

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The philosophy and culture of aid, HC 101

Tuesday 30 November 2021

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Theo Clarke; Chris Law; Navendu Mishra; Kate Osamor; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 221 to 254

Witnesses

I: Tom Wein, Founder, The Dignity Project; Nabila Saddiq Tayub, Development and Network Manager, STOPAIDS; Sanjayan Srikanthan, Board Chair, The Start Network, and Chief Executive Officer, ShelterBox.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Tom Wein, Nabila Saddiq Tayub and Sanjayan Srikanthan.

Q221 Chair: I would like to start this session of the International Development Select Committee. We are looking at the philosophy of aid. We come to this without any preconceived ideas but we are very minded that, at this point in time, both the Foreign Secretary and FCDO are developing their next five-year development strategy. We would hope that this Committee is able to influence that thought process with debates like this.

We are very fortunate to be joined by three witnesses, all of whom have a broad breadth of knowledge in this sector. We are looking to draw on your experience and ideas. I will ask you to introduce yourselves and your organisations first, and then we will get going with the questions. Starting with Sanj, I wonder if you could introduce yourselves and the organisations you are representing. I know you have a lot of hats.

Sanjayan Srikanthan: Good afternoon, Chair. I am Sanj Srikanthan. I am the chair of the Start Network, who invited me to represent them here, and I am also CEO of a disaster relief organisation called ShelterBox.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: I am Nabila Saddiq Tayub. I am here representing STOPAIDS, which is an HIV/AIDS advocacy organisation. We are also working on global health equity. I have just returned from 16 years in Malawi working in public health there, so I will be talking with both of those hats on.

Tom Wein: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for the chance to be here. My name is Tom Wein, and I am the founder of the Dignity Project, which is a campaign for more respectful international development.

Q222 Chair: The first question is deliberately broad. In your own opinions, or in the opinions of your organisations, what do you think the point is of international aid?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: International aid is ultimately about giving something to people who are often put into vulnerable situations to improve their overall life outcomes. How you do it is often up for debate and discussion. One of the things that the Start Network is certainly passionate about is the fact that strengthening civil society in countries through aid going directly to local NGOs is often an outcome in itself. Strong civil societies mean more democratic countries, longer outcomes and a longer vision in terms of delivery. How we deliver aid is almost as important, if not more important, as what aid is.

Overall, if you want aid to be effective, you have to think about what you are trying to strengthen in that country. The international system is geared towards short-termism, which is aid to solve the problem that is in front of us right now, whether it is humanitarian or longer-term development, rather than strengthening what are broadly the four



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institutions in those countries: Government, including legislature; judiciary; civil society; and the private sector. All those matter. Certainly for Start Network, strengthening civil society will mean not only an effective response in time but also a longer and stronger civil society to deliver subsequently for people in that country.

Q223 Chair: Who decides what the problem is, or who should decide what the problem is?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: Most in the aid sector will tell you that the answer is the people affected by disaster. Often what they want is a solution to the problem in front of them, and we respond. We do not often pause to think about the underlying causes of the problem and whether there is a smarter way to do it.

One of the newer concepts that has been around for a while in the sector is anticipatory action, which is spending aid more smartly before there is a problem, as defined by people affected. For example, one of the ideas in Senegal is using a risk insurance mechanism that was cheaper to provide pay-outs when drought hit to ensure women and children had two meals a day at the very least. The trouble is trying to communicate that problem and the solution to the public audience who like the iconography of response rather than the efficiency of preparedness and anticipation.

Q224 Chair: That assumes that most donors are Governments. Thinking about philanthropic donations, is there currently a mechanism whereby a country or a people could approach them in the anticipatory way that you are talking about?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: The lack of accessibility for funding for people affected, and local organisations close to those people affected, is a major problem. Governments often do not have the bandwidth to deal with lots of local NGOs directly.

In terms of philanthropic institutions, in this country there is an application to a corporate donor every 15 seconds, usually from a UK NGO let alone an international one. We need to have mechanisms that allow for the responsible channelling of funds as quickly and as closely to the front line of disaster as possible.

Start Network, with its growing membership of local NGOs, does not respond directly but, through others, including local NGOs, it is doing that. I can give examples but I will stop there.

Q225 Chair: Nabila, can I ask the same question to you? What is the point of aid? I also know that you are coming from micro-organisations and now in a considerably bigger one. Can you think about that from both perspectives, please?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Sure, thank you. I will start with our vision as STOPAIDS, which is a world without HIV and AIDS, where all people can



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realise their right to good health and wellbeing. In terms of what the point of aid is, what is our global view? What kind of global society do we want to be? What are the minimum rights we expect for all people? Is it that we all aspire to the sustainable development goals? The answer to that question probably varies from organisation to organisation, but for us it is that there are minimum standards of quality of life that we should aspire to for every citizen of the world.

Aid should be delivered and directed towards poverty alleviation, addressing inequalities and addressing structural barriers to equality, rather than aid being focused on the individual security of nations and their trade interests, for example. We believe that that is what the driver of aid should be.

I can speak from my experience working in Malawi on what the point of aid is. I arrived in Malawi in 2005 at the inception of the Global Fund. The HIV pandemic was at its height there. Looking over the 16 years I have been there, what I have seen is a reduction in deaths from HIV/AIDS. You can see this in a very basic level when you are driving along the roads and you would have all these funeral houses popping up on the side of the roads. I would see how many people are off work because they were attending funerals. We have seen this reduction in HIV/AIDS-related morbidity and mortality, and that is something that can be very strongly attributed to the Global Fund. Specifically, I would cite DFID's support to the health system in Malawi.

On the other hand, with my experience of community groups and the work I have done there, personally working with those groups, aside from medicines and ARVs coming through the Global Fund I have seen very little direct impact of international aid reaching really marginalised populations.

Q226 Chair: Can I challenge you on a few things? You are speaking a lot about HIV and AIDS, which I understand; if we had a TB charity sitting there, they would be telling us that the priority is dealing with TB. When we have been speaking particularly to African nations about the Covid vaccine, they are saying, "Actually, that is not our biggest priority. It might be your biggest priority but we are going to die from starvation or cholera quicker than we are from Covid".

You were speaking about "our global view" of good health. Who is determining, or should be determining, what "our health" and "good health" is, and is that what is happening at the moment, or is this a projection from people with money trying to do worthy things?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Going back to good health and questions of quality of life, yes, these have to come from communities that are affected by specific diseases, be it HIV/AIDS or anything else. Generally, they should come from the community level. Is that what is happening? In my experience, no. The reason is that it is really hard work to engage with and meaningfully work with marginalised, hard-to-reach populations.



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The first half of my time in Malawi was working with Médecins Sans Frontières. I was working with the Ministry of Health and international NGOs.

The second part of my experience was using all of that expertise and knowledge, and leaving that all behind and going to work directly with communities. I found that there were not sufficient mechanisms in place. There were not incentives for international organisations to invest in working with hard-to-reach communities. There is this constant tension around a results-driven framework where you have to report on impact within a period of a year or two.

If you want to meaningfully engage communities, reach out to them, build capacity and make them part of the decision-making process, that is not going to happen in a year. There is always that misalignment, which creates disincentives to engaging with communities.

Q227 Chair: Tom, I put the same question to you: what is the point of international aid?

Tom Wein: To me, it is about the universal promise that every human ought to have: the freedom to do and the freedom to be. They ought to have thriving lives. It is perhaps helpful to say that aid to me is adamantly not there to block people from moving to a better life or to create a market for British goods or to win over extremists. It should be for humanity, not for national power.

When good aid is done right, and it often is not—Sanj made this point nicely—it promotes universal social services and universal human rights for those with the least power. It upholds their dignity. Colleagues of yours, like David Willetts and Jon Cruddas have talked a lot about dignity in domestic policy, and we should be extending that same promise, to the extent that we can and to the extent of our own ability to do so, to as many people as we can.

Q228 Chair: I share your view, but can aid ever be mutually beneficial to both the donor and the recipient? Does one side always have an agenda and will it always lose out on a deal?

Tom Wein: I hope not. We have seen plenty of great programmes that seem to do enormous benefit for those in most need.

Q229 Chair: Can you give us an example?

Tom Wein: An organisation called Open Philanthropy does a huge amount of research about different programmes. They try to identify six or seven programmes that will be the most effective. They reckon, according to their research, that the equivalent of £1 donated to some aid programmes, such as giving vitamin A supplements and early childhood vaccines, and using chlorine to treat drinking water, does a thousand times more good for the world than if it had been held on to by a family



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in a rich country instead. There really are great examples of programmes that can do a lot more than perhaps the average programme does.

Q230 **Chair:** In our previous evidence sessions, some of the witnesses were saying that aid can be considered as a form of reparation from high-income countries like the UK to right historical wrongs against low and middle-income countries. Do you agree that there is validity in that?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: From a STOPAIDS perspective, we definitely feel that there is a conversation to be had on that. As an NGO based in the global north, we are probably not the right people to be leading on that conversation, but this is a conversation that needs to be had. If there is compensation hundreds of years ago over the slave trade for owners, which we as a country have apparently only completed paying a few years back, the most significant part of that equation of everyone affected is something that needs to be addressed.

From personal experience, I am second generation in the UK. My parents migrated from Pakistan-held Kashmir. Their parents were displaced as a result of colonial policy and partition. They tell stories of how, overnight, they had to flee and leave everything and start their lives all over again. Whatever family inheritance they had and so on was wiped out. There is a real, obvious human effect. I feel that it has been felt within my family. It is something that needs to be addressed.

As STOPAIDS, we want to be part of that conversation and we want to support it, but we believe it is the affected communities that should lead it.

Sanjayan Srikanthan: I had a similar family history to Nabila as second generation, and a grandchild of those who lived under empire. It has a chequered history with some horrific stories as well as some great moments, certainly in the last World War.

At the same time, I prefer to leave politics out of aid. As much as I do not want aid to be viewed as advancing a very narrow set of national self-interests, at the same time I do not want us to be motivated to give based on the concept of reparations. The reason is, first, it does not apply to all countries. We were never in Yemen as a country, so should we not give to Yemen since we are not obliged to give reparations there?

More importantly, we need to frame it in more altruistic purposes and in terms of mutual benefit. When you talk about whether it can be mutually beneficial, a simple case is coronavirus and the way it keeps mutating. That is because we have a very narrow definition of responsibility around eliminating that virus. If we had a much more global vision—which is more than just vaccine donation, by the way; it is about the logistics to the last mile—we would have a better health outcome for all of us. Nowhere in that conversation is there a place to really articulate reparation as a driver of good aid policy. That is my view.



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Chair: Thank you. We could have a whole Committee session just on that last point.

Q231 **Navendu Mishra:** Welcome to all three of you. The Chinese Government have a different approach to aid than perhaps the UK. Is investment in infrastructure a good thing?

Tom Wein: There is a report from AidData, which is an institute in the United States, by Rob Blair and his colleagues, that shows that, when people live close to a UK or a US-funded aid project, those people, after the aid project is implemented, feel more in favour of the UK and the US. When they lived close to a Chinese aid project, they felt less in favour of China after it was implemented. Many of the characteristics of the Chinese aid programme and huge infrastructure investment are quite similar to what the UK and the US did in the 1950s and 1960s. We moved away from that for good reason.

That is not to say that all of that aid is bad, and we should welcome spending and investment in poor countries, but, if we primarily take the preferences of those closest to the aid programmes—those who are supposed to benefit from them—I can say that those programmes are fiercely controversial in the countries in which they are being built. There are many critiques of the ways in which those aid programmes seem to fund the lifestyles of elites as much as the benefit of the people who are supposed to be supported by them.

We should welcome spending and we should welcome investment, but there are huge problems with the way the Chinese programme does things, as, indeed, we should be doing better in our own aid programmes.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Echoing what Tom said, there has been significant Chinese investment in infrastructure in various parts of Africa, and we have had investment in Malawi as well.

My experience has been that investment into infrastructure there has largely been within, and catered for, the private sector. It does not actually generate significant local wealth in terms of the import of the materials or even of labour and expertise. It has not helped provide local opportunities or develop local capacity. There is a limit on the benefit in the model that they are using.

Sanjayan Srikanthan: It can be beneficial, for sure. It depends on how it is done. I totally agree with Tom's point on how it is done badly by some. For example, after Ebola in Sierra Leone and Liberia—I was in Liberia for the response—we spent a lot on health system strengthening, including refurbishment of hospitals that were in such a dilapidated state that it impacted the ability to respond to Ebola. That was not a great motivation, and it was late and after the fact, but that was a good example of infrastructure investment to strengthen health outcomes. That will not do it by itself. We still have to deal with other aspects such



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as brain drain from those countries, as well as education, but it was certainly a key part in improving outcomes for the next time.

Q232 Chris Law: I want to ask a supplementary question, primarily not so much about the infrastructure but about the way aid is linked to loans given by China and what the long-term impact is for recipient countries. For example, Montenegro is now challenging China in court over sovereignty because China claims it owns part of its sovereign land for failing to pay back loans. Is this something you have come across, particularly in the African continent?

Tom Wein: Loans given by China are fiercely controversial. Loans also given by the World Bank right now are fiercely controversial. There were some very passionate protests this spring against another round of World Bank lending to the current Government, which a number of members of civil society felt was unlikely to have much benefit to the citizens.

This is something we should be looking out for. Whenever we see citizens protesting and saying, "This type of aid is not working for us", that is incredibly important. When UK aid programmes are built in adaptive ways and they are listening in the right ways, then they start to notice when the type of aid that is being given is not working for the local citizens. That sort of indicator is really important.

Q233 Chair: Tom, I am going to put you on the spot here because our Government have now shifted their allocation so that more of the aid money can go on capital spend, at the same time that our development bank, CDC, has changed its name so that "development" is no longer in the title. Does that make you a little nervous that there could be more loans going on of the sort that you are talking about?

Tom Wein: It is less likely to support the type of localisation and the spending towards national NGOs that is the right way to do aid. Other people are much more qualified to comment on the inner workings of CDC, or BII as it is now, but, yes, I worry.

Q234 Chair: Are you worried, or are you comfortable where we are?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: It is a parallel channel of investment. As Tom says, we are not expecting it to flow through national or local NGOs. It is about private sector channelling in those countries. I am not qualified to say if all of those are going to be bad or good. We need a strong private sector in countries if you want long-term sustainable outcomes, but it is not strengthening civil society. That is clearly not what this change is about. It is almost a parallel conversation. If I talk to our local NGOs about Chinese investment, it is something that is happening in parallel. They are not interested in civil society strengthening either. They are looking at something else; arguably something much more about self-interest.

Q235 Chair: To push you on that, should civil society be at the heart of decision-making when it comes to development spend?



Sanjayan Srikanthan: Stepping outside of my role, which is to represent civil society, they have to be an important part of this. A strong civil society drives better democratic outcomes in the societies, holding parliaments and leaders to account, but it cannot do it by itself either.

Job creation is important, and that is where the private sector is important. The concern from the civil society perspective is where you are looking to invest in the private sector or in things outside of civil society, which is not optimal in terms of driving us towards a better country versus better specific institutions, and sometimes those are in the national interest.

Yes, I would love to see more investment in civil society. If you want a longer-term outcome than what humanitarian aid can ever do, you have to invest in that civil society. Where we are not investing, it is going to be a problem.

Q236 **Mr Sharma:** We have seen, at present, that the aid sector is not working in certain directions. Would you like to see any changes in it? What do you think the British Government can do to facilitate that change? What would you like to have?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: When we go to the public, not Governments, for aid spending, they want to see the disaster in order to fund it. We are still very reactive in our mindset. People want to see disasters and people displaced, and then they want to respond. That is just not the most efficient way to spend aid, and often costs more. Reactive, preparedness, anticipatory action and risk insurance are the new tools that are emerging, which are already available in more developed economies, that can make aid work smarter.

Where Government have a role is where you can be much more courageous than we can with the public, who want to see that, in thinking about how to make aid go further and making the case for anticipatory action. Government is about mature thinking, and not requiring the iconography of reactive disaster to fund it. It is about making taxpayers' money work smarter. If there is one thing Smart Network and ShelterBox would support, it is anticipatory action. There are numerous examples in Senegal and other places.

Some aid has to be reactive. Do not get me wrong. You cannot do everything by preparedness and anticipation. We have seen localisation in Start Fund Bangladesh reduce the overhead costs from 30% to around 11%, funding local NGOs, which is where 80% of the funding goes. A lot of that is UK Government funding. It is cheaper, it is closer and it is more localised. You retain the institutional knowledge in those local NGOs to respond to the next disaster because you funded them for this one. Those are some really smart ways to do it.

Being honest here, the challenge is that local NGOs, and even national NGOs, have finite capacity. Governments often give large amounts of



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multilateral funding to the UN system because they still operate at scale. If you want to do cash distributions to a million-plus people in Lebanon, you go to WFP or UNHCR, not to a local NGO or even a national NGO.

The problem there is that we have created a parallel system. We have not invested in civil society. We have a quasi-social service system funded by donors through a UN implementer rather than thinking about the four things I said, which is investing in Government, judiciary, civil society and the private sector to do that themselves.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: At STOPAID, we have been looking at our own impacts. One is transforming AIDS solidarity and development co-operation. Our position is that aid eligibility and allocation for AIDS should always be guided, first, by the most marginalised communities. Again, I would echo what you said about meaningful involvement of the communities that are affected.

It is also about shifting the narrative a little from this idea of aid and assistance coming from the global north and going to the south, and thinking around the ideas of a model of global public investment or a global system whereby all countries input into a pot for aid, so that everyone feels that they are part of it.

Certainly, speaking from my experience in Malawi, it is not a nice feeling to always feel that we need help and assistance and that it is coming our way. From a Government level down to the individual level—call it national individual pride or whatever—it is about having everyone inputting. Call it global public investment and let everybody decide on how that should be allocated, working towards a more collaborative approach to pooling and distributing funding for aid.

Tom Wein: All the way through my answers, I have been making a distinction between better aid and worse aid, better programmes and worse programmes. One thing that DFID got really right over the last few years was its investment in evidence, in the results agenda and in checking whether a programme was delivering the results that we hope it is.

One thing I would like to see added to that is a greater focus on incorporating an understanding of the process and whether it is being done in the right way to that results agenda, so checking, using the same quality of evidence and that same thriving research and evidence division, which I really hope will not be lost in this merger, to make sure that we are doing the right process.

Every country team and every programme ought to have an ability to listen to the citizens they are supposed to be serving and be programmed to be adaptive and ready to make changes if they start to hear that that is not working for people. If we are doing that, starting to incorporate those ideas of good process as well as good results, then the FCDO will really be showing that Britain continues to be a place that does aid in the



right way, as well as one that gives a lot and contributes large amounts of money.

Q237 **Mr Sharma:** Sanjay, do you think donors are committed to shifting funding and decision-making powers to the organisations and communities where programmes are delivered?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: It is a mixed story. The commitment by the USAID administrator, Samantha Power, to 25% of funding from USAID going to local organisations in the next four years is a huge and seismic step change in getting us closer to a global commitment around that grand bargain of localised response. The public desire and the donor narrative is very much supportive of this, but there are constraints driven by taxpayer accountability around compliance requirements, the bureaucracy and the qualifying criteria, which means that most local NGOs simply do not have the capacity to qualify for funding, even if the desire is there to give them more funding.

That also forms part of our responsibility, certainly for ShelterBox. We do not view capacity-strengthening of a local organisation as a means to an end for us; it is the end in itself. The best stories are where an international partner can strengthen a local NGO to the point where they can apply independently for UN pooled funds, as happened in Somalia with us.

Donor desire is there. The execution is flawed or stalled—take your pick—and that is where we really need to be joined up, less self-interested as international NGOs and much more solutions-focused with donors around investing in that capacity for frontline assistance. The benefits are there, as I have said, in the Bangladesh example. You saw a drop in overheads in the long term. That does not happen overnight; it is through that front-loaded investment. You then also have the by-product of a stronger civil society in that country.

Q238 **Chair:** Could I just push you a little? It is the same question that I gave to Nabila. Do you think that there will ever be a time when the NGOs are able to have that broader holistic position? They are being funded to put wash facilities in, for example, or they are being funded to prevent child mortality. I agree that there needs to be that overarching thing but, when you have to do your own individual fundraising for your own individual topic that you think is the most important thing, do you think it is possible?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: When we say “broader services”, NGOs need to be quite careful about what those services are in the first place, so not replacing Government is really important. There are plenty of international NGOs whose services have expanded to justify the income to support their office in that country to do things that should be done by a Government. We have never weaned ourselves off, as it were.

One of the most depressing conversations I remember was with a doctor in Rumbek in South Sudan after the referendum in 2011. I asked him



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what he was hopeful about in the future with a free and independent South Sudan. He said, "We have to buy more tanks and get ready for an attack from the north again". I said, "What about roads—you have 40km of roads—and hospitals?" He said, "We have NGOs for that". That is a really sad story, because we have created that dependency, and not a strong Government taking responsibility for those things, so, in the first place, I do not think we should be thinking so multisector.

There is a place for NGOs in the short term in terms of acute emergency response. Even in this country, with the floods in the north of England, there is a civil society response. In the longer term, we need to think about what the role is of not just international NGOs but even local civil society to complement Government, not replace Government. That is possible and those are where donor funds should go.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Again, I refer to my experience in Malawi and what I have seen in terms of donor engagement. When I arrived in 2005, there was a shift then to go towards core budgetary support and really supporting Governments, and moving away from supporting individual NGOs. When you get issues with the Government, such as various corruption scandals or reasons for aid to be forestalled or withheld, you look for other avenues of disbursing that aid.

I definitely feel that the rhetoric is there in terms of communities. I have seen the voices around the need to work with local communities and engage with them becoming louder. In terms of actual practice, in my experience, I have not seen huge change there. I helped set up and support a grassroots organisation of women and girls affected by HIV/AIDS 10 years ago. Most of them cannot read or write. Most of them have not encountered officials of any sort and are not in a position to be able to get international funding.

No one is going to go out and work with these groups, but, when we do get calls from international organisations, what is unfortunate, in my experience, is that there is this drive to say, "Have you done your due diligence with community organisations? Have you spoken to them?" Organisations will get in touch, ask some questions and then disappear. That has happened numerous times, to the point where I felt, working in Malawi, that it was more effective to raise funds privately from the local business community and from other services, and just try to implement whatever needs to be implemented that way.

Tom Wein: We should be asking what that commitment would look like. There is no doubt that the rhetoric is there. Donors are talking about localisation a lot.

For instance, we saw a very centrepiece speech by Administrator Power. That is good and that is an extra commitment. We would also be seeing, if they were really committed to it, more measuring of the types of outcomes that a local NGO can credibly win a bid on. I talk about more measurement of process outcomes, whether a programme is respectful of



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people's dignity, whether it is being done in the right way, and whether it is a good match to the preferences of the local citizens. If we start scoring bids on those sorts of things, then a local NGO is much more likely to win.

To the extent that we primarily score bids on value-for-money and number of people reached, of course, the largest NGOs, the big INGOs and the big aid implementers are always going to win those bids.

Q239 Mr Sharma: Sanjay, how has FCDO funding to the Start Network benefited local communities and organisations in the countries where programmes are delivered? How has FCDO funding worked on those countries?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: The most immediate example is taking that pilot from Senegal that I mentioned, which was around an insurance pay-out to women and children to ensure two meals a day during drought if that drought event occurred, which it did, and now extrapolating it and doing the same in southern Africa, which is going to be funded by this FCDO grant. There is also top-up to the funding for reactive localised start funds like Bangladesh so that we can really go to a bigger scale. With those funding pots, 80% goes to local organisations. As I have mentioned, they have reduced overall cost from 30% to 11%.

In addition to that, we have seen a 25% drop in average response time from 32 to 24 days. These are good outcomes in themselves, but they are also going through local organisations. It has been hugely beneficial, and we expect a report on more results.

Q240 Mr Sharma: Sanjay, the Start Network incorporates big international NGOs as well as small organisations in-country. How do you reconcile the objectives of those different aid sectors?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: It is a really good question, and we are still on that journey. We have 18 local NGOs as part of the global Start Network. We want to see more. The strategy that we have just rolled out for the forthcoming future is really creating a network of networks, creating more localised funds, not just in Bangladesh but around the world, and these will be owned by NGOs in that country. They will make decisions, not the London headquarters where we currently are for Start Network. They will also make decisions on who is a member of that fund.

This is difficult because international NGOs still have an important role to play, and a complementary role to local NGOs. We continue to have them as members but we are decentralising power and decision-making to where disasters are actually occurring, close to these hubs and these funds. That is the vision and that is the hope, so that in the coming years you are going to see that growing responsibility and accountability and funding channelled to these local hubs.

Q241 Mr Sharma: Do you ever have some difficulties or experience difficulties when the big brother talks to the smaller ones and a conflict of interest



comes?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: Power is finite. When you transfer it, somebody wins and somebody loses, if you are being honest about it. Those conversations are difficult. One has to ask international partners, “What is your motivation for doing it? Is it the good in itself of strengthening civil societies in these countries or is it about doing it as an ‘also’ to ensuring funding for yourself?” There could be a lessening of influence and of funding as a result, but you have to appeal to people’s vision and outcome, which is decentralising and a stronger civil society.

International NGOs are like any other organisation. They have to think about the bottom line, cost and where funding will come from. I appreciate that these are not easy conversations and they are ongoing, but there is an instinct to do this that we want to hold on to.

Tom Wein: There are three levels of localisation: greater respect for national Governments and the strategies they lay out; more inclusion of civil society; and more listening to citizens. IDinsight is a research organisation that has done some fascinating methodological academic work on what the best way would be of rigorously determining what the preferences are of citizens, knowing that polling can only tell us so much, methodologically. They have done that work in Kenya and Ghana, and they have shown that people want more focus on children and supporting children’s lives than we normally give. They want more focus on health than we normally give. I really believe that work should be extended. It is incredibly important.

Q242 **Chris Law:** Tom, you must have predicted what I was about to ask you next, which is about the approach and how respectful we are to the people we serve. How do you gauge if aid is reaching people in a respectful way and giving respect at the same time?

Tom Wein: It always has to be in the eye of the person with the least power in that interaction. We have to be asking them. If I think I have done an enormous amount of work to be respectful and been very careful but the person who is receiving aid does not, then it does not really matter; I have clearly failed on that. One of the reasons we do that is that ideas of what is respectful will vary enormously from person to person and from culture to culture.

In my research, there are three pathways that seem to recur across different cultures: making certain that people have representation, that they feel seen by the organisation that is delivering aid to them and that they seem themselves in that organisation; autonomy and that they have choice and a meaningful chance to consent; and equality—that they feel treated as an equal and that, even if the power differential is there, they still feel treated as if they were an equal. Those three pathways seem to recur across different cultures and through all the different research projects we have done.



Q243 Chris Law: The Scottish Government are undergoing a review just now on their own international development structures. One of them is the Global South Programme Panel, which works in partnerships with its partners in Malawi, Zambia and elsewhere. How does the FCDO ensure its approach to UK aid is respectful to people who receive it? Has it been respectful or do big steps need to be made?

Tom Wein: The FCDO, or at least DFID as it was, did better than some organisations do on this. I do not think it is ever out of malice when it slips up. It is inherent in the scale at and the bureaucracy in which it is trying to operate. You guys know from the people you meet every week in surgeries that there is often something deeply frustrating about interacting with large state bureaucracies. Hopefully, it is not always because the bureaucracies are set up to harm people; they fail because they are not set up to hear people.

It varies enormously from programme to programme. There are some wonderful projects. I used to work for a charity in Uganda called Raising Voices, which works on preventing violence against women and children. That got DFID funding at one point, and that is a charity that I have so much respect for because of its grounded approach and its ability to hear the people it was serving. There are certainly examples where it is done very well.

Q244 Chris Law: I want to turn to Nabila because I have talked about Malawi and you are just back from there. I am also aware that tomorrow is World AIDS Day, and I am very sorry that the UK Government cut 83% of their funding to UNAIDS. How do the programmes on the ground in Malawi, for example, work in a way that is respectful to the people who are receiving our support?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: I am glad that you brought up the devastating impact of the AIDS cut. I have talked a lot about the impact of aid and the Global Fund, and how important it is for the UK to show leadership in the next Global Fund replenishment next year.

Again, just going back to my experience of working with communities in Malawi, I did a lot of work around health system strengthening in really hard-to-reach clinics. Part of that work involved interacting and speaking with patients. A really basic requirement is to inform. I am saying "inform" here, but ideally we want to involve communities in the design and development of any intervention that is going to affect them.

If decisions have been made that we are going to introduce X, Y or Z programme, it is about simply talking to the communities and informing them, taking any action that makes communities feel that they are part of the process in whatever way is meaningful, and that certainly carries a level of respect with it.

Whether it is a national Government-funded project or an internationally funded project, the norm is often, especially in hard-to-reach



communities, that you will get a notification, normally from a clinic or whoever is delivering the service, that this service is here, or you probably will not even know and you will just show up. Anything that informs local communities of changes or any service delivery in their area is in itself a significant step, as is going beyond that to having mechanisms of meaningful engagement. It is often really helpful to do these in existing community settings. If there are already ongoing monthly meetings with communities in health centres, for example, it is about joining those existing processes and using them to stay in touch with and connect with communities.

Q245 Chris Law: Tom, I met with Cool Earth a few weeks ago to talk about cash transfers that they do with the rainforest communities in Peru, Congo and Papua New Guinea, where nearly everything they do is in cash transfers. I want to ask about your own thoughts on why you think cash transfers are a more respectful way of providing assistance in comparison to other approaches. Do cash transfers increase the risk to donors of losing money to corruption, fraud and otherwise?

Tom Wein: Cash transfers are now one of the most researched types of programmes that go on anywhere in the aid world. The evidence is now incredibly strong that they help people, that those effects last 10 years on and that incredibly little of that money is wasted. A charity such as GiveDirectly, which is one of the leading providers of cash transfers, has incredibly strong processes for making certain that that money goes to the people who were signed up to use it.

The reason it is more respectful is partly because of that: it is so simple; it does not impose on people's lives; and it gives people an enormous amount of autonomy to start the business that they would like to and to address the family needs that they would like to. A study was done of whether these cash transfers were used on what we might call vices. Do people go out and buy alcohol and so on? It showed that the most common first purchase after receiving these aid transfers was a really nice fried chicken dinner. Then, after that, almost everybody spent it on a business or a productive asset. We could hardly begrudge people a nice dinner by way of celebration.

Q246 Chris Law: Can I put that question to the other two? What are your thoughts on cash transfers and how effective they are?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: We have recent experience of this, and I agree with Tom's comments about the effectiveness of cash transfers. We know that the messaging about cash transfers is a different challenge, especially to taxpayers.

For example, in Haiti, after the earthquake and Storm Grace, we have distributed shelter to 2,000 households. We found that the shelter kits we distributed are worth more in Haiti than we paid for them out of the country, because of the global supply chain crisis, the lack of a



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functioning market and the criminality. On the black market, those items are worth more.

For families with that shelter, they are left with this fundamental choice: “Do I have a roof over my head or do I sell it?” for what is a small fortune to that family to pay for food, clothing, water and some more immediate things that they need. We therefore also did a cash transfer to those 2,000 households alongside the shelter, so they would not have to make that choice.

The beauty of cash, when it is done well, is that it gives freedom of choice around specific needs of individuals and families in a way that, however responsive and however driven by a needs assessment we are, we cannot do with just physical items. The story of cash is that we are technically confident about it but we are still not confident in communicating it to a mass audience. That is what we will need to do through good case studies, examples and evidence.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: I have not had direct experience of cash transfers.

Q247 **Navendu Mishra:** On cash transfers, this Committee visited Geneva in September, and we heard from the Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. I was quite interested in that. They run the largest cash assistance programme in the world, in Turkey. I take the point you made about public relations and that message to the public. Do you think cash transfers increase the risk to donors of losing money to corruption and fraud? I understand what you said, Tom, about the research suggesting buying a meal. Would you like to comment on the corruption and fraud?

Tom Wein: The more transactions that are made, the more likely it is that money can be siphoned off. If the only transaction is from the donor into the NGO’s bank account and then from there, through mobile money, into the recipient of that aid, it is a very easily auditable trail. If you then have to also go and buy something—buy some equipment or some transport—then the more different contracts you have entered into, the more that prices could get inflated and the more different ways in which money can disappear.

There are real problems with money evaporating through corruption in all forms of aid, especially in the more chaotic environments. This is particularly acute when we are looking at aid in fragile and conflict-affected states. I do not see it as being particularly acute with cash transfers. If anything, it is a little better.

Q248 **Navendu Mishra:** You are saying it is similar to other forms of donations.

Tom Wein: It probably is, yes.



Sanjayan Srikanthan: We benefit from living in the digital age. That is a huge benefit to doing secure cash transfers in a safe way. When you talk about leakage or corruption, there is also the risk to the person receiving the aid when it is physical cash that is removed. That has been a huge benefit. I agree with Tom that, the fewer supply chain processes there are, the simpler the process becomes and the less room there is for corruption.

If the question is what happens after the money is received and whether it is used by the family as intended and whether they are paying for other things that are being coerced out of them, that is much harder to prove because it is often very hard to get that kind of evidence. We are seeing the efficacy of it getting to families. I am not saying that it is without scope for corruption or that corruption has not happened, but it is very competitive with more traditional forms of assistance through physical items.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: My experience of recipient selection is that that part of the process is quite crucial, doing the due diligence then, especially when you are dealing with a vulnerable population, such as with an orphan support programme. Who does the money go to? How are the guardians identified? A lot of due diligence at that stage is quite essential.

Just adding to the autonomy that cash brings, with the organisation that I helped set up in Malawi, we have been running a successful microfinance programme for over a decade now. This is something we can monitor in terms of how many funds are generated and where the money is being spent. That autonomy is really important because the priority for someone living with HIV might be nutritional requirements to help them absorb their ARVs while, for someone with children, it might be school uniforms. Having the freedom to make that choice, especially among women and female-led households, is really crucial.

Q249 **Theo Clarke:** Nabila, what do you think it would look like if the FCDO applied the global public investment framework to its aid spending?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: That is a good question. The global public investment framework looks in terms of the five paradigms. You have the ambition, which is moving away from this idea of reducing poverty and looking at reducing global inequality overall. I suppose it would increase the scope of development assistance. It is then about looking at the function of it, if we are talking about international public money not being piecemeal responses to either humanitarian crisis or identified development needs, and we are instead looking at it as a permanent force for global development. That would affect the FCDO in terms of having aid as it currently is as a permanent feature and entity of our politics.

Looking at it from the perspective of geography, I guess it would mean ceding of some power, if we are talking about shifting away from this



north-to-south flow of power, resources and money. It would be inputting into a global pot. Whether decision-making power will be proportionate to how much money we have put in is obviously under discussion, but certainly moving towards a more democratic model probably would be ceding power and influence, working on that scale. Again, in terms of governance, representative decision-making would mean bringing in other countries and giving them a voice in our aid spending as well. That would be another shift.

Q250 Theo Clarke: You made a point there about aid not being permanent. Do you think that aid should be finite? If so, what should be the trigger to ending it?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: It goes back to the purpose of aid. If we were talking about the purpose of aid being to deal with imminent and critical humanitarian crises, potentially you can say that aid is finite. If the purpose of aid is that we are working towards some sort of a global standard of health and basic quality of life, certainly it seems to be far from finite as things stand. I would go back to the sustainable development goals.

In terms of when we pull the trigger, when DFID changed policy to use gross national income as a measure of when to withdraw aid for middle-income countries, that transition had severe consequences. When to pull the trigger is an important question, but I do not feel that you should use simple proxy markers such as "Once a country is on this level", in terms of using an economic indicator such as gross national income, "we can pull the trigger on aid". That does not show us the levels of inequality within a country.

For example, we have a significant amount of the new poor now coming from middle-income countries. When to pull the trigger is definitely something that should be done with co-operation and discussion with the countries and communities involved and with enough time to work on a transition plan.

Q251 Theo Clarke: Can I clarify? What happens when aid programmes are coming to an end? What can we do, as the UK particularly, to make sure that progress is not being lost when those programmes are finished?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: I will give an example of a programme that was led by DFID and supported by international NGOs, as well as other donor Governments. This was the emergency human resources programme, and that was from 2004 to 2010 in Malawi. It was in response to the Malawi Government putting out a call to say that their health system is on the verge of collapse. This assistance was over about £100 million of spending. There was investment into infrastructure but also paying top-ups for salaries, which of course is something that is not considered to be sustainable or desirable.



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At the end of that, we saw that, because of the investment in the infrastructure, increasing the capacity of training colleges, for example, and because topping up those salaries showed that you can retain health workers within country, once the aid for that particular project had finished it was something that was then inherited, taken on and sustained by the Government of Malawi.

With the right planning, that is something great that international aid can do. It can show results and build national consensus and commitment to continue successful projects.

Sanjayan Srikanthan: It is interesting to explore that, when we think about impact, we do post-distribution reporting and monitoring at the end of a project. To your point, if you want to really see impact, is it worth funding research a year after the project ends to see what the impact has been long after the project has stopped being funded? Have we created lasting change, or did it stop when the project ended?

Tom Wein: Projects will always have their timelines. Maybe overall aid should be finite notionally, but we are so far off a world in which all the problems that aid could be addressing have been addressed that I cannot imagine it coming up in our lifetimes.

Q252 **Chair:** Nabila, I listened to what you were saying in response about aid being finite. I remember being struck in Uganda a few years ago when they were about to meet the threshold of going from a low-income to a middle-income country, which would then have a disproportionate impact on the cost of vaccines, for example. Do you believe that having hard cut-off points is something we should be perpetuating, or should we go back to what you were saying and have a more tailored approach?

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Certainly, we should not have hard cut-off points. This is another challenge in international aid. In order to practically do something and hold yourself accountable to a unified results and reporting framework, there is this kind of push to treat every country and every situation in a very standardised way. Sometimes that is just not possible, because all countries are different. You have countries like India where you have a significant middle class. Then you have other countries like Uganda that might be at that threshold but might not have the same kinds of demographics and structures. Certainly, there cannot be any hard cut-off factors. That could end up doing more harm than good.

Q253 **Kate Osamor:** I have a few questions for all three of you on the FCDO's international development strategy. The new Secretary of State for FCDO is at a very crucial stage in forming a newly put together Department. With that being said, what do you think should be in the UK's forthcoming international development strategy?

Sanjayan Srikanthan: That is a very big question. Self-interest will say that I should point to investment in civil society, and particularly local civil society, strengthening, for all the reasons I have previously said.



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There is a place for bilateral assistance to Governments, particularly those in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and climate-affected contexts, which is the newest risk that we see. This is because, increasingly, the burden of response is falling on local and national organisations to help those facing climate, as well as conflict and poverty. We need to think about transference to Governments.

It needs to be based around the best of British values. By that, I mean not about national goals around strengthening trade links but about what we want to see our role in the world as, in terms of improving outcomes for those who are not British. That is the reason why I, and certainly many others as well, work in aid. Motivation will be key and articulating that in the strategy, thinking about bilateral assistance, thinking about, specifically, climate preparedness assistance as well and strengthening civil society in those countries. That is absolutely essential, in terms of leaving that lasting legacy we have talked about.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: There should be bilateral and multilateral assistance, and different forms and models of international assistance. I do not think we have a preference for only multilateral or bilateral support. It depends on the country in question.

The overall message for the new strategy would be that it would be really important for the UK to continue its leadership in areas where it has traditionally been strong, one of those being the global response to HIV/AIDS. That is something that recently, because of the pandemic and because that has set back progress on HIV/AIDS, simultaneously with the UK Government's cuts to UNAIDS, Unitaid and other organisations, is significantly under stress.

One of the core aims would be to not lose that investment that we have put in to date. Let us push ahead and continue with it, because we really are at a point right now where there is a real danger. We have already failed to meet the 90-90-90 UNAIDS targets for HIV/AIDS. There is a real danger that we are going to slide back at high speed.

Tom Wein: There are two requests from me. One is a thriving research and evidence division that is incorporating those questions about process and whether we are doing aid in the right way into its research. Are we upholding and affirming people's dignity? Then, every programme should have a plan, a process for incorporating the preferences of those they seek to serve and making sure that their voices are heard, making sure they have a plan to adapt their programme when those things are getting out of line and they need to course-correct.

Q254 **Kate Osamor:** The FCDO's written evidence to this inquiry appears to emphasise more trade and enterprise, with less focus, sadly, on fragile states, climate crisis preparedness, multilateral and bilateral work, strengthening civil society, peace, security—the list goes on. What do you make of this approach?



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Sanjayan Srikanthan: It is disappointing, from the perspective of aid. It may achieve other outcomes for this Government, but it is not aid then that we are talking about. The choices we make on a project-by-project level are working with the most vulnerable. In the case of Governments, they should be working with fragile states. It is not a coincidence that the kind of issue we are seeing in the Channel at the moment and the tragedy that is happening is coming from some of the most fragile and conflict-affected countries.

We have to really distinguish the difference between trade and aid, and this has been said throughout the sector. There is a role, of course, for a Government to craft their trade policy. Unfortunately, it seems we are synthesising the two into one and that is always dangerous.

It is really important that, with DFID now part of FCDO, we have two different policies and that FCDO works with the Department for International Trade on one and with those within the FCDO for articulating what aid can do. If it has retained the talent that it had in DFID—the team at DFID was really outstanding across the world and it was a reputation-enhancer for the UK—you have the intellectual talent to craft what could be a very exciting future for aid policy. I am really hoping that that is what will happen.

Nabila Saddiq Tayub: Trade at the expense of aid is certainly something that is quite unwelcome. If the expectation or understanding is that the private sector is going to step in and fill gaps, that is something that I do not feel, at least based on my experience in Malawi, is going to happen. There is also an assumption there that, by investing in trade, there is a sufficient trickle-down effect and that, from a national level, everyone will benefit proportionally. We know that that is not true either.

If you look at Malawi, for example, the split between the higher-income groups and everyone else is quite huge. That is currently how wealth is channelled and held. Take the pandemic as an example. If we were investing, if we were relying on aid or relying on the private sector to step in and fill gaps, that is something that would not happen with regards to public health, which is a public good.

An example is that I helped set up Malawi's first Covid treatment centre about a year and a half ago. On day two of us being open, the private hospital in Blantyre ejected a patient who was in ICU and we were able to take them in. That model currently is not serving the public good. That is something that really needs to be taken into account.

Tom Wein: There are plenty of ways in which trade is inequitable. A trade policy that pursues justice is certainly another way in which we can support global good, but I do not think that is what is happening here. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: Sorry; we were expecting a vote at 4 pm. It has just been called now, so I am going to have to end this session. Before I do, can I say



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that I am so grateful for your thoughts, and for you being so open, honest and particularly so thought-provoking for us?

If there are other things that you would like to feed into us, or you can recommend other people to feed in, we would be really grateful because this has been a very thought-provoking session and we really appreciate it. Committee, thank you very much.