



Briefing for members of the UN All-Party Parliamentary Group: UK aid commitments

This briefing has been prepared by UNA-UK¹ to assist Parliamentarians in preparing for the Westminster Hall debate, scheduled to take place from 4.30pm to 7.30pm on 13 June 2016, which will consider “[E-petition 125692 relation to foreign aid spending](#)”.² Organised by the Mail on Sunday, the petition was titled: “Stop spending a fixed 0.7 per cent slice of our national wealth on foreign aid”.

The briefing includes extracts from official documents on aid as well as examples of how UK aid has made a difference. It makes the case that the UK’s aid commitment is both squarely in Britain’s national interest and is an essential part of Britain’s international responsibilities.

Overview

The United Kingdom has emerged as a global leader in international development. It is the first G7 country to meet the target to spend 0.7% of GNI on overseas development assistance (ODA), agreed by the UN in 1970, and the largest donor in the EU. Only the United States disburses more.

At the same time, the UK has increased its activity in monitoring aid effectiveness, through the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, and the Multilateral Aid Review that assesses the performance of multilateral organisations, which receive some 60% of UK aid. It has also sought to concentrate its bilateral aid, closing programmes in countries such as China and Serbia, and focussing on just 28 countries. About 30% of DFID’s budget goes to conflict-affected states, and the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (NSS/SDSR) commits to investing “at least 50%” of the budget in fragile states and regions³.

In addition, the UK played a key role in the development of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁴ through the Prime Minister’s co-chairing of the UN High-Level Panel⁵.

Support for 0.7%

There is cross-party support for meeting this target. In January 2010, DFID (under Labour) introduced a draft Bill that would have enshrined it into law. Having featured in both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos in 2010, the Coalition Agreement included a commitment to meet the target by 2013. This was achieved, and the target was enshrined into law in the March 2015 International Development (Official Assistance Target) Act. It also featured in party manifestos, including the Conservative manifesto, ahead of the 2015 General Election.

The national interest case

Since then, the UK’s commitment to the target has been reaffirmed in key documents. The **2015 NSS/SDSR** sets out the rationale for UK aid in the context of protecting and promoting the security and well-being of UK citizens.

It links the 0.7% commitment to expanding the UK’s “*soft power and our global reach to promote our values and interests*” and to “*reducing the likelihood of threats materialising and affect the UK, our interests and those of our allies and partners*”.⁶ It also notes that “*our leadership on international development...enables us to influence a range of partners and multilateral organisations*”.⁷

¹ The United Nations Association – UK is the UK’s leading source of independent analysis on the UN and a nationwide grassroots movement campaigning for a safer, fairer and more sustainable world – see www.una.org.uk

² [E-petition 125692 relation to foreign aid spending](#) - nb this petition was set up by the Mail on Sunday newspaper and, at attracted 230,700 signatures at the time of writing. The accompanying Mail on Sunday article can be found [here](#).

³ [2015 NSS/SDSR](#)

⁴ [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

⁵ [UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Agenda](#)

⁶ [2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review \(page 11\)](#)

⁷ *ibid*, page 14

The UK's **new aid strategy**, meanwhile opens with a clear recognition that the UK's investment in overseas development enables Britain to exert influence on the world stage: "*Britain will continue to meet its commitments on aid spending. We firmly believe that spending 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) on international development – alongside our commitment to spend 2% on defence – means our country walking taller in the world*"⁸.

Criticism in some press outlets

Some media outlets have criticised the 0.7% commitment specifically, and UK aid more generally. This includes the Mail on Sunday petition, which has prompted the 13 June Westminster Hall debate.

The petition condemns the 2015 Act as "the wrong approach", contending that the requirement to spend a fixed percentage of GNI will lead "to huge waste and corruption". Instead, it calls for money to be provided "only for truly deserving causes, on a case-by-case basis". In articles accompanying the petition, it is argued that spending cuts at home have delegitimised the Government's stance on aid.

The sections below set out the argument that the UK's aid commitment is both squarely in Britain's national interest, and an essential part of Britain's international responsibilities.

Aid as an investment

Faced with cross-border challenges such as climate change and extremism, Britain's national interests increasingly dovetail with our global responsibilities. Our security and prosperity therefore depend on us working with other states at international institutions like the United Nations. By investing in overseas development, the UK Government is both living up to its international obligations and investing in Britain's future.

Aside from the moral case for providing aid, there is much to be gained, from an economic perspective, from investing in developing countries. Least developed countries have the greatest growth potential and a large share of the world's strategic minerals and resources – it is in Britain's own trade interests to ensure they are able to flourish.

Development is also closely tied to conflict prevention. States that enjoy higher levels of development and opportunity are less prone to violence, terrorism and refugee crises. It is for this reason that many other countries, such as the United States, incorporate aid into their national security strategy. The 2015 NSS/SDSR sets out the Government's plans to refocus its aid budget to support fragile states in order to prevent conflict, and to promote the rule of law and good governance. The Prime Minister states in his foreword⁹:

"These interventions are not just right morally – they are firmly in our national interest. Our substantial aid budget means that Britain not only meets our obligations to the poorest in the world, but can now respond rapidly and decisively to emerging crises overseas which impinge on our security at home – and with this speed and agility of response comes greater influence in the world."

The current migrant and refugee crisis is a prime example of the imperative to supply aid. It is no coincidence that the flows of people into Europe began to increase as UN agencies were forced to curtail support due to lack of funding, and as countries in the region – some of which have taken in over a million refugees – started to take more restrictive measures.

What has UK aid achieved?*

- **Education:** Supported **11 million** children to get a good quality education including **5.3 million** girls
- **Governance:** Supported freer and fairer elections in **13** countries in which **162.1 million** people voted
- **Healthcare:** Helped to save the lives of **44,000** women in pregnancy and childbirth, and helped to save the lives of **97,000** newborn babies. Ensured that **5.1 million** babies were delivered with the help of doctors, nurses or midwives. Immunised **43.8 million** children against preventable diseases through the Gavi Alliance
- **Family planning:** Helped **9.3 million** more girls and women to access modern methods of contraception
- **Access to justice:** Supported **10.4 million** women to have improved access to security and justice
- **Climate change and natural disaster:** Reached **200,000** people affected by earthquakes in the remote Himalayas with essential survival supplies. Supported **15 million** people to cope with the effects of climate change
- **Water, sanitation and hygiene:** Supported **62.9 million** people, of whom **22.2 million** were women, to access clean water, better sanitation and/or hygiene services

*[DFID – UK Department for International Development](#)

⁸ [UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest \(page 7\)](#)

⁹ [National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 \(page 6\)](#)

The UK says that it has already spent £1bn to help people fleeing the civil war in Syria since 2012. Much of this has been spent on helping some of the four million refugees who escaped to neighbouring countries such as Jordan¹⁰.

Widespread support from British citizens

Despite the popularity of the Daily Mail's online petition, a range of polls and surveys indicate strong support among British people for the UK supplying aid to developing countries. They also reveal widespread misconceptions over how much the British public perceives to be spent on aid.

A 2011 survey conducted by the Institute of Development Studies showed that a majority (62%) of respondents thought it was morally right to give aid to developing countries¹¹. In a Eurobarometer poll¹² carried out for the European Commission at the end of 2014 – before the 0.7% contribution was enshrined in law – two thirds of British people said the UK should increase our foreign aid budget, with 13 per cent saying that the 0.7 per cent pledge was not enough.

While there is broad public support for overseas development assistance, there appears to be less public support for ring-fencing the UK's aid budget. It is possible that some of this opposition is rooted in misconceptions. For example, in a 2011 Chatham House/YouGov¹³ survey, the average estimate of UK aid spending was £79bn – it was £8.5bn that year. Polling across the OECD consistently shows that people believe their governments spend 10–20 per cent of gross national income on aid and that they think it should be 1–5 per cent – far higher than actual spending.

This research suggests that **the Government needs to do more to improve public knowledge of UK aid** – how much is spent, where the money goes and why this benefits British citizens.

In March 2015, as the aid bill was going through Parliament, UNA-UK invited its members across the country to write to their local newspaper and show their support for UK aid¹⁴. Some quotes from published letters and articles are featured below:

- *“Sadly the image of the UN in the media does little to inform of its role and why it is so important for national governments to work through the UN. For example overseas aid is an investment in our future and we are proud that the UK is the first G7 country to reach the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on overseas aid.”* – **Kathy Doughty, UNA Brighton and Hove**
- *“As UK – and global – citizens, we all have a stake in international development. We don't just want the UK to do its bit – we want it to lead the way.”* – **Patricia de Mowbray, UNA Lymington**
- *“There has been a lot of discussion in the media recently concerning the amount of aid given by the UK to poorer developing countries... Our security and prosperity depend on us working with other states at international institutions such as the United Nations.”* – **Lucinda Smyth, UNA Norwich & District**
- *“This very small percentage of our GNP makes a huge difference in raising living standards of people in the developing world”* – **Jo Stocks, UNA Putney & Roehampton**
- *Our welfare is closely entwined with wider responsibilities. In this respect, it is a matter of far greater pride that Britain is the first GT7 country to reach the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on overseas aid.”* – **Michael Swindlehurst, UNA Saffron Walden**
- *“Britain's interests increasingly dovetail with our global responsibilities... the UK has the opportunity to make a real contribution towards addressing global issues.”* – **Margaret Matthews, UNA Southampton**

This briefing was produced by UNA-UK for members of the UN APPG.

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¹⁰ [Syria conflict: Number of refugees passes four million, BBC News, 9 July 2015](#)

¹¹ [Institute of Development Studies, 2011](#)

¹² [European Commission, Eurobarometer: Citizens' views ahead of the European Year for Development, 2014](#)

¹³ [The Chatham House–YouGov Survey 2011](#)

¹⁴ [UNA-UK challenges members to get development proposals into print, 6 February 2015](#)