



Reporting Unsupported? Exploring the Effects of USAID Cuts on Media Work in Africa

RICHARD STUPART

Executive summary

The closure of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has had far-reaching effects across a range of humanitarian and development activities. This report examines the current and likely future effects of the agency's closure on journalism in Africa. It has a particular focus on reporting in authoritarian contexts and on the case of South Sudan as one of the major historical recipients of USAID-funded media assistance. The report argues that the short-term implications for the operation of funding-dependent newsrooms have been catastrophic. Evidence suggests that alternative funders are unwilling or unable to fill the financial gap that USAID has left behind and that we are seeing an increasing degradation in the capacity both of newsrooms and of the broader civil society ecosystems that protected their work. The likely longer-term effects include increasing risks of state pressure on journalistic autonomy, increasing commercial rather than public service reporting and the juniorisation and deprofessionalisation of newsrooms.

Introduction

The aftermath of the 2025 closure of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) is still unfolding. The agency's total budget for the 2025 financial year was approximately \$30 billion and covered everything from emergency food distribution to developing better governance and accountability across the world. Beyond being one of the US's most significant forms of soft power¹ in the developing world, it was a lifeline in many contexts where basic institutions or services would otherwise be unable to function. The closure of USAID was ostensibly undertaken as part of the rapid cost-cutting work of the Department of Governmental Efficiency led by Elon Musk, on the grounds that foreign assistance was wasteful foreign expenditure incompatible with the 'America First' agenda of the Trump administration. The closure of the agency has been widely condemned as morally abhorrent and undertaken with ill-considered haste.²

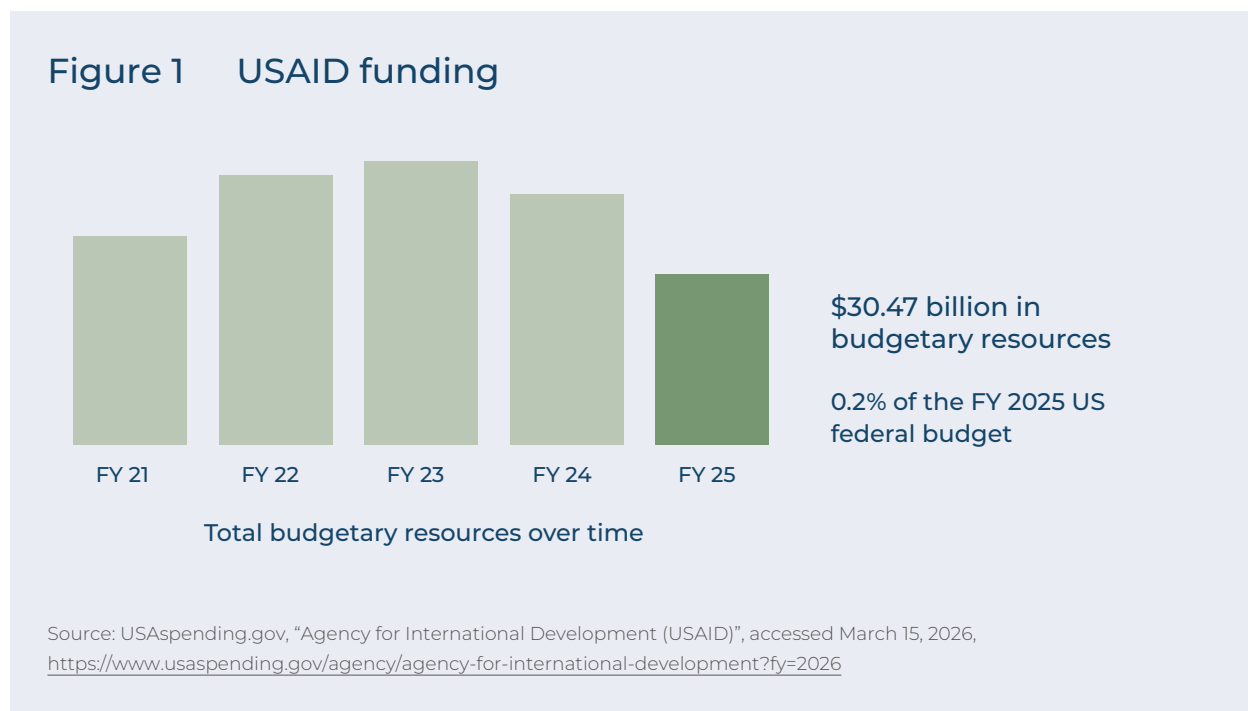
For the most part, accounts of how the destruction of USAID affected its recipients have rightfully focused on the starvation and death that the closure of its nutrition and medical programmes will cause. A study has suggested that up to 14 million people may die as a result of the termination of the agency.³ Beyond the direct effects of ending these activities, it is worth noting the likely future consequences of ending programmes that helped stabilise or improve governance structures in some of the world's most politically fragile contexts. This report explores such long-term effects of ceasing USAID's funding for

1 Robert A. Blair, Robert Marty and Philip Roessler, "Foreign Aid and Soft Power: Great Power Competition in Africa in the early Twenty-First Century", *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 3 (2022): 1355–1376.

2 Anna Faguy, "USAID Officially Closes, Attracting Condemnation from Obama and Bush", *BBC*, July 2, 2025.

3 Jonathan Lambert, "Study: 14 Million Lives Could Be Lost Due to Trump Aid Cuts", *NPR*, July 1, 2025.

journalism and media development in Africa. USAID-funded media projects⁴ accounted for a fraction of the \$12.7 billion spent by USAID in Africa in 2024,⁵ yet the importance of developing robust media and promoting watchdog journalism in fragile and/or authoritarian states makes the loss of these programmes a potentially acute threat to the development of long-term democratic accountability.



The value of media and journalism funding

In its annual list of the level of freedom for media outlets and journalists to operate safely, without the risk of arrest or government control, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has consistently ranked most African countries poorly. In RSF's 2025 World Press Freedom Index,⁶ for example, Eritrea ranked last among 180 countries. Media freedom and the presence of a well-functioning ecosystem of accountability and investigative journalism have long been understood as part of the fundamental structure of a healthy democratic society. Access to credible information and independent scrutiny of those in power are necessary for citizens to participate meaningfully in matters of governance. Equally, an environment in which the media is trusted is critical to disseminating credible information on, for example, public health or government policy. Without

4 Such as "media development and countering disinformation in Liberia" (\$12 million) or the "Open Spaces Project to develop free and democratic expression in Zambia" (\$11 million).

5 Ruth Maclean and Saikou Jammeh, "Africa Received Billions in US Aid. Here Is What It Will Lose", *The New York Times*, March 8, 2025.

6 Reporters Without Borders, "Index: 2025", accessed March 8, 2026, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

this, government policymaking – particularly during epidemics or other national challenges – is severely limited in its practical reach. In recent years, disinformation and misinformation, and their consequences for conducting elections, managing political polarisation and de-escalating violence, have also become major areas of concern.

A free and independent media is critical for a healthy democracy

A free and independent media is critical for a healthy democracy. Yet media in Africa increasingly face severe political and economic headwinds. This has made it difficult for them to perform their core function effectively – to inform citizens and act as watchdogs of society’s centres of power. Some of these issues are global in nature, such as the economic consequences of the audience shift from legacy media to digital platforms and the widespread loss of traditional advertising revenue to the major social networks. The effects of these trends are often even more pronounced in newsrooms in the Global South.⁷ In other cases, media organisations face increasing censorship by authoritarian governments under the pretext of countering extremism, promoting national cohesion or on national security grounds.⁸ In parallel, challenging economic conditions have also led to the increasing concentration of media ownership in many countries. Independent and private media have been bought by companies or individuals with interests in using journalism to gain or expand political or financial influence.

At an individual level, journalists find that their work is becoming increasingly precarious and under-supported. As the broader economic and political climate for media deteriorates, newsrooms become increasingly ‘juniorised’ as more senior staff leave to pursue work in other fields, such as public relations or (in more fragile contexts) humanitarian communications work. Such migration is typical of journalistic career trajectories in Rwanda⁹ and South Sudan,¹⁰ for example, where it is proving difficult for newsrooms to retain and attract more skilled staff. Even in wealthier contexts, such as South Africa, major dailies have experienced a significant decline in circulation and readership due to staff attrition and layoffs resulting from budget cuts. *The Star* and the *Mail & Guardian*, once prominent agenda-setting news outlets in South Africa, have seen their influence over national political discourse decline.¹¹

7 Julian Matthews and Kelechi Onyemaobi, “Precarious Professionalism: Journalism and the Fragility of Professional Practice in the Global South”, *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 13 (2020): 1836–51.

8 Richard Keeble, “Secret, Repressive States Worldwide and the Threat to Journalism”, *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (2019): 114–17.

9 Ruth Moon, *Authoritarian Journalism: Controlling the News in Post-Conflict Rwanda* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

10 Richard Stupart and Katherine Furman, “Bearing Witness” (London School of Economics and University College Cork, 2019).

11 For an account of the decline of the *Mail & Guardian*, see Rebecca Davis, “‘Painful to Witness’: Behind the Jobs Bloodbath at the *Mail & Guardian*”, *Daily Maverick*, June 5, 2025.

News professionals engaged in investigative, watchdog and accountability journalism in less democratic countries are increasingly targeted by an interconnected community of adversaries from the worlds of business, government and organised crime.¹² Human Rights Watch, for example, has reported a surge in the arrests of journalists in Ethiopia on charges of 'bias' and 'inciting violence'.¹³ In Rwanda, some private news organisations have abandoned public accountability stories, eg, on corruption, or have provided less support to their investigative journalists due to fear of government bans or shutdowns.¹⁴ The cases of journalists forced into exile as a result of their reporting illustrate these pressures.¹⁵

While recognising the urgency of addressing the economic and political pressures faced by the media in many countries, it is important to note that the situation is even more severe in authoritarian contexts. In these countries, projects funded by USAID constituted a small but important investment in developing and maintaining the basic enabling conditions for civil society to grow. Whether the end of this funding signals the degradation or even the obliteration of public accountability work in various countries is therefore a matter of concern for independent organisations interested in addressing democratic backsliding, corruption and the decline of civil society. The direct and indirect dependence of accountability journalism on USAID funding also highlights the broader fragility of media-assistance programmes and, in general, the vulnerability of media development across Africa.

The structure of this report

This report explores what USAID's commitment to developing journalism and media projects looked like in the last financial year before its shutdown, and some of the practical consequences this has had for its partners. It proceeds as follows. First, it sketches the general funding situation of USAID for the 2025 financial year, before looking in more detail at one of its largest recipients (*Internews*) and the specific consequences of the termination of those programmes. It also examines the extent to which other funders have stepped in to fill the gap left by USAID funding versus media organisations and systems simply being left to degrade, disappear or mobilise other funding to survive.

Methodological note

The data on which this analysis is based is taken from publicly available records of USAID funding and commitments drawn from the US government spending portal.¹⁶ This is combined with interviews of staff from selected organisations affected by the funding

12 Keeble, "Secret, Repressive States".

13 "Ethiopia: Surge in Arrests of Journalists, Media Workers", *NPR*, September 22, 2025.

14 Moon, *Authoritarian Journalism*, p. 122.

15 The cases of Amir Aman Kiyaro and Alexandre Niyungeko, in Ethiopia and Burundi respectively, illustrate the nature of the problem.

16 USAspending.gov, "Prime Awards and Transactions", accessed March 8, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search>.

cuts. The report looks at all USAID records for the 2024 and 2025 financial years, filtered for projects in African countries that mention 'media' in the detailed project descriptions. The resulting records were then manually filtered to remove all projects that did not relate to media in the sense of news or journalistic work (eg, work on biological media). While this approach potentially misses project funding directed at other topics (eg, governance or democracy) that may have an indirect media focus, the data does include a number of significant media interventions (in recipient countries) whose current situations illustrate what are likely common challenges in the aftermath of losing USAID funding.

In the process of exploring USAID funding data, it became clear that the international media-development organisation Internews has been a major implementer of USAID media projects. This includes its being allocated up to \$80 million in the past for its I-Stream project to develop media systems in South Sudan.¹⁷ The impact of USAID's closure on Internews's operations is considered in particular detail, given its apparent centrality to USAID's efforts to develop journalism and sustainable media systems on the continent.

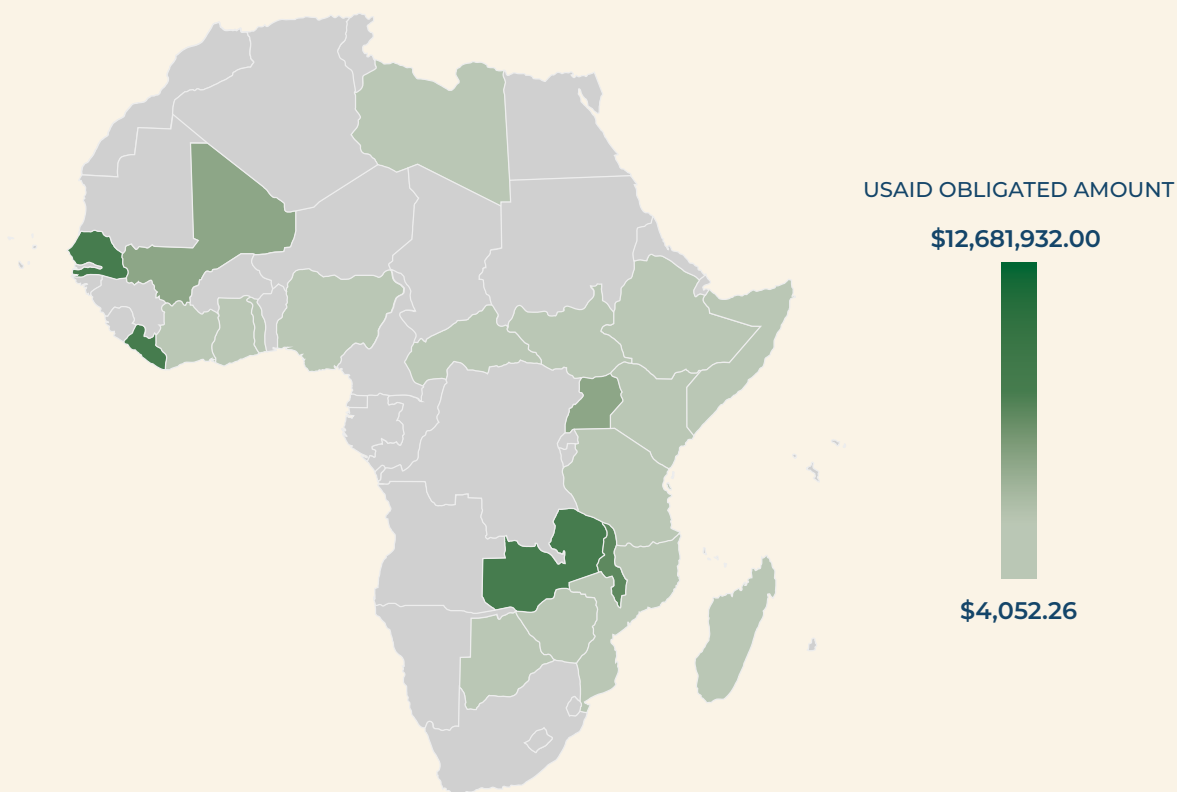
Where was USAID media funding going?

Funding for media development, and the development of journalism in particular, is not a discrete line item in USAID's financial records; a precise estimate of the funds lost to journalism, however defined, is difficult to measure. Such funding may include direct support for news reporting projects, such as helping news organisations develop sustainable business models, hone new staff skills or obtain the equipment needed to do their work. From the available allocation data, though, it is clear that media-related funding was primarily directed at media organisations in some of Africa's least-developed nations.

Beyond direct support to journalists, USAID was also involved in project funding that affected the journalistic ecosystem more broadly, in ways that were useful to conducting investigative or public accountability journalism. This included projects focused on developing a better understanding between officials and journalists on the role of the media and improving communication between them. This appears to have been the case for the now-defunded Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening project in Senegal. In another project run by Internews Liberia, partners included the Press Union of Liberia, the Female Journalists Association of Liberia Community Radio and a youth group. These examples illustrate cases in which USAID funding was directed not only at newsrooms but also at media-related activities. This included funding for other stakeholders whose relationships with the media and with each other can help ensure a more hospitable environment for journalists and media workers more broadly.

¹⁷ Internews, "South Sudan", accessed March 8, 2026, <https://internews.org/where-we-work-south-sudan/>.

Figure 2 USAID allocations: References to 'media', manually filtered to remove non-media projects (2025 financial year)



Source: USAspending.gov, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search>

In addition to funding directed at journalism’s broader ecosystem, humanitarian funding effectively serves as an indirect subsidy for some forms of reporting. The increasing financial precarity of international foreign reporting also means that many journalists working in conflict or disaster-affected communities lack appropriate medical and risk insurance. Media researchers have argued that the humanitarian presence in these countries amounts to an ‘archipelago of international space’¹⁸ through which reporters can access safe lodging, transport and accommodation while in conflict or disaster areas. Support for journalists covering crises, therefore, tends to come from humanitarian organisations, which have historically been funded by organisations such as USAID.¹⁹

18 For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Mark Duffield, “Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Everyday Life in Post-Interventionary Society”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 4 (2010): 453–74.

19 For a more detailed look at the increasing dependency of conflict and crisis journalism on humanitarians, see Rob Sharp and Richard Stupart, “Friends Like These: A Shift in Labour, Security and the Normative Ideals of Conflict Journalism”, *International Communication Gazette* 85, no. 8 (2023): 612–26.

The shutdown of USAID, then, can be usefully understood as impacting journalism in at least three ways. First, news organisations directly dependent on USAID funding or partners, such as Internews, have found their budgets threatened through the USAID funding cut. Second, the political and financial ecosystem in which these news organisations function is severely affected by the withdrawal of USAID funding. With less financing for journalistic unions, projects focused on improving media–government communication, media policy/law and skills training, journalists are likely to lose an enabling environment (in terms of policy, stakeholder support or even political will) in which they can thrive. In more authoritarian contexts, this is also likely to result in less influence for civil society groups that previously championed media freedom and independent journalism. Third, USAID’s departure is leaving an enormous gap in the international humanitarian sector, leading to the closure or downscaling of various projects. Even where not explicitly media-focused, these often included funding for disseminating information, public service announcements or other peripheral media work that formed part of the routine income of community radio stations in particular.

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Taken together, the withdrawal of USAID funding has left news organisations less financially sustainable and seen revenue streams from the humanitarian sector sharply decline. Such shifts would have been difficult to manage even with a long lead time for planning, but the speed at which the USAID withdrawal occurred only exacerbated the shock. As a senior editor at an East African radio station²⁰ put it, ‘[The organisation managing USAID funding] wrote to us, and then, they communicate[d] that [funding was ending] ... they were just sent home. Everyone was sent home.’²¹ The station has since had to shed a majority of its staff. Its newsroom has been reduced from 15 to seven journalists, with many general staff asked to stay on a voluntary basis. As the editor described it, ‘We ask journalists to volunteer. We have some small [allocation] where we sustain, like, a token for you as a journalist. This one, you, you take it, end of the month, we give you something to keep you around.’

20 The identity of some respondents interviewed for this report has been withheld at their request.

21 Radio newsroom editor, interviewed January 14, 2026.

The case of Internews

Internews deserves particular mention, as it was one of the largest news media support organisations working across the continent on projects focused on supporting news reporting, both directly and in helping to develop a supportive ecosystem for journalism more generally. According to federal spending records for the 2025 financial year, Internews's US office was due to receive over \$33 million in USAID funding for various projects. These ranged from improving access to humanitarian news and information in South Sudan to developing journalism and supporting media operations in Liberia and Uganda.

In contrast to its European arm, USAID funding for Internews had been a major source of revenue for the organisation's US section. The effects of USAID's withdrawal were swift and devastating, with hundreds of staff layoffs and the abrupt ending of projects. The effects have also percolated downstream to local non-governmental organisation partners in various countries and, ultimately, newsrooms on the continent that Internews had been supporting.

And then, within a couple of weeks, it was sort of clear that it was, it was all over

As described by Rafiq Copeland, a senior technical advisor at Internews, the end of funding was abrupt and initially uncertain, until the full scale of what was happening emerged:

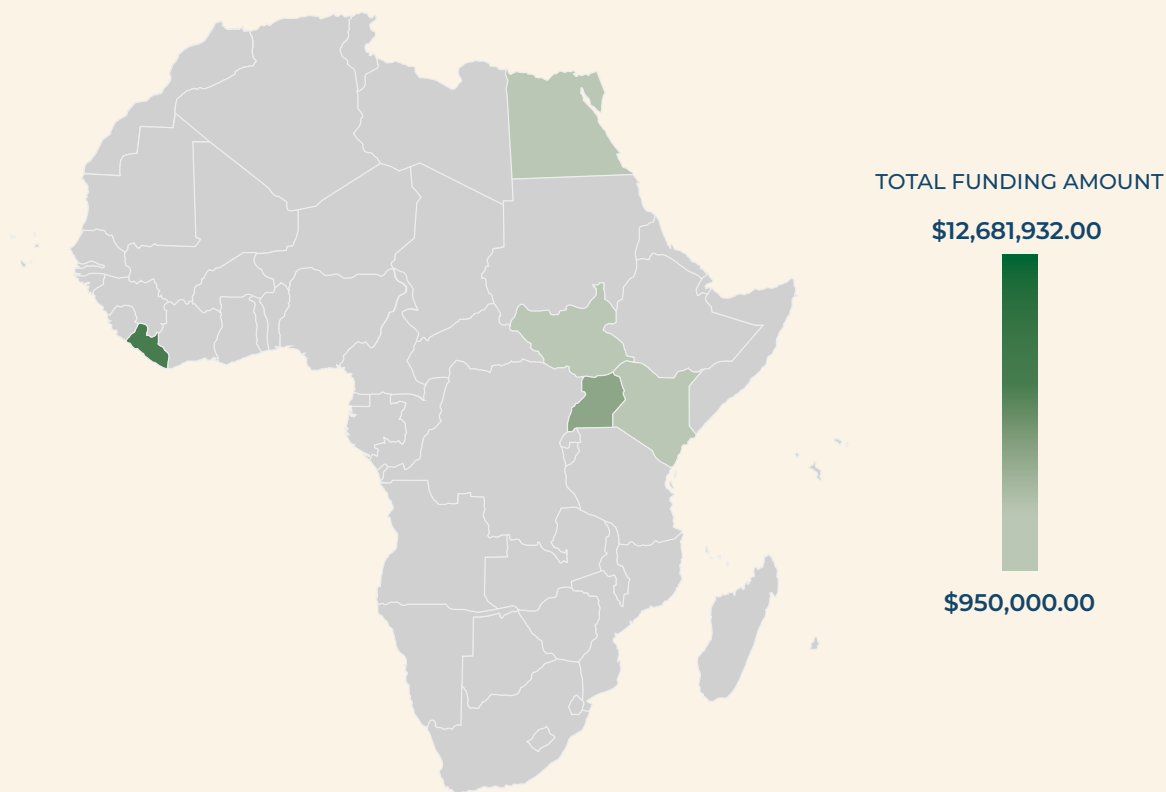
You know, initially the aid was suspended, and that was kind of unclear whether that meant just that new funds wouldn't be dispersed, or kind of what was going on, and then we were told that we had to actually suspend our programming, even with funds that had been dispersed, so everybody had to just down tools, and then, within a couple of weeks, it was sort of clear that it was, it was all over.

TABLE 1 USAID FUNDING TO INTERNEWS PROJECTS BY LOCATION, INCLUDING TWO PROJECTS EACH IN LIBERIA AND SOUTH SUDAN (2025 FINANCIAL YEAR)

Country	Allocation
Egypt	\$950,000.00
Kenya	\$1,438,828.77
Liberia	\$10,778,000.00
Liberia	\$12,681,932.00
South Sudan	\$1,466,895.01
South Sudan	\$1,484,000.00
Uganda	\$4,500,000.00

Source: USAspending.gov, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search>

Figure 3 Internews areas of activity (2025 financial year)



Note: Amounts differ from Table 1, as some Internews project descriptions do not specifically reference 'media' in the federal funding database

Source: USAspending.gov, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.usaspending.gov/search>

In Internews's case, while its US section and the projects it supported were devastated, its European section – which was not dependent on USAID funding – was largely left unscathed by the end of the funding. As a result, the organisation as a whole has been able to continue certain projects, such as the Earth Journalism Network, which focuses on environmental journalism, even as most of its global projects have collapsed.

Internews's experience reveals that while certain media projects funded by alternative donors, such as private philanthropy and the EU, continue, the massive dependence on USAID funding for media development work in Africa and worldwide has caused enormous damage. Like most major organisations affected by the cuts, Internews has been unable to source replacement funding anywhere near the amount required to fill the gap left by USAID. This is, firstly, because the scale of the funding gap created by USAID's closure is too large for other donors to fill. Secondly, many donors are likely waiting to see how the landscape shifts in the coming months before deciding which partners might be viable funding recipients in the new environment.

Adaptation by news organisations

The strategies adopted by news organisations in Africa to adapt to the cessation of funding largely resemble those of media organisations dependent on USAID funding in non-African countries. At least four main approaches appear to be emerging.

Immediate, short-term cost containment

In the weeks and months following USAID's withdrawal, most news organisations drastically shed staff and sought routes to contain running costs. New projects were either cancelled or heavily downscaled. In some cases, staff were asked to stay on at reduced remuneration or to continue working on a volunteer basis, to keep the organisation functioning. In South Sudan, this has led to a reduction in substantive news content, as downsized newsrooms battle to fill the schedule. As one former journalist put it,

There are programs that are used to be there, it has to be... you know, suspended, and then it will just be news and radio, and then you hear some music, and then this funding awareness projects and all that. [...] the voices that you used to hear are [no] more there.

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In addition to staff reductions, other forms of support required to work safely, such as medical and other insurance, have been scaled back or removed, increasing the vulnerability of the staff left behind.

Juniorisation of newsrooms

Typically, more senior staff have elected to seek alternatives in other sectors, such as public relations, communications roles in other organisations or independent media production. Staff who have been retained on reduced or, in some cases, zero wages are typically more junior journalists and production staff, for whom the opportunity to learn reporting and production skills makes the new working conditions an acceptable bargain. As a result, the rate of news production has declined. In the case of the East African newsroom discussed earlier, its weekend broadcast schedule has been halved, with staff being redirected to other tasks, such as marketing, and salaries cut to an average of 10% of their previous value. The newsroom is being reduced from 17 journalists to as few as five. The effect of this has been the juniorisation of the newsroom and a decreased capacity to do investigative work or report specialist news beats.

Increasing dependence on commercial work

In some cases, newsrooms have been forced to consider non-news media production work, such as commercial filming and recording, to generate the additional revenue needed to offset reduced news production. In the short term, this can compensate – in some cases and to a limited degree – for the loss of donor funding. However, it risks detracting from the core reporting work of newsrooms and leading to an overall reduction in independent journalism across the sector.

Dependence on new donors

Many newsrooms have had conversations about seeking new donors to compensate for the loss of USAID funding. This approach has been complicated by the fact that USAID money – either directly or via intermediaries such as Internews – was often provided in ways that respected the editorial independence of newsrooms. Potential new donors may bring political complications or pressures to toe a certain line that newsrooms might previously have declined to do. While there are no confirmed cases yet of USAID-funded African news operations partnering with (for example) political organisations or other potentially conflict-producing parties as a survival strategy, interview responses indicate that some organisations are actively considering this as preferable to ceasing to exist entirely. In other contexts, such as Ukraine, newsrooms suffering financially from the withdrawal of USAID are in some cases being courted by politicians and other parties interested in securing media power through newsroom sponsorship. There is, therefore, good reason to believe there is a significant risk of media capture in the short to medium term.²²

Discussion

As highlighted above, funding that was directed towards journalism and the ecosystem that safeguards and nurtures it is of particular relevance, given the importance of the profession to the overall health of democratic politics and public accountability more generally. Overall, the effects of USAID's departure at a granular level will be hard to measure. The closure of many USAID partners has made tracking the details of individual news organisations and journalism-supporting organisations difficult. Many of the effects of the withdrawal of funding will only be felt over the course of the months ahead, and these will be difficult to isolate from various other longer-term effects of USAID's departure from humanitarian support more generally. That said, the fact that USAID's closure has created an unprecedented economic challenge for newsrooms across Africa is undeniable. As newsrooms and media ecosystems generally adjust to the new financial landscape, there are a number of cautions that readers interested in the challenges to media and democracy should bear in mind.

22 Maca Vojtech Darvik, "Local Newspapers Are a Lifeline in Ukraine, but USAID Cuts May Force Many to Close or Become Biased Mouthpieces", *The Conversation*, March 17, 2025.

Market effects

It is highly likely that news and media organisations with existing audiences and operations that are at risk of bankruptcy may be bought out or included in mergers and other forms of restructuring. This reshaping of media ownership in different country contexts ought to be watched closely for signs of media market concentration that could raise concerns about media consolidation – directly or indirectly – in the hands of political figures or conglomerates aligned with specific party factions. As newsrooms seek additional revenue from non-news activities, including producing content for third parties or increasing commercial and entertainment programming, this may have knock-on effects for public accountability as the volume of investigative and watchdog reporting in particular countries declines.

Political effects

Public accountability and watchdog journalism in the public interest are cornerstones of a healthy, democratic public sphere, yet these forms of original reporting are among the more expensive for newsrooms to produce. They typically require open-ended commitments to fund investigations that may not pay off with a story for some time and frequently require specialist skills in open-source investigation and financial or legal specialisation. To the extent that newsrooms abandon these in the process of cost containment, this is likely to worsen accountability problems for public officials and administrations. Insofar as newsrooms – and the broader legal and civil society infrastructure that supports them – are defunded, journalists and their organisations will also be less able to fend off politically motivated attacks. Such attacks could take the form of legal challenges, security threats and anti-democratic changes in media governance. These are all significant concerns in most African countries affected by the USAID cuts, and concerns that require healthy newsrooms and civil society organisations to defend against. As these become weaker in the new funding landscape, it is likely that many polities will see increased democratic backsliding and lower levels of public accountability.

Media effects

Adequately funded journalism typically functions as a gatekeeper of public discourse and does much of the work of verifying and responding to information circulating in the public domain. When there are fewer newsrooms, and these newsrooms are less active as a result of job losses and commercially oriented operations, it is likely that power over public discourse will increasingly be ceded to social media platforms. This is a cause for concern, given that major social media companies such as Meta no longer have fact-checking teams,²³ including for their operations in African countries. A further shift in

²³ Liv McMahon, Zoe Kleinman & Courtney Subramanian, "Facebook and Instagram Get Rid of Fact Checkers", *BBC*, January 7, 2025.

power from institutional journalism to generally ungoverned social media spaces could worsen problems of dis/misinformation and polarisation.

It is also worth noting that the success with which affected news organisations navigate their funding challenges should not be conflated with the success of the news media sector as a whole. It is entirely likely that news organisations that manage to adapt to the new financial environment will be substantially weakened in the ways described in this report. It is also possible for news organisations and the civil society ecosystem to remain resilient, but donors and other organisations would be wrong to misread this resilience as a continued sign of the profession's health in the worst-affected country contexts.

The extent to which these concerns may be realised will be highly dependent on the specific economic and political dynamics of the countries concerned and the degree to which USAID funding was central to the news-reporting environment in each nation. In a country like South Sudan, USAID funding was a significant pillar of the news ecosystem, and so a high degree of concern about the effects of its closure is warranted. In countries like Senegal or Nigeria, the effects of USAID's closure will probably be negligible, given the small size of the funding relative to the overall media ecosystem.

The longer-term effects of USAID's funding withdrawal will likely only become apparent in the months and years ahead, as news and media-support organisations exhaust their savings and it becomes clearer which capabilities are being lost in each country and their centrality to the overall work of democratic accountability. It will also become clearer in the medium term whether the countries most impacted will see alternative donors responding to their needs.

Recommendations

- In the short term, replacement funding for many news organisations and media development programmes is urgently required, before skilled professionals become irretrievably lost to newsrooms.
- In the long term, media funding needs to be diversified. Even newsrooms dependent on funding from multiple local/national media-funding organisations need to evaluate the degree to which these may ultimately be tied to large, single funding sources, which may be a potential weakness.
- For media-development organisations (and much of the humanitarian world more generally), diversification of funding sources is an equally pressing strategic concern.
- The broader problem of news funding needs to be a policy priority. Given the difficulty of creating profitable, independent commercial journalism in many African contexts, market intervention is likely necessary, but requires addressing complex questions of subsidy sources and political control.

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Cover image

Washington, DC February 5, 2025: People protest against US President Donald Trump's decision to shut down the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on Capitol Hill (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

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