



Parliamentary Inquiry Response

University of Southampton
Response on the Future of UK
Aid and Development
Assistance

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**Written Evidence to the International Development Committee: Future of UK Aid and
Development Assistance**
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About the Author

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Executive Summary

Despite unprecedented funding cuts to UK development assistance, evidence shows that grants alone are insufficient to address the education quality crisis affecting developing nations. This submission argues the UK's shift from 'grants to expertise' is timely but requires urgent capacity development within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to succeed. Specifically, my response demonstrates that to achieve greater impact with fewer resources, the UK should adopt a more evidence-driven, expertise-oriented, and partnership-based approach to development assistance; one that recognises the evolving needs of partner countries, invests in its own policy capacity, and embraces locally grounded knowledge as a vital component of effective global development, in addition to embracing South-North policy learning opportunities.

The following recommendations draw on existing empirical evidence and my own research focused on the school education sector, but the key principles are applicable to other development sectors as well:

1. Flexibility to respond to development partner's needs. I recommend that the Government acquire an **accurate and up-to-date picture of such needs and how they have evolved over time**. This helps ensure that policy interventions subsequently designed and implemented can match the policy ends or intentions and effectively solve the problems identified (1.1). The increasingly limited financial resources under unprecedented funding cuts can still be useful if closing the financing gap remains the most urgent need for some partners. Beyond that, I recommend that the Government **diversify the policy interventions beyond monetary measures** to help address partners' more complex needs pertaining to the quality and equity of public services (1.2, 1.3).
2. The Government's pledge to move from "grants to expertise," albeit welcome, represents a fundamental paradigm shift for policy works in international development. To understand whether the FCDO and other departments are sufficiently resourced and supported, I recommend that the Government take a **comprehensive and systematic survey** of their organisation-level capacity along **analytical, operational and political dimensions** (2.1, 2.2, 2.3). In doing so, it is crucial to underscore that for agencies dealing with international

development, such policy capacity should entail the familiarity with both what the UK can offer on the supply side and local situations of the aid recipients, as well as the capability to conduct **cross-cultural policy work**. Hence, alongside taking inventory of the organisations' existing capacity and identifying the gaps, it is recommended that the Government also pay close attention to **capacity development** by encouraging and working with **social science programmes** in the higher education sector who are the potential suppliers of the high-skill workforce demanded in the sector (2.4).

3. To strengthen local aid delivery and development decision-making, the Government should promote an attitudinal shift that treats **local stakeholders and communities as equal partners in building multi-contextual expertise** (3.1) It should also draw lessons from successful equal partnership models emerging from the Global South to enhance South-to-North policy learning (3.2).

Detailed Response to Questions

In response to this call for evidence on Future of UK aid and development assistance by the International Development Committee of the UK Parliament, I provide evidence and policy recommendations **to these questions:**

1. How can the UK's approach to development be sufficiently flexible to respond to what its development partners need the most?
2. Do the FCDO, and other departments, have the resources, expertise and time to successfully implement the shift in aid delivery to achieve maximum value for money?
3. How should UK ODA best be deployed to empower local delivery of aid and decision making around development?

1. How can the UK's approach to development be sufficiently flexible to respond to what its development partners need the most?

- 1.1 To be sufficiently flexible and responsive to partners' needs, a prerequisite is for the Government to first gain an **accurate and up-to-date understanding of such needs and how they have evolved over time**. Without that, the Government would be ill-equipped to work out what policy interventions to devise and deploy for solving which policy problems that are currently troubling the economy and society of the recipient countries the most. In other words, as pointed out in [my recent research](#), it may lead to the means-ends mismatch where policy responses fail to address the needs of policy targets despite good intentions.
- 1.2 For the education sector, as illustrated in [my book](#), abundant research evidence has shown that thanks to the collective endeavour of the international community over the past few decades, remarkable progress has been made on improving access to and completion of basic education. Accordingly, while safeguarding and expanding schooling access is still urgently needed for [conflict affected areas](#), improving quality and inclusiveness of education beyond access has now become the priority for most other development partners, which is also aptly acknowledged in the [fourth sustainable development goal \(SDG4\)](#).
- 1.3 Funding cuts in development assistance in general and school education in particular is undoubtedly unfortunate. That said, from the perspective of policy design and especially the match between policy means and ends, its ramification may be less than pessimistically assumed. To elaborate, financial policy instruments (such as funding for school infrastructure or cash transfers conditioned upon school attendance) may be more appropriate for solving the

problem of expanding schooling access. It is in this aspect that donor funds and international development assistance have [proven essential](#) for closing the financing gap faced by many developing countries over the past decades. Financing the access to basic education during and after conflict situations should therefore continue to be prioritised by the Government when it comes to the now substantially shrunk aid budget. Above all, this is a crucial way to [avoid systemic denial of the right to education for children remaining in those areas](#): according to a recent [UNICEF report](#), cuts to the aid budget for FCDO and other major donors risks leaving 6 million more children, 30% of whom live in crisis-affected countries, out of school by the end of 2026. Beyond that, to tackle the **more complicated challenges of improving quality and equity of education outcomes**, monetary investment alone is hardly sufficient. Although this is not evidence directly from government agencies, the [Gates Foundation](#) as a major global philanthropy reported to have spent 8.6 billion USD over the past two decades on fixing the public education of the United States. Despite such huge financial commitments to an education system that is arguably more advanced than many in the Global South, progress was still less than expected. **A diversification of policy interventions** beyond monetary grants is therefore urgently needed to enable the UK to **deliver “more with less”**.

2. Do the FCDO, and other departments, have the resources, expertise and time to successfully implement the shift in aid delivery to achieve maximum value for money?

- 2.1 Considering the urgent imperative to diversify the means or formats of development assistance to better support the evolving needs of the recipients under more funding constraints, the Government’s pledge to move from “grants to expertise” is welcome. Yet precisely because this is a new priority adjusting to a shifting and more challenging international development landscape, whether the FCDO and other departments have the required resources and expertise to carry it out is not something that can be taken for granted, but **warrants serious and systematic investigations**.
- 2.2 Interpreting policy capacity as the “set of skills – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions”, the [policy capacity framework](#) provides a useful conceptual lens for this purpose. I have utilised it in my research to examine education systems in the Global South to make sense of how policy capacity matters for [teacher capacity development](#) and [system-wide education reforms](#). Applying that to the international development context, policy capacity at the organisational level of the FCDO and other departments should therefore encompass an **analytical dimension** in terms of adequate supply of professionals skilled in policy analysis and evaluation, as well as solid infrastructure for data collection and analysis underpinned by a willingness to advance evidence-based policymaking. On the **operational dimension**, the organisations should have an adequate supply of staff skilled in specialised areas of public management (such as human resource management, budget and financial management, strategic management etc.) as well as an effective system for performance management and internal coordination. Lastly, on the **political dimension**, these agencies need to manage internal and external stakeholders effectively to gain political legitimacy for their policy activities.
- 2.3 To my knowledge, no comprehensive stock-taking of policy capacity of the FCDO and related international development agencies is (publicly) available to date that is conducted by the Government, think tanks or research institutes, although there are surveys focusing on [policy analytical capacity of the UK Civil Service](#) as a whole from a comparative perspective. With that as a reference, it would be useful for the Government to **commission a more specialised inventory** to aptly address this question.

2.4 In doing so, it needs to be highlighted that unlike the policy capacity requested for domestically facing government departments, whose capacity to perform policy functions usually tends to be mono-contextual, the capacity necessitated for the FCDO and related departments to deliver “more with less” in the new international development landscape is essentially **multi-contextual**. That is, not only do they need to understand and leverage on the expertise, strengths and opportunities in the UK **on the supply side**, but as mentioned earlier, these also need to be joined and complemented by in-depth and up-to-date contextual knowledge about the progress and challenges **at the receiving end, in addition to** conducting cross-cultural policy work in a way that is **respected and trusted (or at least not opposed) by the locals**. While the sweeping popularisation of novel technologies and especially (Generative) artificial intelligence can facilitate knowledge exchange, communication and execution in many aspects, the cumulation of such contextual knowledge and cross-cultural acumen would still fundamentally require **repeated and sustained immersion** and, importantly, **human-to-human interaction**. For this very reason, although the funding cut may have implications on the attractiveness of a career in international development, encouraging the development of specialised social science degrees in international studies or development management in higher education is more important than ever to guarantee a steady supply of high-skill workforce demanded in the sector.

3. How should UK ODA best be deployed to empower local delivery of aid and decision making around development?

3.1 The **relational approach** as outlined above is also the key to empower local delivery of aid and decision making around development. To make that happen, it is important for the Government to keep pushing for an attitudinal shift towards treating local stakeholders and community as **equal partners**. Fundamentally, this is also what is advocated by the seventeenth sustainable development goal (SDG17) on Partnerships for the Goals. Relatedly, instead of viewing international development as one-way street of transferring knowledge and (financial and other) resources from the UK (or the Global North more broadly) to the recipients in the developing world, **local partners should be reimagined as valuable contributors** to the strengthening (or even co-creation) of **donors’ multi-contextual expertise** by sharing their own local or indigenous knowledge.

3.2 Such an attitudinal shift could also open the door for South-to-North policy learning: an underdeveloped alternative to the long-dominant North-to-South model in international development. On the one hand, many of the policy challenges faced by the developing world are increasingly experienced by their Global North counterparts too. In the education sector, the learning crisis is a phenomenon consistently documented for countries like [India](#). However, recently, the Government also reported that [even in the UK](#), “too many children... leave school without essential qualifications and skills” and that even worse, “one in five children [are] missing a day a fortnight of school or more.” On the other hand, whereas much has been scrutinised about the policy failures in the developing world, recent studies, including [my own](#), started to note and unpack how governments in the Global South managed to improve outcomes in education and [other sectors](#), the lessons from which deserve to be [foregrounded on equal terms](#) with those from the Global North. As a further area in which the potential for South-to-North policy learning can be unleashed, it is therefore worth for the Government to **pay more attention to [good practices of equal partnerships](#) emerging from the Global South**.

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