



RISING NEED, DECLINING AID: CONSEQUENCES OF THE USAID AID FREEZE IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

INTRODUCTION

In pursuit of his 'America First' strategic vision, President Donald Trump, after his inauguration in January 2025, announced the cancellation of 83% of the United States' foreign aid contracts, reducing the total number of contracts from about 5,200 to only about 1,000. This led to the shutdown of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Schreiber, 2025). This development has significant implications for Africa, where USAID aid has been crucial to development and humanitarian efforts for over six decades. Assistance from international donors such as USAID has become deeply woven into the fabric of many African countries, helping them to fund development in health, education, agriculture, and other economic growth and development areas (Nyasuguta, 2025).

The states and economies of the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) have been major recipients of USAID aid, owing to their fragility and the prevalence of humanitarian crises in that area. According to the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), USAID represents 40% of the total funding accruing to the LCB from international donor communities (Lake Chad Basin Commission, 2022). This funding has been used in a broad range of sectors, including humanitarian relief (food, shelter, clothing, and psychosocial support), health, peacebuilding and social cohesion, education, security and stability, and efforts towards climate change adaptation and mitigation¹.

This policy brief examines the impact of USAID's aid cuts in the LCB, as one of the areas that has been hardest hit by the recent reductions in funding. The brief makes use of data generated from key informant interviews (KIIs). The interviews were conducted with selected leaders and key stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the Lake Chad area, with a focus on Borno State in Nigeria and the Far North Region in Cameroon. Five organisations were purposively selected in each of the countries, bringing the number of interviews conducted to ten. The criteria for selection of the organisations included the nature of their interventions, as well as the donor agencies associated with them. Organisations wholly or significantly funded by USAID, focusing specifically on education, peacebuilding, humanitarian relief, and social cohesion, were deliberately chosen.

The interviews were conducted in the month of August 2025. Field data collected for the study were manually transcribed and sorted according to the themes arising from the study's objectives. The results were synchronised with textual insights and documentary evidence arising from desk research, based on credible documentary, media, and online sources. The outcome of this process allowed us to form a coherent empirical narrative, which is presented in this brief.

¹ This is shown by interviews with different leaders of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations.

1 THE LAKE CHAD BASIN, HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, AND NEED-AID GAPS

The LCB consists of fringe areas of Nigeria (the North East zone, particularly Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States), Chad (the south west of the country, particularly the Lac and Hadjer-Lamis Regions), Cameroon (the North and Far North Regions), and Niger (the Diffa Region in the south east of the country). The area is so called because it falls within the periphery of Lake Chad's littoral sphere. The lands and populations in the Lake Chad Basin, despite belonging to different countries, have several characteristics in common: they are under-served, historically marginalised, and mostly remote from their respective states' centres of power, which makes them suffer some degree of neglect (Owonikoko, 2021).

Figure 1 : Map showing the area of the Lake Chad Basin, covering the borders of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.



Source: Nick Ferris, [Aid cuts leave a million facing starvation in Nigeria—as food supplies run out, The Independent](#), 4 July 2025.

The LCB is the site of multidimensional crises, including ecological stress associated with climate change, socio-economic deprivation, violent extremism, conflict and insecurity, mass displacement, and food insecurity. The region has previously experienced reduced rainfall and prolonged drought, especially in the 1970s and 1980s (Owonikoko & Momodu, 2020). Since the early 2000s, parts of the LCB have experienced erratic rainfall, with various consequences. In some places, reduced rainfall has resulted in drought, while in others, increased rainfall has led to destructive flooding incidents.

The erratic rainfall patterns of recent years have significantly impacted the surface area of Lake Chad, which is estimated to have shrunk from about 26,000km² in 1960 (Owonikoko & Momodu, 2020) to around 1540km² in 2020 (Ferris, 2025). This has caused significant disruption to livelihoods, adversely affecting the majority of the local population, most of whom are farmers, fishermen, or herders, who depend on rainfall and water for their earnings and subsistence. This has worsened poverty and unemployment among the population, thereby increasing their vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism and criminality (Owonikoko & Momodu, 2020).

The LCB has also been significantly affected by violent extremism and conflicts. Boko Haram and Islamic State—West African Province (ISWAP) have been responsible for most of the terrorist activities in the region. Between January 2022 and May 2025, these terrorist groups have been involved in a total of 4,491 incidents; of these, 875 took place in 2022, 1,223 took place in 2023, 1,810 took place in 2024, and 583 took place between January and April 2025². These incidents, involving killings, gender-based violence, abduction, and the destruction of livelihoods, have exacerbated a deepening humanitarian crisis marked by population displacement, economic disruption, an increasing rate of out-of-school children, food insecurity, acute malnutrition, and widespread community dislocation.

² Data obtained from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, June 2025.

A report published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in July 2025 indicated that there were about 3.2 million internally displaced persons and more than 502,000 refugees in the LCB (IOM, 2013). Also, a report on the LCB published in June 2025 by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) found that a total of 3.9 million people were food insecure, while 83,000 children were severely malnourished, and about 1,874 schools were non-functional. In addition, some 10.2 million people are in critical need across the region (UN-OCHA, 2025). The continuing problem of malnutrition, together with the reduction in the number of functional schools across the region, is contributing to the climate of conflict and insecurity, and increasing the vulnerability of children and young people to being recruited into violent extremism. The ineffectiveness of state agencies at the national and sub-national levels has created a governance vacuum, which national and international stakeholders are attempting to fill through various interventions, including grants and aid.

Essentially, the humanitarian situation in the LCB presents the paradox of rising need and declining aid. The complex humanitarian crisis in the region is worsening, with new threats emerging alongside pre-existing ones. In addition to the escalating climate of violent extremism, the region is also suffering from multiple environmental crises (Tiky & Ndilose, 2025). As of June 2025, there were no fewer than 2.5 million displaced persons in the various countries of the region (see Table 1).

Table 1: Internally displaced persons and refugees in the LCB (July 2025)

Country	Internally displaced persons	Refugees	Most-affected areas
Niger	174,208	266,201	Diffa Region
Nigeria	2,252,348	77,883	Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States in the North East zone
Chad	233,989	30,231	Lac Region
Cameroon	475,871	128,057	Far North Region

Source: Data obtained from IOM, Displacement Tracking Matrix, ‘Situation in Lake Chad Basin’, July 2025.

In fact, the LCB faces a critical situation in which the prospects of receiving sustainable humanitarian assistance are grossly diminishing, while survival needs are rising. As Charlie Ward and Mark Plant (2025) put it:

As rates of conflict and fragility rise across the region, aid flows decline. These reductions threaten to eliminate life-saving health and food assistance programs, worsening already dire social and humanitarian conditions.

The aid cuts in the LCB are not exclusively due to the US decision to reduce USAID’s interventions in that context (Cilliers, 2025). Other donor countries have also reduced aid spending in this region and elsewhere. Between 2022 and 2025 Germany cut aid spending by US\$5.3 billion, France cut it by more than US\$1 billion for the period 2024–2025, and the United Kingdom reduced it by US\$900 million in the same period, having also diverted US\$1.28 billion to housing asylum-seekers in the country (Cilliers, 2025). However, the reduction of USAID’s aid programme in West Africa and the Sahel to less than a quarter of its previous value by March 2025 remains the most drastic and disruptive cut of all. The data in Table 2 reveal the extent of the current aid deficits in the LCB.

Table 2: Aid cuts across LCB countries (June 2025)

Country	Cut as % of USAID’s country intervention	Cut as % of gross national income (GNI)	Absolute cut (in million USD)
Nigeria	23	0.50	178
Niger	34	0.36	59
Chad	8	0.08	11
Cameroon	59	0.11	52

Source: Nick Ferris, [Aid cuts leave a million facing starvation in Nigeria—as food supplies run out](#), *The Independent*, 4 July 2025.

The consequences of aid cuts in the LCB have been stark. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) was set to end all food aid to Nigeria by August 2025, with the closure of all of its nutrition clinics in the country (WFP, 2025). This is a worrying development, considering the degenerating state of food security in the country.

The situations and outlook in other LCB countries are not any better, as the data in Table 3 indicate. Aside from the issue of food and nutrition, other indices of human security are also concerning. For example, nearly 1,500 schools had closed in Chad by June 2025.

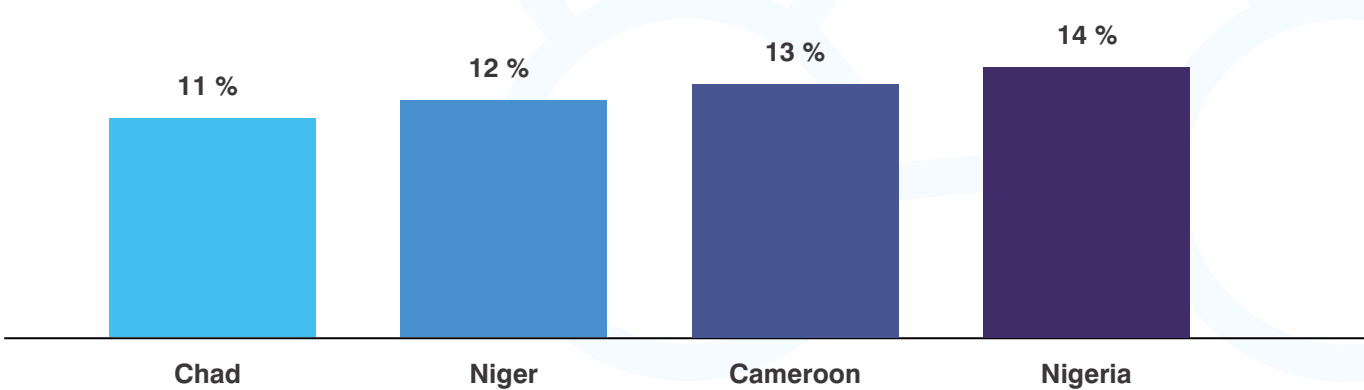
Table 3: Comparative incidence of food crises in the LCB

Country	Persons suffering from food insecurity (millions)	Severely malnourished children (thousands)
Nigeria	4.6	192
Chad	0.3	10
Cameroon	1.2	11
Niger	0.1	7

Source: UN-OCHA, [Lake Chad Basin Humanitarian Snapshot](#), June 2025.

As the humanitarian situation in the LCB has deteriorated, aid flows have substantially and persistently dwindled, leaving significant deficits in terms of local and international humanitarian efforts. In fact, most of the international humanitarian interventions in the region have remained critically underfunded and underperforming. Figure 2 shows that, as of July 2025, the United Nations’ humanitarian response plans in the region remained grossly underfunded.

Figure 2: Proportion of the UN’s 2025 Humanitarian Response Plans that were funded, July 2025



Source: Adapted from UN-OCHA, [Lake Chad Basin Humanitarian Snapshot](#), June 2025.

2 USAID’S AID FREEZE AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES IN THE LCB: NIGERIA AND CAMEROON

The impact of the USAID aid freeze is already being felt in communities in the LCB. Respondents interviewed in Cameroon and Nigeria observed that, since USAID is the single largest donor in the LCB, its aid freeze has led to a significant reduction in programmes and projects aimed at improving living standards for the local population and targeted beneficiaries. Some of its pilot programmes focused on peacebuilding and social cohesion, education, livelihoods, and humanitarian relief have either ended abruptly or been significantly scaled down.

For example, USAID funded many programmes focused on improving education in the LCB. One of these was the Opportunity to Learn (OTL) programme, which was implemented by a consortium including national and local civil society bodies in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States in Nigeria. The programme

sought to bring educational opportunities to people who had been forced out of education owing to various factors³. Beneficiaries of the programme had a fully-funded school built in their community. In the last two years of the programme, over 12,000 students had been enrolled into the programme across the different states of Nigeria⁴. However, the USAID aid cuts led to the abrupt closure of the programme in 2025, resulting in the loss of all those school places, unless alternative funding could be found. It is therefore likely that the 12,000 students previously enrolled under the programme will swell the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria’s North East zone.

A recent publication captured how the USAID aid cut has also impacted another school programme that supports children who were victims of Boko Haram extremism (Adetayo, 2025). The programme had created about 3,000 school places, but the aid cut considerably reduced the number of students and teachers who could be supported under the programme, raising fears that the children who could no longer be supported

³ Interview (conducted remotely), Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Initiative for Education Awareness and Economic Development (IEAED), 28 August 2025. ⁴ Ibid.

by the programme might end up joining a violent extremist group (Adetayo, 2025). As stated by one of the respondents, 'our greatest fear is that these children risk being recruited by terrorist organisations... and this is what we are fighting against'⁵.

The school spaces facilitated through funding from USAID also served other essential purposes aside from learning. They offered balanced meals, clean water, healthcare, and protection for vulnerable children⁶. These services have proved critical in conflict-afflicted zones such as the LCB, where they provide hope, stability, protection, and access to essential services that contribute to children's well-being and recovery. The USAID education programme had also helped to reduce the gender gap in educational access and attainment, which was previously substantial in the region⁷. Most of the educational programmes have seen an increase in the proportion of female students. In the Far North Region of Cameroon, most of the USAID-funded programmes used incentives to attract female students, such as a feeding programme and curricula designed to facilitate the empowerment of girls and women⁸. These measures were helping to reduce disparities in educational enrolment between boys and girls, but the aid cut and shutdown of the programme have led to a reversal of these gains⁹. This is also the case in the North East zone of Nigeria (Adetayo, 2025). A recent study by UNICEF notes that USAID's aid cuts could lead to a reversal of hard-won progress in the education of girls and women (UNICEF, 2025). This is already a reality in the LCB, and could deteriorate further. Children in the region are not only losing access to learning, they are also losing access to essential services in ways that negatively impact their overall health, development, and well-being.

Another critical area of intervention that has been severely affected is that of peacebuilding programming. The LCB is characterised by multiple and overlapping conflicts, including identity-based disputes, competition over natural resources, and other localised tensions. These often escalate and feed into broader crises such as those of violent extremism, terrorism, and insurgency, which lie at the core of the region's persistent instability. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive peacebuilding initiatives that address the root causes of these conflicts, through measures including community dialogue and mediation, the strengthening of local governance structures, the establishment of conflict prevention

mechanisms, effective, gender-inclusive natural resource management, and programmes that promote social and community cohesion. Unfortunately, several ongoing USAID-funded initiatives designed to support these efforts in the LCB have been discontinued.

One of the main types of peacebuilding programming funded by USAID is that of social and community cohesion programmes in areas affected by Boko Haram insurgency. These programmes promote community acceptance of ex-combatants. Studies show that some communities in Nigeria and Cameroon have tended to reject the reintegration of former Boko Haram members owing to historical grievances, doubts about their genuine repentance, and the exclusion of certain communities in the design of reintegration packages. Feelings of rejection have led to some repentant or deradicalised former fighters returning to their group (see Owonikoko, 2022; Ugwueze et al., 2021; Melchisedek et al., 2024). These USAID-funded interventions aimed to foster peacebuilding while preventing ex-fighters from returning to armed groups. One respondent acknowledged that 'much has been achieved in terms of building peace between community members and repentant ex-combatants for sustainable peace, but much more needs to be done, especially now that more ex-combatants are disengaging from their groups and seeking reintegration into communities'¹⁰. The reduction in USAID aid may prevent such programmes from continuing, thereby limiting the prospects of consolidating the relative gains that have been made so far.

USAID-funded life-saving health programmes have also been significantly affected. While many of these programmes have not come to an immediate halt, their beneficiary coverage has been considerably reduced. One such programme is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Respondents noted that PEPFAR operations in some communities have continued in a limited form, largely due to prior expenditures and procurements, but they expressed fears that these programmes may cease once these resources are exhausted¹¹. However, other factors may affect the possibility of continuing such programmes, such as their legal status, limited waivers for life-saving funds, and pushback against the cuts from the US Congress (KFF, 2025). Nonetheless, many USAID-funded health initiatives, in the LCB and elsewhere, face severe or moderate disruptions arising from suspensions and reductions (WHO, 2025).

3 MOVING BEYOND THE USAID AID DEFICITS IN THE LCB

USAID's aid cuts are having a severe impact on the success and sustainability of humanitarian initiatives in the LCB, as well as on the work of NGOs operating in the region. Some organisations that rely partially on USAID have scaled down their workforce and operations, while others, notably those that depend entirely on USAID, have shut down. This contributes to the shrinking of the civic space in the region. Insights from fieldwork, however, revealed that some NGOs working in the region are mitigating the impact by exploring other funding options, such as crowdfunding, appealing to philanthropic individuals, and seeking out other grant opportunities, although these other sources each present their own challenges.

Attempts to use crowdfunding in Africa, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, have yielded limited results owing to widespread poverty and low levels of disposable income. Poverty is particularly endemic in the LCB. For example, in Nigeria's North East zone, the proportion of people living on less than one dollar per day is as high as 70%, which is double the national average (Amos, 2021). In this context, crowdfunding offers only limited prospects for generating the funds needed for the operations of NGOs and civil society organisations in the region. Contacting philanthropists is another option, but this carries the risk that the neutrality and credibility of beneficiary organisations could be undermined by overbearing partisan influence, especially from those who have political ambitions. Seeking out grants from more diverse sources is yet another option, but the global funding system is shrinking

⁵ Interview, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, IEAED, 28 August 2025. ⁶ Interviewed respondents mentioned various services being provided free to students in such school spaces, in order to attract enrolment from vulnerable groups. ⁷ Interview (conducted remotely), Executive Director, Concern for Women and Children Development Foundation (CWCDF). Interview (conducted remotely), Executive Director, ONG Association de lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes et aux filles (ONG ALVFF), Cameroon. ⁸ Interview, Director, Conseil d'appui pour la paix et le développement intercommunautaires (CAPDI) in Far North Region, Cameroon. Interview, Director, Plateforme des association citoyennes pour le développement de la commune de Mora (PLADECOM), Cameroon. ⁹ Interview, Executive Director, CWCDF; Interview, Executive Director, ONG ALVFF. ¹⁰ Interview (conducted remotely), Executive Director, Inter Action Initiative for Community Development (IAICD), 29 August 2025. ¹¹ This view was frequently expressed by respondents regarding some of the USAID funded programmes that have continued.

overall, and this context has led the United Nations to reform its approach to international humanitarian challenges, with a so-called 'humanitarian reset' (Ohms, 2025).

The 'humanitarian reset' is a global reform initiative aimed at addressing the overstretched and underfunded state of humanitarian operations by prioritising life-saving assistance, strengthening local actors, and fostering inclusivity, flexibility, and adaptation (ICVA, 2025). Although critics view it as an attempt to prioritise humanitarian intervention in ways that could deny many people access to support (The Hague Humanitarian Hub, 2025), its emphasis on more efficient use of pooled resources is a key merit. In the LCB, pooled funding could serve as a vital coping mechanism for humanitarian actors in mitigating the impact of reductions in USAID support.

In accordance with the principle of empowering local actors, one of the promising reforms that might emerge from the 'humanitarian reset' is the more efficient use of country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) across the LCB. This could help to address the most pressing humanitarian needs by concentrating funds on critical sectors that need urgent funding attention.

CONCLUSION

The worldwide humanitarian sector has witnessed a profound drop in aid spending in recent years. Donor countries, agencies, and their partners are withdrawing significant aid commitments to their beneficiaries, even as humanitarian crises escalate. While reductions in aid from European donors and partners have been incremental, USAID's recent aid cuts across the world have been more drastic, thereby contributing to huge aid-need deficits in many aid-dependent countries.

The consequences of USAID's spending freeze have been particularly acute in the LCB. Nigeria and Chad are already experiencing large deficits in terms of the aid flows needed to cater for their rising humanitarian needs. At the same time, security and development indices for these countries are not improving. As a large proportion of the region's aid needs were shouldered by USAID-linked interventions, the sudden freeze poses a serious humanitarian threat in itself.

To mitigate the situation, countries in the region need to strengthen their national and transnational mechanisms for good governance and development, in order to address the root causes of human insecurity and related vulnerabilities. Donor countries and agencies should prioritise their interventions by focusing on sustainable solutions and partnerships in the most critical areas.

The outcome of USAID's aid freeze underscores the need for the countries of the LCB to rethink their external aid relations, including finding a balance between aid dependency and strategic partnership. Although USAID's aid freeze has created serious challenges in Nigeria and Cameroon, it has also offered the political leaders of these countries the opportunity to develop resilient, self-reliant, transparent, and sustainable mechanisms for addressing spiralling humanitarian crises. Overall, there is a strategic necessity for them to look inward and wean themselves off aid dependency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to address the challenges identified, for various stakeholders:

LCB countries and their governments

- 1 - Establish a dedicated national humanitarian fund within annual budgets, with at least a fixed percentage earmarked for health, education, and food security in crisis-affected regions.
- 2 - Forge stronger partnerships with the International Development Association (IDA), the Global Fund, and UN-OCHA in order to fill critical funding gaps in health, education, and infrastructure.
- 3 - Strengthen transparency and accountability mechanisms in aid utilisation through civil society monitoring in order to build donor and citizen confidence in state-led interventions.

The LCBC

- 1 - Serve as a central coordinating hub for pooling resources from member states, donors, and private sector actors in order to avoid duplication and ensure efficiency.
- 2 - Embark on the implementation of joint cross-border projects (climate adaptation, livelihoods, infrastructure) to enhance resilience and interdependence.

Donor agencies and international partners

- 1 - Shift from short-term humanitarian relief to multi-year predictable funding frameworks that integrate development and peace-building.
- 2 - Prioritise direct support to local NGOs and community-based organisations through targeted funding and inclusion in programme design in order to strengthen grassroots responses.

The US government

- 1 - Increase investment in development partnerships (e.g., the African Continental Free Trade Area) that build long-term resilience and reduce aid dependency.
- 2 - Provide technical and financial support to the LCBC and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to strengthen regional security efforts and the stabilisation of affected communities.

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REcAP NETWORK

The REcAP network is an interactive platform for regional cooperation, bringing together organisations and experts in peacebuilding and preventing conflicts and violent extremism in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin.

Implemented by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the REcAP Network project has been designed to respond to capacity gaps and limitations to collaboration between peacebuilding experts, policymakers and practitioners and to improve the impact, progress, and sustainability of peacebuilding research, policy and practice.

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