AFTER THE AGE OF ABUNDANCE: THE RE-ORDERING OF HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE IN THE WIDER HORN OF AFRICA[1]

Jan Pospisil

INTRODUCTION

A paradox sits at the heart of the current moment. After Elon Musk's decision to abolish USAID, many of its long-time critics suddenly came to its defence. Former firm opponents of what they once called a vehicle of US American, often deliberately anti-communist, strategy now lament its disappearance. The reversal is striking. And it signals the unfolding of something deeper. We may be standing at the edge of the world of development as we have known it.

For decades, the aid system expanded almost without interruption. Of course, there were constant claims of shortfalls and crises, yet budgets kept rising. The famous 0.7 % of GDP target for Official Development Assistance (ODA) was rarely met, except by a few Scandinavian donors and the United Kingdom. In absolute terms, however, aid flows grew year after year. This expansion stopped abruptly in 2025 when the Trump administration, without pre-warnings or even proper contingency planning in place, terminated all their foreign aid and dissolved USAID (Haug et al. 2025).

Instead of subsidising these losses, the shift from aid and development toward "hard security" spending echoed among European donors. The United Kingdom, a 0.7 % donor only a few years ago, reduced its aid contribution to 0.3 %, its lowest level in decades.[2] Other European governments followed with cuts, among them development strongholds such as the Netherlands and Sweden (OECD 2025). The European Commission remained the exception. It continued to engage politically and kept its regional aid envelope at high levels. Yet this is not nearly enough to fill the gap.

The consequences for the Wider Horn of Africa became visible almost instantly. The region has been long one of the largest recipients of humanitarian and development funding. Now, it had to face the most dramatic adjustment. Amid wars in Sudan and northern Ethiopia and related food scarcities that partially exceeded famine thresholds, US cuts hit hardest those agencies that formed the backbone of the international response.

The World Food Programme (WFP), traditionally heavily reliant on US contributions, lost roughly 40 % of its 2024 budget.[3] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) suffered reductions in a range of about 30 %.[4] In South Sudan, for instance, both agencies dismissed hundreds of staff, closing programmes and leaving large areas insufficiently covered – among those also the support for refugees from the Sudan war. Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and other humanitarian hotspots faced parallel losses.

Peacekeeping was also affected. In October 2025, the UN mission in South Sudan got notified of a cut of about 40 % reduction in its funds, forcing them to close field offices and temporary field bases, while also substantially reducing its civilian staff.[5] The African Union mission in Somalia as well was left without a sustainable funding base, as independent donor contributions were not enough to hit the threshold to trigger UN co-funding (van Emmerik 2025).

The scale of these changes suggests they are a structural turning point. The era of aid abundance has ended. Against this background, this article asks a simple question: How does shrinking aid reshape governance, dependency, and the bureaucratic logic of humanitarianism? And can positive outcomes emerge from this disruption? The following discussion builds on the argument is that the current contraction is not merely a crisis but a systemic correction. This correction, disruptive in its impact, still exposes and possibly resets an aid economy that has long operated as a self-referential system of power, incentives, and belief.

The symptoms of this shift in the Wider Horn are not an isolated event but part of a wider retraction of the humanitarian order. Similar contractions have happened in other regions as well: in Afghanistan after the 2021 withdrawal, where Western donors abruptly halted direct

assistance; in the Sahel, where military coups and donor fatigue have frozen most parts of international development assistance and relief aid; and in Haiti, where years of external dependency culminated in near-total disengagement. The Horn therefore provides an early laboratory for observing how global humanitarian contraction interacts with fragile political orders.

Across these cases, aid withdrawal exposes the same pattern: a shift from expansive, institution-building ambitions toward minimalist, risk-averse crisis management. The Wider Horn thus mirrors a global transition from the moral economy of abundance to a politics of scarcity, in which humanitarianism is recalibrated to fit shrinking fiscal and political bandwidths in the Global North.

The analysis builds on first-hand discussions with practitioners and policy staff in the region, and in South Sudan in particular, between March and September 2025, complemented by public data from UN agencies and donor reports. It is written as a reflective essay rather than an empirical study. The discussion unfolds in four parts. The first examines how decades of external funding shaped political economies of dependency in the Wider Horn. The second explores the bureaucratic labyrinth that developed within aid agencies and their persistent resistance to reform. The third part reflects on the changing realities of aid scarcity – how it alters the lives of beneficiaries, governments, and aid workers alike. The conclusion outlines what this new world of "post-abundance management" may mean: a leaner, perhaps more accountable humanitarian system emerging from the crucible of contraction.

POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF AID DEPENDENCY

Decades of aid in the Wider Horn of Africa created a well-known political economy. Its pitfalls have been analysed extensively in both academic and policy debates (e.g. Prendergast 1991; Duffield 1993). High aid volumes encouraged rent-seeking, parallel administrations, and a service economy built on donor money. Contracts, procurement, and project selection became lucrative arenas of competition. In a country like South Sudan, the combined budget of the UN agencies alone exceeds the official national budget.[6]

Somalia offers an extreme version of this dependency. The federal government controls little territory beyond Mogadishu. Yet, it maintains influence over how aid is channelled to the regions (Hailey et al. 2023). Donor money substitutes for taxation, allowing the central authority to survive without genuine legitimacy. In South Sudan, the dynamic is even more blatant. An economy based almost entirely on external assistance has created space for massive corruption. Political elites have privatised much of the country's oil revenue through opaque infrastructure deals. A recent UN report revealed that three-quarters of all electronically generated state income – taxes, customs, duties – is captured by a private company controlled by the family of the President. At the same time, aid agencies are required to use the official exchange rate, while those in control of the black-market rate profit from the margin. Estimates in the report suggest that for every ODA dollar spent on actual programming, another ODA dollar is directly lost to elite rent extraction (Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan 2025).

Such an imbalance distorts incentives. It turns aid into a tool in regional and national political marketplaces (de Waal 2015) in which elites and their networks compete for access and control. Such processes are not confined to states with weak governance. On the contrary, the stronger governments appear to be, the more they have learned to steer aid flows toward their own political priorities. "Successful" development models such as Rwanda or Uganda illustrate this pattern.

These dynamics have hollowed out fiscal responsibility and public accountability across the region. Governments reliant on aid have little reason to build effective tax systems or provide services. The ethical dilemma is stark. In South Sudan, the example just discussed, roughly seventy per cent of the population requires food assistance[7], while the same system that feeds the hungry also sustains the elites who plunder the state. The aid sector becomes both a symptom and a cause of dysfunction.

The material side of this dependency runs deep. The end of aid abundance has shaken not only institutions but also entire urban economies. In cities such as Port Sudan, Juba, or Mogadishu, aid has supported an inflated real-estate market, expensive hotels, and a chain of hospitality, logistics, security, and transport services. The withdrawal of funds has triggered layoffs, business closures, and falling rents. Thousands of families who lived off secondary employment in the aid economy, drivers,

security guards, translators, suppliers, or even waiters, now face uncertainty. What appears as fiscal correction in donor capitals translates locally into recession and social dislocation.

Regional variations reveal the level of entrenchment these dependencies have created. In Ethiopia, aid historically underwrote the developmental state model, enabling the government to combine authoritarian control with a façade of technocratic success (Brown/Fisher 2020). In Kenya, aid has long functioned as a stabiliser for regional operations and peacekeeping rather than as domestic welfare spending (Njeru 2004). In South Sudan and Somalia, it effectively replaced all public service provision. Across all these countries, external monetary flows blurred the line between humanitarian relief and political finance.

Contraction, hence, undeniably opens a window for change. With external liquidity drying up, the capacity of elites to fund patronage networks declines. This can be destabilising but may also force a re-anchoring of government responsibility. States that can no longer outsource welfare and service delivery might rediscover the need to tax and govern, and, at least in a tokenistic manner, to invest on public needs to prevent widespread indifference or protest. The outcome will not be uniform. Some regimes will turn to new rent sources such as resource extraction or security partnerships. Others may face pressure from citizens, markets, or international lenders and, hence, might be forced to build more transparent systems.

The fiscal decline therefore finally exposes decades of structural dependence. What has been argued conceptually and practically by critical development studies will now be put to the practical test. The cuts dismantle a political economy rewarding aid access over accountability. Whether this produces collapse or renewal depends on what replaces it: coercion and extraction, or the slow emergence of a more grounded state-society contract.

THE LOGICS OF AID BUREAUCRACY AND THE MYTH OF REFORM

Without doubt, the abrupt aid cuts carry severe risks. Yet, they also expose a deeper problem: bureaucracies are structurally unable to reform themselves (Niskanen 1971). The aid system is a textbook case (Easterly 2002). Each time its weaknesses or malpractice are criticised, the response is not reform but the invention of a new concept. Sustainability, gender inclusion, conflict sensitivity, resilience, and, most recently, localisation all entered the humanitarian and development narrative as answers to failure. Rather than changing incentives or structures, they produced new bureaucratic layers and job profiles: gender advisors, conflict sensitivity resource facilities, resilience consultants, localisation specialists. What appears as innovation is bureaucratic reproduction under a different name.

IOM's "durable solutions" agenda[8] is a great example for illustrating the pattern. Behind the technocratic language lies a primary institutional instinct: self-preservation. This is not driven by bad faith but by the structural logic of what Niskanen called the budget-maximising bureaucracy. Every new agenda creates new mandates, new staff, and new reporting frameworks. The mission expands even when results shrink.

The South Sudan case demonstrates how this plays out operationally. The UN country team there is headed by the so-called "triple hat" official, the DSRSG/RC/HC (short for Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, Resident Coordinator, and Humanitarian Coordinator). The DSRSG/RC/HC is responsible for aligning humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding work. In practice, the system functions as a patchwork of largely autonomous UN agencies, seventeen of them with in-country presence, and the still massively big UN peacekeeping mission UNMISS, each protecting its own funding streams and branding.

Coordination itself has become an industry in this setting. Hundreds of staff employed merely to manage meetings, reporting cycles, and cross-agency strategies. When donors began cutting humanitarian budgets, the "durable solutions" framework was introduced to justify new coordination structures, complete with area-based coordinators and an integrated office led by a UN Director-level post, basically competing with the established, OCHA-managed humanitarian cluster network (OCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). While effectiveness is still in need to be proven, the UN has succeeded in establishing another country-wide coordination layer. The argument of efficiency has again bloated bureaucracy.

Similar practices appear across the region. In Somalia, the shift from the New Deal compact to the Resilience Framework was designed to move from a top-down,

state-building focus to a more comprehensive approach based on a "bottom-up consensus building methodology" (UNDP 2018: IX) aimed to integrate humanitarian and development efforts. In practice, it produced a new generation of technical secretariats and coordination platforms staffed by international advisors. The so called "contiguum" approach in Ethiopia (Mohamed et al. 2025) entailed the creation of multiple joint humanitarian-development task forces under the Humanitarian Response Plan. The approach added yet another layer of coordination between federal ministries, donors, and UN clusters. Disputes over mandates or accountability, however, were not addressed accordingly and have remained ever since. Even in Kenya, often cited as a model of reform, the localisation agenda translated into a cascade of compliance requirements that only larger national NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) could meet, consolidating rather than decentralising control.

These examples reveal a consistent pattern: aid bureaucracies reform discursively, not institutionally. Each new "paradigm" becomes a discursive solution that justifies institutional survival. The incentives are powerful. Organisational success is measured by budget volume, staff size, and the absence of risk. Long-term outcomes are an afterthought, if even.

Short recruitment and contracting cycles of only a few years produce risk-averse professionals, whether in UN agencies, bilateral donors, or international NGOs. Their incentive is to seek to secure the next funding cycle rather than reduce dependency. When sustainable impact should become visible or not, they are already two jobs further in their career development. Genuine success in difficult contexts would require proactive risk taking and the possibility of high likelihood of failure with potentially high return investments that fail to deliver on static programme management requirements.

The system's self-referential logic has been recognised before. The "counter-bureaucracy" that dominates most donor agencies emerged in the early 2000s as a compliance regime designed to prevent waste and corruption. It now consumes vast administrative resources while discouraging experimentation and adaptive learning (Natsios 2010). Audits and risk registers have replaced field presence and trust. The aid sector mirrors broader trends of managerialism in public administration, where the pursuit of accountability creates inertia rather than efficiency.

Seen from this angle, Musk's populist attack on USAID carries an uncomfortable truth. Bureaucracies change only when they are forced to. The present contraction and the disruption it causes may achieve what decades of reform rhetoric could not: a genuine re-evaluation of purpose and scale. Whether that leads to renewal or collapse will depend on whether agencies learn to operate with fewer resources and clearer mandates – or whether they simply reinvent new vocabularies of relevance while continuing to expand their bureaucratic footprint.

THE NEW WORLD OF AID SCARCITY

The new realities of aid are reshaping three fundamental relationships: between aid and its beneficiaries, between donors and governments, and between institutions and aid workers. Each is undergoing a structural transformation, and together they signal a deeper reordering of the humanitarian system.

BENEFICIARIES: FROM DEPENDENCE TO RELUCTANT AUTONOMY

Early empirical data suggests that not all recipients of aid see the cuts entirely negatively. The 2025 South Sudan Public Perceptions of Peace Survey[9] revealed a small but notable majority of respondents randomly chosen across the country agreed with the statement whereby "the suspension of food aid is a good thing because it will reduce South Sudan's dependency on aid and encourage us to produce food for ourselves". Such sentiments cannot only be explained by ideology but by fatigue. For decades, a "beneficiary" identity has defined entire communities. Aid was not only a temporary lifeline but a livelihood system, anchored in food distributions, NGO employment, and a network of per diems, training allowances, and tokenised "community participation".

When this infrastructure contracts, the disruption is severe, but it also reopens local economies long suppressed by external inputs. In parts of Upper Nile and Jonglei in South Sudan, where food convoys no longer arrive regularly, people have reactivated cross-border trade routes into Gambela in Ethiopia, creating small informal supply chains. In Somalia's Bay and Bakool regions, market traders report rising demand for locally produced grain as imported food aid declines. These are fragile and localised recoveries, but they demonstrate

adaptive capacity that aid discourse belatedly labelled "resilience".

The same pattern appears in the Sudanese borderlands and the Tigray lowlands, where community associations and diaspora-funded cooperatives now play a growing role in remittance pooling and small-scale production. What aid agencies once called "self-reliance" existed all along, embedded in local social economies. The reduction in external support may, paradoxically, strengthen these indigenous systems, provided that violence and market blockades do not reappear.

Still, the transition is uneven. Decades of humanitarian presence created expectations, routines, and also peculiar beneficiary career paths, from village savings groups and vocational trainees to local NGO enumerators. Their collapse will leave social vacuums and resentment, especially among youth who saw aid-related employment as their only route to income. Yet the larger lesson is clear: people rarely desire dependence. The rediscovery of local initiative and interdependence may become one of the few constructive outcomes of scarcity.

GOVERNMENTS: BETWEEN FISCAL REALITY AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

For aid-dependent governments, the new austerity represents both a loss and a potential reset. Relations between donors and host states have long been uneasy. The rhetoric of "government ownership" masked asymmetric control. As a USAID official once put it to me in a conversation in the Southern Philippines in the mid-2000s, "we want the government in the driver's seat, but only on the road we built for them". Aid simultaneously enabled corruption and constrained sovereignty.

The immediate effects of contraction are painful. Ministries accustomed to donor-financed payrolls and project support now face arrears. In Mogadishu, entire directorates funded through project budgets have closed. Ethiopia's federal agencies, long accustomed to off-budget donor grants, are scrambling to consolidate accounts and negotiate new loan instruments with the African Development Bank and Gulf lenders. In South Sudan, public sector employees have not seen their regular salaries for almost two years, now the opportunities to subsidise failed salary payments by donor-funded Daily Subsistence Allowances (DSAs) and other incentives are shrinking substantially.

This fiscal squeeze also compels governments to confront structural weaknesses long hidden by aid inflows. Experiments with new taxation, better procurement procedures and cut downs on corruption by state officials are underway. Kenya offers a more advanced version of this trend: as donor funding declines, the Treasury has sought to replace it with syndicated credit lines and diaspora bonds, integrating external financing into standard fiscal policy.[10]

If managed carefully, such moves could re-centre politics around taxation and service delivery, not aid brokerage. But the risk remains that regimes will compensate by extracting new rents from natural resources or security partnerships, perpetuating a different kind of dependency. Whether austerity translates into accountability or repression will depend on how domestic political settlements adapt.

AID WORKERS: FROM PROFESSIONAL CLASS TO FRAGMENTED LABOUR MARKET

The third site of transformation is within the aid workforce itself. For two decades, humanitarianism has been a global career path, complete with graduate programmes, risk payments, and rotational postings with extensive leave and R&R arrangements. That world is disappearing. Thousands of staff across the Horn have lost their jobs as programmes close or merge. Many now operate as freelance consultants, competing for short-term contracts financed by residual donor budgets or UN pooled funds.

The reduction in scale is prompting uncomfortable reflection. The aid sector's internal hierarchies – international versus national staff, secure versus expendable – has long mirrored global inequalities (Ward/Bian 2024). National staff, who regularly bear the highest personal risks (on the risk divide and the travesties of the humanitarian risk culture, see Duffield 2010), receive a fraction of the salary and almost none of the benefits. The downturn has exposed this imbalance.

In several parts of the region, former NGO field staff are shifting into private logistics, cash transfer operations, and digital payment systems linked to humanitarian cash programmes. These hybrid models blur the line between aid and market. Other career trajectories have seen

skilled staff released from UN agencies to work in data management, risk analysis, or consulting for regional organisations such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the African Risk Capacity. This migration of expertise into regional and private sectors could be healthy, leading to a more plural humanitarian ecosystem less dominated by international agencies.

At the same time, the end of large-scale humanitarian employment exposes an ethical problem long ignored: the exploitation of cheap labour under the banner of altruism. A number of humanitarian organisations, ACTED as the internationally probably most notorious example[11], for long pursuit the practice of systematically recruiting international staff for cheap salaries to put them in competition with a better-skilled national labour pool. The motivation of humanitarian adventure was exploited to avoid issues with higher skilled and more conscious national staff by running a purely foreign operation based on short-term contracts on low pay.

The contraction now eliminates such positions altogether, revealing how unsustainable they were. A smaller but more professional cadre may emerge, experienced analysts, logisticians, and negotiators operating through short-term missions rather than permanent bureaucracy. The figure of the "international humanitarian" as a job profile, but more so as a lifestyle profession in, how Séverine Autesserre (2014) has called it, "peaceland", may well fade.

A RECONFIGURED ECOSYSTEM, A RECONFIGURED EPISTEMIC SYSTEM

Across all three domains, scarcity is forcing redefinition. Beneficiaries are turning from passive recipients to market participants; governments are discovering the limits of rentier politics; and aid workers are becoming independent actors in a diversified humanitarian marketplace. Together, these shifts suggest a conceptual change: from aid delivery toward risk management facilitation. The disruption might well act as an enforcer for societies to manage shocks rather than outsource them to external agencies.

The contraction of aid also has epistemic consequences. For two decades, expansive funding sustained a parallel ecosystem of research institutes, monitoring systems, and data platforms that underpinned the humanitarian state. From needs assessments to baseline/endline surveys and evaluation frameworks, this architecture became the evidence base through which crises were seen and governed. As budgets shrink, so too does the capacity to collect and interpret information. The risk is that decision-making becomes less empirical and more anecdotal, with fewer independent data sources and reduced scrutiny of official narratives. The end of abundance thus also marks a contraction of knowledge: a quieter crisis that limits how humanitarian action can know and therefore justify itself.

The transition will be uneven and at times painful, but it also opens space for a leaner, more politically grounded humanitarian order – one less concerned with institutional growth and more attuned to the realities of those who live through crisis.

CONCLUSIONS

It is by now visible that the contraction of aid in the Wider Horn of Africa marks a structural shift, not a temporary downturn. It exposes both the fragility and the overgrowth of a system that expanded far beyond its original purpose. For decades, aid acted as a substitute for governance, a source of elite rent, and a self-sustaining bureaucracy that thrived on its own continuity. The abrupt withdrawal of funding has brought this architecture to a halt. What is now unfolding is less a humanitarian crisis than a moment of systemic correction.

Across the region, this correction plays out in three interlinked ways. First, the loss of external liquidity reveals how deeply political economies have been shaped by aid dependence. Patronage systems built on access to donor flows are beginning to crumble. This is painful, but it also forces governments to confront the fiscal realities long masked by grants and project budgets.

Second, the contraction exposes the bureaucratic inertia that dominated the aid sector. Decades of "reform" produced new layers of administration but few structural changes. Each new paradigm – sustainability, resilience, localisation, to name only a few – expanded payrolls and reporting rather than outcomes. The present financial squeeze is the first external force capable of breaking that cycle. Institutions that cannot adapt to smaller budgets will shrink or vanish. Those that survive will need to demonstrate value through results rather than rhetoric.

Third, scarcity is transforming social relations around aid. Beneficiaries are becoming economic actors again, rebuilding local markets and networks once overshadowed by external provisioning. Governments face renewed pressure to deliver, not just distribute. Aid workers themselves are leaving the shelter of institutional careers and entering more fluid, hybrid spaces that link humanitarian, private, and civic activity. Together, these shifts at least open up the opportunity of an emergent humanitarian order that is leaner, more political, and less bureaucratic.

While the cuts are destructive in the short term but may prove constructive in the long run. By dismantling the scaffolding of dependence, they create the possibility of a more grounded, accountable, and locally embedded aid landscape. For donors, the challenge is to design funding cycles that reward lean operations, local contracting, and measured risk-taking rather than compliance volume. For governments, the opportunity lies in using the vacuum to rebuild fiscal responsibility and social contracts. For researchers and practitioners, the task is to study this bureaucratic ecology not as a neutral set of institutions but as a political settlement in its own right.

The age of abundance has ended. What follows will not be simpler or necessarily better, but it might finally be more honest: a humanitarianism forced to live within its means, and perhaps, at last, to serve the societies it claims to support. Scarcity exposes the political nature of humanitarianism itself, its reality as a field of negotiation over responsibility, survival, and power. The politics of scarcity may yet restore what abundance obscured: responsibility.

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2 https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-to-reduce-aid-to-0-3-of-gross-national-income-from-2027/.

3 https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-warns-six-critical-operations-are-facing-significant-food-aid-pipeline-breaks-year-end.

4 https://www.iom.int/news/update-iom-operations-amid-budget-cuts.

5 https://www.eyeradio.org/ms-gbeho-unmiss-to-close-torit-field-office-amid-budget-cuts/, where an 18 % immediate cut is confirmed. The overall cut will reach the 40 % mentioned. Personal communication with UNMISS staff and internal documents on file with author.

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10 https://gfrid.org/kenyas-diaspora-bonds-innovative-development-finance-or-potential-debt-trap/.

11 As their own website, which adverts ACTED as a good place to start a humanitarian career without prior experience, confirms: https://www.acted.org/en/get-involved/join-us/career-with-acted/. The statement is also confirmed by personal conversations with ACTED staff.