

International Development Committee Inquiry: The Philosophy and Culture of Aid

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development and humanitarian aid. As COVID-19 continues, we are supporting our members to adapt their programmes and operations and keep their staff safe and organisations secure.
- 1.2. This inquiry comes at a timely moment when international development is experiencing a maelstrom of change - from new development actors to changing political priorities to the impact of climate change and technology.
- 1.3. This requires actors in all parts of the system to rethink their role and purpose.¹ In a report last year, Bond identified four transitions that will frame aid and development in the next ten years. Transitions that lead to ten probable shifts in aid and development work. For this inquiry to be effective it is essential that it sets its parameters in the context of these transitions and shifts and looks across the aid system – not just at development agencies.
- 1.4. Of particular importance are:
 - **A multi-actor global system.** Aid is now a multi-country with China and others playing a major role. UK aid and development needs to be viewed as a contribution to a much wider system where there are multiple actors operating, including multi-laterals and non-state actors.
 - **A changing need base.** Going forward we could describe ODA needs as breaking down in three ways: Traditional humanitarian support and development for fragile states, LICs and protracted crises that are likely to increase; protection of global goods like health and the environment (that can't be restricted to ODA); and addressing inequalities across countries, that increase instability. Addressing these requires specific approaches to the different aspects, but ones that are joined up and systemic. These needs are in the wider context of traditional development pathways no longer being available due to market and resource constraints, with a need to move to an economic system that is aligned to the environment and human well-being.
 - **Recognition of power dynamics.** Who holds the power and how it is deployed are central to the nature of aid. In the UK this is often based on a colonial mindset. This needs to change and evolve so that communities and countries can make their own decisions about how they live sustainably.
 - **Increased importance of how aid and development work is done.** How aid agencies, governments and companies act is critically important. Over the next few years, different structures and operating models will emerge to address the wider challenges. They must be supported by cultures that are inclusive, equitable, protect the vulnerable, innovative and work in partnership and solidarity.
- 1.5. The UK context itself is also important. Post Brexit, the UK has an opportunity to redefine its role in the world and move towards being a true partner. The UK public, who are generally supportive of alleviating poverty, but see it different ways, need to be alongside on this journey.

1.6. In this context, the inquiry has some critical questions to answer. We recommend a focus on four main ones:

- What should the UK approach to aid be and how does it need to change?
- What is needed to build a safe and anti-racist culture for UK aid?
- How do we ensure that power is decentralised and held by local people?
- How can ODA be used most effectively in this changing context?

1.7. They will not have easy answers. To address the sorts of system level challenges that the philosophy and culture of aid suggests needs a good diagnosis first that narrows down the questions that need to be answered. It needs creative thinking to find new solutions to entrenched challenges.

1.8. We recommend that the inquiry does not rush to answers but gives time and space to exploring the complexity of the system and a range of options for moving forward. However, this should be underpinned by a baseline requirement of an anti-racist, inclusive and safe approach.

2. Thoughts on How

2.1. Alongside asking the right questions, how the inquiry creates space and opportunities for diverse, under-heard and under-represented voices and perspectives will be equally important. This will require an intentional and intersectional approach.

2.2. The UK has a strong, well-established development sector that will undoubtedly bring meaningful and important contributions to the committee's inquiry. Many organisations within the sector are working through questions of their own power, inequality (based on gender, race, disability, sexual orientation and other factors of exclusion) and colonial legacy, and how these manifest in institutional racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia etc.

2.3. In order to fully grapple with questions of the issues of power and culture within aid and development, the committee should model a deliberately inclusive approach that centres the voices from women, girls and marginalised communities and people with lived experiences, including those with disabilities alongside those who are more traditionally thought of as experts.

2.4. The first oral evidence session for this inquiry set a good precedent by including aid experts from the global South. This inquiry should go further and challenge the idea that women, girls and marginalised groups do not have the capacity to challenge oppression themselves, and work with them as agents of their own change to critically analyse and understand the issues that affect them.

2.5. We encourage the committee to think proactively about how they can address barriers to access and inclusion of diverse voices including language and digital access and to set aside costs for it. In addition to the practical considerations of translation, reasonable adjustments and technology, an inclusive approach also requires a cognitive shift around what constitutes 'evidence', 'knowledge' and 'expertise'. Marginalised voices are often discounted because they don't speak English, or their testimony is 'anecdotal' and 'unscientific' or is 'biased' because it is grounded in their lived experience rather than 'research'.

3. What should the UK approach to aid be and how does it need to change?

3.1. For a long time, aid has been defined first and foremost in relationship to development and poverty reduction. The Sustainable Development Goals provide a global framework for development. The OECD DAC rules set out clearly that overseas development assistance (ODA)

‘promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries’. The UK International Development Act (2002) dictates that aid must contribute to the reduction of poverty and support sustainable development. However, the primacy of poverty reduction as the frame for aid is under threat. Global challenges, inequality, national interest and reparative justice are some of the competing frames; all of which have implications for how UK aid is understood and allocated.

- 3.2. The UK’s 2015 aid strategy ‘UK Aid: Tackling Global Challenges in the National Interest’ articulated a vision for UK aid which centres global challenges like insecurity, migration, climate change alongside poverty. Today, global health threats would make the list. Moreover, the strategy explicitly asserts that aid will support the UK’s national interest. Recent UK governments have questioned the continued fitness of the OECD DAC’s rules, arguing for reform and “modernisation.”
- 3.3. Voices from within the international development sector have articulated a very different critique of the DAC and its rules, as an exclusively Northern club and calling for a rethink of international aid as a first step in trying to correct centuries of wrongdoing. This would go hand in hand with a larger commitment to reshaping the international rules of aid which keep developing countries poor. In this re-framing we would start by asking why countries are poor in the first place. This would allow us to situate aid with the UK’s colonial legacy, how that legacy is currently perpetuated by existing rules and even aid itself and finally to move towards solutions and an understanding of aid as part of those solutions.
- 3.4. While offering competing solutions, these critiques of the current system ask similar questions about global development and the role of UK aid within it. We would encourage the committee to engage with these critiques by asking:
 - Are the rules that govern international aid fit for purpose? Are they legitimate? If not, how should the international aid architecture be reformed?
 - What are the risks and opportunities of opening up a discussion of the primary purpose of ODA? What are the gendered and social inclusion dimensions of these risks and opportunities?
 - What do the different proposed purposes for aid (inequality, global challenges and reparatory justice) offer above poverty reduction to questions of aid effectiveness and accountability?
 - How would UK aid be allocated differently under each of these frames and would it deliver better outcomes and for whom? Can they be reconciled?
 - How are global challenges currently impacting UK ODA priorities? Is this the right approach?
 - How has prioritising ‘aid in the national interest’ influenced the policy and practice of UK aid, specifically what are the implications for effectiveness, accountability, gender and inclusion?
 - What role should national interest play in determining aid policy and practice?
 - How would decolonising aid change UK aid?

4. What is needed to support a safe, inclusive and anti-racist culture in UK aid?

- 4.1. We need to acknowledge and recognise the power imbalances that exist in the sector, that cause and sustain racial, gender, class and ability inequalities. The international development and

humanitarian sector has left incidences of racism unchecked for too long. Over the summer of 2020 we heard incidences of racial discrimination being reported in the international aid sector.

4.2. These incidences are upheld by the current structures and ways of working that exist in the sector and continue to harm people of colour working both here in the UK and overseas. They mirror the sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation incidents that have shaken the UK aid sector since 2018. Both have forced the sector and organisations to look inwards and examine the institutional structures that we operate in and live within, including the ways of managing, communicating and labouring that may perpetuate systemic inequalities.

4.3. Short-term funding, measures of success and due diligence requirements all contribute to creating imbalances of power that are so extreme that they foster abuse of power and lack of accountability: this includes oppression and abuse of women and girls and other forms of oppression, including racism, homophobia, ablism, bullying and harassment.

4.4. We encourage the committee to consider the following sub-questions as part of their inquiry:

- How can the current aid structure be changed to favour lived experience of people of colour, women and girls and marginalised communities and people?
- How do you build a system in which decisions can be created more equitably?
- How can the barriers to acknowledging the colonial roots of the sector be overcome to normalise the centering and valuing of lived experience of racialized people and marginalized communities?
- How can UK aid support the work of women, girls and marginalised groups, including people with disabilities to challenge their oppression and exclusion and act as agents of their own change?
- How can the international development sector ensure that the expectations, rules and requirements they set on safety and safeguarding are responsive to and informed by the lived experiences, values and preferences of the women, girls and marginalised communities and people they are meant to protect?
- How can the UK aid sector address the harmful social norms that perpetuate violence and abuse around the world and work with communities to shift those harmful norms?
- How do we redress the imbalance and lack of representation in UK-based NGOs at Board and Senior management level?
- How can FCDO engage more with racialized people in the sector, both in the UK and overseas?

5. How can we ensure that power is decentralised and held by local people?

5.1. The desire to retain control - over decision-making, funding and over the consequences of development interventions - is perpetuated by and perpetuates the colonial roots of UK development. The current system of aid works around communities rather than centering on them. Localising development requires the established Western entities being willing to let go of power, but also requires them to acknowledge and respect the expertise and rights of local communities. Numerous structural and cultural systems within the UK aid sector prevent local communities from having ownership over aid and development.

5.2. We encourage the inquiry to consider the following question on decentralising and localising development:

- How can the UK aid sector, including NGOs and donors, create cultures and structures that share and shift power to local communities? How do they build trust with locally led actors, movements and approaches?
- How can the UK aid sector, including NGOs and donors, engage directly with southern based organisations, networks and communities to find solutions to achieving locally led development?
- What would more equitable and inclusive development partnerships look like, and how could UK foster such partnerships?
- What does the UK aid sector, including NGOs and donors, need to do to support local communities to lead their own development?
- How can UK aid and NGO community best act in solidarity with civil society actors experiencing undue restrictions and pressures on civic space?
- What are the barriers to funding going directly to local communities?
- What are the implications of promoting specific values such as democracy and human rights through development? How should the systems of a partner country inform decision making?

6. How can ODA be used most effectively in this changing context?

6.1. It is clear that aid is both under threat and being asked to do more than ever before. At the same time, people's belief in aid and development has been shaken by scandal and by perceived failures. After decades of development poverty and inequality still exist and, in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, is getting worse. The big, challenging questions this inquiry will seek to answer are critical to the future of UK aid.

6.2. We would also encourage the Committee to consider the following questions as well:

- How can and should the UK balance the competing demands on its aid budget amidst rising and proliferating needs?
- How can UK aid best deliver development outcomes across the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and ecological?
- What are the implications of the vision for the UK's role in the world outlined in the Integrated Review for UK aid? How will a more integrated approach to diplomacy, development and defense shape the policy and practice of UK aid over the next decade?
- Where should the international development sector prioritise focusing its time and resources in the next few years?
- What do 'value for money' and 'value for UK taxpayers' mean and what role should these questions play in decisions about aid?
- What is the best way to balance accountability to UK citizens and to affected communities?
- What innovation is needed to ensure that aid is effective and addresses the root causes of poverty.