SIGNED, SEALED, (STILL NOT) DELIVERED: WHEN AID AMBITION MEETS POLITICAL REALITY

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In 1970, the world's richest countries gathered under the banner of the United Nations and made a simple, bold commitment: to spend 0.7% of their GDP on official development assistance. The logic was seductive. A small slice of rich-world income could finance poverty reduction, support growth and narrow global inequality. Half a century on, only a handful of countries have consistently met the target. For most, 0.7% has become less a benchmark than a rhetorical prop – wheeled out at summits and conveniently shelved when domestic politics intrude. Today, that shelving is no longer subtle. As security concerns rise and defence budgets expand, development spending is increasingly treated not as long-term investment but as discretionary diplomacy – first in line for cuts when fiscal and geopolitical priorities collide.

The problem was never just political cowardice. Fixating on a single input target created its own distortions. Volume crowded out judgement. Spending became a goal in itself, not a means to development outcomes. And as aid budgets grew – at least on paper – scrutiny of what that money achieved became harder, not easier. The 0.7% promise survived as a moral signal, but its economic logic and political durability steadily eroded.

By 2005, the pendulum swung from how much aid to how well it worked. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness promised a quieter revolution: country ownership, donor alignment and harmonisation, a focus on results and mutual accountability. These were sensible principles, born of hard-won experience. Yet progress was halting and often superficial. Donors still preferred their own flags on projects and reporting systems. Recipient governments still bent to donor priorities rather than the other way round. "Mutual accountability" rarely felt mutual.

The uncomfortable truth is that aid effectiveness ran into political limits. It asked donors to give up control, accept risk and tolerate ambiguity – precisely the things bureaucracies are least rewarded for doing. As security concerns hardened and fiscal space narrowed, development cooperation also began to lose its status as protected, long-term, reliable funding. It became discretionary diplomacy, competing with priorities that promised quicker, more visible political returns. In that world, principles that relied on patience, trust and shared ownership were never going to win budget battles. The Paris Principles did not fail because they were wrong, but because they constrained behaviour. Over time, they became a language everyone spoke and few truly practised – polite suggestions rather than a binding framework.

Then came 2015, and another moment of global resolve in Paris ("we'll always have Paris", to borrow from Casablanca). This time, the stakes were planetary. The Paris Agreement on Climate Change committed governments to keep warming well below 2°C and mobilise USD 100 billion a year in climate finance for developing countries. A decade later, emissions continue to rise, the finance target remains unmet and the countries least responsible for climate change bear its heaviest costs – many of them the intended beneficiaries of the original 1970 pledge.

Once again, the arc is familiar. Ambition. Applause. Anti-climax. Climate finance now carries the moral weight that aid once did – urgency, inevitability, virtue. Yet it is already showing the same fault lines: inflated expectations, blurred definitions, creative accounting and a widening gap between what is promised internationally and what materialises on the ground. Much of what is labelled climate finance is neither new nor particularly developmental, and much of what vulnerable countries actually need remains hard to fund.

As public budgets tighten, impact investing is increasingly presented as the grown-up solution – disciplined, market-based, and supposedly insulated from politics. In practice, it often inherits the same ambiguities as ODA itself: ambitious claims, selective metrics and a quiet reliance on public subsidy to make returns palatable. Much of what is branded "impact" gravitates towards the narrow band of opportunities that already look investable, leaving harder structural problems untouched. This is not a failure of markets, but of expectations. Private capital was never designed to replace political commitment – only to follow it.

What links these episodes – aid quantity, aid quality, climate finance and impact investing – is not a lack of technical solutions. It is politics. Each depended on sustained political will, and each collided with competing priorities: fiscal pressure at home, geopolitical rivalry abroad and an increasing tendency to treat development as an instrument of security, migration control or strategic competition. These agendas did not simply drift off course; they were overtaken.

International development is now having an existential crisis – and not the fun kind where you move to Bali and start a wellness brand. Budgets are shrinking, voters are unsympathetic and aid is increasingly justified through the language of risk management rather than long-term change. When governments can mobilise hundreds of billions for defence overnight but struggle to sustain decades-old development commitments, the issue is no longer efficiency alone. It is priority.

The risk is not that aid disappears altogether, but that it continues to reinvent itself without resolving its underlying tension. More money, better money, greener money, private money – each presented as the answer, each quietly constrained by the same political realities. Until those are confronted honestly, the gap between ambition and outcome will persist.

Aid may not be ending. But its era as a protected moral project almost certainly is. What comes next will be smaller, sharper and more overtly political – less about universal promises and more about what can actually survive a cabinet meeting, a spending review and a nervous electorate.

That may feel like a loss. But after fifty years of ambitious targets colliding with political reality, it might finally be the moment development stops pretending otherwise – and starts working from the world as it is – inconvenient, constrained, and still the only one we've got.