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The Government rebranded aid as charity to dodge international responsibility

The Labour Government has confirmed that it will be going against its campaign promise to raise foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of gross national income, and will instead be cutting it further to 0.3 per cent. Gloria Novović argues that the Government's new framing of foreign aid as charity is a gross misrepresentation of the UK's domestic and international commitments.

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The Labour Government has been practicing U-turn manoeuvres, most recently around the [winter fuel allowance](#) and potentially the [two child benefit](#). In the media storm that follows frequent government announcements, a recent U-turn that received limited attention was the Baroness Chapman of Darlington's confirmation that the British official development assistance (ODA) would be cut from 0.5 per cent to 0.3 per cent of gross national income (GNI). Replacing the previous Minister of State for International Development, Annelise Dodds, who opposed ODA cuts and promised to help "create a world free from poverty on a liveable planet," Chapman declared the days of the British Government acting as a "[global charity](#)" over.

This statement mischaracterises ODA, which is a government responsibility inscribed in the domestic legal framework, as well as the UK's international commitments. Starmer's Government ODA cuts are a direct [reversal](#) of the electoral promise to restore the government spending to a statutory duty of 0.7 per cent.



The Government is not cutting charity, but global resources for survival.



ODA was initially cut to 0.5 per cent in 2021, when the Conservative Government cited economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further reducing ODA is both unconscionable and short-sighted. In the current global context, ODA cuts halt life-saving programs and weaken the global governance we need to confront future pandemics, as well as rising planetary threats, from rising militarism to climate change. The Government is, therefore, not cutting charity, but global resources for survival.

What is ODA and why is the UK responsible to contribute to it?

Official Development Assistance is defined in the [UK's International Development Act of 2002](#) as "assistance provided for the purpose of (a) furthering sustainable development in one or more countries outside the United Kingdom or (b) improving the welfare of the population of one or more such countries." More recently, the [International Development Act of 2015](#) recognized the international responsibility of high-income countries to meet the minimum global standard of ODA equivalent to 0.7 per cent of the country's GNI. This objective was [set out](#) in the 1970 UN Resolution and international assistance definitions of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) following intense multilateral negotiations, mainly between the Western block and the Group of 77 (G77) that has [represented](#) the Third World countries since mid-1960s.

G77 has repeatedly [clarified](#) that ODA must be disbursed in addition to (and not in place of) other reparatory mechanisms like technical assistance or trade reforms to allow formerly colonized or otherwise historically disadvantaged countries to drive independent and self-sufficient political and socio-economic agendas. High-income countries emerged *responsible* for issuing ODA based on historical and ongoing economic advantages that the system of trade and finance awards them. Since 1970s, global governance has been further rigged in favour of "advanced economies" with the United Nations [acknowledging](#) that the international trade regime and the international financial infrastructure are set up to reproduce global inequality.

As the gap between world economies of former colonial powers and their settler colonies, and the rest of the world widens, ODA remains a political **responsibility** rather than an act of **charity**. This was clear to the British Labour Party of 1959, whose **Manifesto** “solemnly pledged (...) to devote an average of 1 per cent of our national income each year to helping the underdeveloped areas” as a part of commitment to peace.

The last five decades have been marked by aggressive neoliberalism, which imposed austerity on the already impoverished majority of the world through a global debt regime, foreclosing social welfare and **enabling** corporate abuse through foreign direct investment. In this context, ODA serves a palliative function, satiating the most extreme hunger brought on by the **unsustainable** global agri-food market, sheltering **generations** of refugees held in the limbo of inter-state politics, **preventing and mitigating** viral outbreaks driven by profit maximization, and **preserving** what is left from our collapsing ecosystems.

ODA is certainly not what it takes to solve world problems. But it is a lifeline for hundreds of millions around the world, who suffer the consequences of neoliberal capitalism that the UK and its allies have been imposing since the global catastrophe of Margaret Thatcher.

Divesting from global cooperation amidst planetary threats

There is never the right time to cut ODA. The current moment, however, is the worst. The Trump administration has **recklessly**, and to an extent **illegally**, **eliminated** over 83 per cent of the programs run by the US Agency for International Development (USAid) and **left** mere US\$4 billion for critical humanitarian response, despite rising needs. Programs **combatting HIV-Aids**, **malaria**, and **tuberculosis** have been suspended, threatening millions of lives.



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Development assistance, aiming to redress gender inequality, systemic exclusion of persons with disabilities, violence and discrimination against queer and other LGBTQI2S+ communities, as well

as other hierarchies of power, is sacrificed at the altar of the budgetary cuts. This is particularly concerning given the mounting crisis of social reproduction are exacerbated by rising global debt, which threatens our ability to care for children, the elderly, and one another, helping communities thrive through cohesion and welfare. As the Labour MP Bambos Charalambous **briefed** the UK Parliament in February, over a third of humanity **lives** in countries that spend more on debt servicing (just servicing!) than on health and education.

Starmer's shortsighted politics

The announced ODA cuts are consistent with domestic politics, which include cuts to the **elderly support**, **disability benefits**, and **climate action** (including through ODA cuts).

Just last week, the Prime Minister **lamented** the empirically **disproven** burden that migration poses on the UK. Yet, the Labour Government ignores the fact that hunger drives conflict and that conflict **drives** migration (which is, however, protected under the international law the UK continues to **interpret** with great evasive creativity). The choice to further undermine the already collapsing humanitarian system that mitigates said migration is, therefore, not rooted in logic, but militarism and racial necropolitics, whether explicitly **embraced** or not.

Against this backdrop, it is critical to strengthen solidarity networks in joint opposition of cuts to social welfare domestically and internationally. Failing to sound the alarms about government U-turns invalidates not only past but also any future electoral victories. If we confuse government responsibility with charity, we will find ourselves with a government that ensures neither.

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