

Transforming adversity into opportunity for the AIDS response

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As South Africa commemorates World AIDS Day 2025, themed 'Overcoming disruption, transforming the AIDS response', CAPRISA Director Professor Salim Abdool Karim reflects on the frantic days following this year's unprecedented cuts to health aid and research funding from the US, arguing that the deliberate disruptiveness was designed to be cruel. Nonetheless, he argues, our HIV response must now forge ahead on a path that is more affordable, sustainable, and independent.

STOP WORK!

A "STOP WORK" order is immediate.

The Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA) received its first US Government 'STOP WORK' order from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) on 27 January 2025, imposing a 90-day suspension on a major HIV-prevention research project.

A week earlier, on 20 January 2025, incoming US President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order imposing a 90-day freeze on USAID funding. Shortly thereafter, Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency arrived at the USAID headquarters to systematically dismantle it and terminate most of its projects. Within seven days, the full effect of Trump's decision was reverberating across the world. The acute US funding cuts disrupted its foreign aid programmes, which had for years worked to improve the lives of the most vulnerable communities across the globe.

The impact was instantaneous. Several US-funded projects ground to a halt. Feeding programmes for the hungry, shelter projects for those displaced by war and conflict, daycare for abandoned children, and many other programmes in dozens of countries around the world were stopped. The swiftness of the implementation of the USAID dismantling caught the world off guard.



Epidemiologist Prof. Salim Abdool Karim is internationally recognised for his significant contributions to research on HIV treatment and prevention *Photograph: Spotlight*

On 3 February, Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, declared himself to be the new Head of USAID, giving Musk carte blanche to destroy it. That day, I was contacted by journalists from *The New York Times* and from the prestigious magazine *Science* for information on the impact of US funding cuts on our HIV research.

On 7 February, *The New York Times* front page headline, "Clinical Trials Left in Lurch By Aid Freeze" informed the world of the impact of the US funding cuts on AIDS research in Africa. It described in graphic detail the impact of the funding cuts on research Dr Leila Mansoor and Dr Disebo Potloane of CAPRISA were undertaking, in partnership with world-leading US scientist Dr Sharon Hillier, in developing new HIV prevention technologies for women.

Exactly a month after the initial 90-day 'STOP WORK' order, we were notified that this US Government-funded project had been officially terminated for good. Several other large US-funded projects in South Africa, such as an HIV-vaccine development project led by Prof. Glenda Gray, also received termination notices.

While the US Government is perfectly entitled – as it sees fit – to stop funding for any of its projects, the deliberate disruptiveness of its implementation was sadly designed to be cruel.

Disownment of science

The Trump administration effectively dislocated the highly effective partnerships forged by the US and South African scientific communities over the past three decades. It was not simply a withdrawal of funding, but the disownment of science that rocked these research collaborations. A devaluing of science and an era of disinformation set in.

False information from the Trump administration is now rife, from debunked theories regarding autism from vaccines to the supposed dangers of paracetamol during pregnancy. This is a threat to the decades of progress made in the AIDS pandemic. Science, in its search for the truth, is under attack, as disinformation-based policies become official.

No time to wallow

Following the initial shock, we realised that we had zero time to wallow in this grief of sorts. CAPRISA went to work mobilising our own resources, reaching out to participants in terminated studies to offer them medical and emotional support. In March and April, our scientists routinely worked late into the night on new grant applications to research funders besides the US Government. That hard work is now beginning to bear fruit as new grants begin to fill the gaps in our research funding.

These unprecedented disruptive funding cuts have been a stark reminder to never take donor funding for granted. And certainly, never to be as heavily reliant on a single donor again. While overseas development aid is intended to be altruistic, it has often come with strings attached. Those strings were a rude awakening in 2025 and left several governments and non-governmental organisations, who were dependent on US foreign aid, in the lurch.

Scientific breakthroughs in HIV, including those by South Africa's many highly accomplished AIDS researchers, have had widespread global impact, benefitting vulnerable groups from all walks of life. Ironically, the funding cuts come at a time when even greater resources are needed for research to successfully navigate the 'last mile' on the way to the United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal of ending AIDS by 2030.

As this year's World AIDS Day theme *Overcoming disruption, transforming the AIDS response* reminds us, this is the time to forge ahead on a path that transforms the response to one that is more affordable, sustainable, and independent. As African scientists, we have already begun to take bold steps on the path to greater independence, thereby shifting our focus away from the disruption towards charting a determined path to a world without AIDS.

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