

Security Dialogue for East Africa: Insights & Perspectives

Disrupted Lifelines

The Horn of Africa in the Wake of Trump's USAID Freeze

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U.S. Marine Corps photo

1 Introduction

By Edgar Mwine and Susan Natumanya

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On January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14169, titled *“Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid”*¹. The order directed a near-total freeze of foreign assistance programs, cutting 83% of USAID’s operations and reducing its workforce from approximately 10,000 to a skeletal 290 employees². In justifying this drastic decision, Trump’s administration labelled USAID as a bloated and inefficient bureaucracy, accused of promoting liberal global agendas and engaging in questionable political interventions abroad³. Elon Musk, Trump’s de facto head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), was a vocal advocate for dismantling the agency, calling it a “criminal organisation” that was “beyond repair”⁴.

USAID was established under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961⁵, following President John F. Kennedy’s decision to unify several foreign assistance programs under one agency. For more than sixty years, USAID has provided assistance to developing countries across multiple sectors, responded to natural and man-made disasters with humanitarian assistance, and contributed to U.S. political objectives in post-conflict and strategically important settings⁶. Subtly, USAID also served as a vital soft-power complement to America’s defence and diplomacy interests.

For sub-Saharan Africa, the American aid agency had three major priorities: humanitarian aid, health, and economic development. Other sectors that USAID supported include democracy, human rights and governance, education and social services, peace and security and the environment⁷.

In 2023, USAID allocated a total of \$12.1bn to countries in sub-Saharan Africa, mainly to support and improve healthcare, deliver food assistance, and promote security⁸. This amount is more than a quarter of the total overseas development assistance (ODA) from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to Africa. In the same year, East Africa received over 40 percent of the ODA from the U.S. alone⁹. Ethiopia was the largest recipient of USAID funds, receiving more than 1.6 billion U.S. dollars. Other countries in the region also received comparably higher amounts, with Somalia (981 million), Kenya (821 million), South Sudan (709 million) and Uganda (683 million), receiving more funding than, for instance South Africa (545 million), Ghana (196 million) and Morocco (133 million)¹⁰.

Modelling using the International Futures forecasting platform¹¹ by the University of Denver found that 5.7 million more Africans would fall below the 2.15 U.S. dollars extreme poverty mark within one year of withdrawal of USAID. By 2030, the cumulative number of Africans falling into extreme poverty would be 19 million people¹². Countries in Eastern Africa will likely be most affected, given their dependency on USAID. South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia are five of the eight poorest countries globally that receive over a fifth of their assistance from USAID¹³. Moreover, the economies of these countries are so small that aid makes up an average of 11 percent of their total income (based on available Gross National Income- GNI). With USAID providing 30 percent of that support, the freeze could create a shortfall equivalent to over 3 percent of GNI¹⁴.

Over the last six decades, USAID has not only improved lives, but it has also changed communities, stabilised economies, offered help in times of need to the most impoverished people across the East and Horn of Africa. The withdrawal will have a dire

impact for the region. Viewed as a tool for the U.S.'s soft power in the region, the withdrawal of USAID may diminish the U.S.'s influence on governance and undermine long-term diplomatic its relations with countries in the region. Whereas it is acknowledged that none of the other players will be able to adequately fill the gap the U.S has created, some players will make their mark evident in the Horn of Africa. Players like China, Russia, United Arab Emirates and Türkiye are demanding their presence in these countries to be noticed by mainly implementing tangible effects in infrastructure and trade.

Focusing on the role of USAID in the East and Horn of Africa, this anthology provides country-specific assessments of the impact of the withdrawal of USAID for Kenya, Somalia/Somaliland, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, by contributors from respective countries. It assesses the merits of the agency during its tenure, the impact of its restructuring and how countries in the region can cope with its withdrawal.

2 The Impact of USAID Withdrawal on Uganda

By Samuel Muhindo

The February 2025 announcement suspending the global operations of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and its subsequent transfer to the State Department has disrupted the operation of critical sectors in Uganda. Before the shocking halt of operations, the US government, through USAID, channelled about a billion dollars into the Ugandan economy annually¹⁵. USAID had been integral in strengthening the capacities in the education, health, humanitarian response, and governance.

Until its suspension, USAID supported over a quarter of Uganda's national budget allocation for health.¹⁶ Jane Ruth Acheng, Uganda's minister for health, informed parliament that by this decision, the ministry's budget for this year is faced with a 604 billion Uganda Shillings (164 million U.S. dollars) deficit.¹⁷ Uganda's health budget for the financial year 2024/2025 was at 2.94 trillion Uganda Shillings (797 million U.S. dollars). Among the most affected were HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis, which accounted for 66 million U.S. dollars, 33 million U.S. dollars and 16 million U.S. dollars, respectively.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates that access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) for nearly 1.4 million people living with HIV (PLHIV) has been disrupted.¹⁸ There's a risk of more people succumbing to the disease due to the absence of drugs to sustain their prescribed dosages. The efforts of the government of

Uganda on HIV/AIDS prevention, control and treatment were highly dependent on the last-mile support extended by USAID-funded partners in Aids control. These partners replenished drug kits, distributed condoms and conducted free safe male circumcision and further sensitisation on AIDS prevention. Standalone HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (TB) clinics have been phased out by Uganda's Ministry of Health. Their services have now been integrated into the general outpatient and chronic care units within hospitals and lower-level health facilities.¹⁹

Although the country might weather the immediate aftermath of the suspension of funds due to the existing stock, the effects will be felt in the long term when the stocks cannot be replenished. Unfortunately, the percentage of new infections might rise due to the drop in sensitisation and prevention initiatives like Condoms distribution. The deaths linked to HIV/AIDS might surge due to

the absence of drugs, undoing the UNAIDS vision 2030, which looks at reducing AIDS-related deaths by 90% from 2010 levels.²⁰

Since 2006, Malaria rates in Ugandan children aged below five years have declined by 77 percent, while overall child mortality rates have also dropped by 53 percent.²¹ The withdrawal of this funding will also disrupt key malaria interventions like sleeping under a treated mosquito net and the provision of malaria treatment for pregnant women initiatives that the Americans have incentivised through USAID. If Ugandans are forced to choose between buying a treated mosquito net and affording a meal, they will settle for the latter. This implies that there is a likelihood that the infant mortality rate could rise, exacerbated by new malaria infections in the absence of drugs and treated mosquito nets.²²

The closure of USAID will directly affect research in Infectious disease research and control, since the agency was among the leading supporters of research entities like the Infectious Disease Institute at Makerere University, the Joint Clinical Research Centre and the Uganda Virus Research Institute.²³ There's also a likelihood that the country might not have accurate data when the next epidemic breaks out.²⁴ For developing economies like Uganda, the burden of infectious diseases is terrible as it can provoke further economic breakdown and political unrest. Whereas the calls for establishing a sustainable model for critical sectors like health are commendable, the short-term cost on the lives of Ugandans and the economy remain dire.²⁵ With globalisation, questions relating to epidemics remain those of where and when—and not whether—the next epidemic emerges, as historical examples have shown.

Uganda is a relative bastion of stability within East Africa. The country hosts nearly 1.8 million refugees, ranking top in Africa and fifth globally. The highest portion of refugees hosted in Uganda hail from neighbouring conflict-ridden South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2024 alone, the US, through USAID, contributed about 86 million U.S dollars towards humanitarian refugee programmes in Uganda.²⁶ While fighting between rebel forces and government-allied forces in the DRC and South Sudan persists, there's a growing influx of refugees from the two countries into Uganda despite a significant drop in refugee support. If there's inadequate funding to facilitate the refugees in the host communities, conflict between the two groups over the strained resources will become inevitable.²⁷ Malnutrition in refugee reception centres in Uganda has reached critical levels of over 15 percent following the cutting of over a million refugees from food assistance due to severe funding shortages²⁸. If the situation persists, the government of Uganda could be prompted to revisit the approach to refugee hosting since it is merely a humanitarian endeavour. Many of these refugees will then seek third-country resettlement options, including in Europe and North America, adding to the emigration crisis there.

The exit of USAID will also affect the operations of several pro-democracy initiatives, especially within the civil society sector. For example, under the "*Your Rights*" activity implemented by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), USAID supported several not-for-profit organisations within the media, activism, and technology spaces, among others. This

allowed the beneficiary institutions to utilise digital platforms while encouraging civic engagement. Pro-democracy NGOs critical of the government are now exposed to unabated abuse by state agents without a semblance of security that the USAID umbrella provided to them. As the funding for democracy shrinks globally, countries in transition like Uganda will need alternative financing sources, like the costly cooperation with the country's private sector, to support pro-democracy activities.²⁹ The remaining pro-democracy EU and UK institutions are already financially strained to fill the gap left behind by the exit of USAID. The situation is compounded by the earlier closure of the multi-donor 102 million Euro Democratic Governance Facility.³⁰

The exit of USAID will have a bearing on the performance of the economy. With an estimated over 30,000 people losing their jobs, there's a likelihood of increased crime and social unrest. Desperate individuals, most of whom are young people, might turn to crime as a means of survival. This could destabilise the political environment and erode public trust in the government's ability to maintain law and order.

In addition, the government of Uganda is currently undertaking several time-bound, capital-intensive projects. These include the 1443 km heated East African Crude Oil Pipeline (5 billion U.S dollars), the 273 km Kampala – Malaba Standard Gauge Railway (3 billion U.S dollars), the 2026 general elections

(estimated at 226 million U.S dollars), and the preparations for the Africa Nations Cup, estimated at 260 million U.S dollars, among others. With Uganda's debt-to-GDP ratio standing at 52.7%, 32 Uganda shillings of every 100 Uganda shillings collected in tax revenue goes to debt servicing.³¹ The earliest that Uganda's fortunes can turn around is 2027, when the petrodollars from commercial oil production trickle into the economy.³²

Although Uganda has warmed up to the BRICS as a partner state, its hopes will be pinned on new allies like China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey.³³ However, first are preoccupied with domestic matters, especially wavering trade tariffs under Trump 2.0 and sustaining the assault on Ukraine, respectively. This harms the cost and amount of credit facilities income that could be set aside for development cooperation.

The 2023 global index report by *The Economist* identified six of the BRICS member states as authoritarian and four as flawed democracies.³⁴ It also classified Uganda as a hybrid regime, featuring a mix of authoritarian and democratic elements. This unholy alliance could embolden the regime in Kampala to clamp down further on civil liberties, as it manoeuvres a transition. The USAID exit has sparked a new pursuit for identifying "new partners". This pursuit of new alliances is led by first son Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, who doubles as Uganda's Chief of Defence Forces.³⁵

3 The Impact of USAID Withdrawal on Kenya

By Janice Sanya

Kenya ranks among the top U.S. foreign aid recipients in the world, receiving significant development, humanitarian and security assistance in Africa³⁶. This has been made possible through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Kenya, US President Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) Kenya, United States Mission to the United Nations – Nairobi, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Peace Corps³⁷.

USAID has been supporting the US-Kenya bilateral relationship and partnership since 1964, initially focused on infrastructure, agriculture and education. USAID expanded its development assistance programs into health, governance and economic sectors. The USAID Kenya office had been allocated 2.5 billion U.S. dollars in its 2020-2025 strategic plan, averaging about USD 471 million annually.

About 80 percent of this funding was allocated to healthcare, the bulk of which was focused on HIV/AIDS and malaria control, maternal and child health, and vaccination programs³⁸. For instance, USAID supported the 58.5 billion Kenya Shillings (452 million U.S. dollars) Kenya Health Partnerships for Quality Services (KHPQS) initiative. This initiative was being implemented in 34 counties, running 13 core healthcare programmes including HIV prevention and treatment, family planning, reproductive and maternal health, child and adolescent care, nutrition and water sanitation and hygiene³⁹. In addition, USAID

supported the “*Tamatisha TB*” program which worked to attain the global End TB Strategy⁴⁰ through strengthening Kenya’s health system and capacity to achieve sustainable, quality TB control⁴¹. Through the U.S. President’s Malaria Initiative (PMI), USAID partnered with Kenya’s National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) to strengthen the health information system for malaria surveillance and interventions⁴². It also supported treatment efforts, including bed nets, malaria prophylaxis for pregnant women, and indoor residual spraying to reduce transmission⁴³.

These USAID supported programmes have achieved notable success including a decrease in malaria prevalence from 8 per cent in 2015 to 6 per cent in 2023 as a result of the increased mosquito net distribution and improved treatment protocols, as well as an 85 per cent treatment success rate for over 264,000 TB patients due to the TB program incorporating innovations such as Artificial Intelligence-enhanced screening and community-based care⁴⁴.

In the education sector, USAID supported initiatives like the Primary Mathematics and Reading (PRIMR) initiative which aimed to enhance literacy and numeracy skills in Grades 1 and 2 through innovative approaches and interventions. This initiative covered 1,384 schools and its success led to the launch of “*Tusome*” USAID program which focuses on foundational literacy skills in English and Kiswahili in the first few grades of primary school⁴⁵. It has also helped improve the Kenyan education institutions’ capacity to create and distribute literacy materials.

As of 2023, “*Tusome*” had been implemented in over 25,000 schools across Kenya (including 1,500 low-cost private schools), impacting 101,000 teachers and 7.6 million students⁴⁶. These education programmes have had a net effect of breaking the barriers to accessing basic education including enrolment, attendance, retention, progression, and/or transition, and provide vocational training for some adolescents.

Additionally, following President William Ruto’s state visit to the US, a Framework for Cooperation that would provide financial support to institutions of higher learning by fostering partnerships with industry to improve innovation, research, and job growth in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) was agreed. Consequently, USAID announced an investment of 32 million U.S. dollars in Kenya’s education system that would support the Edtech Africa initiative, to promote STEM partnerships⁴⁷. It would also support initiatives aimed at connecting STEM graduates with jobs in fast-growing sectors like information and communication technology and manufacturing of textiles and pharmaceuticals.

In terms of economic assistance, USAID launched a five year Sustainable, Transformational and Accessible Water Interventions Project (STAWI) or “*STAWI Mashinani*” Initiative. The programme featured partnerships with county governments across Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASLAL) counties to advance water security for social, economic and environmental needs. The program has enabled the creation of a comprehensive framework for water security that addresses the intertwined challenges of resource scarcity, conflict, and poverty⁴⁸. In Northern Kenya, USAID implemented the USAID “*Kuza*” programme which helped develop and support economic opportunities in the region. The program helped improve the enabling environment for economic opportunities, accelerate public private investment, expand, and deepen county-level capacity to build resilience, foster self-reliance, and reduce the need for humanitarian assistance⁴⁹.

USAID has also supported the agricultural sector through projects like *Feed the Future* Kenya Livestock Market Systems (LMS). The project was implemented with a focus on improving people’s resilience, their ability to cope with stresses and shocks, while reducing poverty, hunger, and chronic undernutrition. Within the project, USAID in collaboration with county governments operationalised 36 livestock markets in northern Kenya to boost trade and income for pastoralist families. In addition, USAID LMS trained Livestock Marketing Associations (LMAs) on important aspects like leadership, marketing, record keeping, and inclusivity which helped improve market management. This project was impactful that 78,617 households recorded 40 percent increase in household income⁵⁰.

In terms of humanitarian assistance, through USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), USAID has responded to the urgent needs of those affected by natural disasters in Kenya, by providing food, water, shelter, emergency healthcare, sanitation and hygiene, and critical nutrition services to vulnerable communities. In collaboration with its partners, USAID has conducted drought response activities in 15 arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) counties giving the most vulnerable communities assistance in agriculture, cash, food, health, livelihood, nutrition, protection, and WASH interventions⁵¹.

USAID has also provided support to Kenya's security sector by funding programs on Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) such as the USAID Sauti Yako, Amani Yako (USAID Sauti) program, a localised system-strengthening approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) in Kenya⁵². The program has helped strengthen state and community institutions' capacities to building sustainable resilience to Violent Extremism (VE) in counties that have been affected by VE (hotspot regions) in the coast (Kwale, Mombasa, Kilifi, Lamu) and Garissa⁵³.

The crucial role played by USAID in Kenya is evident, and the significant changes undertaken by the new US administration will impact various programs at both national and county levels. The healthcare sector in particular, faces a major setback, with key programs worth nearly 25 billion Kenya Shillings (193 million U.S. dollars) now at risk of suspension⁵⁴. According to the former Cabinet Secretary (CS) for Health, Dr. Deborah Barasa the country will require KES 30.2 billion (232 million U.S. dollars) to ensure a seamless

transition. Aside from HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis interventions, U.S. funding has been instrumental in financing human resources for health, (45 million U.S. dollars per year), oxygen supply, laboratory services, cervical cancer, and COVID-19 programs (29 million U.S. dollars), distribution of medical commodities (17 million U.S. dollars), health data systems (1.1 million U.S. dollars), blood and blood product supplies (21 million U.S. dollars), family planning (46 million U.S. dollars), and nutrition programs (23 million U.S. dollars) which will cost the government in mitigating⁵⁵. When USAID funding was halted in January, over 150 supported clinics shut down, and hundreds of healthcare workers lost their jobs. In addition, it is projected that there will be an increase HIV/AIDS infections and tuberculosis-related deaths. The risk projection for new HIV infections by 2030 is as high as 58,495 and 23,500 annual TB-related deaths, 20,000 of which, are linked to HIV⁵⁶.

In the education sector, the funding freeze has handicapped institutions such as the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), which receives about 3 billion Kenya Shillings (23.5 million U.S. dollars) yearly, for printing, evaluation and distribution of Grade 1 to 3 textbooks under the USAID "*Tusome*" programme⁵⁷.

Kenya's economy has also suffered a major setback with the sudden halt in funded programs that has caused mass job losses around the country with about 40,000 direct and indirect employees facing an unsettling future by February 2025. Among the Kenyans who have lost their jobs are; 1,952 doctors, 1,234 nurses, 578 laboratory staff, more than 340 pharmacists, and over 24,577 community

health workers⁵⁸. This has in turn affected the livelihoods of many Kenyans including their families and dependants hence worsening the poverty and unemployment rates.

According to FarmBiz Africa, at least KES 30 billion worth of in agricultural funding has been halted in Kenya due to the suspension of USAID programs⁵⁹. Prior to the changes introduced by the Trump administration, USAID supported eight umbrella agriculture projects that directly benefited 5 million farmers, pastoralists, and rural households, and indirectly supported up to 7 million people. Arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) counties, particularly in Northern Kenya, are expected to be hardest hit, with the suspension of programs like USAID's STAWI and Feed the Future Kenya Livestock Market Systems, which had improved water access for livestock keepers and strengthened drought resilience. Farmers in regions such as Western and Central Kenya have also been affected, as the halted programs had significantly enhanced agricultural practices and boosted food production, which is now at risk.

Kenya has received an aggregated 1.26 trillion Kenya Shillings (9.75 billion U.S. dollars) as aid from USAID between 2001 to 2024, with a large part of it having gone to healthcare and humanitarian crisis programmes⁶⁰. Speaking before the Senate in March, the CS Treasury John Mbadi, noted the significant growth in USAID's contribution from 50 million U.S. dollars to nearly 1.7 billion U.S. dollars (220 billion Kenya shillings), under the Development Cooperation Framework Agreement (DCFA) of 2019 to September 2028. He also pointed out that USAID had been crucial in supporting over 2.5 million people, including refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma refugee settlements.

Kenya expected 405.4 million U.S. dollars (52 billion Kenya Shillings), in assistance from USAID in 2024/2025 covering health, economic growth, water, and the environment. Despite this, USAID has been critical in providing services across the country and fostering the development agenda.⁶¹

This paper argues that USAID has had a significant impact in Kenya's healthcare, economy, security, agriculture, education system and humanitarian aid. It has further explored some of the projects USAID has undertaken in the aforementioned sectors and how some of these sectors have been negatively impacted since the changes made by the new administration. As a result, it is important to note that the negative impacts may outweigh the positives with time and Kenya needs to navigate through the transition.

The abrupt withdrawal of USAID presents Kenya with an opportunity to strengthen the economic pillar of its foreign policy by building relationships with other state actors. Kenya should leverage on the Horn of Africa's geopolitical significance to international actors, and its strategic position in the region to attract foreign aid and investments especially from non-traditional donor states such as the Gulf states. It should also ensure continuity but also strengthen bilateral relationships with countries such as China, which has been critical in Kenya's infrastructural development and technology; UK, which through its Department for International Development (DFID) has provided support in education, trade and investment; and Germany, in development and cultural cooperation among other traditional donor states. Although foreign aid plays a crucial role in Kenya's

development goals, it is important that the country finds ways to slowly drift away from foreign aid especially with the Russia-Ukraine conflict that has caused a shift in budgetary allocations of western powers where some of them are reducing their aid budgets and channelling more funds towards defence.

Kenya could reduce its dependency on donor funding by building on multiple income generating avenues. This can be done through regional integration where institutions such as the African Trade Insurance Agency (ATIDI), a Pan-Africa insurer, and other institutions such as the East African Community (EAC) can help Kenya's economic facilitation. The country could also focus on creating partnerships with the private sector through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). This will enable sustainable economic growth by strengthening healthcare, transport and agriculture that will in turn help in job creation and promote development. There

should also be a reallocation of national and county budgets by ensuring that high-priority programs are put into consideration, eliminating unnecessary expenditures and prioritizing economic recovery initiatives. Lastly, the government should support homegrown innovation solutions and, create and implement policies that foster economic self-sufficiency.

Although the withdrawal of USAID may have brought about uncertainty in regards to Kenya's bilateral relationship with US, the meeting between Prime Cabinet Secretary Dr. Musalia Mudavadi and the US Secretary of State, Senator Marco Rubio on May 7, 2025 reaffirmed the continued long-standing relationship between the two countries. It is however not clear whether this reassures some of the agreements made during President Ruto's state visit and Kenya's designation as a major Non-Nato ally.

4 The Impact of USAID Withdrawal on Somalia and Somaliland

By Moustafa Ahmad and Mohamed Ali Hussein

With the withdrawal of USAID, African states, particularly Eastern and Horn of Africa, will be affected immensely, given the high level of fragility, political instability, and security threats that they face. These factors also make them highly dependent on aid and foreign assistance. Since the 1960s, USAID has been the key institution through which Washington channelled its support and exerted influence in Somalia. In the post-1991 period, following the collapse of the Somali government, USAID played a central role in both humanitarian relief and state-building efforts. In 2013, the Obama Administration recognised and supported the transition of Somalia from the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS)⁶². This meant direct engagement of USAID in contributing to the stability and gradual process of state-building in Somalia through the federal arrangement.⁶³

Somaliland, which restored its sovereignty from Mogadishu in 1991, received no direct assistance from USAID. It is still excluded from the humanitarian and state-building programs, since the US engages with Somaliland through the broader “Single Somalia Policy.” Somaliland officials have consistently appealed to the United States government for direct foreign assistance separate from Somalia.⁶⁴ The U.S. government is not part of the Somaliland Development Fund (SDF), a pooled, multi-donor initiative established to support Somaliland’s development priorities. Principal contributors include the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark⁶⁵. However, USAID has contributed to projects in Somaliland, particularly in the livelihoods, education, and health sectors.

Supporting Somalia’s humanitarian work was a priority for the USAID programs targeted in Somalia. The country has been hit by recurring droughts, floods, and food insecurity, which have affected hundreds of thousands of lives. According to Care International, 2020-2023 droughts in Somalia were the harshest in four decades, exposing an estimated 6.9 million people to urgent humanitarian need.⁶⁶ USAID was a major partner with local Somali authorities and international NGOs in addressing these crises. For instance, the U.S. government, through USAID, committed \$29 million to build resilience and food security in the face of famine.

In the context of security operations, USAID and other international donor agencies

have been active in pursuing a 'countering or preventing violent extremism' (C/PVE) agenda.⁶⁷ Although USAID did not directly engage in combating militant groups like Al-Shabab and ISIS in Somalia, its efforts addressed the rehabilitation of former al-Shabab fighters and preventing youth from joining the terror groups. This aligns with what the Somali government laid out in its offensive in 2022, which emphasized not only military approaches but also undercutting radical extremist ideologies.⁶⁸ However, this has had limited success in achieving the strategic goal of discouraging youth from joining Al-Shabab⁶⁹.

Somalia is battling serious security issues relating to violent extremism and occasional inter-communal violence. The halting of USAID is likely going to affect the stabilisation efforts as the government struggles to address security and political challenges.⁷⁰ For instance, one of the projects affected is Transition Initiatives for Stabilisation (TIS3), which amounted to 30 million U.S. dollars.⁷¹ The program aims to foster long-term stability and development in Somalia by promoting government-community dialogue, expanding economic opportunities, and strengthening governance.

Apart from the aid through the USAID, Washington is said to reconsider its security commitments in Somalia, similar to 2020 when the Trump administration pulled out its troops from Somalia and instead intensified airstrikes against al-Shabab targets. Somalia's elite forces, Danab, trained and advised by the U.S., were affected by this decision, exposing how vulnerable the Somali security sector is. As USAID cuts were announced, logistical support, medical evacuations, and

maintenance of Baledogle airbase, which was used by the forces, were affected.⁷² In recent months, Al-Shabab has escalated its offensive against Somali security forces' positions, retaking key areas that government forces had dislodged previously⁷³. Without a sustained U.S. backing, the Somali government's ability to defend itself against the group will be difficult. This also threatens regional stability. According to the Armed Conflict Location Event Data project (ACLED), the number of attacks by Al-Shabab inside Kenya spiked since 2023, particularly on the towns bordering Somalia⁷⁴.

Additionally, the U.S. government is likely to reject funding and support for the new African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). Instead, according to policy experts, Washington might pivot to strategic interests in Somaliland, where authorities are offering military bases, aligning with the perceived transactional approach of the Trump administration.⁷⁵ As it stands, U.S. aid cuts have not significantly affected the operations of Somali forces, but a drastic change of policy, such as pulling out the 500 U.S. troops stationed in Somalia, could significantly alter the dynamics in Somalia.

The new aid halt also worsens the humanitarian crisis Somalia is facing. According to the Centre for Global Development, the U.S. has suspended 22% of its USAID aid programs in Somalia, estimated at 113 million U.S. dollars.⁷⁶ Later, the U.S. government reinstated lifesaving food aid programs for several countries, including Somalia. With the government's inability to address these challenges on its own, the prospects of this exerting pressure on the fragile government are likely to exacerbate. Despite the critical

role USAID has played in mitigating such crises, however, there are voices critical of their approach and effectiveness. As Rama argues, Africans should take advantage of this moment to turn away from assistance and secure more economic self-reliance, arguing against the dependency trap⁷⁷. This raises the question of how self-reliance can be achieved in the light of an acute humanitarian crisis.

Somalia's fragile democratization prospects are another area that USAID cuts are affecting. For instance, USAID launched a people-centred governance program that sought to empower district councils' ability to govern⁷⁸. The program launched in 2023, which commits \$40 million, will help the district council to consolidate services that will be essential, for the longer term, for the direct elections model the government is pursuing. Conversations regarding the viability of the electoral model are ongoing but ineffective, and the marginal role of district councils is a major impediment to the electoral process in Somalia⁷⁹. In February 2024, the parliament passed the new framework, which stipulates direct elections over the indirect elections, which were the norm for many years.⁸⁰ The aid cuts also affect civil society organizations dedicated to civic education and dialogue. Among them is the Somali Stability Fund (SSF). Over the years, the project has worked with government and non-state partners as well as federal member states to support political dialogue.

4.1 Somaliland

In Somaliland, the withdraw of USAID will cripple the work of U.S. - based civic organisations such as National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which supported civil society organisations, journalists and human rights organisations⁸¹. The U.S. government did not necessarily invest in Somaliland's democratisation process compared to other Western partners who supported the work of the electoral commission.

Africa has not been a priority for U.S. policymakers and has always been seen in a security-centred approach to the war on terror, and now the geopolitical competition with China. Washington's global retreat and preoccupation with the Middle East and Ukraine invited other regional and global players into the African sphere, particularly in the Horn of Africa. China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, and Qatar are increasingly becoming assertive in their interests. In Somalia, Turkey has been playing the biggest and most visible role in supporting the federal government in humanitarian aid, investments, and training security forces in return for securing lucrative deals in oil and gas exploration as well as controlling the airport and the port of Mogadishu. Turkey's foreign aid to Somalia exceeded 1 billion U.S. dollars in 2023⁸². Recent reports of Turkey sending its special forces to Somalia to protect the port and other important assets reflect the increasing role Ankara is playing as the U.S. steps back.

Meanwhile, China sees the Horn as a priority for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with significant investment in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya's infrastructure⁸³. Its regional strategy also revolves around isolating Taiwan, which forged relations with Somaliland. This resulted in Beijing getting closer to Somalia's federal government and stepping up its support in humanitarian and developmental aid.⁸⁴ It's unlikely that China or Turkey will step up their aid engagement in Somalia, similar to USAID, as their main preoccupation is the stability of Somalia. Experts on China-Africa relations argue that China will not replace USAID as it prioritises investments and economic partnerships, and less on foreign aid assistance⁸⁵.

The aid cuts by the Trump administration reflect a pattern of a new world order where geopolitics and state interests precede multilateralism and values. In this context, the impact of these cuts will be huge, particularly in contexts where the government, such as Somalia, is incapable of providing essential services without external support. But it also allows us to reflect on the sustainability and the future of aid in the African context in an increasingly divided world over geopolitics, power, and resources.

5 The Impact of USAID Withdrawal on Sudan and South Sudan

By Eynas Latef and Marlyn Leone Modi

USAID began operations in Sudan in the early 1960s, focusing on post-independence development initiatives, especially irrigation, public health, and education. In the 1990s, the agency shifted from development to emergency relief due to the Second Sudanese Civil War. Following the military coup by former president Omar al-Bashir, the U.S. designated Sudan a “state sponsor of terrorism” in 1993, suspended direct aid, and severed relations with Sudan. However, due to the growing humanitarian crisis in Darfur, USAID was restored and became a key funder of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a UN-led relief effort that operated between 1989 and 2005, delivering food and medical assistance to war-affected civilians⁸⁶

Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, the support from USAID included peacebuilding, local governance, and basic services, and played a role in post-conflict recovery in both northern and southern Sudan, through partnerships with international NGOs, multilateral agencies, and local CSOs. After the independence of South Sudan in July 2011, USAID continued humanitarian programming in Sudan’s conflict-affected areas such as Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. The agency supported food security, health, WASH (water, sanitation, hygiene), and protection for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Following the ouster of Omar al-Bashir and the consequent lifting of sanctions on Sudan, USAID resumed direct engagement with the Sudanese government and CSOs, during

which USAID supported Sudan’s transitional government by addressing both the immediate needs of the population and the foundations of democratic governance. By fostering the Sudan Family Support Program, substantial investments in electoral processes, urgent humanitarian aid, and COVID-19 response efforts, USAID’s interventions were crucial to stabilising Sudan during a fragile and historic moment of transformation.⁸⁷

In April 2023, tension escalated between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Response Forces (RSF), resulting in a nationwide war, which has created one of the worst humanitarian crises globally. USAID has since been the largest single donor to Sudan up to the time of its withdrawal in January 2025, contributing up to 44% of total humanitarian aid to Sudan. These funds supported lifesaving

services, such as community kitchens (Al Takkaia), direct cash transfers, mobile clinics, and emergency response rooms (ERRs) - grassroots networks- that became essential for delivering aid in conflict zones.⁸⁸

For Sudan, the direst effects of the USAID suspension are in areas of food security and healthcare. Two years into a war, over 2 million people were dependent on food supplies from emergency kitchens (Al Takkaia), funded by USAID. The shutdown of these kitchens following the withdrawal of USAID leaves them exposed to severe hunger and exacerbates the challenges they already face in displacement⁸⁹.

The on-going conflict in Sudan had already put a huge strain on the health sector, putting over 80% of hospitals and clinics out of service. A further 335 health facilities were affected by the halt of USAID funding, including dozens of rural clinics and mobile units that served displaced person camps and remote regions, also essential services such as vaccinations, malnutrition screenings, and clean water distribution were disrupted.⁹⁰

Before the funding halt, USAID-supported organisations provided thousands of direct and subcontracted jobs across sectors—from healthcare to humanitarian logistics. The sudden withdrawal led to widespread layoffs, particularly affecting health workers,

nutrition specialists, field coordinators, and education facilitators. For many individuals, especially those working in aid delivery or community-based programs, this translated into an immediate loss of income, deepening the socio-economic strain on families already coping with conflict and displacement.

USAID was a crucial ally in Sudan's post-2019 transition, investing in democratic development, including support to independent media, fact-checking platforms, electoral awareness campaigns, and youth- and women-led civic engagement initiatives. These efforts helped amplify marginalized voices and foster civic participation during a critical period of political uncertainty⁹¹. And after the war with the severe political disturbance, USAID supported a pro-civilian power coalitions of CSOs in their effort to facilitate peace talks between the SAF and the RSF, and also promoting the peace talks and supporting documentation of violence in its all forms whether it's SBVs, forced disappearance, combating hate speech and tackling misinformation. Since the withdrawal, many civil society organisations report that networking, training, and advocacy activities have ceased, while some groups can no longer meet their basic operational needs, hindering the Sudanese SCOs' efforts in peace reconciliation.

5.1 South Sudan

South Sudan is highly dependent on foreign aid, particularly from the U.S. According to the Centre for Global Development, about 25 percent of South Sudan's Gross National Income is obtained from foreign aid.⁹² USAID has been a cornerstone of humanitarian and development assistance in South Sudan since its independence in 2011. The agency has provided humanitarian assistance to address issues of food insecurity, improving agricultural productivity, support to the health sector programmes including maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, provision of essential pharmaceuticals, and also engaging in a long-term development programmes aimed at building resilience, fostering sustainable economic growth, and promoting peace and good governance⁹³.

USAID provided life-saving aid to millions affected by the civil wars of 2013 and 2016, supported the enrolment of hundreds of thousands of children in schools, providing access to literacy, numeracy, and other essential skills, in one instance, more than 600,000 children and adolescents were provided with a learning environment suitable for them with USAID support, and also played a role in maintaining critical health services⁹⁴. In its peace-building efforts, USAID, through its conflict mitigation programs and support for civil society, fostered reconciliation within communities, creating peaceful coexistence and a more informed society.

A significant portion of this funding is channelled through L/NGOs, which play a frontline role in delivering services to remote and vulnerable communities.⁹⁵ The

withdrawal of USAID will have a huge impact for the economy, security and humanitarian efforts. South Sudan is currently facing worsening economic, security and humanitarian crises arising from more than two years of war in the neighbouring Sudan. Domestically ethnic tension, political fragmentation arising from the continued failure to implement the peace agreement, and other challenges like poverty and unemployment have defined South Sudan since its independence⁹⁶. The suspension of aid will limit the transitional government's ability to address the outcomes of these challenges.

According to the UN refugee agency, there are over 2 million internally displaced persons in South Sudan.⁹⁷ In addition, more than half a million Sudanese refugees have fled to South Sudan. Displaced people are the ones hit hardest by the aid suspension. They face severe challenges accessing safe drinking water and other sanitary, food and medical provisions. Relatedly, they are also more vulnerable to gender-based violence, child abuse, and other forms of exploitation as the direct result of reducing funds for protection programs, an area that USAID previously invested in.

Child recruitment in the armed conflict is a major factor in security in South Sudan. According to UNICEF, South Sudanese children are robbed of their normal childhood by conflict actors and rehabilitating them requires significant intervention. USAID has been critical in funding UNICEF's work in addressing child recruitment and alleviating socio-economic factors that push them to fight in the conflicts⁹⁸. In addition, the U.S. has already showed unwillingness to continue

supporting the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)⁹⁹ which has been crucial for the stabilisation of South Sudan.

USAID has also supported various development initiatives in South Sudan. The country received \$0.79 billion in economic aid in the 2023 fiscal with a significant amount going to development priorities¹⁰⁰. The termination will negatively impact economic stability as Initiatives promoting economic growth, livelihoods, and job creation were affected, as well as affecting the institutional growth, including support for governance, rule of law, and civil society organizations, which has also stopped as a direct result of the halt.

Experts believe that the economic crisis in South Sudan is a major factor in the worsening political and security situation¹⁰¹. The landlocked nature of the country meant that it would rely on the conflict-ridden Sudan for exporting its oil resources. Sudan's government directive to oil companies to shut down the pipeline that carries crude oil from South Sudan for export¹⁰² significantly limits the government's ability to generate revenue and manage administrative and political issues.

In both countries, the impact of USAID's halt is not only immediate but also strategic, potentially marking a shift in the geopolitical and humanitarian landscape as we know it. As U.S. support recedes, other powers have moved in, offering funding without the same emphasis on rights or civic space. These actors often prioritise resource extraction or political influence at the expense of democratic development. As of early 2025, no donor has stepped in to replace USAID's critical role, leaving a vacuum in both local accountability

and the coordination of aid efforts. The same is true for South Sudan, where growing political tensions risk the outbreak of a second civil war.

The consequences extend beyond national borders, threatening stability across the Horn of Africa. Sudan's conflict has already caused widespread displacement into Chad, South Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia. In South Sudan, the pressure from refugee arrivals, combined with the absence of coordinated aid, has indorsed the fragility of the system leading to poor humanitarian situation for refugees, who are now becoming victims of not only the war in their countries but the already fragile and vulnerable systems in their host countries—challenges compounded by the halt of crucial support like USAID's assistance. Meanwhile, the erosion of civil society networks and peace-building mechanisms has weakened regional cooperation on cross-border security, migration, and arms trafficking. Without USAID's presence and convening power, fragile borders risk becoming the epicentres of new conflicts and humanitarian collapse, along with increasing the risk of empowering the already existing Islamises armed movements in the region by finding new incubators with the absence of peace and security.

The suspension of USAID funding has not only disrupted lifesaving services but also reduced international engagement and pressure to resolve the conflict. USAID often served as both a stabilising force and a diplomatic lever, promoting dialogue and accountability among local actors and warring parties. Its absence has diminished support for civil society, weakened incentives for peace, and allowed violence and political fragmentation to spread unchecked.

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