whatever finally emerges from the Trump Administration's **assault on USAID** (and other governments such as **Switzerland jumping on the bandwagon**), surely the status quo ante is unlikely to return.

What to do? Yes we can keep making the case for aid, hoping that the political tide will turn, but the political consensus around aid had been under assault since long before Trump 2, and it seems likely that whatever system emerges from this aidageddon 'critical juncture' will look very different. How to ensure that what comes next is both more effective and less vulnerable to the political whims of populism?



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Check if there is a typo in www.usaid.gov.

Screenshot from the USAID webpage.

I think there are at least two lessons for those interested in international development.

The first is that the last couple of weeks have finally exposed the folly and fragility of aid dependence. As the West declined, at least relatively, and the sea of populism rose all around us, many in the aid sector just tried to carry on as usual, hoping that aid budgets might stay under the politicians' radar (as they did to some extent in Trump 1.0), or that a tweak towards national interest would keep the pols happy and the money flowing. It feels like that era is over.

Now, those who still have aid dollars or energy to spend (foundations, other donors, including non traditional ones) should think about how to help domestic change makers – civil society organizations and others – raise their money from non-aid sources. I'm talking about raising money locally, but also from Diasporas.

I've been chewing over this issue for at least a decade – here's my first blog (2015) asking why there is no '[Fundraisers Without Borders](#)' dedicated to helping CSOs build their local fund raising capacity. Here's an extract:

'[Mike Edwards](#) argues that 'we should focus as much attention as possible on strengthening the financial independence of voluntary associations, since dependence on government contracts, foundations or foreign aid is the Achilles' heel of authentic civic action.'

That is true both because no-one in their right mind would prefer national organizations to be aid dependent, when they could raise funds from their own societies, but also because many of the [increasing attacks on 'civil society space'](#) are justified by governments on the grounds that CSOs are pawns of foreign funders.



It would be unrealistic (and probably disastrous) to just try and export today's northern fundraising techniques to CSOs in developing countries. Like everything else, fundraising is highly context specific both in terms of culture and history, so helping people identify what works locally and encouraging south-south exchanges of ideas might be better.

One such example is [Zakat](#), which has massive potential in any country with a significant Muslim population. Fundraisers without Borders could help by collecting and publicising Zakat-compatible fundraising drives from around the world.’ In a 2018 post, I dug deeper into [religious giving](#) as an alternative to aid dependence.

There have been lots of attempts to promote things like [Community-based philanthropy](#), but mainstream aid has largely chugged along regardless, creating and perpetuating aid dependence among CSOs and (I assume) crowding out at least some attempts to build domestic platforms for altruism and solidarity. The folly of that approach has now become clear.

The second lesson I draw from the Trump meltdown is that the slow shift in the aid sector’s attention towards influencing and activism, and away from direct service provision, needs to accelerate drastically. Put simply, aid may no longer have the big bucks to provide services en masse, and one way to still make a difference is to support domestic activists to pressure governments to do that job better.

To be fair, I’ve seen that realization dawning in recent years – whether at national level in the greater focus from Oxfam and other INGOs in supporting local and grassroots activism, or all the training we’re being asked to provide at the LSE on [influencing and advocacy for senior people in the UN, Red Cross/Crescent and INGOs](#). As one UN boss put it to us ‘we’re promoted on the basis of being good at tents and blankets, and now they’re asking us to try and stop the Saudis from bombing Yemen – how do we do that?’

If you can influence a government or another big player, you potentially can get huge impact at relatively little cost, but that’s a big ‘If’. We don’t yet have much reliable analysis on how different approaches to influence work in different contexts. Which is why we are setting up a research and training programme on ‘Activism, Influencing and Change’ at the LSE. We’re nearly ready to launch, but the events of recent weeks mean we had better get a move on – watch this space.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Featured image credit: USAID U.S. Agency for International Development via [Flickr](#).

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