

Written Evidence for International Affairs Select Committee - The Future of UK Aid

Introduction

My name is Dr Victoria Honeyman and I am an Associate Professor of British Politics at the University of Leeds. My particular specialism is British foreign policy and ODA policy, how different parties in government approach these policy areas and how they justify or 'sell' their policies to the public. My research in Britain's ODA policy focuses on the benefits and costs for Britain, rather than being focused on the specific nations or organisations aid is donated to. At the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Leeds, I work alongside colleagues from a wide range of specialisms, including both British politics and International Development.

Short Summary

This written evidence focuses on the strategic targeting of UK ODA. It argues that the British government needs to be more straightforward and transparent about its ambitions for ODA, in terms of what it wants to achieve in developing nations and what it wants to achieve for the UK. The UK is not unique in having a mix of motivations at the heart of its ODA policy, but by being opaque about these, it is in danger of fundamentally undermining development projects and failing to achieve its aims. The vagueness of the FCDO priorities allows this confusion to continue and could undermine trust between development partners and the UK.

Written Evidence

The FCDO, and DfID before it, have been expected to prove their worth and the efficacy of their funding on international development projects. As a prominent donor nation, that is not surprising, but it does bring with it certain constraints and expectations which need considering before the specifics of the FCDO's seven global challenges can be discussed.

The current expectations for ODA funding focus primarily on 'value for money'. The government expects ODA projects to have a suitable concluding point and for the money invested to be both accounted for and to have appropriate value. That is entirely understandable, and possibly even justifiable for some aid projects, but it treats ODA as a series of large and small projects which, when fitted together like a jigsaw will 'fix' problems in the developing world. It could be argued, and perhaps should be argued, that the issues that developing nations face cannot be addressed in this way and therefore the focus on the fiscal or empirical element of these projects is undermining their efficacy.

While the UK undoubtedly wants to be a positive partner with developing nations, helping them to develop while also serving our own priorities and needs, it should be considered whether this approach is appropriate and whether it is working effectively. By steering development aid in specific directions, is the UK failing to recognise the needs of specific developing nations? Are we simply replicating a paternalistic relationship where we ask developing nations to bend to our priorities, rather than recognising the value of their

priorities and trying to work effectively with them in the hope of joint success? How much do we trust our development partners?

The Seven Global Challenges set by FCDO reflect the priorities of the UK in relation to the developing world and global governance more generally. In general terms, several of them are hard to criticise as priorities such as climate change, global health security or the educational needs of girls. These are longstanding issues and attention and long-term funding is required to deal with them effectively. However, the devil is always in the detail, and it must be asked whether the way these issues are being tackled is being driven by UK priorities or the priorities of the developing nations. Without this synthesis of ideas, the actual policy could easily be less effective than its priority status would suggest.

However, several of the priority areas raise questions. **The focus on humanitarian preparedness and response, for example, appears an obvious priority and one where funding is desperately needed in a timely fashion.** However, the nations potentially labelled as recipients raises issues. How effective is funding for Yemen when, at the same time as providing aid, the UK government is selling weapons to Saudi Arabia with no knowledge of where they are being utilised in the region? How will this funding be used? Will it go directly to political forces in Yemen once (we hope) the conflict ends, or will it be used in neighbouring nations to support them with the costs of caring and protecting refugees and displaced persons? How dynamic will the list of priority nations be and how quickly can funding be assigned to specific nations dealing with humanitarian issues? None of these questions have been answered and the answers to these kinds of questions are key to assessing the effectiveness of this priority.

The **science and technology priority** could, again, be extremely positive or may have more limited results. In the minds of many, ODA funds projects in developing nations, but this chunk of money does not appear to have these limitations, although they may be evident in in-house documentation from the FCDO. Instead, the statement from the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab on 21st April 2021 simply indicated that money would be put aside to fund R&D on issues relating to all seven priority areas, including satellite imaging and AI. While technology can be extremely useful in identifying a whole variety of natural and manmade disasters as they occur, this stream of funding could be easily seen as a backdoor funding stream for UK business and science. If that is what this is supposed to be, if the UK is hoping to develop new R&D to aid work in developing nations, it should be clear on that to both members of the public and interested parties both in the UK and overseas. ODA spending can and is used to further the UK's interests as well as the needs of developing nations, and the government should be open about this.

Again, in terms of its aims, the **open society and conflict resolution priority** seems very positive. However, we know from experience that forcing developing nations to adopt Western norms, be they economic or political, quickly can cause unforeseen consequences. The building of democracy in nations is not a quick process and external projects should not ride rough-shod over the efforts already being made in developing nations. When the UK has worked with developing nations and engaged with key groups and individuals within nations, the systems produced can be made to work more effectively and be embedded within nations, which ultimately is better for the UK's future relations with nations.

However, the UK government needs to think carefully about the potential costs of forcing developing nations to introduce Western rules and norms, especially when that is done quickly (as was done at the end of colonial rule in numerous nations across the world). Not only does it not often work well, it can sour existing relationships. With more aid donors than ever before fighting for relationships with developing nations, including China and Russia, we need to be very careful in how we engage in these relationships – working with nations rather than telling them what they should be doing in order to gain our patronage.

The final priority – **economic development and trade** – perhaps hints most obviously at one of the key aims of ODA policy in the UK. The real question behind this priority is whose economic development and trade is being prioritised? The FCDO suggest that economic development can benefit both the UK and the nations they invest in the developing world. While that may well be true, it isn't always the case and when there are conflicts, whose interests will be primary?

This leads us to the **issue of communication**, which is at the heart of the issue of ODA in the UK. Successive British governments have been somewhat opaque with regard to ODA and how it is communicated to the UK public and often the wider global audience. The majority of ODA donors are motivated by a mix of altruism and self-interest, with only a very few being considered truly altruistic donors (primarily some of the Nordic nations). UK ODA policy is a mix of self-interest and altruism, but also includes, due to the OECD re-categorisation of ODA funding in 2012, several costs which the general public may not consider traditional aid costs. Examples of this might well be the payment of specific administration costs relating to aid, the funding of consultants to provide expertise on specific projects or the funding of certain military activities in the delivery of aid projects. While they may be important to ODA project delivery, their inclusion in ODA budgetary figures is not always clear to the public or the British press.

The 0.7% commitment to ODA was useful for the UK in a number of ways. It allowed us to build a new international image, helped rehabilitate relationships with former colonial nations and allowed us to develop markets in developing nations. It bought good will, but the reduction to 0.5% is undermining not only specific projects but the whole ethos of the policy. Suddenly, the UK appears to be a far less secure funder and, with new funders entering the arena of donation and investment, the British government may well want to reconsider this reduction before permanent damage is done.ⁱ

If the British government is committed to ODA, whether it be a 0.7% or 0.5%, it needs to be more upfront with the British public, and the wider global community, about what the benefits of that funding are for both developing nations and the UK. Without this honesty, the work of FCDO in this area will continue to be mis-understood and undermined, and the aims of development projects in developing nations will be unclear.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Honeyman, Victoria and Lightfoot, Simon. 'The Giant Cashpoint in the Sky: The DFID/FCO Merger and its

implications for Global Britain', *Political Insight*, 4th September 2020. Available at:
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2041905820958821>.

ⁱⁱ Honeyman, Victoria. 'New Labour's overseas development aid policy – charity or self-interest?', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2019, pp. 313-335.