

VSO submission to the International Development Committee inquiry on the Effectiveness of UK Aid

VSO is an international development agency with over 60 years' experience of addressing poverty and marginalisation through our unique approach of working through international, national and community volunteers. By bringing together different perspectives, and working at all levels of society – from communities to government ministries – volunteers can build trust and provide the right support to ensure that national development efforts deliver lasting change. VSO has a particular focus on social inclusion, social accountability and resilience – seeing the absence of these as fundamental causes of marginalisation and vulnerability.

VSO also leads a consortium of NGO partners to deliver the UK Government funded International Citizen Service (ICS) programme. This brings together young people from the UK to work alongside young people in the Global South in delivering national development programmes in education, livelihoods and health. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry.

How effective and transparent is the UK aid spent by the Department for International Development (DFID) compared to aid allocated to other Government departments and to the cross-Government funds?

1. VSO supports the view held widely across the international development sector in the UK that the majority of the UK's aid budget should be spent via the Department for International Development (DFID) as this is the most effective, accountable and transparent way to deliver aid. DFID is one of the most scrutinised departments within government, being subject to monitoring from four bodies; the International Development Committee (IDC), the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), the National Audit Office (NAO) and the international peer review of the OECD, and the collective work of these organisations ensures Britain's aid spending delivers both development impact in our partner countries, and value for money for the British taxpayer. The overall impact of this level of scrutiny was demonstrated in the June 2019 NAO report into aid effectiveness¹, which noted that despite the government's ambition for every department to reach a ranking of 'good' or 'very good' against an independent assessment of transparency, so far only DFID has met this target, demonstrating the high levels of transparency and accountability of DFID spending in comparison to other departments.

2. Considering the overall high levels of scrutiny within DFID, its stature and expertise on the world stage, and the concerns raised by bodies such as the NAO about a lack of assessment of the impacts of non-DFID ODA spend, we take the view that non-DFID ODA spend should in each case be justified both in its aims and its outcomes.

1. <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-effectiveness-of-Official-Development-Assistance-expenditure.pdf> (pg. 11)

The definition and administration of UK aid – who should be responsible, and accountable, for targeting and spending aid?

3. In terms of accountability within political leadership, we take the view, echoed across the sector², that an independent Department for International Development with Cabinet-level representation, is vital to ensure high levels of accountability for UK's aid spending as well as ensuring a focus on poverty reduction.

4. DFID is rightly tasked with a specific remit to reduce global poverty and deliver on the SDGs. Under the current system, the Secretary of State can be held accountable for the performance of their Department. Were DFID to be placed under the political leadership of the Foreign Office, we would be concerned that the risk of competing objectives between the UK's aid strategy and its foreign policy goals would make it harder to ensure accountable leadership on SDG delivery.

5. Several accountability mechanisms would be lost if the Department were downgraded; these include that the Secretary of State and Ministers for International Development are answerable to the IDC, as well as to their Opposition counterparts, both during regular sessions of International Development Questions, and on any occasion when they are called to Parliament to answer Urgent Questions on any international development issues which arise.

6. We also note the importance of the collective level of development expertise within DFID as a factor in Britain's effective development work. DFID is highly respected across the world and international development system as having some of the highest qualified staff in the world. Any potential merger between DFID and the FCO risks the potential of loss of expertise from the Department³, as well as the challenges faced by countries such as Australia and Canada which have followed this path, where a loss of specialist expertise and reputation has been noted.⁴

How the national interest should be defined, and what weight should it be given, in relation to targeting UK aid?

7. VSO takes the view that the primary purpose of UK aid spending should be to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and address poverty and marginalisation. We believe that this does align with the national interest, for the following reasons:

i. Our international development commitments enhance British power and influence around

² <https://www.bond.org.uk/press-releases/2019/12/over-100-charities-warn-that-plans-to-merge-dfid-with-fco-risks-britain>

³ <https://www.devex.com/news/there-s-only-so-much-you-put-up-with-dfid-staff-survey-details-collapsing-morale-96887>

⁴ Stephen Brown, Professor of Science at the University of Ottawa, cited in Devex: <https://www.devex.com/news/what-happens-when-an-aid-department-is-folded-96262>

the world, with DFID rightly recognised as a “*development superpower*”⁵, and a key factor in our influence on the world stage. A recent report by the UNA-UK⁶ noted “*a strong link between the UK’s reputation within the General Assembly and its commitment to providing 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) in foreign aid*”, with former UK Ambassador to the UN, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, describing 0.7% as “*evidence of real intent to be a global power*”, and former UK Ambassador to the UN Lord Hannay noting that without this continued commitment the UK’s reputation “*would be in sort of free fall territory*”. Furthermore, DFID’s Country Offices function as a diplomatic network which can grant access to government Ministries and other relevant institutions which the FCO may not have access to. Our development work also enhances a perception of trust globally, with a British Council report into “*The Value of Trust*” finding that the UK’s contribution to development work was the main driver of trust in young people across the G20⁷. As with initiatives like the Chevening Scholarships, and the International Citizen Service programme (ICS), Britain’s aid work is noticed and appreciated by young people around the world, and contributes to a perception of trust among them which will pay dividends amongst the emerging political and business leaders of tomorrow.

ii. Britain, along with all other countries, has an interest in seeing levels of global poverty reduce, in fighting global diseases, and in improving peace and security around the world. As the coronavirus pandemic continues, it is clearer than ever that no strict binary exists between national and international interest, and that no country can consider its own ‘national interest’ in isolation. As President Aday of Ethiopia said recently, “*if Covid-19 is not beaten in Africa, it will return to haunt us all*”⁸. The UK should be rightly proud of its support for vaccination programmes through initiatives like GAVI, and, when a coronavirus vaccine is developed, should be at the forefront of efforts for worldwide vaccination. This will be in both the UK national interest, and in the interests of developing countries, as every nation will remain at risk from the pandemic unless and until we develop widespread global vaccination against Covid-19.

iii. Britain’s interests are also served by our support for economic development overseas, through our health, education and livelihoods programmes. The recent UK-Africa Summit showcased the growing economic links between the UK and Africa, which will benefit businesses and consumers in both regions. Improving employment opportunities is particularly important for the many millions of young people across Africa who are out of work. Yet growth in many African countries is still threatened by diseases like measles, tetanus and pneumonia, which still cause too many preventable deaths. In some cases, our international development work goes hand in hand with our international trade objectives – not because of deliberate alignment between departments, but because a safer and more prosperous world benefits everyone.

⁵ <https://dfidnews.blog.gov.uk/2018/01/15/britain-will-no-longer-fund-the-good-works-foreign-governments-can-fund-themselves/>

⁶ https://www.una.org.uk/sites/default/files/UNA-UK_GlobalBritain_20190207d.pdf

⁷ ⁷ https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_value_of_trust.pdf

⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/c12a09c8-6db6-11ea-89df-41bea055720b>

iv. Lastly, DFID's work towards the Sustainable Development Goals can be described as being aligned with the national interest because it reflects the views of a majority of the British public, two-thirds of whom, according to research from Eurobarometer, think tackling poverty in developing countries should be "*a major priority*" for the UK government⁹. The majority of British people believe that the UK has a role to play in helping the world's poorest, and support their governments in doing so.

8. As a development agency which works through volunteers, many of whom are British, we have a particular insight into how the UK's aid work also benefits UK citizens, communities in Britain, and the wider national interest. Our international volunteers gain immense personal and professional development from their time overseas, and in many cases return to work in the UK after a period spent volunteering abroad with improved skills and experience. For example in the context of the health service, we see how our volunteer medics gain from their time spent volunteering for development overseas, both from the practical experiences of treating diseases found more commonly in developing countries, such as tuberculosis and malaria, as well as in the resilience, communication and cross-cultural skills and innovation engendered through working in new and challenging environments. This was echoed in DFID's recent report, "Stronger Health Partnerships for Stronger Health Systems"¹⁰ which noted "*the benefits for UK health volunteers and the UK health system through their learning, acquisition of new skills and leadership development opportunities.*" A recent twinning partnership implemented by VSO between Lewisham hospital in London and Nyagatarre district hospital in Rwanda has also generated learnings for NHS staff around community outreach which are now being applied in the UK. In education, VSO and its education technology partner, OneBillion, have seen the application of learning from online numeracy and literacy initiatives brought back into UK schools following support from DFID in Malawi¹¹.

9. Our evidence¹² shows that returned ICS volunteers get involved in volunteering and social action in the UK at higher rates than their peers, doing good for their communities across the country after their return from overseas. As our returned youth volunteers are typically at the start of their careers, we also see how the skills and experiences gained from ICS – in problem solving, inter-cultural communication and awareness and personal resilience – improve their prospects in education and employment, which is of particular importance to our young volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, the 20,000 plus ICS alumni in our partner countries, also at the start of their working lives, as well as gaining necessary skills and experiences to prepare them for future employment, will in many cases go on to be influential, and will carry with them the life-long personal and cross-national links with Britain developed since their time on ICS.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/oct/23/two-thirds-of-british-people-see-overseas-aid-as-a-major-priority-eurobarometer>

¹⁰ <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205243/documents>

¹¹ See video available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oa1f0rF9weE>

¹² For example, See "ICS social return on investment report" conducted with the New Economics Foundation in 2019: <https://www.volunteerics.org/social-return-investment>