CHAPTER 9

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Management of Displaced Persons in the Lake Chad Region

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Introduction

Internal displacement and forced migration have become defining features of contemporary humanitarian crises. As of 2025, over 305 million people globally require urgent humanitarian assistance and protection due to the escalation of conflicts, climate-induced disasters and economic instability (OCHA 2025b). These complex emergencies have placed enormous strain on vulnerable populations and exposed the limitations of existing humanitarian systems.

Among the most severely affected areas is the Lake Chad Region (LCR), comprising northeastern Nigeria, Cameroon's Far North Region, western Chad and southeastern Niger. This region has emerged as one of Africa's major displacement hotspots, primarily due to the protracted insurgency led by Boko Haram that began in northeast Nigeria in 2009 and subsequently spread to neighbouring countries. In addition to armed conflict, the region's displacement crisis is exacerbated by a confluence of climate change, socio-political instability, environmental degradation and weak state capacity (OCHA 2025c; International Organisation for Migration 2025).

As of February 2025, the LCR hosts an estimated 6.1 million crisis-affected individuals. This figure includes 3.2 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), 2.4 million returnees (including both former IDPs and returnees from abroad) and nearly 500 000 refugees both within and outside camps. These populations face critical levels of food insecurity, exposure to gender-based violence and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education and clean water. Thus, host communities are similarly placed under pressure, straining already limited resources and infrastructure (International Organisation for Migration 2025).

In this fragile context, humanitarian assistance is not only essential for the immediate survival of displaced persons but also for supporting early recovery, resilience and the eventual stabilisation of affected communities. Interventions in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), food security, shelter, healthcare and education remain paramount. Financial, security and technical support from both national governments and international donors have been instrumental in delivering life-saving humanitarian interventions to displaced persons across the region (Roy 2025).

Among the key donors, the United States (US) is the largest provider of humanitarian assistance globally, through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) since its inception in 1961 (DeSilver 2025). USAID has enabled the US to play a significant role in supporting emergency relief efforts in Africa and the LCR through various programmes, spanning agriculture, health, education, democracy promotion and emergency response. In the LCR, USAID has implemented multi-sectoral programmes targeting displaced populations, provided funding for food, aid, shelter, health services, protection of vulnerable populations, security of the region against insurgent activities and WASH programmes since 2014, often in collaboration with United Nations (UN) agencies, local governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Cillers 2025a; USAID Office of Inspector General 2020; Cole et al. 2017). In partnership with international NGOs, UN agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and local civil society organisations have all contributed to both immediate relief and medium-term development goals (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020).

However, recent policy shifts threaten to undermine these gains. In January 2025, upon returning to office, US President Donald Trump signed an executive

order significantly reducing USAID funding. While this move is justified on the grounds of combating corruption and preventing aid diversion to terrorist groups, it is likely to have serious implications for humanitarian operations in the region, limiting the resources available for displaced populations and increasing the risk of regional destabilisation (Cillers 2025b; USAID Office of Inspector General 2020).

It should be kept in mind that humanitarian projects undertaken by donor agencies or states are generally temporary interventions designed to respond to the immediate needs of people in crisis and are therefore expected to come to an end at some point (Pal et al. 2019). To facilitate this transition, such projects typically have exit strategies, although the nature and implementation of these strategies may vary across organisations and states (Tull 2020; Ahmed, Dillan and Robinson 2018). The manner in which humanitarian interventions are brought to an end is therefore critical, particularly where abrupt withdrawal may disrupt essential services or leave vulnerable populations without adequate support. In this regard, President Trump's sudden withdrawal from USAID did not appear to follow the established USAID exit guidance, raising concerns about the implications of an unplanned disengagement. At the same time, the question of when and whether humanitarian actors should withdraw is complicated by the possibility that aid itself may sometimes produce unintended or negative consequences. This raises an important dilemma for humanitarian agencies: should they withdraw their services when their interventions may be causing harm, and can foreign aid always be assumed to benefit its intended recipients? (Van Laeken 2021).

While existing literature has explored the role of foreign aid in conflict zones (Maqbool 2022; Bywater 2021), its use as a humanitarian alibi (Bywater 2021), the ethical dilemmas it poses (Van Laeken 2021) and its tensions with military assistance (Sauter 2022), as well as the implications of US withdrawal from international bodies like the World Health Organization (Ogieuhi et al. 2025), few studies have specifically examined how shifts in US foreign aid policy affect displaced populations in the LCR. This research fills that gap by employing a realist theoretical framework and a qualitative approach to analyse displacement trends, aid allocation and socio-economic outcomes and consequences in the LCR. It provides a contextualised analysis of how humanitarian assistance intersects with US geopolitical interests, offering a novel contribution to the

literature on foreign aid, displacement and regional security in West and Central Africa.

This chapter is structured into eight sections. The first section introduces the thrust of the research, followed by the research methodology. Sections three and four examine the theoretical framework and provide an empirical review of the research theme, respectively. The fifth section, 'Humanitarian Crisis and Needs Overview', contextualises the scale and complexity of displacement in the LCR. The sixth section analyses USAID's Humanitarian Engagement in the LCR, focusing on its strategic role and historical interventions. The seventh section explores the 'Effects of USAID Funding Reduction on Displaced Populations', assessing the implications for aid delivery and socio-economic conditions in the region. The last section offers the findings, concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

Research methodology

This research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness, impact and limitations of USAID interventions in managing humanitarian needs in the LCR and assesses the potential consequences of the funding withdrawal. To achieve this, the research adopts a qualitative research design using descriptive methods to examine the effects of the withdrawal on the displaced populations in the region. The qualitative method allows for an in-depth understanding of the effects of this withdrawal, giving an accurate picture of its aftermath.

The research focuses on the four countries that make up the LCR, which include Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, their displacement trends and the intervention they receive from USAID. It interrogates data from various sources, including USAID, the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). The data derived from these sources include aid disbursement figures, displacement trends and socio-economic indicators. Quantitative data derived from ACLED were visualised using Tableau.

Theoretical framework: Realist theory

This study is anchored in the realist theory of international relations, which provides a foundational lens for understanding how states behave in an anarchic international system. Realism posits that states are the principal actors in an anarchic international system where no central authority exists above the state. Within this framework, states are viewed as rational, self-interested entities that prioritise survival, power and national interest in their foreign policy decisions (Waltz 1979). The theory concerns itself primarily with these pursuits in the international system. It assumes the primacy of states, motivated by self-interest. Thus, it views issues such as humanitarian aid, international co-operation and foreign policies as strategic tools to attaining these goals (Morgenthau 1959).

The two major schools of thought within realism have differing views about the nature of power in international relations. One school, represented by realist figures such as Otto von Bismarck of the nineteenth century and Richard Nixon of the twentieth century, defines power primarily in terms of military capability. In this view, weapons, strategic dominance and defence capacity form the core of a state's international influence. Thus, states and their representatives always ensure that they maintain a balance of military power favourable to the state. The other school, while still grounded in realist assumptions, acknowledges the utility of intangible tools such as human rights, humanitarian aid, economic influence and soft power as means to achieve strategic goals. Historical figures like Woodrow Wilson and V.I. Lenin exemplify the use of these tools in pursuit of national interests, often cloaked in ideological or humanitarian rhetoric. In the last century, the foreign policies of states in the global system have largely been shaped around finding a middle ground between these schools of thought (Miskel 2002).

Classical realism, as articulated by Hans Morgenthau (1959), views the international system as governed by objective laws rooted in human nature. From this perspective, states are inherently self-interested and act to secure power, often using foreign policy tools, including military force and diplomacy, to achieve strategic dominance. Morgenthau emphasised that the national interest, defined in terms of power, should guide all foreign policy decisions.

Neorealism, or structural realism, advanced by Kenneth Waltz (1979), builds on these foundations by focusing on the anarchic structure of the international

system as the primary constraint on state behaviour to seek power and security, often at the expense of moral considerations. In this view, the absence of a global governing authority compels states to prioritise survival, leading them to adopt policies that strengthen their relative power, even at the expense of ethical or humanitarian concerns. These theoretical principles offer a useful lens for analysing US foreign aid policies across the world and in the LCR, especially where strategic interests intersect with humanitarian objectives.

In the context of this research, realist theory offers a robust framework for understanding the motivations behind USAID interventions in the LCR and the US decision to withdraw humanitarian aid from the region. While humanitarian aid is often presented as altruistic, realist scholars argue that such assistance frequently serves broader geopolitical purposes. Scholars such as Mearsheimer (2001) and Nye (2004) have emphasised how US foreign aid functions as a strategic instrument to promote geopolitical stability, counter extremism and maintain influence in fragile states and regions. The LCR, characterised by transnational insurgency, weak state institutions and persistent humanitarian crises, presents a case in point where humanitarian aid aligns with broader US national security interests.

Since 2014, USAID's humanitarian engagement in the region can thus be interpreted as a realist manoeuvre to secure US strategic interests in West and Central Africa. By providing humanitarian assistance, particularly in areas of food security, WASH and the protection of vulnerable populations, the US government has addressed human suffering while also containing the influence of violent extremist organisations such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Cole et al 2017). Through USAID, the US has also worked to foster regional stability, limit forced migration and prevent the spillover effects of insecurity into Europe and the US (Kishi and Raleigh 2020). Thus, realist theory illuminates the dual purpose of US humanitarian assistance in the LCR, both as a response to human suffering and as a calculated effort to secure national interests.

Empirical review

The United States has historically played a significant role in delivering humanitarian assistance globally, particularly in countries affected by epidemics,

natural disasters and armed conflicts (Ogieuhi et al. 2025). Over the decades, the US government, primarily through USAID, has allocated hundreds of billions of dollars to humanitarian aid across more than 100 countries. In 2023 alone, USAID disbursed nearly US$44 billion in aid to 160 countries, using multilateral platforms such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and various international NGOs (Roy 2025). USAID has served not only as a humanitarian instrument but also as a vehicle for advancing US foreign policy objectives through soft power.

The literature is replete with examples of US humanitarian engagement in conflict-affected countries such as Sudan, Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina (CARE International 2002; Blanchard 2016; Bywater 2021; Maqbool 2022). Between 2001 and 2009, the US allocated approximately US$38 billion in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, despite internal criticisms regarding the effectiveness and intent of the assistance (Maqbool 2022). Notably, in the early years of intervention, particularly in 2003, military operations accounted for the vast majority of US expenditure in Afghanistan, with only nine per cent allocated to humanitarian assistance (CARE International 2002). A similar trend was observed in Sudan during the Darfur crisis, where US foreign aid reached unprecedented levels in response to the humanitarian emergency (Blanchard 2016). In the case of Bosnia, the United States has been criticised for employing a 'humanitarian alibi' to legitimise its political and military engagement (Bywater 2021). Some analysts argue that interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were driven more by geopolitical strategy than by purely altruistic motives, with humanitarian rhetoric used to justify military actions (Rieff 2002). While humanitarianism in Bosnia served as a pretext for avoiding direct intervention by the great powers, the opposite occurred in Kosovo, where it was used to support military involvement. These examples underscore a realist interpretation of US foreign policy, where humanitarian assistance is often intertwined with strategic and security foreign policy interests (US State Department 2000).

Humanitarian aid is typically designed as a short- to medium-term intervention, intended to stabilise crises and enable recipient countries or regions to build resilience and then transition towards self-reliance. Accordingly, most donor governments and agencies often implement structured exit strategies that emphasise sustainability and the continuation of impact after aid is withdrawn (Tull 2020). However, even where aid has been phased out gradually,

unanticipated challenges, such as political instability or renewed conflict, can undermine earlier gains and disrupt developmental progress (Slob and Jerve 2008).

The Trump administration's executive decision in January 2025 to reduce USAID funding illustrates a realist recalibration of US foreign policy priorities. Rooted in realist theory, such decisions are driven by a cost-benefit assessment of foreign engagements, especially when national interests appear threatened. When the perceived benefits of aid diminish, due to concerns over corruption, aid diversion or rising domestic political pressures, realist logic suggests that states are likely to reduce or withdraw their involvement (Cilliers 2025). President Trump's opinion that USAID funds were being mismanaged or diverted to terrorist groups mirrors this rationale, signifying a strategic pivot from humanitarian leadership to domestic political consolidation and resource protection (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020). While the decision to exit an aid programme is inherently political, made solely by the donor state, best practices in development co-operation recommend that such withdrawals be guided by developmental benchmarks and undertaken through inclusive consultations with local and international stakeholders to ensure sustainability and mitigate unintended consequences (Slob and Jerve 2008).

Realism reveals the inherent tension between the ideals of needs-based or peacekeeping responses to humanitarian situations and strategic calculations by the powerful donor states. In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), the peacekeeping budget has been found to outweigh the humanitarian budget, illustrating the prioritisation of security over aid. For instance, in Mali, the peacekeeping budget reportedly reached US$2 billion compared to only US$160 million for humanitarian assistance, raising concerns about the militarisation of aid (Refugees International 2019). Thus, humanitarian appeals in these contexts remain chronically underfunded, prompting calls from the UN Secretary-General for stronger donor commitments (Sauter 2022).

The reduction in USAID funding further exacerbates the vulnerability of humanitarian operations that rely heavily on the goodwill of powerful states, but are also susceptible to their shifting political priorities, such as in the case of the present Trump administration. The impact of the cutback has been compounded by the Trump administration's decision to halt funding to the WHO, a key global

health actor. Between 2022 and 2023, the US contributed US$1.284 billion to the WHO's total budget, approximately twenty per cent of its total budget, surpassing other funders like the European Union and Gates Foundation. The US funding withdrawal significantly disrupted disease response programmes in vulnerable regions, particularly in Africa (Ogieuhi et al. 2025). US contributions were pivotal in combating diseases such as Ebola, HIV/AIDS and polio, especially in West Africa (Fuster et al. 2017).

Meanwhile, due to the changing nature of war and conflicts, humanitarian actors increasingly face ethical dilemmas, causing them to question the ethics of their aids. Some of these dilemmas have to do with aid benefiting armies, killers or militias who terrorise the civilian populations or embezzle funds. In some cases, the system of government practised by some states has prevented the judicious use of humanitarian aid, particularly under despotic rulers (Sachs et al. 2004; Van Laeken 2021). This implies that humanitarian aid does not always have unimpeachable outcomes and may even be responsible for prolonging suffering or conflict. Although humanitarian agencies try to be impartial in their activities, the impact of their aid has political consequences regardless of their motives. This is because humanitarian emergencies are a product of political and economic upheaval, benefiting certain elites at the expense of the broader population (Vayrynen 1999).

In African states, foreign aid is sometimes perceived as 'easy money' to be squandered for personal gain by corrupt political leaders (Kalu 2018), reinforcing cycles of corruption, dependency and weak governance (Kalu 2018; Moyo 2009). Despite receiving billions of dollars in aid, many African countries continue to experience rising poverty rates, calling into question the long-term effectiveness of such interventions. This has sparked an ongoing scholarly debate about whether aid should be continued or curtailed. While proponents like Sachs et al. (2004) argue that aid is essential to lift countries out of poverty traps, critics (Moyo 2009) contend that aid fosters dependency and undermines domestic initiative.

Conditional aid has been suggested as a compromise to improve effectiveness. However, historical cases like Kenya under President Daniel arap Moi show that while conditions were attached to World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) funding, they were often ignored or manipulated. Nonetheless, some analysts argue that these conditions produced positive outcomes in the long

run, contributing to Kenya's democratic evolution (The Economist 1998; Sachs et al. 2004). Ultimately, decisions around aid provision rest with donors, who also bear responsibility for monitoring its use and ensuring it aligns with stated development goals.

Humanitarian crisis and needs overview: The LCR

The LCR, encompassing northeastern Nigeria, the Far North of Cameroon, western Chad and southeastern Niger, is facing a severe, long-standing crisis driven by armed conflict, violent extremism, climate shocks, economic stagnation and weak governance systems. Since the emergence in 2009 of Boko Haram in Maiduguri, Nigeria, the group and its affiliates, most notably ISWAP (see Figure 9.1), have expanded their operations across borders into Chad, Cameroon and Niger (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020). The US government designated Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organisation in 2013 (Attoh 2018; Thurston 2016), a move that acknowledged the growing transnational threat it posed. The group and its affiliates continue to carry out attacks in the region, with 1,198 events perpetrated by Boko Haram recorded in the first quarter of 2025, the highest since its emergence, as shown in Figure 9.1.

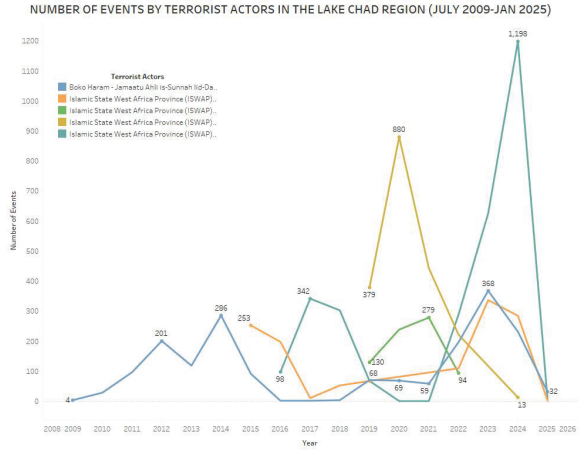

Figure 9.1: Number of events by terrorist actors in the LCR (July 2009-January 2025). Source: By author(s) from ACLED dataset.

The continuous attacks by Boko Haram, ISWAP and other non-state armed groups have led to an acute humanitarian crisis, displacing millions, destroying critical infrastructure, disrupting livelihoods and restricting humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2025b; Oriola, Onuoha and Oyewole 2022). As shown in Figure 9.2, the number of fatalities caused by terrorist violence in the Lake Chad Basin peaked in 2016 when 5322 deaths were recorded, the deadliest year since the start of the crisis. This was followed by smaller, though still alarming, spikes in 2015 (1257) and 2020 (1976). Nigeria has consistently recorded the highest number of fatalities in the region over the years, while Chad, Niger, and Cameroon have experienced intermittent but devastating surges in violence. Notably, 2025 is already on track to surpass previous years, indicating an escalation of hostilities in the region, as shown in Figure 9.2.

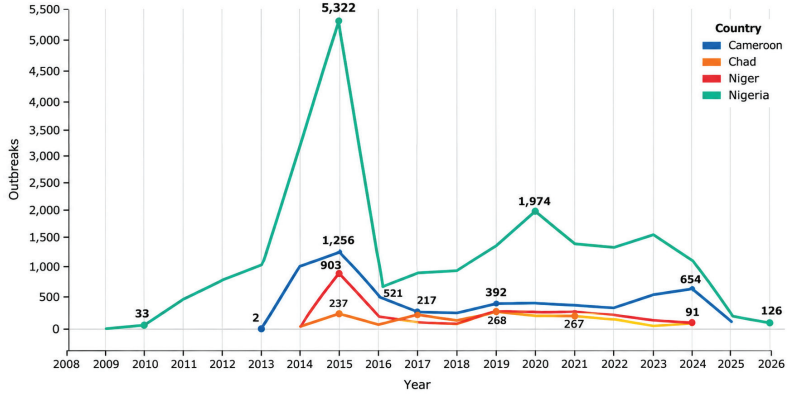

Figure 9.2: Number of fatalities in the Lake Chad countries (July 2009-January 2025). Source: By author(s) from ACLED dataset.

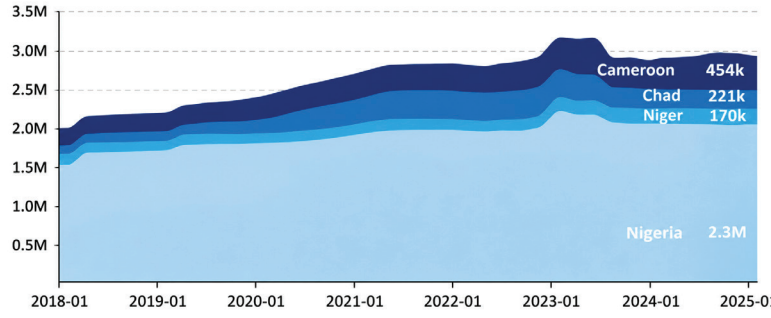

Figure 9.3: Monthly internal displacement trend in the LCR. Source: OCHA (2025c).

Figure 9.3 traces the internal displacement dynamics within the Lake Chad Basin; Nigeria remains the epicenter, with about 2.3 million IDPs as of January 2025, consistently accounting for the largest share throughout the period. Cameroon follows with 454 000 IDPs, showing gradual increases linked to persistent insecurity in the Far North. Chad hosts 221 000 IDPs, with displacement trends reflecting cross-border spillovers from Boko Haram and ISWAP activity. Niger has 170 000 IDPs, mostly concentrated in the Diffa region, with relatively small fluctuations compared to other countries. The spike in 2023 suggests intensified terrorist activities or climate shocks that aggravated vulnerabilities, with levels remaining high into 2025, indicating no significant recovery (OCHA 2025c).

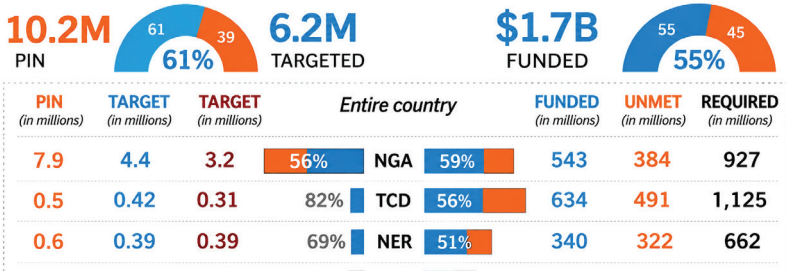

Figure 9.4: People in need and funding requirements. Source: OCHA (2025c).

As shown in Figure 9.4, across the four Lake Chad countries, 10.2 million people

are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2025, but only 6.2 million (61%) are currently targeted for aid delivery, due to financial and logistical constraints. Nigeria bears the brunt with 7.9 million people in need, yet with only 3.2 million people targeted. The country's humanitarian response plan requires US$927 million, of which only US$543 million (59%) has been funded, leaving a gap of US$384 million. Similarly, Chad needs US$1.125 billion to support 0.5 million IDPs, but has a US$491 million funding gap. Niger has received just over half (51%) of its US$662 million requirement. Cameroon faces the most severe shortfall, with only 45% of its US$371 million humanitarian needs funded. This represents a collective US$1.7 billion funding shortfall across the four countries (OCHA 2025c). In the context of shrinking external resources and limited local and regional capacities, the collective goal of saving lives, restoring dignity and reducing vulnerability is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

USAID's humanitarian engagement in the LCR

The US government's intervention in the LCR began in 2011, driven by dual objectives that include countering terrorism and addressing the region's deepening humanitarian crisis. In the same year, the US urged Nigeria to address poor governance, corruption and human rights abuses by both the government and security forces (Campbell 2014). By late 2014 and early 2015, four Lake Chad Basin countries, Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon, along with Benin, established the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), committing over 8 000 troops to joint operations (International Crisis Group 2020). However, assessments of the MNJTF revealed limited success in combating terrorism, hindered by an unclear mandate, underestimation of Boko Haram's capabilities, political complexities, slow adaptation to evolving threats and ambiguous roles for vigilante groups (Ajala 2021).

To strengthen regional response, the US applied the '3Ds' framework (Defense, Development and Diplomacy) to support LCR governments in combating Boko Haram while addressing underlying vulnerabilities. This 3Ds approach delivered humanitarian assistance to IDPs and refugees, supported community resistance to Boko Haram and advised and built the capacity of partner security forces. US support was instrumental in enabling LCR forces to collectively clear and hold territory comparable in size to Belgium (USAID

Office of Inspector General 2020; Cole et al 2017).

Subsequently, through the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), USAID provided life-saving aid and strengthened resilience in crisis-affected communities, funding interventions in food aid, shelter, water and sanitation, health services and protection for vulnerable groups (Cole et al 2017). By 2013, the United States had begun providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and some IDPs in the LCR, as shown in Figure 9.5. Assistance levels increased from virtually nothing in fiscal year (FY) 2012 to US$42.25 million and US$67.77 million in FY 2013 in Chad and Niger, respectively. Humanitarian aid was expanded to Cameroon in 2014 and to Nigeria in 2015. The US provided US$13.7 million to Nigeria in 2015 and US$11.4 million in 2016, as Nigeria's leadership became more open to external assistance. Assistance to displaced populations in northern Cameroon also dramatically increased from less than US$1 million in 2013 to US$8.5 million in 2014 and US$23 million in 2015. This assistance, provided by USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and Food for Peace, as well as by the State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, was channeled through the UN (Cole et al 2017).

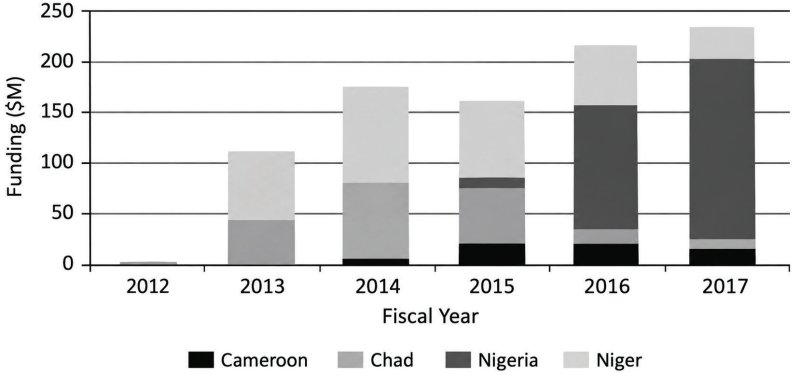

Figure 9.5: Humanitarian assistance to Lake Chad basin. Source: Cole et al (2017).

Since 2014, USAID has been the largest bilateral humanitarian donor in Cameroon, providing emergency food aid to over 1.4 million people and supporting health, security, environmental co-operation and trade promotion

(US Embassy in Cameroon 2024). In Nigeria, funding rose dramatically in mid-2015, from US$17 million in June to US$94 million by September. In November 2016, a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) was deployed to lead the US humanitarian response. In 2021, over US$700 million was allocated to Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020; Cole et al. 2017).

In 2022, USAID provided US$2.5 million for flood response in Lac province and N'Djamena, Chad, as well as US$73.6 million for food, relief and WASH support (United States Embassy Ndjamena 2022). In Niger, US foreign assistance played a critical role in improving food security, building counterterrorism and peacekeeping capacity, sustaining security sector reform, supporting productive agricultural enterprises, promoting democracy and good governance, supporting justice sector reform, improving health and education and strengthening security sector education and training (U.S. Embassy in Niger 2022). USAID Niger was elevated to a full mission in August 2020, and became a Feed the Future target country under the Global Food Security Strategy, as well as a President's Malaria Initiative country. A US$437 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, came into force in January 2018, aiming to strengthen Niger's agricultural and livestock sectors by improving water availability through investments in large- and small-scale irrigation systems, rehabilitating 300 kilometers of important market access roads, restoring some 50 000 hectares of pasturelands and modernising public livestock marketing infrastructure and veterinary services. Niger is one of six countries participating in the Security Governance Initiative and has been identified as a Counterterrorism Partnership Fund partner nation (U.S. Embassy in Niger 2022).

In 2023, all African countries except Eritrea received aid from the US, as shown in Figure 9.6. Ethiopia was the largest recipient of USAID funds, receiving more than US$1.7 billion. Other large recipients of economic development support from USAID were Somalia, DRC, Nigeria, Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda, Mozambique, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia and Malawi, each of which received more than US$400 million (Cillers 2025a; OECD Data Explorer 2023).

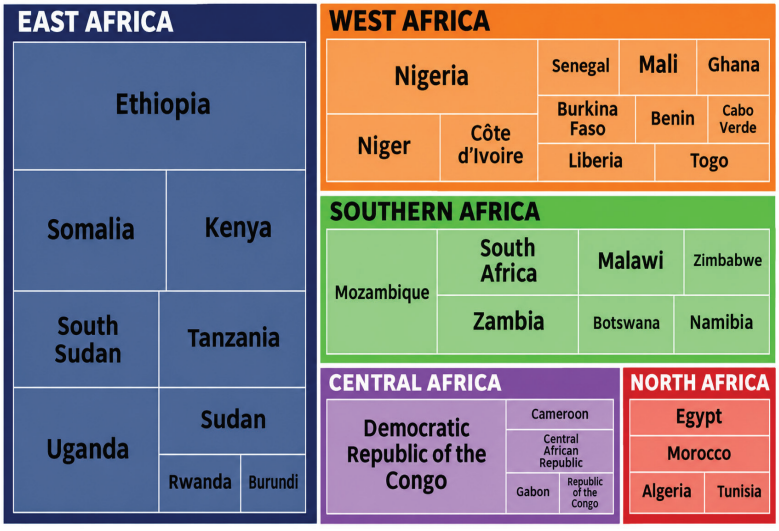

Figure 9.6: US aid flows to Africa in millions of dollars in 2023. Source: Cillers (2025a) and OECD Data Explorer (2023).

To prevent the diversion of aid to terrorists, USAID established requirements and implemented a due diligence process for activities with certain identified risks. One risk mitigation measure taken by USAID implementers operating in the LCR was to follow up on the distribution and use of USAID-funded commodities. In addition, USAID incorporated a provision on preventing terrorist financing into the list of standard provisions for all Agency awards. This provision states that a recipient of USAID funds cannot engage in transactions with or provide resources to people and organisations associated with terrorism. However, USAID had limited involvement in verifying that implementers followed up on the distribution and use of commodities because it did not require implementers to provide post-distribution monitoring reports to USAID for its review. USAID also has limited staff overseeing its operations, and the security situation of the LCR limited their monitoring and access efforts to remote areas (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020). These inadequacies create opportunities for fraud and diversion of large amounts of aid and US-funded commodities, aimed at humanitarian crises, to terrorists in the LCR.

Effects of USAID funding reduction on displaced populations in the LCR

During Donald Trump's first term as president (2017–2021), US foreign assistance policy faced significant pressure from the administration's America First approach, which was accompanied by scepticism towards multilateralism and proposals for substantial reductions in foreign assistance. The administration's proposed 2018 budget, for example, included a 28 per cent reduction in funding for the State Department and USAID and a 13 per cent reduction in Africa-related programmes (Coulibaly 2018). These proposed cuts, alongside delays and uncertainty in the US foreign-aid budget process, created concerns about disruptions to aid programmes and the implementation of development projects (Ingram 2018). The administration's emphasis on security interests also raised questions about the extent to which US engagement with Africa would increasingly be shaped by strategic and counterterrorism priorities (Coulibaly 2018).

When returning to the presidency in January 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order that significantly reduced USAID funding. Justified on the grounds of combating corruption and preventing aid diversion to terrorist groups, this decision is expected to have profound consequences for humanitarian operations in the LCR, limiting the resources available for displaced populations and increasing the risk of regional destabilisation (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020; Cillers 2025b). Moreover, the US withdrawal from such engagements could undermine its use of humanitarian assistance as a strategic tool for advancing broader global objectives.

The impact of this executive order on Africa, and particularly the LCR, is wide ranging. Health programmes, especially those focused on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, which constitute the largest share of US aid to Africa, will be among the most affected. Other critical initiatives funded by the US, including those aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity, fostering economic growth, strengthening security, promoting democracy, protecting human rights and improving governance, as well as expanding access to quality education and social services, will now require alternative donor support. A shortfall in humanitarian funding will leave millions in highly vulnerable positions, threatening both their survival and dignity. In the LCR, inadequate resourcing of the humanitarian

response plan could result in millions being deprived of essential food assistance (USAID Office of Inspector General 2020).

The U.S. is not alone in reducing aid, however. Domestic fiscal pressures have prompted other major donors to follow suit. Germany, the second-largest provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA), has reduced its development and humanitarian funding by more than €4.8 billion (US$5.3 billion) between 2022 and 2025 in absolute terms, with further reductions anticipated (Cillers 2025a). France has lowered its 2024–2025 ODA budget by over US$1 billion, while the United Kingdom has slashed more than US$900 million, partly due to the diversion of nearly £1 billion (US$1.28 billion) to cover domestic asylum-seeker housing costs (Cillers 2025a; Green 2024; Bollag 2024). Nevertheless, the scale and pace of US cuts in aid are unprecedented.

Findings, conclusion and recommendations

Humanitarian aid in the LCR remains significant but highly susceptible to US domestic politics and donor strategic interests. USAID's engagement, while impactful, has been shaped by realist foreign policy shifts, leading to funding volatility that undermines both immediate relief and long-term recovery. This evidence shows that over-reliance on a few major donors increases vulnerability to geopolitical changes. Furthermore, the political sensitivity of aid flows creates instability in humanitarian programming and limits sustainability.

The US funding reductions, though detrimental, present an opportunity to spur innovation, improve efficiency and strengthen transparency and accountability in humanitarian operations. The intersection between politics and aid underscores the need for models of assistance that are less dependent on single donors and more resilient to geopolitical fluctuations. A transition towards locally led, flexible and diversified humanitarian systems is essential to protecting displaced populations and maintaining regional stability in the LCR.

This research recommends reducing transaction costs by directly funding local implementers and expanding cash and voucher assistance, strengthening collaboration with development actors and governments to address structural vulnerabilities, shifting from reactive to proactive responses through anticipatory action, and diversifying resource mobilisation beyond traditional donor models.

These reforms are essential to sustain humanitarian delivery amid shrinking resources (Nigeria Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025).

Finally, there is a need for stronger African-led responses to humanitarian crises. Enhancing co-ordination through ECOWAS and the African Union, improving domestic revenue collection, diversifying economies and building partnerships with emerging donors can reduce dependency on volatile foreign aid. Empowering displaced persons through livelihood creation, skills training and participatory governance will foster recovery and resilience. Strengthening accountability systems, including mandatory post-distribution monitoring, will also address concerns over aid diversion and ensure transparency. Future research should examine China's humanitarian role in Africa and explore gendered dimensions of displacement in the LCR.

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