



DevelopmentAid Dialogues

Season 2. Episode 3: US Aid Freeze: Immediate Effects of the Executive Order | A dialogue with Matthew Robinson

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Hisham Allam

Hello, everyone, and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. Today, we will delve into one of the most significant global shifts in the aid and development sector, triggered by the recent policies of the United States under President Donald Trump's administration. With the U. S. being the largest donor of foreign aid globally these sudden decisions, such as suspending aid programs, slashing funding for global health initiatives, and withdrawing from World Health Organization, have far reaching consequences. The impacts are being felt not only by vulnerable communities in the Global South, but also by the aid sector itself, which now faces daunting challenges to continue its work.

To explore this topic, I'm joined by Matthew Robinson, director of Euro-Gulf Information Centre and a seasoned expert in foreign policy, development and humanitarian advocacy. Matthew's extensive experience includes advising policymakers in Europe and working with organizations like Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Today's conversation will focus on the human and developmental implications of these aid reduction steering clear off the political debates to better understand their practical effect on the ground and the strategies required to adopt. Now, let's dive in. Hello, Matthew. We are delighted to have you here.

Matthew Robinson

A pleasure to join you. Thank you so much for having me.

Hisham Allam

Matthew, let's just start with a broad perspective. What is happening here? These aid calls and suspensions have sent shock waves through the sector. Can you give us an overview of what's behind these decisions and what make them so significant?

Matthew Robinson

Well, I think first and foremost, elections have consequences. And throughout the course of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, he made no secret with some of his proposals and plans for his 4-year term that's just begun in the White



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House. I think what goes to the crux of it is a debate that's going on right now within his own party, within the Republican Party on American interventionism and American foreign policy.

And I think back to former President Thomas Jefferson, when he wants to find peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations and entangling alliances. With one and with none, and I think to an extent you're starting to see a hop back to quasi. Isolationism amongst some camps of the Republican Party, and that has been projected in the Trump White House, but whether it's a withdrawal from the Paris Agreement or the WHO or even what we've seen a freeze in U. S. aid funding none of this, was hidden from the American people, was clearly articulated in the course of his presidential campaign. So, this is a consequence of elections of Trump's America first. Policies and I think, you know, they reflect an emphasis on reducing U. S. spending abroad and reassessing the effectiveness and possible realignment of foreign assistance programs with U. S. national interest at its core.

Hisham Allam

So do you think it's a burden on the American administration or was just a shift in the foreign policy because losing a very important bureau in the soft power is not that easy.

Matthew Robinson

Yeah of course, in the short term there's a huge institutional burden for civil servants and any lack of well, um, current lack of immediate political direction in terms of what the next, forget about even what the next year is going to look like.

But the next 6 months we're going to look like. I would say this is not without precedent. Internationally you saw. Uh, from a European standpoint, all by in a far less dramatic assessing, you saw the United Kingdom's approach as it related to international development dramatically, reshaped when the Department of International Development was folded into the Foreign Commonwealth Office, now known as the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.

And at the time, yeah. Then, prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was somewhat of an international ally of Trump during Trump's first term in office, was candidate in the rationale for that was to look at a reshaping of British international development and humanitarian aid priorities with UK foreign policy goals, and I think you're seeing that as well with the current Trump second administration, but there's also a degree of urgency here from day one, President Trump is a lame duck.

He's term limited. And that is, I think, why also you've seen a rush to as many executive actions as he has right now on the host of these freezes and suspension of membership, this is a president in a hurry and with a realization that, time is against him.

And, there's only so much a president can do by virtue of executive action, but he does enjoy congressional support, both in the House and the Senate, and it will certainly be a test of his support and commanding authority over the Republican Party as a whole.



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Hisham Allam

Do you think he may change his mind later?

Matthew Robinson

He's already speculated on this is the nature of the beast with Trump is that I think it was just yesterday he said there was a possibility that the U. S. could reenter into the WHO. So yes, I think with Trump, everything is always on the table. I would say, as it relates to USAID, the direction, whether it's from Secretary of State Marco Rubio or senior officials in the White House, they've been quite blunt in there, that they've been insistent that Trump's executive actions are honored and any civil servants or officials that work in a contradictory fashion to that direction will be sanctioned.

But of course, I think all of these things are on the table. I think there is a possibility. You could see US reentry the WHO. But the concern remain the US is by far the biggest contributor. Account. I mean, that for the 2-year period, 2022-2023, the US accounted for nearly 1.3 billion dollars in funding. Yeah, this is a big player and I think a concern of the United States is. I think there's been an enthusiasm to see that rebalanced, whether that's by virtue of more funding from private donors or more funding through the other regional blocks like the European Union, China, of course.

Hisham Allam

We will discuss this point in details, but now I'd like to reflect on what you have said. According to your experience, you have worked closely with the European and the global institutions. How do you see the US withdrawal from the WHO and its impact on cooperation in global health emergencies? What is the bigger picture in here?

Matthew Robinson

An absence in US leadership will shine a spotlight in another, whether it's other, other parts of the world, you know, like the European Union, but also on the private sector, you know, I would say, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation account for a huge slice of funding towards the WHO. A crucial, of course, an international organization, but an organization with American origins at its heart. But I do think there is an opportunity for European leadership to step in any vacuum whether it's the top of the European commission that's just commenced its 2nd term under Ursula von der Leyen, whether it's Emmanuel Macron, but also, you know, growing and emerging leaders, people like Giorgio Maloney in Italy that have growing influence on the world stage. So I definitely think in the absence of any American leadership here, and depending on how long the suspension of membership will endure there will be an absence of leadership. It's essential that Europe re double their efforts on the world stage, whether that translates into monetary terms are not as yet to be seen, but if an American absence from this organization endures beyond this year, there will be huge funding questions that will have to be answered for the for the WHO and I struggle to see right now how the organization could come near close to mitigating that funding gap that is absolutely huge.



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Hisham Allam

The question here, what does this mean for the international entrepreneurs in responding to future pandemics or health emergencies?

Matthew Robinson

You've nearly answered your own question there. It poses huge issues and in terms of the budgeting of the WHO and its roadmap over the next five years, all of it is contingent on, on what is its number one contributor maintaining funding. I think this has posed huge questions and of course there is to degree on. I think whether you look at issues like that American funding has been consequential and helping whether you're healthy, you correctly referred to PEPFAR, that there's a relates to HIV and AIDS funding, education programs, even anti-corruption initiatives, you know, that have, fuel transparency and better governance.

All of that has come from generous American funding over the years. And I do worry that if this suspension of membership of well, not just membership, but of leadership on the world stage, endures beyond the next six months, a year, we'll start to see huge problems. Of course, you can try and diversify elements of funding sources and you can try and find more creative solutions on a local level. But that can only go so far to mitigate what is a huge funding gap, I would say that this reevaluation of American approach internationally is not isolated.

There's the same conversation being had on a domestic level in the United States as it relates to FEMA's disaster relief funding on a federal level. You're, you're seeing a total, quite a dramatic total top-down reevaluation of how American money is being spent, both domestically. And internationally and it's going to be incredibly challenging for the global community to adapt and the elephant in the room is how long this actually will last. Trump himself has said that he could reevaluate these decisions at any moment.

Hisham Allam

Exactly. As you have said, the suspension of the U. S. foreign assistance programs has impacted a wide range of initiatives, from health to anti-corruption. So which areas do you believe are being hit the hardest, and what could the long-term effects be on these sectors?

Matthew Robinson

Beyond the WHO, the U. S. is by far the biggest player internationally in development funds and humanitarian assistance in 2023 alone, I think for the U. S. accounted for about 72 billion dollars internationally. You're talking about a huge pot of money. I would say, one of the efforts in which the US has been pivotal is on HIV aids, access internationally, of which American money has been, crucial and American leadership has been crucial.



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Hisham Allam

You mean the for program?

Matthew Robinson

Yes. And I worry about in the interim how that could be affected the strain that gaps in funding could have on local health systems is huge. Reduce access to life saving medications as well that are so consequential, to people, to vulnerable communities, especially in the developing world suffering from HIV and aids. So, I worry about that, but also deepening humanitarian crises international especially as it relates to certain refugee resettlement programs, you know.

Hisham Allam

Before we go to it, I'd like to ask you first about the U. S. aid day. The Trump administration had announced the suspension of U. S. aid for 90 days, what is the rationale behind this move and how does this delay and disturbance impact ongoing projects? I have seen posts from students who got fellowships from the USA aid.

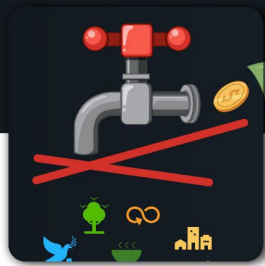
Matthew Robinson

Yeah, this occurred in quite a dramatic fashion, you know, it was after the executive order was signed, there was a memo sent the over 10, 000 USAID staffers. Domestically and internationally effectively with an abrupt stop work directive.

And any of the staff and officials that are found in contradiction to that executive order in that directive, it could face severe sanctions. I mean, this is the rationale from the White House's standpoint is to allow for an immediate rethinking and potential reprioritization of some of this aid money.

I do expect, I'd said that it will of course recommence at a certain point that the frustration is that there's no exact end date to this. I know the new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio has already been put under a huge pressure as the many questions that are already being framed, I would say that the difference between this time around and his first term is, when Trump sought to action these many freezes and spending the first time around there was a great uproar and pushback both from the private sector and politically, I think because so much of this is baked in now and expected from the Trump administration, I mean, you just got to look at even the tech sector in the Trump one, you know, when many of these freezes occurred as a related certain aid spending or WHO or Paris. There was outrage and damning critique of the Trump, White House from many of the tech giants. This time around, there's a deafening silence there, the president is in an incredibly commanding position and a lot don't dare to question, his authority. And, there is a whether many like it or not, he has a democratic mandate to action these things. He's done so legally by virtue of executive action, while somewhat, unorthodox by just the degree of what he's done.

It's still a legal course of action. So. It's all that remains now are the political calculations that have to be made by not just the White House, but obviously the state department under the leadership of secretary Rubio.



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Hisham Allam

Matthew, in this podcast, I used to avoid talking about politics and to focus only on the humanitarian impact of the topics of the discussion, but this topic specifically leads us every time to speak about politics.

Matthew Robinson

And I think it's unavoidable as it relates, the actions on the part of the Trump White House are highly political, you know, and it's unavoidable, you know, the consequence, these actions are the consequence of the modern political reality in the United States, that has led the, the U. S. government, you know, to this point. And I just think it's a reality at this point where the United States has landed internationally in stark contrast to the last 4 years under the Biden White House.

Hisham Allam

Yeah, I totally agree. The point you have referred to about the refugee resettlement program is another area hit hard by these cuts. Yeah. Families who were ready to rebel their lives are now left in limbo. How do these disruptions, deep in humanitarian crisis and what alternative do these families have?

Matthew Robinson

Yeah, this is probably one of the toughest aspects of the new Trump administration's approach to refugee and asylum policy, whether it's mass deportations that are already being actioned or a quasi-suspension to some of its own, the U. S. 's historically generous asylum and refugee policies. You know, there's a huge question as to where is that going to leave even the current tens and hundreds of thousands of ongoing applicants, but also the many undocumented individuals.

I would say now there's been an executive order to prohibit the use of the term undocumented as it relates to talking about illegal migrants. The direction now from the White House is to refer to these individuals as legal aliens and they've been quite tough on that. But I mean, you've seen an example with the two U. S. military aircraft sent to Colombia full of deported illegal migrants, some of which were failed asylum applicants and the action of the Colombian government to dare even challenge that was met abruptly by the threat of trade sanctions, huge tariff threats and the Colombian government, I think, back down within a period of period of about 12 hours.

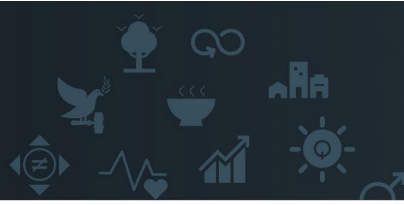
So, this is a complete rethinking and a totally new approach as it relates to American diplomacy, in terms of trying to get it set around just how it's going to even begin to deport what is adding in conservative estimates about 10 million people over the next, a couple of years and what that will mean for relations for those countries in which the U. S. is seeking to deport these migrants back.

Hisham Allam

There is a growing concern from organizations like Oxfam about the life-or-death consequences that these funding cuts could have. How do you see the role of international NGOs and civil society organizations shifting in response to this reduction in US aid?



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Matthew Robinson

What's going to put huge pressure on the voluntary sector. It is worth making the point that as it relates to funding, you know, just WHO funding alone there are big, volunteer organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that are the number 3 donor to the WHO and funds.

But this will put huge pressure on a lot of not just some of the large organizations like Oxfam, but also on the ground, a lot of local groups that are tasked with implementing and delivering a lot of this. It'll force the private sector to adapt and try and take on a more prominent role, put pressure on companies, especially social enterprises to fill the gap and, and reimagine some of its own corporate social responsibility strategies. This probably it can manifest in a host of ways, whether through new private sector partnerships, where you see more and more businesses partner with some of these existing NGOs and local government, you could see arguably increased corporate social responsibility where more companies use some of their philanthropic arms to direct projects and obviously, as it relates to social enterprises, I think you'll, you'll see. It will also offer an opportunity for a growing interest and impact and investment means for social enterprises that they could play a role, whether it's addressing certain poverty goals, education, healthcare. It will obviously provide opportunities for some of these organizations, but it will not come without its challenges.

Hisham Allam

uh I don't like to be pessimistic, and I don't like to underestimate the power of the NGOs and civil society, but do you think the thing can cover the gap that the U. S. aid used to cover. We all know that there are local communities in the global South that are relying heavily on these initiatives.

Matthew Robinson

In the short term. Yes. I think but in the medium to long term, absolutely not. I mean, if this gap, continues, be on the short term there is only going to be so much that the private and voluntary sector can do to make up this gap. I'm somewhat optimistic that, and I think you just got to look at the president's statements. That US funding will be revisited and readdressed. This is not an indefinite suspension of on U. S. funding, whether it's WHO related or U. S. aid related this is, and what, how it's been articulated by the White House is a momentary pause for a rethink and a re-prioritization of some of these funds.

I am cautiously, I'd say optimistic that within the course of the coming months, maybe even the coming weeks that you will, and it will probably occur in a drip by drip, um, approach that some of this money, that some of this money will.



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Hisham Allam

Try to convince me why you are optimistic.

Matthew Robinson

Well, I think you just got to look at the statements from the president. He's made it quite clear that he has an open mind for some of this funding to restart probably with conditions attached. So, there's going to be a diplomatic game that's going to be played here and there's going to be certain asks from the white house in the U. S. Government.

Hisham Allam

In his first term, he would throw from climate agreement and in the second term he initiated it was another one. So, I don't think the president that to change his mind for something.

Matthew Robinson

Well, I think he's shown whether just take the WHO, you know, for example, I think he's made it quite clear that he remains open minded to the committee US funding with the right conditions and the right commitments institutionally to reform. So, I'm cautiously optimistic that whether it's the WHO or other bodies internationally, and I think a lot of other UN bodies internationally will be watching this with keen interest that they demonstrate enthusiasm to meet some of these asks from the U. S. government. So, the funding taps can be recommitted. I don't think there'll be a reevaluation as it relates to the U. S. government's position on the Paris Agreement that I agree with you, I think that is very much off the table for the course of this administration, certainly some of the President's commitments domestically to energy production. I could even look at some of the bolder proposals in Alaska as it relates to drilling efforts. So, of course, I don't think Paris will be revisited, but USAID funding and even WHO funding, I don't think we should be overly, too pessimistic, but I think we should watch this space.

Hisham Allam

Actually, I enjoy playing the role of devil's advocate. So, I was trying to get a clear version out of you.

Matthew Robinson

Yeah. Hopefully you got some of that.

Hisham Allam

Critics argue that the freezing of foreign aid doesn't align with American values, as some programs have proven to be vital for people in crisis. How do you respond to this criticism, especially in terms of moral responsibility of donor countries?



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Matthew Robinson

I think you're right to raise that, and this is why I mentioned from the outset, I think they looking at this with a wider lens. Part of this is a total rethink as it relates to US foreign policy, as a whole. What we've seen over the last 80 years is a United States that's embraced a role as a global leader. Certainly, a commitment to interventionism. And, I think what the, if you could even call it the Trump doctrine yet, but certainly the Trump administration's view of the world is a hark back to some early forms of American isolationism and I don't think yet that even the Trump White House is confident as to how the next year will progress as it relates to some of these freezers. But I think there is a commitment to reprioritizing some more regional and national commitments but domestically in the US, but also to its immediate neighbors in the Americas. And that will have an effect internationally.

Hisham Allam

As we have seen the balance of international relations from the European perspective. How do you think these US policy shifts might influence Europe's it stands on foreign aid and its own role in global development efforts, especially after we have witnessed while the UK and Netherlands has followed the same steps. So, it looks like a trend.

Matthew Robinson

Yeah, as I said before, you know, an absence of American leadership will offer an opportunity, for especially for blocks like the European Union, to step up, I would say that, from a funding standpoint, there is a limit in the reach that the Europeans have in terms of stepping up some of its funding for these bodies. It's already established a lot of it's, 5-to-10-year, funding objectives for these organizations. So, while I think there's an opportunity for increased the European leadership, whether that translates into more money. I don't think it's going to get that is going to materialize.

And I'm skeptical that you'll see much, if not more, any more European money to try and fill mitigate the gap in US funds. I would say beyond even development funding, you know, the US has demand, a bigger ask across the board. You've just gotta look at even what President Trump has asked of Europeans on NATO.

Asking for a, five target, if not five 5% from all of its NATO partners. So, the Americans are asking more of the Europeans across the board and I'm not that confident that, especially considering the current absence in leadership on a European, on a regional level, whether Europe is going to be able to step up to the occasion.

Hisham Allam

How do you think that the U. S. decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement would affect the global development agenda.

Matthew Robinson

As it relates to Paris, many have been anticipating, this move with Trump win, but I do think my concern is this stop start approach to US engagement on these goals is not healthy for the Paris Agreement, as a whole and will have an impact.



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I mean, you've just got to look to what was discussed in the most recent gathering in a COP in Baku and there was I'd say an aura and a sense of pessimism, in the air, of course, there were certain loose additional commitments as it relates to some global, some financing for some of the developing world and those at the front line of the climate disaster and especially island nations that are under huge strain, but yeah, American gap of the absence of American leadership in Paris will be huge.

In fact, I read some remarks for the former US climate envoy, John Kerry, who was in Davos at the World Economic Forum just a matter of days ago. And, his assessment of the situation was quite stark and quite damning.

Yeah. So, it's difficult to be, I don't see how you can be anything but pessimistic, you know, the Trump vision, it runs completely in contrast to the very ethos and heart of the Paris Agreement. There's just no other way to break that down.

Hisham Allam

Thank you, Matthew, for your valuable insights into the current state of US foreign aid and its implications for the global development sector. It's clear that the effects of these policy changes will be felt for years to come. And the need for strategic cooperative responses has never been more pressing and I really enjoyed this discussion. To our listeners, thank you for tuning into this episode of DevelopmentAid Dialogues. Stay informed, stay engaged. Until next time, I'm Hisham Allam signing off.