

From Global Governance to National Interest: Populism and the Reconfiguration of International Development Cooperation in the United States of America and Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how the contemporary rise of populism reshaped international development cooperation by reorienting state behaviour from multilateral, rule-based global governance toward sovereignty-centred and national-interest-driven engagement. Using the United States and Nigeria as comparative cases, the study conceptualized populism as a thin-centred ideology grounded in anti-elitism, moralized constructions of “the people,” and claims to restore popular sovereignty, and explored how these ideas extended beyond domestic politics into foreign and development policy. Drawing on a qualitative, literature-based comparative design, the study synthesized theoretical and empirical scholarship on populism, global governance, and development cooperation, alongside policy analyses of aid, trade, climate governance, and regional integration. The findings showed that in both countries populist discourse delegitimized multilateral institutions by portraying them as elite-driven constraints on national autonomy, thereby encouraging selective compliance, transactional diplomacy, and a preference for bilateral or executive-centred arrangements. In the United States, populist nationalism contributed to reduced commitment to multilateral agreements and institutions, the politicization of development assistance, and the reframing of trade and climate cooperation in security and competitiveness terms, with systemic implications for the legitimacy and capacity of global development regimes. In Nigeria, populism was intertwined with post-colonial and sovereignty-centred narratives that generated ambivalence toward external conditionality and regional integration, leading to selective engagement with and occasional defiance of Economic Community of West African States and African Continental Free Trade Area commitments, thereby disrupting African-led development frameworks. The comparative analysis further demonstrated that structural position in the international system mediated the scale and reach of populism’s effects: while a global power reshaped international norms and institutional authority, a regional power primarily influenced sub-regional and continental governance. The study concluded that populism did not eliminate international development cooperation but reconfigured it toward a more fragmented, interest-driven, and politically instrumental form, posing significant challenges to the sustainability, predictability, and legitimacy of collective action in global and regional development governance.

Keywords: Populism; Global governance; Development cooperation; National sovereignty; United States and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the global resurgence of populism. Once considered a marginal or episodic political phenomenon, populism has become a central force reshaping governance, political discourse, and foreign policy across both advanced and developing democracies. Scholars increasingly conceptualize populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that divides society into two antagonistic camps—“the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”—and claims that politics should be an unmediated expression of the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). This ideological framing has gained traction in the aftermath of economic dislocation, cultural anxiety, and declining trust in political institutions associated with globalization and neoliberal reform (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Pappas, 2019). Beyond its

domestic implications, populism has emerged as a powerful challenge to the liberal international order, particularly to the norms and institutions that underpin global governance and international development cooperation (Flockhart, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

International development cooperation has historically been grounded in multilateralism, institutionalized rules, and collective responsibility. Since the post-1945 period, organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and regional bodies including the European Union, African Union, and ECOWAS have coordinated efforts to address poverty, inequality, health crises, conflict, and environmental degradation. These arrangements rest on liberal-institutionalist assumptions that international institutions can mitigate anarchy, foster trust, and enable states to pursue long-term collective gains that transcend narrow national interests (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Falkner, 2020). Yet the populist turn has increasingly called this cooperative logic into question. Populist leaders frequently portray multilateral institutions as elitist, unaccountable, and biased against ordinary citizens, framing global governance as a constraint on sovereignty rather than a mechanism for shared problem-solving (Mudde, 2019; Zielonka, 2018).

Across regions, populist governments have advanced nationalist and protectionist agendas that prioritize domestic political legitimacy over international commitments. In Europe, the Brexit referendum and the rise of parties such as the Alternative for Germany and the National Rally have weakened supranational solidarity and compliance with EU norms (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Taggart, 2018). In Latin America, leaders such as Chávez and Bolsonaro have challenged international environmental and human-rights regimes in the name of popular sovereignty (Corrales & Penfold, 2015; Fearnside, 2020). In Africa, populist and nationalist rhetoric has often drawn on post-colonial grievances, portraying global institutions as instruments of neo-imperial control and legitimizing resistance to external conditionality (Mamdani, 2022; Chivunda, 2020). Collectively, these developments signal a broader ideological shift from rule-based multilateralism toward a politics of national interest, executive centralization, and selective engagement.

The implications of this shift are particularly significant for international development cooperation. Multilateral development frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals, global climate finance, and coordinated pandemic responses depend on sustained institutional trust, predictable funding, and collective burden-sharing. Populist skepticism toward these arrangements has translated into withdrawal from international agreements, reductions in multilateral contributions, and the reorientation of aid toward bilateral, transactional, and security-driven objectives (Rodrik, 2017; Börzel & Risse, 2021). Falkner (2020) and Flockhart (2018) argue that such behavior weakens the normative foundations of global governance by replacing long-term collective rationality with short-term domestic political calculus. Yet despite these far-reaching consequences, the development dimension of populism remains under-theorized, particularly outside Western contexts.

Most existing studies focus on the domestic political roots of populism—cultural backlash, economic insecurity, and crisis of representation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Mudde, 2019)—or on its implications for democratic erosion and executive aggrandizement (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how populism restructures international development cooperation, foreign aid regimes, and regional integration projects. Moreover, the literature remains heavily Euro-Atlantic in orientation, often neglecting how populism operates in the Global South, where historical experiences of colonialism, dependency, and external intervention shape distinct sovereignty narratives (Mamdani, 2022; Mlambo, 2019). This analytical gap obscures important variations in how populism affects global versus regional governance, donor versus recipient roles, and norm-setting versus norm-following states.

This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of the United States and Nigeria—two countries that occupy contrasting yet strategically significant positions in the international development system. The United States represents a developed global power and principal architect of the post-war liberal order. Its populist turn, most visibly articulated through the “America First” doctrine, entailed skepticism toward multilateralism, withdrawal from key agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord, reductions in funding for international organizations, and the recasting of development assistance in transactional and security terms (Mearsheimer, 2018; Lancaster, 2020). Given America’s structural power, such shifts have systemic consequences, reshaping global norms, weakening institutional authority, and altering the flow and conditionality of development resources (Fukuyama, 2020; Gidron & Hall, 2023).

Nigeria, by contrast, is a leading developing economy and a regional power within West Africa, whose influence is most pronounced in continental and sub-regional institutions such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and the African Continental Free Trade Area. Populism in Nigeria has been characterized by sovereignty-centered, antielite, and anti-colonial narratives that emphasize economic nationalism, protection of domestic industries, and suspicion of external interference (Adegbite, 2018; Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020). While Nigeria lacks the global agenda-setting power of the United States, its policy choices significantly affect regional integration, trade liberalization, security cooperation, and Africa's collective bargaining position in global development forums. Measures such as the 2019 border closure and ambivalent implementation of AfCFTA commitments illustrate how populist governance can disrupt regional development architectures and recalibrate the balance between national autonomy and collective African strategies.

By juxtaposing these two cases, the article advances three interrelated arguments. First, populism in both developed and developing contexts redefines development cooperation through a nationalist lens, privileging sovereignty, control, and domestic political legitimacy over multilateral obligations and long-term collective goals (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Second, the structural position of the state conditions the scale of impact: in a global hegemon like the United States, populism contributes to the erosion of global governance norms and the weakening of multilateral institutions, whereas in a regional power like Nigeria, it primarily destabilizes regional integration projects and collective development initiatives within Africa (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Mamdani, 2022). Third, despite contextual differences, both cases reveal a convergence toward bilateralism, executive-driven diplomacy, and the instrumentalization of development policy in the service of short-term national interest.

In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the future of international development in an era of rising nationalism and contested multilateralism. As transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, inequality, and insecurity intensify, the effectiveness of development cooperation increasingly depends on resilient institutions and sustained collective action. Understanding how populism reconfigures these arrangements—and how its effects vary between global and regional powers—is therefore essential for scholars, policymakers, and international organizations seeking to design adaptive and legitimate frameworks for cooperation in a politically fragmented world.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how the rise of populism has reconfigured international development cooperation by shifting state behavior from multilateral, rule-based global governance toward nationally oriented, interest-driven engagement, using the United States and Nigeria as comparative cases.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyse the core ideological features of populism and how they manifest in the foreign and development policy orientations of the United States and Nigeria.
2. Examine how populist governments in both countries have reshaped their engagement with multilateral institutions and global governance frameworks related to development.
3. Assess the impact of populist-driven nationalism on development cooperation practices, including foreign aid, trade agreements, climate commitments, and regional integration initiatives.
4. Compare how structural position in the international system (global power versus regional power) conditions the scale and nature of populism's effects on development cooperation.
5. Evaluate the implications of the shift from multilateralism to national-interest-driven cooperation for the future of global and regional development governance.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the defining ideological characteristics of populism, and how are they reflected in the foreign and development policy discourses of the United States and Nigeria?
2. How has the rise of populist leadership in the United States and Nigeria affected their commitment to multilateral institutions and global governance arrangements for development?
3. In what ways have populist policies in both countries transformed patterns of international development cooperation, particularly in relation to foreign aid, trade, climate action, and regional economic integration?
4. How do the impacts of populism on development cooperation differ between a global hegemon (the United States) and a regional power in the Global South (Nigeria)?
5. What do these transformations imply for the sustainability and legitimacy of multilateral development governance in an era of rising nationalism and sovereignty-centered politics?

Conceptual Review

Concept of Populism

Populism is widely conceptualised in contemporary political scholarship as a “thin-centred ideology” that constructs society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite,” and that argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Unlike comprehensive ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, populism lacks a fully developed programmatic core and therefore attaches itself to host ideologies—nationalism, socialism, conservatism, or neoliberalism—depending on historical and institutional context (Stanley, 2008; Pappas, 2019). What remains constant is its moralized opposition between the virtuous masses and self-serving elites, and its claim to exclusive representation of popular sovereignty (Müller, 2016).

A defining feature of populism is its Manichean worldview, which frames political conflict as a struggle between good and evil rather than as legitimate pluralist competition (Mudde, 2004). This binary logic simplifies complex policy debates and delegitimizes institutional constraints such as courts, legislatures, and international organizations, which are portrayed as tools of unaccountable elites (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Populist leaders further cultivate direct, emotional communication styles that bypass mediating institutions and foster personalistic bonds with “the people,” often through mass rallies and social media (Moffitt, 2016; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Such leader–people identification encourages executive centralization and weakens institutional checks, a pattern observed across both advanced and developing democracies (Weyland, 2001; Müller, 2016).

Populism also carries a strong sovereignty narrative. It portrays political authority as rooted in a culturally and morally unified national community, whose autonomy has been undermined by cosmopolitan elites, technocratic governance, and supranational institutions (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Zielonka, 2018). This sovereignty-first orientation makes populism inherently suspicious of international rules, legal constraints, and multilateral decision-making, which are seen as diluting popular control and subordinating national interests to external agendas (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Flockhart, 2018).

Concept of Global Governance and International Cooperation

Global governance refers to the ensemble of formal and informal rules, institutions, and norms through which collective problems are managed in the absence of a world government (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Falkner, 2020). It is anchored in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, WTO, and regional organizations like the European Union, African Union, and ECOWAS, which facilitate cooperation in areas including development finance, trade, security, health, and climate change. Liberal-institutionalist theory posits that such institutions reduce transaction costs, provide information, establish credible commitments, and enable states to achieve long-term collective gains that would be unattainable through unilateral action (Keohane, 1984; Falkner, 2020).

However, realist perspectives emphasize that cooperation is ultimately conditioned by national interest and power asymmetries, and that states comply with multilateral rules only when such rules align with domestic political and strategic calculations (Mearsheimer, 2001). This tension between institutionalized cooperation and sovereignty has become increasingly salient in the context of populism, which reasserts the primacy of the nation-state and views global governance as an arena dominated by distant elites and unequal power relations (Rodrik, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2020).

Concept of International Development Cooperation

International development cooperation encompasses the coordinated efforts of states, international organizations, and non-state actors to promote economic growth, poverty reduction, social welfare, and sustainable development, primarily in the Global South (Lancaster, 2020; UNDP, 2021). Traditionally, this cooperation has been organized around multilateral frameworks, pooled financing mechanisms, and shared norms, including the Sustainable Development Goals, climate finance regimes, and global health partnerships. These arrangements depend on predictability, long-term commitment, and collective trust among participating states (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021).

Populism fundamentally challenges this cooperative logic. By framing development institutions as elitist, inefficient, or neo-imperial, populist leaders recast foreign aid and multilateral engagement as constraints on national autonomy and domestic welfare (Mudde, 2019; Mamdani, 2022). Empirical studies show that populist governments tend to reduce contributions to multilateral development funds, prioritize bilateral and transactional aid relationships, and tie assistance more closely to security, migration control, or commercial interests (Gidron & Hall, 2023; Fiedler, 2022). This shift reflects what Rodrik (2017) describes as a move from rule-based globalism to “sovereignty-centred economic nationalism.”

In developed contexts, such as the United States, populism translates into retrenchment from multilateral commitments, withdrawal from global agreements, and the politicization of development finance in line with domestic electoral incentives (Mearsheimer, 2018; Fukuyama, 2020). In developing contexts, particularly in post-colonial states like Nigeria, populism is often articulated through anti-elite and anti-imperialist narratives that emphasize self-reliance, protection of domestic industries, and resistance to perceived external domination, with significant consequences for regional integration and South–South cooperation (Adegbite, 2018; Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Mamdani, 2022).

Populism and the Reconfiguration of Development Cooperation

Synthesizing these conceptual strands, populism can be understood as a political logic that reorients international development cooperation from multilateral, rules-based global governance toward nationally framed, interest-driven engagement. Its core elements—anti-elitism, sovereignty restoration, and moralized representation—produce skepticism toward international institutions, preference for bilateralism, and the instrumentalization of aid and trade for short-term domestic legitimacy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Rodrik, 2018; Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

This reconfiguration does not imply uniform outcomes. Structural position in the international system conditions the scale and direction of populist impact. In global powers, populism can reshape international norms and weaken the authority of multilateral institutions. In regional powers, it tends to disrupt integration projects, compliance with regional agreements, and collective development strategies (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Okoro, 2023). These dynamics provide the conceptual foundation for analysing how populism in the United States and Nigeria transforms development cooperation from a logic of global governance to one centred on national interest and sovereignty.

Theoretical Framework: Populism as a Thin-Centred Ideology and Its Implications for International Development Cooperation

This study is theoretically anchored in the **Populism-as-a-Thin-Centred-Ideology** framework, as developed by Mudde (2004) and further elaborated by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017). This theory is most suitable because it

directly explains the core political logic that underpins the reorientation of state behaviour from multilateral global governance to sovereignty-centred, national-interest politics, which is the central concern of this article.

According to Mudde (2004), populism is not a full ideology like liberalism or socialism, but a “thin-centred ideology” that can attach itself to different “host” ideologies such as nationalism, conservatism, or socialism. Its defining feature is the moral division of society into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups: “*the pure people*” and “*the corrupt elite*”, and the claim that politics should be an expression of the *general will of the people*. This moralized dualism creates a powerful discursive framework through which political authority is legitimized and institutional constraints are delegitimized.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that populism is inherently anti-elitist and anti-institutional. Populist leaders portray domestic political institutions, courts, bureaucracies, and the media as captured by self-serving elites, while supranational institutions are framed as extensions of the same elite order operating at the global level. This theoretical insight is crucial for understanding why populist governments exhibit deep suspicion toward multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, WTO, WHO, African Union, and ECOWAS. These bodies are not seen merely as technical coordinators but as political structures that dilute popular sovereignty and constrain the will of the nation.

Müller (2016) extends this argument by emphasizing that populism is fundamentally anti-pluralist. Populists claim exclusive moral representation of “the people” and reject the legitimacy of opposition, intermediary institutions, and shared authority. In the international arena, this translates into hostility toward collective decision-making, pooled sovereignty, and binding international rules. Multilateralism, which is built on compromise, legal obligations, and long-term institutional commitments, clashes with the populist belief that national leaders must act as direct agents of a unified popular will, unconstrained by external actors.

Within this theoretical frame, populist foreign policy is not simply nationalist; it is a moral project of *sovereignty restoration*. Global governance institutions are portrayed as technocratic elites imposing norms, conditionalities, and policy constraints that undermine the economic, cultural, and political autonomy of the people (Zielonka, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The “people versus elite” dichotomy is thus projected outward: international organizations, donor agencies, and even regional blocs become part of the “external elite” that allegedly benefits from globalization while ordinary citizens bear its costs.

This logic has direct implications for international development cooperation. Liberal development regimes are founded on the assumption that long-term collective welfare requires institutionalized cooperation, rule-based commitments, and shared responsibility. Populist ideology, however, reframes development assistance, trade agreements, climate finance, and health cooperation as arenas of elite manipulation rather than mutual gain (Rodrik, 2018). Consequently, development cooperation is reinterpreted through a nationalist lens: aid must serve immediate domestic interests; trade must protect local industries; climate commitments must not threaten jobs; and regional integration must not compromise sovereignty.

The thin-centred nature of populism explains its adaptability across contexts. In the United States, populism attaches itself to economic nationalism and cultural conservatism, producing the “America First” narrative in which multilateral institutions are accused of exploiting American generosity and undermining domestic workers (Mearsheimer, 2018; Fukuyama, 2020). In Nigeria, populism fuses with post-colonial nationalism and anticorruption discourse, portraying international financial institutions, Western donors, and even regional trade regimes as instruments of elite capture and external domination (Adegbite, 2018; Mamdani, 2022). Despite different historical trajectories, the same populist ideological core—people, sovereignty, anti-elite, anti-institutionalism—drives similar scepticism toward multilateral development frameworks.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) further note that populism tends to centralize authority in the executive, weaken institutional mediation, and privilege direct leader-people linkage. This has profound consequences for development governance, which relies on bureaucratic continuity, technical expertise, and long-term policy coordination. Populist leadership styles favour visible, short-term, politically rewarding actions—such as border closures, aid conditionality, treaty withdrawals, or bilateral deal-making—over slow, collective, and legally constrained multilateral processes.

Thus, the Populism-as-Thin-Centred-Ideology theory provides a coherent explanatory framework for this study. It shows that the reconfiguration of international development cooperation is not accidental or purely strategic, but ideologically rooted in:

1. The moral polarization of politics (people vs elites),
2. The rejection of supranational authority,
3. The reassertion of popular sovereignty,
4. The delegitimization of multilateral institutions,
5. The preference for nationally controlled, bilateral, and transactional engagement.

By applying this theory to the United States and Nigeria, the study demonstrates how a shared populist ideological core produces differentiated but structurally similar outcomes: a shift from global governance to national interest, from multilateral development cooperation to sovereignty-centred, politically instrumentalized engagement, and from rule-based internationalism to leader-driven, domestically legitimated foreign and development policy.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study adopted a qualitative, comparative, and literature-based research design, relying exclusively on secondary sources. The design was appropriate because the objective of the study was not to generate primary data but to critically examine and synthesize existing theoretical and empirical scholarship on populism, global governance, and international development cooperation, with specific focus on the United States and Nigeria. By systematically reviewing academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports, the study sought to analyse how populist ideology reconfigures development cooperation from multilateral, rule-based frameworks to sovereignty-centred and national-interest-driven engagement in both a global power and a regional power context.

Sources of Literature

To ensure analytical depth and reliability, multiple categories of sources were utilised:

- Scholarly Books and Monographs** – Foundational works on populism, nationalism, global governance, and international political economy provided the theoretical grounding of the study
- Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles** – Articles from international relations, development studies, political economy, and African studies journals were consulted to capture contemporary debates and empirical evidence on populism's impact on multilateralism, foreign aid, regional integration, and global governance.
- Policy and Institutional Reports** – Official documents from international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, World Bank, IMF, WTO, OECD, African Union, ECOWAS, and AfCFTA Secretariat, were used to assess policy shifts, funding patterns, and institutional responses under populist administrations in the United States and Nigeria.
- Grey Literature** – Working papers, conference proceedings, and policy briefs from reputable think tanks and research institutes (e.g., Brookings Institution, Chatham House, African Development Bank Group, and International Crisis Group) were incorporated to provide additional context on development cooperation, trade, security, and climate governance.

Literature Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was employed to identify relevant literature. Major academic databases and platforms were consulted, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and African Journals Online (AJOL).

Key search terms and combinations included:

- “Populism and global governance”
- “Populism and international development cooperation”
- “America First and multilateralism”
- “Nigeria, populism, and regional integration”
- “ECOWAS, AfCFTA, and economic nationalism”
- “Foreign aid, bilateralism, and sovereignty”

Inclusion criteria were:

- Publications from 2000 to 2025, with particular emphasis on the period 2010–2025 to capture the contemporary wave of populism.
- Studies addressing populism, nationalism, multilateralism, development cooperation, foreign aid, trade, climate governance, or regional integration in the United States, Nigeria, or comparable contexts.
- Peer-reviewed or institutionally credible sources to ensure academic and policy relevance.

Exclusion criteria were:

- Works focusing exclusively on domestic populism without reference to foreign policy or international cooperation.
- Studies lacking theoretical or empirical relevance to development governance or multilateral institutions.

Validity and Reliability

Validity was ensured through the use of high-quality, peer-reviewed, and widely cited academic sources, as well as authoritative policy reports from recognized international and regional institutions. Reliability was strengthened by employing a transparent and replicable literature search strategy, clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and systematic thematic coding. Together, these procedures enhance the credibility and reproducibility of the study’s analytical process and findings.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The collected literature was analysed using a **thematic and comparative synthesis** approach. This involved:

- Thematic Organization** – Sources were grouped under key analytical themes, including: populist ideology and sovereignty, multilateralism and global governance, foreign aid and development finance, trade and regional integration, climate and health cooperation, and executive centralization in foreign policy.
- Critical Evaluation** – Each source was assessed for theoretical relevance, methodological rigour, and empirical contribution to understanding how populist governments in the United States and Nigeria engage with international development cooperation.
- Comparative Synthesis** – Findings from the two cases were systematically compared to identify convergences and divergences in how populism reshapes development cooperation at global and regional levels, taking into account differences in structural power and institutional context.

This analytical process enabled the integration of the Populism-as-Thin-Centred-Ideology framework with empirical patterns of policy change, institutional behaviour, and development governance outcomes.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study derived from a systematic and critical review of existing literature on populism, global governance, and international development cooperation, with particular focus on the United States and Nigeria. The results are organized in line with the study's research objectives and highlight key patterns, trends, and analytical insights emerging from theoretical debates, policy analyses, and empirical studies. Given the qualitative and literature-based nature of the research, the emphasis is on what the reviewed scholarship reveals about the ideological foundations of populism, its influence on state engagement with multilateral institutions, and the ways in which development cooperation is being reconfigured from a rule-based, collective global governance model toward a sovereignty-centred and national-interest-driven framework. Through comparative analysis, the section elucidates both the convergences and divergences in how populist politics in a global power (the United States) and a regional power in the Global South (Nigeria) reshape patterns of development cooperation at global and regional levels.

Populism as a Sovereignty-Centred Ideology in the United States and Nigeria

The analysis of the reviewed literature reveals that populism in both the United States and Nigeria is anchored in a common ideological core characterized by anti-elitism, people-centred moral legitimacy, and a strong emphasis on national sovereignty (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). In both contexts, politics is framed as a struggle between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” with populist leaders claiming exclusive moral representation of the popular will and portraying institutions as captured by self-serving domestic and transnational elites (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Pappas, 2019). However, while this ideological foundation is shared, its articulation and policy expression differ according to historical experiences, institutional settings, and each country's structural position in the international system (Zielonka, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2020).

In the United States, populism is primarily articulated through a nationalist and economically protectionist discourse that constructs “the people” as hardworking, tax-paying citizens betrayed by cosmopolitan political elites and global institutions (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2018). The “America First” narrative exemplifies this ideological framing, portraying multilateral organizations, trade regimes, and development institutions as structures that allow foreign states and transnational elites to benefit at the expense of ordinary Americans (Mearsheimer, 2018; Fukuyama, 2020). This discourse reflects the classic populist dichotomy between the virtuous people and a corrupt elite, projected onto the international sphere where global governance institutions are cast as “external elites” undermining national sovereignty and democratic control (Mudde, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Consequently, international development cooperation is no longer framed primarily as a moral or strategic global responsibility but as a transactional policy instrument that must yield immediate and visible benefits for domestic constituencies (Rodrik, 2017; Gidron & Hall, 2023).

Empirical studies further show that U.S. populism places strong emphasis on economic nationalism, border control, and cultural protection, translating into skepticism toward multilateral development frameworks, climate agreements, and collective burden-sharing arrangements (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021). Withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, hostility toward the World Health Organization, and pressure on NATO and the WTO have been interpreted as manifestations of a sovereignty-restoration project rooted in populist distrust of supranational authority (Flockhart, 2018; Mudde, 2022). Development assistance and global commitments are increasingly evaluated through the lenses of domestic job protection, national security, and economic competitiveness rather than long-term collective welfare (Lancaster, 2020; Fiedler, 2022). This ideological orientation reinforces executive-centred decision-making and a preference for bilateral and leader-driven agreements that allow greater control, visibility, and political credit-claiming, consistent with populism's anti-institutional and anti-pluralist logic (Müller, 2016; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

In Nigeria, populism is similarly structured around the moral opposition between “the people” and “the elite,” but the identity of the elite is more explicitly dual: it includes both domestic political and economic oligarchies and external actors such as Western governments, international financial institutions, and multinational corporations (Adegbite, 2018; Mamdani, 2022). Nigerian populist discourse is therefore fused with post-colonial nationalism and anti-corruption narratives, presenting the state as a defender of popular sovereignty against

internal exploitation and neo-colonial domination (Chivunda, 2020; Mlambo, 2019). International institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and even regional bodies are often portrayed as instruments through which external interests and local elites collude to constrain national policy autonomy and reproduce dependency (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 2022).

The results indicate that Nigerian populism places strong emphasis on economic self-reliance, protection of domestic industries, and resistance to policy conditionalities associated with international development institutions (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2020). This ideological stance constructs regional and global integration projects as potentially threatening to national autonomy, even when such initiatives promise long-term collective benefits. Nigeria's ambivalent engagement with ECOWAS trade liberalization and the African Continental Free Trade Area, as well as the 2019 border closure, have been interpreted as expressions of sovereignty-first populist reasoning, in which domestic political legitimacy and protection of local producers outweigh regional commitments (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Hlongwane, 2021; Okoro, 2023). In this context, development cooperation is filtered through a nationalist and post-colonial lens that prioritizes control, autonomy, and regime legitimacy over rule-based multilateral obligations (Adegbite, 2018; Ajayi, 2023).

Comparatively, the findings demonstrate that while U.S. populism is oriented toward defending a perceived loss of global dominance, economic advantage, and cultural primacy in a globalized order (Mearsheimer, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), Nigerian populism is rooted in historical experiences of colonialism, dependency, and elite capture, which shape a more explicitly anti-imperialist and sovereignty-protective discourse (Amin, 1976; Mamdani, 2022). Nevertheless, both cases converge in their portrayal of international institutions as elite-driven structures that constrain popular will and national policy autonomy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2020). In both contexts, populist ideology delegitimizes technocratic governance, long-term multilateral planning, and rule-based cooperation, replacing them with narratives of national restoration, executive authority, and direct people-centred representation (Müller, 2016; Flockhart, 2018). This shared ideological logic provides the foundation for the broader reconfiguration of international development cooperation from global governance toward national-interest-driven engagement observed in both the United States and Nigeria.

Populism and the Reorientation of Engagement with Multilateral Institutions

The reviewed literature indicates that populist governments in both the United States and Nigeria have significantly altered their patterns of engagement with multilateral institutions and global governance frameworks, primarily through heightened skepticism toward supranational authority, selective compliance with international rules, and a growing preference for bilateral or transactional forms of cooperation (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Börzel & Risse, 2021). These shifts are rooted in the populist ideological conviction that multilateral institutions are dominated by distant elites and constrain the sovereign will of the people, thereby undermining democratic control and national autonomy (Müller, 2016; Zielonka, 2018).

In the United States, populist governance has been associated with an explicit delegitimization of global institutions and a retreat from long-standing multilateral commitments. The "America First" doctrine framed organizations such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, World Trade Organization, and the Bretton Woods institutions as inefficient, biased, and exploitative of American resources (Mearsheimer, 2018; Fukuyama, 2020). Empirical evidence shows that this translated into concrete policy actions, including withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, suspension of funding to the WHO, and pressure on NATO allies to shoulder greater financial burdens, all justified on the grounds of restoring national sovereignty and protecting domestic taxpayers (Falkner, 2020; Flockhart, 2018; Mudde, 2022). These actions signaled a move away from institutionalized burden-sharing toward a transactional logic in which continued participation in multilateral regimes was conditional on immediate and visible national gains (Rodrik, 2017; Gidron & Hall, 2023).

The literature further reveals that U.S. populism encouraged a reconfiguration of development cooperation from multilateral to bilateral channels. Contributions to multilateral development funds and climate finance mechanisms were reduced or politicized, while bilateral aid and security-linked assistance were prioritized as tools of strategic leverage and domestic political signaling (Lancaster, 2020; Fiedler, 2022). This shift weakened

the normative authority and financial capacity of global development institutions, contributing to what Hooghe and Marks (2020) describe as a “constraining dissensus” against multilevel governance, whereby national executives contest the legitimacy of pooled sovereignty and rule-based cooperation.

In Nigeria, populist engagement with multilateral and regional institutions is shaped by sovereignty-centered and post-colonial narratives that portray international organizations as vehicles of external domination and elite capture (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 2022). While Nigeria has not withdrawn from global institutions, the reviewed studies indicate a pattern of selective compliance, policy ambivalence, and rhetorical resistance to conditionality imposed by bodies such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO (Funke et al., 2020; Ajayi, 2023). Development partnerships are often evaluated in terms of their implications for national autonomy, regime legitimacy, and domestic economic protection rather than collective regional or global welfare (Adegbite, 2018; Mlambo, 2019).

At the regional level, Nigerian populist policy choices have had pronounced effects on institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area. The 2019 border closure, justified on grounds of protecting local industries and national security, disrupted regional trade flows and undermined the credibility of ECOWAS free-movement and AfCFTA trade liberalization commitments (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Hlongwane, 2021). These actions illustrate how populist sovereignty narratives can weaken regional governance by prioritizing domestic political legitimacy over treaty obligations and collective development strategies (Okoro, 2023).

Comparatively, the findings show that while U.S. populism has produced systemic effects by reshaping global norms, funding structures, and the authority of multilateral institutions, Nigerian populism has generated more localized but equally significant disruptions within regional development frameworks (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Mamdani, 2022). In both cases, populist governments do not necessarily reject multilateralism outright; rather, they reinterpret it through a nationalist lens, engaging selectively, contesting institutional constraints, and favoring arrangements that preserve executive discretion and visible domestic returns (Mudde, 2019; Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

Populism and the Transformation of Development Cooperation Practices

The reviewed literature demonstrates that populist-driven nationalism in both the United States and Nigeria has significantly transformed the practices of international development cooperation by shifting policy priorities from multilateral, long-term, and norm-based commitments toward nationally framed, short-term, and politically instrumental objectives (Rodrik, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2023). This transformation is most evident in the domains of foreign aid allocation, trade and investment policy, climate cooperation, and regional economic integration.

In the United States, populist governance redefined foreign aid from a tool of collective global responsibility to an instrument of strategic and domestic political utility. Studies indicate that multilateral development assistance and contributions to global funds were reduced or politicized, while bilateral and security-linked aid gained prominence (Lancaster, 2020; Fiedler, 2022). Development cooperation was increasingly tied to migration control, counterterrorism, and trade concessions, reflecting a transactional logic in which assistance was conditional on recipient compliance with U.S. strategic interests rather than aligned with multilateral development priorities (Fukuyama, 2020; Gidron & Hall, 2023). This shift weakened the predictability and coordination of global development finance, undermining the capacity of institutions such as the UNDP, World Bank, and Global Climate Fund to plan and implement long-term programmes (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021).

Trade and investment policies further illustrate the impact of populist nationalism on development cooperation. The renegotiation of NAFTA into the USMCA, the imposition of tariffs, and the use of trade sanctions were justified through narratives of economic sovereignty and protection of domestic workers (Rodrik, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2018). These measures disrupted established trade regimes and introduced uncertainty into global value chains, with implications for development partners dependent on stable access to U.S. markets (Colantone & Stanig, 2018). Rather than viewing trade as a multilateral development instrument, populist policy reframed it as a zero-sum arena of national competition.

Climate cooperation represents another domain where populist nationalism reshaped development engagement. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and skepticism toward international environmental financing were grounded in claims that global climate commitments threatened domestic jobs and industrial competitiveness (Falkner, 2020; Mudde, 2022). This retreat weakened collective climate action and reduced financial flows to mitigation and adaptation initiatives in developing countries, thereby undermining one of the core pillars of contemporary development cooperation (Flockhart, 2018; Börzel & Zürn, 2021).

In Nigeria, populist-driven nationalism similarly reoriented development cooperation, though its effects were most pronounced at the regional rather than global level. Foreign aid and development partnerships were increasingly assessed in terms of their implications for sovereignty, regime legitimacy, and economic selfreliance, leading to resistance toward policy conditionalities associated with the IMF, World Bank, and other donors (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2020; Ajayi, 2023). Nigerian populist discourse frequently framed external assistance as a form of elite capture or neo-colonial influence, thereby legitimizing selective engagement and preference for partnerships perceived as less intrusive, including South–South cooperation and bilateral arrangements (Mamdani, 2022; Ramirez & Johnson, 2020).

Trade and regional integration policies further reflect the nationalist turn. The 2019 border closure, justified on grounds of protecting local industries and national security, disrupted ECOWAS free trade commitments and slowed the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Hlongwane, 2021). Although framed as necessary for domestic economic protection, such measures undermined regional supply chains, reduced investor confidence, and weakened the credibility of collective African development strategies (Okoro, 2023). This illustrates how populist economic nationalism can conflict with the logic of regional integration, which depends on rule-based cooperation, policy harmonization, and long-term institutional trust.

Climate and environmental cooperation in Nigeria has also been shaped by sovereignty-centred populist narratives. International climate commitments are often portrayed as externally imposed constraints on industrialization and development, leading to cautious or delayed implementation of global agreements and greater emphasis on negotiating climate finance on terms that preserve national autonomy (Mlambo, 2019; Hlongwane, 2024). This reinforces a pattern in which global public goods are subordinated to immediate developmental and political considerations.

Comparatively, the results indicate that populist nationalism in both the United States and Nigeria reconfigures development cooperation by privileging bilateralism, executive discretion, and visible domestic returns over multilateral coordination and long-term collective gains (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Börzel & Risse, 2021). While the United States, as a global power, affects the stability and resourcing of global development regimes, Nigeria’s populist policies primarily disrupt regional integration and the coherence of African-led development frameworks (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Mamdani, 2022). In both cases, however, the core outcome is a shift from development cooperation as a rule-based, multilateral enterprise toward a sovereignty-centred, interest-driven, and politically instrumentalized practice.

Structural Position and the Differentiated Impact of Populism on Development Cooperation (Results for Objective Four)

The reviewed literature indicates that the impact of populism on international development cooperation is significantly shaped by a country’s structural position in the international system, particularly whether it occupies the role of a global power or a regional power. While the ideological core of populism—anti-elitism, sovereignty restoration, and skepticism toward multilateral institutions—is similar across contexts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016), the scale and consequences of its effects vary markedly between the United States and Nigeria due to differences in geopolitical influence, institutional leverage, and historical experience (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Mamdani, 2022).

In the case of the United States, populism generates systemic and global-level effects because of the country’s central role in shaping international norms, financing multilateral institutions, and providing leadership within the liberal international order. Scholars note that when a hegemonic power adopts a sovereignty-first, nationalist

orientation, its policy shifts reverberate across the entire architecture of global governance (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021). The “America First” doctrine exemplified this dynamic by portraying multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, World Health Organization, World Trade Organization, and the Paris Climate regime as elite-driven constraints on national sovereignty and economic competitiveness (Mearsheimer, 2018; Fukuyama, 2020).

Empirical studies show that U.S. withdrawal from or ambivalence toward these institutions weakened their financial base, reduced their normative authority, and complicated collective action on development-related challenges such as climate change, global health, and refugee protection (Flockhart, 2018; Mudde, 2022). Because the United States is a principal donor and agenda-setter, reductions in multilateral funding and retreat from binding commitments have systemic consequences, including uncertainty in development finance, erosion of compliance incentives, and the legitimization of unilateralism among other states (Gidron & Hall, 2023; Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Thus, U.S. populism reshapes development cooperation at the global level by altering norms, weakening institutional capacity, and encouraging a shift from rule-based multilateralism toward transactional and bilateral engagement (Rodrik, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2020).

Nigeria’s experience, by contrast, illustrates how populism in a developing regional power produces effects that are more spatially concentrated but nonetheless significant within its sphere of influence. Nigerian populist discourse, rooted in post-colonial nationalism and anti-elite sentiment, frames international and regional institutions as potential instruments of external domination and elite capture (Ake, 1996; Mamdani, 2022). While Nigeria lacks the structural power to redefine global norms, its size and economic weight within West Africa mean that its policy choices strongly affect regional development cooperation and integration (Adegbite, 2018; Okoro, 2023).

The literature highlights Nigeria’s selective compliance with and occasional defiance of regional commitments, particularly within ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area, as manifestations of sovereignty-centred populist reasoning (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Hlongwane, 2021). The 2019 border closure, justified as a measure to protect domestic industries and national security, disrupted regional supply chains, violated ECOWAS free-movement protocols, and undermined confidence in Nigeria’s leadership role in African economic integration (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Ajayi, 2023). Similarly, cautious and sometimes delayed implementation of AfCFTA obligations has been interpreted as reflecting a populist preference for national economic control over rule-based regional liberalization (Mlambo, 2019; Okoro, 2023). These actions weaken institutional trust and slow the consolidation of regional development frameworks, even though their effects remain largely confined to Africa rather than the global system.

Comparatively, the findings demonstrate that structural position conditions both the scale and the targets of populist contestation. In the United States, populism primarily challenges global institutions and regimes—such as climate governance, international trade rules, and multilateral development finance—thereby producing system-wide repercussions (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021). In Nigeria, populist skepticism is directed more toward regional and donor institutions, with its most pronounced impact on ECOWAS, the African Union, and AfCFTA, where Nigeria’s influence is greatest (Adegbite, 2018; Mamdani, 2022).

Despite these differences, the literature reveals a common directional shift in both contexts: from pooled sovereignty and rule-based multilateralism toward executive-driven, interest-based, and selectively bilateral engagement (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hooghe & Marks, 2020). In the United States, this shift weakens the foundations of global development governance; in Nigeria, it undermines the coherence and credibility of regional integration and African-led development strategies. Thus, while populism operates through a shared ideological logic, its concrete effects on development cooperation are mediated by structural power, producing global-level disruption in the case of a hegemon and regionally concentrated, but still consequential, disruption in the case of a leading developing state.

Implications of Populist Nationalism for the Future of Development Governance

The reviewed literature suggests that the populist reorientation from multilateral, rule-based cooperation toward sovereignty-centred and national-interest-driven engagement has profound implications for the future of both

global and regional development governance. Across the United States and Nigeria, this shift undermines the institutional foundations, normative legitimacy, and operational effectiveness of development cooperation frameworks that rely on collective action, long-term commitment, and mutual trust (Falkner, 2020; Börzel & Risse, 2021).

At the global level, the U.S. case demonstrates that populist disengagement by a major power weakens the credibility and capacity of multilateral institutions central to development governance. Scholars argue that when leading donors reduce funding, withdraw from agreements, or rhetorically delegitimize international organizations, the result is not merely financial shortfall but also a crisis of authority and coordination (Flockhart, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2020). Retreat from climate regimes, global health institutions, and multilateral development banks disrupts collective efforts to address transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and poverty, which require sustained and coordinated responses (Fukuyama, 2020; Gidron & Hall, 2023). This erosion of multilateral leadership encourages other states to adopt more unilateral or transactional approaches, thereby accelerating fragmentation of the global development architecture and weakening compliance with shared norms and targets, including the Sustainable Development Goals (Börzel & Zürn, 2021; Rodrik, 2017).

The literature further indicates that populist nationalism contributes to the politicization and instrumentalization of development cooperation. Aid, trade, and climate finance become tools for short-term domestic legitimacy and strategic leverage rather than components of a rules-based system oriented toward collective welfare (Lancaster, 2020; Fiedler, 2022). This undermines predictability and long-term planning, which are essential for effective development programming, and increases volatility in funding and policy commitments (Falkner, 2020). Over time, such uncertainty weakens the ability of international organizations and recipient states to coordinate large-scale development initiatives and to mobilize resources for global public goods.

In the Nigerian case, the implications are most visible at the regional level. Populist sovereignty narratives and economic nationalism weaken commitment to regional integration and collective development strategies within ECOWAS and the African Union (Ikenwa & Oguji, 2020; Mlambo, 2019). Selective compliance with trade and mobility protocols, border closures, and cautious implementation of AfCFTA obligations undermine the credibility of regional institutions and slow progress toward market integration, infrastructure coordination, and industrial development (Hlongwane, 2021; Okoro, 2023). As regional governance relies heavily on trust and reciprocity, the prioritization of unilateral national measures can generate a demonstration effect, encouraging other states to follow suit and thereby further eroding the authority of regional rules and institutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2020; Mamdani, 2022).

More broadly, the literature points to a normative shift in development governance from solidarity-based and multilateral problem-solving toward a competitive, sovereignty-first order (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Zielonka, 2018). This transformation challenges the liberal institutionalist premise that shared rules and institutions can sustain cooperation even in the absence of centralized authority. Instead, populist politics reasserts a realist logic of self-help and national interest, in which commitments are contingent, reversible, and evaluated primarily through domestic political returns (Mearsheimer, 2018; Rodrik, 2018).

Nevertheless, some scholars suggest that populist contestation may also generate pressures for reform within multilateral institutions by exposing democratic deficits, accountability gaps, and perceptions of elite bias (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Börzel & Risse, 2021). In this sense, the crisis triggered by populist nationalism could stimulate efforts to re-legitimize global and regional governance through greater inclusiveness, transparency, and responsiveness to domestic concerns. However, without such reforms, the prevailing trajectory points toward a more fragmented and less predictable development governance landscape.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that populism constitutes a powerful ideological and political force that is reshaping international development cooperation by reorienting state behaviour from multilateral, rule-based global governance toward sovereignty-centred and national-interest-driven engagement. In both the United States and Nigeria, populist discourse is anchored in anti-elitism, a moralized construction of “the people” versus

“the elite,” and a strong emphasis on the restoration of national sovereignty. This ideological framing extends beyond domestic politics to the international arena, where multilateral institutions and global governance regimes are portrayed as elite-driven structures that constrain popular will and policy autonomy. Consequently, development cooperation is increasingly reinterpreted not as a collective global responsibility but as a transactional instrument that must deliver immediate and visible benefits to domestic constituencies, thereby weakening the normative foundations of solidarity and burden-sharing that have historically underpinned multilateral development efforts.

The study further reveals that populist governments have reconfigured their engagement with international and regional institutions through heightened skepticism, rhetorical delegitimation, and selective compliance with rules and commitments. In the United States, this has manifested in withdrawal from or ambivalence toward key multilateral agreements, reductions in support for international organizations, and a shift toward executive-driven and bilateral forms of diplomacy. Such actions undermine the authority, predictability, and coordinating capacity of global development institutions, particularly in areas such as climate governance, global health, and development finance. In Nigeria, similar sovereignty-centred and anti-elite narratives, informed by post-colonial experiences and concerns about external domination, have produced cautious and sometimes inconsistent participation in regional and global frameworks. Measures such as resistance to policy conditionalities, border closures, and ambivalent implementation of regional trade agreements illustrate how populist politics can weaken institutional trust and disrupt collective development strategies at the regional level.

Across both cases, the practical conduct of development cooperation has been transformed by the prioritization of national interest and domestic political legitimacy. Foreign aid has become more politicized and increasingly tied to security, migration control, and economic competitiveness; trade is framed as a zero-sum arena of national competition rather than a cooperative development instrument; and climate commitments are assessed primarily in terms of their perceived impact on domestic growth and employment. These shifts signal a movement away from long-term, institutionally coordinated and norm-based cooperation toward short-term, transactional, and bilateral arrangements that offer greater executive control and visible political returns. Such reorientation introduces volatility into development financing and policy commitments, complicating long-term planning and weakening the capacity of multilateral and regional institutions to address complex transnational challenges.

The comparative analysis also underscores that the consequences of populism are mediated by structural position in the international system. As a global hegemon, the United States exerts disproportionate influence over international norms, funding flows, and institutional legitimacy, so populist disengagement produces systemic effects that reverberate across the entire architecture of global development governance. In contrast, Nigeria, as a leading regional power in the Global South, generates impacts that are more spatially concentrated but nonetheless significant, particularly in shaping the credibility and effectiveness of regional integration and African-led development frameworks. Despite these differences in scale and reach, both contexts exhibit a convergence toward executive-centred, sovereignty-first, and interest-driven engagement, reflecting a common populist logic that challenges pooled sovereignty and rule-based cooperation.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the populist shift from global governance to national interest is contributing to a gradual erosion of the institutional and normative pillars of international development cooperation. Declining trust in multilateral institutions, increased reliance on bilateral and transactional arrangements, and heightened uncertainty in funding and policy adherence threaten the sustainability of collective action on global and regional public goods such as climate change, health security, and poverty reduction. While populist contestation may also expose democratic deficits and accountability gaps within existing governance structures, the prevailing trajectory identified in this study points toward a more fragmented and nationally oriented development governance landscape, in which long-term cooperative frameworks are increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of sovereignty and domestic political legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the contemporary rise of populism has fundamentally altered the orientation and practice of international development cooperation by prioritizing national sovereignty and short-term domestic political interests over multilateral, rule-based global governance. Populism emerges

not merely as an internal political strategy but as an ideational force with significant external implications, reshaping how states interpret international obligations, institutional authority, and collective responsibility. Its core elements—anti-elitism, moralized representations of “the people,” and the restoration of sovereign control—generate deep skepticism toward multilateral institutions and technocratic governance, which are increasingly framed as instruments of distant and unaccountable elites.

The comparative evidence from the United States and Nigeria indicates that populist discourse and policy practice have redefined development cooperation from a cooperative and norm-driven enterprise into a more transactional, sovereignty-centred, and politically instrumental process. In the United States, populism has weakened global governance regimes through reduced commitment to multilateral agreements, the politicization of development finance, and the reframing of trade and climate cooperation in security and competitiveness terms, with far-reaching systemic consequences given its hegemonic status. In Nigeria, populism has manifested through post-colonial and nationalist narratives that encourage ambivalence toward external conditionality and regional integration, resulting in selective compliance with ECOWAS and AfCFTA obligations and the disruption of African-led development frameworks.

The study further concludes that while the ideological logic of populism is broadly similar across contexts, its effects are mediated by structural position within the international system. A global power’s populist retreat produces global institutional and normative disruptions, whereas a regional power’s populist orientation primarily destabilizes sub-regional and continental cooperation. Nevertheless, both trajectories converge in a discernible shift away from pooled sovereignty and institutionalized multilateralism toward executive-driven, interest-based, and selectively bilateral engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. International development institutions should strengthen their democratic legitimacy by enhancing transparency, accountability, and communication with domestic publics. Addressing perceptions of elite capture and technocratic distance can help counter populist narratives and rebuild trust in multilateral cooperation.
- ii. Global and regional organizations should more clearly demonstrate how multilateral development initiatives translate into tangible benefits for national populations, such as employment, health security, and infrastructure development. Framing cooperation in ways that resonate with domestic priorities can reduce the appeal of sovereignty-only discourses.
- iii. Development frameworks should adopt more flexible mechanisms that allow differentiated responsibilities and policy space while maintaining core collective commitments. Such adaptability can accommodate sovereignty concerns without abandoning rule-based cooperation.
- iv. For Nigeria and similar regional powers, greater investment in the institutional capacity and dispute-resolution mechanisms of ECOWAS, the African Union, and AfCFTA is essential. Stronger regional governance can mitigate unilateral policy reversals and reinforce the credibility of collective development strategies.
- v. National governments should pursue development policies that reconcile legitimate sovereignty concerns with the realities of interdependence. This requires embedding national development plans within regional and global frameworks in ways that preserve policy autonomy while sustaining cooperation on shared challenges.
- vi. Constructive engagement between populist-led states and multilateral institutions should be encouraged through sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures, and the promotion of norms that emphasize mutual respect, fairness, and shared responsibility.

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