

International Development Select Committee: Effectiveness of UK Aid Inquiry May 2020 – Written Evidence from the People and Nature campaign

Introduction

The UK is rightly recognised as a global leader in international development, being the first G7 country to enshrine in law the UN's 0.7% GNI aid target. Alongside the longstanding requirement that all UK Aid spending contributes to poverty alleviation and sustainable development (International Development Act 2002), climate mitigation and adaptation are now central elements of the UK's development strategy, in recognition of the fact that climate change poses an integral threat to the achievement of sustainable development. In contrast, the existential threat posed by the loss of vital species and ecosystems to achieving poverty reduction and development goals is still far too infrequently acknowledged and reflected in UK Aid strategy. While *all* life on Earth is dependent on a healthy environment, the poorest are almost always most directly dependent on nature and hit hardest by its loss. With the safety net provided by nature now stretched to breaking point, **the UK Government must address biodiversity loss as a humanitarian issue which threatens human wellbeing, development and prosperity, both immediately and long-term.**

As we approach major global environmental summits, including the UK's hosting of COP26 of the UN Climate Change Convention, **tackling the *interconnected* 'Triple Challenge' of poverty reduction, biodiversity loss and climate change must be at the forefront of the UK's international development strategy and its ODA criteria.** The UK Government must actively set **additional criteria to require that all UK Aid is nature-positive and climate-smart. Triple Challenge approaches will also support reduced likelihood of future pandemics, meaning they should form a key pillar of the UK's International Development Covid-19 response.** In addition, the UK Government must also **act urgently to put an end to investments that harm nature and contribute to climate change,** including the use of UK Aid to support fossil fuel consumption or extraction, which are undermining positive funding commitments made towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Biodiversity loss must be recognised as a threat to development

We all depend on nature – for the air we breathe, the water we drink, the soil we grow our food in, and the safe climate we need. It is also a source of joy, cultural fulfilment and inspiration to us all. However, the poorest depend most directly on nature. 90% of the world's poorest people are dependent on biological resources for food, fuel, medicine and shelter and often cannot afford substitutes for previously freely available resources once these are degraded or exhausted. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, caused by a zoonotic pathogen has demonstrated more clearly than ever how intertwined environmental and human health are. Experts believe that, as stresses on nature increase, future pandemics are highly likely and could have even more severe health, social and economic impacts than this one¹. Habitat destruction, intensive livestock production and the wildlife trade can all contribute to zoonotic disease outbreaks.

For these reasons, biodiversity loss is estimated to be currently undermining the achievement of 80% of the Sustainable Development Goals and the comprehensive global biodiversity assessment undertaken by IPBES last year subsequently warned that

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/07/promiscuous-treatment-of-nature-will-lead-to-more-pandemics-scientists>

socioeconomic pressures caused by environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change could undermine the wellbeing of 3.2 billion people.

With human health, wellbeing, prosperity and survival so closely intertwined with the state and functioning of natural ecosystems, it is clear that their destruction is a humanitarian and development issue and must be a priority issue for the UK's aid strategy. While the last two decades have seen unprecedented global improvements against development indicators, including the greatest reduction in poverty rates in human history, this progress is now threatened by biodiversity loss. Without significant and immediate action, the decline of the natural world will continue, fast approaching tipping points from which recovery may not be possible, and while all of us will be affected, the world's poorest will continue to suffer the most devastating impacts.

UK Aid must support integrated solutions to the Triple Challenge

These deep and fundamental connections between poverty, biodiversity loss and climate change require that these are considered not as distinct areas of action but rather as one intertwined '**Triple Challenge**'. The only way to effectively tackle such interconnected issues is through well-designed integrated solutions. Integrated solutions must be prioritised at the international level as states meet in 2021 for major summits on climate, biodiversity and sustainable development, and also reflected in the strategy and policymaking at the individual department level, including at DFID.

One example of an integrated solution is mangrove restoration which addresses flood risk, builds climate and natural disaster resilience, enhances coastal and marine biodiversity, and supports livelihoods such as coastal shellfish harvesting, which in many communities is a key income source for women. Likewise, community-based wildlife management in the arid zones of Southern Africa provides a viable, climate-resilient alternative to agriculture, particularly in the face of declining rainfall and increasing aridity, supports local livelihoods through jobs, enterprises and meat production, and provides incentives for habitat and species conservation. Another example of an integrated solution is the reforestation of Amazonian cattle pasture: farms are being restored by reintroducing trees into the landscape – low-density tree planting across pasture means grass-feeding is supplemented by cattle browsing, while the planting or natural regeneration of native trees alongside river banks prevents soil and animal waste from washing into the water, leading to higher yields of milk and beef, increased carbon sequestration and enhanced biodiversity.

It is clear that the Amazon rainforest must be a key focus for action. The science suggests that the 'tipping point' for the Amazon, at which there would be an irreversible shift from tropical rainforest to savannah vegetation, is 20-25% deforestation (Lovejoy and Nobre, 2018²). This figure represents a further loss of only about 5%. Without the world's largest tropical forest, there would be no realistic prospect of limiting climate change to 1.5C.

The key threat to the Amazon system is agricultural expansion, including the production of commodities such as soy and beef. The large-scale import of such key commodities is one of the reasons why the UK has such a significant global environmental footprint and is therefore a major part of the problem. As such, we must demonstrate leadership in developing ambitious and effective solutions. Our current models of production and consumption place unsustainable and irreversible demands on the natural environment and must be addressed by improving policies and practices for responsible land and resource-based investments. The recently published final recommendations³ of the Global Resource

² <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/4/2/eaat2340/tab-pdf>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/88

Initiative, a taskforce convened by the Government to consider how the UK can green its international supply chains and leave a lighter footprint on the global environment, provide a valuable policy blueprint for the UK Government in addressing the Triple Challenge.

Recent commitments from the UK Government, including its doubling of International Climate Finance contributions and announcement of the Blue Planet and Biodiverse Landscape Funds, do demonstrate a growing understanding of the deeply intertwined nature of these challenges. However, more than six months later, it is still unclear how these funds are going to be used. These must be explicitly targeted on integrated approaches that reflect Triple Challenge thinking, including building on successful approaches in place that require further support to scale up. All future new nature and climate funds must include explicit objectives and selection criteria around protecting nature, tackling poverty and climate change. In planning long-term policy responses to the current crisis, the Biodiverse Landscapes Fund also provides a valuable opportunity to build pandemic risk aversion into landscape planning. Furthermore, if the Government implements the findings of the recent Global Resource Initiative publication this represents an opportunity to align trade policy (through sustainable supply chains) with nature and climate funds such as the Blue Planet and Biodiverse Landscape Funds.

Further to the funds mentioned above, the following statement from Alok Sharma, writing with Sergio Costa (the Italian Environment Minister) in the Times to mark Earth Day, also provided encouragement that the Government is committing to a strengthened understanding of the Triple Challenge:

"Ahead of the COP26 summit, efforts to rebuild the global economy will begin. We believe these should focus on supporting a clean, inclusive and resilient recovery building on the principles of the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals. We will work together to ensure that the linked challenges of public health, climate change and biodiversity are addressed."

"As we emerge from Covid-19, we must take our lead from the international collaboration and science-led thinking we have seen during the pandemic to fight climate change, for the sake of all our peoples, future generations and our planet."

However, despite these positive signals, there are still far too many examples of siloed thinking and inconsistent approaches taken across UK Government, including with regards to UK Aid spending. For example, a 2019 inquiry by this Committee noted in its final report that research conducted jointly by CAFOD and ODI showed that **from 2010-2014 the UK disbursed £924 million of ODA funds to support fossil fuel extraction**. This support clearly undermines the UK's commitments under the Paris Agreement and, **given the fundamental underpinning which a healthy and functioning planet provides for human wellbeing and development, is a contradictory and inappropriate use of UK Aid**.

People and Nature campaign asks on UK Aid

The [People and Nature](#) campaign formed in July 2019 to call on the UK Government to recognise nature loss as a sustainable development issue and to implement tangible measures in its domestic and international policymaking, **including through UK Aid strategy and ODA spending to reflect this**. With regards to the scope of this inquiry, the campaign calls for:

All UK Aid to be nature-positive and climate-smart, supporting more integrated interventions that improve people's lives and enhance the natural environment. The UK should both take advantage of the opportunities that investing in nature can offer *and* maximise the positive impact that its existing investments have on nature.

- DFID Smart Rules should be updated to require detailed analysis of the potential nature and climate impacts of proposed DFID programmes. This analysis should include opportunities to enhance positive impacts on the natural environment as well as mitigate possible risks. Improved screening processes should apply to UK Aid across government so that all programmes and investments are required to show their environmental impacts, as well as poverty alleviation impacts, before any aid money is disbursed. This update to Smart Rules and screening processes could be incorporated in the re-thinking and re-planning which DFID is undertaking across its portfolio in response to COVID-19.

The UK Government must stop harmful investments that destroy nature and contribute to climate change, such as investing in fossil fuels, deforestation or conversion, and exploitation of carbon- and nature-rich ecosystems.

- The UK Government should stop all UK funding (both aid and export finance) that is currently directed to fossil fuels, culturally or environmentally damaging agricultural technologies and practices in high biodiversity and/ or sensitive areas, deforestation, and overfishing.
- All UK Aid and UKEF Projects must be aligned with the Paris Agreement and global biodiversity targets.
- COVID-19 recovery stimulus packages (both those developed for the UK and those supported by UK Government in developing countries) should not further exacerbate climate change, biodiversity loss and habitat destruction.

Finally, the UK Government should negotiate an ambitious deal for people and nature at the Convention on Biological Diversity's COP15 meeting that is integrated with the 2030 development agenda and the Paris Agreement.

- The UK Government must negotiate ambitious and effective strategies for addressing the Triple Challenge across the range of high-level environment and development meetings now scheduled for 2021. This must also be a key focus of the UK's 2021 G7 presidency.
- The post-2020 global biodiversity framework to be agreed at CBD COP15 must recognise environmental degradation and loss of nature as threats to achieving sustainable development, including the risk of future pandemics. It must also recognise the needs and rights of local communities and support them to take care of, and benefit from, nature.
- The UNFCCC COP26 must emphasise the importance of nature-based solutions that work for biodiversity and people as well as climate change.

People and Nature Steering Committee members

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The campaign has [33 cross-party MP supporters](#). It is coordinated by Seahorse Environmental Communications, reporting to the Steering Committee. The campaign has received funding from the OAK Foundation, Arcus Foundation, and some of the Steering Committee's organisations.