

Do black lives matter for UK aid?

*Boris Johnson's decision to merge the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office was long expected. But it comes at a time when the UK is grappling with COVID-19, Brexit and the legacy of its colonial history. **Sophia Price (Leeds Beckett)** says using the aid budget as a tool to further Britain's interests abroad is an inward-looking and damaging move.*

The announcement of the merging of DfID with the FCO locates UK aid at the intersection of COVID-19, Brexit and the Black Lives Matter movement. The move can be viewed as an attempt to appease key elements within a party increasingly worried about the government's leadership, declining popular support over their handling of the pandemic, looming recession and the impact the crisis will have on achieving Brexit. It is also a decision that is likely to have detrimental impacts on societies throughout Africa, grappling with the social and economic impact of the global pandemic. This move therefore raises questions about the government's commitment to the core principles of the Black Lives Matter, and prompts renewed debate about why we provide aid.



UK aid shelter kits being unloaded from a RAF plane in Beira, Mozambique, after Cyclone Idai, March 2019. Photo: [DFID](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Post-Brexit Global Britain and the reinvigoration of UK power

The decision to integrate DfID into the FCO and put the Foreign Secretary in charge of aid decision-making marks an attempt to appease the increasingly nervy Conservative party. There is a longstanding antipathy on the right wing of the party to the provision of foreign aid, and a significant overlap in the Venn diagram of ardent Brexiteers and those committed to the end of DfID and reform of aid policy. Occupying this position are not only Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings but also Jacob Rees-Mogg, who very publicly delivered a [Daily Express](#) petition to Downing Street calling for cuts in foreign aid, and Dominic Raab, whose role and power is significantly strengthened by this decision. This announcement therefore is not a technical institutional fix, but a highly politicised move to shore up support at a time of crisis for the Conservative party.

The use of DfID and UK aid as tools to offset internal Conservative divisions was previously evident in Theresa May's appointment of Priti Patel, a vocal proponent of [scrapping DfID](#), as Secretary of State for International Development. Her appointment was later mirrored by that of Anne-Marie Trevelyan, the current Secretary of State for International Development, who had previously voiced scepticism about the provision of UK aid. Like Patel, Trevelyan is a member of the European Research Group and a prominent member of the Vote Leave campaign. Penny Mordaunt, another keen Brexiteer and ERG subscriber, also held the post, replacing Patel in 2017 after her resignation. Through the appointments of the last five Secretaries of State for International Development there has been an increasing focus on re-orientating UK aid to meet the imperatives of a post-Brexit Global Britain and a redefined national interest.

Although unexpected in its timing, Johnson's announcement has long been predicted. In addition to setting up a wholesale review of UK strategic defence and foreign policy, Johnson wrote the foreword to the 2019 report *Global Britain: A Twenty First Century Vision*, which [set the scene](#) for the current reshaping of UK aid. Co-authored by Brexiteer MP Bob Seely, the report recommended the integration of DfID into the FCO and a redefinition of the principles of aid provision. However, the announcement pre-empts the outcome of the government's delayed review of strategic defence and foreign policy, to be [led by John Bew](#). While this was not yet complete there were early augurs of what it might have in store. Like Seely's 2019 report, Bew's co-authored 2016 report [Making Sense of British Foreign Policy After Brexit](#) sets out prescriptions for the reinvigoration of British global power. The report sees Brexit as an opportunity to "craft a more coherent overall strategy for trade, foreign aid and defence". There is a strong focus on the operation and projection of military and hard power and concern of the threat to 'Brexit Britain' from an over-emphasis on trade/economic aspects of foreign policy over the security dimension. The report recommends bandwaggoning with the USA in a reinvigorated special relationship, and strengthening the UK's role in NATO.

Importantly, Bew's 2016 report emphasises that, in the context of the post Brexit changing balance of power, the UK ought to renew its attention on Eastern Europe, and offer 'third party' solidarity to those in fear of a Franco-German rapprochement with Russia and a counter to the power of Germany within 'EU federalism'. The report also suggested that the foreign aid budget should be used to shore up military and diplomatic capabilities and be diverted to Eastern Europe to offset some of the funding losses which "these countries will certainly incur after Brexit, in order to strengthen goodwill and counteract possible attempts to offer punitive terms to the UK in Brexit negotiations". This helps to contextualise the rather incongruous statement within [Johnson's 16 June announcement](#), which equated aid to Zambia to that of Ukraine and highlighted how the UK provides "ten times as much aid to Tanzania as we do to the six countries of the Western Balkans, who are acutely vulnerable to Russian meddling".

While this decision will bring wholesale institutional change, it represents just the latest stage in the ongoing reorientation of aid spending. There had already been a drop in the proportion of total UK aid spent by DfID in comparison to other government departments, including the FCO, from 86.2% in 2014 to 74.9% in 2018. Furthermore there has been increased rhetoric that the purpose of aid provision should be to meet donor imperatives. This has been framed within the 'Value for Money' mantra, reiterated in Johnson's announcement, which determines that aid money should deliver on UK national interests and provide returns to the UK economy, particularly through engagement with UK business and underwriting the expansion of UK private investment. This has been presented as the liberal win-win of economic development, delivering gains to donor and recipient alike, and embodied in the creation of new financing mechanisms such as aid blending and in the positioning of the City of London at the heart of [UK development policy](#).

Johnson's announcement marks a further step in the pursuit of putting aid monies to work for the operation and realisation of British power, and the subordination of development priorities to foreign policy interests. The rhetoric has shifted accordingly to a more explicit focus on the hard power of military and security capacity, with Johnson stating that the "distinctions between diplomacy and overseas development are artificial and outdated". The move also marks a shift towards greater unilateralism. Historically DfID has been effective as a mechanism for the leveraging of UK power through cooperation, by being a leading actor in the expression and operation of development policy at the regional level through the EU, and at the global level through key institutions such as the World Bank. Folding it into the FCO represents a step away from the policy leadership and actorness it previously enjoyed, and a foreign policy desire to 'go it alone'.

The institutional implications are also towards greater centralisation of policy making. The Foreign Secretary 'will be empowered to decide which countries receive -or cease to receive- British aid' within a single UK strategy for each country overseen by the Prime Minister. This centralisation is intensified by the perception that the FCO lacks transparency, which will be exacerbated by the reported closure of the House of Commons International Development Committee as a forum for oversight and scrutiny.

Aid provision and the COVID-19 crisis

In spite of the Prime Minister's assurances of a continued commitment to global health, the merger will necessarily also mean a change in policy focus away from poverty reduction and social development. This move has particular significance at a time of global pandemic. [UK aid through DfID](#) had a significant role in supporting health systems in recipient countries. In 2018 14% of UK bilateral aid was spent on health provision, matching the proportion spent on humanitarian aid. Within health aid spending, the three leading areas were medical research, family planning and health and administrative management.

During the current pandemic, [the World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) has highlighted the importance of UK assistance to the African continent in terms of capacity building and the deployment of UK emergency medical teams. [According to DfID](#), in 2018 the top 20 recipients of UK aid were either Asian or African countries, with the top five being Pakistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Syria. In Nigeria and Ethiopia between 2015-2018, the largest sectors of ODA funding were health and humanitarian aid. While by region more aid has been focused on Africa, and from 2014 onwards this was steadily increasing, in 2018 it decreased by 4.4%, with Somalia suffering the largest reduction in spend to all African countries. Moreover, although the majority (62.5%) of UK aid went to Least Developed (LDC) and Other Low Income Countries (Other LICs), this decreased by 11.7% in 2018, while Low Middle Income Countries experienced a slight increase.

The changing priorities in aid spending and management will have profound impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the world, already struggling to deal with the global pandemic. While Africa currently accounts for only a small proportion of global cases, the spread of the [pandemic is accelerating rapidly across the continent](#), from taking 98 days to get to 100,000 cases to reaching 200,000 after 19 days. More than the 70% of the deaths on the continent have been focused on five countries: Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria and South Africa.

African countries have [acted quickly](#) to put social restrictions and public health measures in place, scaling up health workforces and laboratory capacities and enacting border controls which have been effective at slowing the spread of COVID-19. However, the WHO [highlights](#) how containment and mitigation strategies have been challenged by capacity constraints, particularly in relation to testing and diagnosis, inadequate quantities and quality of PPE and other healthcare provisions, as well as the difficulties of managing unofficial border crossings, all of which have contributed to the rapid spread through the continent.

In terms of [COVID-19 morbidity factors](#), Sub-Saharan Africa benefits from a relatively small (3%) of its population being over 65 yrs old (compared to 10% in China and 20% in Europe) and with more than 60% under 25. However the continent also has the highest global rates of people suffering from HIV/AIDs, TB and malaria. Not only does this compound the challenges already facing health systems, but pre-existing conditions, particularly chronic respiratory diseases, are key co-morbidities associated with poor COVID-19 outcomes.

The threat to health and socio-economic wellbeing, both directly related to COVID-19 and in terms of the declining provision and support for those suffering other conditions, is compounded by economic crisis and poverty. The WHO [highlights](#) how restrictions on movement and economic activity have taken a heavy toll on the most marginalised and vulnerable communities. This has compounded the already precarious economic position of the continent. 2019 had witnessed a [decline in FDI to Africa](#) following lukewarm global and regional GDP growth, and dampened demand for commodities. COVID-19 has intensified this, combining declining commodity prices, particularly for oil, with large scale hits to manufacturing, global value chains and rapid reductions in FDI. The [World Investment Report 2020](#) predicts that FDI to Africa is set to contract between 25-40%. This raises obvious concerns about the funding of programmes to fight COVID-19 in addition to HIV, tuberculosis and other diseases. The recent move by Nigeria, an economy heavily dependent on oil, to [cut its health budget by 40%](#) embodies those concerns.

Time to repair

Johnson's decision to fundamentally change the departmental structure designed to tackle pandemics and poverty is open to question. The realist policy shift to the pursuit of hard power and relative gains overlooks the everyday experiences of those living with the crisis. However, it does raise key questions about why and how we provide aid.

There have been vibrant debates about the purpose of aid. In addition to ideas of justice, morality and ethics, these are frequently framed within the coloniality of the project to develop states in the Western image within unequal, exploitative and paternalistic relationships. Within African politics this questioning has taken shape in 'post-aid' policy frameworks to address ongoing aid dependence, as seen in the [Ghana 'Beyond Aid' strategy](#). However, COVID-19 has revealed the vulnerabilities that rest on pre-existing inequalities and structures of power within the global economy. In this context, and with the raising public consciousness about the enduring impact of slavery and colonialism on contemporary societies and economies around the world, new ideas about how to repair these legacies are taking shape. These could be built around our commitment to provide 0.7% of UK GNI to others.

Yet within current UK aid and foreign policymaking there is little reflection on its relation to the legacies of colonialism. Johnson's view of DfID's work was that it was "the finest demonstration of British values, following in the great tradition of the country that ended the slave trade", without a concomitant acknowledgement of the role the British Empire played in creating and reproducing that trade. A more reflective position might have both recognised that history and the role that aid could play in repairing those injustices and the enduring inequalities that stem from them.

The concept of reparation has been at the heart of the Black Lives Matter campaigns, particularly in the USA but also in the UK in relation to the role and profiteering of leading financial institutions and corporations such as Lloyds and Greene King in the slave trade. In calling for reparations to the Caribbean, Hilary Beckles, Chair of the Caricom Reparations Commission, [pointed](#) to the negative impact of the British legacy of slavery and colonialisation on black communities and said: "Public consciousness is catching up with history: that moment has come. British public morality has caught up with its own institutional history of slavery." Other prominent figures [such as Michelle Bachelet](#), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, urged countries to confront legacies of slavery and colonialism and called for reparations in various forms to 'make amends for centuries of violence and discrimination'.

The combination of the pandemic, which has a disproportionately negative impact on BAME communities around the world, and the gathering Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights those enduring racialised inequalities and legacies of colonialism, could be an opportunity to reformulate aid provision around the ideas of reparation and justice. But strong factions in the Conservative party are historically opposed to development aid. The government's struggles to placate them both reflect and intensify its attempts to 'Get Brexit Done' while managing the pandemic. The decision on DfID and aid spending has moved away from a more progressive turn in our policies towards the rest of the world.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.