



UNITED KINGDOM: COVID AS CATALYST: SEISMIC SHIFTS IN UK AID

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AN OVERVIEW

- The Department for International Development (DFID) has been merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to create one department, with a view to strategically aligning UK foreign and development policy.
- The shrinking of GNI in 2020, caused by the Covid pandemic led to reductions in the total amount of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) for that year. Originally forecast as a cut of £2.9 billion, the final amount is not yet confirmed but likely will be slightly less than this amount. No information on the package of cuts has been formally shared.
- In November 2020, the UK government announced their intention to reduce the percentage of ODA from 0.7% to 0.5% GNI, with a view to returning to 0.7% “when the fiscal situation allows.”¹ The commitment to 0.7% is a legal requirement, and it is not yet clear how the government intends to adjust this, particularly when the announcement was made just 4 months in advance of the start of the fiscal year.
- The move to 0.5% is predicted to reduce UK aid by 30%, cutting the budget by an

estimated £4.5 billion. Where these cuts will fall is unclear, but calculations suggest that bilateral aid will fall by at least 50%.²

- The decision to merge departments and the cuts to UK ODA were made with little consultation or transparency. At the time of writing, information on where the cuts fell in 2020 or were planned for 2021 has not been shared, though an independent inquiry by the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) found that 68% of the 2020 cuts were made by rescheduling multilateral commitments.³
- The lack of transparency around the cuts to ODA raises concerns that decisions will not necessarily protect poverty-eradication as a core focus. The scale of the cuts, 1/3 of the UK's total ODA budget, means that cuts will likely be felt across the board, including in the poorest and conflict-affected states.
- There was a significant shift in the UK's ODA to a focus on health in 2020, with 37% of new spending and 21.5% of total spend going towards the health sector. Spending on emergency response and government and civil society saw reductions in their funding share.⁴
- The UK reported a total commitment of £1.3 billion to the global pandemic response by the end of 2020. Much of this funding went to support research and the development of vaccines, treatments and testing. Support was also given to the COVAX AMC to support developing countries' access to vaccines.
- The UK announced the doubling of its international climate finance investment, committing to spend at least £11.6bn between 2021 and 2026.⁵ At least £3bn of this will be spent on solutions that protect and restore nature and biodiversity.⁶ As COP26 President, the UK is working to encourage others to make similar commitments before the conference in November 2021.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 proved to be one of seismic changes for UK aid. Against the backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic, the UK Government restructured the UK's aid architecture, re-centralised aid spending, and reduced the UK aid budget, first in response to falling GNI and then by abandoning the commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on ODA. Amidst these changes, the strategic and rhetorical commitment to aid in the national interest remained the constant guiding principle, reinforcing concerns that the primacy of poverty reduction in UK aid allocations is at risk.

Wider changes in the UK's international strategy have also demonstrated the intention to redefine the UK's strategy for aid. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, launched

in February 2020, planned to set out the parameters for the UK's role in the world as well as its long-term strategic vision.⁷ With big announcements like the DFID-FCO merger, cutting the aid budget and setting out the strategic priorities for development taken prior to publication, the Review itself focused primarily on defence and diplomacy, with aid given less discussion. Where it was discussed, the Review indicated the intention to align UK aid with future trading and security partners.⁸ The language of 'Global Britain'⁹ continues to promote the UK as a 'force for good' in the world, including its role as host of both the G7 and COP26 in 2021.

Trust between the UK's international development sector and the Government has been undermined. Many of the significant

decisions of 2020 were made with no warning or consultation, and as cuts to aid spending are being implemented the sector has struggled to access any information about them.

In 2020 UK ODA has seen major changes to its fundamental aid architecture. These are, in part, the culmination of trends to re-purpose UK aid in service of foreign policy objectives. The coronavirus pandemic has provided the

opportunity to do so. Underlying all these decisions is the continued strategy to more closely align UK aid with Britain's national interests. This is not a new rhetoric – over the past five years UK ODA has continuously been shaped to fit with diplomatic and trade interests. However, the scale, speed and institutional nature of the changes over the past year indicate a new era and framing for UK ODA.

THE FCO AND DFID MERGER

In June 2020, the UK Government decided to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to create a new department, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The Secretary of State for International Development stated that the rationale behind the merger was “to maximise our impact around the world, project our values and be a stronger force for good in the world.”¹⁰ The various public statements from the Government around the merger made it clear that this decision came from a desire to more closely align the UK's development spending and strategy with wider foreign policy priorities. Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that it was time to “mobilise every one of our national assets, including our aid budget and expertise, to safeguard British interests and values overseas.”¹¹ This positioning continues a trend in the UK over the last five years of seeking to align UK ODA with wider national interests overseas.

While the UK has had a history of merging and re-establishing independent international development departments, DFID has existed, in its most recent form, since May 1997.¹² It had built a good international reputation for effective, transparent and strategic aid programming. The FCO has been less admired and had historically not performed as well as DFID on the Aid Transparency Index, with the former being rated ‘fair’ to DFID's ‘very good’.¹³ On the Real Aid Index¹⁴ the FCO was rated

‘moderate’ on effectiveness and transparency and ‘weak’ on poverty-focus of aid spending, where DFID scored ‘strong’ across the board.¹⁵ This past performance record raised concerns that the merger would hurt the effectiveness of UK aid and damage the UK's reputation as a global development leader.

In 2019 DFID managed 73.1% of UK ODA, with the FCO managing just 4.5%.¹⁶ The new FCDO will manage 81% of UK ODA in 2021/22.¹⁷

While rumours of a merger had been circulating, its announcement and timing came as a surprise to the UK civil society. It was made while the integrated review was on-going and a week after the International Development Committee recommended against a merger in its interim report on the Effectiveness of UK Aid.¹⁸ Observers questioned the impact of making such large bureaucratic changes during a global humanitarian emergency. There was no consultation with the sector prior to the announcement. The strong negative reaction has potentially undermined any early relationships between the sector and the new department as it establishes priorities and processes.

Bringing together two departments with such distinct roles, expertise and cultures does, however, present opportunities to strengthen policy coherence across government, particularly on issues that previously straddled the two departments such as human rights

and civic space. But there is also the risk that the merger will undermine the UK's performance as a global leader on poverty reduction, sustainable development and humanitarian response. The long-term impact of this decision remains to be seen. British Overseas NGOs for Development (Bond) has produced a set of 15 hallmarks against which

the success of the merger will be measured.¹⁹ A six-month assessment has found areas to be commended, including the intention to shift to bilateral programming as a default for ODA and progress on global challenges such as open societies and climate. However, for many of the benchmarks progress had been poor or too early to assess.²⁰

THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE AND THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON AID IMPACT

Alongside the creation of the FCDO, it is clear that the UK Government wanted to disband the International Development Committee (IDC),²¹ the Parliamentary oversight body of the now defunct DFID. It also undertook a rapid review of the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI), which scrutinises the impact and value for money of UK aid spending. Together the two bodies have been the primary vehicles for holding the Government accountable for UK aid and development.

While it was technically out of the control of the Government, its public statements indicated that the intention was to disband the IDC and transfer its role and responsibilities to the Foreign Affairs Committee.²² This proposal quickly ran into opposition in Parliament and ultimately the Government was forced to retreat.²³ The U-turn followed a concerted campaign within Parliament, supported by development NGOs, to save the committee and safeguard the essential role it plays in scrutinising UK aid. The campaign brought together both aid champions and sceptics alike, who effectively rallied around the common cause of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability.

Although the Foreign Secretary in the end responded by confirming a continued role for ICAI,²⁴ there had been concerns that its

independence and ability to hold government to account could be significantly undermined by the review by the Government of its remit, particularly in the absence of a strong Parliamentary counterpart. These fears were alleviated as the review, published in December 2020, stated that ICAI "provides strong external scrutiny of UK overseas development assistance (ODA) and offers excellent support to Parliament in its role in holding the Government to account."²⁵ Crucially, the review explicitly confirmed that ICAI must remain independent and able to produce robust analysis, challenging assessments and ambitious, but practical recommendations.²⁶

The review found that ICAI could do more to help the Government ensure that its aid is as impactful as possible. This included a series of recommendations to both ICAI and the FCDO on achieving that aim. Several recommendations called for an increased role for ICAI in supporting aid spending departments, particularly the FCDO with learning.²⁷ It remains to be seen how ICAI's relationship with the FCDO will develop, and how the new focus on learning will impact the scope and practice of ICAI's reviews. ICAI has set out an ambitious review agenda for 2021, and the IDC has launched an important inquiry into the Philosophy and Culture of Aid.

A SHRINKING GNI: 2020 AID CUTS

Since 2013, the UK government has consistently provided 0.7% of GNI as ODA. This commitment was enshrined in law in 2015.²⁸ The UK has interpreted this 0.7% target as both a floor and a ceiling, each year carefully balancing expenditures against projected GNI.²⁹

In July 2020, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab wrote to three Parliamentary committees to update them on plans to ensure that the UK realized its 0.7% GNI commitment.³⁰ Reductions in UK GNI caused by the COVID pandemic pushed the Government to make reductions to 2020's ODA budget. Raab chaired a review process across all ODA-spending departments, with stated priorities for allocating ODA for poverty reduction, tackling climate change, championing girls' education, UK leadership in the global COVID response and campaigning on religious and media freedom.³¹ Implementation of the £2.9 billion package of cuts was to begin immediately, with provisions built in to adjust further if the level of GNI was lower than forecast.

Although the Foreign Secretary's letter outlined a broad plan to make cuts to ODA, little detail was provided on which areas or departments would see reductions. Stakeholders and Sarah Champion MP, the Chair of the IDC, voiced their concerns that the proposed cuts risked falling hardest on the world's poorest people, who were already bearing the brunt of COVID-19.³² The lack of consultation around this package was a major concern. As 2020 progressed and cuts were implemented, the Government continually resisted sharing any details of cuts with the sector or public.³³

While the exact details of the package of reductions in 2020 remain unknown, it is possible to draw some conclusions on where the Government has targeted these cuts. An investigation by ICAI into the government's previous management of the 0.7% target found that 68% of savings were found from rescheduling multilateral commitments.³⁴ Analysis of published IATI data of formerly-DFID now-FCDO programmes by Development Initiatives found that the former DFID disbursed £2.2 billion less than originally forecast for the year.³⁵ Bilateral spending saw particularly high cuts, in contradiction to the Foreign Secretary's stated intention to use bilateral spending as a default.³⁶ In terms of allocations to sectors, increases in spending to health, action relating to debt and social infrastructure coincided with decreases to emergency response, government and civil society, development food assistance and education.

Albeit partial, the available data indicates UK ODA priorities as well as potential risks and opportunities. Unsurprisingly, the UK has prioritised global health spending and the environment, in preparation for its role as President of the G7 and COP26 in 2021. But the overall reduction in ODA has meant that there are cuts to other, much needed sectors. These sectors have become even more critical with the effects of COVID-19 exacerbating poverty and inequality. Decisions around ODA disbursements for 2021 will provide a clearer picture of the department's priorities and future directions.

ABANDONING THE 0.7% COMMITMENT

Following the 2020 £2.9 billion reductions, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced in the November 2020 Spending Review the intention to reduce the Government's commitment to ODA from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI. It justified this move by citing the financial impacts of the pandemic.³⁷ It is worth noting that just before announcing this cut, the Government allocated an additional £16.5 billion for defence spending over the next four years.³⁸ The additional £4 billion plus a year will be more or less equal to the savings from cutting the aid budget.³⁹

This move, which cut the aid budget by 30%, was on top of any further reductions caused by the continuing poor prospects for economic growth. The announcement received an immediate backlash from the international development sector, former Prime Ministers, and across Parliament.⁴⁰ The following day, the Foreign Secretary appeared before Parliament to set out a £10 billion aid budget with seven strategic priorities.⁴¹ In setting out the new approach, the Foreign Secretary emphasised that UK aid would be focused on countries where UK development, economic and security interests align.⁴² Observers were quick to comment on the absence of a commitment to poverty reduction in the Foreign Secretary's new strategic approach to ODA.⁴³

Since the announcement, the Government has been moving quickly to make 0.5% a

reality. Once again, decisions have been taken in secret, with no consultation and at speed. The Government has continued to rebuff parliamentary questions and sector requests for information on the cuts. A recent interview with Minister James Cleverly gives the clearest statement yet that the Government has no intention of discussing the aid cuts with international development experts until after the decisions had been made.⁴⁴

Despite these obstacles, a picture of UK aid in 2021 and beyond is emerging. At the March 2021 Yemen Pledging conference, the first concrete evidence on the scale of the cuts was made public. The UK pledge went down 60% from 2019, provoking renewed condemnation of the decision to scrap the 0.7% commitment.⁴⁵ By the end of the week, and thanks only to a leak from within the Government,⁴⁶ the details of proposed cuts country by country revealed the full scale of the costs of the move to 0.5%. Although humanitarian response and preparedness is officially still a UK strategic priority, countries experiencing the world's largest humanitarian disasters can expect cuts from 58–93%. Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria, which top the UK government's famine watchlist,⁴⁷ will have their aid budgets slashed by over 50%. Others, like those in the Sahel, will see their budgets slashed by 93%.

UK'S DEVELOPMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Like other donor countries, the UK has found itself responding to the global emergency at home and abroad. The UK's development response to the effects of the pandemic have been shaped by both the domestic fallout and the broader changes to UK aid. Early in the pandemic, infection rates and deaths were concentrated in developed countries. The secondary impacts of the pandemic, resulting from widespread economic shutdowns, had

had a more immediate impact on developing countries. The UK played its part globally early in the pandemic, co-hosting pledging events and committing new funding.

Statements by the DFID Secretary of State as well as the Prime Minister confirm that the UK views global action on COVID-19 as essential. In a joint statement with some of her European counterparts, then DFID Secretary of State,

Anne-Marie Trevelyan set out an ambitious agenda for a global response that would help “fight the pandemic, mitigate its consequences, strengthen preparations and improve our changes of recovery.”⁴⁸ In May 2020, the UK co-hosted the Coronavirus Global Response International Pledging Conference and in June hosted the Global Vaccines Summit. The UK also joined the rest of the G20 in suspending debt service payments to the poorest countries until the end of 2020.⁴⁹

The UK acted quickly, initially pledging £544 million in UK aid to vaccine and treatment development, supporting developing countries health systems and mitigating the economic impact by the end of March 2020.⁵⁰ By the May 9th Pledging Conference UK pledges had risen to £788 million. By the end of 2020, the UK Government stated that £1.3 billion in new ODA had been committed to counter the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic and to support the search for treatments and a vaccine.⁵¹ This amount is in addition to the re-purposing of existing funding to respond to the pandemic in humanitarian contexts. The UK was the fifth largest donor to the global Coronavirus emergency, committing \$462 million to meet humanitarian needs globally.⁵² With the reality of a shrinking ODA budget, this will necessarily have required cuts elsewhere, the detail of which is yet to be published.

The UK has channeled the majority of its COVID response funding to multi-lateral

partners including WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP. UN agencies have received £130 million in funding from the UK. The Red Cross and Unilever each received £50 million. Just £18 million was allocated directly to NGOs via the Rapid Response Facility – much less than the £200 million NGOs estimated was needed to adequately respond in support of civil society on the ground. The IMF received £150 million to tackle economic recovery. Another basket of funding went to vaccine and treatment development,⁵³ with £250 million went to CEPI for vaccine development, with additional funding going to the Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND) and the COVID Therapeutics Accelerator (CTA). An additional £75 million went to the WHO’s critical health systems response. Later in 2020, the UK committed £571 million to the COVAX AMC supporting vaccine procurement.⁵⁴

The categorisation of all the UK’s contributions to vaccine development, treatments and testing as official development assistance is contested. In their interim report the International Development Committee raised concerns that some of the funding may ultimately be disqualified and urged the UK Government to voluntarily re-categorise spending on research and development from ODA, arguing that this could also offset some of the £2.9 billion in reductions required by the drop in GNI.⁵⁵ The UK Government has stood by their claims that the funding meets OECD DAC definitions of ODA.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

2020 has been a pivotal year globally. Many countries have been forced to evaluate their priorities and processes. For the UK, the COVID crisis has been the catalyst for big decisions around the basic architecture for UK aid, including the decision to reduce ODA to 0.5% of GNI. Against a backdrop of Brexit and a new vision for the UK’s role in the world, the ongoing shift to allocate UK aid according to UK’s interests has resulted in seismic changes

to the fundamentals of UK development policy and practice.

The UK has long played its part on global development spending, demonstrating how to use large amounts of aid effectively and partnering with countries to foster sustainable development. DFID’s expertise and proven track record of effective development assistance is well recognized. This, as well as a

sizeable aid budget ensured by the 0.7% GNI commitment, has formed the basis of the UK's strong reputation on global development.

The changes to the UK's aid architecture, aid budget and strategic approach have rightly raised concerns that that UK aid will shift away from effective, pro-poor development and humanitarian programmes. The lack of consultation, engagement and transparency with which major decisions were taken over the past year has done little to reassure the UK's international development sector of the Government's intentions.

Even if the UK Government's decision to drop the 0.7% is temporary, as promised,

the changes implemented by the current Government have highlighted a number of points of concern. The top five to watch are: 1) The continued primacy of poverty reduction and principled humanitarian aid in determining the UK's spending priorities in 2021 and beyond; 2) Safeguarding accountability to UK taxpayers and the communities aid is meant to help; 3) Reversing the decline in transparency in UK aid; 4) Improving engagement with the UK international development sector; and 5) Maintaining a strong evidence-based approach to aid effectiveness. Without strong performance across all of these areas, the UK's reputation on global development could be at risk.

ENDNOTES

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