



Opinion

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Challenges, Implications and Opportunities of USAID Stop Work Order

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Introduction

The abrupt USAID work-stop order issued in response to the U.S. President's Executive Order has sent shockwaves through communities and development organizations, halting projects overnight and sparking widespread debate over its suddenness, legitimacy, and broader consequences. Its suddenness differs significantly from previous donor agency restructures-such as Australia's AusAID merger into DFAT (2013) and the UK's DFID integration into FCDO (2020)-which allowed for gradual transitions and the completion of existing contracts, this directive took effect immediately, leaving stakeholders scrambling for contingency plans, and raising critical questions about its legal foundation, impact on aid effectiveness, and long-term implications for U.S. global development policy.

This decision not only disrupts critical development programs but also undermines U.S. credibility as a reliable aid partner, particularly in fragile regions where USAID has arguably played a stabilizing role. The move signals a deeper shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities, aligning aid more closely with strategic interests rather than long-term development goals. With China and other global players expanding their influence through foreign assistance, the consequences of an unpredictable U.S. aid policy could be profound. While the duration of the current freeze on U.S. foreign aid remains uncertain-along with when and where funding might resume-this article explores its specific impacts, particularly in Liberia given the magnitude of its exposure to USAID funding. By shifting the focus from broad global narratives to on-the-ground realities, we examine the immediate consequences of the suspension while also identifying potential opportunities and unforeseen silver linings

that may emerge from this crisis.

Foreign Aid: Tool for Diplomacy and Development

Foreign aid has long served as both a foreign policy instrument and a vital pillar of global health financing, particularly for low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia. Among the 26 poorest nations globally, eight rely on USAID for over 20% of their total assistance-South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia. In six of these countries, USAID's primary focus is classified as "emergency response," reflecting its role in addressing acute and often protracted crises.

In Liberia, however, USAID funding is primarily directed toward strengthening the basic health sector, playing a critical role in supporting healthcare infrastructure and service delivery. This stands in contrast to Uganda, where USAID's emphasis is on population and reproductive health. The heavy reliance on U.S. assistance underscores the profound implications of the current funding freeze, particularly for Liberia's healthcare system, where disruptions could have lasting consequences on public health outcomes.

The recent suspension of USAID funding has profound consequences for Liberia's Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI), which plays a critical role in protecting public health. USAID has been a key partner in supporting Liberia's health sector, providing essential resources for vaccine procurement, distribution, and technical assistance. Through this partnership, the agency has

facilitated vaccine delivery via monthly health facility outreaches, Periodic Intensification of Routine Immunization (PIRI), and cold chain equipment procurement, including Solar Direct-Drive (SDD) refrigerators, ensuring vaccines remain viable even in remote areas.

One significant milestone in Liberia's post-Ebola health system strengthening was the EPI Recovery Plan, backed by a USAID investment of \$2 million. This initiative led to a marked improvement in immunization coverage, with DTP3 (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis) vaccination rates rising from 65% in 2015 to 73% in 2016, and further to 80% in 2017 (WUENIC Report, 2023). More recently, post-COVID-19 support from USAID helped increase DTP3 coverage from 66% in 2021 to 82% in 2023, safeguarding thousands of children against vaccine-preventable diseases.

Threats Posed by The Suspension of USAID Funding

The abrupt funding pause poses severe risks to Liberia's immunization efforts. Without USAID's support, the country faces:

Supply Chain Disruptions

The suspension could halt vaccine procurement and delivery, leading to stockouts and interrupted immunization campaigns. This increases the likelihood of outbreaks of preventable diseases such as measles, polio, and diphtheria, which have been controlled through sustained immunization efforts.

Rising Numbers of Unvaccinated Children

Liberia could see an increase in "zero-dose" children—those who have never received a single vaccine—exposing them to life-threatening diseases.

Healthcare Workforce Shortages

The lack of funding may hinder the training and deployment of healthcare workers responsible for administering vaccines and educating communities on immunization.

Economic Strain

A decline in immunization coverage would lead to increased healthcare costs as outbreaks emerge, straining Liberia's already limited resources and diverting funds from other critical health programs.

Impact on Global Health Commitments

The suspension threatens Liberia's ability to maintain progress under global frameworks such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Scorecard, where immunization coverage is a key performance indicator.

Lessons and Opportunities Amid the Crisis

While the funding pause presents significant challenges, it

also offers opportunities for Liberia to reassess and strengthen its health system in a more self-reliant and sustainable manner. The crisis could serve as a catalyst for:

Strengthening Local Ownership

With reduced reliance on foreign aid, Liberia has an opportunity to build a more self-sustaining health system. This could involve increasing domestic financing for health, strengthening national supply chains, and enhancing government-led immunization initiatives.

Diversification of Funding Sources

The crisis underscores the need for Liberia to seek alternative funding mechanisms, such as engaging private sector partners, regional donors, and multilateral organizations, to reduce dependency on a single donor.

Sectoral Reforms and Efficiency Gains

The funding suspension could prompt a reassessment of aid effectiveness, leading to improved governance, accountability, and efficiency in health program implementation. By streamlining processes and reducing wastage, Liberia could ensure more effective use of available resources.

Empowerment of Local Communities

With USAID support paused, community-led initiatives may become more prominent. Grassroots health interventions, community-driven immunization campaigns, and decentralized decision-making could play a crucial role in sustaining vaccine coverage.

Conclusion

While the USAID funding pause presents immediate and serious risks to Liberia's immunization program and broader health sector, it also offers a critical moment for reflection and reform. By strengthening local ownership, diversifying funding sources, and enhancing efficiency, Liberia has an opportunity to build a more resilient health system that is less vulnerable to external funding fluctuations. The road ahead will be challenging, but strategic investments and policy shifts could turn this crisis into a pivotal moment for long-term health system sustainability.

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Conflict of Interest

None.