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Donors in a Post-Aid World Briefing Series

North Stars for Northern Donors in a Post-Aid World

Moving from dialogue to decisions

Nilima Gulrajani

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Key Messages

The Donors in a Post-Aid World (dPAW) dialogues series aimed to reimagine and co-create a vision for Northern donorship for the 21st century. This brief presents the boldest policy recommendations inspired by the dialogues.

Eight propositions (the 'North Stars') are presented to be undertaken by donors over the next decade. They include the need to construct a new narrative around solidarity as a shared interest, as well as negotiating an 'offramp' from official development assistance (ODA) in favour of better-purposed financial instruments.

Additional propositions include an end to bilateral Northern donorship, widening the development cooperation toolbox and of putting country leadership at the heart of development. It is also crucial to ground multilateral reform in a common vision, allowing donors to stop defaulting to bilateral financing channels.

Donors need to stop looking for public support for development cooperation, focusing instead on building that support. Finally, and most crucially, the brief outlines the importance of donors committing to governance reform of the development cooperation system.

ODI Global, 4 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA, United Kingdom

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About the author

Nilima Gulrajani is a Principal Research Fellow and Founder of the Donors in a Post-Aid World Project at ODI Global.

Abbreviations and acronyms

DAC	Development Assistance Committee (of the OECD)
dPAW	Donors in a Post-Aid World
EU	European Union
G7	Group of Seven (nations)
G20	Group of Twenty (nations)
GNI	Gross National Income
GPGs	global public goods
NGOs	non-governmental organisations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDS	United Nations Development System

Introduction

Between October 2024 and May 2026, ODI Global convened a series of five dialogues to reimagine and co-create a new vision for Northern donors in the 21st century. Over 18 months, the Donors in a Post-Aid World (dPAW) dialogue series brought together more than 10 bilateral Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members, with a rotating group of thinkers, activists and government officials from the Global North and South, to discuss and debate both what that vision should look like and how it might be operationalised.[1] The objective was to provide a space for frank discussion and creative thinking on the role of Northern donors at a time when many are asking uncomfortable questions about the purpose and effectiveness of foreign aid, as well as the identity of a 'donor'.[2]

Our starting assumption for the dialogue series was Northern donors are on the cusp of a 'post-aid' world. 'Post aid' is not a reference to the end of aid (the series was launched before American aid cuts threw the sector into a tailspin), but an allusion to the broken social contract between Northern governments, their taxpayers and recipients on the value of publicly funded aid and its associated institutional complex. What this reorientation should look like in the immediate-, medium- and long-term, and how it should be carried forward, was the remit for the series. In our summary notes from the dialogues (all can be found at this link), we identified both technical reform proposals for how donors should adapt to new realities, as well as radical ideas for a much more fundamental transformation.

As the dPAW series concludes, we have drafted a policy brief that responds to requests from participants for our main takeaways from the five events we hosted over the last 18-months. We identify the more ambitious propositions inspired by the dialogues on how Northern donors might move forward as they look to their long-term future. To be clear, we do *not* believe a post-aid world marks the end of development cooperation. Rather, there is an opportunity for thinking differently about *why, how* and *over what* we cooperate in development.

We present these ideas as 'North Stars' for Northern donors to draw attention to the bold transformations needed by donor governments and the post-war development ecosystem they were responsible for designing (Figure 1). These ideas are inspired by the debates and discussions that emerged throughout this ODI Global-convened series, drawing on both formal and informal conversations that occurred across all our events. While these propositions reflect recurring themes and were reviewed extensively by participants in our concluding dialogue in May 2026, they do not necessarily represent full participant consensus. Nor does their order of presentation

1 'Global South' is a term that we use interchangeably with the 'Global Majority' to designate countries traditionally on the receiving end of donor interventions.
2 The choice of the term 'donor' was a deliberate provocation, as well as a way to clearly identify our target audience as the wealthy ODA-providing governments that are members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

reflect an intended sequence of implementation, nor their relative importance. Nevertheless, all are united by a general sense that these ideas are achievable over the next 10 years and require foundations to be laid in the near term.

In pointing to these 'North Stars', we are not encouraging nostalgia for a past, 'peak aid' era. Nor are we seeking to downplay current geopolitical and security challenges, the costs of transition, nor the need for systemic and structural change. These eight propositions are informed by current challenges facing the Northern donor audiences we targeted in the series, but they are not intended to be constrained or defined by present realities. They aim to test the horizons of our imagination on what a transformed global development system – one that is more resilient to headwinds – might look like, including how Northern donors can adapt to a changing geography of power and poverty without losing attachment to core values and interests.

Figure 1 North Stars for Northern Donors: Propositions for a New Direction

North Stars for Northern Donors: Propositions for a New Direction

1 **Construct** a new narrative around solidarity as a shared interest.

2 **Build** an offramp from ODA in favour of new and better purposed financial instruments.

3 **End** Northern donorship.

4 **Widen** the development cooperation toolbox.

5 **Put** country leadership at the heart of the development endeavour.

6 **Ground** multilateral reform for development in a shared vision, then stop defaulting to bilateral financing channels.

7 **Stop** looking for public support for development; build it.

8 **Commit** to governance reform of the development cooperation system.

1 Solidarity as a shared interest

> ***Construct a new narrative around solidarity as a shared interest.***
> *Maintain a commitment to values in a transactional world, acknowledging that trade-offs may be necessary.*

The purpose of development has changed with evolving trends and become an 'all-purpose glue' that unites 'the building of airports just as much as the drilling of waterholes' (Sachs, 2020). However, one constant anchor for the sector over the last 55 years has revolved around the provision of official development assistance (ODA).

Yet, with growing fiscal pressures in wealthy countries and an expansive list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ODA has been cut and taken on a 'scatter-gun' quality to satisfy multiple objectives and stakeholders (Gulrajani and Aly, 2024). New priorities like tackling the humanitarian fallout from the Ukraine war, hosting refugees domestically, and meeting climate finance spending targets have been added to the already long list of objectives attached to ODA. Meanwhile, the definition of what can be counted as ODA has also changed, now including lending to the private sector and guarantees. While these are all legitimate allocations within current rules, they are not necessarily in keeping with the integrity of ODA measurement as a proxy for donor effort towards the pursuit of the 'economic development and welfare of low- and middle-income countries' (OECD, n.d.).

The global development endeavour has also inscribed itself in a wide-ranging network of institutions and actors over this time, including international financial institutions and the United Nations system, bilateral donors, Southern providers, consulting companies, corporations and corporate philanthropy, social impact investors, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Against the backdrop of emerging cross-border challenges, this ecosystem has moved development away from a narrow focus on improving the human condition to ensuring collective existential survival: a recognition of the challenges posed by pandemics, a warming climate, conflict and artificial intelligence (Sachs, 1992). Alongside, categories of 'developed' donor and 'developing' recipient no longer match the economic size and political influence of emerging market economies, nor align well to the pockets of structural deprivation and relative inequality in the Global North.

As ecosystem complexity grows and aid cuts bite, a clear rationale for engagement in development, particularly for spending scarce concessional resources like ODA, is needed to triage across a growing list of competing priorities and multistakeholder interests.

Admittedly, that higher-level purpose cannot be grounded in altruism alone. It has long been understood that DAC donors provide ODA for reasons that combine national self-interest and altruistic motivations, with the relative mix of each shifting across time and place (Gulrajani and Calleja, 2019). No country would provide aid if it came at the expense of its own national interest (Packenham, 1973).

Today, geopolitical realities have made a *quid pro quo* framing of development cooperation both acceptable and seemingly necessary today on grounds of economic sovereignty and security, with recent empirical work specifying the domains and accrued benefits development engagement brings to both a provider and recipient (Heidland et al., 2025).[3] Current fiscal pressures mean there is more emphasis than ever on leveraging public ODA to grow private sector inflows and economic opportunities for domestic trade and industry, even if evidence for these benefits remains weak (Kenny 2026). Moreover, growing financial inputs in and of itself is not a compelling rationale for development engagement.

On the other hand, wealthy countries have a range of international obligations to ensure universal basic standards of living as a foundation of dignity and human rights, especially when there are scarce alternatives for delivering these (Collier, 2016). These are values that need protecting and upholding in today's inward-looking environment. We know that aid's ability to optimise for effectiveness deteriorates if not primarily aimed at promoting development (that is, where national domestic advantages become the dominant objective of provision) (Dreher, 2025; Collier, 2016). Delivering well, especially when tackling cross-border global challenges, can indirectly serve national interests (Bermeo, 2018).

If interest-based development diplomacy is both a new and an old feature of the aid landscape, some argue greater transparency of its transactional benefits could support more mature and equitable relationships between providers and recipients. Yet, transactional approaches to development cooperation miss how values can become a powerful source of national influence and mutual benefits (Chen et al., 2023). In a globally connected world, shared benefits are some of the more persuasive arguments in favour of cooperation, with soft moral arguments on grounds of fairness, justice and shared humanity landing well among the public (Oh, n.d.; The Rockefeller Foundation, 2025b; Agence Française de Développement, 2026).

A new development narrative can thus viably lean into transnational solidarity to advance shared interests, rather than seeking to extract individual benefits to each transacting party. Solidarity is a political tradition that recognises the bonds that bind people everywhere and sees collective implication and responsibility for a system that produces inequality (Hunt-Hendrix and Taylor, 2024). It rejects dependency and involves fostering connections by activating 'strengths, assets and resources within communities' that can enable structural transformation, enlarge civic space and boost rights-based agendas (NEAR, 2026). It is distinct from charity, drawing more from ideas

3 These benefits include geopolitical leverage in multilateral institutions, greater security and stability from global challenges like pandemics and conflict, investment opportunities, and preferred access to natural resources.

like justice and fairness. At the level of state interactions, solidarity represents a coming together under inclusive governance systems to tackle shared goals as partners, rather than as unequal providers and recipients of external support (Glennie, 2025a).

A range of policies and governance decisions become clearer if solidarity as a shared interest is development cooperation's starting point. It can sharpen aid into a tool that cuts the Global South loose from the bottom of economic value chains. It can push for policy efforts beyond aid that seek more equitable global decision-making. Fostering transnational connections can make development cooperation more understandable and tangible to citizens everywhere, and into a shared, cross-border political project. This can potentially boost public support for development and local demand for accountability from leaders. Recent polling data also suggests that there is increasing public demand for actions aligned to transnational solidaristic values (Global Nation, 2026).

Nevertheless, solidarity's association with values like equity and justice that are tied to centre-left politics means its role as an instrument for advancing shared interests is often downplayed or negatively perceived. For some, there is a perception that solidarity should be a political commitment even in the absence of any accrued benefits. Nevertheless, the possibility of indirect, secondary and shared benefits should not take away from solidarity's power as an anchor narrative for development. For example, solidarity can be a catalyst for growing trust, strengthening diplomatic relationships, and more risk-taking. These features can advance the formation of new coalitions, improve ways of working and generate advantages in strategic areas like trade and security, precisely the things we need to make development cooperation robust in today's transactional moment.

Framing transnational solidarity as a strategic, shared benefit can help us rethink the purpose of development in a way that preserves a commitment to longstanding values that development cooperation claims to uphold. It is thus in keeping with what might be called a Stubb-Carney paradigm of 'values-based realism', which many middle-powers now claim to espouse (Stubb, 2025; Carney, 2026). To the extent that values and self-regarding interests are not always positive sum, negotiated trade-offs are inevitable.[4] These trade-offs will need to be discussed transparently in mature diplomatic exchange, taking care to avoid core values being routinely sacrificed on the grounds of political pragmatism or economic advantage.

4 To illustrate, solidarity with the South expressed as improved domestic market access or technology transfer will impose costs on certain industries and workers in well-developed markets in the North, resulting a clash between solidaristic values and commercial interests.

2 An offramp from ODA

> ***Construct an offramp from ODA in favour of new and better-purposed financial instruments.*** *Protect ODA in the short run but transcend it in the long run with improved financing mechanisms.*

Official development assistance (ODA) has anchored the aid industry for six decades, conceptually built on a ledger of countries separated by their capacity to invest and receive. Moving beyond this division requires a negotiated political settlement with the Global South to construct an offramp for this 'sacred cow' of the postwar development system via the creation of an improved financing framework.

Over the last decade, a broken social and political contract over the provision of foreign assistance has taken us from 'peak aid' to 'post-aid' (Gulrajani, 2026). In 2025, ODA stood at $174.3 billion, representing a 26% fall in real terms from its peak in 2023 and the largest annual contraction on record, much beyond the projected worst-case scenario (OECD, 2026c). These gaps are unlikely to be filled by others; in 2026, philanthropy stood at roughly 10% of total ODA, while the efforts of non-OECD donors reporting to the DAC constituted less than 2% (International Monetary Fund, 2026; OECD, 2026a).[5] Meanwhile, the SDG financing gap has grown to $4 trillion per annum (United Nations, 2026).

In today's low funding and high-needs environment, ODA needs protection, prioritisation and targeted allocation towards countries that are extremely poor, in severe debt distress, or in situations of conflict or fragility (Aly et al., 2025a). And yet, rather than aiming to stem the sudden and stark impact of US budget cuts in 2025 on those most vulnerable, other Group of Seven (G7) nations, like the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and Japan, have simply followed America's lead. This suggests a more structural cause for concern about long-term support for ODA that needs addressing.

In 2026, the average ODA/Gross National Income (GNI) ratio among DAC members is projected to fall to 0.23% from 0.37% in 2023 (the latter number a record high for the ODA/GNI ratio). There is little reason to believe aid spending will shift from its current downward spiral given past trajectories and current donor policy aspirations. When the 0.7% target was set at the United Nations (UN) in 1969, governments agreed that they would exert 'efforts' to meet it by '1975 or shortly thereafter, but in no case later than 1980'. Yet only four countries currently attain the target (Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and Denmark) and, prior to 2005, no country had ever even promised to attain it (Clemens and Moss, 2005).

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5 Estimates of Chinese ODA suggest it is a donor comparable in size to Norway in terms of aid provided (Davies, 2025).

The 0.7% target is the foundation for a strongly institutionalised international norm that governments of rich countries provide ODA to improve conditions in poor countries. ODA is viewed by many as both a historical obligation, ecological debt and colonial reparation from the Global North to the Global South. Inter-governmental negotiations for development default to the 0.7% ODA target to ensure donors are held accountable for these responsibilities. Abandoning ODA would carry diplomatic repercussions, likely undermining efforts by the Global North to court emerging markets in the Group of 77 (G77).

However, on both the demand and supply sides of the aid relation, there are arguments for moving away from an ODA target. The 0.7% ODA/GNI target never accurately captured investment needs, operating largely as a lobbying and advocacy tool (ibid.). It has also posed challenges for successful public expenditure management, which has been compared to 'landing a helicopter on a handkerchief' (Gnanendran, 2018; Dissinayake, 2021).

In addition, influential Global South voices are increasingly vocal about the distorted domestic political accountability and external dependency that ODA creates (Adeyi and Nonvignon, 2024; Opalo, 2026). Current processes like the Accra Reset, a Ghana-led international initiative that seeks to rethink global development cooperation from the perspective of countries in the Global South, seek to grow Southern sovereignty by reducing dependency on external finance. Thinking about an offramp from ODA is no longer as radical as it once had been, though its downstream institutional implications are not without consequence.

Currently, ODA is not well-aligned with its widely accepted trinity of purposes: humanitarian aid, global public goods (GPGs) and core development (Glennie, 2025b; Ahmed et al., 2026). Any new mechanism should ensure a sharper distinction between these domains and be accompanied by new standards to define clear goals, capital inputs, accountability structures, governance mechanisms, and output and outcome metrics.

- **Humanitarian aid:** Any offramp from ODA should maintain a commitment to mitigate and provide relief from humanitarian crises, famines and natural disasters, which the public broadly supports (Agence Française de Développement, 2026; The Rockefeller Foundation, 2025a). Nevertheless, this commitment could potentially emerge from a different conceptual starting point, one that acknowledges the growing ability and desires of newer providers to support this provision, as well as the evolving nature of shocks and vulnerabilities.

- **Global public goods:** Financing global challenges that transcend national borders requires an instrument that also preserves efforts to support countries' long-term development goals. This is because GPGs tend to benefit richer countries rather than poorer ones and are viewed as incurring differentiated responsibilities (Glennie, 2025b). There are some templates for how a donor might account for its efforts towards these distinct expenditure lines, which others can learn from and put into practice (Global Affairs Canada, 2026; Hegertun, 2021).

- **Core development:** The biggest challenge, perhaps, lies in defining the boundaries of 'core development' spending. The contested meanings of poverty eradication, growth and the SDGs mean these can be large conceptual tents. The principle that concessional public finance for development is reserved for countries with limited access to other financing sources is, however, increasingly accepted in principle, if not in practice (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2026; Suzman, 2026). As part of these initial conditions, we need realistic assessments of the potential for 'blending' concessional capital with non-concessional funding, and robust accountability systems that capture when they do not.

Designing a thoughtful and fair offramp from ODA can build on alternative development finance frameworks like 'international development investment' (Melonio et al., 2022), 'global policy finance' (Severino and Ray, 2009) or 'global public investment' (Glennie, 2021). These can all provide a conceptual foundation for breaking the donor–recipient logic on which aid rests once and for all.

An ODA offramp does not absolve wealthier Northern governments of their historical obligations and moral responsibilities to redress contemporary inequalities, ecological debts and colonial legacies. An offramp would require a new negotiated settlement to be agreed with the Global South. This would require some consideration of what an enforceable floor might be with any new mechanism, and who might adjudicate any breach.

Of course, reopening negotiations on an ODA successor under current geopolitical conditions risks opening a 'Pandora's box' and producing a less effective regime than the one we have today. Any effort to reform the existing financial framework must therefore be approached with caution, ensuring that hard-won gains are preserved and that any successor arrangement strengthens rather than weakens development cooperation.

3 End Northern donorship

> ***End Northern donorship.*** *Agree an end date for Northern bilateral donorship and build a new infrastructure for bilateral development cooperation that makes partnership 'real'.*

Donors from the Global North have long anchored the international aid regime through their provision of ODA. But if ODA is no longer a defining organising principle for the sector, what becomes of the institutions and identities of these former 'traditional donors'?

There is growing distaste for the term 'donor' as a descriptor of those institutions in the Global North providing ODA, with a preference for the term 'partner' (Eyben and Savage, 2013; Chapman, 2025; Aly et al., 2026). Meanwhile, the prospects for ending Northern bilateral donorship are undeniable with falling ODA, lower levels of public support and growing demand for country-led development. However, truly ending bilateral donorship will take more than a new label; it will involve fostering a new organisational template and mindset.

Ending bilateral donorship can be consistent with growing alternative formats for cooperation that privilege equal partnership and increased development expenditures. For example, former donors can foster policy change, diplomatic cooperation, knowledge-based initiatives, and enable control and engagement by others. Specific donor-driven programmes or departments might downsize, close and shift execution to other partners like the European Union (EU), the World Bank or local intermediaries, or they might simply merge with other government entities (Aly et al., 2026). Central review functions in government and interdepartmental coordination platforms could instead screen policies like trade, climate and migration together, ensuring they cohere with the development ambitions of Southern partners. Senior advisers could be appointed to champion global structural economic transformation from a domestic vantage point, identifying inconsistencies between vision and approaches. Building towards full donor exit can start small at the project level; using the project design phase to anticipate how core functions, institutional responsibilities and development gains will be sustained after external support ends. Transition plans would specify how resource flows, policy decisions, knowledge exchange and relationships would be structured in the future to consciously avoid the trappings of 'donorship'.

Making donor exit an explicit goal can incentivise these alternative formats for cooperation that privilege real partnership among equals. Ending bilateral donorship refocuses global attention on problems needing to be solved, creates a horizon for planning with clear milestones and dispels the perception of donorship as a permanent status with never-ending obligations. This can ultimately boost political and public support for engagement and investment.

A genuine partnership anchored in mutual respect and shared power will inevitably entail costs and trade-offs, requiring former donors to cede influence and embrace forms of cooperation over which they exercise less control. This can be a ‘difficult line to walk’ (International Development Committee, 2026), yet it is precisely from these tensions that a culture of partnership without paternalism can emerge.

To advance this end, Northern governments could collectively set an end date for bilateral-funded and controlled institutions, just as the Gates Foundation has adopted a 2045 exit date and the Accra Reset proposes sunset clauses for several global health bodies (Pate et al., 2026). Recently, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Gates Foundation publicly referenced the possibility of aid’s ‘planned obsolescence’ (Suzman, 2026). If donors provide a surge in support over the next 20 years, low-income countries can meet basic needs for health and education and spur the growth that allows for their increased self-sufficiency from aid (Gates Foundation, 2026).

Orderly donor exit should not be understood as an abrogation of global responsibility, nor as a signal of abandonment or isolationism, but rather as evidence of a serious commitment to transformation and redesign for a new multipolar era where emerging providers from the Gulf, Asia and elsewhere loom large. There is evidence this shift is already happening, as interviews with senior European officials suggest younger diplomats do not see their careers defined by traditional development cooperation and aid management (Sherriff and Veron, 2024).

Ending donorship does not mean the end of bilateral diplomacy, nor does it imply that diplomacy should be de-funded. It would, however, retire ODA and the bureaucratic structures that surround its delivery from the heart of the bilateral diplomatic effort, as relations between former donors and recipients are ‘normalised’ to be no different from those between any other country.

4 Widen the development toolbox

> ***Widen the development cooperation toolbox.*** *Support development beyond financial transfers by leveraging political capital and technical knowledge for structural, regulatory and policy change.*

If grant money confers power 'over' the receiver, logic suggests reducing such transfers could promote more equitable interactions based on shared power 'with' partners. This is not to absolve Northern governments of their financial responsibilities to the Global South but to highlight that the transfer of grant funds in the absence of real trust has arguably become an obstacle to greater equity and horizontality between transacting parties. For example, being in receipt of donor funding makes it harder for those who receive it to push back against control-focused fiscal accountability structures that demand quick results and disbursements (Aly et al., 2026). Reducing the centrality of money in bilateral development cooperation can therefore lessen upward accountability to donors and their taxpayers and strengthen downward accountability towards partner governments and their citizens.

Supporting development beyond aid could include Northern governments leveraging their diplomatic and political capital in international and regional fora to advocate for better global policy and regulatory reform. For example, the Global North can reformulate policies that currently keep many countries at the periphery of global value chains and systems of international governance, leaving them burdened by debt, exposed to climate vulnerabilities, and constrained in their energy, food and health sovereignty (IBON International, 2025; Sokona et al., 2023; Aly et al., 2024, 2025a; Ghosh et al, 2025).

Many of these policy changes will not be without significant domestic costs for donor countries; for example, a global tax treaty that ensures companies are taxed where profits are generated rather than where they are resident will likely affect tax receipts (Tax Justice Network, n.d.); or legal obligations on private creditors to engage in sovereign debt restructuring may dampen the competitiveness and operating environment for domestic financial, legal and ancillary services (Debt Justice, 2025; Olivares-Caminal et al., 2025). Nevertheless, bringing the influence of current 'donor' countries to bear on the domestic and international policy and regulatory environments that enable development success can, over time, generate global returns that exceed those lost in diminishing aid transfers.

With less emphasis on aid transfers and the bureaucracy that comes with it, capacity will be freed up to build diplomatic relationships, coordinate with others, and exchange intelligence both internally and externally (Aly et al., 2026). This can build the more demand-driven, knowledge-focused approach to engagement, something that is sought by middle-income countries especially. This approach demands more specialised staff with the capacity to leverage technical networks from within and outside government, who can be placed for sustained periods in targeted countries. Roles would shift from project planning and implementation towards brokering expertise, building connections and sustaining relationships with partner countries over complex policy challenges.

5 Country leadership

> ***Put inclusive country leadership at the heart of the development endeavour.*** *State institutions are essential and cannot be bypassed, but nor should they be romanticised. Ensure local actors closest to problems have the most influence in defining and operationalising solutions.*

There has been longstanding recognition that successful development rests with countries taking control of their policy destiny (Aly et al., 2026). 'Country ownership' and 'putting countries in the driver's seat' have become popular monikers to encapsulate this sentiment, with a more recent effort made to systematically assess the assets and liabilities that enable/constrain country-led development (Future of Development Cooperation Coalition, 2026).

Less discussed is the challenge of deciding whose priorities count across the donor-country relationship. Sovereign central governments are the normal counterpart of Northern donor governments. And yet their priorities do not always align with those of donors, let alone other actors, including subnational governments, civil society, the media and domestic economic actors.

Devolving control and decision-making, providing predictable and flexible commitments, and facilitating information flows allow these governments to discharge their responsibilities for national development effectively, especially in cases where there is inclusive country leadership. In such contexts, Northern governments should stop bypassing the state and orient their staff and institutions to build relationships anchored in trust, humility, respect and reciprocity. Decentralisation of staff, greater delegated authority, and championing local voices and delivery mechanisms can build sustainable domestic capacity and grow civic space, building platforms for ongoing state-society exchange and interaction.

Of course, 'enlightened' leadership cannot be foisted upon unwilling governments. Especially in fragile and conflict-affected states, there is little space for romantic notions about a state's benevolence. In such environments, patience, presence and propensity for risk are qualities and mindsets to cultivate among external providers. Flexible funding directed to local actors and support for reform-inclined elites can empower demand for government accountability in ways that are authentic and designed on local terms, though they may require generational timelines to bear fruit (Peace Direct, 2026; Pacifico et al., 2026). There needs to be courage to bring conversations on civic space into policy dialogues with government (OECD, 2026b). Governance challenges, meanwhile, should be reasons to lean in, not excuses to retreat.

Country leadership is an essential ingredient for development, one that donor-driven development can never substitute for or supplant. External actors should be aiming to create the conditions under which this leadership can blossom, with a particular effort made to grow the capabilities and amplify the voices and power of those with lived experiences closest to the problems that leaders are looking to solve.

6 Reform multilateralism for development

> ***Ground multilateral reform for development in a shared vision, then stop defaulting to bilateral financing channels.*** *Create a shared purpose for a reformed multilateral development system. Then consider growing multilateral allocations, while using bilateral financing channels only when necessary.*

The multilateral development system delivers value in terms of reach, scale and expertise that no individual donor could replicate alone (OECD, 2026d). Yet, bilateral channels remain donors' preferred vehicle, with less than half of total ODA consistently disbursed through multilateral channels.

Indeed, there is limited confidence in the vision and effectiveness of the 'non-bankable' multilateral institutions that comprise the United Nations Development System (UNDS). Over the past year, core contributions to UNDS entities declined by 27%, even as contributions to the World Bank and regional development banks increased (OECD, 2026c).[6] This revealed donor preference raises important questions about the functional purpose of an ailing UNDS within the broader multilateral development system (Gulrajani and Hendra, 2025; Aly et al., 2025b).[7]

To date, the system-wide UN reform process initiated in 2025 (UN80) has focused on administrative and efficiency reforms and has not asked critical questions about purpose, preferred functions and vision. 'Structural reform' has struggled to get beyond a few sunsetting and merger proposals for several UNDS entities, while legal and political difficulties deriving from complex global governance structures and fears of losing influence have all inhibited fundamental dialogue on how to evolve the system (Patz, 2026). Yet, without a shared vision for the multilateral system to guide UN reform among at least a subset of invested member states, individual cost-

6 The G7 and Group of Twenty (G20) are aiming to grow effective aid spending by expanding multilateral development bank (MDB) lending capacity, revealing the preferred multilateral channels of the largest global economies. Meanwhile, global survey data tells us that while trust in international institutions is low, it is notably higher for United Nations entities than the World Bank (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2025b).

7 The United Nations Development System (UNDS) was created in 1965 through the merger of the Expanded Programme on Technical Assistance and the UN Special Fund, establishing a model for coordinated development assistance. The UNDS comprises the funds, specialised agencies and other entities that have emerged with changes in development paradigms, geopolitical realignments and knowledge domains (Schônrock et al., 2026). These entities carry out both the normative and operational activities for achievement of the SDGs at the country level. Contributions to the UNDS consist of funding for development and humanitarian activities, also referred to as 'operational activities for development'. They consist of 43 entities, although 12 receive the lion's share of contributions from member states (UNDESA, OCHA, WHO, FAO, IOM, UNRWA, UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP and UNEP). The bulk of these are funded through voluntary contributions (Aly et al., 2025b).

cutting exercises simply represent an ad hoc erosion of the UNDS's capacity rather than a strategy to rally investment, rethink institutional configuration and ensure system-wide coherence (MOPAN, 2025).

Nevertheless, Northern donors should have 'skin in this game'. They represent the largest investors in the UNDS, which is disproportionately funded by DAC members' voluntary contributions. Yet, even among this relatively cohesive group, there has been limited convergence on a functional vision for UNDS built around its unique value as a normative and standard-setting body, distinct and complementary from the international financial institutions (Aly et al., 2025b). There is now an opportunity to build a shared vision for a system that upholds global norms and delivers targeted support to countries that need or request it. Such a reconceived UNDS should aim to have a smaller footprint, engaging when no other national or local actor can do so effectively, for as short a time as needed. As donors reimagine the UNDS for the long haul, they should lean into its role as a guide to navigate countries through major global challenges and transitions in health, digital technology, and climate and the environment. Only once such a vision achieves widespread support can the process of UNDS bureaucratic reform to support these functions be productive.

A reformed multilateral ecosystem with a committed investor base has the potential to become a preferred donor allocation choice. While donors suggest accountability gaps and political logjams are strong reasons to allocate bilaterally, evidence suggests core multilateral contributions are less politicised, better targeted to the poorest countries, more 'helpful' to development leaders, more transparent, more consistently engage local actors and achieve greater scale (Gulrajani, 2016; OECD, 2022, 2026b; Custer et al., 2025; Publish What You Fund, 2024). The comparative advantages of core multilateral investments come from their ability to aggregate interests, pool funding and collectively hedge risk.[8]

'When recipient development rather than donor interests is key, there are *no good reasons* to allocate aid bilaterally,' writes Dreher (2025). Assuming this is true, donors should consider carefully why they are allocating bilaterally and decide what level of spend is appropriate given the nature of country priorities, other actors' investments and the likelihood of transitioning away from external resourcing (Aly et al., 2025a, 2026). As multilateral reform motivated by a shared vision takes root, bilateral financing (as distinct from bilateral diplomacy) should become a deliberate choice exercised in constrained circumstances, not an automatic default.

8 To date, aid cuts have disproportionately hit the bilateral side of the ODA ledger, possibly because these are easier to withdraw than core multilateral contributions. Bilateral ODA fell by 26.4% to $126.4 billion in 2025, with multilateral ODA declining by less than half that amount (OECD, 2026c). Tightly earmarked multilateral assistance displays many of the limitations of bilateral aid as it directs multilateral institutions according to bilateral priorities (OECD, 2022). This is also why earmarked funding to the multilateral system is counted as a 'bilateral' flow.

7 Build public support

> ***Stop looking for public support for development cooperation; build it.*** *Public support is fickle and needs to be nurtured. Cultivate ambassadors and grassroots connections to make the case for development cooperation.*

Recent public opinion surveys tracking perceptions of global development suggest several trends. Support for aid is fragile and reaching new lows, though it remains between 45 and 75% of the public in most donor countries (Oh, n.d.; Agence Française de Développement, 2026). There is some indication that declining support is driven by those located in shrinking middle-class groups, those with less education and among younger males (Anders, n.d.). Meanwhile, citizens overestimate the amount of ODA spent by a large margin, which may also explain why – when it is pitted against other areas of public spending like defence – there is considerable support for cuts (Difford, 2025; Agence Française de Développement, 2026).

These trends are often a source of concern among champions of development. But we also know that public opinion is erratic and shifts quickly with global events, media coverage and domestic economic conditions (Oh, n.d.). Recent polling in 31 countries suggests global solidarity is growing among all demographic groups as disruptions to international rules and global order becomes more obvious (Global Nation, 2026). These are promising roots that with cultivation can emerge into new shoots of public support for development cooperation.

Because development cooperation is a low salience issue, it is not a driver of voter behaviour at the polls. Aid is seen as an optional extra, especially at times of domestic economic stress (Day, 2018). This low saliency is one reason political leaders rarely build platforms that lead with aid policy. Instead, motivated policy entrepreneurs who see personal relevance on the issue of development cooperation are often credited with making a conscious effort to amplify this agenda. Political figures like Clare Short in the UK, Lester B. Pearson in Canada and Kevin Rudd in Australia have all been strong ambassadors for development cooperation by casting visions of global equity and justice that have subsequently been 'caught' by the public (ibid.).

We need to undertake a deliberate search for such leaders and cultivate influential messengers who can translate personal commitments to global development into stronger stories of impact and improved public understanding. Messaging that demonstrates the personal investment of senior public figures and inspires hopefulness in the future is part of a strategy to rebuild public support for development cooperation (Crombie, 2025; Anders, n.d.).

Prominent ambassadors can be assisted by NGOs in donor countries acting as bridges by strengthening people-to-people ties across borders via faith-based networks, civil society partnerships, youth and educational exchanges, municipal and community links, and digital communities. These connections can provide a solid bedrock of political support in wealthy countries, while also shifting international NGOs away from project management and contracting roles that should ideally be occupied by local actors (Aly et al., 2025a). Moreover, given public polling suggests many remain unconvinced that aid works, greater donor investment in public education about how resources are spent and delivered effectively can potentially grow public support, while helping to counter negative narratives (The Rockefeller Foundation, 2025b; Agence Française de Développement, 2026; Development Engagement Lab, n.d.).

Public support for development is the ultimate foundation for an enabling, authorising environment for political and policy action. Rather than lamenting its fragile state, we need donors and leaders to invest in the creation and maintenance of such support.

8 Commit to governance reform

> ***Commit to governance reform of the development cooperation system.***
> *Northern donors should commit to sharing power at the highest levels.*

In 1960, Northern governments united under the umbrella of the newly formed OECD, with Article 1 of the new body integrating development as part of its mission (Bracho et al., 2021). This eventually led to the formation of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The DAC was meant to serve as a venue for broader policy discussions and coordination among donor countries, a place for industrialised democracies to exchange experience and ideas on current and future trends, to generate good practices and 'soft law', and to review member country performance in formal peer reviews (Carey, 2021). For political, structural and historical reasons, the DAC has had a hard time integrating Southern government providers, who see the United Nations as their natural inter-governmental home, with a few important exceptions. The growth of development finance providers with different norms and approaches has challenged consensus-building efforts within the DAC and its competitive edge among recipients (Gulrajani and Swiss, 2019).

If the distinction between donors and recipients is to fall away, or if the ODA standard is to change fundamentally, the role of the DAC as a regulatory body for members' development cooperation providers would likely have to be reopened. To bring the Global South into any new standard or regime, the UN Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) may need to be engaged given its global mandate and political legitimacy (Gonsier and Klingbiel, 2021). One option may be to consider how to decouple the DAC's strong technical expertise and standard setting capacities from its political function as an inter-governmental club with exclusive membership. Separating these two functions could safeguard DAC expertise on best practices, graduation criteria and development statistics while ensuring more representative global governance for development within the UN-DCF, as was committed to in the Seville Financing for Development Outcome Document (United Nations, 2026).

Development governance challenges exist beyond the DAC too. Several standalone global funds have overlapping mandates with UNDS funds, specialised agencies and other entities, challenging coherence and institutional oversight, especially in sectors like climate and health (Sridar and Woods, 2013; Schônrock et al., 2026; Pate et al, 2026). Tighter earmarking contributes to mandate creep that directs UNDS institutions into areas that are not always aligned to institutional objectives and country priorities (Weinlich et al., 2020). Independent board governance among specialised agencies means the UN Secretary General cannot force reform across all the UN's constituent parts, complicating UNDS reform (Schonrock et al., 2026). Meanwhile, the G7 under a French Presidency has put international financial architecture reform at the top of its agenda, hoping to improve representation of the Global South and tackle systemic debt vulnerabilities and high sovereign borrowing costs (Vestergaard and Wade, 2025). And in June 2026, China published its vision for global governance that privileges sovereign equality and a ‘people-centred ‘approach.

‘If the conversation about a post-aid world is to be meaningful,’ writes Abdenur (2026), ‘it must engage in a much more democratic manner with questions about the governance of global systems.’ While this is the last North Star in our list, it is perhaps the most important one that sets the scene for all the others. This is because more equitable governance is the foundation for building a new and shared development narrative, reformulating development finance and its relationship to a wider set of tools, articulating the future of bilateral donorship and multilateralism, fostering inclusive country leadership, and boosting citizen support. Governance reform is a prerequisite for a post-aid development cooperation system that is genuinely shared, legitimate and capable of commanding broad-based support.

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ODI Global
4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

odi.org
www.linkedin.com/company/odi/
bsky.app/profile/odi.global