
Critique under fire: Researching international aid in times of crisis

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Résumé

How do we study international aid critically, at a time of fierce global debate about its future? Globally, international aid is under heavy fire. In early 2025, President Trump's shutdown of 90% of the global operations of United States Agency for International Development revealed the growing trend of anti-humanitarian ideology within the populist far-right. In Europe and North America, aid budgets have been slashed, as humanitarianism is framed as a betrayal of national interests and priorities. In Africa, global aid has been frozen, projects have begun to close, the supply of medical drugs has halted, and mass redundancies have begun. This appears to be something of a crossroads: some scholars have argued that 'the liberal order' of humanitarian interventionism is coming to an end (Fiori et al., 2021). Meanwhile, progressive critiques of liberal internationalism have long illustrated how aid – from development, humanitarianism to global health interventions - reproduces the same global structures of post-colonial inequity that causes suffering in the first place (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2007; Crane 2010; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). Some have questioned that the supposed end of the 'liberal humanitarian order' is 'something to be mourned,' suggesting this a moment of rupture for more meaningful anti-colonial action (Rutazibwa 2019; Tudor 2025). On the ground, international aid is facing a crisis of legitimacy across Africa, with growing public protests demanding that peacekeepers and other intervenors, perceived as crisis profiteers, withdraw. What role does academic critique of international aid have in this contemporary political moment? This panel examines the dilemmas facing social scientists studying international aid in Africa today. How can academics ensure that relevance of critique is not lost in - or hijacked by - simplistic populist narratives? Is there a risk that academic critiques become strange bedfellows of reactionary forces, and instrumentalized by the far-right (Glasman 2025)? The panel invites contributions that examine the methodological, epistemological and ethical consequences for the critical academic study of international aid institutions in Africa. As global aid faces a crossroads, we examine the tensions for the critical study of international aid, amidst fierce debates around aid's future, in Africa and beyond.

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