



Water that has
been begged for
does not quench your thirst

Reiterating the case towards a robust
post-(US)aid future in Africa



HOUSE *of* SESHAT

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The House of Seshat - An introduction

We are The House of Seshat—a knowledge management and storytelling Institute committed to centering African thought in the making of culture, policy, and power. We are a Think, Do Feel Tank, intent on contextualizing, translating, and making African knowledge actionable—bridging the gap between research, lived experience, and decision-making. We're building a home for ideas: a space where archives, creative expression, and rigorous inquiry come together to shape how Africa is understood, both from within and beyond. In a world where our knowledge is too often extracted or ignored, we are reclaiming authorship. From fellowships to media projects, exhibitions to research labs, we are developing tools, spaces, and platforms that make African knowledge visible, valuable, and unstoppable.

Contents

Introduction	5
We need to explore the full picture	5
An unsustainable debt Infrastructure	6
“Outsourcing” of critical State functions	6
Civil society is part of the problem	7
A deep-seated, long-standing problem – the history is telling	8
A Definitive Way Forward	11
Reclaim Ideological Agency	11
Prioritise economic self-sufficiency	12
Conscious approach to Africa’s Demographic Dividend	14

Introduction

“President Trump and DOGE can now dismantle USAID” – read headlines¹ across the world in early February, setting global development into a frenzy and putting a final nail in the coffin for many actors, including Local governments, International and local NGOs, and vulnerable populations across Africa. A gigantic and complex infrastructure of numerous actors and networks, thus far thought of as sacrosanct, the operations of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) now loom in suspense, with the possibility of a formal and permanent shutdown. With droves of USAID workers laid off, projects terminated and the majority of global offices closed (across Africa), a fervent discourse on the future of the continent without aid has ensued.

Discourse is typically enabled through emerging or existing narratives that people utilize in explaining or making sense of situations. Narratives, as such, serve as some of the greatest reserves of our societal memory, and also, offer great insights into the events of the present day, while also shaping perceptions of the future. The discourse around the USAID funding cuts to Africa presents one of the richest lores of our time; a deluge of commentary on the different perspectives to the funding cuts, unraveling deeply unsettling truths, grey areas and falsities – a sea one can drown in.

This paper advances and reiterates a position we believe indispensable to this discourse: that the withdrawal of aid is not a crisis, but a historic opportunity to reimagine African self-reliance.

We need to explore the full picture

From the outset, there has been no shortage of proclamations of the doom envisioned to befall the continent as a result of the funding cuts. Data driven analyses, modeled estimates² and such other evidence has allowed beyond intimations, a pre-determination of sorts, especially done by many of Africa’s leading development think tanks into what is slowly a cementing of yet another “woe unto Africa” narrative. For instance, one of these projections shows that the Sub-Saharan African economy will be US\$ \$4.6 billion smaller by 2030 and with 19 million more Africans having fallen below the US\$ \$2.15 extreme poverty income level by then.³ With USAID having previously contributed to the continent’s core social sectors like health, agriculture and security, there has been a prediction of an increased likelihood of a change in the dynamics of regional (in)security, and an adverse impact on the health infrastructure. Health facilities that have been dependent on initiatives such as the U.S President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which was launched under President George W. Bush’s Administration in 2003, and the President’s Malaria

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/goats-and-soda/2025/04/24/nx-s1-5375110/doge-dismantling-foreign-aid-agency-started-by-george-w-bush>

² <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/data-modelling-reveals-the-heavy-toll-of-usaid-cuts-on-africa>

³ <https://futures.issafrica.org/blog/2025/The-toll-of-USAID-cuts-on-Africa>

Initiative are likely to suffer greatly. In parallel, broader implications on climate⁴ and other USAID-supported infrastructure are also expected.

It has also been postulated that the much needed data on the subsequent impacts of the aid cuts and reductions may be lacking since major programs focused on collecting some of the most reliable sectoral data such as the Demographics and Health Surveys program on public health have been axed,⁵ together with a number of civil society interventions which have been filling much of Africa's data gap.

Much of the analysis surrounding potential cuts to USAID funding as such tends to emphasize humanitarian aid, often jumping to the conclusion that Africa will “collapse” without it. This framing, however, misses several deeper considerations.

An unsustainable debt Infrastructure

Africa is heavily indebted to international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. A plain reading of these doomsday analyses might suggest that without U.S. aid, African states are at a risk of immediate collapse. However, a closer look at the structure of U.S. foreign assistance to Africa reveals a more complex picture.

In recent years, the U.S. has directed up to 26% of its total aid to Africa,⁶ including through multilateral institutions like the UN and the IMF. This aid, combined with dwindling support from other countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, amounts to roughly \$60 billion—of which the U.S.'s contribution notably dropped from \$20 billion to \$12.7 billion in 2024⁷. In contrast, Africa's debt servicing obligations reached approximately \$163 billion that same year.

While most discussions focus on humanitarian aid—often in the form of conditional grants like PEPFAR—the more significant issue lies in the steady flow of systematic aid via multilateral loans. These have saddled many African nations with long-term debt, crowding out spending on critical public services like health and education. In fact, debt servicing now consumes a larger share of many African governments' budgets than those essential sectors.

“Outsourcing” of critical State functions

Aid dependence has stripped African states' apparatus of their core functionality, among which is the provision of public services such as health, education, infrastructure and security. Although post-colonial Africa has seen some material improvements, for example with its demographic dividend, over the decades, there has also been a steady erosion of state responsibility, with power increasingly handed over to external actors. Marked by economic regression, state corruption and mismanagement of public funds, this shift has contributed to a breakdown in trust between governments and citizens. The widened income inequality and unconstitutional rule in many parts of the continent has further eroded public confidence in governments.

4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/world/africa/africa-usaid-funds.html>

5 <https://www.devex.com/news/critical-global-surveys-fall-casualty-to-us-foreign-aid-gutting-109513>

6 <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/193535/africa-foreign-aid-declining>

7 <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/193535/africa-foreign-aid-declining>

Civil society is part of the problem

Civil society in Africa has long played an important role in filling in the gaps left by governments, from healthcare to democratic rule and human rights advocacy. However, in the conversation around a post-aid Africa, it's important to recognize that civil society is not just a casualty of donor cuts; it is also part of the problem. The loss of USAID funding undoubtedly disrupted many vital projects, particularly in health and governance. Yet much of this work was and continues to be driven by agendas tied to foreign interests. For instance, "Breaking the Silence on NGOs in Africa,"⁸ a book recently authored by Kenyan Organic Intellectuals Network dives deep into the role that civil society plays— a ***critical role in stifling the development and independence of radical African movements,***⁹ adding fuel to longstanding criticisms that civil society often operates as an extension of Western influence¹⁰— a charge many CSOs dismiss as backlash for holding power to account. But the reality is that donor funding can redirect civil society efforts away from challenging entrenched power structures, reinforcing dependency and serving broader soft power objectives.¹¹ The post-aid discourse, then, risks being skewed, not just by absent state capacity, but by the foreign-aligned frameworks within which much of civil society still operates.

This issue extends deeply into Africa's media landscape. Far from being neutral observers, many media institutions act as soft power conduits, reinforcing external agendas under the guise of public interest reporting. BBC Media Action, for instance, received significant USAID funding — about 8% of its 2023–24 budget¹² — for projects across Africa like Down2Earth and Bridges, which, while addressing climate resilience, also subtly align editorial focus with donor priorities. Across the board, donor-funded campaigns distort editorial agendas, sidelining local crises in favor of donor-aligned narratives and democracy-building frameworks steeped in Western liberal orthodoxy. Training programs and capacity-building initiatives by the Civil society further embed ideological influence by shaping how African societies come to understand power, legitimacy, and progress. Both Western and non-Western actors — including China¹³ — compete for narrative control, leaving little space for independent civic or media voices.

8 <https://darajapress.com/publication/critical-reflections-on-the-role-of-ngos-in-africa>

9 <https://roape.net/2023/09/07/breaking-the-silence-on-ngos-in-africa-a-review/>

10 https://x.com/african_stream/status/1893338741017657755

11 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14002939>

12 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/press-releases-and-statements/simon-bishop-feb-2025>

13 <https://theconversation.com/china-flexes-its-media-muscle-in-africa-encouraging-positive-headlines-as-part-of-a-soft-power-agenda-245804>

A deep-seated, long-standing problem – the history is telling

The unsustainability of the aid model, whether for government or civil society tells an even more interesting story. In the midst of disruptions to aid, the question – what has long sustained this system, with its apparent dysfunctions and precariousness? – begs to be asked. Historical contextualisation segueing into the present offers some answers. With much of Africa coming out of the colonial period in the 1960s, foreign aid's earlier manifestations on the continent were tied to the alliances from the cold war; either for or against the USSR communists or the US capitalists. In this period, aid had little to do with the nature of a country's leadership. Instead, simply allying with particular interests was rewarded with aid.¹⁴ A key example of this was Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko at the time and his allegiance to the U.S.¹⁵ Needless to say, this period encouraged regressive leadership as corruption and state mismanagement went largely unchecked as in the case of Mobutu and several other African despot's cases.

The post-independence era of the mid 1960s to the early 1970s saw a period of growth where aid was particularly funneled to the development of infrastructure, such as roads, railways and dams. However, with little to show for this investment, by the 1970s, a sudden turn was taken to focus on poverty or the poor. Here, social services, agriculture, rural development, literacy and mass inoculation programs received up to 50% of funding, up from 10% in the previous decade.¹⁶

This earlier wave of infrastructure did not come free – it's where Africa's debt burden began. By the early 1980s, following the global economic turmoil of the 1970s¹⁷ and widespread debt defaults by African states, the IMF and World Bank—key institutions of the Washington Consensus¹⁸—ushered in the era of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). These programs were presented as solutions to the financial crises on the continent, and they also aimed at addressing the root causes of debt repayment failures. This era saw intense pressure on African states to adopt neoliberal policies, including widespread privatization of state-owned enterprises. While marketed as a path to transformation, much scholarship now shows these reforms often caused more harm than good to African economies.¹⁹

¹⁴ https://gdsnet.org/Dambisa_moyo_DeadAidForward.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/20230823133108.pdf>

¹⁶ *Ibid*- Dead Aid-Dambisa Moyo

¹⁷ <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2024/04/29/structural-adjustments-complex-legacy-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

¹⁸ *The Washington Consensus was a set of free-market economic policies promoted by institutions like the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed at boosting growth in developing countries through trade liberalization, privatization, and reduced government spending.*

¹⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-have-the-washington-consensus-reforms-affected-economic-performance-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

As SAPs continued to underperform in the decades that followed, blame shifted to “bad governance” in African states. In response, aid conditionalities began to focus more on strengthening government institutions and governance reforms. This approach later morphed into the over-emphasis of Western democracy as the panacea to Africa’s underdevelopment problems, although increasingly, minimal correlation has been found between nominal democracy and economic development in Africa.²⁰ But even as this governance-focused approach took center stage, aid flows did not hold steady. Since peaking in the mid-1990s, Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa has been on a steady decline.²¹ To sum this history up in the words of economist Dambisa Moyo, **“aid has been and continues to be an unmitigated political, economic and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the developing world”**.²²

Several arguments have been put forward to explain the endurance of the aid system even in the face of its several limitations. First, the development infrastructure and its dominant frameworks leave Africa at the mercy of continued extraction and domination as seen in Africa’s debt trap and failure of economic structures, exemplified in the SAPs imposed on the continent. For example, the Bretton Woods institutions²³ being colonial era institutions which largely represent the interests of the wealthier nations (the OECD).

Another major resultant issue relates to power and knowledge systems. Decades of aid intervention have entrenched systems of thought upon Africa, begging the question, “Who do these formulations serve?”. Ideologies such as globalisation, multilateralism, neoliberalism, democracy among others have been imposed through aid, and influenced how African states organise (or otherwise) and determine their priorities and paths. Globalisation and multilateralism for instance, have relegated African states to pawns as opposed to players in the global order which, overseen by the US and the wealthy West, has maintained approaches to ‘international cooperation’ which tremendously benefit them at the expense of the rest of the world.²⁴ A current example is the conditional loans tied to aid, which often open the door for multinational corporations to extract value from developing countries – shifting profits to tax havens²⁵ and avoiding local reinvestment.

Some claim the era of social imperialism – where foreign social values are imposed – is ending. But the unequal impacts of multilateralism and globalisation on Africa may only worsen under the new Trump administration. VP Vance made this starkly clear in a recent speech, saying, “the idea of globalisation was so that richer countries would move further up the value chain while poor

20 *Ibid- Dead Aid Dambisa Moyo*

21 <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/04/official-development-assistance-2024-figures.html>

22 https://gdsnet.org/Dambisa_moyo_DeadAidForward.pdf

23 *The Bretton Woods Institutions are the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, created in 1944 to help manage the global economy after World War II. Their main job is to provide loans, financial advice, and economic support to countries, especially during financial crises or for development projects*

24 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2063305/watch-alibabas-jack-ma-live-world-economic-forum-davos>

25 <https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/FINAL%20Who%20wes%20Who%20-%20FINAL%20COPY%20FOR%20WEBSITE%20-%205th%20Feb%202025.pdf>

countries made simpler things²⁶.”

This type of thinking leaves little optimism to Africa’s international relations particularly with Euro-America which urgently calls for the region to rethink its global position and relations, with some lessons to contemplate from the US aid synopsis shared above. From the aid conversation, Africa’s weak and subaltern position in the global order appears to be the single most recurring motif to its underdevelopment. While this isn’t a fresh revelation from the USAID funding cuts, since theorists and policy makers have over the years made a case for contextualising Africa’s development, this watershed moment offers greater clarity of our reality as well what alternative paths must look like for the prosperity of Africa. Approaches which acknowledge the structural weight of history on the present while also acknowledging the power of Africa’s agency and the reconfigurations of power to refashion the future²⁷ are much of what ought to be today’s African thought process to ideate around this fundamental challenge.

26 <https://x.com/RnaudBertrand/status/1902528428643168632>

27 <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2022/10/14/africa-in-the-21st-century-from-pawn-to-a-significant-player/>

A Definitive Way Forward

For the start, the tired language of ‘this is a wake up call to the continent’ dominates the definition of what comes next. While indeed this may be a moment which catapults the continent into action and out of the quagmire it finds itself in, the undertones to the ‘wake up call’ language largely suggest a knee jerk reaction, as if this response will be automatic. The danger in this framing is it works to pacify Africans without necessarily acknowledging their endeavours, creativity and innovation in navigating the status quo in which they exist, and getting them to fully appreciate the unified effort which it will take to undo Africa’s predicament. Rather than frame this as a wake up call, focus should be on addressing why Africa’s position at present is critical, together with deliberate thinking and action tended towards changing this.

Reclaim Ideological Agency

Without question, the most effective and enduring path toward Africa’s prosperity is deeper and meaningful regional integration – economically, socially, and politically. Countless cases have proven that Africa’s future depends on unity, collaboration, and a shared strategic vision. The African Union (AU), which brings together the continent’s sovereign states, remains the primary vehicle for realizing this integration. Yet, 62 years after its founding as the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, much of its Agenda 2063²⁸ mandate for “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa” remains unrealized.

Historically, Pan-Africanism²⁹ and the idea of an African renaissance³⁰ have served as the ideological bedrock of Africa’s unity agenda. However, as our analysis has shown, Africa continues to lack true ideological agency. Its political and economic direction remains heavily shaped by external interests. At the AU level, Pan-Africanism has been diluted into rhetoric, detached from its original aim of securing the political, economic, and social liberation of African peoples. Decision-making is often mired in kinship politics, self-interest and corruption,³¹ – with policies that perpetuate the very challenges they are meant to solve.

28 <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

29 https://books.google.co.ug/books?hl=en&lr=&id=4VIAfPNT0kQC&oi=fnd&pg=PA56&dq=pan+africanism+in+africa&ots=XYJF8XvKvV&sig=lcDtz06e5iVP-nE0EsC6z3KUWcA&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=pan%20africanism%20in%20africa&f=false

30 <https://philarchive.org/archive/CHAMOA-5>

31 <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20181122/outcome-investigation-allegations-harassment-against-women-and-other>

A definitive way forward demands the engendering and restoration of Africa's ideological agency through two core actions:

First, the AU must re-anchor its agenda in authentic Pan-African ideals. This means adopting a non-negotiable norm-setting framework: any decision that undermines Africa's independence, sovereignty, and collective liberation must be rejected outright. But ideological clarity alone is not enough – it must be matched by a restoration of trust between states and their citizens. Years of outsourcing critical functions and the AU's failure to uphold its own commitments have eroded this social contract. To rebuild it, transparent, participatory governance must be prioritized, placing citizens at the heart of policy and development. Only through this civic cohesion can Africa harness its demographic dividend and realize a collective, self-determined future.

Second, Africa must reclaim a consistent, assertive voice in global affairs. The continent's silence during pivotal moments – from USAID funding cuts to the ripple effects of U.S. and Chinese protectionist policies – reveals a dangerous absence of strategic coordination. With China as Africa's largest trade partner, external shocks increasingly dictate African realities, often without a unified continental response. To counter this, the AU and its member states must urgently build policy coherence, resolve overlapping regional commitments, and adopt joint economic and diplomatic positions. Only through clear, collective stances can Africa safeguard its interests and prevent external actors from defining its path.

Prioritise economic self-sufficiency

A critical pillar for Africa's prosperity is expanding and securing its fiscal space. The continent continues to grapple with elevated debt levels, high interest rates, and significant illicit financial flows that undermine domestic resource mobilisation. In 2024 alone, African governments spent an average of 27% of their revenues on interest payments – a fiscal burden that erodes the capacity for meaningful development investment.

To reverse this, Africa must prioritise restructuring its public finance frameworks. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) stands as the single most transformative economic initiative in this regard. Beyond driving intra-African trade and industrialisation, the AfCFTA will expand taxable economic activity, increase government revenues, and reduce reliance on external aid.³² Operationalising this agreement fully – through investments in infrastructure, logistics, and trade facilitation – will not only grow Africa's economies but also create new fiscal space to service debts and finance governance systems capable of advancing Africa's ideological agency. A case in point is Nigeria's recent move to simplify cross-border payment processes for businesses trading under AfCFTA, a practical step towards formalising and scaling intra-African commerce³³.

Furthermore, mechanisms to restructure systemic challenges whether it be debt servicing mechanisms or how to broaden states' tax bases will have to be prioritised to undo Africa's need for aid support. A great example here is the Kigali decision which was taken by the AU in 2017 to address issues in member states financing the AU budget as to date, over 60% of it remains

³² <https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/50385>

³³ <https://www.afreximbank.com/nigeria-unlocks-intra-african-trade-with-new-papss-policy-boost/>

externally funded. This decision enacted a 0.2% levy on all imported goods which was assessed to be adequate in financing much of the AU's budget and thus fostering financial sovereignty.³⁴ This levy however has not fully been implemented by a number of member states including those in the SADC region.

Other relevant reforms here include the need for member states to restructure their economic objectives towards self reliance. Here, endogenous food production, conservation³⁵ and other systems which cater first to human sustenance are inalienable to this endeavor. For example, most countries' exports are dominated by primary commodities (raw materials) even with evidence showing that resource intensive countries typically experience slower growth than non-resource intensive countries due to limited economic diversification.³⁶ Emphasis thereby should be on social, political and economic transformations which place citizen's needs and welfare at their centre and not market priorities which align citizen's well being.

Additionally, governance reforms especially the streamlining of regulations across the continent is another critical aspect in realising Africa's economic self-sufficiency. Here, aspects such as the harmonisation of customs procedures and the reduction of non trade barriers (NTBs) which remain a hindrance to this vision ought to be urgently addressed. Research has shown that while the AfCFTA prioritises tariff liberalisations, addressing NTBs will be more effective in boosting intra Africa trade.³⁷ Indeed, the limited free movement of people across the continent remains one of the biggest barriers to an African single market as visa regimes remain and as such impeding the creation of regional value chains with protocols such as the Free Movement of Persons in Africa³⁸ still being barely ratified by member states years after its adoption.

Another point to consider is digitalisation which has over the recent years been posited as key to Africa's transformation. However, with a looming digital divide for example with only about 37% of Africans being connected to the internet³⁹ and even less women being connected, investments in digital infrastructure including data centres, broadband networks and internet exchange points are needed to realise the 4IR's potential in Africa especially as the techno-economic paradigm alters how goods and services are produced and moved.

By linking a people-first approach to our economic planning, economic integration and digital transformation to fiscal sovereignty, Africa can realise economic self sufficiency and overall be able to reclaim control over its own developmental agenda.

³⁴ https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-03/PB_Chapter_5_ECO_Kesaobaka%20Pharatlhathe.pdf

³⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324933950_J_Mbaria_and_M_Ogada_The_big_conservation_lie_Auburn_Washington_USA_Lens_Pens_Publishing_1300_Paperback_ISBN_0692787216

³⁶ <https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/43774>

³⁷ <https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/50385>

³⁸ https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36403-treaty-protocol_on_free_movement_of_persons_in_africa_e.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.ecofinagency.com/telecom/2702-45230-africas-internet-use-doubles-in-decade-despite-high-costs-report>

Conscious approach to Africa's Demographic Dividend

Finally, Africa's demographic dividend with the world's youngest labor force presents an opportunity in terms of an intellectually and politically transformative era⁴⁰ which can help foster a more liberating socio-economic paradigm across Africa. However, there has been a tendency to romanticize this demographic-as if their numbers are a guarantee of prosperity and not a window of opportunity- without much deliberate thinking and interventions to meaningfully design their futures. Ensuring a prosperous Africa based on its demographic dividend will therefore depend on how the continent approaches this space; eg, investments in their robust education, skilling, capitalization and digital literacy and connectivity and enacting enabling work conditions which can pave a well considered path to harnessing the potential that lies herein.

All in all, these propositions, while not exhaustive by any means, can serve as building blocs to Africa's post-aid future.

⁴⁰ <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/52547/gen-z-is-reshaping-kenyan-politics>

