


## DEBATE

WILEY

## Future of Humanitarian and Development Aid

# Taking (anti-)'woke' seriously: the future of development cooperation and humanitarian aid

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This article examines the Trump administration's 'war on woke' as a key narrative in dismantling USAID in early 2025, arguing that its cultural framing is politically significant alongside material and geopolitical impacts.

**Approach:** Drawing on Project 2025 and a Lonsdale and Black blog as examples, we explore how 'woke' is cast as a threat to US values and interests.

**Findings:** Cuts disproportionately harm women, children, and marginalised groups, while emboldening conservative actors globally. Anti-'woke' narratives gain traction from inequalities produced by neoliberal globalisation; liberal aid arguments have lost voter appeal. Reclaiming 'woke' in its original sense offers opportunities for justice-based development approaches.

**Value:** Foregrounding the cultural politics of aid, we call for structurally oriented, globally connected solidarity that engages alienated domestic constituencies and addresses racialised inequalities in North and South.

**KEYWORDS**

anti-woke rhetoric, authoritarianism, Black consciousness, critical race theory, development cooperation, humanitarian aid, LGBTQI+, politics, racial dynamics, racialised inequality, Trump administration, USAID, wokeness

Most critical commentaries on the dismantling of USAID and other parts of the US aid system have rightly focused on its immediate and longer-term humanitarian and developmental consequences, the implications for local and global development institutions and governance, and its profound geopolitical reverberations. For many, ourselves included, the speed, scope and brutally chaotic nature of Trump and Musk's actions represent a deep rupture with the post-1960s North-South liberal aid regime. That said, like others, we suggest that in most respects their actions are not a significant change in the recent direction of travel within the international aid landscape, but rather an unprecedented amplification. Foreign aid was already shrinking in absolute and

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relative terms; its economic and developmental significance has been increasingly sidelined by remittances and other non-aid flows; aid agencies have been merged with foreign affairs and trade departments; and explicit assertions of donor national interests have become commonplace. (Neo)liberal commitments to poverty reduction and the poorest, deeply problematic though they were, have been hollowed out as finance and financialisation have been normatively (re)turned to the heart of an economic growth-oriented development industry (Gabor, 2021).

Where the second Trump presidency's attack on foreign aid, development and humanitarianism stands out more distinctively in comparison to its OECD-DAC peers – at least for now – is the prominence of a highly distorted and inflammatory framing of 'woke', and the extraordinary degree of visceral loathing with which that is being presented and weaponised. This is not entirely distinct from other donors – the long history of deriding UK aid in parts of the British tabloid press includes similar accusations, famously, for example, leading to the termination of a potentially highly effective DFID partnership with an Ethiopian girl band. But in the US, this projection has especially old and deep roots in highly racialised cultural, regional and class politics, and has been amplified within a distinctively American media landscape. To be clear, as used by Black Americans to refer to Black social and political consciousness and collective solidarity, woke is a term that has been taken seriously, and should be. In this short intervention, we argue that, alongside the more commonly analysed material impacts, and geoeconomic and governance implications, the development sector – critical and mainstream – should take the Trumpian attacks on a distorted version of 'woke' seriously as well. After a brief analysis of how two important Trump-allied interventions frame the idea of wokeness in relation to USAID, we provide three brief analytical points to this effect.

Before starting, we note that the Trumpian project creates and exploits chaos to actively overwhelm analysis – in Steve Bannon's words, to 'flood the zone with shit' (Stelter, 2021). We also acknowledge the challenge of discerning between strategically deployed intentional statements and fawning, ad hoc or simply provocative soundbites by Trump (e.g. USAID 'has been run by a bunch of radical lunatics') and his allies (e.g. Musk describing USAID as a 'criminal organisation'). Despite this, as Pagel (2025) brilliantly demonstrates, patterns can be identified, and they matter. The place of the 'anti-woke' critique in the dismantling of USAID is part of the pattern. Second, we observe that only one author of this paper, Chloe, is Black; none of us is American; and four of us are white, with John having mixed Māori ancestry. We write as critical development scholars, informed by and grateful to writers and activists working on development, Black feminism and critical race theory, amongst other theoretical influences.

## 1 | THE PROJECTION OF AND ASSAULT ON 'WOKE' USAID

There is no shortage of examples of USAID, and US humanitarian and development institutions and policies more broadly, being described and attacked as 'woke' by the Trump administration and its supporters, from Fox News presenters to a plethora of social media channels. We highlight two more formal interventions to demonstrate this. The first is Project 2025, the 900-page Heritage Foundation publication described as a 'playbook' for the second Trump presidency. The chapter on USAID was authored by Max Primorac, a one-time USAID staffer. In parts, the tone and content are what might be expected from a strongly conservative think tank analysing different elements, functions and strategic leverage points within the organisation. As is so often the case in the strange politics of aid, critical scholars and analysts might also find points of contact with some of the Project 2025 critique, such as excessive corporate profiteering by Washington insiders. Project 2025 did *not* make a case for the dismantling of USAID – it proposed shrinking it to pre-Covid levels, although it also recommended making many more political appointments to explicitly subordinate it to Presidential agendas. In this regard, Project 2025's USAID recommendations represent that part of the Republican party that recognises the many ways in which USAID has worked in US geoeconomic and domestic interests (agricultural exporters, for example), actors who

are (mostly quietly) discomfited by what has actually transpired. Much more could be said about this chapter, but relevant to our focus here is the tone, framing and content when the discussion turns to USAID's role in 'promoting abortion, gender radicalism, climate extremism, and other woke ideas' (p. 263). The chapter essentially argues that the Biden administration:

has deformed the agency by treating it as a global platform to pursue overseas a divisive political and cultural agenda that promotes abortion, climate extremism, gender radicalism, and interventions against perceived systemic racism. It has dispensed with decades of bipartisan consensus on foreign aid and pursued policies that contravene basic American values and have antagonized our partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America ... and US foreign aid has been transformed into a massive and open-ended global entitlement program captured by – and enriching – the progressive Left (Primorac, 2024: 286).

Decades of culture war politics have paved the way for this sort of statement. 'Woke' here projects a dark, systematically organised, existential threat by heavily racialised enemies within, to (white, straight, conservative) 'American' values and to the (white, straight, conservative) 'American' nation. By its nature, this therefore demands a purging of institutions, a foundational reset of gender, family, science and more, inside the US and in its foreign policy.

A second intervention of note is a widely circulated blog, 'How to DOGE US foreign aid' authored by Joe Lonsdale and Ben Black (2025). Lonsdale is a mentee of Peter Thiel, and Ben Black is the son of a private equity mogul. Black has been nominated by the Trump administration to head the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the US's Development Finance Institution (Pequeño, 2025). Lonsdale and Black's blog sets out a far more aggressive approach to USAID and other parts of the humanitarian and development sector, which is much closer to what happened over the first few months of Trump 2.0 than Project 2025. The only institution they are interested in saving is the DFC, which they assert should be redesigned to better serve US interests, for example by providing strategic investments in critical minerals *within* the US, as well as places like Greenland. Here too, the authors lambast USAID's 'absurd mission drift' into 'initiatives like "Improving Gender Equity in the Mexican Workplace," "Gender Based Violence Risk Reduction and Response Services," "Gender Equality for Climate Change Opportunities," "Supporting the Fight for Tunisian LGBTQI Persons," and "Promoting Respect Equity Together in Belize."

Aside from these two sources, an unscientific trawl of Trump-faithful news channels and social media makes clear that, among his base, these views are widely held, and are often expressed in terms of extreme hostility. We argue that the Trumpian critique of USAID as 'woke' is not trivial in its larger political rationale or its consequences. In the next section we pick out three reasons why.

## 2 | ANALYSIS

The first point is the most obvious, namely that women, children and other vulnerable groups are likely to be most heavily hit: more general aid cuts will fall hardest on them (e.g. ActionAid, 2025a, 2025b), as will the more specific loss of funding and programmes oriented towards women, children and marginalised groups, including infant and maternal care and LGBTQ+ initiatives. They will also be most affected by the enabling effect on other conservative forces, including religious organisations, partner governments, and other DAC donors. The Trump administration has been proactive and unrelenting in stripping away any programme that hints at diversity elements or goals, particularly those focused on climate or reproductive rights. At the same time, progressive civil society organisations, important champions of the interests of the marginalised, are coming under renewed attack (again, this predates Trump 2.0 in the US and among many DAC donors more generally), and many are

shutting or being diminished. Project 2025 makes a virtue of this, arguing that the new conservatism in the US is better aligned with the 'cultural values' of African and other partners. It may be coincidental, but this year the Netherlands has chosen to withdraw aid from all international women's rights and gender equality projects (Rutgers International, 2025). In short, the prominence and aggressiveness of the 'anti-woke' narrative in the US is significant, with both immediate and longer-term material impacts, and very likely longer-term effects and implications by empowering other conservative forces.

Second, scholars and commentators across the critical / mainstream spectrum need to address why the 'anti-woke' message has been so popular with such a large share of the US public – and its difficult corollary, namely why liberal arguments for supporting global development financing and activity have become less and less compelling for many voters. This is not just in the US, but across other OECD-DAC donors too – even if, to date, less viscerally and in less politically weaponised ways (country-level details, trends and nuances are beyond this short piece, but this drift should not be under-estimated). There are many rich theories and fields of analysis here, but we suggest that this is at least in part a structural product of the inequalities and social pathologies of neoliberal globalisation in the South *and* North. These are structural inequalities that the mainstream aid industry does not address – rather, for many, it is effectively confined to palliating global inequalities. The mainstream aid system was unable to resolve the cognitive dissonance of either growing inequality and vulnerability in the South, including in terms of sovereign and personal indebtedness, or growing economic pressures and concerns in OECD countries.

The traction that the 'anti-woke' agenda has in the US and elsewhere makes clear the need to identify, articulate and project a different set of narratives and policies around solidarity and self-interest. Can progressive elements of the liberal aid system remobilise around a more structurally oriented, justice-based agenda? There are many stakeholders around the world, especially in the global South, who are thinking seriously about the current moment as an opportunity to drive for genuine structural change, led by the South. There are also a range of initiatives which engage with global transformations within and across financial, corporate and national and global institutions of power, including ideas around Global Public Investment,<sup>1</sup> the Cape Town Declaration<sup>2</sup> and the Bridgetown Initiative.<sup>3</sup>

Mainstream liberal aid actors must acknowledge and respond to the forces and narratives driving the broader authoritarian turn across the North (and beyond), not least by engaging with alienated Northern populations who are experiencing growing precarity, and for whom liberal elites promoting (supposedly) 'woke' values seem alien and out of touch. In short, if an aid industry is to rebuild – or, rather, reinvent – itself, it must finally embrace more structural and global perspectives. The popularity of various 'anti-woke' positions and messaging by Northern leaders and actors might not be comfortable, but they can't be dismissed.

Chiming with the point above, third, we propose that now could be the time to flip the 'anti-woke' agenda on its head by reclaiming the term and giving it back its meaning in the context of Black consciousness of structural injustice. Attributed to Jamaican social activist Marcus Garvey in 1923, woke has travelled through music (Erykah Badu and Childish Gambino, to name two) and political and social struggle, and 'stay woke' was a key slogan in the Black Lives Matter campaign, sparked by the killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many others. There is an irony in that, even though USAID has *not* been particularly woke in its genuine sense, the 'war on woke' at USAID could promote new forms of woke, which are precisely concerned with structural change – this time in terms of racialised global inequality and injustice. While deploring the immediate impacts of the US aid cuts, and the nature and intentions of the Trump presidency, we can perhaps seize the opportunity to revive and project more radical theories of and responses to the highly

<sup>1</sup><https://globalpublicinvestment.org/>.

<sup>2</sup><https://allafrica.com/stories/202502280100.html>.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.bridgetown-initiative.org/>.

racialised structural injustices and inequalities of global power: something that the former aid regime most emphatically did not achieve.

### 3 | CONCLUSION

Among its many impacts, the 'war on woke' has exposed the way altruism and empathy have been held and used by development agencies as the global political tide has turned to the authoritarian right (partially, and not without plenty of contestation – including 2025 election results in Australian, Canada and Romania).

Concern for the needs of distant others, and the rhetorical promotion of development as an altruistic and humanitarian project, have until recently sustained sufficient public backing for large aid programmes and support for multilateral development agencies across DAC partners – albeit uneasily and in ways that were already unravelling over this last 5–10 years. This discourse obscured the underlying use of aid and development to promote donor economic and political power and neoliberal globalisation, often at the very cost of those things (poverty, indebtedness and inequality) that it putatively seeks to alleviate. The reality of the many benefits of foreign aid to donor elites is disbelieved and / or disregarded by the ascendent conservative Right, or the centrist Left confronting increasingly hostile voters. This analysis challenges the mainstream aid and development industry to find the intellectual and moral courage to connect racialised social and economic injustice in the North *and* the South, without losing the very specific histories of extraction and exploitation experienced highly unevenly in both. Our very brief analysis of the role played by the 'war on woke' in the case of USAID is suggestive of the need for a more critically engaged reinvention of new forms of global solidarity and justice.

In this spirit, we conclude with an alternative. Former Foreign Minister of Aotearoa/New Zealand (2020–2023) Nanaia Mahuta articulated a set of four principles to guide the country's foreign policy: *manaakitanga* (care/hospitality), *whanaungatanga* (connectedness), *mahi tahi* and *kotahitanga* (unity through collaboration), and *kaitiakitanga* (intergenerational guardianship) (Smith and Holster, 2023). Although these were never firmly embedded in New Zealand's development policies and practices – and have been quietly shelved since a change of government in 2023 – they did promote discussion and influence thinking among the development community (Wood, 2023). A deep critical engagement at home and abroad with principles such as these could foreshadow development relationships that are enduring, respectful, personal and reciprocal. They could be more capable of withstanding change and conflict, they are long-standing and even inter-generational and they are mediated not through legal or political processes, but answer to much more enduring values and ontologies, such as the idea of common ancestors. If we can conceive of such alternative ways of thinking about and practicing development for all, we may yet flourish. Stay woke everyone.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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