

Gender and Development Network and Gender Action for Peace and Security

Written submission to the International Development Committee Submission on the impact of the UK aid cuts

28 May 2021

Summary

Cuts in the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) do not sit well with the UK Government's professed commitments to gender equality, made most recently in the context of its Presidency of the G7, nor with its long-held understanding of the complexity and importance of achieving equality for women and girls - as outlined in its Strategic Vision for Gender Equality.

This submission argues that the UK Government's recently announced priority areas for its ODA allocations in 2021-2022 fail to address the most pressing global challenges of our time. It goes on to demonstrate the stark distinction between the UK's rhetoric on gender equality, within the G7 and elsewhere, and the corresponding reality of cuts in aid spending on programmes that were proven to benefit women and girls in the Global South. The lack of transparency and consultation in relation to the amount and location of these cuts is challenged, and the question is raised about whether the impact assessment the Government used recognises the role that women will have to play in absorbing the impacts of the cuts on their families and communities. The likely effects of these cuts on the lives of women and girls is then explored, revealing a bleak picture which further suggests that cutting of existing, effective, programmes with sunk costs, is unlikely to be good value for money.

In the concluding recommendations, the Government is called upon to reverse the cuts in aid and make tangible financial commitments as part of its G7 promises on gender equality. We also request that the Government make public the methodology used in assessing the impact of the cuts on gender equality and demonstrate its continued compliance with the International Development (Gender Equality) Act. Finally, we call for increased targets for spending on gender equality as a proportion of ODA, with a holistic approach recognising the breadth of action needed if gender equality is to be attained.

Introduction

This submission is written by the Gender and Development Network (GADN) and Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) - co-chairs of this year's Women 7 (W7).¹ GADN is a network of leading UK-based non-governmental organisations, academics and experts working on gender, development and women's rights issues. GAPS is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network that works to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide. We also support the submission by Bond as well as that led by CARE International UK, in collaboration with a group of UK-based INGOs working on gender equality – including our two organisations.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry on the impact of the UK aid cuts. This submission focuses on the UK's role as the host of the 2021 G7 in the context of the aid cuts. It considers the extent to which its seven priority areas are adequate to respond to current global challenges, the divergence between the UK's rhetoric on gender equality and its funding commitments, as well as the process of its decision-making and the likely impact it will have on women and girls.

Strategy

The UK's seven priority areas, as outlined in the Foreign Secretary's announcement on ODA allocations for 2021-2022 on April 21st, sought to focus on the most pressing global development challenges.² However, these priority areas - alongside the conclusions in the Integrated Review³ - fail to recognise or attempt to remedy some of the key global challenges affecting UK international policy. These include the issue of global inequality that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the risk outlined by the World Bank that up to 150 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2021 as a result.⁴

In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed long-standing structural gender inequalities and highlighted the ways in which women and girls, especially those who experience other forms of intersecting discriminations, have disproportionately borne the pandemic's impacts.

¹ UK Government. 2021. G7 Ministerial Meetings and Engagement Groups. <https://www.g7uk.org/women-7/>.

The W7 is one of six official G7 Engagement Groups that make recommendations to G7 country governments. The views expressed by the co-chairs of the 2021 W7 do not necessarily represent all the W7. The W7 Communique is available at: <https://gadnetwork.org/w7-summit>

² UK Government. April 2021. UK Official Development Assistance allocations 2020-21

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-official-development-assistance-oda-allocations-2021-to-2022-written-ministerial-statement>

³ UK Government. 2021. The Integrated Review 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-integrated-review-2021>

⁴ World Bank. 2020. Covid-19 to add as many as 150 million extreme poor by 2021.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021>

However, these realities are not reflected in the UK Government's ODA strategy and allocations for 2021-2022.⁵ Instead, the UK Government has squarely focused on girls' education as a proxy for all its gender equality work thereby failing to recognise that tackling gender inequality requires a holistic, multi-sectoral approach covering all different areas of gender discrimination - as outlined in DFID's Strategic Vision for Gender Equality (2018 - 2030)⁶ and the UK's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018 - 2022)⁷. Issues like women's economic empowerment (WEE), violence against women and girls (VAWG) and women, peace and security (WPS) are all left unmentioned.

Furthermore, at this stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic recovery is of significant importance to many developing countries, especially with threats of a prolonged global recession combined with unprecedented levels of borrowing to fund their health and socio-economic responses, while already in the midst of a global debt crisis. Instead of responding to this challenge, the UK Government has chosen to focus on developing new trading relationships with countries in the Global South rather than supporting the development of a global "Build Back Better" strategy that incorporates gender equality and pushes for new, more sustainable, economic models.

Additionally, the Foreign Secretary's announcement does not acknowledge or reference the UK Government's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and how the seven priority areas will work towards fulfilling those ambitions ahead of 2030.

Process

Rhetoric vs Reality

The UK Government has said that it will use its G7 Presidency in 2021 to "unite leading democracies to help the world fight, and then build back better from coronavirus and create a greener, more prosperous future".⁸ The Communique produced following the G7 Foreign Affairs and Development Ministers' meeting in early May 2021 set out the importance of what the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) have termed the '3Es' - educating girls, empowering women and ending violence against women and girls.⁹ This included signing

⁵ See note 2

⁶ DFID. 2018. Strategic Vision for Gender Equality.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708116/Strategic-vision-gender-equality1.pdf

⁷ UK Government. 2018. UK National Action Plans on Women Peace and Security

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security-2018-to-2022>

⁸ <https://www.g7uk.org/> page 1

⁹ UK Government. May 2021. G7 Foreign and Development Ministers Communique.

<https://www.g7uk.org/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-may-2021-communique/> paragraphs 66-75

up to new global targets on girls' education as well as the signing of the Girls' Education Political Declaration.¹⁰ However, these commitments came just two weeks after the UK Government had announced its ODA allocations for 2021-22¹¹ which saw a 41 percent and a 49 percent reduction in its bilateral spending on girls' education, as compared to 2018 and 2019 respectively.¹² The cuts will also have knock-on effects on other associated areas like sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) which are key components of quality education. In fact, cuts are apparent across all the areas covered in the '3Es' including: WEE, Women's Political Leadership (WPL), and VAWG.

Despite the UK Government's emphasis on ending violence against women and girls within the G7 context, no mention of it was made in the April announcement of ODA allocations¹³ and evidence from our member organisations suggest that cuts are being made to programmes that have already proven to be effective. A reduction in funding to what is known to work on VAWG would notably undermine the UK's credibility and authority to lead on this issue on a global platform. As a co-lead of the Gender Based Violence Action Coalition¹⁴ within the UN Women-convened Generation Equality Forum, the UK Government will be facing calls to rescind this global leadership role if cuts to VAWG related policy and programming are later uncovered or announced.

Furthermore, the UK Government's decision to drastically reduce its contributions to key multilateral agencies¹⁵ such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNAIDS (who work on advancing women and girls' rights globally) is in stark opposition to its bold rhetoric on gender equality and once again threatens to undermine the UK's international reputation and global leadership at a critical time.

Additionally, to lead the UK's gender equality work at the G7, the Government also announced the creation of a Gender Equality Advisory Council (GEAC), expected to "produce recommendations to drive women's empowerment across the world".¹⁶ However, concerns remain about the extent to which these recommendations will be heeded by the UK

¹⁰ UK Government. 5 May 2021. Declaration on Girls' Education.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-may-2021-communique/declaration-on-girls-education-recovering-from-covid-19-and-unlocking-agenda-2030>

¹¹ See note 2

¹² FCDO. 2020. Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2019. p.35.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-final-uk-aid-spend-2019>

¹³ See note 2

¹⁴ UN Women. 19 April 2021. Action Coalitions – Leadership Structures.

https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/AC_Leadership_Structure_Full_List_PDF_English.pdf

¹⁵ UN News. 29 April 2021. "UK's 85% family planning aid cut will be devastating for women and girls says UNFPA, while UNAIDS also 'deeply regrets' cuts". <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1090892>

¹⁶ UK Government. 8 March 2021. "Government launches G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council".

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-g7-gender-equality-advisory-council>

Government, given the existing announcement of cuts in spending that will directly impact on the empowerment of women and girls.

The UK Government's contradictory approach to its aid spending has been made worse by its attempts to block US President Biden's push within the G7 for a global minimum corporate tax rate which could recover up to USD\$640bn¹⁷ a year in underpaid tax from multinational corporations. Such a proposal has the potential to drastically increase government revenues, including across the Global South, and would give governments the fiscal space they need to more adequately respond to the many challenges they face, and which are not tackled through UK aid.

Lack of transparency and consultation

There has been wide-spread condemnation across the UK aid sector about the lack of information and public consultation ahead of the UK Government's unilateral decision to cut the aid budget and announce its ODA allocations for 2021-2022. Concerns remain about the legality of this decision, without Parliamentary oversight, and the failure to disclose the metrics that were used to make such far-reaching decisions. The UK Government has advised that it employed a central equalities impact assessment to decide where the cuts should be made but, to date, details have not been made public.

Impact of the cuts

The reduction in the UK's Gross National Income (GNI) in 2020, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, had already seen a drop in its ODA spend during a critical year when support to developing countries was paramount. Therefore, the UK Government's decision to initiate a further reduction in 2021, by unlawfully cutting ODA from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of GNI is not only poorly timed and dangerous but also a dereliction of its historic global leadership. This is at a time when a shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls (VAWG) has taken hold and intensified across the world, and hard-won gains on gender equality have been eroded as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, an issue that appears to have been missed in the Government's central equalities impact assessment of the aid cuts is the likelihood of women and girls having to step-in and make up for these funding deficits with little consideration for the impact it is likely to have on their time, paid work or unpaid care responsibilities. Examples include areas such as education, water and sanitation provision, as well as nutrition.

¹⁷ Tax Justice Network. 15 April 2021. "Biden tax plan can recover \$640bn but OECD proposal would shrink gains and reward worst perpetrators". <https://www.taxjustice.net/press/biden-tax-plan-can-recover-640bn-but-oecd-proposal-would-shrink-gains-and-reward-worst-perpetrators/>

Further detailed analysis of the likely gendered impacts of the aid cuts can be found in a joint briefing produced by a number of UK-based INGOs and networks, including GADN and GAPS, working on gender equality and women's rights.¹⁸ In the absence of official data and information from the Government, agencies have pieced together what evidence they can, and the result paints a bleak picture for the millions of women and girls who stand to be cut off from often life-saving UK aid programmes. Members of GADN and GAPS are gradually being told by the FCDO of the cuts that are affecting them, and this is starting to create a picture of devastation in programmes across all areas of gender equality work from WEE, WPL, Girl's Education, WPS and SRHR.

Many of the international development organisations and partner organisations experiencing the cuts have been given only 90 days' notice to close down well-established, multi-million pound, multi-country programmes. This has been a source of immense uncertainty for UK-based organisations but also, more importantly, for partner organisations and the communities they work with - many of whom might have to close permanently despite money already spent on research and learning, staff training and capital investments. The rationale remains unclear about the apparent efficiency and value-for-money that is to be achieved by cutting programmes with a proven track-record and with no recourse to review the arbitrary decisions by the FCDO.

Moreover, at a time when the UK Government is seeking to build new post-Brexit relationships with countries in the Global South, such drastic decision-making threatens the UK's international reputation, and certainly brings into question its dearly held reputation as a global leader on gender equality.

Recommendations for the UK Government and the FCDO

The UK has made clear its full commitment to gender equality, not least in its Presidency of the G7. Yet the cuts in ODA announced over the course of the last six months are directly impacting on proven work to promote gender equality and, in doing so, are undermining the Governments' commitments and the reputation of the UK as a champion for gender equality on the international stage. As co-chairs of the 2021 W7 we propose that to put right this anomaly the UK Government must:

1. With immediate effect, commit to reversing the proposed cuts to the UK aid budget and **reinstate the UK's legally binding commitment to 0.7% of GNI**, which is also reaffirmed in the Government's 2019 election manifesto.

¹⁸ Care International UK et al. 2021. UK Government decisions to cut UK aid are disproportionately falling on women and girls. <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/uk-government-decisions-to-cut-uk-aid-are-disproportionately-falling-on-women-and-girls>

2. Use the upcoming G7 Summit to ensure that its **bold rhetoric on gender equality is matched by corresponding funding commitments.**
3. **Commit to the immediate and full publication of the methodology used in the Government's central equalities impact assessment** that was used to decide where the aid cuts would be made.
4. **Prove its compliance with the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014** which ensures consideration of gender equality across all ODA spend, by publishing the impact of the cuts on the promotion of gender equality.
5. **Increase the proportions of aid spend that have gender equality as a 'principal' objective to 10% of bilateral aid spend with an additional 75% spending on projects and programmes with gender equality as a 'significant' objective¹⁹** to ensure that gender equality is not disproportionately impacted by the any cuts in spending.
6. **Commit to resourcing and tackling the full breadth of gender discrimination** as part of the UK's international gender equality, recognising the Strategic Vision for Gender Equality's five foundation areas - VAWG, SRHR, girls' education, women's economic empowerment, and women's political empowerment.²⁰

For more information please contact:

Sophie Efangé at the Gender and Development Network

Sophie.Efange@gadnetwork.org

¹⁹ OECD DAC. no date. Gender Equality Policy Marker.

<https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/dac-gender-equality-marker.htm>

²⁰ See note 6.