

The Rhetorical Power of Aid for Trade: UK Aid in the Age of Brexit and Covid-19

Abstract

The UK is a global leader in Aid for Trade (AFT). Aid for Trade discourse frames it as a solution to development challenges and key to building trade relationships. This article examines the rhetorical value of this framing in pursuit of myriad interests amidst Brexit, the **Covid-19** pandemic, and changes to the UK's aid budget and administration. It is informed by data from government documents and interviews with AFT and aid experts. This study finds that AFT discourse is used to justify the UK's merging of diplomatic and development agendas and its new 'Global Britain' identity.

Le Royaume-Uni est un chef de file en Aide pour le Commerce (APC). En effet, l'Aide pour le Commerce est reconnue comme un outil indispensable au développement international et comme un élément clé lors de l'établissement de relations commerciales. Cet article examine la valeur rhétorique de cette représentation dans la foulée de la présente redéfinition du rôle Britannique dans le cadre du Brexit, de la Pandémie de **Covid-19** et des récents ajustements budgétaires apportés à l'aide internationale. Il s'appuie sur des données provenant tant de documents gouvernementaux, que d'entretiens avec des experts de l'APC et d'aide internationale britannique. Cette étude révèle que le discours de l'APC est utilisé pour justifier la fusion des programmes diplomatiques et d'aide internationale menant à la révision du rôle britannique mondial en sa nouvelle identité de « Grande-Bretagne mondiale ».

Introduction

Aid For Trade (AFT) funding and programmes are applied to help developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) engage more with international markets. Donors may support countries to build trade strategies, train regulators, and negotiate trade deals or provide grants and concessional loans. This range of activity makes AFT difficult to define, as it is commonly pursued alongside other forms of aid and trade programming (WTO, n.d.). The term ‘Aid for Trade’ is a relatively recent creation in development discourse, but flows used for trade-related infrastructure, regulation, productive capacity, and adjustment are nothing new (Laurent and Razzaque, 2011, 3). Developing countries may struggle to benefit from free trade for several reasons, including cost. For example, ineffective export infrastructure, fragmented supply chains, and convoluted regulations make doing business expensive. This may prevent small and medium size enterprises from trading internationally and keep LDCs trapped in lower value regional markets (Lammersen, 2015, 1, 9). Their participation may also be truncated by the absence of knowledge and capacity required for growth (Stiglitz and Charlton, 2006, 3). AFT should address these imbalances by helping recipient countries overcome barriers to trade, grow their economies, and reduce poverty.

The House of Commons International Trade Committee (ITC) called the UK one of ‘the global leaders and champions and donors of Aid For Trade’ (ITC, 2018a). The UK’s interest in and commitment to AFT is expressed with reference to helping the world’s poorest people and building new trade relations after Brexit (Braithwaite, 2019; Crawford et al., 2018; Jones and Copeland, 2017), particularly with African countries (ITC, 2018b; APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018). The UK pursues this programming and manages a portion of its AFT budget through a team working across the Department for International Trade (DIT) and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) (FCDO, 2021).¹ References to AFT and related programming are made by many development actors

¹ This reference pertains to email communication between the author and a representative of the FCDO on 26 August 2021 regarding management of the AFT budget and relevant programming following the merger of DFID with the FCO.

including former Secretaries of State for International Development prior to the creation of the FCDO, prime ministers, members of Commonwealth organizations, and government departments. The UK is a valuable case study to answer the research question, how is discourse about AFT and related programming used by development actors in complex economic and political contexts? The research focuses on the five-year period after the UK EU membership referendum to examine discourse and decisions regarding Brexit; changing leadership from prime minister Theresa May to ‘aid-skeptic’ Boris Johnson (Edwards, 2019); the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to create the FCDO; the cut to the UK’s aid budget from 0.7 per cent GNI on ODA to 0.5 per cent, and the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. This article draws on the works of Fukuda-Parr and Shiga (2016), Mawdsley (2012) and Saidi and Wolf (2011) to **locate AFT and related programming in a binary understanding of development for charity or opportunity. To achieve this, it** analyses primary documents and data collected in interviews about AFT programming, Commonwealth trade, and the UK’s post-Brexit aid policy. The significance of this research extends beyond the UK; it reveals AFT’s rhetorical power and role in political and economic agendas.

Literature and contribution

AFT in the literature

Aid For Trade has been described as a ‘hybrid development strategy’ or a result of the merging of trade and development agendas (Bearce et al, 2013, and Suwa-Eisenmann and Verdier, 2007, cited by Gnanon, 2018, 439). Hoeckman (2008, 42) remarks that AFT was accepted quickly by actors in both trade and development communities. He contends that this may be due to its aims and objectives: enhancing competitiveness by maximizing opportunities and increasing trade, respectively. Hayashikawa (2008) explains that AFT promotes greater economic integration by reducing the constraints that prevent poor people from benefiting from the economic opportunities of expanding regional and international

markets (ibid, 23). Yet, if opportunities to trade are to result in economic growth and poverty reduction, AFT should be delivered with policies that reduce risks and vulnerabilities experienced by heterogeneous groups in developing countries (ibid). Other authors, including Kim (2019) discuss AFT's results in a more tempered fashion, finding that it has limited effects in terms of trade diversification while Cirera and Winters (2015) find that AFT had no significant impact on processes of structural change in Sub-Saharan Africa or on trade costs and different forms of aid flows in the region between 1995 and 2010. They did find however, that AFT programmes had a positive impact on trade policy and regulations resulting in shorter import and export times (2015, 42). Cali and Te velde (2010) also received mixed results in their study of the effects of AFT on the costs of trading in 130 developing countries between 2005 and 2009 and on the level of and changes in exports in 100 developing countries between 2002 and 2007 (2010, 725; 738).

Stiglitz and Charlton (2006) list the principles they argue should be implemented as AFT is expanded. They highlight the importance of predictable aid, to ensure developing countries receive the assistance promised by donors. Recipients should also retain some ownership of this assistance, to tackle the challenges they face rather than simply improving trade agreements with donor countries (Stiglitz and Charlton, 2006, 9). Chauffour (2006) agrees with elements of Stiglitz and Charlton's argument but contends that the authors miss how recipient countries slow their own development. They also fail to address the root causes of trade barriers including weak infrastructure and capacity and limited aid predictability. Chauffour concludes that it is unfair to state that developing countries are poor because of a 'Machiavellian plan' by donors to keep them that way (Chauffour, 2008, 9). The Commonwealth Secretariat, which commissioned Stiglitz and Charlton's (2006) study, is effusive about AFT's effect on exports and economic growth in developing countries. Doubling the provision of AFT relates to a 5 per cent decrease in import costs and a 3.5 per cent increase in exports by developing country recipients. The impact of AFT on recipients, particularly countries in Africa, 19 of which are Commonwealth members, is pertinent given the challenges many of these countries face. Africa's youth population is expected to double in size to over 400 million by 2045, with up to 18 million new jobs needed each year until 2035 to maintain current employment

levels² (APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018, 32; May, speech, 28 August 2018). Trade can improve youth employment opportunities and AFT is one of the Commonwealth's Ten Policy Priorities for Trade and Development (APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018, 39). Authors writing about Commonwealth development, APPG-TOP and ODI (2018), Crawford et al., (2017), Mendez-Parra, et al. (2017), and Sarwar et al., (2018), also discuss AFT within the broader trade context. AFT features heavily in their suggestions for how the UK can become a 'key global leader in trade for development' after Brexit (Crawford, et al., 2017, 1). The authors draw examples from successful AFT projects run by TradeMark East Africa³ (TMEA), 'the UK's flagship trade facilitation programme' (Crawford, et al., 2017, 14; ITC, 2018a).

Trade's power to lift populations out of extreme poverty is predicated on the notion that liberalizing trade leads to economic growth (Krueger, 1980; WTO 2013, as cited by Siddiqui 2015, 228; Morwa, 2017, 2). Increased integration in the world economy will purportedly have positive results for developing countries through greater exports and improved living conditions (Siddiqui, 2015, 229). Yet, Morwa (2017) argues that lack of access to world markets is not what keeps Sub-Saharan African countries poor. This is caused by many factors including political instability, ineffectual policies and weak institutions that limit market economy growth (2017, 3). Trade liberalization can worsen poverty and its outcomes as resistance to state leadership on investment in health, education, and infrastructure, further marginalize populations in countries across South Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Siddiqui, 2015, 243). Naanwaab's (2022) work about the impact of trade liberalization on inequality finds that the direction and type of trade matter. While trade liberalization is associated with lower levels of inequality overall, import liberalization, particularly from high-income to low-income countries has the opposite effect (2022, 3). More generally, liberalizing trade between North-South and South-North countries appears to worsen inequality. Naanwaab, contends that developing countries should consider the impact of trade with high income countries when devising trade policies and agreements (ibid, 28). Siddiqui (2015), also argues that developing countries

² These estimates refer to the youth population size for the whole of Africa.

³ TMEA is a not-for-profit organization established in 2010 as an instrument for AFT with offices in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, DR Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, Uganda, and South Sudan.

must approach trade liberalization with caution, only fully participating in free trade when it benefits them (Siddiqui, 244).

Langan and Scott (2014) describe the ‘pro-poor norms’ that inform the use of AFT to improve productive capacity, trade governance, and private sector development. These norms resonate with donor visions of a ‘post’-Washington Consensus understanding of development, committed to poverty reduction and trade liberalization (ibid, 144). The authors apply a moral economy analysis of AFT programmes to understand how discourse about this form of aid constructs ‘moral economies’ and ‘common-sense acceptance’ of trade liberalization in the context of the WTO’s DDA and ACP-EU⁴ trade relationships (ibid, 151). They argue that there is a gap between norms and outcomes for recipient countries as AFT is influenced by corporate interests which secure asymmetric economic structures that harm poor people in developing countries (ibid, 157, 158). The authors urge policymakers in donor and recipient states to reflect on the purposes of AFT to ensure that it is not used to shut down spaces for more innovative and impactful trade policy to prioritize trade liberalization in the Global South (ibid).

Trade liberalization fits neatly into the ‘crisis but salvation’ narrative of the political economy of development. Bracking (2009) contends that this narrative, bolstered by such development actors as the Bretton Woods institutions and governments in creditor states, understands development as a process led by experts. It persists to justify attempts by these institutions to save ‘underdeveloped’ countries from poverty (2009, 4, 207). This narrative conflates development with capitalist visions of growth and misinterprets political economy in Sub-Saharan Africa as it seeks to protect the interests of powerful people and institutions. The second narrative focused on ‘resistance but subordination’ recognizes the radicalism that shaped the independence period but fails to grasp the full role of African elites in the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics and structures maintained by development processes in modern African contexts (ibid, 5). Bracking argues that these narratives ought to be critiqued to reshape global markets and geopolitical structures to

⁴ WTO DDA refers to World Trade Organization Doha Development Agenda and ACP-EU refers to African, Caribbean, and Pacific states – European Union.

recognize the value of the awareness and experience of dispossessed and marginalized people (ibid, 5, 220).

Alesina and Dollar's (2000) study about patterns of aid given by donor countries highlights the role of political and strategic motivations in allocation decisions (2000, 33). In three cases, the US, Japan, and France, these decisions more closely reflected security interests in the Middle East, shared voting patterns at the UN, and historical colonial relationships of the donor, respectively than commitments to reduce poverty or promote democracy and good policies in the recipient countries (ibid, 55). The results of Baccini and Urpelainen's (2012) study also shows that need is not the only motivator for foreign aid allocation. In the cases they analysed, donors used foreign aid to support the implementation of preferential trading agreements (PTAs) which brought about economic reforms in recipient countries. van der Veen (2011) presents an in-depth analysis of aid decisions by four European donor countries: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway. He measures the statements policymakers made about the goals of foreign aid in each of these countries (2011, 4). He classifies goals for foreign aid into seven frames which refer to policy choices as well as targets for aid policies. These frames are security; power/influence; wealth/economic self-interest; enlightened self-interest; reputation/self-affirmation; obligation/duty; and humanitarianism. This study sheds light on the dynamics of policymaking as well as how policy frames influence decision-making about aid and its outcomes (ibid, 22).

Saidi and Wolf (2011, 6) examine the motivations that guide the provision of 'development cooperation', primarily provided by donors outside the OECD-DAC. Development cooperation can be divided into: 'international development assistance' informed by a philosophy of charity and 'international development investment' which benefits the recipient in ways that promote the donor's interests (Said and Wolf, 2011, 7). Similarly, Fukuda-Parr and Shiga (2016, 3) compare the 'normative framing' of Japanese bilateral aid with that of Southern (non-DAC) donors. Their work builds on that of Mawdsley (2012) which outlines the symbolic claims of Western donors and Southern development cooperation partners and the interests they obscure (2012, 153, 161). The construction of

donor identities as ‘development actors’ and the pursuit of interests are salient in sociology of development literature. Long’s (2001) work understands the role of individual agency and interaction of these actors in contestations over meaning, legitimacy, and control in development. Ratner (2004) applies a constructionist approach to his analysis of sustainable development. He recognizes that the meaning of this multidimensional concept is informed by the diverse and sometimes competing values of actors interacting in local, national, regional, and global contexts (Ratner, 2004, 55). Other authors, including Cohn (2016) focus on the state as a key development actor (Cohn, 2016, 394-395). In their review of the literature, Viterna and Robertson (2015, 20) emphasize the sociological analysis of state and institutional action in the complex contexts of development. This commitment to understanding contextual specificity lends sociologists a richer understanding of how complementary and conflicting interests, actions, and forces impact development. Approximately \$410 billion of AFT was disbursed between 2006 and 2017 (OECD/WTO, 2019, 4) yet there is little sociological research about how AFT promotes the interests of donors in the contexts in which they are pursued. This research fills this gap by **applying a sociological understanding of how interests are constructed and expressed by development actors to the study of the UK government in its role as donor and trading partner with African countries, particularly those in the Commonwealth. The research in this paper examines the UK’s rhetorical use of AFT under the political and economic pressures of Brexit, changes in development and national leadership, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, it centres the study of AFT in sociology of development by conceptualizing its rhetorical use as a bridge between understandings of development of ‘aid as charity’ and ‘aid as opportunity’ (Mawdsley, 2012, 153). This approach draws on a critical understanding of the impacts of aid decisions, policies, and programming on recipient countries. This rhetorical flexibility thus allows the UK government to use discourse about AFT and related programming to justify the pursuit of controversial interests guiding the merger of its diplomatic and development agendas and shaping its vision of Global Britain.**

Methods and materials

This research is informed by the analysis of primary documents produced by government departments creating aid policy and programming as well as organizations scrutinizing these policies. These documents include reports by DFID, DIT, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Trade out of Poverty (APPG) as well as two inquiries launched by the International Development Committee (IDC), ‘Effectiveness of UK Aid: Potential Impact of FCO/DFID Merger’⁵ and ‘Future of UK Aid’⁶ regarding the cut from spending 0.7 per cent GNI on ODA to 0.5 per cent. The dataset also includes official press releases and speeches by former prime ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson during their time in office and statements by former Secretaries of State for International Development Rt Hon Priti Patel, Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt, Rt Hon Alok Sharma, Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan.⁷ The analysis also includes statements by and about the Commonwealth including the Secretariat, of which the UK was Chair-in-Office from 2018 until June 2020. These statements refer to the importance of the Commonwealth to the UK’s broader trade plans, AFT programming, and identity as Global Britain following Brexit.

The research is informed by ten in-depth interviews with representatives of organizations with direct experience of AFT and UK aid as well as Commonwealth trade relations. This purposive sample is comprised of two CEOs of UK aid-funded organizations leading AFT and market development programmes in Africa, two consultants with vast experience of UK aid, two former heads of Commonwealth organizations, and a representative of a larger body working directly in AFT, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), and

⁵ This inquiry ran during the second half of 2020. The documents include three reports by the IDC and the government’s written response, two transcripts of oral evidence and 79 pieces of written evidence. The written evidence referred to in this article is cited according to inquiry document codes beginning with EUA00. The reports and oral evidence are cited the usual way.

⁶ This inquiry opened in January 2021. The documents include the transcripts of three oral evidence sessions, 11 letters between government committees and departments, two pieces of legislative scrutiny evidence and 86 pieces of written evidence submitted to the inquiry. The latter is cited in the text according to its document code beginning with FUA00.

⁷ Rt Hon Rory Stewart is not referenced in this article as his speeches were not directly relevant to the research.

a senior major donor agency official.⁸ These interviews were conducted between June 2019 and July 2020 with data updated through correspondence with participants in November 2021. **The interview data is analysed thematically to explore the concepts and themes that emerge from participant responses to questions about AFT, UK aid programming, and trade relationships with Commonwealth African countries. This data is triangulated** with analysis of secondary policy and programme documentation produced by the Commonwealth Secretariat, WTO and OECD, UK government and the Bond network, comprising 400 international development and humanitarian response organizations. A range of academic literature is included to locate this research within the fields of sociology and development studies.

Results

Participant perspectives about AFT, aid, trade, and the likely impact of Brexit

The interview and primary document data present a narrative which depicts AFT as a solution to structural challenges limiting development in African countries. It also highlights the UK's role as a major funder of AFT and how Brexit might impact this. The high cost of transportation has been one of the most obstructive barriers to trade. Moving goods and materials through corridors in East Africa, for example, has been very costly due to poor physical infrastructure, corruption, lack of automation and delays at borders.⁹ TMEA worked with regulators in the region to simplify bureaucratic requirements and increase automation which sped processing times and enabled more efficient cargo tracking. This reduced cross-border smuggling. The organization's 'poverty-targeted programmes' have helped it to engage more deeply with local producers and associations as well as with women, 35,000 of whom work informally in the region.¹⁰ When asked about obstacles to inclusive trade and investment in Africa, Participant 4 stated that there

⁸ The names and roles of all research participants have been anonymized.

⁹ Interview with participant 5 on 20 September 2019. Participant is the CEO of an AFT organization in East Africa.

¹⁰ Interview, participant 5, 20 September 2019.

is room for improvement, as targeting barriers in the formal sector may not create the jobs needed to lift people out of poverty. Support is needed on the frontier of formal markets to ensure that young people and women have access to adequate investment and training.¹¹ This could include establishing graduation programmes that result in business mentoring, supporting infrastructure for affordable cash transfers to help young entrepreneurs build capital and become more attractive to investors, or increasing shared technology use by workers in local value chains.¹² AFT should focus on creating opportunities for young people in supply chains.¹³ When asked about whether UK AFT and trade focus enough on creating jobs in the informal sector in Africa, Participant 10 explained that aid must find a balance between supporting informality and pushing formality. AFT programmes must also get regulatory frameworks right to protect workers without stifling growth.¹⁴

The Commonwealth is depicted as ‘another untapped resource’ for promoting poverty reduction as its networks allow greater access to the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people (IDC, 2020b). The APPG-TOP and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) urge the Commonwealth, with support from the Commonwealth Secretariat, to launch collaborations to improve the effectiveness and reach of AFT across its members (APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018, 5). This urgency is not new. Funding for trade was discussed by the Commonwealth Secretariat in partnership with the World Bank as early as 1999. Formal programming was not initiated, however, as the organization focused on governance over development from about 2000 onwards.¹⁵ This enthusiasm for the potential benefits of increased AFT across the Commonwealth stems in part from the ease of doing business

¹¹ Interview with participant 4 on 31 July 2019. Participant 4 is a CEO of a UK aid-funded organization focused on market development in Africa.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview, participant 10, 17 July 2020. Participant 10 is a senior official from a major donor agency.

¹⁴ Interview, participant 10, 17 July 2020.

¹⁵ Interview, participant 3, 15 July 2019. Participant 3 is a former head of a Commonwealth organization. The participant updated their response on 11 November 2021 to focus more on the impact of changing discourse about governance and development at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

created by a shared language and legal framework, investment by its diaspora¹⁶ and the potential for it to result in increased and more profitable trade between recipients and donors, including the UK (ITC, 2018a).

AFT is a ‘suite’ of programmes and support for trade deals that ought to be aligned with the SDGs and agreed with CSOs.¹⁷ When asked if there is something unique about the UK’s approach to trade, Participant 5 highlighted the UK’s commitment to value for money, innovation, rigour, and advocacy for AFT. ‘They, [DFID], realise how important Aid for Trade is in developing prosperity’.¹⁸ Participant 9 called AFT’s impact and the UK’s motivations for using it a ‘fig leaf’ when what recipient countries export or could export is not given preferential UK market access.¹⁹ Participant 10 disagreed with this depiction, explaining that the UK is focusing on setting up trade agreements to support a smooth transition regarding market access for African countries after Brexit.²⁰ Research participants had differing views about how Brexit may affect the UK’s funding for AFT, trade and aid more broadly. Participant 2 stated in June 2019, that Brexit planning had not noticeably impacted DFID’s development projects due to the long approval process for new programmes.²¹ While Participant 4 stated that economic growth is so deeply entrenched in the UK’s aid policy that its commitment to supporting financial sector development would likely continue after Brexit even if DFID’s budget was slashed. The UK’s commitment to providing 0.7 per cent GNI for ODA and high-quality investment-oriented support are valuable to the UK’s soft power and vision of Global Britain and would thus continue.²²

¹⁶ Interview, participant 1, 26 June 2019. Participant 1 is a former head of a Commonwealth organization.

¹⁷ Interview, participant 7, 7 May 2020. Participant 7 is a representative of a CSO working in international development.

¹⁸ Interview, participant 5, 20 September 2019.

¹⁹ **Interview, participant 9, 2 July 2020. Participant 9 is a consultant working in sustainable development.**

²⁰ **Interview, participant 10, 17 July 2020.**

²¹ Interview, participant 2, 28 June 2019. Participant 2 is a consultant working in UK aid.

²² Interview, participant 4, 31 July 2019.

Concerns were raised however about the impact of Brexit on trade. Participant 5 **described** the worries expressed by some of their organization's beneficiaries and partners about the introduction of a UK trade border and the instability this might create. They also worried that the UK might prioritize market and trade support for developing countries rather than LDCs.²³ Participant 6, speaking in January 2020, stated that leaving the EU was not a constraint for their team and their work on AFT, but rather the context in which they are working. 'Brexit has been everything that we are doing'.²⁴ They argued that the UK's commitments to spending 0.7 per cent of its GNI on ODA and using AFT and trade support to reduce poverty remain at the heart of their programmes and plans regardless of how the UK leaves the EU.²⁵ These interview responses foreshadow major points of contention in the UK's changing approach to aid and trade over the following year. These issues include the promulgation of the UK's post-Brexit identity of Global Britain, the creation of the FCDO and the cut to the aid budget during the Covid-19 pandemic. Themes of impact, identity and national interests in development appear throughout the remaining primary and secondary data.

Key themes in the primary and secondary data

The Labour government's 1997 White Paper on international development is shaped by 12 strands focussing on poverty reduction and economic growth, partnerships with developing countries, and support for political stability and social cohesion in conflict-affected countries (UK Gov, 1997, 6-7). The twelfth strand prioritizes the provision of resources to boost UK spending on development and reaffirms the country's commitment to reaching the 0.7 per cent target, which was not achieved until 2013 by the Coalition government under Conservative leadership (ibid, 7; Loft and Brien, 2022, 5). The White Paper describes the UK's moral obligations to the poor and common interests with developing countries to protect populations from global warming, food insecurity, and other threats. With this

²³ Interview, participant 5, 20 September 2019.

²⁴ Interview, participant 6, 6 January 2020. At the time of interview, participant 6 was a representative of UK-based body working in AFT.

²⁵ Ibid.

comes the desire to educate the British public of its ‘mutual dependence’ with developing countries as UK employment and prosperity depend on trade, investment and growth in the global economy, the system into which developing countries could contribute in the future (ibid, 16).

The Conservative party’s 2009 Green Paper on international development influenced the aid policy of the Coalition government from 2010 (Glennie, 2011, 508). Commitments to a results-based approach and value-for-money stand out alongside the characterization of international development as a form of Victorian charity (ibid, 509). Glennie (2011) argues that this approach allowed the party to avoid more complex discussions about justice, responsibility, and human rights (ibid). Mawdsley (2017) adds that the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments elected in 2015 and 2017 framed UK aid as a charitable pursuit, while also becoming increasingly explicit about aid serving the national interest. The UK held significant influence over EU development assistance throughout this period. It directed €4.5 billion to EU aid from 2014-2020 and was the third largest donor to the European Development Fund (EDF), which sits outside the EU budget (Price, 2019). It was also the leading member state behind the EU’s work on AFT (Braithwaite, 2020). The post-referendum period, from 2016 brought changes in the UK’s domestic leadership and aid priorities. This includes leadership of DFID by five different Secretaries of State in four years and Theresa May’s 2019 resignation. Boris Johnson’s election as Conservative leader and appointment as prime minister created uncertainty for the UK’s approach to aid spending. Johnson wrote the forward for the Henry Jackson Society report, ‘Global Britain: a Twenty-First Century Vision,’ in which Seely and Rogers urge the UK government to roll DFID and the DIT into the FCO, earmark up to £1 billion of aid money to fund the BBC World Service, and keep the 0.7 per cent GNI target only if the UK can define ODA as it sees fit (Seely and Rogers, 2019, 8).

The ‘purpose’ of aid refers to the donor government’s broad goals for aid as evidenced by stated commitments, and decisions taken regarding amount, allocation, and application of aid (Lancaster, 2006, 13). Redefining ODA and leveraging aid *for* trade were central to former Secretary of State for International Development Priti Patel’s vision of Global

Britain, with prosperous Commonwealth trade relationships a key theme in the ‘Vote Leave’ campaign, of which she was a leader (Price, 2019). The UK’s approach to aid allocation and spending throughout this period was guided by the 2015 Conservative Manifesto, the 2015 Spending Review, and DFID’s Economic Development Strategy published in 2017. The Conservative Manifesto outlines commitments to prevent climate change and protect the most vulnerable including by spending 0.7 per cent GNI on ODA, keeping aid untied, and maintaining an independent DFID (HM Treasury and DFID, 2015, 11). The Spending Review’s four strategic objectives include a commitment to promoting global prosperity and tackling extreme poverty (ibid, 9). DFID’s Economic Development Strategy outlines priorities to reduce poverty and boost economic growth including strengthening the UK’s approach to AFT, making it easier for companies to invest in emerging markets and targeting support for the poorest people including girls and women in the informal sector (DFID, 2017, 4-6). The notion that supporting economic development in the poorest countries is in the UK’s national interest is a key feature of Global Britain (ibid, 4).

Theresa May was the first politician to formally use the term Global Britain to describe the UK’s post-Brexit identity (Seely and Rogers, 2019, 10). This posits the UK as a trading nation, united at home with strong global relationships, including within the Commonwealth (May, 2017; Parliament Select Committee, 2018). The UK’s development budget and diplomatic networks are integral as the country understands global challenges and champions the poor while promoting its own interests (Parliament Select Committee, 2018). Penny Mordaunt emphasized aid’s ‘triple return’ of benefit to the British taxpayer, a stronger Britain, and a more prosperous and stable world (Mordaunt, 2018a; Mordaunt, 2018b). NGOs and CSOs criticized the government’s focus on primarily financial national interests. They also argued that a clear definition and design for Global Britain’s approach to diplomacy and development are missing (IDC, EUA0050). Likewise, Participant 8 argued that there are UK commercial interests at play when asked about the use of AFT for the pursuit of mutual prosperity and national interests. Participant 8 contended that this neoliberal approach does not help countries to develop by building a strong public sector. Rather, the UK’s focus on win-win development benefits wealthier parties on both sides

with only a limited trickle down to the poorest people.²⁶ According to Langan and Scott (2013), AFT is well suited to this pursuit. AFT is depicted as a means of improving the wellbeing of poor people in developing countries, yet the benefits of trade do not trickle down to the most marginalized populations. Rather, they found that AFT stabilizes structures that do not meet the needs of these groups (2013, 158).

Win-win development, also conceived as mutual prosperity, appears in UK policy as a cross-cutting agenda. ICAI described it as a spectrum ranging from benefits for the UK and aid recipients through global trade to a focus of aid money and programmes that seek short-term commercial results (ICAI, 2019, i). The commitment to pursuing mutual prosperity and national interests without clear pathways towards poverty reduction and development goals risks implicitly tying aid to trade and other benefits to UK companies (IDC, EUA0071; IDC, EUA0074, 25; IDC, 2017). The prioritization of short-term donor interests under the guise of mutual prosperity points to the power of benevolence to hide underlying structures of capitalist profitability (Bracking, 2009, 208). The IDC warned that ‘ODA must be directed primarily at reducing poverty, helping the very poorest and most vulnerable rather than being used as a slush fund to pay for developing the UK’s diplomatic, trade or national security interests’ (IDC 2018c, 22; IDC, 2018b). The UK’s pursuit of short-term interests has thus been criticized for failing to rebalance an inequitable system or tackling root causes of poverty (IDC, EUA0012) and damaging the UK’s global aid reputation and soft power (IDC, EUA0077; IDC, EUA0076, 23).

The UK’s aid reputation is deeply connected to DFID which was considered not only a global leader in aid transparency and accountability but a benchmark of donor behaviour (IDC, EUA0072, 2).²⁷ This reputation as a ‘development superpower’ was bolstered by the department’s independence with its own Secretary of State (IDC, EUA0055, 2; IDC, EUA0053, 2). This was lost when prime minister Johnson announced the merger of DFID with the FCO on 16 June 2020 with plans for the FCDO to be responsible for 80 per cent of the UK’s £15.2 billion aid budget (IDC, 2020d, 5). The FCDO was launched to promote

²⁶ Interview, participant 8, 16 June 2020.

²⁷ Interview, participant 4, 31 July 2019; interview, participant 5, 20 September 2019

the UK's national interests in a 'new all-government approach' to reduce poverty, meet global challenges, and promote security and prosperity (IDC, 2020e, 1). Over 100 NGOs warned that merging the departments will damage the UK's aid reputation and effectiveness as it shifts focus away from extreme poverty, climate change, and war to use aid as a vehicle to meet its foreign policy, commercial, and political interests (IDC, EUA0047, 4). Moreover, there is a risk that merging departments and using ODA for multiple purposes to serve the national interest will result in doing neither diplomacy nor development very well (IDC, EUA0014, 3; IDC, 2020a, 5).

The UK's geopolitical influence, attractiveness and trustworthiness to recipients are enhanced by its generous aid programme, particularly its commitment to the 0.7 per cent target (IDC, EUA0022, 2). The UK sets an example by delivering and administering this aid, and by legislating to protect it (IDC, EUA0059, 1). All UK national parties contesting the 2010 election (except the UK Independence Party) made this a manifesto commitment. Failing to meet it in any given year will lead to significant political embarrassment (IDC, EUA0076, 16). The commitment to spending 0.7 per cent GNI is highly relevant to AFT as ODA is used to fund programmes including TMEA and the Enhanced Integrated Framework, a multilateral partnership building trade capacity in the world's poorest countries and the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (DFID, FCO, DIT and Braithwaite, 2020).

Trevelyan stated to the IDC in April 2020, that prime minister Johnson is 'absolutely committed to the 0.7%' (IDC, 2020b, 25). This commitment was dropped in January 2021 with a cut in aid provision to 0.5 per cent GNI equating to a loss of approximately £4 billion. Former Foreign Secretary Rt Hon Dominic Raab justified the temporary cut as a response to the 'worst economic contraction this country has faced in three hundred years and a budget deficit of £400 billion' (IDC, FUA0001). Raab explained that this decision will help to protect jobs in the National Health Service (NHS) without damaging the UK's aid reputation (ibid; IDC, 2021b, 6). The 0.7 per cent target will purportedly return when the fiscal situation allows, but it is unclear how or when that will be determined (IDC, 2021a, 5). The IDC launched the 'Future of UK Aid' inquiry on 19 January 2021

examining aid budget changes, the merger to create the FCDO, and the findings of the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. Most respondents described how the aid cuts will negatively impact their organizations and/or beneficiaries of their programmes, with many calling for the funding cut's immediate reversal. Others wrote about how the aid cuts will damage the UK's reputation as a 'funder of innovative solutions', leader in global health and its perceived reliability as a development partner and leader at the G7 and COP26 summits (IDC, FUA0047, 4; IDC, FUA0042, 7; IDC, FUA0043, 2; IDC, FUA0083, 10). Sara Pantuliano, Chief Executive of ODI, questioned the 'very strange' timing of a complex merger in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the IDC warned that the world's poorest populations will suffer when a decision puts the international response to Covid-19 at risk (Pantuliano, 2020, n.p.; IDC 2020d, p.13). Former Prime Minister Johnson, referenced the Covid-19 crisis in his justification for the merger, stating that the government has a responsibility to consider whether its bureaucratic arrangements, set out under the Labour government in 1997 are still optimizing 'British influence' (HC Debate, 16 June 2020, col 667).

The social and economic impact of the pandemic is creating significant strain on ODA spending. Trevelyan described the pandemic as a health, humanitarian and economic crisis that could 'undo 30 years of international development work' (IDC, 2020c, 20). Disruptions to industrial production, increased insecurity, and financial market volatility, compound the impact of rising debt risks for the world's poorest countries (UN, 2020, xvii). The pandemic pushed Sub-Saharan Africa into its first recession in 25 years (World Bank, 2021). Covid-19 has distinctly gendered consequences with BOND warning in May 2020 that the pandemic could push 500 million people back into poverty and result in 31 million women experiencing gender-based violence. Women and girls living with disabilities will be worst affected as they are at a higher risk of abuse and have the poorest access to services (IDC, EUA0038, 4). Social distancing measures and disruptions to services including travel and tourism are also creating obstacles for informal cross-border traders (WTO, 2021, 2). TMEA reported in April 2021 that Covid-19 had a particularly negative impact on women who comprise 60-70 percent of informal traders in East Africa (Brenton et al, 2011 cited by Mveyange, et al., 2021). Border closures, lockdown measures,

supply chain disruptions and delays to the movement of perishable items resulted in spoilage, loss of revenue, and debt (Mveyange, et al., 2021). For women traders, financial instability, and more time at home under lockdown increased their risks of gender-based violence (UNECA, AERC and TMEA, 2021, 11).

AFT features in the UK government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic impact for developing countries. The UK mission to the WTO stated in 2020 that the government is ready to contribute through two AFT offers, the Trade and Investment Advocacy Fund (TAF2+) and the World Bank Trade Facilitation Support Programme (TFSP) (UK Mission to the WTO, 2020). Trevelyan described the UK's investments in vaccine and drug development to the IDC in April of the same year. These include £250 million to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and £300 million for resilience programmes through the UN and WHO. She highlighted the need to support countries whose economies rely on the informal sector, though it is not clear in this document how this will work (IDC, 2020b). Raab assured the IDC in January 2021 that though the national budget deficit was twice the level of the 2008 financial crash, it remains one of DAC's largest ODA-spenders (IDC, 2021a). Global health continued to be a major priority for the FCDO 2021/2022 budget with a commitment to £1,305 million on global health as announced in April 2021 (FCDO, 2021).

Discussion

This article aims to understand how **UK development actors use discourse about AFT and related programming in the political and economic contexts of changes to leadership, the creation of the FCDO, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Narratives about identity, national interests, and the win-win nature of development intervention are key components of this discourse.** Fukuda-Parr and Shiga (2016) argue that Northern donors construct narratives in accordance with their own world views and agreed norms of the OECD-DAC. Norms develop and change as contexts evolve and new ideas gain traction with development actors. Fukuda-Parr and Shiga (2016) draw on the work of Saidi

and Wolf (2011) to analyse the normative frameworks they refer to as ‘aid as charity’ and ‘aid as investment’ (Fukuda-Parr and Shiga, 2016, 3). Saidi and Wolf (2011) examine the dichotomous philosophies they see as informing international development cooperation provided by non-DAC donors: international development assistance (charity) and international development investment (economic self-interest) (Saidi and Wolf, 2011, 8). Mawdsley (2012) contends that Western (referred to as Northern donors elsewhere) or DAC donors predominantly apply the ‘aid as charity’ framework to justify their behaviours and programmes, while non-DAC or Southern development cooperation partners apply the ‘aid as investment’ approach, which she conceptualizes as ‘aid as opportunity’ (2012, 153). The former approach frames donor action as a ‘moral obligation to the unfortunate’, with ‘expertise based on superior knowledge, institutions, science and technology’, ‘sympathy for different and distant others’, and ‘the virtue of suspended obligation, a lack of reciprocation’ as is guided by the contention that poverty reduction is the core aim of development programming (Mawdsley, 2012, 153).

The ‘aid as opportunity’ approach describes ‘solidarity with other third world countries’, ‘expertise based on direct experience of pursuing development in poor-country circumstances’, ‘empathy based on shared identity and experience’, and ‘the virtue of mutual benefit and recognition of reciprocity’ and seeks to promote development by boosting economic growth (Mawdsley, 2012, 153). Mawdsley qualifies this binary depiction as heuristic in nature and explains that donor norms and resources are shaped by the cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts in which they are constructed and operate (2012, 161). These performative narratives are used by donors and development cooperation partners not only to justify their solutions to development problems, but to obscure motivations and interests for these actions (Mawdsley, 2012, 161). In a later work, Mawdsley (2018) argues that Northern or DAC donors are increasingly adopting the narratives and actions used by Southern development cooperation partners. She traces how Northern donors promote their national interests by justifying aid as ‘win-win’; seek to promote economic growth rather than poverty reduction; and blur or blend aid programmes with trade and investment objectives (2018, 173). Donors quietly or openly blending sectors, agendas, and programmes to meet their goals reflects broader changes in ODA

allocation and aid modalities during the same period. These include loan instruments being favoured by some donors over grants, project-related aid allocations increasing, and the aid landscape being shaped by a more complex network of actors and mechanisms including private philanthropists and blended financing institutions (UNCTAD, 2020, 54).

Rhetorical use of AFT in the context of Brexit refers to elements of both binaries Mawdsley (2012) describes. Some descriptions of AFT depict programming as promoting poverty reduction and economic growth (Stilby Harris, 2016; HOC-ITC, 2018b; Lammersen, 2015, I), but most references only focus on one of these goals. Comments on AFT's impact on poverty are made with reference to the Commonwealth as an untapped resource for promoting poverty reduction through its vast networks (IDC, 2020b). Lifting people out of poverty is also posited as a key goal of trade with developing countries, particularly when it is supported by AFT (APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018). References are also made to blurring or blending AFT with trade in the pursuit of economic growth (ITC, 2018b). Blended financing influenced Brexit planning, as initiatives that combine public and private sector financing were seen as creating new opportunities for investment in Africa (Price, 2019). AFT is highlighted by several authors as an important part of the UK's efforts to become a global leader in trade for development after Brexit (APPG-TOP and ODI, 2018; Crawford, et al., 2017, 1; Mendez-Parra, et al., 2017; Sarwar et al., 2018). Crawford et al. (2017) urged the UK to continue building policies that are entirely within its own control even after it leaves the EU, including AFT.

Assertions that UK aid may serve a dual purpose were made prior to the 2016 referendum, with the UK being described as a donor that provides good value to taxpayers and meets not only its responsibilities to the world's poorest people but also its own interests (HM Treasury and DFID, 2015, 4). More explicit references to ownership of aid programming, the promotion of national interests, and the 'win-win' nature of aid have been made since 2016 (May, 2018; Mordaunt, 2018a; Mordaunt, 2018b; Parliament Select Committee, 2018). The pursuit of mutual prosperity and national interests comes with risks of implicitly tying aid to trade if its relationship with poverty reduction and broader development goals is not clear (IDC, EUA0071; IDC, EUA0074, 25; IDC, 2017).

Moreover, the pursuit of national interests through aid spending is bolstered by populist politics. Framing and using aid in this way justifies spending on non-citizens in other countries, appears to improve efficiency, and allows donors to compete with other governments that are pursuing commercial interests and/or tying their aid (Gulrajani and Calleja 2019, 7). Donors ought to allocate aid in a ‘principled manner’ to ensure that prosperity is truly mutual. This requires the pursuit of long-term strategic interests in ways that plug development gaps, foster partnerships and participation, and minimize the use of aid to meet short-term donor interests with limited global benefit (ibid).

Poverty reduction is a core principle of how UK AFT and aid money should be spent. This stated commitment from the International Development Act 2002 is upheld in the context of competing interests and outcomes for myriad actors. These include the UK’s commitment to supporting developing countries and LDCs through imports without supplanting UK jobs. **Its achievement is also shaped by the challenges of creating trade and development policies that provide good value for money while also having a positive effect** on global institutions, norms, and values. This approach may result in withdrawing funding from less successful programmes as the UK seeks to maximize the ‘win-win’ nature of its AFT programming and policies.²⁸ **As such,** AFT does not fit a binary understanding of development as ‘aid as charity’ or ‘aid as opportunity’ (Mawdsley, 2012, 153). Rather, it serves as a bridge between both pursuits that allows development actors to pursue controversial interests informed by either or both end goals and shaped by the political and economic contexts in which these interests are constructed. This has resulted in its use to justify the merging of the UK’s diplomatic and development goals. Trade relations are pursued alongside commitments to poverty reduction and/or economic growth as the UK builds its new identity as a Global Britain that normalizes the use of development funding to pursue national interests.

²⁸ Interview, participant 6, 6 January 2020.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the UK normatively frames its commitment to and support of AFT funding and programming. The data provides examples of references to AFT shifting between descriptions of aid as a moral obligation and form of poverty reduction, tool for economic growth, and source of mutual prosperity. This final element, the ‘win-win’ depiction of AFT has become more important as value for money is paramount, the pathway towards returning to 0.7 per cent GNI on ODA is unclear and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to be felt. Most impactful, perhaps, is the rhetorical value of this framing in constructing and rationalising the identity of Global Britain. The significance of these findings extends beyond the UK, as they reveal AFT’s rhetorical power and the role this plays in political agendas. Future studies can explore the form and function of AFT and related programmes in other contexts, particularly in developing countries. This article provides a sociological analysis of the construction and expression of complex and controversial interests in the field of development.

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