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Development Cooperation at a Tipping Point

How, Why and Through What Mechanisms Do Policy Norms Break?

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Abstract

This paper applies the concepts and theories of “policy norms” to the disruptive effects of the second Trump administration on global development cooperation. We argue that recent US actions represent more than a domestic political shift. They signal a tipping point to longstanding norms of the development cooperation system and specifically multilateralism as well as notions of global solidarity. This paper’s objective is to explain how, why and through which political and institutional mechanisms policy norms break down or are reconstituted in global development cooperation. It uses the current moment as a case study of “norm antipreneurship”, potentially even “norm imperialism” illustrating the political and institutional strategies through which policy norms are currently been contested, dismantled or displaced. This paper addresses a set of questions: (i) What are the core mechanisms through which development cooperation norms are formed, contested and fragmented? (ii) How is the second Trump administration seeking to reshape normative regimes in development cooperation? (iii) What research agenda is needed to understand norm change in a multipolar and contested development cooperation landscape?

Keywords: development cooperation, norm contestation, policy norms, global (dis)order, nationalist conditionality regime, New Washington Dissensus

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Abbreviations

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEI	diversity, equity and inclusion
GPEDC	Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation
ODA	official development assistance
MDG	millennium development goal
NDB	New Development Bank
NWD	New Washington Dissensus
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	sustainable development goal

1 Introduction

Malcolm Gladwell (2000, p. 12) describes a "tipping point" as the moment when an idea or trend crosses a threshold and spreads quickly. The book's discussion was about consumer trends, yet the same concept holds for global development cooperation today, which is facing accumulated political and institutional pressure and seemingly approaching its tipping point (see also Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025).[1] Development cooperation appears to be undergoing a fundamental paradigmatic shift. Long-gestating political, institutional and normative forces are reordering development cooperation's ideational architecture. The future of global development cooperation might not be determined by technical coordination or best practice transfer or more trust or better narratives, but by struggles over meaning, power and legitimacy. Understanding how norms break is not simply an academic exercise. It is central to understanding the reordering of global development cooperation in the mid-2020s.

In this paper, we consider the tipping point in terms of the policy norms of global development cooperation. Our core argument is that the Trump administration marks a normative tipping point in global development cooperation. However, the Trump administration is not treated here as a national aberration. Rather, it is understood as a transnational political project. It is rooted in sovereigntism, transactionalism and anti-multilateralism. It crystallises and amplifies wider trends already in motion. These include a shift from collective to self-interested framings of development cooperation, the instrumentalisation of aid for ideological policing and migration control and the proliferation of institutional forums that contest or sidestep established norms. In other words, the Trump administration is triggering a tipping point that accelerates normative contestation, institutional fragmentation and the pluralisation of development cooperation regimes.

Drawing retrospectively on Gladwell's original framework (2000), we use three analogies: first, the influence of powerful norm antipreneurs ("the Law of the Few"); second, a compelling, if polarising, ideological message ("the Stickiness Factor"); and third, a permissive context of weakened multilateralism and rising geopolitical rivalry ("the Power of Context"). Yet, where Gladwell once saw these forces as enablers of positive social contagion, his later reflections reconsider such dynamics as mechanisms of systemic breakdown (2024). In this sense, the Trump administration era marks a tipping point. It is also a breaking point. Accumulated normative strain and disillusionment now converge into open fragmentation and the reconstitution of development norms under rival geopolitical logics. Long-held assumptions about what constitutes legitimate aid, how it should be delivered and in whose interest are being openly contested. These shifts are not merely about funding levels or donor fatigue; they signal a deeper fracture in the normative foundations of the system. What was once perceived as an incremental evolution of aid norms toward alignment, effectiveness and partnership is now subject to fragmentation, ideological contestation and institutional bypass.

This paper seeks to explain how and why norms in the areas of development and development policy break, with attention to contestation and strategic reconfiguration. Norms are treated not as stable end points but as artefacts of political contestation. This paper addresses a set of questions: (i) What are the core mechanisms through which development cooperation norms are formed, contested and fragmented? (ii) How is the second Trump administration seeking to reshape

1 We define the system of development cooperation as the broader architecture of actors, norms, instruments and institutions that mobilise and coordinate resources, knowledge and political support for development goals. Within this system, official development assistance (ODA) is a core financial instrument, primarily provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members, and functioning alongside other modalities such as South-South cooperation, climate finance, philanthropic aid and impact-oriented private-sector engagement.

normative regimes in development cooperation? (iii) What research agenda is needed to understand norm change in a multipolar and contested development cooperation landscape?

In addressing these questions, this paper makes four contributions. First, it is a survey of international relations, sociology, development studies and public policy on the conceptualisation of policy norms and the mechanisms of norm emergence, contestation and fragmentation. Second, it is an empirically grounded analysis of the Trump administration as a case study of "norm antipreneurship", potentially even "norm imperialism", illustrating the political and institutional strategies through which policy norms are currently being contested, dismantled or displaced. Third, it presents the competing normative regimes in development cooperation. And fourth, it proposes a research agenda.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 surveys the conceptual and theoretical study of policy norms. Section 3 applies those concepts and theories to analyse shifts in development cooperation under the second Trump administration. Section 4 presents a typology of competing development cooperation regimes within the development cooperation system. Section 5 concludes with a forward-looking research agenda.

2 Policy norms and development cooperation

2.1 The concept of policy norms

In international relations, sociology, development studies and public policy, "policy norms" are often defined as "collective expectations for the proper behaviour of actors with a given identity" (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 5). By contrast, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 891) describe norms as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity". They also operate as procedural expectations about how authority should be exercised and how organisations are expected to operate (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Eyben, 2010). They are not merely technical rules. They are value-laden principles that specify who sets standards, how compliance is assessed and who bears responsibility (e.g., donor-recipient models vs. mutual partnership). What conditions are legitimate is a separate normative question (e.g., alignment vs. autonomy). Examples of development cooperation policy norms are numerous and include the Paris principles on aid effectiveness (ownership, alignment, harmonisation, results and mutual accountability), as well as more recent norms around policy coherence, gender equality and climate responsibility. These norms evolve historically and are often embedded in institutional arrangements such as the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) peer reviews, the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) and multilateral lending practices (Honig & Gulrajani, 2020). The crisis of the development cooperation system today is a crisis of these norms. Longstanding assumptions about what aid is for – and how it should be delivered – are being contested, reframed, eroded or rejected altogether.

Sociological theories, especially those grounded in practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984), conceptualise norms as embedded in and reproduced through social practices.[2] Norms are not exogenous constraints but, as noted, are constitutive of identity and action: they are internalised, habituated and enacted in everyday institutional and professional routines (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Public policy research adds a further lens. It examines how problems are defined and how solutions become acceptable. This happens within "policy paradigms" (Hall,

2 Practice-oriented social theory explains how social order is structured and reproduced through everyday action (see also Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984).

1993), “belief systems” (Jenkins-Smith & Weible, 2025) or “policy frames” (Schmidt, 2008) that frame problems and acceptable solutions.

Much of the international relations literature treats norms as institutions that organise expectations. They guide behaviour and define legitimate roles (e.g., what it means to be a “donor” or a “partner”). This is widely adopted in international relations scholarship, including by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). To this can be added evaluative norms, which are those that define criteria for judging legitimacy or success (e.g., “value for money”, “leaving no one behind”), a concept supported in part by Legro’s (1997) effort to identify norm robustness and consistency. Legro does not use the term “evaluative norms” directly but discusses norm robustness and norm specificity, which indirectly informs evaluative dimensions. This is elaborated in Wiener’s (2007) work on contested meanings and norm interpretation. Further, with specific reference to development cooperation we propose two additional categories of norms: (i) “instrumental norms”, which encode procedural rationalities or technical preferences, for example, results-based management, and (ii) “meta-norms”, which we define as higher-order norms that govern normative order itself, such as multilateralism or consensus-based decision making.[3] We argue that it is the erosion of such meta-norms in particular that signals deeper systemic shifts when a system has reached a tipping point. This expanded typology is based on a notion that contestation occurs not only over substantive content but also over the metarules that govern who gets to define development cooperation, through which institutions and in whose interest.

From this interdisciplinary synthesis, we define policy norms in development cooperation as contested standards that guide how states, institutions and others act, explain their actions and challenge aid and cooperation practices. Policy norms function through logics of appropriateness and are embedded in discursive and performative structures.

2.2 Theories of policy norm change

The often-cited model of norm formation is that of emergence, cascade and internalisation of norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This has been influential, but its linearity and teleology are contested. Accordingly, policy norms typically follow a similar trajectory. First comes emergence, when new ideas are introduced by norm entrepreneurs (individuals or organisations advocating new standards, e.g., the DAC’s aid-effectiveness agenda). Second comes diffusion, which highlights how powerful states and organisations endorse new norms that are then spread via socialisation or peer pressure or emulation (e.g., results-based management promoted by DAC donors and institutionalised through performance-based budgeting and conditionality). Third comes internalisation, when norms become embedded in institutional routines and legal frameworks, taken for granted and no longer actively contested (e.g., the sustainable development goals (SDGs) prior to 2025). It has been argued that norm trajectories are also about disruption, reversal or contestation even more so than the traditional model implies (Bloomfield, 2016; Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019, 2020). Norms often arise when advocates (individuals or institutions) introduce and promote new standards. However, norms can be conceptualised as sites of ongoing contestation, not stable endpoints (Wiener, 2009, 2018). Indeed, the contestation itself may even be part of normative “order” in the sense that norms are continuously reinterpreted through practices of invocation, resistance and re-signification. In development cooperation, for instance, the principle of “ownership” can be mobilised to support sovereign autonomy or to justify donor control, depending on how it is discursively framed and institutionally utilised (Keijzer et al., 2020). Norms are not static; they are politically constructed and remain contested.

3 The concept of meta-norms aligns loosely with discussions on higher-order beliefs and principles that define legitimate actors and rightful state action in international society (see, for example, Reus-Smit, 2013).

Analysis should track how actors displace and replace norms, not just how they make small adjustments. In particular, it is important to pay attention to "norm antipreneurs" who deliberately obstruct or reverse norm adoption through strategies of blocking, narrative inversion or institutional sabotage (Bloomfield & Scott, 2018). In development cooperation, such actors often mobilise sovereignty, national interest or economic competitiveness to delegitimise redistributive or cosmopolitan norms. The Trump administration offers a particularly clear example. Trump has defunded multilateral institutions, politicised aid allocation, rejected collective action on climate finance and redefined aid as a transactional tool for security and migration control. This represents not merely non-compliance, but a coherent project of norm displacement and replacement at an unprecedented scale.

Norms are institutionalised through rules, routines and organisational cultures (Hall, 1993; March & Olsen, 1998). Norm fragmentation occurs when existing norms are questioned, selectively applied or actively dismantled. Historical institutionalism identifies the following four concepts that emphasise how norms are embedded in and shaped or contested within formal organisations and procedures (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005):

- *Layering*: New norms are added onto old ones (e.g., integrating climate finance into aid effectiveness frameworks).
- *Conversion*: Old institutions are repurposed for new goals (e.g., repurposing aid budgets for border enforcement).
- *Drift*: Norms persist formally but lose salience or operational content (e.g., SDGs post-COVID-19).
- *Displacement*: Norms are replaced wholesale by new institutions (e.g., bilateral deals eclipsing UN funding mechanisms).

International organisations exercise "classificatory power" by defining legitimate problems, actors and responses; this authority is increasingly contested (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) in four ways:

- *Framing and reframing*: Shifts in language, such as from "aid effectiveness" to "mutual benefit", redirect policy by reframing cooperation as transactional and emphasising economic returns over social returns.
- *Evidence mobilisation*: Competing narratives draw on different evidence; while the SDGs rely on social indicators, nationalist regimes emphasise donor-country economic returns (e.g., job creation).
- *Narrative contestation*: Concepts like "global solidarity" compete with "America First" or "migration control" in defining official development assistance (ODA) goals.
- *Institutional contestation*: Countries redirect debates between forums or block initiatives by exploiting procedural rules.

Further, recent scholarship (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019, 2020; Wiener, 2018) identifies four modes of contestation, each of which can be applied to development cooperation:

- *Applicatory contestation* challenges how a norm should be implemented (e.g., tensions between donors and recipients over what "ownership" entails as noted above).
- *Validity contestation* challenges the legitimacy of the norm itself (e.g., rejecting the value of climate or diversity, inclusion and equity goals).

- *Norm antipreneurship* is strategic effort by powerful actors to not only resist but also reverse norm diffusion (e.g., the Trump administration's approach).

- *Institutional contestation* is the use of different forums to contest norms through blocking or introducing hundreds of amendments to "final" outcome documents (e.g., the Trump administration's attempt to wreck the 2025 Financing for Development Sevilla conference outcome document).

The various mechanisms, with their overlapping dimensions, help explain how development cooperation can experience normative upheaval without formal rupture, indicating that contestation may be deeper than it initially appears. For example, the Paris and Busan principles still exist in donor discourse, but their operational relevance has been eroded under the weight of bilateralism and geopolitical instrumentalisation (Brown, 2020).

Countries and institutions of the Global South are not passive actors in this norm diffusion. Acharya's (2004) theory of norm localisation provides a framework for understanding how Southern actors adapt and reinterpret global norms within local contexts. Rather than being passive norm takers, Southern actors selectively integrate norms in ways that align with their domestic priorities and political cultures. Zwingel (2012) extends this by showing how feminist norms are reshaped in different institutional and cultural settings. Further, South-South cooperation has emerged as a key site of norm pluralisation. Institutions like the New Development Bank, the China International Development Cooperation Agency and regional development funds articulate alternative principles: mutual benefit, non-conditionality and respect for sovereignty. These are not only rhetorical differences but they constitute a rival normative order grounded in historical experience and geopolitical realignment (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Mawdsley, 2012).

This normative pluralism challenges both the content and the custodianship of development cooperation norms. It implies a more polycentric model where different sites, such as the UN, BRICS, G20 and the DAC for example, promote overlapping or conflicting standards. This also flags how norms are not only about institutionalisation. In fact, discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) and framing theory (Snow & Benford, 1988) underscore how norms gain or lose legitimacy depending on how they are represented. Competing coalitions construct rival narratives: "global solidarity" versus "national interest" (or "America First"); "development effectiveness" versus "mutual interest"; and "alignment" versus "conditionality". This narrative contestation then structures public support, bureaucratic implementation and institutional legitimacy. The reframing of development as security policy, climate diplomacy or economic partnership, for example, reflects not only shifts in priorities but shifts in values.

Since at least the early to mid-2010s, there has been a period of substantial norm contestation in development cooperation. While the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs offered a shared template for cooperation (and an example of norm generation), the implementation of this agenda has been marked by norm contestation, driven by unresolved political conflicts. Chaturvedi et al. (2021) introduced the concept of "contested cooperation", highlighting how differing interpretations of cooperation norms and contestations over institutional authority shape development efforts. These contests manifest in two main forms: first, the politicisation of existing multilateral institutions (e.g., SDG agendas being leveraged for commercial interests and, second, counter-institutionalisation through the creation of new forums (e.g., emerging South-South platforms or G20 development groups) that compete with established DAC/UN frameworks. These overlapping "sites of contested cooperation", which include UN fora, regional banks and plurilateral clubs for example, intensify norm fragmentation. Multiple, sometimes conflicting standards and narratives now challenge the cohesion of global development governance (Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Indeed, the current tipping point has a much longer history in the sense of mounting pressure shaped by longer-run dynamics identified by Esteves and Klingebiel (2021):

- *Norm diffusion and fusion*: Traditional (ODA-based) North-South norms blend with South-South principles, creating hybrid models that combine mutual benefit, solidarity and commercial interests.
- *Institutional proliferation and confusion*: New platforms (G20, BRICS, South-South networks) challenge DAC/UN institutions, promoting overlapping norms and conflicting obligations for partner countries.
- *Contested authority and standards*: Actors reshape or bypass institutions, legitimising alternative norms on transparency, conditionality and ownership, undermining coherence.
- *Emerging sites of contestation*: Development cooperation now unfolds across multiple arenas – UN platforms, exclusive clubs – each with distinct value logics, fragmenting efforts toward the SDGs.

Norms fragment when power shifts alter incentives, crises expose contradictions and competing norms emerge. Today, fragmentation is also driven by populist politics, fiscal consolidation, geopolitical rivalry and institutional fatigue (see also Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). The SDG agenda has struggled to regain momentum post-COVID-19, while bilateral actors – most notably the US under the Trump administration – increasingly impose their own value-based frameworks. In short, norms in development cooperation form through advocacy and socialisation but fragment under political contestation, power asymmetries and institutional shifts that erode their legitimacy.

Critical junctures are also of importance. Shocks such as the end of the Cold War and the 2008-2009 financial crisis opened windows for norm change (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). The Trump administration represents such a juncture: it delegitimises existing meta-norms (e.g., multilateralism), promotes antipreneurship and signals a broader realignment in global order. As we will discuss in the next section, unlike previous US deviations from multilateralism, the Trump administration enshrines disruption as it's governing logic. In terms of political and institutional mechanisms, we next examine three domains that shape how development cooperation norms emerge, persist, are contested or break down. Table 1 shows three intersecting domains are (i) policy actors and networks, (ii) institutions and context and (iii) policy narratives and evidence.[4] The current period is marked by heightened contestation across all three in development cooperation. Within the domain of policy actors and networks, norm dynamics are influenced by the presence of norm entrepreneurs and antipreneurs, the formation of coalitions or epistemic communities. Actors use agenda-setting and venue shifts to promote or resist particular norms. For instance, the OECD-DAC has historically acted as a norm entrepreneur, while the Trump administration functions as a norm antipreneur. The second domain, policy context and institutions, refers to the formal and informal rules and structures that shape normative trajectories through mechanisms such as institutional layering, conversion, drift and displacement. Examples include the influence of DAC peer review processes and critical junctures like COVID-19, which can accelerate institutional change. Finally, policy narratives and evidence encompass the discursive and epistemic dimensions of norm change, including how problems are defined, framed and supported by claims to knowledge. This includes competing narratives such as "aid effectiveness" versus "America First", as well as the mobilisation of evidence on aid impacts to support or challenge prevailing norms. The interaction of these three domains determines how development cooperation norms emerge and are contested.

4 There is resonance here with Gladwell (2000, 2024) in the sense of (i) the "Law of the Few"; (ii) the "Power of Context" and (iii) the "Stickiness Factor", respectively.

Table 1: Political processes of policy norm contestation in development cooperation

Domain	Elements	Mechanisms	Examples
Policy actors and networks	– Norm entrepreneurs – Norm antipreneurs – Coalitions and alliances – Epistemic communities – Power differentials	– Strategic framing – Coalition building – Leverage politics – Agenda setting	– OECD-DAC as norm entrepreneur – The Trump administration as norm antipreneur – G77 promoting South-South cooperation norms
Policy context and institutions	– Formal organisations – Rules and procedures – Historical legacies – Geopolitical shifts	– Institutional layering – Conversion – Drift – Displacement – Critical junctures	– DAC peer review mechanisms – World Bank safeguard policies – COVID-19 as juncture
Policy narratives and evidence	– Problem definitions – Causal stories – Normative frames – Knowledge claims	– Problem construction – Discursive framing – Narrative contestation – Evidence mobilisation	– “Development cooperation effectiveness” narrative – “America First” counter-narrative evidence on development cooperation impact

Source: Authors

Recent scholarship suggests that development cooperation norms are fragmenting rather than converging (Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021). They are fragmenting across institutional, discursive and geopolitical dimensions. The resulting landscape is one of polycentric normativity: overlapping, contested and often incompatible normative orders are shaped by differentiated power, interests and histories. Norm fragmentation is then not the absence of norms but the presence of contested pluralism. The next sections of the paper apply this theoretical discussion in more depth to the empirical case study of the Trump administration.

3 The Trump 2.0 tipping point: normative disruption and development cooperation

3.1 The context of global (dis)order

In order to analyse the contestation of policy norms under the Trump administration it is first useful to set the context as one of "global (dis)order". The current context for international political economy has been characterised as one of "global (dis)order" or a "global disorder of governance" (Zürn, 2018) or a "multiplex world order" (Acharya, 2025). The concept of global dis(order) captures the coexistence of order and disorder in contemporary international relations, marked by the fragmentation of global governance and the erosion of the post-Cold War liberal "rules-based" order. A multipolar world is emerging, with competing visions of governance and increasing normative contestation (see also Bremmer, 2012, 2014; Hurrell, 2006; Weiss & Wilkinson, 2019).

What is new precisely? Power shifts have long shaped international relations, but the current pace of change has not been seen since right after World War II. The Trump administration has intensified challenges to norms, institutions and forums. While norm violations are not new, many states still seek to justify their actions within existing frameworks. China and Russia, for instance, reinterpret "multilateralism" and "democracy" to align with their own worldviews. The US had traditionally upheld liberal norms and market-oriented order at least in principle. The Trump administration, however, explicitly rejects this notion. Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, for example, have been dismissed as "soft global governance" threatening US sovereignty (US Mission to the United Nations, 2025). The key characteristics of global (dis)order can be summarised by a set of five characteristics. First, order and disorder coexist: pockets of cooperation persist even as trade, migration and security fragment (Ishmael et al., 2025; Zürn, 2018). For example, at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development in Sevilla in 2025, participating countries reached a consensus; the US government, however, did not take part in this agreement. Second, there are competing visions of order: liberal internationalism, authoritarian statism, multipolarity and non-Western models (Acharya, 2025). Third, there is an erosion of multilateralism: norms are under strain both internally (e.g., US retrenchment) and externally (e.g., assertive rising powers) (Weiss, 2016). Fourth, there are norm violations by major powers: UN principles like territorial integrity are increasingly ignored or questioned (e.g., US threats towards Canada and Greenland) (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019, 2020). And fifth, that there is polycentric governance: regional and informal groupings (e.g., G20, BRICS+) are gaining prominence and bypassing formal institutions.

We use "global (dis)order" to describe a context in which the foundations of international order are being reordered. Within this context, we discuss the evolution of development cooperation and the Trump administration's bid to shift the global order by recasting development cooperation norms. Development cooperation is deeply entangled with the making and remaking of international order. It constitutes a form of global governance that is as normative as it is financial and within which donor-recipient relations mediate competing visions of development, legitimacy and power.

3.2 Normative disruption in development cooperation and the New Washington Dissensus

Development cooperation is more than material redistribution. It constructs and reshapes global norms and political orders (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Eyben, 2010; Mawdsley et al., 2014). The concept operates as a normative tool of global governance, shaping how development, legitimacy and power are understood and negotiated. Historically, US development cooperation has played a leading role in shaping global order. During the Cold War, it served as an instrument of containment, embedding capitalist models and securing alliances (Engerman, 2003; Latham, 2011). US development cooperation projected Washington's influence in the Global South. After 2000, development cooperation policy partially shifted toward global public goods and multilateral norms, particularly under the Obama and Biden administrations, though strategic interests remained central (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014).

Conceptually, development cooperation can be understood through three overlapping lenses: as soft power (Nye, 2004), as a legitimacy device (Sending, 2015) and as a strategic ordering mechanism (Gill, 1995; Li, 2007). The soft power lens frames development cooperation as a means of shaping preferences through attraction rather than coercion. Development cooperation under this logic enhances a donor's international standing, builds goodwill and diffuses values such as democracy and sustainability. The second perspective treats development cooperation as a legitimacy device. This means donors and recipients participate in a performative architecture together that signals normative alignment and technocratic modernity (Sending, 2015). Here, development cooperation helps sustain reputational credibility in global arenas, irrespective of domestic outcomes. The third and most relevant to the Trump administration frames development cooperation as a strategic ordering mechanism through norm-setting and structural dependence. This perspective draws on Gramscian notions of hegemony and Foucauldian governmentality to foreground development cooperation's role in structuring the rules and norms of global governance (Gill, 1995; Li, 2007).

Development cooperation in this framing is a means of embedding institutional logics, economic models and governance templates that favour the donor's preferences. Rather than relying solely on persuasion (i.e., soft power), it works through structural dependence to push new norms and their diffusion. Trump's second presidency marks a shift within this from hegemonic consent-building to transactional coercion (Haug et al., 2025). Under the Trump administration, development cooperation is no longer a vehicle for universal norms but an ideologically policed instrument of national interest. The Trump administration set out an instrumental and exclusionary logic for development cooperation that prioritises national objectives. This stance uses development cooperation as a lever of global influence and further seeks to weaken multilateral norms. Where Cold War development cooperation emphasised alliances and capitalism, and post-Cold War development cooperation focussed on millennium development goals (MDGs) and global public goods, the Trump administration shifts the paradigm from consent-based hegemony to transactional coercion. The Trump administration's policies exemplify norm antipreneurship: active dismantling, displacement and conversion of existing norms (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025).

The ideological architecture of the Trump administration's development policy is explicit, not latent. It appears in the 2025 questionnaire sent to ODA recipients during the aid review, in reporting by Yourish et al. (2025), and in the 2026 budget requests and rescissions, which together articulate five principles we term the "New Washington Dissensus" (NWD) or an exemplar of a "Nationalist Conditionality Regime" (see Table 2) (Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). The NWD's first principle reframes development cooperation as a tool to weaken, rather than strengthen, global cooperation. US ODA recipients are asked to confirm that their programmes do not rely on international organisations such as the United Nations. This reflects a broader effort to delegitimise multilateralism and to erode the normative authority of institutions perceived as constraining US

sovereignty. In effect, development cooperation is repurposed to disrupt rather than support rules-based international governance and to weaken norms around multilateralism as a global public good (Haug et al., 2025; Mawdsley, 2019).

The second principle of the NWD is to place ideological vetting at the core of development cooperation. Recipients of ODA must certify that they do not engage with “communist, socialist or totalitarian parties” or express “anti-American beliefs”. Certification functions as political screening; in effect, flows depend on ideological loyalty, not effectiveness or need. The Trump administration extends the domestic culture war into development cooperation, targeting China, left-aligned movements and non-aligned actors.

The third principle of the NWD is the instrumentalisation of development cooperation for donor countries’ domestic migration control. Projects are assessed on their role in deterring irregular migration and enhancing border security. Traditional aims, such as reducing poverty, advancing rights and transforming economies, have given way to domestic political objectives and restrictive conditionality; in practice, governments use development cooperation to extend immigration enforcement.

The fourth principle of the NWD is that development cooperation systematically excludes climate action and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. ODA recipients should disavow environmental justice and inclusion agendas. This marks a deliberate rollback of prior commitments and aligns with domestic opposition to “woke” policies. Large areas of socially transformative work are disqualified from US support.

Finally, the fifth principle of the NWD is that development cooperation is explicitly transactional. development cooperation must show economic benefits for the US either via cost-sharing or gains to US industries and workers. The survey demands evidence of return on investment, aligning development cooperation with trade and industrial strategy. Foreign development cooperation becomes an export and job-creation tool. The erasure of humanitarian or justice-based vocabulary reflects a broader shift toward instrumental and security-driven justifications.

The NWD marks a deliberate rupture with multilateralist norms. It entails defunding global institutions, ideological vetting of recipients and rejection of climate and equity agendas. The SDGs, which were once a unifying framework, are explicitly denounced (US Mission to the United Nations, 2025). While this may not resemble traditional development cooperation, it now defines US engagement in the area of development cooperation. When actors see Agenda 2030 and the SDGs as threats to sovereignty, the issue is not credibility but competing worldviews. The Trump administration’s development cooperation thus reflects a strategy of what has been termed “norm antipreneurship” (Bloomfield & Scott, 2018), rejecting key tenets of what has been an implicit consensus. Institutionally, this means defunding the United Nations Population Fund, withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and cutting contributions to the World Health Organization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, as well as the World Food Programme, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Children’s Fund. These were not just budgetary moves, but discursive rejections of multilateralism and “anti-American” globalism. The Trump administration has promoted a transactional vision of development cooperation, replacing solidarity-based frameworks with ideological conditionality. The reinstated “Mexico City Policy” (or “Global Gag Rule”) blocks funding to foreign NGOs involved in abortion services. This exported domestic culture wars via development cooperation, contesting gender and health norms and constructing a conservative normative order (Walt, 2025). Executive orders under the Trump administration reshaped policy instruments on migration, trade and religion (see also Haug et al., 2025). Several orders redirected or conditioned development cooperation through these domains.

Table 2: The New Washington Dissensus: five principles of the Trump administration's nationalist conditionality regime

Principle	Questionnaire sent to ODA recipients	Disappearing words in federal documents	Budget FY 2026 requests
Dismantling global governance – anti-UN, anti-SDGs	Does this project reinforce US sovereignty by limiting reliance on international organisations or global governance structures (e.g., UN, World Health Organization)?	Removal of SDG-related terms (e.g., climate crisis, equity, person-centred care); DEI terminology (e.g., inclusion, under-represented)	Major cuts or elimination of contributions to multilateral institutions (UN, Global Environment Facility, World Health Organization) Global health programs cut by 62%: USD 10bn/year to USD 3.8bn/year
Ideological policing – loyalty tests against "anti-Americanism"	Can you confirm that your organisation does not work with entities … [that] espouse anti-American beliefs? Does your organisation have a clear policy prohibiting any collaboration, funding or support for entities that advocate or implement policies contrary to US government interests, national security and sovereignty?	Elimination of activism and social justice terms (e.g., advocacy, feminism, intersectionality, anti-racism)	Elimination of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) accused of supporting anti-Trump or leftist organisations Defunding of educational exchanges with perceived ideological bias
Border securitisation – aid and migration deterrent	Does this project directly contribute to limiting illegal immigration or strengthening US border security? To what extent does this project strengthen partner and ally security assistance by contributing to securing US borders, protecting American sovereignty and upholding national security? What impact does this project have on preventing illegal immigration to the US?	Removal of migration and humanitarian terms (e.g., immigrants, marginalised, trauma, vulnerable populations)	Border security-oriented and migration-deterrence programmes prioritised Cuts to migration-related assistance Humanitarian funding tied to domestic enforcement priorities Economic support and development assistance zeroed out (from approx. USD 8bn in FY 2025)

Principle	Questionnaire sent to ODA recipients	Disappearing words in federal documents	Budget FY 2026 requests
Erasure of climate and DEI – disqualification of "woke" projects	Can you confirm that this project contains no DEI elements? Can you confirm this is not a climate or "environ-mental justice" project or include such elements? Does this project take appropriate measures to protect women and to defend against gender ideology as defined in …Executive Order? Is your organisation compliant with the latest Mexico City Policy?	Elimination of DEI, gender identity and environmental terms (e.g., trans, climate science, diversity, equity)	Funding eliminated for Global Environment Facility, climate investment funds and DEI-related programmes No funding of family planning
Transactional nationalism – aid as return on investment for US economy	Does this project create measurable benefits for US domestic industries, workforce or economic sectors? What is the specific financial return of this project, including measurable dividends, cost benefit analysis and economic impact? What impact does this project have in increasing American influence, trust and reputation within foreign governments? And among foreign publics?	Removal of humanitarian/altruistic justification for aid; shift toward instrumental language	Creation of the America First Opportunity Fund (USD 2.9bn)

Sources: Sources: Based on USAID (2025) and Yourish et al. (2025) (see also Kine, 2025)

Together, the principles reflect a coherent ideological departure from the liberal norms that have underpinned development cooperation for decades. They redefine the purpose, beneficiaries and conditions of development cooperation in ways that elevate nationalism over multilateralism, compliance over collaboration and short-term political gain over long-term development partnership. The Trump administration's approach is not simply a disruption. It represents a deliberate construction of an alternative logic. Basic assumptions about international politics are not shared, as values play no role and underlying concepts like "soft power" are not taken into consideration (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025). And it is not only evident in the US as discussed in the next section. It constitutes an emergent and ideologically coherent mode of (re)ordering. Through this lens, development cooperation is no longer framed as a broadly shared public good. It functions instead as an ideologically policed tool to assert national dominance. It is a strategic ordering mechanism constituting a novel and informal ordering project, one that departs from consent-based hegemony and embraces transactional nationalism. Conditionality has long been a central feature of development cooperation, historically used by donors to influence recipient

countries' policies and governance frameworks. The Trump administration's approach, however, marks a departure from previous iterations of conditionality in both form and intent. Understanding this departure requires situating it within a longer genealogy of conditionality regimes.

This nationalist conditionality regime breaks with the Washington Consensus era, when donors tied development cooperation to neoliberal reforms. Second-generation conditionality (2000s) focussed on governance, democracy and rights. The Trump administration's model breaks from both, replacing economic or liberal benchmarks with ideological and national-interest conditions. This reflects a broader strategy of informal empire or power without rules where coercive bilateralism replaces multilateral engagement. The Trump administration uses disorder instrumentally: hollowing institutions, delegitimising norms and demanding compliance. It fragments global cooperation by asserting dominance through disruption. Development cooperation, under this logic, becomes a tool for asserting unilateral dominance rather than fostering shared (development) goals. The Trump administration's approach eschews formal rulemaking or institutional innovation in favour of bilateral pressure, bureaucratic obstruction and discursive delegitimisation. This is our definition of a "nationalist conditionality regime". The strategy mirrors what Flockhart (2016) has described as "order through disorder" or the deliberate weakening of multilateral norms and institutions as a means to recalibrate international order around narrower, nationalist principles.

This strategy resonates with broader theoretical perspectives on how power operates in a fragmented world order. It aligns with the concept of informal empire, whereby hegemonic states exert influence via transactional tools such as development cooperation. In this view, the US abandons universalism not as retreat but as a recalibration of influence under conditions of declining legitimacy (Parmar, 2018). Second, the strategy mirrors the logic of decoupling in global economic governance and fragmentation as a means of control. Just as global production networks are being strategically reoriented toward security goals, US development cooperation is reframed as a foreign policy instrument. The aim is to privilege allies, punish adversaries and channel resources toward actors whose behaviour signals ideological allegiance and geopolitical utility (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Third, the nationalist conditionality regime may also be understood as part of a broader process of authoritarian learning, wherein states experiment with new instruments of control, replicate effective tactics and adapt to shifting global constraints. The Trump administration's approach offers a template for illiberal or populist regimes to assert external influence while undermining liberal institutional constraints, suggesting a form of norm diffusion through disruption (Kahler, 2018). Taken together, "order through disorder" is not a paradox but a method: disorder is instrumentalised to erode rival norms and entrench an emergent, exclusionary order in the development domain.

Perhaps the most evident risk of the nationalist conditionality regime is not only its immediate operational impact (i.e., ODA cuts), but its potential for normative contagion. The Trump administration's development cooperation model provides a mode that may be attractive to other donors seeking to consolidate domestic support, discipline international partners or exit from multilateral entanglements. The logic of transactionalism or aid for loyalty and aid for economic returns may appeal to other governments. At the same time, recipient countries may strategically realign. If US assistance becomes too unreliable or coercive, states may pivot toward alternative sources of finance, particularly from China, the EU, or regional South-South mechanisms. China's emphasis on infrastructure, credit lines and non-conditionality offers a form of stability, even if it generates debt concerns. The EU may serve as a normative counterweight by recommitting to inclusive development and multilateral channels, albeit strategically. What is at stake is not simply the future of US development cooperation, but the integrity of the broader development cooperation regime and the collapse of a positive incentive system. The erosion of inclusive, rules-based principles undermines the multilateral fabric that has, however imperfectly, coordinated

collective responses to global challenges. In their place, an ad hoc and politically instrumental logic of development cooperation threatens to fragment the development landscape into competing spheres of influence.

3.3 Norm contagion, emulation and global reverberations

Although these developments originated in US development cooperation, their influence extends beyond US policy. The Trump administration has catalysed a broader normative recalibration to differing extents among a range of donors, multilateral institutions and development actors.

Among a number of traditional donors, elements of the Trump administration's logic can be found. For example, the United Kingdom merged the Department for International Development into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in 2020. The merger reoriented development policy toward foreign-policy objectives, and the change has not been reversed by the government elected in 2024. Further, the UK government will reduce ODA from 0.5 per cent to 0.3 per cent of gross national income by 2027 (or 0.17 per cent excluding in-donor refugee cost), citing the need to increase UK defence spending.

The previous UK government's *Integrated Review* (Cabinet Office, 2021) framed aid in terms of national interest, development finance for trade and security priorities, including the externalisation of migration control to partner countries. This shift aligns with the transactional and securitised development paradigm evident in the Trump administration. Although the government has changed, this framing is still evident. Further, although in principle climate change is a core theme shaping priorities, the Foreign Secretary has made reference to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office creating UK jobs and UK growth (FCDO, 2024).

Similarly, the European Union's external action strategy increasingly ties aid to migration deterrence, especially through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (European Commission, 2021). This represents a normative hybrid: blending development objectives with security, surveillance and control agendas. While rhetorically distinct from the Trump administration's "America First", the underlying normative logic is similar in the sense of instrumentalising development for domestic priorities.

Multilateral institutions, though not originators of such shifts, have also adapted to changing normative terrain. To maintain donor support, organisations like the World Bank have incrementally adjusted their framing and discourse (not least because the US appoints the World Bank president by historical precedence). These changes were not driven solely by the second Trump administration. Yet they contributed to a shift toward transactional goals and away from redistribution or rights-based agendas.

In this context, non-Western actors have been empowered to contest norms over the past two decades. For instance, China's development cooperation, which is organised primarily through bilateral channels and the Belt and Road Initiative, promotes a sovereignty-based, mutual benefit narrative. By challenging the legitimacy of long-standing Western development norms and institutions, the US creates space for alternative approaches to take hold. Recipient countries increasingly engage in "forum shopping", seeking institutional arenas and partners that confer recognition, resources, or status in terms of concessional finance, infrastructure investment, or even symbolic recognition (Zürn, 2018). Southern-led institutions, such as the New Development Bank (NDB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China's South-South Cooperation Fund, have further contributed to this diversification. These institutions promote distinct normative logics such as demand-responsiveness, infrastructure-led growth and state-led development that stand in contrast to the governance and rights-based norms of traditional donors (Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021). The result is not the wholesale displacement of existing norms, but the

emergence of a polycentric and pluralist norm environment in which multiple, and sometimes contradictory, standards coexist.

This fragmentation is further exacerbated by coalitions of norm antipreneurs. Within multilateral settings, alliances between the US, Argentina, Hungary and others have challenged sexual and reproductive health norms, gender language and climate targets. Such coalitions can effectively block consensus, introduce alternative language and demand "sovereignty clauses" in outcome documents. This effectively institutionalises contestation within global governance. Even where consensus is achieved, the resulting texts are diluted.

These changes have had a marked effect on development cooperation. The narratives of "Agenda 2030" or "global solidarity", which were once hegemonic, are now competing with narratives of self-reliance, managed migration and economic returns. Although the development cooperation system has not collapsed, its normative architecture is increasingly polycentric and contested. Norm fragmentation has arisen not only from normative decay but also from the proliferation of institutional alternatives, discursive rearticulations and political realignments. The Trump administration, in this context, is both a cause and a catalyst by actively undermining existing norms and thus opening space for alternative ones. Its legacy may be the broader realignment of development cooperation as a field of geopolitical strategy and domestic political signalling. The implications for norms are thus long-term and may shape the development cooperation well beyond the second Trump presidency though it competes with several other regimes of development cooperation, which we turn to next.

4 Competing normative regimes in global development cooperation

The Trump administration's NWD is a form of a nationalist conditionality regime and is one of a set of competing regimes of development cooperation within the development cooperation system as a whole. To map this landscape, we propose a typology of four contemporary regimes, each reflecting distinct logics. Drawing on recent comparative scholarship (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021; Mawdsley, 2019), we use examples from the US, EU and South-South cooperation. We group the four regimes along two dimensions: how much international coordination they seek and how far they commit to development in the Global South. These generate four ideal types, which are summarised in Table 3. The typology enables an analytical framing of ongoing shifts in the normative architecture of global development cooperation. Each regime exhibits distinct assumptions regarding the purpose of development cooperation, the basis of legitimacy and the appropriate role of norms.

First, the "liberal multilateralism regime" reflects high coordination and high commitment, grounded in shared rules, pooled resources and inclusive governance. It is exemplified by the post-2000 development cooperation effectiveness agenda. In contrast, the "nationalist conditionality regime" represents a fragmented and low-commitment logic, where development cooperation is deployed transactionally and conditioned in alignment with donor interests, often subordinating development goals to domestic political imperatives. The "pluralist development cooperation regime" reflects high commitment but low coordination, often seen in South-South cooperation or differentiated bilateral initiatives that respect national sovereignty while still pursuing developmental goals. The "strategic multilateralism regime" involves coordinated action but low developmental commitment and typically instrumentalised for geopolitical or commercial ends.

We can elucidate each regime further. The "liberal multilateralism regime" represents the continuation of post-2000 normative architectures, including the MDGs, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the broader development cooperation effectiveness agenda. Rooted in a

universalist logic, this regime promotes collective action, peer accountability and development conceived as a global public good. It is institutionalised through bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme and the OECD-DAC. Other fora include the United Nations Economic and Social Council Development Cooperation Forum and the GPEDC. Key normative features include a strong commitment to multilateralism, pooled resources, an emphasis on transparency, evaluation and coherence and rhetorical alignment with principles such as “leave no one behind”. Norm change occurs primarily through layering, whereby new priorities (e.g., digital inclusion, climate finance) are added without displacing existing ones, and drift, whereby principles are retained rhetorically but weakened in practice as political priorities and budgetary allocations shift. An illustrative case is the OECD-DAC peer review system, which formally continues but has seen its influence diminish as donors increasingly bypass multilateral mechanisms in favour of earmarked or bilateral arrangements (Honig & Gulrajani, 2018).

The “nationalist conditionality regime” narrowly reframes development cooperation as an instrument of foreign policy leverage. It is bilateral, purely interest-driven and conditional in nature. The second Trump administration exemplifies its key features: ideological or security-based conditionalities, emphasis on national sovereignty and explicit rejection of multilateralism as inefficient or politicised. Here, norm change or “norm imperialism” manifests through displacement and conversion: older norms are reinterpreted or crowded out as new priorities take hold. Domestic political entrepreneurs and sympathetic think tanks then translate these shifts into operational guidance used by development cooperation agencies to advance domestic ideological agendas. For example, US development policy under Trump (both administrations, the second even more so) has involved defunding multilateral institutions, reinstating the Global Gag Rule and conditioning development cooperation on support of US migration and ideological goals.

The “pluralist development cooperation regime” is driven by emerging powers, such as China, India, Brazil and the entire BRICS+ group, and regional platforms, including the NDB, the AIIB and the India, Brazil, South Africa Dialogue Forum. These actors reject DAC norms, particularly conditionality, and promote alternative values based on sovereignty, mutual benefit and strategic alignment. Norm change occurs through localisation and institutional displacement whereby new organisations are created with their own reporting and evaluation systems. The NDB offers a clear example: it supports climate and infrastructure finance based on performance criteria, rather than DAC-style procedural compliance (Gray & Gills, 2018).

Finally, the “strategic multilateralism regime” reflects a mode of cooperation in which multilateral instruments are retained, but their use is increasingly subordinated to the geopolitical or commercial priorities. Unlike liberal multilateralism, where cooperation is framed as a collective ethical obligation, strategic multilateralism leverages multilateral platforms to serve selective national or regional interests often through earmarked funding, governance influence and donor-dominated agenda-setting. This regime retains formal multilateralism but with weaker normative commitment to shared goals. Institutions like the World Bank remain central but are increasingly shaped by shareholder geopolitics. In this regime, norm change occurs mainly through conversion and drift: universalist commitments remain on paper but lose substance in practice. For example, initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment and the EU’s Global Gateway are framed as alternatives to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Strupczewski, 2021). Their narratives emphasise transparency, debt sustainability and strategic alignment with partners. Strategic multilateralism realigns norms and steers cooperation toward competition, containment and transactional alignment.

Each regime has distinct mechanisms and institutional actors that uphold or contest norms. In liberal multilateralism, norm drift and layering are driven primarily by technical agencies and development ministries. The nationalist conditionality regime is characterised by antipreneurship and displacement, often led by executive branches and foreign policy apparatuses. In the pluralist development cooperation regime, actors localise and differentiate instruments while keeping

modalities flexible; they coordinate and standardise weakly, and finance ministries and regional development banks lead decisions on allocation, instrument choice and implementation.

Strategic multilateralism is shaped by major donor governments working through multilateral institutions to advance selective geopolitical or commercial objectives. Norm change in this regime occurs through conversion and drift, as traditional development norms are repurposed or deprioritised within existing institutional frameworks. Narrative contestation cuts across them: terms like “mutual benefit” or “strategic partnership” compete with universalist SDG discourses. Multilateral norms are not rejected outright but rendered contingent and subordinate to national or geopolitical priorities.

This normative fragmentation may open space for more inclusive and co-developed standards. Whether pluralism of development cooperation approaches leads to renewal or incoherence remains unresolved. The coexistence of competing regimes reduces predictability for recipient countries, who face divergent expectations and reporting obligations. Further, institutional weakening occurs as parallel systems erode the agenda-setting capacity of traditional multilateral frameworks and accountability gaps widen as normative pluralism makes it more difficult to enforce common standards. At the same time the fragmentation contributes to geopolitical polarisation, as development norms become entangled with bloc competition. The decline of DAC norm hegemony may open potential space for more inclusive and negotiated standards. Whether this pluralism will ultimately support a fairer normative order or exacerbate institutional incoherence remains an unresolved question. Table 3 summarises the four development cooperation regimes and their normative orientation, key characteristics and dominant policy narratives.

Table 3: Characteristics of competing normative regimes of development cooperation

Regime type	Normative orientation	Key characteristics	Dominant policy narratives
Liberal multilateralism	Universalism, global public goods, mutual accountability	Pooled funding, peer reviews, SDG alignment, results-based management	“Leave no one behind”; global solidarity
Nationalist conditionality regime	Strategic interest, ideological conditionality, national sovereignty	Development cooperation tied to migration control, trade deals or political alignment	“America First”; “development cooperation as leverage”
Pluralist development cooperation	Mutual benefit, non-interference, horizontal partnerships	Infrastructure and trade focus; no standardised ODA; performance over procedure	“Development through partnership”; “respect for sovereignty”
Strategic multilateralism	Selective multilateralism; geostrategic alignment; instrumental use of global institutions	Earmarked funding; governance influence; securitised and commercial logics within multilateral settings	“Values-based partnerships”; “Secure and open development” UK and EU’s new focus on own interests and maintenance of multilateral approaches

Source: Authors

5 Conclusion

We have argued that global development cooperation has reached a tipping point, driven by the Trump administration's policies and a wider decline in consensus-based multilateralism. In short, the return of Donald Trump to the presidency marks a profound disruption in the normative architecture of development cooperation. But this disruption is not simply a departure or a retreat; it constitutes a deliberate act of normative reordering or "norm imperialism".

The Trump administration is seeking to define the purpose, content and conditions of development cooperation along nationalist lines. It reframes development cooperation as an extension of domestic political priorities and foreign policy leverage, dismantling multilateral norms in favour of coercive bilateralism, ideological loyalty and transactionalism. The implications extend well beyond US foreign development cooperation. What we also term the NWD signals a move away from the liberal multilateral consensus of the post-2000 period and toward a fractured global development landscape. This landscape is shaped by competing normative regimes, each grounded in different assumptions about what development cooperation is for, who it serves and how it should be governed.

The Trump administration is both a symptom and an accelerator of this fragmentation. It exemplifies how disorder can be instrumentalised as a mechanism of global (dis)order-making. In fact, although the Trump administration may be unusual in its bluntness, it is not unique. The diffusion of nationalist and transactional norms whether from the US or other countries poses a systemic test for the area of development cooperation. How development cooperation actors respond in this moment of contestation will shape the trajectory of global order itself. The norms that have historically governed development cooperation, such as the aid effectiveness agenda, multilateral solidarity and SDG-aligned coherence, are no longer merely eroding through drift or institutional fatigue. Instead, they are being actively contested, displaced and reconstituted through new political coalitions, institutional forums and discursive frames.

The implications of these shifts are profound for the governance of development cooperation. First, normative fragmentation undermines the very idea of a shared development agenda. If "ownership" means strategic alignment in one context, and subordination in another and if "results" refer to developmental outcomes in some cases and donor political dividends in others, then policy coordination becomes increasingly difficult. Second, the diffusion of power across rising Southern donors, populist governments and alternative institutions challenges the normative monopoly once held by OECD-DAC donors and the UN system. Governance becomes increasingly negotiated, with shifting alliances and competing standards. Third, as norm contestation intensifies, so too does the political nature of development cooperation. Questions of whose norms prevail, how they are enforced and through which institutions are no longer implicit but openly debated. For the broad field of development cooperation, the challenge is not simply to restore trust or funding levels, but to grapple with the deeper norm divergence emerging within international cooperation. In this context, normative pluralism may lead to either adaptive reinvention or to incoherence and disengagement. Development actors, whether multilateral, bilateral ODA providers or South-South providers, must navigate this contested terrain by articulating and defending the normative assumptions embedded in their own practices.

Further, what is at stake is the future meaning of international cooperation itself. If development cooperation becomes narrowly defined as leverage or loyalty enforcement, the space for inclusive, rights-based and public goods-oriented cooperation contracts. Yet fragmentation may also open room for negotiated alternatives, especially from actors in the Global South and parts of the EU seeking to reaffirm development as a global public endeavour.

This moment calls for a re-theorisation of global development cooperation not as a domain governed by consensus, but as one structured by normative conflict. The paper's typology of

cooperation regimes illustrates this pluralisation. These regimes coexist, interact and compete, each with its own actor configurations, normative logics and institutional forums. Future research should refine and test the typology introduced in this paper. This work would map the cooperation regimes shaping development assistance, identify their dominant norms and follow how these evolve over time. Mixed-methods research, combining discourse analysis, institutional ethnography and donor decision-tracing, could reveal how norms are operationalised differently across regimes. Particular attention is needed to hybrid forms (e.g., EU migration-linked aid or Chinese-financed SDG projects) that blur conventional boundaries. Scholars should develop typologies of norm actors in development cooperation: entrepreneurs, antipreneurs, norm carriers, transnational coalitions and technocratic intermediaries. This includes investigating how these actors construct, resist, or reinterpret norms across sites of cooperation. For example, what role do conservative think tanks, feminist alliances or religious groups play in norm construction or rollback?

A deeper focus is also needed on institutional mechanisms, both formal and informal, through which norm contestation occurs. These include agenda-setting practices (e.g., who defines key concepts in global reports), procedural blockages (e.g., “bracketing” of language in negotiations), funding decisions (e.g., conditionalities and earmarking) and alternative institutional arrangements (e.g., G20, NDB or bilateral compacts). Comparative studies could identify how different forums (OECD-DAC vs. GPEDC vs. BRICS) codify and legitimise competing norms. Given the central role of metrics in shaping development priorities, future research should examine how indicators, benchmarks and evaluation frameworks reflect and reinforce particular norms. For instance, how do “value for money” or “return on investment” metrics privilege certain cooperation models? How do SDG indicators align, or conflict, with national policy narratives or geopolitical strategies?

While much norm theory has focussed on Northern actors, future research must centre the role of the global South in norm entrepreneurship and institutional innovation. This includes studying how actors like the New Development Bank, African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the Emerging Donors Forum frame development priorities, articulate values and operationalise norms. Are South-South norms converging into a coherent framework, or do they represent a strategic bricolage adapted to context? Finally, micro-level studies are needed to see how norms are translated into practice. Ethnographies of negotiations, project implementation and multilateral diplomacy could reveal how global norms are reinterpreted, resisted or transformed in everyday interactions. Such work would ground macro-level analysis in the realities of implementation, revealing the frictions that shape norm trajectories.

Development cooperation is no longer framed by stable rules and shared goals. Instead, a tipping point has been reached, and an era of intensified normative conflict is emerging across institutions, actor networks and discursive spaces. The Trump administration is both a symptom and a catalyst of this reordering: its policies alter aid governance, erode liberal multilateralism and advance a nationalist conditionality regime. The future shape and form of development cooperation is on the table.

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