

I am a researcher and principal lecturer in political economy at the University of Portsmouth. My specialism is UK development aid and the securitisation of development aid. I have published in this area. This evidence addresses the following query: “Whether spending from the aid budget to support refugees in the UK is an (a) efficient, (b) effective and (c) ethical use of public money”.

For context, I include the gross disbursements of DAC countries’ ODA for ‘Refugees/asylum seekers in donor countries’ from 2012 to 2020. 2020 is the latest year currently available. Because of different reporting systems within countries it is difficult to directly compare amounts across countries. However, we can see that the level of spending has been generally rising for the UK since 2012 and jumped significantly from 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020.

Dataset: Creditor Reporting System (CRS)

Sector	930: Refugees in Donor Countries, Total									
Flow	Official Development Assistance									
Channel	All Channels									
Flow type	Gross Disbursements									
Type of aid	Refugees/asylum seekers in donor countries									
Amount type	Constant Prices									
Recipient	Developing Countries, Total									
Unit	US Dollar, Millions, 2020									
Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
Donor										
DAC Countries, Total	4,145	4,489	6,200	12,950	17,195	14,890	9,422	8,995	7,892	
Germany	77	134	163	3,372	7,283	6,475	3,876	3,139	2,631	
United States	945	1,086	1,366	1,305	1,829	1,536	1,670	1,903	1,506	
France	488	419	447	396	507	660	64	1,263	1,224	
United Kingdom	43	48	199	369	590	534	512	648	805	
Netherlands	338	355	889	1,496	489	912	584	514	562	
Switzerland	636	433	461	506	723	346	159	191	223	
Italy	237	371	765	1,062	1,784	1,882	1,109	458	200	
Spain	21	22	17	35	96	227	272	308	194	
Canada	220	177	190	219	413	471	501	..	155	
Sweden	486	573	921	2,424	830	819	249	152	107	
Greece	17	18	18	60	150	68	27	136	80	
Finland	23	20	15	42	142	82	57	71	51	
Norway	147	172	190	416	759	135	84	51	45	
Ireland	0	..	0	1	1	43	56	84	38	
Austria	59	62	105	491	656	164	62	32	31	
Denmark	137	148	232	429	444	123	67	3	11	
Poland	..	..	..	10	6	6	6	6	7
Portugal	1	2	1	3	5	6	10	3	6	
Czech Republic	10	9	12	17	21	24	25	6	6	

Iceland		0	0	3	5	16	19	10	6	4
Hungary		..	..	10	11	11	3	4	0	3
Korea		..	..	..	..	..	..	2	1	1
Slovak Republic		..	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1
Slovenia		0	0	0	8	8	1	0	0	0
Japan		1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Luxembourg	i	0	0	..	..	..	..	..	0	0
Belgium		125	149	176	254	413	334	..	..	..
Australia		115	272	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
New Zealand		18	18	17	17	17	17	17	16	..

Data extracted on 14 Dec 2022 11:25 UTC (GMT) from OECD.Stat

I want to make three points regarding the extent to which spending from the aid budget to support refugees in the UK is an efficient, effective and ethical use of public money: Spending from the aid budget to support refugees in the UK will 1) undermine the UK's own development strategy, 2) undermine the soft-power gains from development aid, and 3) negatively impact current and future recipients of UK aid.

Firstly, whilst in-donor refugee costs may fall within the OECD DAC definition of ODA, these costs do not support the UK's own ODA priorities. These were set out in the latest international development strategy published in May this year. The priorities set out in the strategy are British investment partnerships, women and girls' freedom, humanitarian work and climate change. In-donor refugee costs do not contribute to any of these priorities and in some cases are undermining them. For example, when explaining the UK's commitment to humanitarian work, the UK International Development Strategy states that "The UK stands for humanity and dignity and is committed to unlocking the potential and agency of people trapped in cycles of crisis". The current hostile refugee regime in the UK (funded in part by ODA) does not respect dignity or humanity and damages people's potential through incarceration and criminalisation.

This mismatch between government priorities and spending on in-donor refugee costs, undermines the UK's own values and commitments stated in the international development strategy. It is therefore not an ethical use of public money. It makes less money available to forward the government's own stated priorities and also looks like a cynical attempt to reduce the UK's aid budget further.

Secondly, funnelling ODA to in-donor refugee costs (along with the decrease in ODA to 0.5% GNI), will significantly undermine the UK's post-Brexit soft power projection. Soft-power has long been seen as an important asset by successive UK governments. International development is an established aspect of this. In the 2010s the UK was able to use its international development reputation to its advantage to influence international norms and debates, and to gain seats within international fora. During this decade, the UK government promoted itself as an international development leader across a number of areas including transparency, governance policy, gender equality, and building stability through development. The idea of the UK as a global leader in development was part of the wider concept of 'global Britain', which sought to encapsulate the UK's post-Brexit international outlook. The UK's international development reputation is a long-standing, central aspect of its soft power, particularly in the face of growing Chinese soft power in the form of development investment.

The initial reduction of development aid at a time when the UK had lost international influence through Brexit undermined the 'Britain as a development leader' narrative, in the first instance. Shifting funds from external development programmes to internal refugee costs, damages the UK's

international reputation further and weakens its ability to use soft power to influence global norms and have a voice in international fora.

Moving on to my final point, repurposing ODA spending to support in-donor refugee costs will reduce the funding available to support international development projects in the Global South, unless the ODA budget increases overall. This will further negatively impact UK aid recipients, who have already seen essential development programmes cut or reduced. It is estimated, for example, that bilateral aid to Africa will fall by 66% as a result of recent ODA cuts.

In conclusion, spending the aid budget to 'support' refugees in the UK is neither efficient nor effective in terms of the government's own development policies. Doing so will also further undermine the UK's soft power projection and, more importantly, it will mean deeper cuts for UK aid recipients abroad.