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Is there still public support for foreign aid?

What do citizens of European countries think about foreign aid and development cooperation?

Using a new dataset covering France, Germany, Great Britain and the US, Felipe Torres, Soomin Oh, Paolo Morini, Jennifer Hudson, David Hudson and Molly Anders show that concern for poverty abroad persists but is sensitive to political shocks and competing crises.

The 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Agenda looms, even as the United Nations and civil society express concern (**and in some cases alarm**) that its goals feel increasingly out of reach.

Meanwhile, European leaders have **joined a commitment to mobilise \$300 billion in global climate finance by 2035**, even as their constituents – responding to a rising tide of populist rhetoric – seem to lean inward. Unable to ignore this tension, charities, NGOs and policymakers are all faced with the same existential question: do the public still believe in global solidarity?

At the **Development Engagement Lab (DEL)**, our research is examining this question. Drawing on five years of surveys in France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, we track how the public understand, value and act on global development, resulting in a wealth of insights, many hinted at below, while others are **ready and available for researchers to mine**.

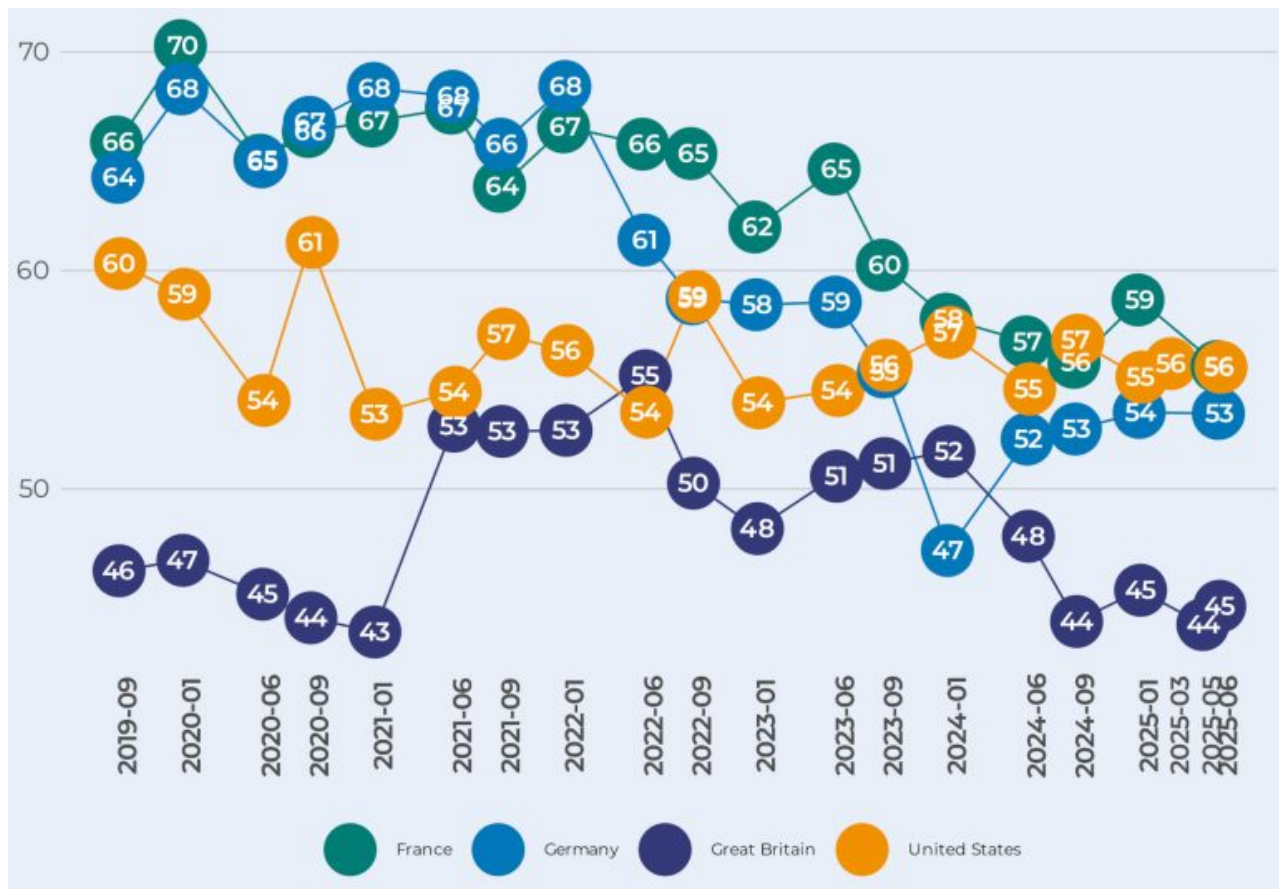
DEL data is free to use and available under our mandate to produce data for the public good, and so this dataset in particular represents an opportunity for researchers from a range of fields – from political science to sociology to psychology – to draw out a range of novel insights for existing or new research.

Public support for aid is fragile, but not disappearing

One clear insight from DEL data is that support for foreign aid cannot be taken for granted. Across our surveys, we find publics are consistently concerned about poverty abroad. Yet concern does not always translate into backing for government aid budgets.

In Great Britain, for instance, support for maintaining or increasing aid levels has been dropping noticeably since 2022, after an uptick in June 2021 when the government cut its aid spending target from 0.7% to 0.5% of national income. The overall decline is consistent across other European donors in the sample, namely Germany and France.

Figure 1: Support for foreign aid and development in selected countries



Note: Figures reflect percentage of respondents agreeing their country should keep or increase current expenditure levels. Data are weighted to be nationally representative.

In the United States, the level of support has been stable between 50% and 60% but is **highly politically polarised** (30% of Trump voters vs 80% of Harris voters in the 2024 presidential election). The lesson? Concern about poverty is widespread, but it is fragile, conditional and easily shaped by domestic politics and global crises.

Global crises shift attention and crowd out other priorities

Because the DEL dataset spans a turbulent half-decade, it allows us to see how major events reshape public opinion. When the post-COVID cost-of-living crisis struck, support for aid fell as citizens turned inward, prioritising household recovery and domestic concerns. Similarly, concerns over more salient issues like war, conflict and terrorism, migration and refugees, and economic crises, push concern for longer-term issues, most notably climate change, further down the agenda.

In this context, DEL's 2022 *sandbox* survey in Great Britain tested a specific trade-off: would people redirect aid and donations from humanitarian crises in Africa or the Middle East to support Ukraine? Many respondents said yes. This illustrates a broader tension revealed across the dataset: the public frequently rally to topical, high-profile crises, but sustaining attention and resources for enduring development goals – from climate action to gender equality – is far harder.

A wealth of research possibilities

The comprehensive scope of the dataset enables researchers to address diverse questions across multiple disciplines beyond the findings mentioned. The dataset can be used to answer questions from an array of disciplines and topics, from political psychology (e.g. “does emotional response to government aid spending predict behavioural engagement better than rational cost-benefit calculations?”), to democracy and accountability (e.g. “do citizens who feel economically left behind punish the government in elections for supporting overseas aid?”) and political economy (e.g. “how do different welfare states affect citizen preferences over domestic versus international redistribution?”).

The longitudinal nature of the dataset helps answer questions of *change*, such as what the drivers of stability vs change are in public attitudes towards global poverty and development over time, and how generational differences in engagement patterns evolve. The experimental component of the dataset also allows for testing specific theoretical mechanisms (e.g. “does acknowledging the presence of corruption help or hinder public support for overseas aid?”).

A unique and comprehensive dataset

Between 2019 and 2024, we carried out 91 surveys, resulting in 270,829 observations from 130,286 respondents.

The project combined three types of surveys: annual *panel* surveys, which followed the same individuals over six years to track how their attitudes changed; biannual *tracker* surveys, which are shorter surveys capturing shifts in public opinion more frequently; and responsive *sandbox* surveys, which explored pressing global issues in depth, from **climate change** and **COVID-19** to global gender equality, feminist development policy and **the war in Ukraine**.

What distinguishes this dataset is the breadth and depth of variables it offers. It captures *attitudes*: concern about global poverty; preferred levels of government aid spending; whether aid should serve national interests or altruistic goals; perceived costs and benefits of aid; trust in governments and NGOs; and views on migration, economic outlook and international cooperation.

It captures *behaviours*: ten indicators of engagement, from donating to international NGOs, volunteering and signing petitions to lobbying elected representatives or sharing information online.

It captures *segmentation*: using those behavioural measures, DEL groups people into six audience types, namely Negatively Engaged, Totally Disengaged, Marginally Engaged, Transactionally Engaged, Purposively Engaged and Fully Engaged, providing a nuanced map of public engagement.

And finally, it captures *context-specific modules*: experimental designs such as conjoint and list experiments to test how different frames, messages and project characteristics influence preferences.

We have thus created a dataset that is both broad and deep, offering researchers, NGOs and policymakers the ability to look at long-term trends while also examining responses to specific events.

Overseas aid is contested now more than ever, and the public's views will shape what is possible in the years ahead. By bringing together five years of rich, cross-national survey data, we provide a rare, detailed picture of how citizens think about and engage with global development.

These data show that concern for poverty abroad persists but is sensitive to political shocks and competing crises, and that engagement is varied but not static. As governments, NGOs and researchers look toward the future of aid, this open dataset offers an evidence base for understanding and strengthening the public foundations of global solidarity.

*For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in **Scientific Data**. The complete collection of 91 surveys is publicly available via **Harvard Dataverse**.*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: © **European Union, 2023***

About the author

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Dr Felipe Torres is a Fellow in Quantitative Methods in the Government Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His primary research focuses on corruption, bureaucratic politics, adaptive experiments, and political economy of development.

Soomin Oh

Dr Soomin Oh is Senior Research Fellow in the International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Her research is focused on the political economy of development as part of the Development Engagement Lab. She uses both qualitative and quantitative methods, including survey experiments and quasi-natural experiments, as well as interviews. Her works uniquely link academic research with public engagement and impact, in particular with international NGOs and charities, as well as governmental organisations in the UK, US, Germany, and France.

Paolo Morini

Dr Paolo Morini is a Research Fellow at the Policy Institute, King's College London and an Honourary Research Fellow in the Department of Political Science, University College London. He holds a PhD in Political Science from UCL, and at King's he works to deliver analysis and insights for the UK in the World Values Survey, and leads the Trust, Facts, Democracy research theme, researching political participation and public engagement with global challenges. His work has been featured in The Conversation and The Big Issue, and has been covered in the media including the BBC.

Jennifer Hudson

Professor Jennifer Hudson is Professor of Political Behaviour at University College London (UCL). She is the Director of the Development Engagement Lab and has published on a wide

range of topics analysing elite and mass political behaviour, including public opinion and engagement with development; support for foreign aid; and parliamentary campaigns and elections. Her research has been funded by the Gates Foundation, Economic and Social Research Council, Danish Council for Independent Research, Nuffield Foundation and Leverhulme Trust.

David Hudson

Professor David Hudson is Professor of Politics and Development in the University of Birmingham's International Development Department. He is the Co-Director of the Development Engagement Lab. His research focuses on the politics of development. Recent projects include fieldwork or data collection in Fiji, France, Germany, Indonesia, Jamaica, Myanmar, Rwanda, the UK and the US, involving survey data, network analysis, experiments, text analysis, interviews and focus groups. He has held grants from the ESRC, British Academy, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Leverhulme Trust.

Molly Anders

Molly Anders is the Research Insights and Engagement Lead at the Development Engagement Lab and a research fellow at University College London. She is the former UK senior correspondent at Devex, where she reported on development finance and aid policy in the UK. A Fulbright Scholar, she produced flagship research on media rights and engagement in Jordan, Syria and Palestine, before joining IREX's Jordan Media Strengthening Programme, funded by the US Agency for International Development.

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