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What will become of international development after the end of the aid paradigm?

Some thoughts in response to questions I get from students and young professionals



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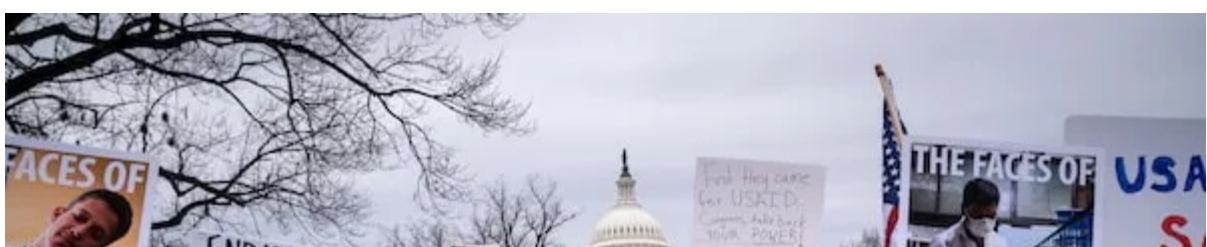


Sh:

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I: Despite permanent cuts to foreign aid, global coordination in the quest for structural economic change is still a noble goal worth fighting for.

I get a lot of email from students and young professionals on how to design a successful career in international development — whether in research and/or policy practice. The volume of emails has gone up a bit since [the U.S. government](#) embarked on a radical downsizing of its foreign aid architecture.



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A protest against USAID restructuring. Source: [The Globe and Mail](#)

Sadly, the majority of the self-selected subset of people who email me tend to be disillusioned with the work they are doing. They are typically nationals of high-income countries and include folks working on projects that are clearly going to fail but which must go through to please donors, policy researchers who decry the fact that the audience for their research is never the purported beneficiaries (this is mostly donor fault), and students who are frustrated by the variance between their classes' instructional content and the objective realities in low-income countries.

Since I am not able to answer all the emails, I figured it might help to respond to some of the most frequently asked questions in the form of a post. Some of the answers may be useful even for veterans in the field.

Overall, I think that despite the recent convulsions it's still possible to build a successful career in international development. The field can still play a useful role if everyone got back to the basics (see [Lant Pritchett](#) and [Marc Bellemare](#) for summaries of what I mean here). Helping low-income countries achieve structural economic change is still a noble goal. Countries that are doing catch-up development need not reinvent the wheel; and can learn a lot while getting a helping hand from high-income countries. Convergence is possible.

However, in order to stay relevant and impactful the field of international development must drastically change. Everyone must be clear-eyed about the fact that this is the end of the aid paradigm and that it's imperative to prepare for what comes next. Nobody should have any illusions of rebuilding what existed before — it achieved

some good outcomes (notably in health and humanitarian relief), but was ultimately not good enough to help low-income countries grow and achieve structural economic change. Furthermore, a good share of ongoing aid cuts will be permanent, with donor countries intensifying their use of whatever aid is left (both bilateral & multilateral) more nakedly advance their narrow foreign policy goals.

While the U.N. system, IMF, World Bank, and most MIDBs have always been dominated by donors, efforts to make them into more perfect agents of projecting donors' power and influence will significantly alter the international development landscape. The chasm between the policy needs of low-income countries and the projects/policies that get foisted onto them will likely grow wider (especially in countries whose leaders don't care to maintain their policy autonomy). It's unclear if philanthropies, think tanks, and other non-state actors from donor countries will withstand the pressure to bandwagon with their governments' foreign aid nationalisms and related agendas.

Consequently, aid-dependent countries that don't correct course will be overwhelmed across multiple fronts.

It follows that anyone who builds their professional careers in service to the old model of aid dependency will struggle as aid becomes ever more nakedly associated with undue foreign interference, the coddling of unambitious leaders, and the facilitation of economic pillaging in low-income countries. Opportunities for impactful and rewarding work will come from the alignment of low-income countries' development strategies with the realities of global geopolitics. This won't be new. We saw variations of the same during the Cold War. The only difference is that this time it will be happening under multipolarity — which comes with its own set of risks and opportunities.

Relatedly, I must say I've been a little surprised by the global divergence in both the tenor and content of conversations around the demise of USAID. As far as the impact of aid goes, American commentary has mostly focused on the plight of individual aid

beneficiaries and the potential loss of U.S. influence around the globe. Commentators from low-income countries have mostly emphasized the ills of aid dependency, while also pointing out the glaring failures of most aid projects outside the health sector. These conversations need to merge. Only then will everyone be in a position to imagine future forms of development assistance that are mutually beneficial and that do not cultivate aid dependency or create a pretext for undue foreign interference in low-income states.

II: So you want to do good in the world and end global poverty and human suffering?

Which brings me back to the emails. I should start by noting that the answers below arise from a perspective that views success in international development as actually moving the needle towards reducing poverty via structural economic change. Which to say that some of my suggestions might not give (aspiring) development experts the warm glow that many seek in the field, or help one earn the promotions and accolades that are needed to make ends meet. I should also add that my knowledge of the field as an academic/commentator and not necessarily as a practitioner. I consult on initiatives/projects that I find interesting and potentially impactful, but have never worked as permanent staff in a development organization.

The first set of questions I ask students interested in international development relate to their conceptualization of what success looks like and whether they have considered the full range of potential ways to “do good in the world.” What exactly are you trying to achieve? Have you ever visualized what a developed Malawi looks like from the perspective of Malawians? Also, have you considered private sector work that focuses on low-income countries — like, for example, going into finance/consulting to raise capital in your home country for infrastructure or private firms in low-income countries? How about staying in your home country and lobbying your government for better market access and less ruinous interventions in low-income countries?



Image of a massive traffic snarl up on the mostly two-lane Nairobi-Nakuru highway, part of what is arguably East Africa's most important road. It's inexplicable why no one is yet to figure out how to finance the expansion of this road. In addition to Kenya's Western half, the road serves Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Eastern DRC. Source: *The Standard*

The questions above emphasize simple facts that everyone working in international development should internalize: low-income countries are normal places with normal people dabbling in normal politics, economics, cultural production, etc. Such countries need functional markets and public sectors in economies populated by large firms to create jobs and pay taxes. They also need normal functioning administrative-bureaucratic institutions. They have normal politics and are not mere versions of high-income countries waiting to happen. And above all, low-income countries are populated by real people who aspire to live dignified, materially comfortable, and fulfilling lives.

I emphasize these points because too often development experts get caught up in the

motions of their work and careers and lose sight of the big picture.

To reiterate, the current upheavals in the field of international development present opportunity for positive change. At the end of what will undoubtedly be a painful transition period, the goal shouldn't be to simply re-establish the situation ex-ante. Instead, the field must reorient in the direction of growth and national development through structural change. There shouldn't be a rush to sweep all the valid critiques under the rug lest they get weaponized by administrations bent on slashing programs. Reforms of big systems like the global aid industry only happen when there are strong pressures from multiple directions. Now is such a time. In this spirit, below are some thoughts on how to cultivate a fulfilling and potentially successful career in international development.

Things to do/avoid in order to build a successful career in international development.

1) Learn how to learn new things (mostly by reading lots of books and talking to people who live in low-income countries): The process of economic development is complex. There's no set recipe or manual. To be good at your job you'll need to be a good comparativist of **complex systems**. Read widely across multiple disciplines and well off the beaten path (you'll have to go out of your way to read papers and books written by nationals of the countries you work in). Teach yourself how to learn new things about new places very quickly. The best way to go about this is via binge learning (consuming multiple books, music, movies on/from a place concurrently). Keep up with the development literature, even if you don't find it particularly useful for your job. It's good to know what donors consider to be worth researching and the literature regularly produces amazing new insights. Trust me, the more you read the easier it will become.

2) Develop a specific useful skill for your chosen area of work: A good deal of frustration by many professionals in international development comes from the fact that they seldom have any tangible skills beyond their "development expert" person

(pushing paper and attending conferences/seminars don't count). Honing at least one useful skill is a ticket to sanity and feeling that you can move the needle on at least one dimension. In addition, mastering your own field will inoculate you against gullible to faddist trends, or the temptation to completely cede knowledge production to itinerant academics/consultants lacking contextual knowledge or interest (*always remember that as academics our incentives are all screwed up!*) Don't hide behind feigned ignorance or illusions of rigor (real rigor is great, though). People see right through that. You should aspire to be a knowledgeable expert in your sector (and its application to at least one country case); and should have reasonably well-founded ideas about how to get things done from experience. I cannot stress this enough. Know your stuff. Become an expert through learning by doing.

3) Actively invest in knowing the people and the places where you work: The prevailing high levels of social/intellectual segregation in the field of international development is a leading impediment to success. Don't reinforce it. Group think is bad, especially among small groups of people who've erroneously convinced themselves of their intellectual and moral superiority. What's the point of moving from Nebraska to Lilongwe for five years and then proceeding to only spend time with fellow expats from high-income countries while never getting to know any (upper) middle class Malawians? How can you seriously consider yourself to be an expert on WASH in Bangladesh or Niger when almost everyone you consider worth consulting for ideas/feedback share your background in terms of education, nationality, ideological orientation, etc?

Proactively seek critical feedback from people with skin in the game, and who aren't your employees, don't need your grant money or visa sponsorship, and aren't local elites who only understand themselves from the perspective of foreigners. Try to understand the core motivations and issues facing the (aspirational) middle classes in your host countries. Make real friends. Get to a point where you can cogently debate policy positions. Get a handle on the local historical political economy and culture - enough to hold a meaningful conversation over a long dinner party.

While it is natural to build community among fellow immigrants/foreign workers, avoid the group-think of closed self-referential cliques (correspondents/diplomats/academics/expats). Don't operate on baseless gossip about "the locals" from expat b and embassy parties. Instead, seek out serious people who've built working relationships and networks among local politicians, policymakers, intellectuals, and professionals (yes, such expats exist!) Follow the local news and policy debates, including outside of your specific sector.

4) Don't become a cynic: There's a lot of cynicism in the field of international development, with lots of people feeling trapped in the diurnal rituals of going through the motions without any expectation of real impact on the ground. Never become a cynic.

5) Learn some economics (and then become an amateur economic historian): Despite the contents of most syllabi in development courses, there's a lot more to (development) economics than evaluating the impact of donor interventions. Learn some economics (and political economy). Learn to appreciate the fact that low-income countries are normal places where the normal rules of economics apply. Internalize the fact that incentives matter, and that all policy choices involve tradeoffs. To this end you should cultivate a love for economic history. Read up on how countries actually develop, beyond the dumbed down memes of "become a capitalist democracy with strong Western institutions." Appreciate the fact that there's no one true path to economic development. Learn the real economic histories of your home country and the countries you work in.

6) Don't be an ideologue or assume that your beneficiaries subscribe to your ideological projects: Again, the development process is complex and highly contextual. Don't let your ideological leanings overwhelm your analytical chops (this happens all the time — see [here for some research evidence](#)). Always remember that the color of the cat shouldn't matter as long as the mice get caught. Focus on solutions. Success in the field isn't measured in levels of your personal ideological

fulfillment. Don't use people as means to an end in your ideological fights. Always know that you are working with real people with their own worldviews and who are necessarily interested in your ideological proselytizing.

7) Understand that, however solid it might be, scientific evidence doesn't make policy; cross-pressured people do: The credibility revolution was great. Pursuit of evidence-based policymaking is great. It's great that we are at a point where the default expectation is that evidence should inform policymaking. However, evidence doesn't magically transform into policy. Cross-pressured people navigating politics, institutions, and interest group politics make policy. Learn to appreciate that this is an important feature of policymaking, not a bug. Good policy must be anchored in local political economies. Policymaking also requires making judgment calls on tradeoffs. Plus you can't always change social policy based on shifts in the scientific evidence (recall that science is iterative). Policy must therefore be stabilized and given social meaning by local politics and institutions.

8) Your individual efforts alone will not save the world. And that's OK: Focus on doing the best you can to move the needle in your area of expertise.

9) Find yourself a good mentor and intellectual model(s) and build community: It's good to have a sounding board for ideas, even if from a temporal distance. Take time to read the works and biographies of the first generation of development economists from the fifties, sixties, and seventies. The most important thing you can do for your career is have a reality-based conception of the true state of the world and how countries actually develop. Since history tends to rhyme, it is worth knowing what others did in the past. Join or build a community of people from diverse professional backgrounds. Strike a balance between having people who will encourage you to keep at it, and ensuring that you can also get constructive critical feedback.

III: But will there be jobs?

The simple answer is that there won't be as many jobs as before. However, there's a distinct opportunity for those that can build careers not anchored in aid dependency. As noted above, the coming changes in how donors and most aid organizations conduct their affairs are unavoidable. The same goes for opinions against aid dependency in low-income countries. The new job market will likely reward those who invest in understanding the geopolitics of aid, are interested in fostering commercial and security relations between historical donors and low-income countries, and those willing to work in/with the private sector in low-income countries. For obvious reasons, there will be very few jobs that fall in the category of haphazard social or political engineering.



On the folly of aid conditionality for social and political engineering. Source: Tanzanian Cartoonist Godfrey Mwampembwa

Keen readers will have noticed that I avoided much discussion of what all this means for policymakers in low-income countries. That will be the subject of a future post. Now, it is worth noting that it is imperative that they do not let this crisis go to waste. Now is the time to think seriously about ending aid dependency once and for all. Of course not every country will be able to do so at once. But that should be an overarching policy goal even for countries that have to continue relying on donor assistance for service delivery in critical sectors like health and education.

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