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Post-Humanitarian Militarism and the End of Development: Global Inequality, Security, and the Ethics of Post-Imperial Solidarity

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the transformation of global development from a discourse of aspirational equality to a regime of post-humanitarian militarism. It shows how aid, once framed as solidarity and progress, increasingly operates as an instrument of coercion, surveillance, and containment. Drawing on historical sociology and decolonial critique, the article argues that postwar development legitimated global stratification by promising political recognition while deferring redistribution. As this legitimating order unravels, illustrated by U.S. foreign aid retrenchment and the European Union's migration-security nexus, a new mode of governance has emerged: one that manages inequality through exclusion rather than inclusion. The analysis contributes to sociology by reframing development as a mechanism of stratification, by showing how racialized hierarchies structure global governance, and by advancing postimperial solidarity as a normative alternative grounded in redistribution, epistemic plurality, and collective responsibility.

1 | Introduction

The Global North's global development project is being *strategically repurposed*. This is not the story of sudden collapse, but of a deliberate transformation in the logic, instruments, and goals of international aid. In 2025, the newly reelected Trump administration terminated 90% of USAID foreign contracts in the first half of 2025 and proposed a 2026 budget that will reduce further US foreign assistance by at least 45% from 2025 levels—an approach that effectively dismantles the once massive US foreign aid apparatus (Mateo 2024; Nolen 2025; Haug et al. 2025; S. S. Regilme 2025a, 2025b; Saldinger and Miolene 2025). The cuts targeted the symbolic heart of post-Cold War liberalism: democracy and human rights promotion, market economy, and the role of the US as a self-proclaimed provider of global goods. Thus, USAID, long viewed as the institutional flagship of U.S. humanitarian engagement, is undergoing structural dismantlement

(Nolen 2025; The White House, Office of Management and Budget 2025; Haug et al. 2025).

This article approaches the crisis of development through a historical-sociological lens. Global development has never been a neutral process of uplift but a system of managing inequality across borders, binding postcolonial societies into hierarchical structures of wealth and power. Sociology has long interrogated the institutional and ideological foundations of inequality, from class and state formation to world-systems analysis. Building on this tradition, the article argues that the global order's legitimating framework has shifted over time: from *aspirational equality* after 1945, to *posthumanitarian militarism* in the present, and toward the fragile and aspirational emergence of *postimperial solidarities*. This historical sequence reveals not simply changes in aid policy but broader transformations in the ways inequality is organized, justified, and enforced. This

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analysis builds on sociology's long concern with inequality and domination, from Marx's critique of formal equality to Weber's analysis of bureaucratic rationality and Wallerstein's account of the world-system. Recent work on racial capitalism and decolonial sociology (Bhambra 2022; Go 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020) shows how global hierarchies are reproduced not only economically but also epistemically and politically. By placing global development within this sociological tradition, the article reframes aid not as a neutral instrument of policy but as an institution of social reproduction that sustains stratification on a planetary scale.

This article addresses this core puzzle: How did the post-Second World War development order sustain entrenched global inequality while legitimizing itself through the language of political equality, sovereignty, and humanitarian uplift? Moreover, now that this legitimizing discourse is unraveling, what has replaced it? What mechanisms sustain the global order once its moral scaffolding has lost credibility?

The main argument states that the contemporary global order witnesses the end of *aspirational equality*: a normative formation that underwrote global development by Western hegemony promising political rights *without* material redistribution. The normative order aimed to universalize liberal norms—civil liberties, market economies, national self-determination, electoral democracy, while deferring collective material equity. Its power lay not in solving inequality, but in moralizing it: portraying deprivation as transitional rather than a consequence of global hierarchy. This ideological regime worked through inequality. Development institutions rendered poverty as technocratic, governance failures fixable, and global injustice a matter of state capacity. However, that discursive cover is being stripped away. Under the second Trump administration, U.S. officials frame aid cuts as principled realignments, insisting America's resources should serve Americans. This nationalist frame has become politically saleable, especially when paired with claims that foreign aid sustains corrupt elites abroad at working-class citizens' expense. This ideological unraveling occurs against intensifying global inequality. According to Oxfam's (2024) report, the richest 1% of the world's population captured nearly two-thirds of all new wealth created since 2020—amounting to \$26 trillion—whereas the poorest 90% collectively gained just \$4 trillion (Oxfam 2024, 2025). This wealth concentration signals a distributional imbalance as well as the entrenchment of a global oligarchic constitutional order, where transnational elite accumulates disproportionate influence over economic systems, governance institutions, and political discourse (S. S. F. Regilme 2024, 2025; S. S. Regilme 2024; S. S. Regilme 2023a; Hägel 2020). This oligarchic constitutional order refers to a system where formal liberal democracy coexists with extreme wealth concentration and elite capture of policymaking, thereby rendering political equality hollow and reinforcing global stratification (S. S. Regilme 2023a; Hägel 2020; Page et al. 2018). In such a system, the rhetoric of equality has lost plausibility. Furthermore, a new sociological order emerges where increased wealth concentration consolidates transnational elite power, whereas systemic deprivation entrenches precarity for the global majority.

Postwar development helped stabilize a profoundly unequal international order by translating domination into the language of progress. Its universalist promise was never innocent as it was selective, paternalistic, and inseparable from imperial power, capitalist expansion, and geopolitical discipline. Yet that promise still mattered because it gave moral cover to hierarchy by portraying deprivation as transitional and inclusion as forthcoming. What marks the present conjuncture is that this legitimating fiction is wearing thin. The promise of development does not disappear, but its institutional remnants are increasingly redirected toward coercive ends: migration containment, security partnerships, tactical stabilization, and the regulation of populations cast as threats rather than rights-bearing subjects. Post-humanitarian militarism names this hardening conjuncture in which the management of inequality persists, but with less and less need to disguise itself in the language of shared human advancement.

Posthumanitarian militarism names a global governance regime in which aid infrastructures once legitimated through solidarity, development, and human rights are repurposed for securitized containment, surveillance, and transactional geopolitics. Inequality is not denied within this order. It is administered. Development remains institutionally present, but its tools are increasingly deployed to protect the core from the periphery through crisis management, coercion, and the preemption of dissent, all in ways consistent with the political economy of empire. The article theorizes this transformation and examines its effects in the Global South, where world order governs through suppression rather than solidarity. It intervenes in three debates: on the liberal international order, by showing a mutation in moral grammar from humanitarian universalism to security pragmatism; on critical development studies, by exposing development as a technology of governance that offers symbolic inclusion while deflecting demands for redistribution; and on global hierarchy, by showing how racialized foundations continue to organize international politics. Aspirational equality, I argue, served as the legitimating logic of postwar development. Posthumanitarian militarism now succeeds it.

The article proceeds in five parts. The first theorizes aspirational equality as the ideological scaffold of postwar development. The second traces the erosion of moral authority in donor practice. The third elaborates posthumanitarian militarism as a regime of exclusion and coercion. The fourth examines its materialization in the Global South, where development is folded into security strategy. The fifth outlines postimperial solidarity as an alternative grounded in material redistribution, collective sovereignty, and epistemic justice.

The analysis adopts layered periodization rather than epochal rupture. Postwar developmental liberalism institutionalized sovereign equality while preserving dependency through aid, debt, and unequal exchange. Neoliberal restructuring deepened market discipline and recast inequality as a technical problem. Post-9/11 securitized development fused aid with counterterrorism, state-building, and border control. The current conjuncture intensifies these inherited logics while shedding the universalist promise that once gave them moral cover. The

present is best understood, then, as the exhaustion of imperial development's moral alibi.

2 | Theorizing the Global Order: Aspirational Equality Amid Stratification

This article develops a conceptual triad—aspirational equality, posthumanitarian militarism, and postimperial solidarity—to examine the shifting ideological foundations of global development governance. As shown in Figure 1, these concepts trace a structural and moral arc: from a liberal order promising inclusion without redistribution, to an emergent regime governing inequality through violence, state coercion, and dehumanization, and finally to a vision of justice grounded in material equity, epistemic plurality, and collective agency. Rather than diagnosing a crisis of liberalism, this article argues that we see the exhaustion of its legitimating capacity and consolidation of a more hierarchical global order underwritten by violence from the US and its state and nonstate allies.

As shown in Figure 1, these three governing logics can be distinguished by legitimating principles, operative mechanisms, and ethical claims. Aspirational equality relied on moral universalism and deferred justice; posthumanitarian militarism favors coercion and containment; and postimperial solidarity reclaims justice through redistributive ethics and collective agency. These shifts are overlapping regimes layered onto global inequality infrastructures.

Aspirational equality emerged post-1945, when the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank codified sovereign equality and modernization promises. Yet managed dependency prevailed through debt regimes and aid conditionalities. Posthumanitarian militarism emerged after 9/11, reconfiguring aid into counterterrorism and migration control. The 2015 European migration crisis and COVID-19 pandemic normalized

militarized borders and vaccine nationalism. These moments show humanitarianism yielding to coercive management. Aspirational equality projected universal rights while deferring structural redistribution. It moralized global inequality by presenting deprivation as transitional and individualizing poverty's causes. Development discourses—through rights-based governance and liberal institutionalism—functioned to normalize inequality rather than transform it (Norrlöf 2018; Stokes 2018; S. S. Regilme 2019).

This conceptualization extends and deepens insights from critical development studies (Olivé et al. 2025; Hunter 2012; Escobar 1995) and decolonial critique (Bhambra 2022; Sondarjee and Andrews 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Go 2016, 2023). Aspirational equality operated through four key mechanisms. First, it privileged civil and political rights while marginalizing demands for material equity, allowing profoundly unequal societies—such as post-apartheid South Africa or liberalizing Southeast Asian states—to be celebrated as electoral democratic success stories without an equitable political economy (Majavu 2023; Kapoor 2016; Morvaridi 2012). Second, it depoliticized inequality by recasting it as a matter of weak institutions or poor governance rather than global structural violence and dehumanization of those in the periphery (Hickel 2017; Babb 2013; Arestis 2004). Third, it rewarded liberal compliance among Global South elites, who were integrated into global governance structures that upheld transnational and local elite priorities while perpetuating local dispossession (Bello et al. 2004; S. Regilme 2014). Fourth, it displaced global accountability by framing inequality as the result of domestic failure, while ignoring how trade regimes, debt traps, conditional aid, and the externalization of costs that sustain Global North wealth have systematically constrained emancipatory politics at the local level (S. S. Regilme 2023a). Together, these mechanisms produced a durable ideology and practices of deferred justice—a moral promise without material substance.

Concept	Definition	Core Logic	Role in Global Order
Aspirational Equality	A legitimating discourse promising inclusion without redistribution.	Moral persuasion through rights and formal sovereignty.	Masks structural stratification under a veneer of liberal universalism.
Post-Humanitarian Militarism	A security-based governance regime replacing aid with surveillance and coercion and abandonment of normative justifications	Strategic containment, externalization, and abandonment of global responsibilities to those in the periphery.	Manages inequality through militarized infrastructure and elite alliances.
Post-Imperial Solidarity	A radical vision of justice grounded in dignity, material redistribution, and co-agency.	Mutual recognition, reparative justice, and collective sovereignty.	Builds horizontal, plural, and ecological global relations beyond empire.

FIGURE 1 | Three governing logics of global development: From aspirational equality to postimperial solidarity.

Gillian Hart's distinction between small-d development and big-D Development clarifies the historical specificity of the present conjuncture while avoiding nostalgia and conceptual inflation. In Hart's formulation, development refers to the uneven processes through which capitalism transforms labor, land, social relations, and political authority, whereas Development denotes the postwar field of organized intervention emerging through decolonization, Cold War rivalry, and expert rule institutionalization (Hart 2001, 2010). This distinction reveals a crucial continuity and mutation. The continuity lies in capitalist and imperial ordering, which reproduce hierarchy through selective incorporation, dispossession, and dependency. The mutation lies in Development's changing political labor as an interventionist apparatus. For much of the postwar era, Development stabilized global inequality by translating domination into modernization, poverty reduction, institutional capacity, and national advancement. Those promises were selective, often violent, and inseparable from strategic power, yet performed a legitimating function. Now, that justificatory work is exhausted. Development institutions remain active but are explicitly tasked with containment, border externalization, resilience management, pacification, and security partnerships. What distinguishes this era is not the replacement of a just order by a coercive one, but the hardening of conditions where inequality management persists while universalist idioms that disguised it lose credibility. Hart's d/Development distinction sharpens this article's central point: posthumanitarian militarism represents Development's reorientation under conditions where its moral grammar lacks authority.

As this architecture loses credibility, development governance is being reorganized rather than abandoned. Posthumanitarian militarism names this reorganization. It does not mark coercion's first appearance in development, since coercion and racialized management long coexisted with humanitarian discourse. Its novelty lies in the declining need to legitimate hierarchy through universalist promises of uplift. Aid increasingly ties to containment, surveillance, migration control, and strategic bargaining, whereas solidarity language remains only instrumentally. Posthumanitarian militarism thus represents an intensified mode of governing inequality under liberal exhaustion.

Yet in aspirational equality's ruins, a different horizon is possible. Postimperial solidarity emerges as critique and proposition—a normative framework rooted in human equality, just redistribution, and cocreation of futures beyond empire. It rejects liberal paternalism, managerialism, and militarized containment for reciprocal recognition, planetary care, and collective sovereignty. Postimperial solidarity builds on existing practices—climate justice movements, Indigenous resistance, and feminist care infrastructures, and calls for scholars to work with, not on, marginalized communities. It is neither utopian nor naïve but names the imperative to reimagine development as structural redress. If aspirational equality justified hierarchy and posthumanitarianism enforces it, then postimperial solidarity confronts it, thereby insisting another world remains thinkable.

3 | The Exhaustion of Moral Legitimacy and the Rise of Post-Humanitarian Militarism

Any persuasive account of the present conjuncture must begin with a sober recognition that development has long been

entangled with coercion, pacification, and the management of politically subordinate populations. Ferguson's work on Lesotho showed how development discourse depoliticized struggles over land, labor, and inequality while extending bureaucratic state power (Ferguson 1994). Li's account of the "will to improve" demonstrated how expert interventions rendered populations legible to governmental reform in ways deeply imbricated with discipline and dispossession (Li 2007). Duffield further showed that the fusion of development and security was not a deviation from liberal order but one of its durable governing logics, especially in spaces treated as unstable frontiers of global risk (Duffield 2007). More recent scholarship on Palestine and Afghanistan sharpens that insight by showing how aid has worked not merely alongside imperial power but through it, territorializing rule, institutionalizing surveillance, and containing populations within unequal regimes of mobility and violence (Bhungalia 2023; Attewell 2023). My own work on U.S. foreign aid in post-Cold War Southeast Asia similarly shows that aid has often functioned as a political technology of imperial governance, legitimizing counterterrorism priorities, strengthening coercive state institutions, and enabling domestic repression against unarmed populations while retaining the language of reform, rights, and developmental partnership (S. S. F. Regilme 2021). What distinguishes the present moment, then, is not the discovery of violence within development, since that violence has long been there. The sharper shift lies in the weakening of the older justificatory vocabulary through which domination could still be narrated as modernization, poverty reduction, institutional capacity-building, or eventual inclusion. That promise was always selective and hierarchical, but it furnished moral cover. In the current conjuncture, coercive functions increasingly appear with less rhetorical mediation. Border externalization, deterrence, stabilization, resilience, and transactional partnership are now frequently advanced as sufficient ends in themselves. Posthumanitarian militarism names this hardening political condition in which development continues to govern inequality but does so more openly through containment, preemption, and the differential allocation of security across human lives.

As liberalism wanes, global governance maintains its dominance through mechanisms that rely less on normative justification. The unraveling of humanitarian and developmental discourse signifies a loss of credibility and also the erosion of moral legitimacy as a mode of global rule. For decades, global development and foreign aid were supported by a moral framework that positioned power in terms of solidarity, uplift, and universalism of human dignity. U.S. foreign aid institutions, such as USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, routinely integrated human rights, democracy promotion, and capacity-building into the broader machinery of soft power intended to sustain Western hegemony, and in effect, the enduring hierarchies of humanity (Knack 2004; Sandholtz 2016; Davies 2018; Lebovic 2014). Similarly, the European Union positioned itself as a "normative power," exporting values, such as good governance, gender equity, and participatory development, through conditional aid instruments (Zielonka 2013; Manners 2002).

In the post-COVID world order, this moral framework began to unravel (Barnett 2020; S. S. Regilme 2023b). Austerity pressures, geopolitical competition, and nationalist backlashes constrained

foreign aid budgets and policy ambitions in contributing to global institutions managing disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and public health. Although institutions used humanitarian language, their policies aligned with security imperatives. This shift culminated post-2025, where the Trump administration dismantled US aid and contributions to global development, abolishing US-funded democratic governance programs and redirecting funds toward counterterrorism and border control. Here, development discourse becomes a blatant tool of strategic leverage rather than moral responsibility. Europe followed suit. The European Peace Facility (EPF) signaled a break from previous norms, though Europe's fortress mentality amid refugee deaths had preceded Trump (Feldblum 1994; Stierl 2021). Across the Sahel, Eastern Europe, and North Africa, EU assistance shifted from civilian infrastructure to financing arms, military training, and securitized governance (Conlon 2024). Development funds now support border enforcement, migration deterrence, and security operations. Human rights conditions have weakened whereas threat-centered partnerships proliferated. These changes mark development's shift to posthumanitarian militarism, consequently reconstituting global governance ontologically. Unlike its liberal predecessor, which masked domination through humanitarian responsibilities, this regime abandons moral coherence. It operationalizes hierarchy as natural, embracing a world divided into governable and ungovernable populations, secure and insecure zones, and lives deemed valuable versus disposable (S. S. F. Regilme 2024; S. S. Regilme 2023b). This emerges through eroding the Enlightenment premise of equal human protection. It marks the retreat from cosmopolitan ideals toward what Achille Mbembe calls necropolitical ordering, where sovereign power over life and death becomes central to global authority. The division of life into subjects of care and control now organizes development itself.

A compelling theoretical parallel lies in Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "state of exception": once considered an emergency condition, it now becomes routinized in development governance (Agamben 1998, 2008). The deployment of drones, biometric tracking systems, detention infrastructures, and militarized aid flows illustrate how the exception becomes the norm, targeting those outside the boundaries of recognized political subjectivity. Refugees, undocumented migrants, and low-income racialized populations in the Global South are increasingly governed through practices of preemption, not inclusion: managed as risks and threats to be managed and disciplined rather than communities to be supported and empowered.

At the same time, this emergent regime borrows selectively from liberal vocabulary when expedient. References to "stabilization," "resilience," or "migration management" obscure the underlying architecture of lethal control (Mangueira 2024; Norman and Micinski 2023). Military imperatives are laundered through developmental language. Thus, we observe how ethics was subordinated to strategy. Development ceases to be a site of normative contestation and becomes a security governance modality. It opposes an inclusive future as it entrenches an unequal present. This is the rupture inaugurated by posthumanitarian militarism, a system in which coercion is framed not as humanitarianism's failure but as its successor.

Posthumanitarian militarism operates through three interconnected logics. First, it naturalizes hierarchies of humanity as the ontological basis for expanded coercion (S. S. F. Regilme 2024; S. S. Regilme and Parthenay 2024; Mattern and Zarakol 2016). It assumes that certain populations, especially in the Global South, are not only unequal in status but inherently dangerous, surplus, or burdensome. This naturalization justifies the use of militarized interventions, surveillance infrastructures, and externalized borders as necessary tools of global management. Second, it enacts domination without ethical pretense (S. S. Regilme 2019). Whereas liberalism insisted on the moral justification of intervention, often invoking democracy, human rights, or humanitarian urgency, posthumanitarianism dispenses with such claims. Power is exercised explicitly in service of national interest, regional stability, or migration control, with little concern for normative coherence and universal human dignity. Third, it institutionalizes a securitized infrastructure of containment (Brown 2016; Fisher and Anderson 2015).

Development assistance has shifted from providing universal public goods, such as schools, health systems, and infrastructure, toward securitized projects including border fortifications, detention centers, and surveillance. This reflects a transformation in aid logic: rather than fostering development, assistance now manages populations and contains unrest away from the global North. The line between development, diplomacy, and defense collapses, with funding based on strategic utility through migration control, counterterrorism, or geopolitical alignment. Aid becomes a reward for compliance, given to regimes that reinforce Northern security priorities. This order is coproduced as authoritarian governments act as subcontractors of global security by suppressing dissent and policing mobility in exchange for resources and recognition. Taken together, these logics show that the contemporary aid regime does not simply fail to reduce inequality; it increasingly governs inequality by organizing who may move, who must remain governable, and whose precarity can be treated as an acceptable condition of order.

4 | From Developmental Legitimation to Security-Centered Governance

The shift from aspirational equality to posthumanitarian militarism should be understood as a mutation in the governance of inequality, not as the replacement of a benevolent order by a coercive one. Since World War II, development has often managed rather than dismantled global hierarchy, incorporating postcolonial societies into unequal circuits of finance, expertise, and security. What distinguishes the current moment is that development infrastructures are now more explicitly tasked with immobilizing populations, stabilizing compliant regimes, and protecting the geopolitical core from the distributive claims of the periphery. The 9/11 securitization of aid, the 2015 European migration crisis, and COVID-19's uneven public health order accelerated this tendency. The issue, then, is not that development has ceased to be political. It is that its political function is less frequently narrated through uplift and more openly organized through deterrence, selective abandonment, and preemptive control.

Far from being an anomaly, the expansion of U.S. military aid amid sweeping domestic austerity signals a deliberate recalibration of state priorities, where coercion is fortified whereas the rhetoric of care is withdrawn. In 2025, the U.S. Congress approved a budget that reduced development aid, dismantling most of USAID's programming in global health, education, economic development, and civil society (Mallapaty 2025; Nolen 2025). In its place, military assistance expanded to client regimes with strategic alignment to American interests. Egypt, Israel, and the Philippines all received advanced surveillance technologies, cybersecurity tools, and counterinsurgency hardware. Unlike earlier U.S. policies that cloaked security assistance in democratic conditionality, the Trump administration dispensed with moral justifications (Nolen 2025; Haug et al. 2025). Arms and intelligence are now exchanged for loyalty and silence, consequently entrenching a transactional order in which repression is rewarded with strategic support. For 2026, Trump's proposed budget raises defense spending by 13%, bringing it to \$1 trillion, whereas cutting nondefense discretionary spending by nearly 23%, or \$163 billion, reducing it to around \$557 billion (Luhby et al. 2025). The plan also includes a \$175 billion investment to fully secure the border and a \$3.3 billion increase for military veterans' medical care (Luhby et al. 2025).

Across the Atlantic, the European Union, long championing itself as a "normative power" and moral leader in development, has undergone a parallel reorientation (Manners 2002). The EU—facing the collapse of its border regime, the erosion of its post-2015 multicultural consensus, and the disintegration of its traditional partnership with the United States—has fundamentally redefined its external engagement approach (Manguerra 2024; Norman and Micinski 2023). Migration partnerships with authoritarian regimes and conditional aid linked to European security reflect a posthumanitarian consensus where inequality must be contained and stratification persists. This shift alters governance: development now functions as a securitized tool for crisis management and mobility regulation rather than moral justification for stratification. Although rights discourse persists, borders are fortified, and aid becomes military support.

In Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Mauritania, EU development assistance has been redefined as a tool for migration control (Delioglu 2025; Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2025). EU funding now supports detention centers, coast guard operations, and deportation infrastructures across North Africa. Since 2015, the European Union has increasingly tied development aid to border externalization and expansion of surveillance apparatus, exemplified by the €3.4 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) aimed at addressing the so-called "root causes of irregular migration", but the aim is focused on expansion of migration prevention through militarization and securitization of the borders (Heck and Habersky 2025). Moreover, the EU's migration funding schemes have had significant negative impacts on African countries, particularly in the Sahel region (Tubiana et al. 2018). For example, in Niger and Sudan, EU funding and pressure led to the criminalization of traditional migration routes, which not only destabilized local economies but also increased the dangers faced by migrants. In Niger, after the enforcement of migration bans, the number of migrants dead in the desert rose dramatically—from 71 in 2015, to 95 in 2016, and

then to 427 in 2017, according to IOM data. These policies have concentrated smuggling revenues in fewer hands, with only experienced "stuntmen" drivers remaining, whereas less experienced individuals abandoned the activity. From a sociological perspective, these border externalization policies have reshaped the conditions of migration itself. By criminalizing established routes, the EU has forced migrants into dangerous clandestine journeys, increasing undocumented lives. Survivors often enter Europe irregularly, channeled into racialized labor markets—agricultural fields in Italy, construction in Spain, or domestic service in France—where precarity becomes institutionalized. The border acts as a filter creating disposable labor populations, whose lack of legal protection ensures their economic utility. EU aid now reorganizes social hierarchies within Europe, ensuring migrant bodies are contained and economically extracted. The EU's approach, lacking oversight, risks empowering authoritarian regimes as seen in Sudan where funding may support abusive actors. The focus on reducing migration has overshadowed human rights concerns, with little attention to root causes such as economic inequalities. Although migration flows have decreased, routes have become more dangerous, undermining aid recipient countries' stability (Tubiana et al. 2018). These are not anomalies but the architecture of post-humanitarian militarism in action.

Since its launch in 2021, the European Peace Facility (EPF) has expanded rapidly, in part due to Russia's war in Ukraine and growing instability in the Sahel (Altamimi 2022; Rutigliano 2022). Initially framed as a mechanism to strengthen civilian peacekeeping and crisis management, the EPF has rapidly evolved into a conduit for military assistance to regimes implicated in authoritarian repression. For the period 2021–2027, the EPF funding is budgeted at least 17 billion Euros, with a growing proportion allocated to countries in the Sahel and North Africa (European Parliament 2025). In Niger, EU-supported forces carried out cross-border operations with little regard for civilian casualties or due process. These operations are defended not in the language of rights or development, but through regional security narratives centered on the containment of jihadist insurgency and irregular migration. Civilian programs for education, governance, or economic empowerment are increasingly eclipsed by border control technologies, paramilitary training, and weapons transfers. Peacebuilding has been redefined as regime stabilization. Conceived to enhance civilian-military cooperation, the EPF now finances lethal weaponry and military training for third countries. This includes regimes with troubling human rights records, such as Niger and Burkina Faso, raising concerns that EU external action subordinates humanitarian objectives to security imperatives. Meanwhile, EU development funds—especially under the Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)—have been reallocated toward previously unthinkable objectives: migration deterrence, border externalization, and digital surveillance of migrants. In North Africa, cooperation agreements with Tunisia and Libya provide aid in exchange for intercepting migrants before reaching European shores (Vigneswaran et al. 2024; Deridder and Sylla 2024). This shift has turned development funding into a tool for containment, shifting its focus from uplifting recipient societies to preemptively managing their movement and potential instability.

The rise of private military and security companies (PMSCs) furthers this transformation (Groot and Regilme 2021; C. D. Robinson and Matisek 2021; Jawad and Hamid 2024; Virginski 2024). Since 9/11, firms, such as G4S, DynCorp, and GardaWorld, have expanded from logistics to direct involvement in surveillance, detention, and border enforcement. PMSCs operate in legal gray areas, contracted by donor governments to provide tactical solutions. They build biometric databases, run detention facilities, and train foreign security forces without oversight. Their involvement severs accountability between donor funding and humanitarian outcomes, making aid an arm of global policing.

The developmental subject, once a beneficiary of modernity, is now viewed as a threat to contain. Aid goes to those who immobilize populations; development has become demographic triage. Migration and instability are seen as risks to neutralize rather than symptoms of inequality. This represents a new paradigm of governance. Posthumanitarian militarism imposes compliance through surveillance and force, ensuring immobilization rather than transformation. Its targets are movement, dissent, and demographic growth. The development regime is a strategy of exclusion, enforced through technological violence.

Stability has become the moral alibi of securitized aid, yet under posthumanitarian militarism its meaning has been transformed. It no longer denotes the construction of public goods, democratic accountability, or social protection. It increasingly refers to fortifying coercive institutions, immobilizing unwanted mobility, and insulating donor states from global inequality's consequences. The United States makes this shift visible. The White House's FY2026 budget request proposed cutting major development assistance accounts by \$8.326 billion, humanitarian assistance by \$3.207 billion, and State and USAID operations by \$2.462 billion, whereas raising defense spending by 13% to \$1.01 trillion and advancing a \$175 billion border-security investment (The White House, Office of Management and Budget 2025). The European Union reveals this governing logic through migration externalization. Its cooperation with Libya has strengthened border and coast guard capacities while shifting migration control's human costs onto a space documented for arbitrary detention, torture, trafficking, and other grave abuses against migrants and refugees. In the Philippines, a pattern of subcontracted authoritarian governance emerges, where external security backing through the United States strengthens Philippine state's coercive capacities while democratic safeguards remain frail. Counterterrorism cooperation has bolstered repressive state institutions as antiterrorism laws target activists, civil society groups, indigenous communities, and journalists. Across these cases, securitized aid redistributes insecurity downward toward the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy and outward the core of the elite centers. What it secures is distance between powerful states and the consequences of inequalities they continue to benefit from.

5 | The Global South as a Laboratory of Militarized Governance

The Global South has evolved from a recipient of development to a testing ground for a novel model of governance blending coercion, neglect, and experimentation. Unlike previous aid that

masked hierarchy with moral appeals, today's development regime makes no pretense. It governs through infrastructural asymmetries: health systems collapse whereas surveillance technologies expand; NGOs lose funding whereas military partnerships flourish. What is ending is not development as a field of intervention, but its capacity to sustain credibility through the promise of universal uplift. Assistance flows not to build autonomy but to entrench dependency under security claims. What unfolds is not the withdrawal of global engagement but its redirection: from moral persuasion to tactical discipline, from inclusion to disposability. In this order, the Global South serves as a laboratory—not for justice innovation, but for refining instruments of deterrence and control that underpin the global architecture of inequality.

This transformation has produced deadly consequences. Across Africa, U.S. aid withdrawals have scaled back development, destabilized health systems, undermined civil society, and intensified state precarity. Trump's aid cuts reflect a transactional and militarized logic of disengagement, with lethal consequences. After dismantling USAID as an independent agency, his administration cut 90% of foreign contracts, reducing sub-Saharan Africa's funding—which stood at \$12.7 billion in 2024—by devastating margins (Fröhlich 2025). In Kenya, HIV/AIDS funding fell from \$846 million to \$66 million, leaving one million people without antiretroviral medication. South Africa faces losing 500,000 lives in the next decade due to disrupted HIV services. Amref Health Africa, serving 20 million people yearly, lost 20% of its budget; in Tanzania, 500,000 TB screenings were canceled, and in South Sudan, cholera response collapsed as clinics closed. Trump's withdrawal from Gavi threatens immunization of 75 million children over 5 years, risking 1.3 million preventable deaths. This rollback reverses decades of health progress and exposes millions to death from treatable diseases, serving narrow American self-interest. When HIV/AIDS programs collapse, effects extend beyond health: they destabilize families, undermine labor markets, and weaken social infrastructures sustaining everyday life. In South Africa, women—who disproportionately shoulder caregiving—face increased unpaid care work as relatives lose treatment access, reproducing gendered inequalities. U.S. funding withdrawal deepens intergenerational precarity: children pulled from school for caregiving, workers exiting employment due to illness, and communities stripped of civic capacity to mobilize around public health. These are central outcomes of aid retrenchment, which transforms structural inequality into lived disposability.

In Southeast Asia, abrupt termination of U.S. assistance has destabilized the region's civil society landscape (Rey 2025). USAID's sudden exit from the region eliminated approximately \$1.5 billion in active projects, including over \$300 million in democratic governance initiatives and more than \$500 million in health and education programs. In Myanmar, over 200 civil society organizations lost funding, whereas in Cambodia, U.S. aid cuts affected more than 80% of independent media and human rights groups. In the Philippines, at least 120 local NGOs were forced to scale down or shut operations, eroding vital services for marginalized communities and weakening democratic resilience across the region. As a result, civil society resilience has collapsed, authoritarian consolidation has accelerated, and regional governance capacity has been significantly undermined.

In the Middle East, long reliant on military aid and development assistance, USAID's dissolution marked a shift toward militarism. U.S. support to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel continued, but solely under strategic defense. In Palestine, the end of US-funded humanitarian assistance worsened healthcare, education, and infrastructure decline in Gaza and the West Bank, whereas US arms transfers to Israel increased. As rhetoric shifted to "regional stabilization" and "terror deterrence," developmental priorities vanished. Trump administration's aid strategy adopted a transactional logic that deepened authoritarian control and civilian vulnerability. Egypt—having received over \$87 billion in U.S. aid since 1946—saw no change in its \$1.4 billion annual military assistance, despite human rights abuses, forced disappearances, and militarized civil governance (Salhani 2025). Jordan faced a \$770 million cut in economic aid in 2025, undermining education, infrastructure, and public services amid economic strain (Salhani 2025). This asymmetry was deliberate: military aid continued to ensure compliance and benefit U.S. arms industries, whereas development aid cuts disciplined resistance and shifted governance costs to brittle regimes. Trump's approach made aid a weapon—strengthening repressive forces, removing social protections, and increasing state violence in fragile societies.

The impact extended to Central Asia, where post-Soviet states relied on U.S. aid for institutions and infrastructure. Trump's termination of USAID programs marked a transactional shift in U.S. foreign policy (Putz 2025). In Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, all bilateral USAID development assistance ended, alongside 78% cuts in Kyrgyzstan and 69% in Tajikistan (Putz 2025). These cuts eliminated \$52.8 million in health programs, \$40.9 million in economic development, \$37.8 million in peace and security, and \$32.1 million in democracy initiatives—affecting anticorruption, civil society, media, education, and LGBT rights. Except for limited tuberculosis relief and food aid, development support ceased, eroding U.S. influence as Russia and China filled the void.

6 | Post-Imperial Solidarity

Postimperial solidarity rests on a simple but demanding premise: every natural human person possesses equal political worth, and the universality of human dignity has meaning only when equal recognition is matched by material conditions that make a humane, decent, and livable life possible. Political equality cannot remain a ceremonial abstraction while access to food, housing, healthcare, education, physical safety, mobility, and legal protection is distributed according to imperial history, geopolitical usefulness, or the accident of birthplace. A world order that proclaims equal dignity while tolerating chronic hunger, preventable death, forced displacement, and zones of permanent abandonment is not merely unequal, it is organized around graded humanity. Postimperial solidarity names the political struggle to undo that graded humanity by joining moral equality to material distribution. Its core claim is that no state, market, or security doctrine is legitimate if it preserves abundance for some through the structured precarity of others. Accordingly, solidarity requires institutions that secure the social and economic bases of dignity across borders, not as charity from the powerful, but as obligations arising from equal personhood and from histories of empire, extraction, and

organized deprivation. This means redistribution without donor tutelage, migration governance without dehumanization, climate responsibility without evasion, and international cooperation ordered toward the guarantee that all persons, wherever they are born, enjoy the substantive conditions of a life worthy of equal respect.

The Global South now stands at the sharp edge of post-humanitarian governance. Development has been recoded from a language of progress into an apparatus of exclusion, where aid is militarized, surveillance substitutes for welfare, and authoritarian intermediaries enforce donor priorities. They reveal a world order whose legitimating promises have been exhausted. Postimperial solidarity responds to that impasse as a normative and political horizon grounded in universal human dignity, just material redistribution, and mutual respect across difference. It rejects the epistemic paternalism, depoliticized technocracy, and coercive governance that have long organized the global development regime, and it begins from a harder truth: inequality is one of its constitutive principles.

Postimperial solidarity is also a sociological project. It treats universal human dignity as a relational achievement sustained by institutions of care, redistribution, and recognition not as an abstract possession secured by formal rights alone. Solidarity, in this sense, is coresponsibility: it organizes social life so that individual worth is protected through collective provision. This is why climate justice campaigns demanding reparations, Indigenous autonomy movements defending communal land, and feminist infrastructures of care matter analytically as well as politically: they show how collective responsibility can secure individual dignity against the coercive logics of posthumanitarian militarism. The project is postimperial because it seeks to move beyond colonial, epistemic, and economic domination toward a plural global community organized through reciprocal recognition, shared responsibility, and planetary care. It is solidarity because it demands coresistance, reparative justice, and material obligation. In that horizon, sovereignty means the collective capacity to shape one's future without domination, whether epistemic, economic, or political.

These practices already exist. South–South health cooperation, including Cuba's Henry Reeve Medical Brigades, the Africa CDC's pooled procurement initiatives, and the WHO-supported mRNA Technology Transfer Hub in South Africa, democratizes life-saving capacity rather than monetizing scarcity (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2024; WHO 2021; Kirk and Walker 2016). In Indigenous territories, struggles for free, prior, and informed consent under UNDRIP, together with community land titling advanced by COICA in the Amazon and AMAN in Indonesia, protect land, biodiversity, and collective survival against dispossession, displacement, and gendered violence (Ornelas 2014; Rice 2022; Manaysay 2020). Feminist humanitarian infrastructures, including women-led safe spaces in Cox's Bazar and cash-plus support for Rohingya refugees, translate dignity into concrete protection while cultivating leadership among those most affected (UN Women – Asia-Pacific 2019). Climate justice coalitions led by small island states and frontline communities pushed the Loss and Damage Fund from demand to institutional reality, asserting that those who benefited most from extraction bear reparative obligations

(McDonnell 2023; S. Robinson and Carlson 2021; Oxfam 2023). Municipal solidarity initiatives, such as Barcelona Ciutat Refugi and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, show how local publics can secure dignity when national and international regimes fail (Irgil 2016). Cooperative platforms, such as CoopCycle, and locally led climate finance models, including IIED's Community Development Funds and Locally Led Adaptation principles, embed reciprocity and collective agency in resource allocation (Kasparian 2025; Papadimitropoulos and Malamidis 2024).

In the ruins of aspirational equality and the decline of humanitarian pretense, postimperial solidarity offers a firmer foundation for global politics: universal dignity, equitable redistribution, epistemic humility, and shared care for planetary life. It refuses the claim that militarized inequality is inevitable. Its wager is that justice becomes real only when equal human worth is secured through institutions that dismantle, rather than merely manage, the hierarchies inherited from empire.

7 | Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that global development is best understood as a shifting regime of inequality governance. The promises of postwar global development legitimized hierarchies through a universalist rhetoric of deferred inclusion and sovereign recognition. The contemporary conjuncture marks a reorganization of development around more explicit logics of containment, surveillance, and strategic bargaining. Post-humanitarian militarism names this mutation. It captures a moment in which the moral alibi of development has weakened, even as its infrastructures remain active and are increasingly repurposed for security-centered rule. Postimperial solidarity, in turn, names not a finished alternative order, but a normative horizon oriented toward redistribution, coagency, and reparative justice.

The analysis here contributes to sociological debates in three ways. First, it advances a historical account of how legitimacy in global governance has shifted over time, linking international development to broader trajectories of global stratification. Second, it introduces the conceptual triad of aspirational equality, posthumanitarian militarism, and postimperial solidarity as a framework for analyzing transformations in governance and inequality. Third, it highlights how emerging practices of solidarity illustrate the possibility of alternatives, demonstrating that global order is not only reproduced but contested. By reframing development as a sociological problem of inequality and legitimacy, the analysis shifts debate beyond policy evaluation toward the structural logics of global governance. In doing so, the article opens space for rethinking how global institutions and social practices might secure justice and human dignity in a world where the notion of global development no longer carries credible moral authority.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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