



IMPACT OF EXECUTIVE ORDER PAUSING US FOREIGN AID

on LGBTQI+ People

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On January 20, President Trump issued an executive order that effectively halted U.S. foreign assistance to all developing countries. The executive order imposed a 90-day pause on foreign aid to assess “programmatic efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy.”¹ It requires all heads of agencies that engage in development programming to enforce the pause across U.S. implementing partners, including international organizations and contractors. Four days later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio issued guidance that operationalized Trump’s directive as a “stop work” order for nearly all existing grants and programs.²

While the executive order does not explicitly target programs that support LGBTQI+ people by name, the order is likely to have far-reaching consequences for a wide variety of activities and interventions that work to advance the rights of LGBTQI+ persons in developing countries. Indeed, Project 2025, with which many of Trump’s executive orders align, calls for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to “cease the promotion of the DEI agenda, including the bullying LGBTQ+ agenda” in foreign assistance.³ Trump has yet to appoint a new Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator at USAID, and nearly all documents and pages affiliated with LGBTQI+-specific programming have been scrubbed from the USAID website. As such, this executive order likely reflects a first step toward the Trump administration’s broader goal of eliminating LGBTQI+ issues from U.S. foreign policy and development assistance.

¹ Executive Order, Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid, The White House, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/>.

² Michael Igoe, “Exclusive: State Department Issues Stop-Work Order on US Aid,” *Devex*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/exclusive-state-department-issues-stop-work-order-on-us-aid-109160>. The order includes carve-outs for aid to Israel and Egypt.

³ Max Primorac, “Agency for International Development,” in *2025 Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, ed. Paul Dans and Steven Groves, 2025, https://static.project2025.org/2025_MandateForLeadership_CHAPTER-09.pdf.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Under the Biden administration, LGBTQI+ issues were elevated as a priority within U.S. foreign policy. Early in his term, Biden issued a presidential memorandum directing all U.S. agencies engaged abroad to ensure U.S. diplomacy and foreign assistance worked to advance the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons.⁴ The memo expressly called for U.S. leadership in decriminalizing consensual same-sex activity around the world, protecting LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers, and advancing nondiscrimination protections inclusive of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and sex characteristics.⁵ Biden also appointed a Special Envoy whose portfolio focused exclusively on promoting LGBTQI+ human rights.⁶

USAID and the use of foreign aid was central to enacting Biden's memorandum. Under his administration, USAID grew resources for LGBTQI+ programming from \$6 million in 2021 to \$25 million in 2024.⁷ At this level, USAID was the second largest global donor to activities supporting LGBTQI+ persons in developing countries.⁸

USAID programming, in conjunction with country Missions and local partners, engaged across a range of issues impacting LGBTQI+ persons in nearly every region of the world, from HIV treatment and prevention to reducing hate crimes to combatting so-called conversion therapy practices. The Interagency Report on implementing Biden's Presidential Memorandum highlighted several of these activities.⁹ For example, USAID/Bangladesh worked with legal professionals to help ensure that LGBTQI+ community members understand their rights within international and domestic law. In Latin America and the Caribbean, USAID supported the first-ever national survey of LGBTQI+ individuals in the Dominican Republic, identifying important dimensions of their lived realities, including the experiences of intersex people. And in Uganda, USAID offered emergency assistance to LGBTQI+ human rights defenders who were victims of violence, evicted from their homes, or needed medical care in the wake of the Anti-Homosexuality Act. It is difficult to identify the specific number of LGBTQI+ people impacted by USAID programming. However, USAID reports that, in 2024, the agency's D.C.-based Inclusive Development Hub reached more than one million people who are marginalized or in vulnerable circumstances, including LGBTQI+ persons. Additional programming from country Missions reached millions more.¹⁰

At the agency level, USAID under the Biden administration took steps to ensure LGBTQI+ issues were integrated into development programming more broadly across the agency. In 2023, USAID adopted an LGBTQI+ Inclusive

⁴ Dan Avery, "Biden Signs Foreign Policy Memo Putting U.S. at 'Forefront' of Global LGBTQ Rights," NBC News, February 5, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/biden-signs-foreign-policy-memo-putting-u-s-forefront-global-n1256848>.

⁵ Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Persons Around the World, The White House, February 4, 2021, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-202100806/pdf/DCPD-202100806.pdf>.

⁶ Donald Sullivan and Kate Judd, "President Joe Biden Appoints Jessica Stern Special Envoy for LGBTQ Rights," CNN, June 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/25/politics/lgbtq-envoy-jessica-stern/index.html>.

⁷ USAID, Exit Memo: United States Agency for International Development, January 2025, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2025-01/ExitMemo_508.pdf.

⁸ Global Philanthropy Project, "Global Resources Report," June 2024, https://globalresourcesreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GRR_2021-2022_WEB-Spread-Colour_EN.pdf, p. 86.

⁹ Interagency Report on the Implementation of the Presidential Memorandum on Advancing the Human Rights of LGBTQI+ Persons Around the World (2022), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Interagency-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Presidential-Memorandum-on-Advancing-the-Human-Rights-of-Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer-and-Intersex-Persons-Around-the-World-2022.pdf>.

¹⁰ USAID, Exit Memo: United States Agency for International Development, January 2025, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2025-01/ExitMemo_508.pdf, p. 26.

Development Policy that “reiterates, guides, and reinforces USAID’s commitment to championing LGBTQI+ inclusive development and the human rights of LGBTQI+ people as part of a coordinated, whole-of-U.S. government effort.”¹¹ The policy enshrines USAID’s commitment to inclusive, locally-led development programming on the premise that inclusion of LGBTQI+ persons leads to better development outcomes. Indeed, research by the Williams Institute has demonstrated that societies that are more accepting of LGBTQI+ people and their rights tend to be more economically prosperous and experience stronger levels of democracy.¹² Under the Biden administration, USAID also produced sectoral guidance for agency staff and implementing partners on including LGBTQI+ persons in education, resilience and food security, and economic growth programming.¹³

THE LIKELY IMPACT ON LGBTQI+ PEOPLE

Although the executive order is vague in scope and intention, it is likely to have significant implications for U.S. foreign assistance programming that supports LGBTQI+ people. In the short term, the executive order is already disrupting critical global health programs that serve LGBTQI+ individuals. The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which disburses \$7.5 billion to support HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention programs, initially stopped providing aid, and countries were forced to stop distribution of all HIV medications already procured under PEPFAR contracts.¹⁴ On January 28, Secretary Rubio announced an exemption that appeared to allow for the distribution of HIV treatment drugs. Still, it remains unclear as to whether PEPFAR will be able to provide HIV prevention medication or other services like antenatal care for pregnant women with HIV.¹⁵ PEPFAR was a hallmark initiative of President George W. Bush and is estimated to have delivered lifesaving treatment to as many as 25 million people in 54 countries.¹⁶

In other sectors, aid organizations that receive U.S. funding have expressed concern that they, too, will have to shut down without necessary resources, further endangering LGBTQI+ participants in these programs, including refugees and youth.¹⁷ Already, more than 50 career civil servants, many in senior positions at USAID, have been placed on administrative leave.¹⁸ USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance has furloughed nearly 40 percent of its staff.¹⁹ This diminution in leadership and capacity across the agency will likely add more uncertainty and instability to programming in these sectors.

¹¹ USAID, “LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy,” August 2023.

¹² Andrew Flores, Miguel Fuentes, and Ari Shaw, “Democratic Backsliding and LGBTI Acceptance” (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, September 2023), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/dem-backsliding-gai/>.

¹³ Ari Shaw and Miguel Fuentes Carreño, “Sectoral Guidance on Integrating LGBTQI+ Communities into Economic Growth Programming,” (Washington DC: USAID, January 2025), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/USAID-LGBTQI-Economic-Growth.pdf>.

¹⁴ Apoorva Mandavilli, “Trump Administration Halts H.I.V. Drug Distribution in Poor Countries,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/27/health/pepfar-trump-freeze.html>.

¹⁵ Apoorva Mandavilli, “State Department Permits Distribution of H.I.V. Medications to Resume — for Now,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/28/health/trump-pepfar-freeze.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nahal Toosi, Robbie Gramer, and Carmen Paun, “‘It Will Kill People’: Chaos, Confusion after Trump Halts US Foreign Aid,” *Politico*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/01/27/chaos-confusion-trump-u-s-foreign-aid-00200771>.

¹⁸ Abigail Williams, Vaughn Hillyard, and Raquel Coronell Uribe, “More than 50 Career Civil Servants at USAID Are Placed on Administrative Leave,” *NBC News*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/dozens-usaid-career-civil-servants-put-administrative-leave-rcna189539>.

¹⁹ Elissa Miolene, “Scoop: USAID Furloughs Hundreds of Contractors from Humanitarian Bureau,” *Devex*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/scoop-usaid-furloughs-hundreds-of-contractors-from-humanitarian-bureau-109196>.

In the long term, the pause in foreign aid could endanger the lives of LGBTQI+ persons around the world. Sixty countries continue to criminalize consensual same-sex activity.²⁰ In many more, LGBTQI+ people face stigma and discrimination.²¹ A pause and potential cessation of funding to programs that support LGBTQI+ people means that individuals in these countries risk violence and imprisonment, as well as exclusion in education, employment, health care, public services, or other dimensions of their daily lives, where programs that work to mitigate these risks and promote inclusion are forced to shutter.

There is also uncertainty about the current impact on funding for LGBTQI+ programming provided by other donor countries. Several countries like Sweden and Canada provide funding to USAID and the State Department for LGBTQI+-specific initiatives. To the extent the Trump administration curtails LGBTQI+ programming in particular, or inclusive development programming more broadly, the status of these partnerships and previously allocated funds remains unclear.

CONCLUSION

Under previous administrations, the U.S. has been a global leader on LGBTQI+ rights and one of the largest bilateral donors supporting the inclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals in development programming. President Trump's executive order from January 20 represents a significant departure in U.S. policy that will likely have negative effects on the livelihood and well-being of LGBTQI+ people in developing countries, particularly those in contexts where anti-LGBTQI+ stigma and exclusion are prevalent.

²⁰ ILGA World Database, "Legal Frameworks: Criminalisation of consensual same-sex acts," <https://database.ilga.org/criminalisation-consensual-same-sex-sexual-acts>, (last visited January 28, 2025).

²¹ Andrew R. Flores, "Social Acceptance of LGBTI People in 175 Countries and Locations: 1981 to 2020" (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute, November 2021), <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Global-Acceptance-Index-LGBTI-Nov-2021.pdf>.