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A reset of international development for the UK requires a principles-based approach

A reset of the global aid system must be guided by key principles to respond to current challenges and rebuild global solidarity, argue **Martin McKee** and **Kent Buse**

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Donald Trump's rejection of long established assumptions about development assistance have forced a global reassessment.¹ In autumn 2025, David Lammy, the British foreign secretary, will convene a major conference that will contribute to what he has described as "a long overdue conversation about the future architecture of aid."² We propose eight principles that will enable the UK to shape the global debate.

First, we must change the narrative about aid. Never again should a British minister describe the UK's aid as global charity.³ Such comments display a worrying misunderstanding of its contribution to national security,⁴ and how it tackles the root causes of conflict, forced migration, and extremism. Instead, ministers must show courage and challenge myths promulgated by certain politicians and media commentators. There is a positive case to be made for aid. The many UK charities that attract substantial support do so by celebrating their many achievements, not by concealing them.

Second, the UK should re-establish a department for international development led by a cabinet minister. The abolition of the department by Boris Johnson in 2020 sent a message to the world that the UK was deprioritising development assistance.⁵ Consequences of this policy are difficult to disentangle from the effects of the global pandemic, cuts in aid spending, and diversion of what remained, including stretching the definition of aid to include large sums spent on housing people seeking asylum in the UK.⁶ However, many working in aid and development have highlighted a loss of expertise and demoralisation in those remaining, as well as confusion about what the UK is now trying to achieve.^{7,8}

Third, the UK must work assiduously to strengthen the principle of multilateralism currently under sustained attack from the US. Multilateralism promotes global cooperation through institutions and agreements that confront challenges no single nation can resolve alone, such as climate change, pandemics, economic instability, and the externalities of unfettered multinational corporate practices. Multilateral frameworks ensure that all countries have a voice regardless of their power, and reinforce international norms and the rule of law. Historically, the UK has had a strong voice in many multilateral bodies by virtue of its expertise. The withdrawal of the US provides an opportunity to strengthen that voice further, building coalitions that support international bodies as they adapt to changing

circumstances, and ensuring that its priorities, such as antimicrobial resistance,⁹ are not overlooked.

Fourth, the UK can enhance its global reputation and thus its soft power, by sending out a strong message that it takes seriously the importance of upholding the rule of law. Global justice is under threat, with US attacks on international courts and those who work for them.¹⁰ Action on corruption is paramount¹¹ to ensure that limited funds are used most effectively and also demonstrate that the UK was serious about some of the criticisms levelled at development assistance. A good first step would be to implement the repeatedly delayed reforms to the transparency of financial operations in its overseas territories.¹²

Fifth, the UK should support other issues that have been attacked by the US administration, such as diversity, equality, and inclusion and sustainability. It should champion gender equality, advocate for the rights of minorities, and work to meet the needs of marginalised communities. Education and capacity strengthening, especially for young people and underrepresented groups, can empower societies to drive their own development.

Given growing concern about potential tipping points in the climate crisis, coupled with US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement,¹³ the UK should prioritise the principles of environmental responsibility, minimising ecological harm and promoting green solutions. This should also attract domestic support given the growing popularity of the Green Party. A focus on climate justice also recognises the disproportionate burden of the climate crisis on poorer countries.

Sixth, UK development assistance must be grounded in the best available evidence, drawn from a wide range of relevant disciplines. To maximise impact, avoid harm, and build credibility with global partners and the public, aid policy should be informed by real world data, independent evaluation, and the lived experience of those affected.

Seventh, the UK should promote mechanisms to hold governments accountable for the commitments they make. This should start by taking UK aid back to its legal commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income but would also embrace stronger independent monitoring mechanisms, building on the Accra Agenda in which donor and recipient countries pledged to increase their mutual accountability.¹⁴

Finally, the UK must innovate its development finance. In a constrained fiscal environment, tools like blended finance, development bonds, and

targeted taxation on harmful commodities or digital giants can supplement traditional aid budgets.¹⁵

The Trump era's rollback of global aid is a cautionary tale about the fragility of international cooperation. The UK must not follow this path. Instead, it should craft a bold, values based strategy that will meet the challenges of today and rebuild trust in the idea of global solidarity.

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