

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK's progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, HC 1732

Wednesday 26 June 2019

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Members present: Stephen Twigg (Chair); Richard Burden; Chris Law; Mark Menzies; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Paul Scully; Mr Virendra Sharma; Henry Smith.

Questions 192 - 229

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Rory Stewart OBE MP, Secretary of State for International Development; Nick Dyer, Director General, Economic Development and International, Department for International Development.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Rory Stewart OBE MP and Nick Dyer.

Q192 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Minister, you spoke in recent debates about your real sincerity and the importance of leadership on this agenda. Of course, your predecessor had agreed that she would be leading the delegation in New York, barring emergency upsets. You have decided not to lead the delegation, as I understand it.

Rory Stewart: No, I will be.

Chair: You will be leading it.

Rory Stewart: I will be.

Chair: Excellent. That is great news.

Rory Stewart: I am very pleased to go. There is a small discussion going on, because I have to miss Cabinet and the NSC on that Tuesday, but my intention is to go to New York to lead the delegation.

Chair: Brilliant.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Well, we will see you there, Minister.

Rory Stewart: You will be there.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I will be there for the whole two weeks, and my other colleagues will be coming.

Chair: There are four of us going from the Committee.

Rory Stewart: Well, I may come in with a request for a pair, if the Whips are not listening to me. Yes, I will see you there.

Q193 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I am sure we can oblige. We are pleased about this. One of the other things we talked about in the statement in the House, but also to you directly, is including stakeholders within that wider delegation. I have been given nice warm words so far about this, but I want to confirm whether you have decided what stakeholders will be engaged in the presentation at the HLPF and all the side events that go along with the HLPF presentation. How exactly are they going to be involved?

Rory Stewart: My apologies, my understanding is that we are still discussing that. I am going to slightly turn to poor Nick on this.

Nick Dyer: We are still in the process of finalising the delegation, but, on our current plans, we are in conversation to include some stakeholders: one who is involved in the private sector, one from the NGOs and a youth delegate. We need to have a further conversation with the Secretary of State in terms of tying that down and pinning that down.

Q194 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** If it is possible, am I able to probe on how those



representatives are being chosen? Have you worked through Bond for the NGO representatives? Have you worked through the British Youth Council for its representatives? If it is still sensitive, I do not want to push.

Rory Stewart: I do not want to put poor Nick on the spot. To give you an undertaking, they will be chosen in the fairest and most transparent way we possibly can. I have absolutely no interest in turning up in New York with some sort of strange stooge. The idea would be that those representing us are the most senior, credible figures that we could possibly have, if you have any anxieties. The likelihood is that the people representing on behalf of Bond would be from the kind of organisations that you would expect us to have. There is certainly no attempt for us to try to hide anything.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When you can, I would appreciate it if you could write to us about who the representatives will be, but also the process that you went through. It would be useful, just so that we have it on the record.

Rory Stewart: Sure, of course.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: In terms of their involvement and which sections you expect them to take part in, is it still a bit fluid? I understand that you cannot give that now, but it would be good in writing.

Q195 **Paul Scully:** The VNR says that the UK adopted a comprehensive approach to stakeholder engagement to reflect best practice and ensure inclusivity. That does not reflect the views expressed to us by stakeholders involved in the process, and our own views as parliamentarians. The IDC itself has been critical about our role within that as well. Do you agree that stakeholders could have been engaged more meaningfully in the process?

Rory Stewart: The key is to get to the bottom of what it is people are anxious are about. You will be aware that there were basically four stages of engagement. There was a call for case studies between October 2018 and May 2019. We received a very large number of those case studies. We did a series of outreach events from October to December 2018, which were co-hosted with organisations such as Bond. Then every Department bar one did goal-specific events focused on particular goals. Then DfID led an additional series of events, including events in Leeds and Bristol, and seven events in London, one of which was on inclusive civil society. Then we did an 11 March parliamentary event.

Formally, I guess we felt—or at least I felt, coming in as a Minister five weeks ago and being briefed on this—that we had done quite a lot, but if there are specific lessons we need to learn from this for the next time we do it, we would be very happy to hear what these organisations felt had not worked or why these engagement events were not appropriate.

Q196 **Paul Scully:** That is good. UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development talked about it being limited and selective with the predominant method being an online survey—that is how they described it—so they were



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concerned about that. The VNR itself proposes the introduction of a proper mechanism for stakeholder engagement in the domestic SDGs agenda. I am wondering if you have a timeline for when such a mechanism can be developed and introduced, and what it might look like.

Rory Stewart: The answer is that I do not have an answer to you on that. I will write to you on that.

Q197 **Paul Scully:** Thank you very much. You said during last week's debate about the SDGs, which has been referred to, that you had hoped that would in itself inform the final VNR. Are you in a position to tell us how Members' contributions to that debate have been taken into account so far in the final review, and has anything changed following that debate?

Rory Stewart: Yes. What I took away from the debate, which was helpful—certainly for me, and in the way we think about this—is this question on consultation. What I was expecting to happen in the debate, an assumption which a lot of my speech was framed around—and this is probably why Governments in every country get anxious about this—was that it would become a stick simply to attack us on domestic policy issues. Interestingly, in the debate, there was some of that, but a lot of the interventions, including from Lloyd, were around the proper frameworks, the processes and the kind of questions we were asking.

The lesson I am taking forward, both in what I will present to New York and in what we have done, is that, rather than being excessively anxious about the light it casts on us by doing this, people are looking for much more reassurance on stakeholder engagement, consultation and the formal structures, as we have just said, through which that happens, so it is not just a question of us saying we are talking to people.

That is something that, if I was not forced to stand at the Dispatch Box and have Members of Parliament, quite rightly, have a go at me, would not have landed quite as strongly on my head.

Q198 **Paul Scully:** Fantastic, thank you very much. Again, we have been critical as a Committee about the fact that the VNR has been delayed in submission. I am wondering why that has been delayed by two weeks.

Rory Stewart: Why was it so late? The answer is that one of our key partners in bringing the submission together did not deliver quite on the schedule we were hoping, but, to be fair to them, two weeks is not the end of the world. There was quite a lot of last-minute panic in the last few weeks getting all the submissions.

Q199 **Paul Scully:** Obviously, we have known about the process since 2015, when it was first conceived. Do you believe that the Department has allowed enough time for its review to be completed, given what you have just said, with resilience?

Rory Stewart: One of the challenges we have learned about is not so much the Whitehall Departments; it is the co-ordination with the



devolved Administrations. Quite understandably, the Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish Governments have quite a lot of justified pride in what they have done in relation to the SDGs and the SDG frameworks. Possibly, next time round, there is more diplomatic work we could do in advance to make sure their submissions come in in the sequence in which we were hoping. They had a story that they were very proud of and very keen to tell, quite rightly. It did not quite arrive on our desk in the time that we required in order to submit, and that is probably something we could do better next time round.

Paul Scully: Brilliant, thank you very much.

Q200 **Chair:** In a moment, we will come to some questions relating to the evidence from Scotland and Wales. It is a big document. There is a lot of coverage in there of activity and some really positive and constructive case study examples, but it does not seem to address the UK's performance in a systematic way against each individual target and indicator, which both you, Rory, and your predecessor told us would be the case. Why is it not the case?

Rory Stewart: I guess, in the end, we decided as a Government as a whole that we wanted to use this as an opportunity—and here we differ a little from the way Scotland and Wales approached this—to cast light on areas where we have performed less well, push back on areas where we think we have maybe performed better than people have acknowledged, and find intelligent ways of reflecting on the gap between rhetoric and reality or the gap between what we do abroad and what we do at home.

We have resisted a little the idea that this is somehow a universal scorecard, because there is an important principle at the heart of this, which is that we see these as underpinning values, but Government is not in the end, in any democratic society, a purely technocratic process. It is about the allocation of scarce resources. There will be understandably huge differences between what would happen if, for example, a Conservative Government are in and if a Labour Government are in, in terms of the emphasis that you would put in practice on different goals and the different ways that you would approach those goals.

Q201 **Chair:** Should the difference not only be the different way you would approach the goals? These goals were adopted under a Conservative Government. David Cameron played a crucial role in the framing of the goals. There should not, surely, be anything within the targets and indicators that is problematic for a Conservative Government, and, if so, should that not be said explicitly?

Rory Stewart: We should certainly say explicitly that none of these goals is problematic for us. The way in which we would approach goal 6 would be different.

Chair: No, that is fair.



Rory Stewart: We would approach it through a privatised system. You would approach it through a nationalised system. In the emphasis on peace, justice and strong institutions, you would have a different attitude to the way in which you would approach legal aid. On climate action, we are now aligned on net zero. On industry, innovation and infrastructure, there would probably be quite different views on whether HS2 was prioritised over HS3.

Q202 **Chair:** You are talking about the means, whereas what we are really talking about is a set of ends, which are internationally agreed. The UK has been not just a player, but a key player in framing what those indicators are.

Rory Stewart: I will defer to my much brighter colleague, to see if Nick can provide a more adequate answer than I can.

Nick Dyer: The starting point on this is recognition of the data and what data is available. New Zealand is submitting its VNR at the same time as we are submitting ours. It is a 63-page report, which is very qualitative, without much data in it. Compared to many other VNRs, ours is a particularly data-rich report, but even then the Office for National Statistics, probably one of the strongest in the world, can measure only 70% of indicators. Even within that 70%, only 70% of those can you disaggregate in any fashion. There are a lot of data gaps.

Nor can you get a decent time series that looks at how you are comparing against 2015. That is the comparison, with 2015. We do not have enough data. The way we have chosen to present this report is as a stocktake of where we are in 2019, and this then becomes a baseline for future reports.

Q203 **Chair:** Why did you not go through each individual target and indicator? Sometimes you might have said, "We do not have the data for that, for whatever reason", or, "We do not yet have the data, because it has only been four years". I think we would have understood that. The sense I get is that there is basically cherry picking here.

Nick Dyer: The statistical annexe goes through every single indicator and explains how we measure in the UK, in terms of what the calculation is. It gives the source of the data, and it explains why we are using a different data series than, perhaps, the UN is using. It is all there. Every single data point that we have is in the report. There are 100 data boxes in the report where we are trying to bring this to life. There is far more data in this report than many of the other VNRs that we see out there.

Q204 **Richard Burden:** I understand what you say. There is a mass of data there, particularly in the appendix, the annexe, to the VNR. But, as an example, does it really address the "leave no one behind" agenda adequately, particularly when you talk about vulnerable and marginalised groups: homeless, migrants, and so on? When you look at the chapter on "leave no one behind", it seems to focus on examples of good practice, rather than data. There is a box there with "leave no one behind"



examples.

Rory Stewart: Are you on a particular page?

Chair: Richard is reading it from our briefing, which does not have the page number on it. It is the "leave no one behind" examples.

Nick Dyer: Page 22 is about women.

Q205 **Richard Burden:** That follows on from it. This one is headed "leave no one behind example". The first one is that the UK is investing up to £115 million for funding support work on the health agenda. Then it has an example about Scotland, then one about Wales.

Rory Stewart: If you go to goal 10 in the annexe, we do proportion of people living below 50% of median income. We do proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against. We do labour share of gross domestic product, comprising wages and social protection transfers. One of the things where I would agree with you, Richard, is that there is a broader issue in the way that we deal with the poorest and most marginalised in our society in general, and that is true generally for the way that we discuss these things.

We have tended to focus very strongly, for understandable reasons, on key markers of relative and absolute poverty, in this report, for example, focusing on 60% of median income. What that disguises, generally, is that the bottom 10% in our society is much, much, much worse off. In my constituency, for example, the average income is below 60% of the median income; it is £16,000 a year, but what I see in Tower Hamlets or Poplar is a completely different scale of human misery than what I see in my constituency.

If you are challenging us in our next VNR, in Parliament in general, and in the political conversation, to start talking about the very worst off in our society, by which I mean effectively the bottom 10%, the sort of people I was dealing with in prison, illegal migrants, some of the most extreme examples of the poor elderly, people with addiction, mental health issues, homelessness, you are looking at something very, very important. But it is not adequately captured either in the indicators produced under the global goals, or in the indicators on which we tend to measure ourselves in Government. That is a bigger political problem.

Q206 **Richard Burden:** Yes, I am partly saying that and I certainly would welcome a greater emphasis on that. What I am getting at, at this stage, is more the way the VNR approaches these things. It links back a little to what Stephen said earlier on. There seems to be an emphasis on activity rather than on objective, and sometimes on actually telling it up in lights how it is. For example, the Environmental Audit Committee highlighted the fact that you can find stuff on food insecurity and food poverty in there, but you have to look pretty hard.



Rory Stewart: This is something I tried to address in my speech. This is why the VNR process is a really good one, because this comes to the fundamental point of democratic government and the way that Governments and Oppositions work together. The reason it is important is that it takes effort for a Government to point out what is not going well, partly because there you are basically saying, understandably, that a lot of the things you have been saying on the Opposition benches have a point. We are criticising ourselves in a document.

What I have learnt through that is an important point for international development, because it is almost exactly the same reason that the President of DRC is reluctant to admit there is Ebola, or the scale of the Ebola threat we are facing in eastern DRC. We are learning through this that, when Governments publicly make statements about their own development progress, they understandably emphasise the positive and downplay the negative. To be fair, that is the job of an Opposition party, to do what you are doing, rather than to expect that, even if you were in Government, you would necessarily always be emphasising all the things you got wrong.

Q207 **Richard Burden:** It is probably one of the reasons I am asking the question. In fairness, some of these questions about things that strangely seem to be missing would be shared by Government members as well. For example, there is a section on overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Now, they feature in the VNR quite prominently on oceans and biodiversity, and that is very good, but there is nothing in there in relation to goal 16 on illicit financial flows. That just seems odd to me.

Rory Stewart: Sure, the point is taken. What you are pointing to there, which we need to be more careful with next time round, is a diplomatic anxiety, which is that we are dealing with overseas territories where we are trying to strike the balance of not seeming like we are engaged in some sort of postcolonial finger-wagging. We have tended to emphasise the positive and not the challenges, but you are right; we should do more on that.

Q208 **Richard Burden:** Perhaps one thing I could just flag up to you is that, when examples are given in the VNR, sometimes there seems to be rather meatier, more detailed information in relation to Scotland and Wales than in relation to England. An example of that would be in relation to women and domestic abuse. There is quite a helpful table and a lot of meaty information there in relation to Scotland. For England, it is a lot sketchier on that. Is that simply down to the quality of data?

Rory Stewart: No, the data is the same. It is that Scotland prepared it totally independently of us and has approached it in a totally different way. In the normal way, we would have to learn from Scotland's approach and make sure, in the next iteration, if there are things they are doing better than we are, we learn from that. The answer is that those were two separate processes. We were not conducting a single United Kingdom process.



Chair: I was going to channel Chris, but I will bring Chris in.

Q209 **Chris Law:** It is almost as if you are a medium. On that note, I wanted to ask whether there was any relationship going on between the devolved Administrations and here in London with regard to how the publishing was done. Wales did its report independently, as did Scotland. I take on board that you say lessons will be learned, and that is a good thing, but, if there was not any relationship before now, why was that, and will there be one going forward?

Rory Stewart: There was a relationship. The challenge is—

Chris Law: Are you sure?

Rory Stewart: The challenge is that those Administrations were understandably proud of the work they had done. Look, I do not know quite how to say this. Maybe I am taking a risk by returning to this again and again, but the truth is that all development is political in context, in this country as in any other country. This document shows that, even in the United Kingdom, with the best will in the world, where we are trying to do a process that takes the politics out of things, you cannot take the politics out of things. You cannot take the politics out of things because— and this is a really important lesson for development; this is so fundamental—education is political; health is political; resource allocation is political; the way that you do statistics and score things is political.

When we go to other people's countries, we often pretend that is not the case. We pretend that you can go into Egypt or Indonesia and say, if you are the World Bank, "You have to cut your oil subsidies or take off your wheat subsidies; this is just a technocratic discussion". Actually, it goes straight to the political base of a particular party. You say, in Zambia, "You have to remove the agricultural subsidies", and the entire Cabinet, or half of them, are landowners and this is their income.

So too, here, the bruise you are punching is that there is a very proud, very competent SNP Government in Scotland that has taken a very particular approach to the SDGs. I have been trying politely to avoid saying that they have not been particularly keen on making this a United Kingdom process, because, quite understandably, they feel they are doing a very good job and they want to make sure that Scotland's distinct contribution is acknowledged in this report. That did not make it very easy to co-ordinate and bring together a United Kingdom position. The same will be true for the Government in Wales. The Scottish Government have brought in a framework arranged around the SDGs, which is very impressive, and it is quite unlike anyone else's. The Welsh Government have passed their own law on well-being, which again has been completely different to the way the English Government have done it. Quite understandably, those devolved Administrations are a little reluctant to be swept up in a United Kingdom story. They want to tell their own story in their own way.

Q210 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The VNR states that the Government will review



and further strengthen the existing means and mechanisms to oversee their delivery of the goals, and that this review will take place as a matter of priority. We have seen in the VNRs of Ireland and Germany that they have developed policy windows from the VNR. What exactly will this review look like, and how will it start to tackle the failure of the single departmental plans, which quite frankly have been unable to properly capture the transformative nature needed to achieve the SDGs domestically?

Rory Stewart: This process will start next Friday. Nick Dyer, who is our director-general, will be meeting the Cabinet Office next Friday in order to begin that process.

Chair: Brilliant.

Q211 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Can you tell us a bit more about how the process is intended to run?

Nick Dyer: As the report lays out, there are two things. First, the UK Government have chosen to reflect the SDGs in the single departmental plans, as you pointed out. There are very good examples in the current single departmental plans of references to the goals. BEIS references about five of the goals in its single departmental plan. That is the performance framework that the UK Government use to demonstrate their progress against their policy. At the moment, the Government have decided that is the right place to put the progress against the goals.

In terms of the review, at the moment, there is a cross-Government group, co-ordinated by officials, that has produced the VNR. We are going to have a conversation to review what the ministerial and official arrangements may be going forward. At the moment, the process we have in place is the one that will continue.

Q212 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Thank you, Nick. Rory, do you recognise any of the failures of using the single departmental plans for the SDGs? When we met with members from respective Departments who had been appointed the champions, a number of them did not even know they had been appointed, apart from getting a letter in their pigeonhole. Some of them did not really know what all the SDGs were. It was not like we were testing them; we were trying to tease out what they knew and how they had been involved. For one of them, it felt like the SDGs were an afterthought that had been slotted in since. Is there a recognition that the process with the single departmental plans in the past has failed, and there needs to be a recognition of them at least changing the way they handle the SDGs? Otherwise, we will just repeat the same failure.

Rory Stewart: The answer is that I would agree with quite a lot of your sentiment. It has definitely been an imperfect process. It is a process. This is our first VNR. We are learning from it. I think it will grow and strengthen. Part of that will grow and strengthen not just because of what happens in the UK. It is really, really important that the world remains committed to the SDGs. If we end up in a situation that we are



sitting in this room in five years' time and somehow the UN itself has begun to veer away from the SDGs, that will massively undermine this process going forward.

The school that Stephen and I saw this morning is a really interesting example of the way that the SDGs are becoming embedded in people's consciousness. It was an entire school arranged around the SDGs. In a way, what happens in a Department or with an individual is deeply, deeply affected by the surrounding culture and the emphasis from the leadership of Government. To be very blunt, one big challenge is going to be how much emphasis the next Prime Minister and the new head of the Cabinet Office put on the SDGs. That is going to be central, as is the way that the international system operates and that citizens operate and arrange themselves around this.

I was a little depressed, seeing my constituents out there, by how few of them were directly engaged with the global goals conversation. When I said, "Look, I am really sorry; I have to go, because I have to testify on the SDGs to the International Development Select Committee", instead of them going, "High five, well done; that is fantastic", there was a lot of saying, "Come back here; I want to talk to you about climate". Getting them to really feel that this is a process that is on their side, and that this really matters, is going to be central.

What was so lovely about that school, which is going to be what will decide, in five or 10 years' time, whether this works, is that, for them, these goals were not 17 random ideas put together by a committee of men in suits in the basement of the United Nations. These are ethical and moral values about rights and equality that were driving a very diverse community in north London, in terms of how they think about their individual rights. You have an 11-year-old boy saying, "The one that matters most to me here is gender equality. I really care about gender equality". That is the way in which this will really work.

Q213 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Some of the next questions are going to be about the communication. I know everything is in flux at the moment in the Government in this sense, but is there any political will for a commitment that there will be a permanent and appropriately resourced SDG co-ordination team at the heart of Government, say in the Cabinet Office, which not just co-ordinates this when the next VNR comes around, but is, week in, week out, co-ordinating not just our international efforts, but our domestic efforts? Is there any political will in the current Government or any future Government for such a group of people?

Rory Stewart: In four weeks' time, we will see who the Prime Minister is. That person will determine that. My speculating now whether Boris Johnson or Jeremy Hunt is going to feel that they want to put this at the centre of the Cabinet Office is unhelpful.

Q214 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The process you are setting up now—



Rory Stewart: It will start on Friday.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: —will be open to some of those questions and allow that to be fed in.

Rory Stewart: The process we are starting next Friday is a sincere process, driven at a very senior level by our most senior director-general driving through the system with the Cabinet Office.

Mark Menzies: Rory, I apologise for my voice.

Rory Stewart: It makes you sound like the Attorney-General.

Q215 **Mark Menzies:** It does indeed. The VNR presents a great opportunity to communicate the SDGs to the public, which has not so far been capitalised on. How are you in the Department planning to use the launch and presentation of the VNR to engage with people in this incredibly powerful agenda?

Rory Stewart: We are trying hard. At this event I did, launching it today in the primary school, we had journalists from *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*. We had Press Association cameras. We have a social media campaign. That is going to lead into my presentations in New York. We have done a debate in the House of Commons. There is still an issue, which goes beyond our Department, of really exciting people about this, and it may be that the timing is not ideal. A lot of those journalists want to ask me questions about the leadership campaign when I am trying get them focused on the VNR. It is something that I have really thrown myself into.

I hope you acknowledge that there was a choice available to us, when I took over six weeks ago, to hide from this, because people would be worried that the entire conversation would potentially be about food banks, instead of which we have really leant into this. We are proud of what we have done, and have been as honest as we can. The lesson we have been trying to drive here is a lesson of humility and self-reflection, and I am very keen to promote this work and these values.

This is also important, I think. In terms of our own single departmental plan in DfID—and this relates to Lloyd's questions about single departmental plans—the big change I have been able to bring in, in the last five weeks, is to reframe our entire single departmental plan around the sustainable development goals. Actually, that was not the case before. The five key framing devices for our entire single departmental plan, which was rewritten in five weeks, are now about this. It is a really powerful tool for me, because this tool is the way that you talk about how our action on poverty, on climate and the environment, come together. This is a gift to me, so I am deeply, deeply proud of it. I am trying to promote it in as many ways as I can.

Q216 **Mark Menzies:** That is great. On a similar thread, the VNR does not discuss the Government's role in communicating or raising awareness of



the goals, and it focuses very much on the role of civil society and local organisations in performing this function. What more can Government do to communicate the goals? Is this something that falls not just on DfID, but on Government in totality? How do you see the role for Government?

Rory Stewart: The way this would take off—I keep pushing this—is if you had a Prime Minister who made this central to their domestic agenda. That is what would really transform this. If they did make it central to their domestic agenda, they could do it in a whole series of ways. They could make it absolutely central to the Cabinet Office. Just as, if you had a Prime Minister who really cared about the union, they might put a really pumped up function of union-proofing everything into the Cabinet Office, if you had a Prime Minister who put the environment and climate change at the centre of what they were doing, you could imagine a really pumped up function of the Cabinet Office greening every bit that the Government did, and you could do the same on the SDGs.

You could also follow the Scottish example on frameworks. You could follow the Welsh examples on legislation. If you had a Prime Minister who really made this the framework through which they thought about development in this country, there would be a huge amount of choice.

Q217 **Mark Menzies:** You have had a reputation as being not just a good Secretary of State but a rather famous filmmaker. I am afraid you were superseded in a previous evidence session, when we had Richard Curtis before us. He told us about plans to campaign for a decade of delivery on the SDGs from 2020. Will you and the UK Government pledge to support this campaign and drive your own delivery of the goals forward?

Rory Stewart: Yes. Oddly, this experience has been quite good for us. When David Cameron announced that we would be marking our own homework domestically in 2015, there was a lot of nervousness. People thought this was completely crazy and totally inappropriate, and all we were doing was providing more Opposition and Backbench Business Committee debates on our head. Actually, that is not the lesson that I would take from this. I would say to a future Prime Minister that this has been approached in a much less political, much more bipartisan, much more generous fashion than people would have expected, and that we can have the confidence to keep talking about these things. Some of the stuff that happened in 2015-16, which tried to use the SDGs to challenge domestic legislation, has faded a little, because people have accepted that it is true that Governments will make different decisions on allocations and on means.

If we can get there, I think we really can put these values at the heart of it. This is about a values conversation. It is about what we think development is, what we think growth should be, what we think a good society should be, and we should develop a common conversation about that. What was striking in the school was that they were struggling with, I imagine, potentially 50 or 60 different nationalities, and they were looking for a common narrative about what it meant to be British. They



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had found in the SDGs a very, very good way of finding something that every different person at school could relate to, particularly in terms of their rights, and their views on equality and the environment.

We can make it something that feels more like a common, shared set of national values, adjusted for the fact that, when we talk about goal 6, clean water and sanitation, that is, thank goodness, by and large something that we have in this country. We are measuring ourselves in a completely different way to the way that other countries will measure themselves on sewerage and clear water supply. But the overall idea is that these things have to go together, that development is not a single thing.

If you go back in time to our original Act, development sounded to us as though it meant just one thing. It just meant extreme poverty, and extreme poverty was generally measured in incomes. This has been a really transformative conversation for us, but also a transformative conversation for what we are trying to achieve in the United Kingdom. Presumably we are all, from whatever party, not just talking about how to increase our GDP. We are talking about how that money is allocated. We are talking about the question Richard is raising of how that affects the bottom 10% of our society.

Q218 Chair: My strongest memory from the visit to Torriano primary school was of a little boy when we asked the group which of the goals was most important, and he went for 16. We asked why, and his initial answer was all about the US-Mexican border. It was really interesting. Then he was slightly tentative and said, "And there is another reason: someone got knifed on my estate last week and, for me, security is about where I live as well as what happens on the US-Mexican border". He is a little, 10-year-old boy. I thought that was an incredibly moving and powerful way of making that connection between the global and the local.

I really welcome what you have said, Rory, about the future, if a Prime Minister takes a lead on this. Clearly, one challenge is going to be how to sustain priority, focus and momentum after New York and the HLPF. Is the implication of what you are saying that, really, the Cabinet Office should now be in the driving seat of this, that DfID does great international work and rightly leads on it, but driving some of these domestic issues really ought to be at the heart of Government, with the Cabinet Office?

Rory Stewart: I am afraid that, realistically, that has to be a conversation for the next Prime Minister. That is not my call.

Q219 Chair: Fair enough. Thinking back to your previous roles outside DfID, in all honesty, how far did the SDGs figure in conversations when you were in other Departments?

Rory Stewart: The problem is this. Let us take my last two domestic Departments. Let us take 16 and look at the MoJ. If we look at the indicators, the number of victims of intentional homicide per 100,000 was



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an indicator that we took very, very seriously. Conflict-related deaths was obviously less so. Our conflict-related deaths are currently 1.1 per million, in our population, so 16.1.2 is not very important. Sexual violence is very important. We were doing an enormous amount on domestic violence. The proportion of the population that feels safe walking alone around the area they live relates to the young man you were talking to in the school. More broadly, the risk is that, if you put peace, justice and strong institutions up in the Ministry of Justice, you need good leadership to explain to people why that is not a glimpse of the blinding obvious.

Chair: No, I get that.

Rory Stewart: If you put clean water and sanitation up in the Environment Agency or Ofwat, they might think, "Well, okay, that is what we do. We do clean water and sanitation. How does it help us to know that it is a global goal?" If you put quality education in the Department for Education, they would probably think quality education is kind of what they are about. It is probably about how these 17 come together, rather than how they work. The interesting thing about the Scottish and Welsh framework is that it does not tell the Department for Education that quality education matters; it is about how you think about these things holistically. How do you think about what a valuable life or a valuable society is, as a whole?

Q220 **Richard Burden:** Whatever challenges there may be of trying to embed SDG thinking in other Departments, at least in DfID it has been seen to be important from the word go. Assuming you stay in this post, can you really make sure it is embedded even more in DfID? There could be a danger, even within DfID, that it is referenced in officials documents—

Rory Stewart: I agree, Richard. There is still a lot of work to be done in DfID. We should not be complacent about what has happened in DfID. There is a tension here. We were set up in that Act to focus on extreme poverty. Some of these indicators relate to extreme poverty indirectly, not directly. There are clear connections, right? There is a clear connection between gender equality and poverty; there is a clear connection between peace, justice and strong institutions. But, when you begin to get into life below water, you move out of the traditional comfort zone of DfID. Given that I am somebody who really thinks that the insight of these goals is correct, that development must be sustainable, and for development to be sustainable it must be sensitive to the environment, and that include life below water, I will use this as a tool to change the way that DfID thinks about things and to challenge staff in DfID to be less resistant to pure environmental proposals.

Q221 **Richard Burden:** Could more perhaps be done in terms of DfID's own procurement processes? At the moment, funding calls quite rarely reference the SDGs. Is that something you would like to see changed?



Rory Stewart: That is a very good question, Richard. That is quite a technical question, and I am going to drop poor Nick in it on procurement.

Nick Dyer: Most of the contracts that we put out for calls are to deliver a particular activity. You can probably look back and see there is a line of sign in the business case for the SDGs, so I would not necessarily expect all our contract proposals to explain everything about the SDGs. Where we are running perhaps a competitive fund, like the school grants scheme, the civil society schemes we have, or research, perhaps we should be asking ourselves more explicitly about the SDGs.

Again, many of the choices we are already making. On the research programme, if we are going to do research on lower-energy technology, we have already made a choice about linking that back to the SDGs. I am not sure it will always make a huge amount of difference if you put it in the call explicitly, because we have already made the choice in advance.

Q222 **Richard Burden:** I see that where DfID is making that choice but, if part of the objective here is to embed a new way of thinking—which, if I have read Rory correctly, is what you were saying: that it should start to inform a whole mindset about how development is approached—presumably, that needs to somehow reflect itself through into procurement processes, even if they are for specific things.

Nick Dyer: We would certainly want our suppliers to be thinking hard about their offer around the SDGs. There are potentially some ways you could use Government procurement as an incentive to drive certain behaviour. Some thought has been given to that in the recent past, but I am not in a position to say how the rest of Government should be doing its procurement.

Q223 **Richard Burden:** Rory, does DfID need to specialise a bit within the goals? Clearly, the entire gamut of policy needs to be aligned with the goals, and that links to your point about trying to create a new way of thinking. The Dutch Government, for example, have said, “Right, we are actually going to show leadership”, and have put a lot of emphasis on SDG 16. Is there a case for the UK to say, “This is an area in which we have a particular specialism, in which we would like to show leadership”, and if so which ones?

Rory Stewart: Yes, this is a real challenge for us. My instinct is always that we have to specialise, that the world is too big, and the problems too large, for us to pretend we can do everything equally well. The problem DfID has is that every Secretary of State who comes in suddenly has a new priority. To take an example, traditionally we did not do work on disabilities. A new Secretary of State will come in, and suddenly we have to stand up a new centrally managed programme on disabilities. We did not have experts on urban planning and cities, and we will suddenly decide that we need to do something on global goal 11, and then we have to stand it all up.



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Again, we have not traditionally, at least for 20 or 30 years, had great speciality in infrastructure. Other development agencies have tended to do that; we have tended to focus more on issues such as health and education. Then, of course, you get a sudden focus on economic development, and more emphasis will be put on infrastructure. DfID itself has to have the capacity to respond to this strange phenomenon of new priorities coming in with new leadership.

I would support DfID in two regards in pushing back. First, if we genuinely do not have expertise in an area, we have to think very, very seriously before we go into that area. I believe, in my case, that climate and the environment is such a big issue that we cannot afford not to have expertise in that area, so I will be pushing resources into that, and I will be forcing the Department to hire more people in that area. But we cannot do that across 17 goals.

Secondly, I would like to move to a world in which there was much more discretion for our country directors, where it is not all done through centrally managed programmes, and they are able to work out what is the most useful thing they can do with their money and power, what they can do in Malawi. My real dream, if I remained in this job for three years, would be to delegate that authority down to them. In fact, it may be even more radical. I have been interested in piloting a model where you could almost set up a British Development Foundation Nepal, where you would have a chief executive appointed, with full control over that budget, and you would say to them, "Over to you to decide what you want to do over the next four years, and the control I have over you is whether to top you up and give you your funding again in four years' time", which is what we do in our national parks.

If you are the chief executive of the Lake District or the Peak District National Park, you get your funding from Defra, a three-year settlement, and you essentially decide what you want to do with that money. That is a very, very empowering thing, because it allows you, even with relatively small resources, to do that. If you were the chief executive of the Development Foundation Nepal, it is a job that any one of us would kill to have, because you would have the ability to think, "Okay, what do I and my team think are the best things we can do in Nepal over the next four years?" You might have much more freedom on who you could hire, have much more freedom about the Civil Service regulations and security regulations, be able to make much longer-term decisions, be able to go into very unusual areas and build up expertise there, in that country, that did not exist elsewhere. That would be my long-term vision, if I was lucky enough to still be here.

Q224 **Chris Law:** Returning to what we talked about earlier, climate and your ambitions for climate, this is the really important bit. The problem we have is that we have one Department, for example your own, that is really ambitious about increasing funding, while in another Department, for example UK Export Finance, 99% of the funding goes towards fossil



fuel projects in the developing world, which then leads to long-term use of fossil fuels by other countries that we have invested in, which completely undermines your Department in what you are trying to achieve here. Do you agree that this would be far more effective for SDGs if there was proper policy coherence? We have heard repeatedly on this Committee about the lack of coherence, where one hand is not speaking to the other.

Rory Stewart: Your logic is correct, but the choices here are choices in which we need to explain to people what that means. For better or worse, we have a huge number of people in this country employed in oil and gas exports. Essentially, the decision that you are making there comes right down to whether you support a small SME from Aberdeen providing—

Q225 **Chris Law:** Sorry, I might have got this wrong. What I was aiming at was UK Export Finance.

Rory Stewart: No, but that will be for the small SME from Aberdeen going to Basra to provide the oil infrastructure support for BP on the ground. If you look at the £1 billion that has been put in export finance to Iraq over the last few years, which is a very good way of looking at this, some of that is on water and sanitation infrastructure. An enormous amount of that is on fossil fuels, and that is connected, yes, partially with big British-owned companies such as BP and Shell, but has an enormous amount to do with the supply chain in oil and gas, and exploration.

This is one of the challenges, and you could make the same challenge to me, quite rightly, ethically, on our defence industry. We have an economy in this country that is very heavily dependent, in certain parts of the country, on fossil fuels, in other parts of the country on the export of defence equipment. That poses real foreign policy and development challenges, because it means that we are having to weigh up the interests of, quite literally, hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country against our stated environmental policy challenges.

What can I do from my Department? I am very keen to shift the investment that we put through, for example, CDC in fossil fuel generation over to renewables. I am very keen to make sure that our development assistance is directed towards environmentally friendly projects. I do not want our development assistance to be damaging the environment. But there is a much, much bigger strategic policy decision, which would have to be made at a No. 10 level, about whether we wanted to go into a world where we decided that we were, for example, not supporting a medium-sized enterprise working in secondary downstream oil supply in Basra, based in the United Kingdom.

Q226 **Chris Law:** It partly answers my question, to be fair. This is the point I am getting at. If you have policy coherence across all Departments, where someone is leading on that, for example, as you suggested earlier, the Cabinet Office, would the decisions not be better measured and the outcomes less hypocritical, to put it bluntly? I can give you another



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example. If we look at human rights, there is little mention across the SDGs, yet more than 90% of SDGs are based on human rights, so they are outcomes for individuals. What I am asking for is how you see policy coherence going forward. What type of leadership would it take?

Rory Stewart: This is why, to repeat myself a little, this process is very useful, if we are not scoring political points off each other but are trying to be honest about the realities of why development is difficult in this country or elsewhere. I am going to restrain myself from turning it around and asking you the obvious, which is what your policy would be towards SMEs in the oil business in Aberdeen. I am not going to do that to you, but the reason I am not is that it should be apparent to all of us around the table that these are difficult issues. The same would be true if Richard, quite understandably, raised an issue about BAE Systems and I asked, "What is our attitude towards workers in Barrow?" These are not easy questions to answer.

I feel that human rights needs to be very central in what we do. That is why I was very reluctant, in some ways, to spend as much as we were spending in Zimbabwe. In a sense, Zimbabwe is easy. If I wash my dirty linen in public, Zimbabwe is easy because it had both very severe human rights challenges and a very poor performance in development, and I did not feel we were getting much value for money in what we were doing there.

It becomes more difficult when you look at somewhere like Ethiopia, which is a great development success story, where an enormous number of people are being taken out of poverty and the economy is growing at 6.5% a year, and I have to then decide what our attitude is towards human rights and whether we can continue to support people there. The only reason I am clawing into these things, and taking quite a lot of political risk in doing so, is that we have to try to be open about this. Of course, yes, the charge of hypocrisy is always a very reasonable charge to make, but it is important to explain to the public what the reason for this apparent hypocrisy is.

Q227 **Chris Law:** The compilation of the VNR has given an opportunity to maybe think different about policy coherence, given it is the first one. I want to know what efforts will be made to create better systems within Government, to monitor and track the UK's performance on policy coherence. I know we might not have the answers yet, but what do you think they might look like?

Nick Dyer: The Government already have a recent track record in trying to get at this cross-departmental coherence: the establishment of the National Security Council, the international climate fund board that the Committee has taken evidence on in the past from both the Department for International Development and BEIS, cross-Government efforts on violence against women and girls. There are a number of attempts to create this cross-Government coherence. There are increasingly conversations across Government about how you can replicate this kind



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of approach in the national security space, broadly, in the domestic space.

Thought has been given to that, but it comes back to the question of what the next steps are in taking forward the SDGs. As the Secretary of State has said, this is for the next Administration, but I would not say there has been no co-ordination, because what is going on in the national security space has been quite a good example of what can be done.

Q228 **Chris Law:** But there is more to do.

Nick Dyer: There is always more to do.

Q229 **Chair:** Secretary of State and Nick, thank you both very much indeed for your evidence today. Can I say two things by way of closing? One is to welcome warmly that you will be leading the delegation to New York; that is very, very welcome. The other is, I guess, to say I hope to see you here again in the future.

Rory Stewart: Thank you all very much indeed. Thank you for a very, very intelligent conversation. Whoever succeeds me, please keep pushing on this. The way in which you have approached this has been very positive, because people felt they were taking huge political risk to do this, and the way you have approached it will make it much easier for people to lean into it in future. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.