



# USAID Freeze Discussion on Social Media in the DRC

February - March 2025



## Introduction

From 2022 to 2024, the United States provided nearly \$3 billion in humanitarian and bilateral assistance to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), accounting for over half of the country's [total aid](#). On January 20, 2025, the U.S. announced a 90-day freeze on aid to the DRC to reassess its programs, a move that immediately disrupted critical services and raised alarms across the humanitarian [sector](#).

The suspension came amid escalating violence in eastern DRC, where renewed fighting between the M23 rebel group and government forces has caused more than 7,000 deaths and displaced over 2.29 million people since January, particularly in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. In February alone, around 100,000 people were forced to flee IDP camps near Goma, placing further strain on already overstretched host [communities](#). Although a waiver allowed for the continuation of life-saving programs, humanitarian organizations report receiving little to no funding since the suspension. One terminated project had provided the only access to clean water for 250,000 displaced people near [Goma](#).

At the same time, the country has faced a widespread mpox outbreak, with over 69,000 suspected cases and nearly 1,400 deaths. USAID had been instrumental in transporting lab samples from outbreak zones—a function now severely impacted by the aid [freeze](#).

This brief explores how the aid freeze—an event with immediate humanitarian consequences and deeper political undertones—was perceived and debated across X and Facebook in the DRC from February to March 2025.

### What Insecurity Insight analyses on social media:

#### How was the data collected?

Between February 1st and 31 March 2025, Insecurity Insight collected and analysed public posts and comments on Facebook and X, using AI-powered tools to identify content related to the aid sector, mentioning USAID and based in the DRC. The analysis focused exclusively on publicly accessible content. Posts shared via private platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or private Facebook groups were excluded.

#### What is social media data?

Social media data includes user-generated posts (original content shared by individuals, media outlets, NGOs, or institutions) and comments (responses to those posts). It also encompasses forms of engagement such as likes, shares, and reposts. This analysis considered content from a wide range of actors, including media organisations, aid agencies, local authorities, and political figures.

#### Key terms:

- Misinformation refers to false information shared without the user realising it is incorrect.
- Disinformation is the intentional spread of false claims.
- Hate speech involves the use of language aimed at inciting violence or discrimination.

All posts and comments were categorised by sentiment—**positive, neutral, or negative**—to assess public perception of aid and aid actors in the DRC.

## Key findings

The anger and criticisms expressed online in response to the US aid freeze goes far beyond disappointment. These reactions reflect a deeper and more widespread frustration—one that positions foreign aid not as a lifeline, but as a symptom of a broken system. In a context like eastern DRC, destabilised by the enduring M23 conflict, such narratives can quickly move from frustration typed into a phone or computer to real-world mobilisation. There are growing concerns that the aid suspension—combined with perceptions of foreign interference—could fuel protests, civil unrest, or even targeted violence against aid workers.

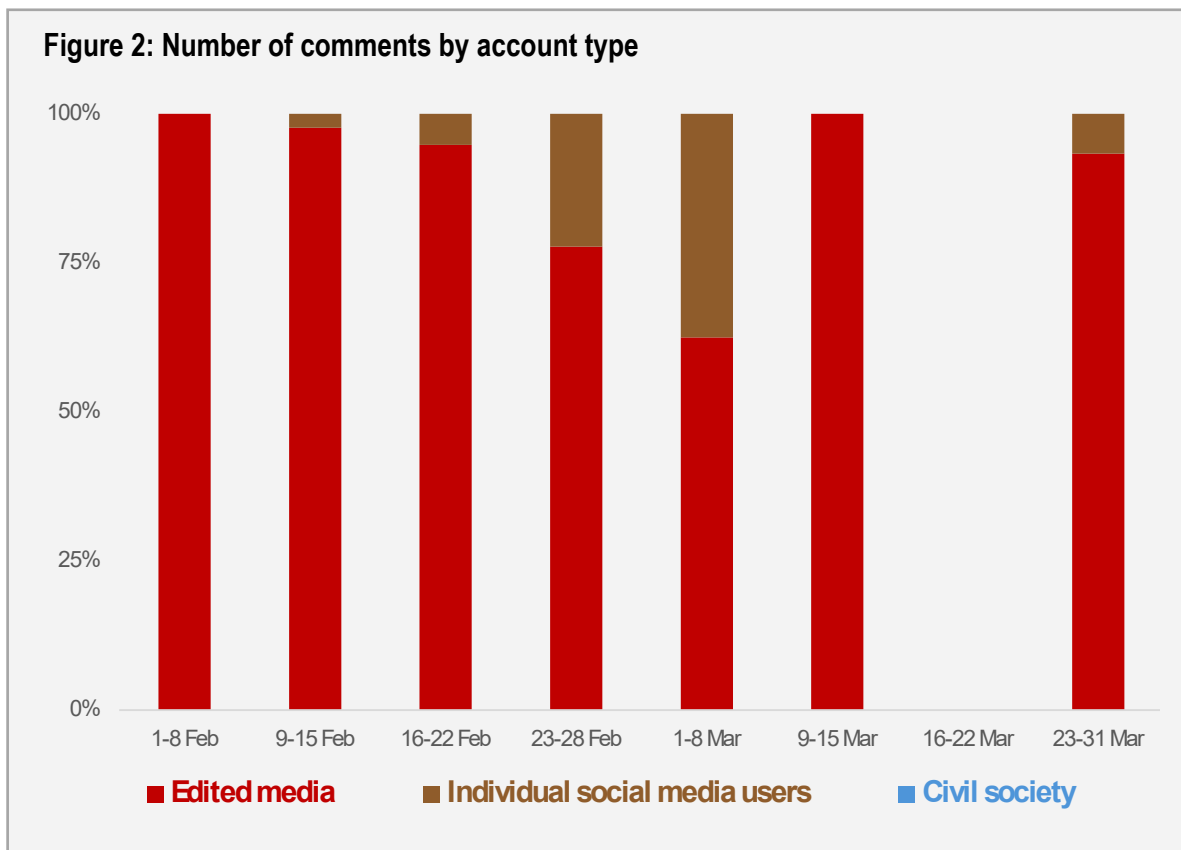
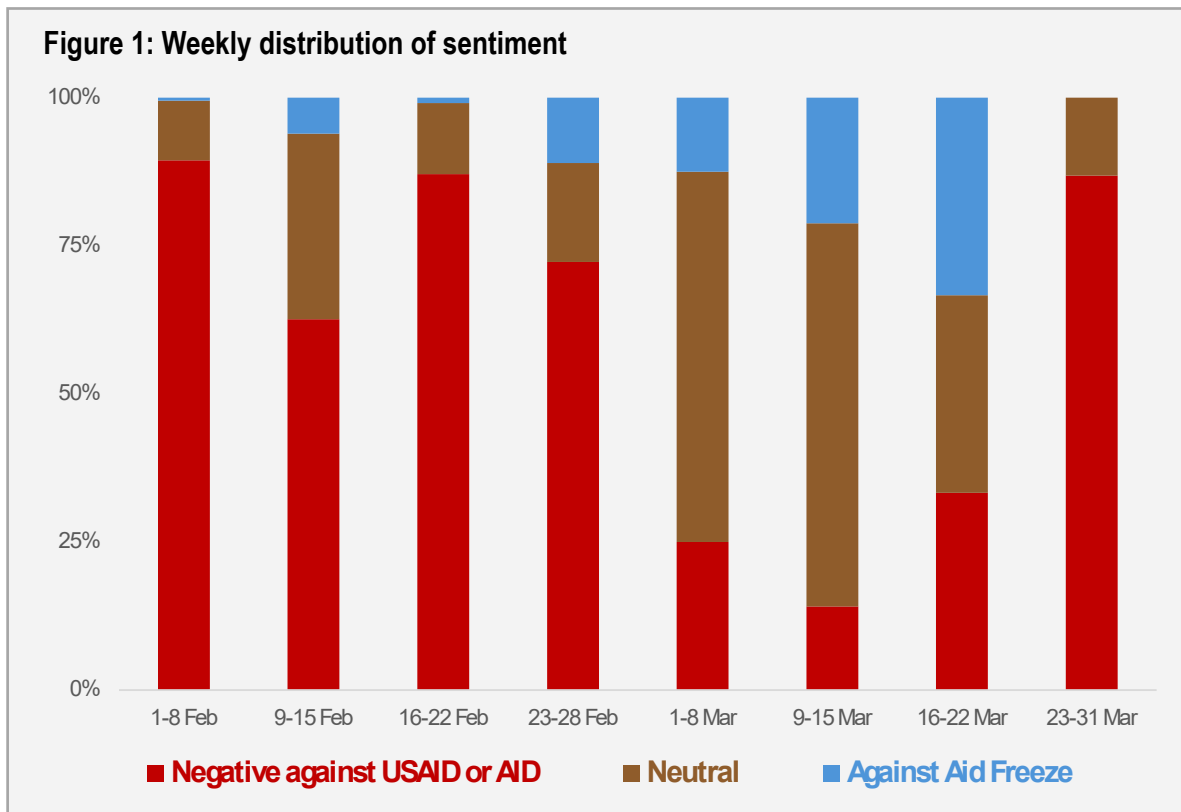
The comments analysed in this brief don't just criticise USAID—they **question the entire logic of international aid**. They accuse donors of prolonging conflict, enabling corruption, and manipulating national politics. They target individual aid workers and agencies, spread conspiracy theories, and call for an end to all foreign involvement.

These are not isolated remarks. They are **repeated, echoed, and shared** across platforms, forming a larger narrative that poses a **security risk** for those working within it, **undermines the collective reputation** of the aid sector and poses serious challenges to the adjustment of the aid sector to the withdrawal of the United States from international aid.

## The data at a glance

Between early February and late March 2025, most comments were consistently negative toward USAID or the aid sector in general - and did not criticise the aid cuts - peaking at over 89% in the first week. However, starting in March, sentiment began to shift, with neutral and critical perspectives on the aid freeze itself becoming more prominent. In early February, the discourse was predominantly negative toward USAID, largely driven by the immediate reactions of social media users responding to posts from a few media platforms announcing the event. However, between March 1 and 8, at least two accounts linked to the aid sector, a journalist, two media platforms, and one individual from the private sector initiated more neutral discussions. While March saw fewer total comments, the number of posts remained consistent—and those posts attracted more mixed or balanced opinions. This change coincided with a drop in post volume from edited media and individual social media users, suggesting that public discourse is driven by the media and a few individual social media users.

- **738 comments from 138 posts** mentioning USAID in the DRC between February and March 2025 were collected.
- These comments came from two platforms: 633 on Facebook and 105 on X.
- A total of **138 posts** related to the USAID aid freeze were collected. Of these, 68% (94 posts) came from individual social media users, 17% (23 posts) from edited media, 7% (9 posts) from civil society actors, and 7% (12 posts) from other sources.
- The peak in activity occurred during the week of 9–15 February, which alone accounted for **32%** of all posts—primarily driven by individual users (36 posts).





## X: Many posts and most comments are negative and from individual users

On X, 122 public posts were identified in response to the suspension of USAID’s operations in the DRC. Of these, 57% – expressed a clearly negative stance against the agency or the aid sector in general. All negative posts originated from individual accounts rather than official or organisational profiles, indicating a decentralised but vocal wave of criticism.

While many of these reactions voiced objective concerns regarding dependency and governance at closer examination several posts stand out because they go beyond critical commentary and include misinformation, personal harassment, and even calls for violence. This highlights the growing risks associated with online discourse around international development actors where real flaws in systems are exploited to discredit whole systems.

The following table displays some examples:

<p>A widely reshared <a href="#">post</a> by a Cameroonian-Swiss influencer, known for ties to Russia and active commentary on the Sahel, framed the suspension of USAID activities as part of a broader covert agenda involving Western-funded NGOs. For example, in this instance the influencer amplified narratives that USAID funded Boko Haram and that the aid sector and westerners finance global terrorism. The narrative gained further traction among social media users in the DRC, suggesting that such narratives are not confined to one country and are gaining traction across the <a href="#">region</a>.</p>	
<p>Another <a href="#">post</a>, originally authored by a high-profile X political commentator and reshared by an anonymous account based in the DRC which often posts anti-aid and anti-establishment views, expresses strong frustration over perceived corruption and lack of accountability in the handling of public funds. It specifically targets NGOs, USAID, and climate initiatives, claiming billions are funnelled through these channels without consequences. The message suggests a system of elite impunity, where aid mechanisms serve corrupt interests while ordinary citizens bear the burden.</p> <p>By engaging with a well-known verified X commentator who frequently blends speculation with high-impact narratives, the post strategically aligns itself with a high-visibility narrative that reinforces public suspicion toward international institutions without presenting verifiable evidence.</p>	

Another post [escalates](#) beyond criticism of USAID and calls for a manhunt against individuals linked to the agency. The language used is inflammatory, portraying USAID supporters as individuals who “sabotage” their own and deserve punishment. Such content is significant not only for its threatening tone but for the way it personalized institutional critique, weaponizing it to mobilise action against specific individuals. This raises the risk of offline harm, particularly in contexts where aid programmes intersect with political or ethnic tensions. Posts of this nature demonstrate how narratives of external interference can be used to inflame local grievances, reinforcing polarisation and heightening the vulnerability of those associated with foreign-funded initiatives. In digital environments with limited moderation, the potential for amplification and mobilisation is considerable, making such rhetoric a serious concern for both safety and social cohesion.



One frequently active X user on the USAID topic shared a post seeking to discredit pro-democracy actors and portray Western funding as secretive or manipulative. The tone is accusatory, aligning with common narratives used in pro-Kremlin discourse that depict civil society actors as foreign agents.

The user has posted frequently on similar themes, and their profile includes indicators of alignment with Russian geopolitical narratives, such as symbolic references in the username and imagery. While the post does not mention the DRC directly, it reflects a broader pattern of framing USAID and other Western institutions as tools of interference—reinforcing distrust in external support. The user does not generate significant reach, but their posts remain harmful to the aid sector. Given their frequency, these posts could have a greater impact over the long term.





Posts on X showed lower levels of engagement than those on Facebook, but were marked by stronger negative sentiment, limited moderation, and more reactionary language. The platform's speed and format appeared to amplify emotionally charged content, often blurring the line between legitimate criticism and harmful rhetoric. Although not representative of broader public opinion, these posts illustrate how criticism of aid organisations can quickly escalate online, turning speculation and misinformation into seemingly credible narratives.

While the IP addresses indicate that the posts originated from within the DRC, we cannot confirm whether the users are Congolese nationals. Due to current technical limitations, we are also unable to determine the geographic origin of the commenters, which may help explain the presence of some English-language posts and comments. As a result, it is possible that some of the harmful narratives are being amplified or even initiated by foreign actors.

## Facebook: the negative conversation was largely driven by individuals commenting on content put out by a single radio station

The radio station, known for having close links to the aid sector, published six key posts on Facebook and X that collectively **reached over 460,000 users—nearly half of the total 915,000 users reached across all posts during the analysed period.** These posts primarily transcribed official statements, press releases concerning the aid freeze, and shared hour-long recordings of radio conversations on the topic inviting the social media users to participate in the comments.

The audience's engagement with these posts was substantial, with **81% (600 out of 738) of all comments** related to the aid suspension appearing in response to these six posts. The nature of the comments varied, encompassing a wide range of negative sentiments:

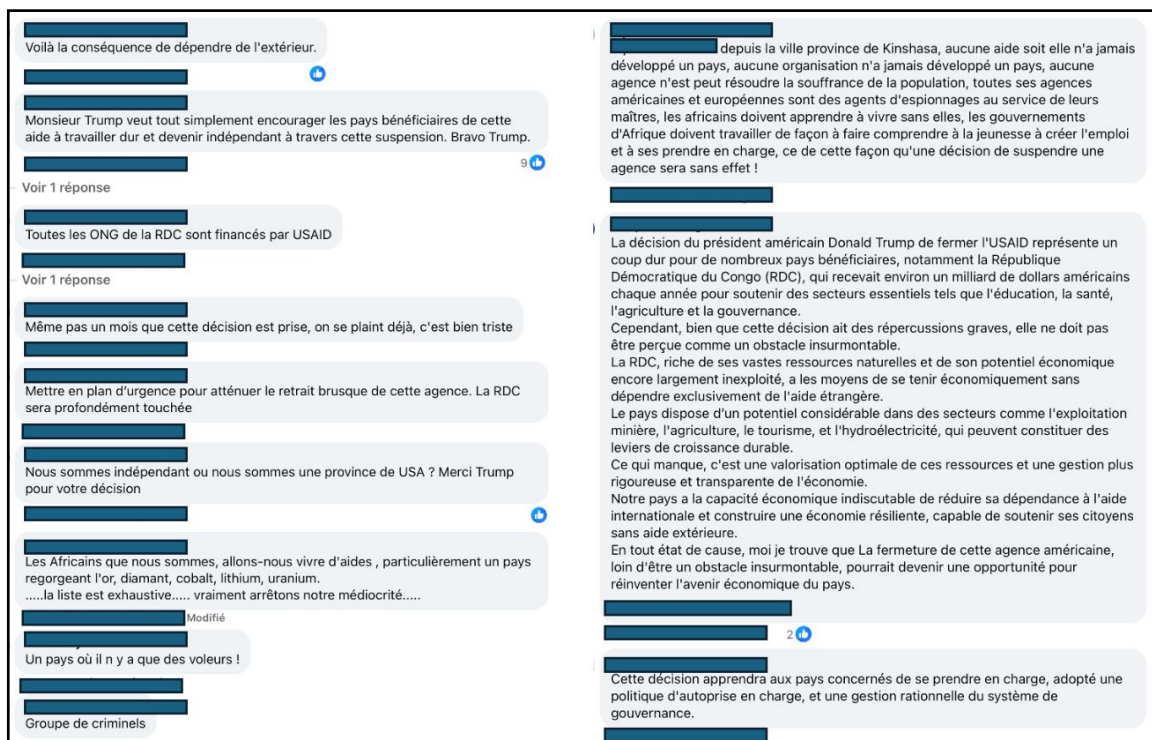
- **Civic forums in the Facebook comment sections:** The comment sections functioned less like reactions and more like open civic forums. Social media users shared long-form reflections, debated each other, and proposed alternatives—from local cooperatives to institutional reforms. The radio station's platform, likely because of its credibility and reach, became a springboard for spontaneous public dialogue.
- **Politicization of a Development Issue:** Although the news shared by the radio station centered on USAID, the public's response quickly merged into political territory. Many comments framed the suspension as government failure—transforming a story about foreign aid into a broader indictment of corruption and mismanagement. For example, a social media user commented:

*“Unfortunately, this sum has been eaten up by our authorities, who work for themselves and their families. The United States really stopped this, and besides, the aid is making us weak. Congratulations, Trump, you've done well.”<sup>1</sup>*

- Message amplification:** Several posts, especially those featuring video, drew repeated phrases and copy-pasted messages—some from individuals, others potentially from coordinated networks (though no tangible evidence of such networks has surfaced). For example, phrases like

*“The closure of USAID is a disaster for the DRC. But let's remember that this aid is apparently so, otherwise their intention is manipulation. It was a tool that allowed USAID to have a hold on the politics of nations and this closure is done with the intention of stirring up the populations, which would lead to coups.”* appeared dozens of times.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of comments under the posts by the radio station were in French, which may suggest greater engagement from local users. However, we cannot confirm the nationality of the commenters due to technical limitations. Though it is likely that radio stations, particularly those with strong local presence, tend to attract a more domestic audience compared to other account types.



***"Unfortunately, this sum has been eaten up by our authorities, who work for themselves and their families. The United States really stopped this, and besides, the aid is making us weak. Congratulations, Trump, you've done well"***



## Final key insights and implications

- **Social media users who identify as teachers, farmers and health workers express disappointment and dissatisfaction with the aid system:** stating publicly that aid had never reached them. This narrative highlights a gap between aid narratives of impact and the lived reality of those aid is intended to support in crisis.
- **Criticism is directed at both western donors and the Congolese government:** While the West was often blamed for DRC's long-term challenges, many social media users also focused their anger on domestic corruption and poor governance highlighting the challenges of localisation in the context of weak governance.
- **Conflict in eastern DRC is central to public sentiment:** The aid freeze was repeatedly linked to insecurity in the east. Many believed foreign aid—particularly from the United States—contributes to instability rather than solving it. Many commentators believed that the line between humanitarian and military assistance had been blurred. Many social media users also claimed in the comments that USAID aid and aid in general was arming and supporting armed groups.
- **There is a growing demand for investment and security, not aid:** A strong narrative emerged advocating for economic development and peace before any further assistance. Calls for jobs, infrastructure, and foreign investment reflected a desire to move beyond the traditional donor-recipient relationship of a humanitarian response in a protracted crisis.
- **Calls for the end of all aid are becoming more mainstream:** What was once considered a fringe position is now assuming a large dominant space on social media platforms. Users demanded a complete end to international support, including UN missions and bilateral donors, reflecting deep-seated frustration with perceived foreign interference. These narratives are widespread and were also observed in the [Sahel region in reaction to the USAID freeze](#).
- **Conspiratorial and geopolitical narratives are gaining momentum:** Some users connected the USAID freeze to recent U.S. decisions to suspend business with South Africa's mineral sector. These theories suggest a growing belief that Western governments use aid as a tool to control Africa's resources and political choices.

## Endnotes

1 “Malheureusement cette somme été bouffe par nos autorités qui travaillent pour eux-mêmes et ses familles, que les États-Unis, vraiment arrêté ça, et d'ailleurs les aides nous rendent faibles, félicitations Tromp t'as bien fait”

2 “La fermeture de l'USAID est une catastrophe pour la RDC. Mais retenons que cette aide l'est d'apparence sinon leur intention est une manipulation c'était un outil qui permettait à l'USAID d'avoir une main mise sur la politique des nations et cette fermeture est faite dans l'intention de soulever les populations ce qui amènerait des coups d'État.”

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