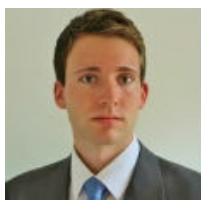


## In aid and development, Britain's long-accumulated expertise is valuable to the EU



*Britain has historically been a leader in development and humanitarian aid, with the EU amplifying the value of its links with the Commonwealth and its global influence. The fall in the value of the pound has already shrunk its budgets. Brexit will sever some of the links British aid experts have spent decades cultivating, writes **Sebastian Steingass (University of Cambridge)**. But it will make sense for the EU to bring the UK into decision-making, though collaboration is bound to be more ad hoc.*

In development and humanitarian aid, the [EU is the world's leading donor](#). The size of Britain's own sector – but also its accumulated skills – have given it a strong voice in shaping the direction of the EU's development policies. Britons have had influential positions in the Brussels machinery – from the European Parliament to the European Investment Bank, the EU's diplomatic service, and civil society. This includes, for instance, the chair of the European Parliament's committee on development, Linda McAvan, MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber, but also a series of less well-known figures in management positions. Britain's civil society sector has been the [second largest beneficiary of EU funding](#) – after France – through grants and commercial contracts. As a result, Britons have been at the heart of discussions on development policies in Brussels. EU development cooperation has long [improved](#) against the measures set by subsequent UK governments and maintained a focus on poverty eradication.



An EU aid worker in Ukraine, October 2017. Photo: [European Union/ECHO/Oleksandr Ratushniak](#) via a [CC-BY-ND 2.0 licence](#)

All this is now at stake. We will no longer benefit from the combined efforts of the EU, and collaboration will be reduced to *ad hoc* arrangements. Given the risk of a funding gap, [British civil society](#) was among the first to consider the consequences of Brexit for the UK development and humanitarian sector. The [plunge in the pound's value](#) instantly shrunk the aid budgets of UK-based organisations. Further cuts are on the horizon: Oxfam's Haiti scandal will have done little to alleviate them. Referring to a leaked EU document from December 2017, [the Guardian reports](#) that UK applicants will cease to receive funding in the event of a 'no deal' Brexit. In any case, while Brexit may not be the end for [UK-European civil society collaboration](#), receiving EU funding through grants and commercial contracts will become more difficult for UK-based firms and NGOs, and they will have less influence on EU policy-making and practice.

In contrast to civil society, the British government has largely remained silent. A long-awaited [review of the performance of multilateral aid organisations](#) to which Britain contributes financially was first delayed, and then largely circumvented the thorny issue of the relationship with the EU. Yet Britain's public development sector also stands to lose from Brexit. Unlike other sectors, Britain's development and humanitarian aid sector has eagerly and closely cooperated with its counterparts in Europe, and thereby pursued its global ambitions through the EU. Before the referendum, [Linda McAvan](#) had already expressed concerns about the UK's ability to resolve international development challenges post-Brexit. Observers fear that the referendum result could signal a [more inward-looking](#) UK agenda, leading to aid cuts and buttressing trends in British development cooperation, such as [spending aid outside](#) the responsible department for international development.

Pro-Brexit commentators rightly insist that Britain will still be able to influence international development. Its know-how and global ties (including with the Commonwealth) and its strong representation in international organisations, as well as extensive public aid spending, are exceptional (the UK is the only major donor to have consistently achieved the globally-agreed aid-spending target of 0.7% of GNI). Moreover, the EU risks losing global influence too; after all, Britain's departure risks the bloc's position as the world's leading aid donor. As a study for the European Parliament finds, [EU aid may decrease](#) by up to 3% and it could lose between 10% and 13% of its global aid share.

Yet EU development cooperation is more than the sum of its parts. It benefits from the special relationships its member states enjoy. For instance, the EU's ties to the Commonwealth have become strong; the EU's [aid to Commonwealth countries has scaled up](#) the UK's own contribution significantly. Despite criticism and some setbacks, the EU has also learnt a lot in using coordination and its collective weight in international negotiations, exemplified during the [negotiations towards a new global agenda for sustainable development](#). Because it is so much better coordinated than it used to be, the EU will remain an important player in international debates relevant for sustainable development, human rights and especially trade.

At the same time, the EU does [risk becoming more inward-looking](#). Continued cooperation between the EU and the UK may help to prevent this. Avenues for policy coordination exist but they may be more *ad hoc* and depend on the goodwill of both sides. [Britain's financial commitments will continue](#) after the day its membership ends. This also applies to aid, which is set for multiple years in advance. As a result, [continued contributions to EU aid after Brexit](#), and potentially even after 2020, are likely. This may come with limited say about how the money is spent. So it makes sense to involve Britain in policy coordination, especially on the ground. The EU has developed its own tools for the coordination of aid donors, which have long been lacking. While an EU member, Britain has actively advocated to keep EU coordination open to non-EU members.

The details of future cooperation have still to be settled: at the same time, the EU is working on a major overhaul of its development cooperation for the years after 2020. But stubbornness will not make it easier for those British professionals who have eagerly and closely collaborated with their European counterparts to continue their close engagement. Neither will barring the British development and humanitarian aid sector improve the EU's development cooperation.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

[Sebastian Steingass](#) is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Cambridge, researching Europe's contribution to international development effectiveness.