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The United Kingdom's policy vision and framework

This chapter assesses the extent to which clear political directives, policies and strategies shape the United Kingdom's development co-operation and reflect its international commitments, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It starts by looking at the policy framework guiding development co-operation, assessing whether the United Kingdom has a clear policy vision that aligns with the 2030 Agenda and reflects its own strengths. It then investigates whether the United Kingdom's policy guidance sets out a clear and comprehensive approach, including to poverty and fragility. The final section focuses on the basis for decision-making, i.e. whether policy provides sufficient guidance for deciding where and how to allocate official development assistance.

In brief

A comprehensive aid strategy sets out a clear vision and rationale for the United Kingdom's development co-operation

The 2015 Aid Strategy offers a clear, top-level statement of the purpose of development co-operation, including humanitarian assistance, and sets out a strong vision of how development objectives support the national interests of the United Kingdom. The Aid Strategy is firmly aligned with the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and guides the United Kingdom's development efforts across government – domestically, globally and in developing countries.

Policy guidance and legislation have been effective in protecting the purpose and poverty focus of all official development assistance (ODA) as well as gender equality. Settling on a limited set of policy priorities would reinforce the comprehensive understanding of vulnerability borne out in the Department for International Development's (DFID) analysis.

The United Kingdom is a strong supporter of the multilateral system and advocates for broad ownership of development, including an independent role for civil society. While the aid strategy does not set out high level vision for partnership, the United Kingdom engages with a range of partners, using a mix of financial, diplomatic and technical resources, and recognises their complementary roles. It uses networks effectively and exerts influence in multilateral and global organisations through staff secondments and active roles on governance boards. However, when it comes to funding partnerships, this diverse set of partners is largely viewed as implementers of the United Kingdom's objectives.

Framework

The aid strategy is effective at combining development objectives with national interests

The 2015 UK Aid Strategy (DFID and Treasury, 2015^[1]) has stood the test of time. The United Kingdom took a clear political decision in 2015 to situate development co-operation within its national security objectives. This was helped by timing – the Aid Strategy was developed alongside the National Security Strategy (HM Government, 2015^[2]) which, as recommended in the 2014 peer review (OECD^[3]), sets out an overall rationale for international development in relation to other government policies (Table 2.1). Although it was not originally developed through broad consultation, the Aid Strategy is owned and used across government and has survived several changes of leadership.

Like the National Security Strategy and the whole-of-government approach embodied in the Fusion Doctrine¹, the Aid Strategy starts from the premise that many of today's challenges are global and shared. In addition to setting out four objectives for the United Kingdom's aid programme, the strategy introduced a number of organisational decisions, including allocating ODA to more departments, increasing the emphasis on transparency and value for money, and introducing specific initiatives and cross-government funds. The Aid Strategy sets out a broad direction of travel, supplemented by the more detailed Single Departmental Plans and documents such as the Bilateral and Multilateral Development Reviews and Civil Society Partnership Review (DFID, 2016^[4]; DFID, 2016^[5]; DFID, 2016^[6]) and thematic strategies.

Table 2.1. Key policy, strategy and planning documents guiding the United Kingdom's development co-operation

Document	Description
National Security Strategy	The 2015 National Security Strategy identified three key objectives: protect our people, project our influence and promote our prosperity. The strategy was updated through a National Security Capability Review in 2018 which introduced the Fusion Doctrine as an approach to integrated policy delivery and cross-government co-ordination and reinforced the role of development co-operation as both a capability and tool for national security.
UK Aid Strategy	The 2015 Aid Strategy is strongly aligned with the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and directs the United Kingdom's development efforts domestically, globally and in developing countries to achieve four objectives: (1) strengthening global peace, security and governance; (2) strengthening resilience and response to crises; (3) promoting global prosperity; and (4) tackling extreme poverty and helping the world's most vulnerable.
Government Plan	The current government plan, developed in December 2017 and updated in June 2019, <i>Building a country that works for everyone</i> , sets out seven objectives for the United Kingdom government, together with actions to achieve each objective.
Single Departmental Plans	Current Single Departmental Plans were updated in June 2019 and set out how each government department contributes to delivery of the overall Government Plan. The DFID Single Departmental Plan is aligned to the UK Aid Strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals, structured under headings of peace, people, planet, prosperity, partnerships and quality.
Spending guidance	The DFID/Treasury Official Development Assistance: value for money guidance applies to all ODA spending across government. The guidance sets out high-level principles for use of ODA to ensure it meets both ODA eligibility requirements and the standards that apply to all public expenditure. Guidance covers governance, approvals, programming, procurement, monitoring and reporting.

Source: Cabinet Office (2019^[7]), *Building a country that works for everyone: the government's plan*, <http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/a-country-that-works-for-everyone-the-governments-plan>; DFID (2019^[8]), *DFID Single Departmental Plan*, <http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-international-development-single-departmental-plan/department-for-international-development-single-departmental-plan-2>; DFID and Treasury (2015^[11]), *UK aid: Tackling Global Challenges in the National Interest*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478834/ODA_strategy_final_web_0905.pdf; HM Treasury (2019^[9]), *HM Treasury Spending Round*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/829177/Spending_Round_2019_web.pdf; HM Government (2015^[2]), *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/555607/2015_Strategic_Defence_and_Security_Review.pdf; HM Treasury and DFID (2018^[10]), "UK Official Development Assistance: value for money guidance", https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/712367/ODA_value_for_money_guidance.pdf.

As a full-spectrum donor, the United Kingdom can respond to needs and opportunities

The Aid Strategy does not identify a set of thematic priorities for the United Kingdom. This is partly deliberate – given the significant technical and financial resources at its disposal, the United Kingdom positions itself as a full-spectrum donor, which allows it to allocate resources and skills according to need, gaps, challenges and opportunities in each context.

With a powerful combination of funding instruments, country presence and expertise, the United Kingdom can achieve breadth, depth and scale in its engagements, with the potential to connect work at a local level in developing countries with global processes. More attention could nonetheless be paid to identifying the United Kingdom's (and DFID's) specific comparative advantage in a changing landscape, taking new providers into account. Through pledges and commitments, the United Kingdom has accumulated targets for spending ODA on a number of policy priorities. Reviewing these targets, with a view to consolidating them, would allow the United Kingdom more flexibility to respond to changing needs, both at the global level and in partner countries. It would also allow the United Kingdom to focus more resources on the core issues which it has consistently championed such as gender equality and fragile contexts. In addition, in light of new expertise available across government, the United Kingdom could re-visit where DFID's

comparative advantage lies, and where other government departments may be better placed to provide expertise.

An updated strategy would allow the United Kingdom to build a broader understanding of development co-operation

The 2015 Aid Strategy focused on managing the ODA budget and, given the changing nature of development, is becoming outdated. The next strategy update (expected to be launched on completion of a government-wide foreign policy review that began in February 2020 (DoD, 2020_[11])), presents an opportunity to:

1. set out a comprehensive vision and strategy for international development, recognising recent commitments on climate change and disability and covering the United Kingdom's international contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), within and beyond the ODA budget
2. review pledges and spending targets made to date and articulate a core set of priorities to guide decision making
3. set out the United Kingdom's role in tackling global challenges, clarifying where it will take the global lead and where it will be a burden-sharer
4. clarify the United Kingdom's approach to regional challenges and set out criteria to guide its work and budget envelope in middle-income countries of varying degrees of poverty and stability
5. set out how the United Kingdom's development co-operation will meet new challenges, including through science and technology
6. clarify the United Kingdom's vision for effective development partnerships in consultation with key stakeholders
7. link ODA allocations to departments' proven capability and performance in relation to managing ODA and delivering development results, consolidating ODA budget lines where appropriate and considering alternative mechanisms to draw on relevant expertise across government
8. clarify how accountability for delivering development results across the UK government will be ensured.

Principles and guidance

A continued focus on poverty reduction is backed by legislation

The International Development Act (2002) – requires a direct line of sight from all DFID-managed ODA to poverty reduction (UK Parliament, 2002_[12]), an approach that has proven effective in ensuring effectively designed and targeted programmes. In response to concerns that DFID systems incentivised quick, easy results over the more difficult or costly options often needed to reach those left behind, “equity” has been introduced as a criterion for assessing value for money in business cases (Chapter 4).

A comprehensive, progressive approach to stability and inclusion drives programming

A comprehensive and progressive approach to stabilisation and stability is a strength of the United Kingdom's policy framework and shapes much of the United Kingdom's development co-operation at country level (Chapter 7).

Equally, the United Kingdom has sustained a strong commitment to inclusion, informed by a solid understanding of the factors that drive vulnerability and exclusion. A series of ministerial initiatives to highlight particular issues within the broader inclusion agenda (Chapter 1) have proven very effective for

directing the United Kingdom's resources as well as influencing others. However, partners are concerned that the time and attention given to different spotlight issues could distort the comprehensive analysis of poverty and vulnerability which drives programming and for which DFID is renowned.

The United Kingdom continues to be a stalwart champion of gender equality and women's empowerment

The United Kingdom continues to champion gender equality on many levels, with a recent emphasis on ending violence against women and girls (Chapter 6), sexual and reproductive health and rights, girls' education and maternal and child nutrition. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) appointed a Special Envoy for Gender Equality in 2017 to reinforce the United Kingdom's leading international reputation in this area. Gender equality legislation (UK Parliament, 2014^[13]) has played an important part in mainstreaming gender equality analysis: almost half of the United Kingdom's ODA addresses gender equality in some way (Chapter 3) and gender equality issues are well addressed in country diagnostics and business cases.

Strong systems to support mainstreaming rely on access to appropriate expertise

The United Kingdom's credibility on issues of inclusion stems from its strong analysis and how it addresses issues of exclusion through its programming. However, expertise on many priority issues – gender equality, fragility, governance and vulnerability – sits largely within DFID, among the advisory cadres (Chapter 4). Limited access to this expertise by departments outside DFID constrains the United Kingdom's ability to fully implement policy guidance, most of which is cross-cutting in nature. For example, opportunities to address environmental sustainability and climate change in both Kenya and Jordan were clearly identified in the country development diagnostic but expertise was not always available to integrate them into programming (Annex C). Within DFID, there is an increasing appetite among advisers to be accredited across a number of disciplines e.g. livelihoods, environment and climate change, which should help to mitigate against missed opportunities where there is no specific adviser in a country team. DFID also provides advice internally and across government through specialist helpdesks, for example on Work and Opportunities for Women, Violence Against Women and Girls and Disability Inclusion².

The United Kingdom uses a combination of comprehensive country development diagnostics and the DFID Smart Rules³ (2019^[14]) – both of which are increasingly used by all government departments – to ensure that priority issues for mainstreaming are assessed and considered in each context and business case. Priority issues set out in the 2019-20 update of the Smart Rules include: political economy, conflict and fragility; institutional environment; climate change, resource scarcity and environmental vulnerability; gender equality; social and poverty impact; and human rights. Both legislation and a dedicated Smart Rule make it mandatory to consider gender equality. For other issues, the Smart Rules allow Senior Responsible Owners to apply their judgement and encourage officials to identify both opportunities for positive mainstreaming and measures to ensure safeguards are in place. While appreciating the flexibility, officials find it challenging to identify priorities for mainstreaming within an increasing number of priority issues.

The United Kingdom's approach to prosperity has a strong focus on inclusive growth

The United Kingdom's vision for inclusive prosperity, set out in DFID's Economic Development Strategy (2017^[15]) is based on robust evidence and learning. Both the Aid Strategy and National Security Capability Review explicitly recognise the role played by development co-operation in creating the United Kingdom's trading partners of the future and that supporting inclusive economic growth in conflict-affected countries helps to build the foundations for stability and economic opportunity. Recent internal work on horizon scanning within DFID recognises the need to respond to the large numbers of young people entering labour markets in order to achieve prosperity, economic and social inclusion and stability. In both Kenya and

Jordan, the United Kingdom's prosperity agenda was anchored in supporting structural changes to the labour market to create decent jobs through the local private sector and a corresponding enabling environment, with the United Kingdom's interests an important secondary consideration (Annex C).

The scale and scope of the United Kingdom's work allows it to address prosperity from many angles and with a variety of tools, ranging from direct financial aid to government linked to structural reforms in Pakistan and Jordan; to investment in banking, insurance and local currency credit markets. This is complemented by support for social protection systems and household cash transfers to avoid a rise in income inequality. While the ODA portfolio has few lending instruments, the UK development finance institution CDC Group invests in fragile states (Chapter 3). The cross-government Prosperity Fund has the ability to blend ODA and non-ODA resources to support inclusive economic growth in low- and middle-income countries (See Chapter 4, Box 4.1) and the primary objective of supporting broad-based and inclusive growth to achieve poverty reduction is well set out in business cases.⁴ Most uptake of Prosperity Fund grants has been in upper-middle income countries and as these programmes start to roll out, it will be important to monitor disaggregated data to ensure that interventions contribute to reducing poverty and inequality.⁵ Unlike the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), the Prosperity Fund has a small non-ODA budget and so has little leeway to support programmes that are important for national interests but that may not be aligned with the Aid Strategy and 2002 legislation.

The United Kingdom's ambitious climate commitments call for a fresh strategy

The United Kingdom has produced consistent analysis identifying climate change and natural resource management as key drivers and accelerators of poverty, vulnerability and instability. The relevance of climate change and environmental sustainability to all four pillars of the Aid Strategy is well understood in DFID and, increasingly, across government.

The United Kingdom is to be commended for its ambitious targets on international climate finance and its commitment to align 100% of ODA with the Paris Agreement (Chapter 1). However, it has not yet set out in any detail how this 100% alignment of ODA will be achieved, including mobilising the required staff and budgets. DFID has taken some positive steps – a new Director Climate has been appointed and the current climate and environment department is expanding to become a division with greater capacity and mandate. A core of 65-75 climate and environment advisers has been retained and training modules allow all advisers to refresh and update their knowledge and capabilities on climate change. Transparency on International Climate Finance spending by DFID, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has improved (Publish What You Fund, 2020^[16]).

Formulation of the next development co-operation strategy is an opportunity for the United Kingdom to carefully consider how to achieve its climate and environment commitments in a way that will have most impact on its development co-operation objectives – harnessing opportunities while managing risks. Disaggregated indicators to be monitored within the Green Finance strategy would help to ensure that poverty reduction and environmental sustainability objectives are not overlooked as pressure to report international climate finance amounts. The next update of the Smart Rules offers an opportunity to clarify expectations on Senior Responsible Owners in ensuring that all ODA is aligned to the Paris Agreement.

Basis for decision making

Decision making is clear to officials but increasingly unclear to external observers

A single aid strategy, combined with strong systems across government, ensure that staff are clear about the United Kingdom's priorities and understand where and how decisions are made. However, political uncertainty during the latter part of the period under review constrained opportunities to formulate,

negotiate and communicate strategic decisions. This, combined with fewer public strategies, is making it increasingly difficult for external observers and partners to understand how and why decisions are being made. This concern was noted by the International Development Committee (UK Parliament, 2018^[17]) and reinforced during interviews with partners and observers. A stronger effort to communicate the basis for its strategic decisions would be consistent with the United Kingdom's commitment to transparency.

The 2015 Aid Strategy sets out broad criteria for country selection and includes a target for 50% of DFID's budget to be spent in a defined list of fragile contexts (Chapter 7). As recommended in the 2014 peer review, the United Kingdom has maintained a clear focus on fragile states and least developed countries (LDCs) and the majority of its objectives, as well as its budget allocations and programming instruments are designed for, and focused on, these contexts. However, the United Kingdom is likely to remain engaged in middle-income countries for political, economic and historical reasons and as its LDC partner countries transition to middle-income status. This calls for a clear agenda for the United Kingdom in middle-income countries with varying degrees of poverty and stability, which the current aid strategy does not provide. Similarly, a robust understanding of how regional challenges impact individual countries and the United Kingdom's bilateral development co-operation programmes has not been translated into guidance on regional approaches. The United Kingdom could develop more regional instruments or structures to address the cross-border issues it identifies (Chapter 5).

The United Kingdom values broad ownership of development processes

Although the 2015 Aid Strategy does not set out an overarching vision for the United Kingdom's partnerships with others, working in partnership is important to the United Kingdom and it uses its networks effectively to amplify its policy priorities and leverage additional resources. Working collaboratively with other donors in the multilateral sphere – particularly on joint country analysis, the humanitarian Grand Bargain, United Nations (UN) Development System Reform and the most recent replenishment of the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) budget – has allowed the United Kingdom to pursue joint reform objectives.

The United Kingdom supports broad national ownership of development and its analytical work and political analysis recognise the diversity and complementarity of each development actor. Many individual initiatives and engagements, as well as the United Kingdom's Aid Connect grants, deliberately seek to build alliances between partners and form multi-stakeholder partnerships, but this does not yet amount to a clear policy commitment to inclusive partnerships.

DFID and FCO teams in the United Kingdom and in developing countries actively advocate for an enabling environment and space for civil society and political freedoms. It is positive that work has commenced on a cross-government strategy for protecting civil society space in developing countries as a response to an Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) review (DFID, 2019^[18]).

Outreach and consultation with civil society is nonetheless inconsistent across government, with pockets of good practice both in the United Kingdom and in partner countries⁶ (BOND, 2019^[19]). In particular, DFID's tradition of systematic consultation, communication and collaboration on key policy priorities has waned in recent years, partly due to the sharp reduction in staffing. A combination of frequent changes in leadership; the classified nature of National Security Council documents and country development diagnostics; and a decision by DFID to stop publishing thematic, institutional and country strategies has affected civil society partners' understanding of, and trust in, the government's intentions. Investing time in meaningful dialogue would bring a number of dividends: the United Kingdom could further influence, and be influenced by, other development partners and strategic alliances would tap into the potential for partners to build public support for UK Aid, to share their learning and experience and to leverage additional resources. Cross-government guidance on engagement, consultation and public information would help to standardise approaches and re-build a mutually beneficial partnership with civil society.

The United Kingdom invests in influencing the multilateral system

The United Kingdom is a strong supporter of the multilateral system. It matches political engagement with replenishments or core funding, and plays an active role in governance structures and associated reform processes. The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (EU) leaves it with an independent voice in the UN and other fora, separate from any EU negotiated position. This is likely to bring an additional progressive voice in key negotiations, particularly on issues of gender equality and women's rights, disability inclusion and other aspects of the inclusion agenda.

The United Kingdom is particularly effective in influencing the World Bank – with whom it has a long-standing relationship – and other multilateral development banks and global funds, assigning skilled staff to governance structures and engaging on substantive issues at a level matched by few other bilateral donors.

The United Kingdom participates in joint efforts to make the multilateral system and its individual agencies more effective. It uses Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) assessments together with its own Multilateral Development Review (DFID, 2016^[6]), multilateral investment principles and programme reviews, to assess the organisational performance of its multilateral partners and their alignment with the United Kingdom's objectives. These reviews require significant inputs from the respective organisations and represent an additional workload. Although both multilateral partners and MOPAN members note that the United Kingdom has made progress in reducing duplication between bilateral reviews and MOPAN assessments, they feel that the United Kingdom could take better account of the timing of upcoming MOPAN reviews. Funding allocations are directly informed by performance assessments (Chapter 3), as well as being linked to progress on agreed reforms (Chapter 5).

UN reform is a particular priority for the United Kingdom, both in terms of supporting a rules-based international system and to build public support for channelling its ODA through the UN system – over USD 2.7 billion in 2018 (Chapter 3). In addition to influencing performance and policy through direct secondments to UN agencies and programmes, DFID officials have been assigned to Permanent Missions to increase collaboration and synergy between the Rome-based UN agencies and among Geneva-based health organisations and global funds. The United Kingdom has been very influential in shaping the UN humanitarian response both globally and in many fragile contexts (Chapter 7). At a policy level, the United Kingdom is a strong supporter of UN reform at country level, an objective that would be reinforced by more pooled funding that is aligned to UN Sustainable Development Country Framework priorities (Chapter 5).

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Notes

¹ The United Kingdom's Fusion Doctrine is an accountable system of working across government to support collective Cabinet decision making. It was introduced in the 2018 National Security Capability Review, drawing on lessons from the 2016 Iraq Enquiry. See www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/246416/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_executive-summary.pdf.

² For more information on these helpdesks, please see www.gov.uk/guidance/work-and-opportunities-for-women#four-areas-of-activity on Work and Opportunities for Women; <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/our-work/vawg-helpdesk/> for Violence Against Women and Girls and <http://www.gov.uk/guidance/disability-inclusion-helpdesk> for Disability Inclusion Helpdesk (all accessed on 23 March 2020).

³ In an effort to streamline its development programme management process, DFID introduced Smart Rules in 2014. These 36 rules – reduced from over 200 – are now referred to by most ODA-spending departments. The Smart Rules are reviewed and, if necessary, revised every six months.

⁴ Since 2011, DFID uses a standard template business case for all funding proposals, regardless of the level of spend. The template covers the strategic case, appraisal case, commercial case, financial case and management case for the intervention, applying the DFID Smart Rules. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840802/Smart-Rules-External-Oct19.pdf. Once approved, business cases are typically published on the United Kingdom Development Tracker website <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk>. Business cases are increasingly used by other government departments managing ODA budgets.

⁵ For example, the Prosperity Fund Better Health Programme targets Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. See www.gov.uk/government/publications/better-health-programme. The Global Future Cities programmes targets Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey and Vietnam. The Global Trade Programme targets Indonesia, Vietnam (and wider South East Asia), South Africa, China, Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria and Turkey. Full programme summaries and business cases can be accessed at <http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cross-government-prosperity-fund-programmes> (accessed 23/3/2020).

⁶ For example, NGOs welcomed consultation around DFID's 2018 Strategic Vision for Gender Equality and Disability Inclusion Strategy and the process for agreeing non-attributable costs. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85196/5/Eligible-Cost-Guidance-Accountable-Grant-Arrangements-Dec2019.pdf. The BOND submission noted mixed evidence of consultation with actors in developing countries when projects are being developed – DFID overall scored very well on this measure, and the Newton Fund and Global Challenges Research Fund within BEIS showed some evidence of consultation. FCO guidance for the potential implementers of the Magna Carta Fund encourages regional bids (page 4) and consultation with local stakeholders to develop projects (page 12). See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/52341/2/Guidance_for_Potential_Implementoers_.pdf. Treasury's ODA/International Development team holds a quarterly NGO forum and FCO staff have appeared on panels at BOND Annual Conferences and interact regularly with Publish What You Fund and Oxfam events.



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