Demystifying Africa's dependence on foreign aid

Mo Ibrahim Foundation

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As development aid from historical donor countries has recently undergone a sharp decline, the moment to examine the weight of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa has never been more urgent. While the extent of USAID cuts and waning traditional donor commitments seem unexpected, they are signalling a broader trend long in the making.

> Some traditional donors have lost faith in the conviction that underpinned aid, the notion that our future prosperity and their future prosperity would go hand in hand. While this is still true, their populations are no longer convinced. [...] The world as we know it has changed for aid, trade and development. We are not likely to return to the familiar status quo ante. These shifts present Africa with obvious challenges, but they also contain opportunities for the continent to move forward and deliver better.
>
> *Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General, World Trade Organization*

> While it [the end of aid] is tragic in the short term [...], it is a future which for different reasons we all embrace as necessary and, if done right, offering predictable, long-term finance to support countries in their development choices.
>
> *Mark Malloch-Brown, former Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations*

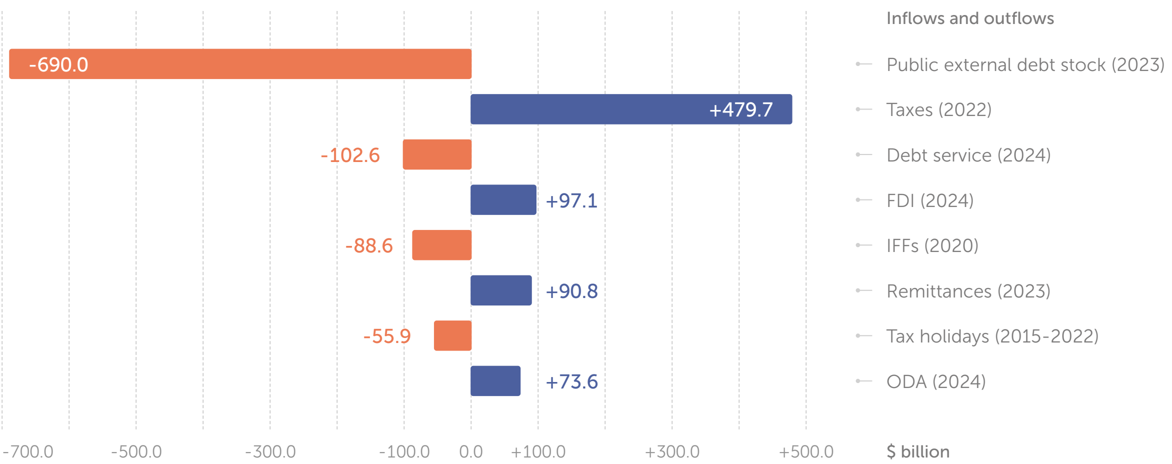
For Africa, ODA received pales in comparison to other sources and losses of revenue

In 2023 (latest year available), ODA to Africa from all donors totalled $73.6 billion.[1] This is less than the continent received in remittances (2023: $90.8 billion),[2] foreign direct investment (FDI) (2024: 97.1 billion)[3] or tax revenue (2022: $479.7 billion)[4] per year, and just under 10% of these four main sources of revenue combined.

Africa's external public debt stock amounted to a staggering $960 billion in 2023,[5] more than nine times more than ODA received, with continental annual debt service at $102.6 billion in 2024.[6] Additionally, illicit financial flows (IFFs) (2020: $88.6 billion)[7] and tax holidays (2015-2022: $55.9 billion)[8] cost the region around the same as it receives in aid.

Africa loses more to debt service or IFFs than it receives in ODA per year

Africa: financial loss & revenue (latest available year)



Source: MIF based on GTED (2025), OECD (2025a) & (2025b), ONE (2025), UNCTAD (2020) & (2025), World Bank (2025a) & (2025b)

2025: a massive ODA cut from historical donor countries

On the day of his second inauguration, 20 January 2025, US President Donald Trump froze US aid for 90 days, pending a government review.[9] As of 7 May, only 891, or 14% of the 6,256 operating USAID programmes remained, worth $69 billion (down from $120 billion on 20 January 2025).[10] In 2023 (latest year available), the US contributed 20.7% of total ODA to Africa.[11]

According to preliminary data across all Development Assistance Committee (DAC)* countries, cumulative ODA for all recipients and sectors fell by -7.1% in 2024 compared to 2023. This is the first drop after five years of consecutive growth, which to a large extent can be attributed to increases in ODA to Ukraine.[12]

In Germany, Africa's second largest bilateral donor after the US, budget reductions for ODA between 2023 and 2025 amount to €3 billion ($3.1 billion), or 10.5%.[13] France's 2025 budget includes a €1.2 billion ($1.4 billion) cut to development aid, bringing it to 18.6% less than 2024.[14] The UK has also reduced development aid by about 6.5%, from £15.3 billion in 2023 to £14.3 billion in 2025.[15]

After 5 years of increased ODA, mostly due to Ukraine, global aid flows dropped by -7.1% from 2023 to 2024

Note on data availability

All ODA data is taken from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Creditor Reporting System (CRS). Preliminary data for the previous year, covering only aggregate levels, is reported in April of the current year. Detailed data for the previous year, including geographic and sectoral breakdown, is released at the end of the current year.

For this reason, the last data year available in the OECD CRS and this brief is 2023. Preliminary 2024 data has been taken from the OECD's Detailed Summary Note "Preliminary official development assistance levels in 2024", published on 16 April 2025.

In 2023, only 5 donors achieved the 0.7% ODA/GNI target: Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden

Most DAC countries have never met their ODA/GNI commitments

Since its adoption in 1970 by the UN, donor countries have only been able to reach half of the set target of giving 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) in aid. In 2023, the average across DAC countries was 0.37%, slightly decreasing to 0.33% in 2024. This includes not just ODA to the developing world, but also to countries like Ukraine.[16]

In 2023, only five DAC countries achieved the 0.7% ODA/GNI target: Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway and Sweden.[17] In 2024, this number fell to four countries as Germany's ratio dropped from 0.82% to 0.67%.[18]

* The DAC is the body through which the OECD promotes development cooperation and policies and today consists of the European Union and 32 generally high-income, industrialised member states: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and US.

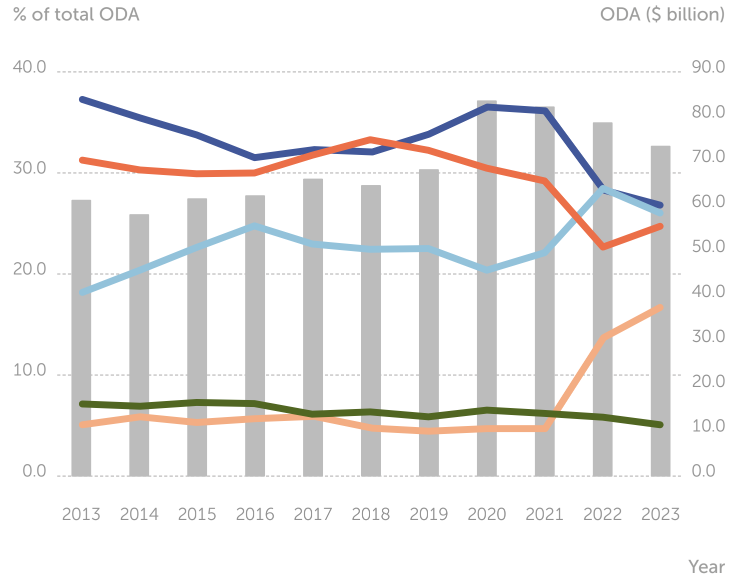
ODA to Africa has been on a trend of diminishing commitment for a decade

Between 2020 and 2023, due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Europe was the only world region to benefit from a substantial ODA increase. Total ODA to Europe more than quadrupled and its share of global ODA went from 4.6% to 16.6% at the expense of other regions.

Despite remaining the biggest recipient by total amount ($73.6 billion in 2023), Africa's share of ODA has dropped 11 percentage points from 37.6% in 2013 to 26.7% in 2023. Of the top ten donors to the region in 2023, six were multilaterals (World Bank, EU, Global Fund, UN, IMF and AfDB) and four DAC countries (USA, Germany, France and Japan).[19]

Africa's share of global ODA has dropped from 37.6% to 26.7% over the last decade

World regions: share of total ODA & total ODA received by Africa (2013-2023)



World region share of total ODA

- Europe
- Africa
- America
- Asia
- Developing countries, unspecified*
- Total ODA received by Africa

* 'Developing countries, unspecified' refers to regional projects and programmes that are not attributed to a specific recipient country, and for activities undertaken in donor countries such as administrative or in-donor refugee costs.[20]

Source: MIF based on OECD (2025a)

USAID cuts mostly impact health and governance-related sectors

According to the Center for Global Development, for 42 African countries (of the 44 African countries with data available), the 2025 USAID cuts amount to less than 1% of their GNI. Only Liberia and Somalia are above this threshold with 2.59% and 1.03%, respectively.[21]

Yet certain sectors face more dire consequences than others, a recent New York Times investigation shows. Health programmes, previously large in terms of USAID $ value, have been particularly affected: reproductive health (-92%), maternal and child health (-89%), pandemic and emerging health threats (-77%), tuberculosis (-72%), HIV/AIDS (-69%) and malaria (-68%). HIV/AIDS had been the second largest USAID sector after macroeconomic stability.

Cuts to governance-related sectors have been even more grave: civic groups (-99%), peacebuilding (-99%), democratic participation (-99%), good governance (-96%) and justice and human rights (-95%), albeit these sectors' financial commitments had already been small compared to economic stability, health and nutrition.[22]

Health, the largest sector in USAID $ value, and governance-related programmes have been cut down massively

African countries: impact of USAID cuts (as of 27 March 2025)*

Country	Cut as % GNI	Cut as % country programme	Absolute cut ($ million)
Liberia	2.59	98	103
Somalia	1.03	22	113
Malawi	0.94	64	116
Mozambique	0.90	47	172
Mali	0.76	66	149
Rwanda	0.74	65	102
Lesotho	0.65	57	17
Uganda	0.64	66	307
Burundi	0.63	82	17
Eswatini	0.61	100	25
DR Congo	0.60	34	387
Zambia	0.48	59	126
CAR	0.45	12	12
Senegal	0.43	100	129
Madagascar	0.40	54	62
Djibouti	0.36	99	14
Niger	0.36	34	59
Tanzania	0.28	38	216
Comoros	0.27	100	4
Ethiopia	0.24	30	387
Namibia	0.24	85	28
Zimbabwe	0.24	35	83
Burkina Faso	0.23	18	44
Kenya	0.21	46	225
Ghana	0.14	79	104
Benin	0.12	58	23
Guinea	0.12	100	25
Cameroon	0.11	59	52
Tunisia	0.11	100	51
Chad	0.08	8	11
South Africa	0.07	89	261
Sudan	0.07	8	74
Gambia	0.06	100	1
Libya	0.06	84	26
Nigeria	0.05	23	178
Sierra Leone	0.05	100	3
Egypt	0.04	84	170
Botswana	0.03	68	7
Côte d’Ivoire	0.03	67	23
Mauritania	0.03	100	3
Congo Republic	0.02	41	3
Morocco	0.02	100	32
Angola	0.00	44	3
South Sudan	0.00	8	54

For 42 African countries, USAID cuts amount to less than 1% of GNI

* Based on USAID financial obligations for 2024-2025; data not available for Algeria, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles and Togo.

Source: MIF based on CGD (2025a)

US tariffs for African countries will have far more devastating impacts on GDP than USAID cuts

While the impacts of USAID cuts on GNI are estimated to be relatively marginal, the imposition of the US government’s new tariff regime could have far more devastating impacts. Previously, 32 African countries had enjoyed duty-free access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In April 2025, for 16 of them a new tariff rate of 20% was announced, while 13 countries were hit with rates above that, led by Lesotho (60%), Madagascar (57%) and Mauritius (50%). Estimates at the time assumed that the effects of increased tariffs could cost Lesotho 6% of its GDP, Madagascar 2.2% and Mauritius 0.6%.[23]

In July and August 2025 these rates were revised and, as of 1 August 2025, reduced to 15% for most countries, except South Africa which remained at 30% – consequently, US imports to South Africa have fallen to their lowest level in five years.[24]

AGOA expired on 30 September 2025, and exports of all AGOA countries to the US are projected to decrease from $30.9 billion to $28.2 billion following the end of AGOA and imposition of tariffs, mainly caused by a large drop in South Africa’s US export estimates from $16.1 to $13.2 billion.[25]

The new US tariff regime could cost Lesotho and Madagascar 6% and 2.2% of their GDP, respectively

The end of AGOA could cost countries around $2.7 billion in exports

While Africa's ODA-to-GNI ratio remains the highest in the world, it is on a downward trend

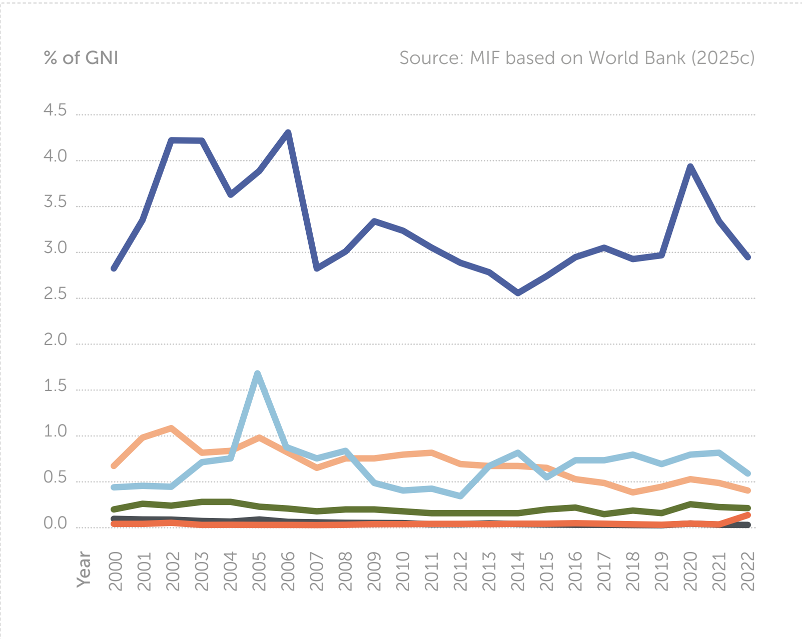
Net ODA received as a share of GNI has remained more or less the same in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past 20 years, from 2.83% in 2000 to 2.95% in 2022 (latest year available). This represents the highest share of all world regions, five times higher than second place Middle East and North Africa at 0.59% in 2022.

Unlike other regions which remained relatively stagnant, Sub-Saharan Africa was on a downward trend from the historical (since 2000) high of 4.29% in 2006 until 2019. However, between 2019 and 2020, ODA received as share of GNI increased from 2.96% to 3.94%, the steepest year-on year rise due to increased disbursements in the wake of COVID-19.

In 43 out of the 51 African countries with available data, the ODA received-to-GNI ratio increased between 2019-2020, the highest number of countries since 2000. Since 2020, this number of countries has been on a downward trend again, albeit from a much higher starting point.[26]

Sub-Saharan Africa's ODA-to-GNI ratio remains the highest in the world at 2.95% with its downward trend interrupted by COVID-19

World regions: ODA received as share of GNI (2000-2022)



World region

- Sub-Saharan Africa
- Middle East & North Africa
- South Asia
- Latin America & Caribbean
- Europe & Central Asia
- East Asia & Pacific

Source: MIF based on World Bank (2025c)

Additionally, the number of African countries in which ODA received represents a high share of their respective GNI has gone down over the last two decades. In 2000, the ODA received-to-GNI ratio was over 5% in 27 countries, over 10% in 14 countries and over 20% in five countries. In 2022, these numbers have decreased to 22, 9 and one country, respectively.[27]

The number of African countries with a ODA-to-GNI ratio of >10% has gone down, from 19 in 2000 to 10 in 2022

Globally, of the 20 countries with the highest net ODA received as share of GNI, eight are African, together comprising 8.6% of the continent's total population.[28] Of these eight, many are countries in acute or with a history of prolonged conflict: Burundi, Central African Republic, Liberia, Mozambique, Niger and Somalia.

Unsurprisingly, these states' ODA/GNI ratios are in line with other conflict countries such as Syria and Ukraine, showing that a 'dependence' on ODA is not an African challenge, but often a consequence of civil war and humanitarian support. Other countries on the list are mainly insular micro-states with comparatively small GNIs.

Top 20 countries: net ODA received as a share of GNI (2022)

Rank	Country	ODA received as % of GNI (2022)
1	Tuvalu	79.85
2	Tonga	54.26
3	Marshall Islands	48.21
4	Syria	36.28
5	Micornesia	32.41
6	Central African Republic	27.22
7	Afghanistan	26.78
8	Kiribati	22.10
9	Palau	21.52
10	Somalia	19.07
11	Burundi	17.20
12	Ukraine	16.85
13	Solomon Islands	16.05
14	Samoa	15.54
15	Mozambique	14.65
16	Niger	14.48
17	Nauru	14.21
18	Liberia	12.92
19	Gambia	12.55
20	Malawi	11.16

Source: MIF based on World Bank (2025c)

High ODA-to-GNI ratios are often a consequence of civil war and humanitarian support and not an 'African problem', as data from Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine shows

Non-DAC partners slowly filling the void?

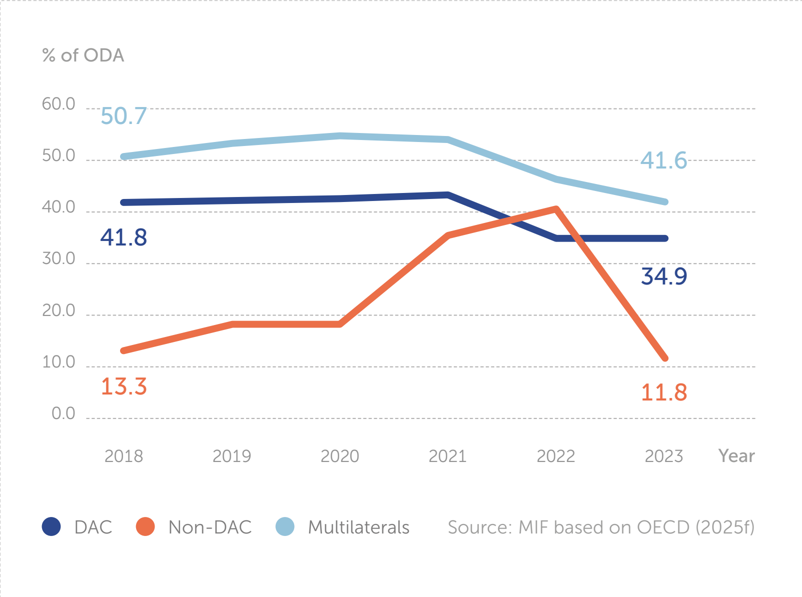
While their total aid contributions to Africa still remain small in comparison, non-DAC donors have been ramping up support since 2018. Non-DAC ODA to Africa rose substantially from $2.9 billion in 2018 to $6.7 billion in 2022, only to drop to $1.7 billion in 2023. The continent's share of non-DAC ODA consistently grew between 2018 to 2022, before the 2023 drop.[29]

Saudi Arabia is the largest non-DAC donor to the continent, ranking eighth at country level, just behind Sweden.[30] In 2023, Saudi Arabia and the UAE made up 87% of non-DAC aid to Africa, with Saudi Arabia reaching a ODA disbursed-to-GNI ratio of 0.56 – higher than the DAC average.[31] The drop between 2022 and 2023 is mainly due to a decrease in ODA from Saudi Arabia from $5.6 billion to $1.1 billion.[32]

Preliminary ODA figures for 2024 show that, similar to traditional DAC donors, global aid from non-DAC donors fell from $11.1 billion in 2023 to $10.6 billion in 2024.[33]

In 2023, Saudi Arabia reached an ODA/GNI ratio of 0.56%, higher than the DAC average of 0.37%

Africa: share of ODA disbursed by donor type (2018-2023)



Non-DAC ODA to Africa, mainly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, steadily rose from 2018 and even surpassed the share of DAC ODA in 2022

Parallel to ODA downsizing, world global military expenditure went up by 37% since 2015

Recent global downturns in ODA are happening at the same time as increases in military spending. Between 2015 and 2024, while Africa's share of ODA lost 11 percentage points, world military expenditure rose by 37% with the steepest year-on-year rise between 2023 and 2024 (+9.4%). Europe is leading these increases with 83% between 2015 and 2024, followed by Asia and Oceania (+46%), the Americas (+19%) and Africa (+11%).

Africa's four largest bilateral ODA donors are all part of the world's top ten countries with the highest military expenditure, but have seen different year-on-year increases from 2023 to 2024: Germany (+28%), Japan (+21%), France (+6.1%) and the US (+5.7%).[34]

In June 2025, NATO members agreed to raise their military spending/GDP ratio to 3.5%

The 0.7% DAC vs the 3.5% NATO target – trading aid for military?

In June 2025, NATO Ministers of Defence agreed to raise guidelines regarding member countries' allocation of their GDP to military spending, from the 2% goal decided in 2006 to 3.5%. While DAC and NATO do not entirely overlap, 25 of the 32 DAC countries are also part of NATO.[35]

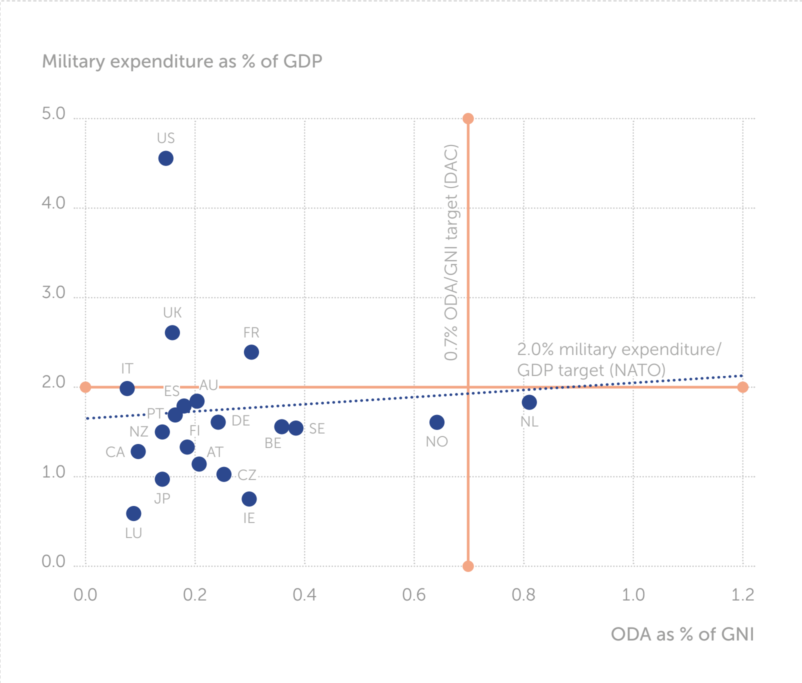
Comparing both the 1970 0.7% ODA/GNI goal and the 2006 2% defence/GDP target over the last two decades shows that in 2002 (earliest data available for ODA), most DAC countries were meeting neither goal. Only one (Netherlands) had reached the ODA/GNI target and three (France, UK and US) were meeting the defence/GDP guidelines. In 2023 however, while the number of countries spending more than 0.7% of GNI on aid had only grown to two (Germany and Luxembourg), the number of countries reaching the 2% NATO target had more than quadrupled to 14 (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, South Korea, UK, US).

In 2002, most DAC countries were meeting neither the 0.7% ODA/GNI nor the 2% defence/GDP goal

Even more interestingly, while 2002 showed a slight positive correlation between the two targets, i.e. the more countries spent on defence, the more they also spent on ODA. In 2023, this trend has reversed, meaning that the higher a DAC country's military expenditure, the less it tends to spend on ODA.[36]

The higher a country's military expenditure, the less it tends to spends on ODA: in 2023, most countries meeting the 2% defence/GDP target did not reach the 0.7% ODA/GNI target

DAC countries: ODA as share of GNI & military expenditure as share of GDP (2002)*



DAC countries: ODA as share of GNI & military expenditure as share of GDP (2023)*

* Includes only countries which were or became official members of the DAC in a given year, and excludes countries for which not all four data points (ODA, military spending, GNI and GDP) were available.

Source: MIF based on OECD (2025i), SIPRI (2025b) and World Bank (2025d) & (2025e)

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