

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Future of UK aid and development assistance, HC 1330

Tuesday 27 January 2026, Science Gallery London

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 January 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Janet Daby; Tracy Gilbert; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; James Naish.

Questions 194-233

Witnesses

[I](#): Sapphire Alexander, Founder, Caribbean Feminist (Trinidad and Tobago); Chido Govera, Founder, Future of Hope Foundation (Zimbabwe); and Finian Ali, Youth Co-ordinator, Scaling Up Nutrition Network (Nigeria).

[II](#): Jennifer Hudson, Director, Development Engagement Lab; Bel Trew, Chief International Correspondent, *The Independent*; and Luke Tryl, Executive Director, UK, More in Common.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sapphire Alexander, Chido Govera and Finian Ali.

Q194 Chair: We are now starting this session of the International Development Committee's inquiry into the future of UK aid development and what its priorities are and should be. As many of you know, the UK Government are going through the process of deciding what their priorities are going to be and, unfortunately, deciding where the 40% of cuts to their aid programme will land. It is really important for us as a Committee to try to get as many voices as we possibly can to say what is important and what our country's priorities should be.

We have had almost 200 organisations and individuals submit evidence to us. We are very pleased to be here today in King's College, and some of the questions have been fed into us by the students. This is a key topic for Britain's place in the world, so we are very grateful to everybody who has fed into our inquiry. We hope that the report will be published in the coming weeks and that it will have some influence.

We are really fortunate to have two panels today. Could I ask the witnesses on our first panel to introduce yourselves, tell us about the work you are doing and, as you are from different countries, tell us about the main challenges and opportunities that your country is facing right now?

Sapphire Alexander: Hi, everyone. It is such a pleasure to be here with you. My name is Sapphire. I am from Trinidad and Tobago, which is the southernmost island in the Caribbean, and I am the founder of a young feminist collective called Caribbean Feminist that works on intersectional gender justice from a Caribbean lens. We work with feminists in the Caribbean and the wider diaspora on initiatives at the intersection of gender, climate, reproductive justice—the list goes on.

One of the key areas that we face here in Trinidad and Tobago, which is very much connected to the work we do, is gender inequality. I do not think that that is a unique experience; I think all of us can share in that. Another one is gender-based violence and, by extension, crime and violence as a whole. Last year, in a population of 1.5 million, our crime rate was something close to 992 instances of crime. For such a small population size, this is a huge risk for us.

Because we are a Small Island Development State, climate change is another huge risk factor. Even though we contribute less than 1% to global emissions, the impact of climate change not just on Trinidad and Tobago but on the wider region is quite significant. If we look at the recent examples of Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica and Hurricane Beryl the year before, we are seeing natural disasters on a scale that we have never seen before, and they are doing huge damage to our region. That bleeds into something that you spoke about in the strategic plan for SIDS, which is debt, and the way that the Caribbean islands and Small Island Development States are particularly vulnerable to debt as a result of climate-induced poverty. That is another issue that we want to talk about

today, and I hope we will have time to discuss climate resilience and equitable financing for Small Island Development States.

Q195 **Chair:** Thank you, that was really clear. Chido, could you tell us about the work you do? Are there particular challenges you are facing right now in Zimbabwe or particular opportunities that we need to be aware of?

Chido Govera: My name is Chido Govera, and I am from Zimbabwe. I am the founder of an organisation called the Future of Hope Foundation. I started this organisation in 2013, building on my own experiences of growing up in a rural village, becoming an orphan as a young girl and having to be responsible for putting food on the table as a very young girl. As a result of that, I was already out of school by the time I was nine years old, and I was going to be married off by the time I was 10 years old, but luckily I learned one technical skill that turned everything around: I learned to farm mushrooms. Thanks to that, I was able to find something that could turn my life around and get me to where I am today.

When I look at the challenges that my organisation works to address today, it is about finding the young woman who is me in the village, who has all these burdens of food security, income security and nutrition, and working out how we address these issues in a sustainable way. How do we help people to help themselves, so that they can stand up and reach their full potential? The opportunity I see is that, because we have a lot of things that are not working well, there is also a chance to push the young people and the people who experience these hardships to the forefront, so that they can be part of the solution.

Chair: Thank you. I am slightly obsessed by mushrooms, so I am very excited that you are on the panel. Finally, Finian, may I ask you the same question?

Finian Ali: My name is Finian Ali, and I am a Nigeria-based nutrition advocate. I am a migration scholar and a development research fellow. My work focuses mainly on nutrition, youth livelihood and community-led development, particularly with marginalised young people and women. I work very closely with grassroots groups—youth networks—across different parts of Nigeria, including very hard-to-reach communities. I am also very much involved in migration governance and management in my country, as well as skills development programmes—programmes that have reached thousands of young people in the fashion and leatherwork sector and in ICT, supporting them to transition into decent work and into an even more stable livelihood.

In terms of key challenges peculiar to Nigeria, I would like to highlight just three. The first one is rampant in the country, and that is the issue of malnutrition and food insecurity, all over the country but much more in the northern part of Nigeria. This is largely driven by rising food costs but also by issues around poverty, climate change and very fragile local food systems. We know that children, young people and women are very much affected by this, including those in conflict-affected communities.



The second challenge, which is usually not talked about, is youth unemployment and also youth underemployment. Underemployment should have a very large emphasis, because a lot of people with very brilliant minds are doing work that is very low compared to the value they bring. This is also a fantastic migration pressure for them. They want to opt for an irregular route to get their satisfaction met. This is largely because many young people lack access to practical, market-relevant skills, capital or clear pathways into decent work.

The third challenge, which is quite relevant to this conversation, is the systemic challenges. Most interventions that happen here in the country—especially donor-funded interventions—are quite short term. They are usually fragmented, and oftentimes they are not owned by the community that the interventions are designed for; they are always externally driven. When funding is reduced or reprioritised, we begin to see programmes stalling and communities being left without support, even with that visible need for resilience.

One major opportunity that the UK may want to really eyeball is that one of Nigeria's greatest assets is our people. We have a very young population, we have young people, we have women, and these people are already leading solutions at community level, from nutritional advocacy to skills, to social accountability. All these things are happening. These things are low-hanging fruit. Many young people are really open to new things and really open to learning and to diversifying, to ensure that they have a better livelihood and better life prospects.

Q196 Chair: Finian, I wonder whether I could ask for your comments. Ajay, the President of the World Bank, said that migration caused by youth unemployment will be one of the biggest global challenges. Do you agree with him?

Finian Ali: Yes, I agree. If you look at Nigeria, for instance, a lot of young people are being driven by the push to migrate, and this is largely because there are no jobs; and secondly, even those who have jobs are underemployed, and when you are underemployed, that alone is already a migrational pressure. Thirdly, a lot of young people don't feel safe. There is insecurity and people are worried. Locally here when we talk about safety, Nigeria is no longer a place where you say that a crisis is just temporary. We now have recurrent, overlapping crises. People are not safe, and this can very much be a migrational push factor.

For those of our young people who are within the labour market age bracket, there are also prospects for better value for the support and for the skills that they provide. So why would you want to continue to work when you don't get the best? What we try to do is to support young people to explore a regular route, because of course migration is also very healthy, it also has this global benefit, it also helps in development, so we cannot exclude those advantages, but we must ensure that it is in line with the global compact— is it safe, is it orderly, is it regular? These are the critical areas. So perfectly aligned with that. Locally here also, particularly in the health sector, we have cases of going to the hospital

where you don't get the best of professionals to support you because we have a brain drain. That is a reality, locally.

Chair: The Committee is aware that I am slightly obsessed about my view that it is shortsighted to cut aid rather than keeping people safe, secure and prosperous in their own country.

Q197 **James Naish:** Thank you, panellists, for your contributions today. If I may ask Chido first—clearly, our conversation today is about the future of UK aid—how do you think that the approach to development of countries like the UK should change in order to maintain a significant impact in the investments that they can continue to make?

Chido Govera: Excuse me, but that was not very clear. Would you please repeat that?

James Naish: The UK's approach to aid will obviously have to change, and other countries are making similar adjustments. How do you think that the UK and others can continue to have a large impact while also making appropriate changes?

Chido Govera: One of the major changes in approach, for me, is to work out better ways of investing in local organisations, and to shift from treating development work as just development, not an investment.

What does that mean when you look at local organisations today? I run a local organisation, and lately there is a push to say that organisations should work more in consortiums to mobilise resources. But when you look at how it works in these consortiums, the international organisations are always the leaders of these consortiums. They decide how resources are distributed. They decide always how much time money is spending in the hands of implementers. Today, it feels a lot like local organisations are just conduits for pushing money from one point to another; and sometimes the time that the money is spending in the field is not enough to have an impact. So we are always chasing deadlines—you have this money and you have from now until then to use it, and we do not really have a say.

As a local organisation, especially today, I have moments where I have seen grant calls and I am thinking, "Is this worth my time, or am I just going to be running around to meet a deadline and not quite making the impact that I want to make?" What is the impact that would make sense to me?

As I mentioned earlier, I work in mushroom production. We are teaching local households to take agricultural waste and convert that into mushrooms, which are used for food, which are brought to the market so that they can have income, and then they have of course additional nutrition. The communities where we work are communities with human/wildlife conflict; these are communities where conventional agriculture does not perform as it used to do. But when we have to work with the current arrangements of how resources are coming, we have to do these things at a speed that does not make sense at all. As an



investment, we are not really yielding the benefits of the resources that are already available.

Now we face cuts. International organisations are more expensive. If you look at a person who has the same position as me in an international organisation, they earn so much more; they are doing the same, or sometimes even less than what I am doing, but I don't get to benefit from getting the same. I think we need to shift that. We need to shift and see to it that when we encourage people to work in consortiums, we need to be intentional about saying, "One moment: an international organisation leads the consortium and decides the course of things, but that has to rotate. Within any group of partners it has to move." And there needs to be investment in ensuring that the local organisations are also able to lead, so that you are not continuously sidelined because they think you don't have the right capacities. It is important to invest in building these capacities for local organisations.

We also need to embrace more and more operating like social enterprises. Some of us are working with very technical things that you can turn into value that is not just value for the communities at the receiving end, but also for the organisation itself. That means we need to be intentional about investing in the right research and development. In mushroom farming today, many things are happening. In the same set-ups where we today grow mushrooms for food, you can grow mushrooms for making building materials, you can grow mushrooms for medicine; but we hardly ever have resources that allow us to explore this and bring this benefit to the communities that we serve, because when resources come they are organised in a way that does not allow the freedom to be creative, to get the most impact. The chase is always, "Let's finish and go to the next grant," and there are not enough resources. We need to change this, and ensure that we build capacities in a different way than we have done before. An organisation itself is an investment, as much as in the communities at the end of the line.

Q198 James Naish: Thank you. There were a couple of really clear points there. There is a lot of nodding going on from fellow panellists. Sapphire, would you like to add to that, or are there any additional points that you would like to make about what the UK and other countries can do to still have the biggest impact?

Sapphire Alexander: I really applaud Chido's words on the importance of investment in grassroots organisations. We always call within the feminist speech for flexible core multi-year funding for non-profits and organisations, because this is the type of funding that is needed. I also always advocate for a participatory approach to the grant-making and grant design process. It is not enough to just give funding to people. We need to be able to help design the way that funding is disseminated, because we know best what our communities need and how that should be disseminated.

I love what Chido was sharing about social enterprises and the importance of moving beyond these very restrictive funding guidelines, to say that,

"This is what the money has to be spent on—it has to be spent on this programme." We are dealing with contexts that are very volatile. We may start a project working on climate and legal, which is something that we work on in the Caribbean, and we might be ravaged by a hurricane, so we may need to be able to divert that funding to support our communities in a disaster resilience and crisis response. We should be able to do that with the funding that we have.

I also think that investing for resilience is really important to ensure that, as Chido said, we are able to build our capacity with the money that is invested into grassroots organisations and our communities, so that we are not dependent on the grant cycle, which, as we know, comes with volatility. We are seeing a huge shift within the global financial architecture, where there is less money going to grassroots organisations and even less than that going to feminist or youth-led organisations. It is really important for us to have funding for both in order to commit to continued core, flexible investment in young feminist organisations and in grassroots work, so we can ensure that we are addressing all the issues that my fellow panellists have raised.

Q199 James Naish: From a UK perspective, or from a developing country's perspective, how do you think their interaction would look and feel different in the future? What do you think would be the right approach from the United Kingdom?

Sapphire Alexander: As I was talking about earlier, it is that participatory grant-making approach, so when you are designing the type of funding that is being disseminated, you are doing consultations with communities. I have seen that in practice. There is a grant called "Education Shifts Power" that was created by UNGEI in participation with young feminist organisations. They were there at every step of the process helping to design how grants are disseminated, what reporting looks like and what key areas need to be addressed. They were designers of the grant and recipients, so they were able to ensure that the benefit of that funding for them and their communities was exactly what was needed to address the core issues.

There was one organisation that worked on climate resilience in Brazil, another that worked on education and capacity building in rural communities in Uganda, and one that worked on child marriage. They were not restricted by what needed to be funded by the grant; they were able to assign funding based on what needs they saw within their communities.

Q200 James Naish: Finian, is there anything you would like to add about what you think the UK or other developing countries could do to shift their behaviours but still have maximum impact?

Finian Ali: My hand was already up because I wanted to share some thoughts in alignment with Chido's comments. First, let me also emphasise that one of the biggest changes that we need to adopt moving forward is

to look at how we move beyond the artificial separation between humanitarian aid and relief and long-term development.

Like I said earlier, in countries like Nigeria crises are no longer temporary; they are recurrent and overlapping. Relief is essential, but when it is not connected to longer-term systems like livelihood, local markets, skills, employment, nutrition and overall health, communities will remain vulnerable. You come just to provide relief and then in the next two, three, four, five or six months they go back to square one and have to start afresh. People do not have a job, a market or improved livelihood, improved health or even an improved household economy when they go back to their home, and they become very dependent and vulnerable. There needs to be a shift.

Secondly, I want to emphasise community ownership. For instance, there was a programme I was involved in that was designed to combat irregular youth migration and provide skills acquisition. In designing that programme, we engaged with the communities—the young people—to ask, “How do you want to learn this skill?” The big goal is to discourage them from irregular migration, but that is not what they want to hear, so we ask them, “How do you want to learn skills that will give you a better livelihood in the future?”, and they propose the apprenticeship model that they want to learn. They are placed with a master craft person, and with that person’s support, they can get equipment support, learn with them and stay there for two or even three years.

As a programme, or as a movement, we were not thinking about this, but it has already helped us to achieve a level of localisation and ownership. We might have wanted to design five months of training for young people; they now want to do that training for two years by doing an apprenticeship. Localised training structures and community ownership are critical, because with that, we can get the desired results. Those two really are critical.

When we talk about consortiums, as my colleague shared earlier, for us, as young people, it might not even be our intention to start creating non-Government organisations, following all the registration protocols. These are things we do every day, like when you wake up in the morning and just want to have your tea—it is what we do every day. Those are very low-hanging fruit that can be leveraged. When we want to design programmatic implementation that requires young people to be part of it, it has to be very intentional about allowing young people to participate. We have to look for youth networks and youth-led organisations and support them.

Sometimes, the complexity around application is quite discouraging—you need to apply, you need to submit this, do this project and so on. Let’s continue what we are doing in the way we are doing it, and let’s just leave it, because often we cannot even get it. I align with Chido 100% on needing to see how we can simplify some of these compliance processes—even on reporting and funding mechanisms. We should find a structure that makes it easier for young people. It is easier for young people to

influence young people, because they will listen to each other, than someone outside that demographic providing that context and support.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q201 **Janet Daby:** Good afternoon. I will come to Finian first. I can hear your passion, and I know that you serve in many roles to do with advocating and empowering young people. You have talked about some of the aims you have—the three aims in particular—and the young population in Nigeria. I will come to the other panellists as well, but first, Finian, how do you feel the UK can best support young people in the causes that you are fighting for? How would you empower them, and what part could the UK play in offering support?

Chido Govera: Sorry, we could not hear you.

Sapphire Alexander: It is breaking up a lot.

Janet Daby: Can you hear me now?

Sapphire Alexander: Yes.

Finian Ali: Yes, it is better now.

Janet Daby: I will be a lot more succinct than I was just then. Finian, how do you feel the UK can best support young people in the causes that you are fighting for? How would you empower them, and what part could the UK play in offering support?

Finian Ali: Thank you—I got the question. I think some of the strategies have already been shared when Chido and I reflected in the past few minutes, but let me also emphasise that young people, particularly young community activists, need the space, the platform, resources and trust. Often, people will be like, “Oh no, we don’t trust young people. They won’t get it right,” but we have done it, and we have got it right.

A good instance of that is the current work I am doing with the Scaling Up Nutrition civil society network on the youth leaders for nutrition programme. Through that programme, we were able to set up the first and only youth network in Nigeria within the SUNN movement. Youth advocates across the six geopolitical zones in the country are doing excellently well, leading community dialogues, listening to young people like themselves and trying to influence policy actions in their states.

We need the space, the resource and the trust. You want to talk about real support, and I think that begins with listening to us and working together with us on funding youth-led and community-led initiatives directly, and even providing support when it is asked for. Often, the models are one size fits all—“We design this. It will apply to all young people.” That is not so, because there are evolving realities and different dynamics.

It also means that we need to begin to recognise lived experiences and value this knowledge, just as Chido shared her experience in her introduction about her upbringing, what her childhood was like, and the

vulnerabilities with that. That is enough and can inform programme design and help other young girls and teenagers who may be facing such challenges—not just in Zimbabwe, but across Africa and even across the world. That would be very helpful. We need to really begin to treat lived experiences as very credible evidence and an important step forward.

One practical step the UK can take is that it can provide more predictable, multi-year funding—not something fragmented. The funding can be just one year or six months, or just two years, but it has to be integrated into all the systems, not just what the programme is aiming to achieve. It has to be fully aligned.

Secondly, like I said earlier, we need to simplify the funding and reporting process so that smaller local actors can access it. We need to intentionally ensure that, if funding is to be released, it can even go directly to who is supposed to receive it, so that, by design, we are involving local leaders; in terms of implementation, they would be critically aligned and participatory in the process. That is what I would like to share.

Q202 Janet Daby: That is helpful, in particular around funding and medium to long-term support in that area. Chido, Sapphire, was there anything you wanted to add?

Sapphire Alexander: Yes, I can definitely add to that. I certainly agree with what Finian has shared. I think that it is important to resource young people. It is also important to support them beyond just token representation and having them as a by-line. Mentorship is also incredibly important, as is capacity-building support.

I saw at first hand an initiative that the British High Commission in Trinidad and Tobago ran quite a few years ago, probably in 2018, called “British High Commissioner for a Day”. It was all about enhancing the access of young people to decision-making spaces and introducing them to diplomacy. I was able to participate in that programme, and that was truly transformative. That is something that we need more of, because young people, as Finian and Chido said, are leading work that is revolutionising communities.

I can list so many organisations. There is Girls Care in Jamaica that is providing avenues for young women to engage in climate justice and resilience work. It was leading the charge after Hurricane Melissa in documenting the gendered implications of the climate crisis. I can talk about the Ashley Lashley Foundation, which is bridging the intersection of climate and health and engaging a new generation of young people to understand how their health is affected by the climate crisis, and how healthy life choices, food security and education can transform their lives and the lives of others in the region.

I can also talk about the Siblings and Friends Network in Trinidad and Tobago, which is revolutionising access for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. Those are areas that our Governments have not been able to invest fully in, and through the agency of and organisations



HOUSE OF COMMONS

led by young people, we are seeing a difference. These are all organisations that have been supported by official development assistance from the British Government.

I also wanted to talk about existing mechanisms, such as the Commonwealth network. We need to fortify these networks, invest more in them, and use these networks of support and funding mechanisms to enhance the experience of young people. The structure already exists; it is just about investing more in it.

I also love the point that Finian made that we must go beyond fragmented funding. We need to have structured funding that happens every single year, so that we know every year these are the grants that we can apply for and that we do not have to be looking on 15 million different pages to see where the funding is going to come from this year. We know that this is a set initiative and that they are going to invest in us over a longer period, so that our work is not reactive but transformative. When we have the funding set, we know we can invest in this and that, capacity building and staff. Staffing is a huge issue for youth-led organisations, to support the labour of the people who are doing the work.

Those are just some of the tangible ways that we can invest in youth organisations and better support young people.

Q203 Janet Daby: Thank you—that's very helpful. The vulnerability to climate change, storms and hurricanes in the Caribbean is extremely alarming, and it is great that the young people are finding a space to make an active contribution. I hear you on all those points exactly, so thank you for that. Chido, would you like to come in?

Chido Govera: Sorry, I will take us a back a little bit to the issue of approaches, and I will share an experience that I recently had in Mozambique. I went there because there is this push to promote youth economic empowerment, and I was there with one organisation that is saying, "Yeah, let's go for skills. Let's do this," but at a distance of about 10 metres from where I was, there was someone who was just distributing food, and people had to choose between coming to me, or going to where they can get food for free.

Speaking of the artificial separation between relief and development, we are different organisations, most likely getting funding from the same sources, but it is about the way in which these things are packaged—one is receiving the funding to distribute food, which is not quite aligned with one who is continuously trying to push for skills. We make communities choose: "Should I go here, or should I just go there, where I can get a bag of rice today?"

I think there is also a need to invest in building that alignment across all of the donor community to say, "When we are working in a community, we should not just talk about relief on its own; it is relief and investment into continuity in the communities. We need to find a way of giving each other space to allow the communities to understand that we need to layer all



these things, and they need to be able to exist at the same time.” Another critical thing that I would say about our approaches is that we need to have the funding organisations communicate with each other and try to align better there.

In terms of the UK’s responsibility to help make things better, I am a big supporter of having youth be part of the curation of some of the decisions that we make about what we do. We talked about migration earlier. If you look at the UK and many parts of the world, you have a lot of people who have left our countries in search of better opportunities, but they are keen to do something back home. They are keen to invest back home and they are full of ideas.

I think it is important to create a kind of committee in which we have all different young people from different parts of our countries and the continent, so that we can really help to fine-tune this. That should not just be from the traditional development perspective, where we just have to keep repeating the same thing. We need to really challenge and propose new areas to invest in, especially in technical expertise, and correctly choose where the most critical need is that we can now address, and who the best people are to put at the forefront of this. I think it would be interesting to see what that could look like.

To give an example, I have been based in Belgium for about two or three years. The ICMPD has a programme where it invests in making sure that people in the diaspora stay connected to their countries. Thanks to that, I was actually able to look at the work that I have done with my organisation since 2013 and see where the gaps are that I can invest in. I was able to present that to them, and they made resources available.

As a result, for the first time, I was able to go back to Zimbabwe to bring regulators together, as well as institutions and different entrepreneurs who are working to say, “How do we build the mushroom industry of this country?”, and we talked about how we can plan this together. However, those resources are not usually available. I will have money to work on it in one remote part of the country, but I cannot really bring the regulators to take part in this, because that money is for that specific district.

It is about adjusting this, building really capable teams that combine the diaspora and the local community, and working together and to build these technical skills in a fashion that allows us to not have to go the long route of solving problems. We can get there fast by fusing what the young people in the local community are experiencing and wanting to solve and what the young Africans in the diaspora have already experienced and see as beneficial to their communities back home.

Q204 Chair: Chido, that was really helpful. You have hit on the nub of the problem that the sector is facing right now. There is aid for humanitarian and aid for development, and in the examples you gave quite often they are tripping each other up, rather than us looking at how they can either unite together or deal with separate issues. Thank you for those examples.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sapphire, I will come back to you. You said Governments have not been able to support youth. I would put to you that they chose not to support youth. What do you think about that?

Sapphire Alexander: I think that sometimes even the Government, with the best intentions, because of the many areas that need investment within our local societies and economies, are not able to invest fully into social justice initiatives. I don't think that that should be the case, but unfortunately it is—when something like a hurricane, a natural disaster, flooding and so on happens, funds are diverted there first, and they are taken from things such as gender initiatives and support for persons with disabilities.

What happens then is that non-profits and civil society come in, and they have to fill in the gap left by those funding restrictions. We are also talking about the wider context of debt. Most of our countries, which have been formerly colonised, live in this never-ending cycle of sovereign debt that we have to support. That also restricts the way that Governments are able to determine where funding needs to go.

Q205 **Chair:** Do you think it is right that NGOs or other Governments are coming in and filling in those gaps, or is their role more to influence the state to prioritise those areas?

Sapphire Alexander: Sorry, I lost you a little bit during that question.

Chair: Do you think it is right that NGOs or other Governments are coming into countries and plugging the gaps—I think that was your language—or should their role be to influence and support Governments to do that themselves?

Sapphire Alexander: I think there is value in partnership. I think there is value in all these different players playing a role in the way this funding is disseminated. Yes, part of the issue can be that Government do not have enough resources to support all the initiatives, and another can be that the Government do not see them as a priority. LGBTQ+ organisations, for example, are never going to be a byline if things such as homosexuality is criminalised in a country.

That is a justice issue that civil society organisations then come in and support through the support of official development assistance. It is not easy to summarise and say that it should just be the Government that get to determine where all funding goes, because there are issues with that framing as well. There needs to be a partnership between all of the actors and stakeholders within this.

Chair: Lovely, thank you very much. I will hand over to Brian.

Q206 **Brian Mathew:** I hope you can hear me okay. My section is called "From grants to expertise", and I have three short questions. I will put them one after another. First, Chido, I should say "zvakanaka" regarding your work with mushroom farming—it sounds fantastic. What is the place for technical assistance in the UK's development assistance offer?

Chido Govera: That should become a top priority, because we need the right technical skills to be able to compete on the same level as everyone else. We have a lot of challenges. I will give an example from mushroom farming, because that is the thing we are busy with, but it also applies to other areas of food production, as livelihoods are a key foundation on which everything hinges.

If you look at some of the things that we still practise, we are still practising things that the rest of the world is busy trying to move away from. To update these skills so that we avoid investing in things that are already getting outdated or so that we get our knowledge updated fast is very critical. It should be the first thing. Next to ensuring that people survive today is ensuring they have the right skills, and there is merit in making that a top priority.

Q207 **Brian Mathew:** Sapphire, the next question is to you. How can these be designed in an empowering way?

Sapphire Alexander: How can technical assistance be designed in an empowering way?

Brian Mathew: Yes.

Sapphire Alexander: By going back to consultations with communities to better understand their capacity needs. We were talking about youth unemployment earlier. What are the skills that young people need to start their own businesses or to be competitive within the workforce? How do we strengthen their capacity in that instance?

If we are looking at civil society, do they need support with grant making? Do they need technical support in how to apply for grants and how to find them? Do they need technical support in how to lobby politicians and how to craft policy? It is about going into the communities and deciding what their needs are and how we can better support them directly through their interventions. We are not doing that helicopter approach where we come in and decide what is needed. We allow them to co-design the technical assistance process.

Q208 **Brian Mathew:** Finian, what else should be considered to maximise the effectiveness of technical assistance programmes?

Finian Ali: Technical assistance can be very valuable, as Chido said, but it has to respond to locally identified needs rather than externally defined gaps. In this case, we need to understand what the community or country needs, and what external expatriate support or technical assistance will be able to close the gap.

In practice, it has to start with local institutions and communities coming together to articulate what system strengthening, what data or skills transfer or even what policy advice is relevant, and international partners can begin to respond to that demand. That is also relevant because if that support is coming, it will need to be time-bound and focused on building local capability, just like the ICMPD programme that Chido mentioned.

There is also a similar programme that GIZ is doing in Nigeria, which is to do with expat return. It helps Nigerian citizens who are outside the country to return in order to provide expat support to their country of origin.

Assistance has to build on local capability. If it is not doing that and if it is substituting for local capability, it will make the company dependent on the technical assistance forever. Someone has to understudy what someone else is doing so that, in the long term, there will be easy transitioning and those skills can be sustainable.

One other thing that needs to change is how the technical assistance is received. As much as possible, there needs to be community acceptance and bilateral understanding so that the support can be domesticated locally. It should not happen in just one particular community; it should cascade. If it is not owned by the country, it cannot be modelled or scaled. Technical assistance is very useful when it is well provided and can give a country the opportunity to scale the support. The model can then be replicated across different counties or states, and can even help to close very visible skill gaps, as Chido said.

Chair: Witnesses, you have been so clear and helpful in the information you have given us. It will really help us with our report to the Government. You have all come up with some fantastic opportunities, but also some of the slightly ridiculous hurdles that you have to get over. I admire all of you. Thank you so much for making time for us today. We really appreciate it. Goodbye, unless you want to stay and watch the rest of the session.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jennifer Hudson, Luke Tryl and Bel Trew.

Q209 **Chair:** I am going to start by asking each of you to introduce yourselves and your organisations. You are aware of why we are doing this inquiry, so we want to get into the details of what you think we should be pushing, how the Government should best use its ODA spend, and, most importantly, how we can communicate it to the people whose money it is—the taxpayers. Bel, could you start by introducing yourself and your organisation, please? Apparently we have to switch the microphones on and off when we are or aren't speaking.

Bel Trew: Good to know. Hi, my name is Bel Trew; I am the chief international correspondent of *The Independent*. I am also a documentary filmmaker and a photographer, and I have been working on a project that we are running called "Rethinking Global Aid", so our focus has been very much on this very issue for the last year.

Chair: I say to people who have not read the associated articles that they are really good, so thank you for all the work you are doing in this space.

Luke Tryl: I am Luke Tryl; I am the executive director of More in Common in the UK, and we have conducted a significant amount of public opinion research into aid and development.

Jennifer Hudson: Good afternoon. I am Jennifer Hudson, vice-provost, faculties, at UCL and director of the Development Engagement Lab. We have been looking at public attitudes towards aid and development in the UK, the US, France and Germany for about a decade.

Chair: As I said to the first panel, we will direct questions to each of you individually, but please do come in, butt in, and give me the nod.

Q210 **Tracy Gilbert:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. I want to first ask the panel about the public perception of aid policy. I will go to Jennifer and Luke first: what does your data tell us about what the public think about the current UK Government's approach to aid?

Jennifer Hudson: I will answer in two ways. First, if you asked the average person on the street, "What is the UK Government's approach to aid?" I think you would be met with silence, because I do not think the specifics of what the Government is doing is something that people carry, hand on heart. That said, what the public really care about are things like whether aid is being spent, whether it is impactful, and whether it represents value for money. I am sure I will come back to that at different points today, but that is what people want to know—are we getting value for money? It is right that, if we are spending taxpayers' money, we do it in a way that really makes a difference. So that is what they would tell you.

More specifically, from the data that we have, if you ask the public what their priorities for UK aid spending are, we have seen over the last decade that they will tell you three things: they want to prioritise health, education and WASH spending. Those are the three areas that align with how the public think the enterprise of UK aid should be allocated, and there has not been much movement in that over the last 10 years. I think that goes to a strong sense that the purpose of aid is to help those in need, and a sense that that is why we are doing this and why we should continue to do it. I will pause there.

Luke Tryl: I do not think I will surprise the Committee by saying that aid in the UK has somewhat of a perception challenge among the public. When we ask the public the words they most associate with aid, "wasteful" and "ineffective" are the two that come out on top.

There is more support than opposition for providing aid: 47% think that we should provide aid; 28% think that we should not. But even in the context of the significant cuts to the aid budget, in our latest tracking people are still more likely to say that we should spend less on aid—50% of people said that—than that we should spend more on aid—13% of people said that.

There is clearly a perception challenge. I absolutely agree with what Jennifer said about the priorities, particularly on what are seen as tangible



humanitarian issues, which are very important for the public. I would add another dimension. I think it is important to look at people's upstream attitudes, which shape how they think about aid. Increasingly, at a time when the public purse is seen as constrained and people think that the UK as a whole is struggling, we find that there is significant support for mutual benefit arguments for aid: that it can benefit both the recipient and us here in the UK. We think that is of growing importance, and particularly important for those who are inclined to be more sceptical of aid.

Q211 James Naish: On that point, how accurate is the public's perception of how much money is actually being spent on aid by the UK? Have either of you looked at that? Is it accurate or not?

Jennifer Hudson: It is wildly inaccurate. In research that we did many years ago, the average estimate was that 25% of the UK Budget goes to overseas aid. When you ask people what they think we should spend on aid, they say about 9% of the Budget. When you then tell them what we actually spend on the UK aid budget, they want to drop it even further.

I think there is a challenge here: often we talk about the aid budget as an input, "We spend x billion on aid." That is a really difficult conversation for the public to have: £1 billion is a lot of money, and so of course their natural instinct is to cut. But I would posit that although it is true that they probably want to cut aid a little more than other areas, if you ask the public whether they want to cut Government spending, they probably want to do it in most places, save for the NHS and maybe their local schools, because of the perception of inefficiency, wastage and corruption that is particular to this issue.

Luke Tryl: I would perhaps be tempted to be slightly more generous to the public. It is definitely true that there is an overestimate but I think that part of that overestimate, particularly when the public are dealing with large numbers, is about signalling something. It is about signalling that we think that this has slightly got out of whack. This is not our polling—this is from Focaldata—but when members of the public were asked about areas where spending could be decreased, overseas aid was the most selected area, and five times more selected than the next most popular area for spending reductions.

Bel Trew: May I add a point in there? We did our own survey of our readers. I am an international correspondent; I am well aware of just how much the public's attention span has been taken from everything that is happening—I mean, January has felt like a year already.

I was actually quite surprised by the engagement that we have had with the stories on aid, which I really thought were not going to do as well as they have. We did an impact survey, which looked at 400 respondents. Critically, we saw a 10% increase in readers who believe that the Government should take action on foreign aid after reading what we had written about foreign aid. That shows that if people know more, they care more.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The vast majority believe that the Government should take action on aid if it was effective. There were a lot of discussions in the comments under articles about rethinking aid—obviously, that is what we are talking about. For example, I think that the '90s structure of handouts is dead. We have seen how USAID can be wiped out in a single afternoon. Those discussions were about not the word "localisation" but leadership; about decolonising aid from the ground up—there were interesting discussions about that—and about how people wanted to take action themselves and did not know what to do about it. That is just from our readers—and they are engaged anyway because *The Independent* has done a lot of work on this in the past—but I think that is quite telling.

Q212 Tracy Gilbert: You have answered quite a lot of my next question. I think Luke mentioned that one of the first words that comes to mind with aid is "wasteful", and we are obviously—to your point, Bel—not telling a very good story about how we spend it. What demonstrable outcomes could we show that would change how the public feel about how we spend that money? What does the data show that they like to see in order to have a productive conversation and to change the conversation around how useful aid is?

Luke Tryl: The first thing is tangibility. We are in an era of immense public scepticism—that could apply to almost anything that I have been talking about, across the things that we look into. It needs to be tangible; people need to be able to know that it is making a difference. I think that there is strong support for the mutual benefit argument.

There is no doubt that things like the provision of vaccines and the work of Gavi enjoy significant support among the public. We found 59% backing for something like that. We have dug into that in focus groups, and people do think it is important that we support vaccinating those who might not have the means to vaccinate themselves, but there is also a self-interest argument. People in focus groups will say openly, "I do not want those diseases coming to the UK." Some people might be a bit squeamish about that argument, but it really matters for the British public at a time when the purse is constrained.

Secondly, on the perception of waste, there is a sense that when money is wasted, there is never any effort to reclaim it. We hear that a lot in the focus groups. You know that the PPE scandal shaped a lot of attitudes in the UK. One of the most frustrating things was why we are not getting the money back. It is similar with what are perceived to be wasteful aid projects.

Bel Trew: I wanted to riff off the idea of a concrete case, which I think is something where we can get the British public really energised. For example, I have been looking at the unprecedented aid cuts to HIV programmes globally following the USAID cuts—even though they are keeping PEPFAR, it has atrophied the entire ecosystem of delivery. The UK has cut £150 million to the Global Fund, and we expect further cuts to ODA.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

What I have realised in my reporting and from the response from readers is that this could be a success story for the UK—it really could. There are lots of different ways in which that could happen. One example is that we have what has been widely called the miracle drug—the closest thing to a vaccine, Lenacapavir—being rolled out this year. That will not be effective if it is not properly rolled out. We need to learn from the mistakes of the antiretroviral roll-outs all those years ago.

That is not an inconceivable amount of money. Let us say that it is \$40 per person per year, and it basically has a 100% efficacy rate to stop people getting HIV. If we need 10 million doses, that is a manageable amount of money. That could be communicated to the public. I did some basic maths, and it is about £5 per adult in the UK, or whatever.

That is happening now. We could end the AIDS pandemic by 2030. It is possible. The UK could be the owner of that, just like George Bush with PEPFAR, which was one of the most successful health initiatives of all time. The UK's previous investment in this has been successful, but I bet you the British public do not know about it. This is the moment to do it, right now.

To add to that, at the same time as the USAID cuts, we have a US Administration with ideological bents in where it wants to put aid. It will not touch LGBT+ communities; it does not want to touch things like family planning or reproductive and sexual health organisations. We had an expansion of the global gag rule announced just a few days ago. The UK could step in, even with limited resources, to redirect aid in that efficient way. That needs to be communicated to the public.

We have been talking about waste. What about having something that we can take ownership of, and that we can actually see positive results from? We can fill the gaps left by what used to be one of the biggest donors, do it in a way that is a success story, and then communicate that to the public.

It affects everyone. We are talking about mutual aid, and we are talking about double the number of drug-resistant HIV strains if these infection rates continue to surge, so it is a win-win.

Q213 James Naish: Luke, you mentioned the word “self-interest”. Obviously you do broader polling as well, and immigration and small boats are top priorities for the public at the moment. To what extent are people recognising that aid has a role to play in managing some of those situations? Do you think that if aid is spent in that direction, there is any potential for it to get greater public support? Would it be seen, once again, as being in our self-interest, even if those issues are more to do with climate, desertification and other matters, as opposed to health, education and WASH, which are more traditional forms of aid?

Luke Tryl: I think the public do not intuitively, immediately make that link, but when they are told about the link it definitely bolsters support for the idea of providing aid, particularly with more sceptical and more socially

conservative groups. The caveat that I would make is that those socially conservative, more sceptical groups are the least likely to think that it will actually have an impact.

Throughout this, there has been quite a lot of emphasis on telling people. The aid sector has spent a lot of time telling, but we have to do a lot more showing. We need concrete examples of how migration flows might have stemmed thanks to UK aid.

Q214 Chair: I am reflecting as I listen to you on whether the word “aid” is toxic. ODA is actually “official development assistance”. Should we look more closely at the language we use, because “aid” seems one-directional? What are your thoughts?

Jennifer Hudson: It is a really good question, and a perennial one that the sector asks itself. There is a challenge with talking about aid because of the uni-directionality that you mentioned, Sarah. On the point that Luke made about when things go wrong or are perceived to go wrong, what is the accountability? That is where, when we draw comparisons to spending here in the UK for the public, the argument we hear is that if we are sending money overseas and it is not being done efficiently, there are no accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that we can either take the money back or ensure that it is spent better going forward.

There is work to be done around challenging that unidirectionality of aid. However, when we ask the public about different ways of talking about this enterprise, they understand aid. They know what we mean when we say “aid”. When we talk about other forms—there are very fancy words we can use to describe aid—they do not get a lot of support.

If we are going to have a different conversation—we have heard arguments around investment or partnership, and we heard lots from our previous colleagues about co-design and co-creation—that is okay, but I think we need to do that with a single voice, as a sector and as a Government, and really start bringing the public along with us.

Chair: That is really interesting.

Q215 David Mundell: Bel, I will come to you first. I reinforce the congratulations to you and to *The Independent* for the work you have done in publicly highlighting the impact of cuts in relation to support for HIV/AIDS. As you know, that will lead to a debate in the House of Commons on the global response to HIV/AIDS, in which some of the issues you touched on earlier can be fully debated. What could the Government do now to inspire more confidence in what UK aid is spent on?

Bel Trew: Putting my journalist hat on, we would love more transparency, just as journalists. We have limited information. For example, we know that there will be funding cuts to ODA; we do not know when or what they are. We thought they were going to be at the end of last year. We do not know. That means that as journalists we will write words like “chaos”, basically, or “lack of clarity”—we are not going to write positively about it.

I am not saying that we need to be mouthpieces for the Government; I am just saying that the response will be negative media, because we just do not know.

At the same time, the UK is supposed to be hosting a conference on the future of aid, for example. It is going to be in May now—I heard about this last week, but we had heard that it would be in March. We have not been communicated with about that. That, again, is a moment where we have lost potential positive feedback.

There has to be better communication to the people about where the money is going and why. That is why language does matter. I do think that we should stick to the word “aid”, because people trust it, rather than other words. If we are talking about filling the gap that has been left, if we can explain how this is an efficient use of limited resources, really hone where the money is going, show the impact, talk about where the UK has historically done a good job and focus on concrete cases that have been successful, I think that would make a big difference.

As a journalist, communication would be really helpful, because it is quite frustrating even trying to find out what the landscape is.

Luke Tryl: Transparency is important, but I think the comms need to be clearer in terms of talking about evidence and what has actually happened rather than using rhetoric and trying to pull on the heartstrings too much.

I think it is deeper than that as well. There is a temptation to see the public’s frustration here purely as a comms challenge, but it might be more of a priorities challenge. One of the things that we know very clearly is that measures around public health, vaccines and areas where you can demonstrate mutual interest go down a lot better. The challenge is how you actually demonstrate that that has happened.

Jennifer Hudson: Some of the work that has been particularly effective has been around the role of the UK in delivering aid. Where we have seen a lot of resonance with the public is not with the UK as a leader in this space, or doing more than its fair share, but with the UK doing our bit, doing what is fair and working in partnership with other countries.

Picking up on Bel’s argument, it seems like a really good opportunity to start framing this as fairness. It is right and it is fair that the UK does its fair share. One way we can do that is by going into this area and providing a solution to a problem that is outcomes-focused and driven by what we want to achieve, rather than the input or something about our role in this space on the global stage. Bringing those two together could be really beneficial.

There is some interesting work that we have done with Comic Relief and that was funded by the FCDO—our previous colleagues were speaking to it. It is about co-production, partnership and the localisation agenda, whether you want to call it decolonisation or other things.

What we have seen from the UK public is that three things really stand out. I have mentioned value for money. The most important thing for the UK public is that the enterprise of aid is bringing value for money, but the second is capacity building. The public were under the impression that what we were doing over the last 30 years with UK aid was building capacity in recipient countries to make sure that local communities have the technical skills to go on and deliver it. Thirdly, there was a real emphasis on locally-led decision making—giving people the power and autonomy to make decisions over a period of years so that they can flex that money, and trusting them to do that.

What was really interesting was that while we might have these conversations and think about power and decolonialism, the actual mechanisms of those things aligned with what the UK public thought aid should be for and what it should be doing. We are in a good space here to think and talk about UK aid as building capacity and building the ability to make these enterprises and programmes sustainable.

Bel Trew: That is particularly important right now because of the collapse of USAID. The British public are seeing how an old structure can be wiped out by a single signature within a few hours of someone's presidency and, just from our reporting, what the cataclysmic impact is. At the same time, I believe that confidence needs to be built in aid, as a thing. People are like, "This has been going on for ages. I don't understand. Now it's all just gone. Everything's going backwards. It was able to be wiped out in an afternoon. What's the point of this?" That is where discussions about doing aid in a better way—decolonising aid, rethinking aid or whatever phrase you want to use—are vital right now, more than ever.

Q216 David Mundell: How does that align with the messages that some NGOs give out? If we had spent our afternoon watching daytime television rather than being at this Committee, we would have seen a lot of adverts from NGOs that convey an impression of hopelessness and a suggestion that all this has been done over many years, yet the situation is not getting any better—in fact, it is getting worse. How do you think that ultimately you can align a positive message—the type of message to which you alluded, Jennifer—with the message of hopelessness that seems to underpin fundraising?

Luke Tryl: My view is that the messaging from aid NGOs has played a significant role in that erosion of public support on a number of levels. One is that, exactly as you say, people in focus groups say, "I am still seeing the same things that I saw 40 years ago, so clearly this is a waste of money. Why are we bothering to do this any more?"

A second thing is that the response to so much of the shift from 0.7% has been constant arguments about the quantum of funding and the amount going in, rather than a discussion about what aid achieves and what we are trying to do. That has been difficult.

I would also add a third point. I understand, from a technical and a moral point of view, the desire to focus on narratives around decolonisation. For



HOUSE OF COMMONS

most of the public, that is seen as a bit of a distraction. It can come across in a way that makes people say, "I put in money. I pay. Are you calling me a colonialist because I want to help people in another part of the world?" I think that the introspection that has dominated the UK aid sector, particularly in the early 2020s, has actually been quite harmful, particularly with more socially conservative groups who you need to bring on board.

Jennifer Hudson: I think Luke is right. One of the things that we saw in our research was that the conversation that the sector has been having about decolonisation and power is not a conversation that the British public want to have. In fact, they feel very uncomfortable talking about power structures and who has power. They feel very worried that they might be called a colonialist. But when you take away those ways of having the conversation, get underneath it and think about capacity building, that goes back to sustainability and the old adage of teaching a man to fish, and it aligns really well with what the public want to hear. If we can talk about building capacity, building resilience and making it locally led, with partnership, we are in a much safer space than if we are talking about the politics of how we do aid.

Bel Trew: I do think that the media is responsible as well, by the way, so I apologise on behalf of every journalist. It is that classic thing where a news story is only a bad news story. This is something that we struggled with in our project. We were very lucky to be supported by the Gates Foundation, which gave us more space to be able to think on it. First, we had to show what had happened—USAID cuts and the cuts globally, which of course is a bad news story—but since then, as we have moved forward with this project, it has been about looking at solutions-based journalism. Hopefully we may also see a change in those NGO adverts. I think that can make a major difference.

I use phrases like "decolonising aid". I don't think I would use that in an article, because I don't think anyone would like it, but there is an amazing organisation in Sudan, for example—the emergency response rooms—and that is an incredible way of turning aid on its head, in my opinion. Maybe I am saying that naively, but that is the kind of stuff that we are writing about because it is exciting and we can do it in a way that is engaging. "Capacity building" is probably also not a phrase that I would use in journalism, but it has that emotion behind it: something new, something different, something that is going to work, something that is better and something that is solutions-driven. As journalists, we all need to have that in the back of our mind.

Q217 **Chair:** I do not want to be mean, but readers of *The Independent* are sort of—

Bel Trew: Lefties.

Chair: Lefties. On the doorstep in Rotherham, I am always delighted when it is either someone from a diaspora community or someone who has faith, because they seem to be the people who ask me exactly what I am

doing to build capacity—or whatever language they use—because they are appalled about what they are seeing and that we are not being more generous. From a data point of view, do you break it down into why the people who like it like it?

Jennifer Hudson: Luke and I might have a nuanced discussion about why people like aid. I mentioned aid for need; our data has strongly suggested that if you are going to talk in just one way about why we do this, it should be about helping people in need, and we should and can help. We have talked about that as being a kind of soft moral argument. It is not a moral imperative, but it aligns with the British public's strong sense of fairness. If we are trying to have a conversation about what motivates people, there is a strong sense that this is the right thing to do and that we should help if we can—that tends to work for the vast swathe of the British public.

Luke and I have had interesting conversations about mutual interests and national interests. We have not found, except for a very small proportion of the UK population—particularly centre-right audiences—that arguments about national interests work. It just does not work in the round, except for a very, very small group. For some, it actually turns people off. They do not see this as a way of making UK plc better.

Where we have seen some more movement—Luke has already spoken to why we do this—relates to the challenge about mutual interest arguments. Yes, they work well with respect to vaccines, and they were particularly helpful in talking about global health challenges as we came through the pandemic. Where there are challenges, can we better articulate the mutual interest for the UK public? That goes a bit more towards what Bel was saying: can we bring the argument into the household and articulate how UK aid is helpful to people in their household—in their everyday orientation? In the communications we have done, and that we have seen so far, we typically are not bringing it home to the level on which people operate and think. If we explore mutually how that might work, can we make that narrower?

Q218 **Chair:** What would that look like?

Jennifer Hudson: One way we have started to look at this is by likening it to talking about the impacts of climate change. If we spend aid in areas that help us to deal with the impacts of climate change, that is going to help us. That is a lot of work for the average member of the public to do, so we are saying, "Climate impacts are difficult, and they're going to really reshape things and affect us." But what we need to do is say, "Climate's going to cause flooding in your local community. You're going to need to draw on your insurance and that's going to drive up insurance rates, so the actual cost to you of this big phenomenon is that it's going to cost you more in terms of your insurance. It's going to cost you more in terms of the air you breathe and in terms of local health impacts." It is probably about narrowing that funnel to take something big and complex, like development and climate, and try to bring it into a space where the public can engage with it at a more intrinsic or innate level.

Q219 **Chair:** I get that on climate finance, but how would that work on something like early intervention in a conflict, or LGBT rights in a particular country?

Jennifer Hudson: We have some data that suggests that aid to make us more safe and secure and to bring peace is really important and does resonate with the public. I do not think we have taken our communications beyond that statement. Aid to make the UK safer, and aid to make the UK more secure—what does that mean for us? Can we thread that line of argument to say that when we invest in a conflict in Sudan, it has these outcomes, which means this for us here in the UK? For example, it means we are not spending money in terms of our defence budget; we're doing it differently. It is about how we narrow that large, really difficult concept down to something that people can engage in, so that we can see whether the arguments work better.

Chair: So on LGBT rights, it would be saying something like, "It would be safe for you to go on holiday to this country."

Jennifer Hudson: Potentially, yes.

Luke Tryl: I should stress that I agree with Jennifer; there is just a nuance in where our research comes out.

We find that there can be some susceptibility to social desirability bias when it comes to the moral argument. The problem we often find is that it does not then survive contact with the second-order arguments around prioritisation. I very often hear in focus groups, "I would love to do this, but we've got homeless people on the streets," or we often get people saying, "I know this sounds really bad, but can we not do stuff that helps us?" That is when it hits that second-order argument about the mutual interest. It is possible to split hairs too much on national versus mutual. I do not think many people think it is purely national—"Why are you sending the money abroad?" It is about the mutual interest.

On that early conflict piece, we find that one of the strongest arguments you can test on building support is around national security. That is particularly true at this time—to build on what Bel said—when people are feeling totally discombobulated. They want to know that we are doing everything we can to make us safer here at home, and they will recognise a foreign dimension to that.

Q220 **Chair:** This is why we should have had three data people, Luke, because you have completely contradicted what Jennifer said. Bel, you get the casting vote.

Bel Trew: Oh my goodness—the pressure's on! I want to make a couple of observations. Yes, the readership of *The Independent* is very engaged in international affairs and foreign aid—that has been a brand over our 40 years of existence—but when we talk about communication, it is difficult to argue that foreign aid is important for national security when the foreign aid budget is being raided for defence. That is a direct contradiction. I do not know whether we need to raid foreign aid for defence—that could be a



whole other panel, which I will not start—but that obviously directly contradicts that point.

The British public do care about the outside world. Mutual aid is really important, especially for health. As I said, we are talking about double the number of HIV-resistant strains, and viruses have no borders, as we learned when we all became epidemiologists in the pandemic—although some people have forgotten that. I do think that people care, and that is probably why NGOs are still running very sad adverts to pull on heart strings. The British public are very diverse, with a lot of people who are connected to many countries. The previous panel was talking about activating diaspora, and that is maybe something we can do as well. I love the idea of there being just as much money in that direction. But yes, it is difficult.

One last thing: when we talk about national security, we need to be really careful that we do not play into dangerous rhetoric. I am very nervous when talking about resistant strains of HIV travelling around the world, because I do not want to suddenly demonise every single person coming from abroad to the UK. We have an incredibly diverse public and an incredible country full of really interesting people, and we benefit hugely from that. We need to be careful in the messaging that we are not making people frightened of the outside world, and therefore think we are throwing money as a kind of shield.

I do not know whether I have answered the question of which of the answers was correct—mine are new answers—but those are my thoughts.

Q221 David Mundell: I want to ask about scrutiny, and perhaps then move on to who people would believe. There is scrutiny of the aid budget, and this Committee is a significant part of that. Over the years we have produced numerous worthy and detailed reports. We have the Independent Commission for Aid Impact—although the Government may wish to get rid of it—and the National Audit Office, which are all trawling through. Do those bodies, ourselves included, have an impact or influence on public thinking? I have seen numerous newspaper articles highlighting all the obscure wastes of money, saying we are spending money teaching people to sing around a campfire and all the rest of it. If I held up my ICAI report, would it have any impact in countering that view?

Luke Tryl: I think the proof is slightly in the pudding, in that we have had these organisations and your very important reports, and it has not shifted those perceptions. To link back to what I said earlier, part of the challenge is that scrutiny often does not have an impact and is impotent if there are not then consequences and clawbacks. Okay, this report has been done and this was wasteful—what people really want to know is what is going to happen as a result of that. You are almost better not having the scrutiny if the scrutiny doesn't have any teeth or any ability to claw back and make the taxpayer think, "Actually, we've got something back from this."

David Mundell: Obviously, some of it demonstrates that good things happened as well.

Jennifer Hudson: I am going to speak without some data to back it up, but I am going to answer your question by saying no, it does not have an impact on the British public. But I want to qualify that, because we do have a lot of evidence when we run our panel surveys. We ask 6,000 British respondents how they think about and engage with ODA and development, and we ask them about the contact points they have with global poverty. Somewhere between 80% and 85% of the touchpoints—the stories they hear about aid and development—are negative. That is whether they hear it through the broadcast news, a Twitter feed or on the front page of a newspaper.

The challenge we are facing is that this Committee, ICAI and all those places that are providing and evaluating the impact of aid are coming up against a much broader narrative, and a set of touchpoints that the public are hearing 100 times more than they are hearing an ICAI report. We are not fighting the same battle here in terms of, “Is ICAI doing the things we want it to do?”, because the way the public are hearing about this story and the way they are engaging is not via ICAI.

I have two other points. There may be a risk if ICAI were to be taken away and there wasn’t this independent evaluation body—we can ask the public about whether that is valuable or not—but we have also seen the import of responding to areas of corruption, waste or inefficiency. All our data has said that whenever cases of corruption or inefficiency have emerged, it is really important for the Government to counter those and for NGOs to counter those. You need to respond to the challenges that aid is facing, and we—I say this collectively—have shied away from that, because getting into the intricacies and difficulties of working in high-risk environments where things don’t always work to plan has not been at the forefront of our communications.

On the premise of your question, it is probably not obvious, *prima facie*, that ICAI is the validation tool for the public, but we need to think about other ways in which the public are hearing about and engaging with aid. Can we use other mechanisms to reassure them that it is robust, and that it is being effective and spent well?

Q222 **David Mundell:** That is the big question: what would those mechanisms be?

Jennifer Hudson: We often talk within the sector about spokespeople for aid. Two decades ago, it was Bono; who is speaking for aid these days? The consensus around aid has fallen. The Government themselves are now cutting aid, and that sends a strong signal to the public about its value. A question for us is, “Where are the spokespeople? Who can talk about this as a value proposition that is important to the British public—left, centre and right? How do we make the case for aid differently?” I don’t have an answer to your question about who that person is, David, but we cannot remain silent and shy away from some of these challenges in the ways we have before if we want to bring the British public with us and have a compelling argument for aid.

Q223 David Mundell: Absolutely. Sarah has her pet views, and I do too, in that I feel strongly that the corporatisation of NGOs led to the break-up of a sort of army of local advocates for aid. If you were at a local event and somebody had read something in the newspaper, somebody who was in the Red Cross cadre, for example, was there to counter that. Now, within each community, you don't have that body of people on the ground who would be authoritative in their community or speaking in a social setting. My personal view is that that has been a big part of the loss of support, but I do not have an easy solution for how you put that back together.

Luke Tryl: We do have, though, a lot of evidence that people are much more likely to trust their neighbours on these issues, and people around them in their community, than they are politicians and others. It is a particularly important point, and I would take it a step further: people have stopped their relationship with the aid sector, and with aid charities being local people and local volunteers, and now it will often be the chuggers who are stopping people on the streets. It has totally changed the nature of people's personal relationship with the aid sector. It is a very important point.

Bel Trew: Can I add a quick point, or more of an observation? At *The Independent* we are playing with different ways of interacting with the aid community, and also just campaigning. Obviously, newspapers have taken on campaigns and everyone, usually at Christmas time, does a charity campaign to raise donations from readers. We recently launched a coalition—which you know about, David—effectively trying to call for the protection of UK funding for HIV/AIDS. It is an interesting mix because it is a newspaper, UN agencies and aid groups focusing on this. It is cross-party MPs and peers all coming together for something that we hope is efficient, effective and easily reachable. That way of doing things differently is maybe what needs to be explored.

Maybe what we are really talking about now is that we are seeing a paradigm shift in the concept of aid. I know that sounds very academic and not very helpful or practical, but it is clear that that is happening, and it needs to be reflected in how the Government move forward, especially when we talk about doing aid more efficiently—because that is where the scrutiny comes in—and especially when talking about leadership at a local level. Even when we look at organisations like the ERRs, we almost need to rip up the playbook from before, because it is gone. We saw that most dramatically with USAID basically atrophying. I am not really sure where I am going with this point, but we are basically talking about new beginnings.

Q224 Chair: Bel, let me bounce off your point. I agree that the British public are incredibly generous and want to support people wherever they are in the world, but I think the space has become quite toxic and polluted. As you alluded to earlier, people do not want to be seen as or criticised as a white saviour or a colonialist. They do not want to have people attack them for helping those overseas rather than helping their own—"You're not a patriot if you're giving money away." How do you create the language and the safe space for people who do believe in supporting humanity, or capacity



HOUSE OF COMMONS

building—whichever way you want to present it? Is that the role of Government, the charities themselves or the media? Where do you see that responsibility?

Bel Trew: Not to be a cop-out, but I think it is everyone together, because we are effectively talking about an entirely different way of trying to do things. Again, the media is responsible in this—I find myself falling into this pattern, simply because, as a human being viewing all of this, I am not very positive. I am trying to approach it with emotions like pride, dignity and shared mutual beliefs. It is well known in psychology that people want to feel proud of something and that it is effective, rather than know that things are just terrible. It is about everyone coming together, in a way, to make a big change.

Q225 **James Naish:** Thinking about younger people and education, is there any evidence, Luke, that campaigns within a school or education setting, or somewhere like King's College, can shift perceptions of how effective aid has been or could be in the future?

Luke Tryl: There are two things. First, we know that there is more support for aid among younger people in general. I do not think we have evidence—Jennifer might—of whether there is a direct causal link there, but it seems reasonable to assume there is. A secondary point that we know from data across volunteering and engagement is that if people start engaging in practices such as volunteering and supporting at a younger age, they are much more likely to carry on with that. As I say, I do not have the direct causal link, but I think the evidence we do have allows us to paint a picture.

Jennifer Hudson: To support what Luke said, that is exactly right. The data we have for the last decade shows a consistently high level of support among young people. It is about engaging them at a young level and building in that socialisation and muscle memory of how to be part of this conversation.

We have seen from some of our work with young people a desire to have different ways of engaging, because it has been quite traditional. We still talk in the sector about donating as the principal way of engaging—the NGOs are much better in this space—but young people think about engagement in drastically different ways, so are we offering the right set of opportunities for them? That requires a different set of thinking; it is not just a trip overseas. How can they do it digitally? How can they do it at a moment's notice? How can they do it differently from how you and I might have been socialised to engage with issues? That is important. We should think about what our colleagues said earlier: are we providing a platform of ways to engage that can facilitate young people being part of this issue?

Bel Trew: We are certainly seeing that play out in the media world. People are getting their news and information from unverified sources on different social media platforms, such as TikTok. Another issue that may come into play is the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation. You have to contend with that when you are trying to communicate about



the aid programme you are working on, especially with the younger generations, who are being flooded with information, most of which is wrong or AI-driven. On something like X, the trust and safety division has been decimated. I am highlighting more of a problem than a solution, but that also needs to be thought about in this process.

Q226 James Naish: Is there any evidence that the diaspora communities in the UK should be thought about differently? Are there opportunities within those diaspora communities that may be less obvious with the more traditional UK population? How would you engage diaspora communities most effectively if you were the UK Government?

Jennifer Hudson: I am not sure I have a good answer to your question on how to engage them, James. We have lots of evidence showing that they are more supportive, engaged and inherently interested in the subject and the topic. Predominantly, engagement has been through remittances back home.

I think it was Sapphire who mentioned earlier connecting diaspora communities and thinking about how we connect the diaspora here in the UK with organisations and institutions in their home country, and do capacity building in that way. Is there a community-to-community mechanism that would be beneficial and would draw on the shared experience of people living here in the UK and back at home? I think there is something to explore there, but I don't have a lot of data on different mechanisms of engagement.

Luke Tryl: My answer will be similarly partial. The particular area that we have looked at is the related area of refugee community sponsorship. One of the things that we found is that, as you might imagine, diaspora groups have a significantly greater appetite than the general public, but they can also act as ambassadors within their community to encourage other people to take part in schemes. We saw that with things like the Homes for Ukraine scheme, in particular, and I am sure the link would be the same on a broader suite of aid and development-related topics.

Q227 Brian Mathew: I used to be an aid worker once upon a time. I am sure other MPs on the panel have had similar experiences of going along to church groups and others in our communities, talking to them and hearing what they have to say. Among those communities, you find young people and old people—all kinds of people—with a wonderful sense that this stuff is important, so we need to hook into that spirit. You certainly find the same thing going on in Ireland and other countries. I believe that in Ireland people give even more proportionally than we do here. Again, we should look at things like the Glastonbury festival and its link with aid. There are lots of green shoots—lots of good things are happening—and we shouldn't be totally despondent about that.

Luke Tryl: I totally agree. There is far less of a challenge when it comes to individual giving, individual support and engagement. The more I look at the evidence, the more I think one of the challenges that we face is almost, "Whose responsibility is this anyway? Isn't aid and development all



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that stuff at church groups and at festivals, and the stuff that my kids are doing when they're getting sponsored? Why is it suddenly this thing coming out of my taxes as well?" There is an interesting tension there.

Bel Trew: If I can add an observation, from what our readers are saying, there is maybe frustration at the discrepancies between aid given to certain groups of people and not others, if we are talking about the diaspora community. An example is the massive amount of support that was given to Ukrainians—which was fantastic; I cover Ukraine and I have been on the frontline there a lot—versus the support for Gaza. Just as an observation, our readers and the people I speak to are saying that maybe the Government could listen more closely to what the British public have to say and what they would like.

Q228 **Brian Mathew:** And, more to the point, there is Sudan, which is the biggest forgotten-about crisis happening in the world today.

Bel Trew: Absolutely—100%. Sudan is such an important thing to mention because it has just been completely—you know, the media is also responsible for that as well. But I think there is a frustration that there is a sort of unilateral decision made about who gets to be looked after and who does not.

Luke Tryl: Can I just add a real caution there, though? Across the public in general, support for Ukraine and support for investing in Ukraine is much higher. In part, that is because, for lots of people, it is a simpler conflict to understand. Just to bring it right down: "Putin bad, Zelensky good." It is interesting; other conflicts are more challenging. My urging to aid advocates—we have seen this in other areas—would be to look at why people want to support Ukraine and use that as a building block for other areas, rather than looking to create some kind of Ukrainian exceptionalism and assuming it is down to race or other issues, when actually the evidence does not support that.

Q229 **James Naish:** I don't know whether I am officially allowed to ask this, Chair, but I want to ask each of you something: ultimately, do you think that aid and its future is ever a vote winner, or is it always a vote loser?

Jennifer Hudson: I will risk going first. In and of itself, I have not seen any evidence—and we have asked questions—of whether this is a vote winner. We asked it in a variety of different ways: "Would you vote for your MP, or your Member of the House of Representatives, based on their position on aid?" The answer we get is, "Probably not." Where I do think it is a vote winner is when it is combined with other, let's call them, global challenges: "What is the value proposition that we are putting forward about the way we want to see the world work and what we are trying to do, protect and deliver?"

If I were a politician, one approach might be that I want to stand up in front of my constituents and say, "I think the world has these challenges. The way I think we need to address them is that we need to be principled around making ourselves safe and secure. We need to address the challenges of climate and we need to think about the interconnectedness



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of the world, and that means how we think about development.” You have to make an argument, and to me, it is not a single issue, but a proposition as part of an argument that we are having here in the UK, in the US—everywhere. In that vein, I think there is a very wide constituency out there that wants to hear a story or a narrative about how this fits in among other things.

Luke Tryl: I would actually slightly nuance the idea that aid is a vote loser. I am not convinced that the evidence shows that it is. I think it is politically low-cost to cut aid, and it is popular to cut it, but I am not sure there is evidence that levels of aid are necessarily a vote loser.

I think the area where you can tell a more positive political story—if I am allowed to say that here; obviously it is a cross-party point—is that aid done well, such as with vaccines, can feed into this idea of the politics of “can”: that politics can actually make a positive difference in people’s lives and that it can benefit us and others around the world, too. From our wider work, that has too often been missing; there has been a lot of politics of “can’t”. But, of course, going back to what we were talking about earlier, all that relies on being able to communicate those results.

Bel Trew: I agree with that. This may be incredibly naive of me, but I think that aid should not be dependent on whether it is a popular thing for voting or not. We live in a global community, and we just can’t not do this. It has a direct impact, and whether we are able to communicate that to the general public or not, it is just so important.

I do think that people respond well to social justice, if that is the right term to use—to care, to pride and to dignity, in the positive meanings of those words. It can be spoken of in a positive way to support, say, a political platform, but it has to be seen as its own thing. We are in a global community. Climate impacts all of us—health, conflict, whatever it is. It will sometimes be too nuanced to explain, for example when canvassing, but it is so essential. It has to be a separate thing at the same time.

Chair: To play devil’s advocate with my colleague, in the 2024 election, seats were won or lost on Gaza, so it does have a powerful resonance.

Q230 **Tracy Gilbert:** I just want to go back a little to participation—this is for Bel and Luke first of all. Are there ways in which you think citizens could be more engaged in how we spend ODA, and what would that look like?

Luke Tryl: Greater agency would help to build confidence—the idea that “I have more and more of a say over things”. I am a little sceptical about things such as citizens’ assemblies on this issue, simply because I suspect it would attract the usual suspects, who would not then act as advocates.

But there have been more creative solutions proposed. Ravi Gurumurthy proposed the idea of individual aid accounts, where people would be given a list of projects that could be supported and would be able to decide where their contribution goes. That has not been explicitly tested, but it is a wider mechanism of the sort that is known to help build confidence in decision making generally.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bel Trew: Journalism has a clear role to play here, because we can explain things and advocate for them—for example, through different campaigns that we have been working on, whether on HIV or sexual and reproductive health. However, for us, transparency remains a challenge. The problem is that we cannot help to communicate about ODA if we do not know what it is going to be spent on, or when that will be announced.

Public engagement is helpful, but I am not entirely sure how you do that on a micro level. Journalism should play a major role in that, but we are finding it difficult to do so when we do not know what it is going to look like.

Q231 **Tracy Gilbert:** Jennifer, is there anything you want to add?

Jennifer Hudson: This is a really interesting question. Some research that we have done showed that when we gave the public a variety of different aid programmes and their constituent parts—do you want to spend in a particular country, do you want to spend under a particular amount, would you rather spend on need or security, and do you want to spend where there is conditionality?—by and large, the public wanted to spend in places where the need was greatest, and that overrode almost all other considerations by a significant factor.

When you put those options to the public, they choose to spend where need is greatest. We already have quite a lot of strong signals about what the public want aid for—health, WASH and education. If we were to make an intervention in this space, we would ask ourselves a more refined question: what we do in these spaces that already align with where the public are at, and that might help them get more agency or understanding of the process, rather than opening it up to questions such as, do we want infrastructure, or do we want to spend in different ways? I think we have already got a lot of strong signals about alignment.

Q232 **Brian Mathew:** One way that you can do that and get greater agency—this is something that has been done quite a bit in the past—is co-funding. So you put £1 into this and we will put £2 in, or whatever it is. Do you have any reflections on those sorts of programmes?

Jennifer Hudson: Where we have done work with certain NGOs who have been co-funded by the FCDO, we see some evidence that it is nice to have—if you put in £1, Government will put in £1. There is a little bit of reassurance that we are doing something together and you are not taking all of the risk. We have not seen a lot of evidence that that is an overly compelling driver to get people to participate, but it is reassurance that the risk is shared or that the enterprise is seen as valued by both Government and the individual. It does not drive people in, but it certainly reinforces that this is something they are happy to be a part of.

Q233 **Janet Daby:** Bel, you mentioned that when people have more information, they are more attuned to and aware of development relief and aid and are therefore more likely to be sympathetic to it. This is a question to you and others. Do you think that if more information were available to the public, they would have a different response? In terms of

the historical impact on many Commonwealth and undeveloped countries that the UK has benefited from, do you think the UK Government have a role to play in public awareness that there is a need to give something back, but also to give because of the great needs in those countries?

Bel Trew: Yes, that is very, very important. We talked earlier about people not wanting to feel colonial, racist or abusive, but at the same time, there is a massive lack of information. The impact of the British empire is not taught enough in schools, in my personal opinion. Absolutely, that would be one way. I do not know whether, psychologically, that would mean people were more willing to give money or whether they would just shut themselves off. This is awful to say, but we noticed from our reporting that if we dig deep into the negativity of a subject constantly, the viewers just drop off.

There is a balance between absolutely needing to do that, to right a wrong and to move forward, and, at the same time, the psychology of it. I notice that people have fatigue. We are contesting with a lot of immediate conflicts that are happening right now. I think there is a way to do that, and it is really important. It is a big hole that needs to be filled.

Luke Tryl: I think, in terms of building a wide coalition of support for aid and development, that it is quite a dangerous track to go down. We find in our testing that any sort of language around reparations appeals very strongly to the most progressive groups in the population and alienates all of the other groups. As well as what has been said about negative emotions, it makes people think that aid is being used for political ends to advance a political agenda. I think it would be a surefire way, unfortunately, to worsen the current levels of public support.

Jennifer Hudson: There is strong evidence from some qualitative work we did of exactly what Luke found. The conversation about the UK's place in history, what it has done and how it might have benefited is of interest to a very, very small segment that, in DEL's terms, we would call the fully engaged—those people who want to have this conversation and are aware. For the rest of the public, it is a non-starter, and for many, it is very, very uncomfortable. It is politically uncomfortable for them.

When we started trying to unpick this, we asked, "Do you understand the power relationship?" and people said, "I don't want to talk about power. It literally makes me feel uncomfortable." The sector has been having this conversation, and inasmuch as we may want to, from a value base, say that it is important that we do that, we have a very long way to go to have that conversation with the public. If we choose to do it, it will really not land well with a very large segment of the public, so I think there is a risk.

Janet Daby: Sometimes that is the elephant in the room, so it is nice to get that out there.

Bel Trew: The problem is that we are asking people now, with the lack of information they have and thoughts already in their brains. Maybe this is more of an indication of how the education system has failed. Not to widen this conversation, but I feel like people would have that response because



HOUSE OF COMMONS

they would not necessarily even know, and they do not even want to think about it. I think it is important, but it needs to be done in a way that starts earlier. It is an important conversation, and it is sad to me that we cannot have it, because it is the truth.

Janet Daby: Thank you for that. I want to raise one more thing. When I was in my teenage years, the Bob Geldof song "We Are the World" was released, with lyrics that said, "We are the world. We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day." There is something about language and how we use it that can bring people together. You have mentioned in many parts of our conversation the issue of who is responsible for improving people's situation and getting them out of poverty. If anybody is listening to this who has any contacts, it would be great if something could happen on a more global basis that is as coherent as "We Are the World", led by Bob Geldof, because that was absolutely fantastic, and I think we need something more like that.

Chair: That is a lovely point to end on. Thank you so much, witnesses. We are aware that we are going to get the budget allocations imminently, which will be the priorities, whether that is health, WASH and education or the countries that are likely to be focused on. I also want to raise that we are looking at a 25% reduction at least in FCDO staff. There is a lot going on. We will aim to get our report, which you have now fed into, into the public domain as quickly as we can, to try to influence those priorities and principles that the Government work to. Thank you all very much, and thank you, audience, for your written contributions; please do keep them coming in.