

Call for EU Leadership: Step Up to Sustain Global Development Aid

Appeal to the Heads of State and Government and the institutions of the European Union to take action to fill the gaps in international development aid created by the U.S. Presidential Executive Order on Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid and the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule

Honourable leaders of the European Union,

On 20 January 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order titled “Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid”, which imposed a 90-day freeze on all U.S. foreign aid. Within three days, key agencies, implementing partners, and beneficiaries of U.S. foreign aid had received so-called “stop work” orders. Shortly thereafter, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a decision to merge the world’s largest development aid agency, USAID, into the U.S. Department of State. That same week, thousands of USAID and State Department employees also received “stop-work” orders, while U.S. government employees across the board received so-called “deferred resignation” offers, which proposed an eight-month salary payout in exchange for the termination of their employment contract, moves which signaled the Trump administration’s intent to significantly reduce, if not eliminate, foreign aid funding.

It will take time before a clear picture emerges of the true scale and nature of the impacts of these decisions, while a general lack of clarity about the specifics of the executive order complicate the process of elaborating an adequate response. Nonetheless, the need for the EU to respond swiftly and forcefully remains imperative, with these decisions having already inflicted direct and widespread harm on millions of vulnerable individuals, community groups, and civil society organisations worldwide who receive U.S. foreign aid. To give but a few examples, the aid freeze has resulted in:

- The **closure of clinics and the suspension of sexual and reproductive health and rights programmes** in refugee camps leaving thousands without essential medical care;
- The **halting of life-saving treatment programmes for HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis**, endangering the lives of millions;
- A **crippling blow to global hunger relief efforts**, with essential food aid and supplies frozen, increasing the risk of malnutrition and starvation among vulnerable populations;
- The **reckless suspension of human rights and rule of law programmes critical to international justice and accountability** in countries struggling to overcome conflict, such as Ukraine and Syria, countries in fragile transitional situations, such as Tunisia or Nepal, and countries in human rights crises where pursuing accountability for atrocities is critical, such as Afghanistan;
- **An existential crisis for thousands of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**, including many in the EU, Western Balkans, and the Eastern Partnership countries, which now face **severe funding shortfalls**, leading to reduced support for marginalised communities – including victims of human trafficking and other crimes – as well as heightened risks of instability and unrest;
- The **weakening of independent media outlets** receiving U.S. funding, posing a threat to transparency, access to information, and media plurality;

- **Heightened risk of further erosion of fundamental freedoms** in countries where NGOs already struggle under restrictive laws, threatening the very survival of many independent civil society actors;
- The **disruption of critical disease prevention programmes**, including those combatting **mpx and ebola** in Africa, as well as **food security initiatives** worldwide;
- The **suspension of landmine clearing initiatives**, increasing safety risks in post-conflict regions;
- The **severe disruption of aid to Gaza**, cutting off access to clean water and hygiene kits and increasing the risk of outbreaks of disease;
- The **suspension of rehabilitation programmes for war veterans and persons with disabilities in Ukraine**; and
- The **disruption of anti-drug trafficking initiatives** in Eastern Europe.

In tandem, on 24 January, the Presidential Memorandum of 23 January 2017 on the Mexico City Policy – also known as the “Global Gag Rule” – was reinstated. The Global Gag Rule is a harmful policy that restricts the access of organisations providing, counseling, or advocating for access to abortion to U.S. foreign aid. It has devastating impacts on global health, gender equality, and human rights. Organisations around the world providing vital essential reproductive health care information and support will likely shutter or be forced to halt their lifesaving work. This policy will disrupt the provision of comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, contraception, maternity care, menstrual hygiene programmes, HIV prevention and treatment, and treatment for tuberculosis, malaria, zika virus, ebola, and other infectious diseases around the world.

The European Union must act now

As the world’s largest provider of foreign aid, the European Union is uniquely positioned to step up and fill the void left by the U.S. retreat from international development aid. This crisis presents the EU with a **historic opportunity** to reinforce its leadership as the global guardian of democracy, human rights, equality, and humanitarian assistance. A strong and swift EU response will not only **help millions of people at risk** but will also **strengthen the EU’s credibility and trust among its allies worldwide**. Conversely, **failure to act will weaken the EU’s legitimacy and global standing**, allowing authoritarian regimes and competing powers to fill the void, with many of the strategic initiatives and critical programmes supported by those including the EU likely unable to survive without renewed funding.

We urge the Heads of State and Government and the institutions of the European Union to:

1. **Demonstrate commitment to supporting the world’s most marginalised populations** by, to the extent possible, providing emergency funding that **matches the financial shortfall** created by the U.S. Executive Order described above and the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule;
2. **Step up funding**, in particular, **for areas likely to see the most drastic reductions in funding** as the ultimate result of the Trump administration’s actions, namely, LGBTIQ rights, reproductive care, racial justice, gender equality, and so on;

3. **Lead a process encompassing the wider community of donors aimed at ensuring financial support for democracy, human rights, equality, global health, and the rule of law** by widening eligibility for funding and reducing burdensome administrative requirements that limit the ability of some groups to apply for, receive, and manage grants;
4. **Take urgent action** to prevent further harm and limit instability, ensuring that aid programmes continue without interruption;
5. **Show leadership on the protection of civil society and development cooperation** in the pursuit of a safer and more stable world, recognising the vital role global civil society plays as one of the cornerstones of democracy; and
6. **Leverage diplomatic relations with the U.S. to encourage the Trump administration to reverse course** in its attempts to shrink the U.S. foreign aid budget and to repeal the Global Gag Rule.

Millions of lives are at stake, and the world is looking to the European Union to **rise to the occasion**. This is a moment to lead, to protect the marginalised, and to stand firmly for the values of democracy, human rights, and international solidarity.

We urge you to act — swiftly and decisively.

Respectfully,

1. Aditus Foundation
2. Araminta
3. Association “Novi put” Bosnia and Herzegovina
4. ASTRA-Anti trafficking action, Serbia
5. Austausch e.V.
6. Bir Diuno
7. Center for Participation and Development supports
8. Center for Reproductive Rights
9. Citizen. Army. Law.
10. Citizens’ Watch
11. Crude Accountability
12. Dignity
13. European Disability Forum
14. Fédération Internationale des ACAT (FIACAT)
15. FIDH International Federation for Human Rights
16. Freedom Collaborative, Inc.
17. Freedom Files
18. Freedom Now

19. FREERIGHTS
20. Human Rights Center (Azerbaijan)
21. Human Rights Center (Georgia)
22. Human Rights Centre ZMINA
23. Human Rights Defense Center Memorial
24. Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF)
25. Human Rights Watch
26. IDP Women Association "Consent"
27. ILGA-Europe
28. Impunity Watch
29. Independent Anti-corruption Foundation (NAKO)
30. Institute for Reporters Freedom and Safety
31. International Commission of Jurists
32. International Dalit Solidarity Network
33. International Partnership for Human Rights
34. International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN)
35. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
36. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
37. Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
38. La Strada International, European NGO Platform against human trafficking
39. Lawtrend
40. Legal Policy Research Centre
41. Libereco – Partnership for Human Rights
42. Macedonian Helsinki Committee
43. Netherlands Helsinki Committee
44. Organization for European Expertise and Communication
45. Plateforme des Droits Humains (PDH)
46. Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights
47. Protection of Rights without Borders NGO
48. Public Verdict Foundation
49. SHOP (Foundation for sex workers and victims of human trafficking, The Hague, Netherlands)
50. SOVA Research Center
51. Sphere Foundation
52. Swedish OSSE-network
53. Swiss Helsinki Committee

54. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
55. The Danish Helsinki Committee for Human Rights
56. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
57. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee
58. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee
59. Turkmen Helsinki Foundation
60. Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union
61. Vanadzor Helsinki Committee of Armenia
62. Women of the Don
63. Women's Rights Agenda Belarus