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Opinion

Editorial Board

U.S. cut aid to Africa. The continent proved resilient.

The abrupt change was messy, but forced governments to reform fast.

The Trump administration's sharp reduction in aid to Africa last year seemed likely to cause a continent-wide crisis of apocalyptic proportions. While there has been pain, particularly in health care, many African nations displayed remarkable resilience. U.S. aid fell to \$7.86 billion in 2025 from \$12.1 billion in the last year of the Biden administration. That's a decade-long low for America, and rich European countries like Germany and France also scaled back donations. Total overseas development assistance was projected to fall by \$42 billion in 2025, according to Donor Tracker.

About 80 percent of projects administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development were canceled. That caused real harm in places like eastern Congo, where clinics assisting victims of sexual violence closed. Funding for an American anti-HIV/AIDS program was drastically curtailed, despite saving millions of lives for relatively little expense to American taxpayers.

Some aid targeting dire needs in places like war-torn Sudan makes sense. Yet the previous system allowed too many governments to plan their budgets around a perpetual flow of foreign dollars. Countries are better off when their leaders are focused on growing the economy rather than winning more aid dollars.

Indeed, despite the cuts, sub-Saharan Africa's economy as a whole grew by 4.1 percent in 2025. The continent is projected to beat the global average this year with growth of 4.3 percent. Turns out charity isn't the main driver of Africa's destiny. Growth was driven partly by a global rise in minerals prices, especially those critical to the green economy like lithium, cobalt and copper. Yet the continent has been rich in natural resources for centuries. Facing the aid cuts and forced into self-reliance, many African governments stepped up with long-needed reforms.

It's hard to grasp in much of the developed world, where high taxes stymie growth, but too many African nations struggle to collect money to fund basic services. Broadening the base of taxpayers is a healthy and necessary reform that became more critical as aid dollars dried up.

Some countries, including Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria, have made revenue collection more efficient through digitization. Kenya, Nigeria, Angola and Ethiopia, meanwhile, began removing inefficient fuel subsidies to free up money to cover the fiscal gap (although higher oil prices as a result of the Iran war have temporarily stalled the effort).

One reason that Africa hasn't fully maximized the benefits of its natural resource wealth is that it doesn't trade enough with itself. Regional free trade zones have been a boon for North America and Europe, but African nations have struggled to do business with their neighbors.

The aid cutoff, however, has accelerated previously sluggish efforts to integrate African economies. Ratifying a continental free trade deal would make the continent more competitive globally while helping Africans prosper more than donor schemes ever could.

In fact, foreign aid is no longer the continent's main source of capital. It's foreign investment and remittances from Africans working abroad. Africa has deepened ties with alternative global partners — China and the Gulf Arab states. They believe more in building infrastructure and strengthening trade ties than aid.

In February President Donald Trump signed a one-year extension of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which gave duty-free access to U.S. markets for qualifying countries. He wants changes to the program to open African markets to U.S. goods through bilateral trade deals.

African nations are showing that they don't want to be charity cases. Will the U.S. have the foresight to do business with them? Or will Washington simply allow China to fill the void?