

South West International Development Network

Written submission to House of Commons International Development Committee Call for Evidence: Future of UK aid and development assistance - November 2025

The South West International Development Network (SWIDN) is a not-for-profit membership network set up in 2005 to support the international justice sector in the UK's South West. We have a network of over 100 members and a wider community of 5600 across the 7 counties of the South West and beyond. We receive funding from the FCDO through the UK Civil Society Collective, along with our peer network organisations in the UK Alliance. In response to the Committee's request to focus submissions, we are submitting evidence on the questions most relevant to SWIDN and the experiences of our wider membership.

1. Future priorities and shifting to flexible partnerships for future UK ODA

1.1 The UK Government (UKG) has a long and problematic history associated with international aid, with its roots situated in harmful British colonial logics and values that persist across UK development today. This is widely evidenced in submissions made to the Committee for [the First Report of Session 2022–23, International Development Committee on Racism in the aid sector, 14 June 2022](#). Reviewing this evidence and reconsidering the recommendations from this process, including more substantive shifts in practice that address systemic change, would both demonstrate value for money and identify transformative priorities that should be addressed with future UK ODA.

1.2 Tackling poverty is at the heart of the UKG's strategy for aid. With a decreasing ODA budget, it is vitally important that remaining funds allocated to ODA clearly reflect this intention. This implies a move away from channelling ODA to in-country refugee costs and to service the needs of international security, towards an evidence-based approach identifying where the needs are greatest, the countries and issues that are experiencing the greatest inequality, and the most effective way of tackling these.

1.3 Despite cuts to ODA, the UK has a continuing responsibility to advocate for justice within its global partnerships. We are seeing increasing attacks on women's and girls' rights internationally. The UKG should be prepared to step up to defend gender equality **within** international negotiations. This requires clear prioritisation of gender equity and justice, and gender mainstreaming, across all aspects of development assistance, in line with the [OECD's Guidance for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls](#). The root causes of inequalities should be addressed, based on an understanding of structural barriers and prevalent unequal power relations. We highlight additional recommendations in the GADN briefing '[Achieving transformative change on gender equality through a new approach to mainstreaming](#).'

2. Adapting UK ODA funding models and partnerships with UK civil society

2.1 In line with a shift from international intervention to local provision, the UK's delivery approach for development assistance should include funding mechanisms that directly support grassroots civil society organisations (CSOs) - either directly or through larger CSOs who have the capacity and responsibility to filter the bureaucratic requirements associated with public funds. Learning can be taken from [philanthropic foundations and larger NGOs](#), who are leading the way in financing models for locally led development, including participatory grant-making models.

2.2 Funding must be long-term and issue-based - not project-based - and include accessible options for unrestricted or core funding for grassroots initiatives. It must align with equal pay, cover equitable overheads and allow an unrestricted contribution to organisational reserves that builds resilience.

There are a wealth of recommendations to adapt funding mechanisms to the changing values landscape in [the recent report ‘Decolonizing Foreign Funding Policies’ by Dr Megha Kashyap and Ipsita Dwivedi](#).

2.3 UK civil society is a vital partner for the UK’s future approach to delivering aid. To realise this opportunity, the UKG must gain a more representative understanding of UK civil society through active engagement beyond large, London-based organisations. Across England and Wales alone, SWIDN estimates that [almost 7000 registered international development charities are contributing to the UK’s efforts](#) to end global inequality, demonstrating the scale and diversity of local and regional efforts.

2.4 The UKG should create opportunities to match-fund small and micro UK CSOs who have existing partnerships with grassroots CSOs, that embody British public solidarity, as well as taking on the risk and bureaucratic burden of managing public finance. Currently, small UK-based INGOs are excluded from all ODA funding, and yet [represent 90% of all international development charities in the South West](#). This funding should invest in transformative models of solidarity. It also has the potential to foster greater collaboration among UK CSOs, building social capital here in the UK.

3. Locally-led partnerships, UK expertise and embracing the opportunities

3.1 We welcome the Committee’s recognition of the criticisms directed at the UK’s paternalistic approach to aid, and of the tendency for UK assistance to reflect domestic priorities over those of the communities most affected by inequality and injustice. We urge the UKG to acknowledge the many drivers of these issues, including attempts to align UK economic benefit with international aid, to drive locally-led development, and to centre accountability to the UK taxpayer within impact measurements. We call instead for:

- *Local delivery of aid that is accompanied by anticolonial, antiracist practice.* We highlight this report by our partner [SIDA \(2024\) From talk to transformation: how Governments can really ‘shift the power’ towards global justice](#) as a resource which identifies practical pathways towards this approach, as well as this report by our partner [Bond \(2024\) Decolonising economic development: the role of development sector](#), by Surbhi Kesar and Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven.
- *Increasingly limited, and ultimately **no decision-making role**, in how other countries choose to spend aid funding.* Aid that is just charity, and not justice, exacerbates inequality.
- *The recognition that aid cannot be both anticolonial and a tool for advancing the UK’s economic or security interests.* Neoliberal policy frameworks have significantly entrenched global inequality and there is a wealth of evidence to document this; using aid to serve national agendas only extends these harms. When aid is tied to UK advantage, it loses its moral and practical purpose, risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to address, and undermines public confidence in the UK’s role as a force for global justice.
- *The recognition that the UK has both a responsibility and a stake in building global solidarity.* Taking a long-term, justice-focused approach serves the interests of the British public as much as those of partner countries. This requires moving decisively away from paternalistic aid models towards equitable, collaborative partnerships that build mutual solidarity.

3.2 Merging the FCO with DFID in 2020 [reduced the capability within the FCDO relating to international development experience](#). The current cuts to FCDO staff further risk limiting capability within the FCDO. This suggests an even greater need for FCDO to invest in effective partnerships with UK civil society to deliver its strategy on development.

3.3 We welcome the Government’s move towards partnerships, but caution against approaches that place UK expertise at the centre of development without an anticolonial and antiracist analysis. This requires challenging the assumption that knowledge is neutral, and critically examining where British

development knowledge is rooted and resourced. Considering how power and history have shaped British knowledge is vital if moving from ‘grants to expertise’.

3.4 We are pleased to see the Committee’s acknowledgement of the enormous wealth of lived and academic experience within UK universities relating to UK ODA and global justice. Rooting ODA in the global research undertaken here in the UK would ensure that practice is based on evidence, leading to more effective, reliable, and impactful outcomes. Where research is publicly funded, it also represents value for money. From SWIDN’s own learning, we particularly highlight the work of Dr Uma Kothari (Manchester), Dr Lata Narayanaswamy (Leeds), Dr Robtel Neajai Pailey (LSE), Dr Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa (LSE), Dr Sara Salem (LSE), Dr Rahul Rao (St Andrews), Dr Kalpana Wilson (Birkbeck), Dr Megha Kashyap (LSBU) and Dr Kamna Patel (UCL).

3.5 Relatedly, SWIDN are concerned that recent UK immigration policy changes requiring higher salary thresholds for migrant workers risk limiting the participation of academics with lived experience and expertise from the Global South in UK-based development research and practice. Combined with shrinking ODA, these measures threaten to create a policy environment where UK knowledge on development further reinforces colonial hierarchies and loses relevance on the global stage.

4. Communicating to the British public

4.1 The UKG also has an important role to play in strengthening public understanding of aid. It should invest in data collection that evidences the depth of British support for global solidarity. [In 2024, SWIDN found that every parliamentary constituency across seven counties in the South West hosted at least one registered international development charity.](#) Broader research across the UK is needed to build a clearer picture of public engagement with, and support for, reparative actions that advance global solidarity, which could also help mobilise further public support.

4.2 Drawing from the UK ODA budget to fund in-country donor costs for asylum seekers has enabled aid to be further weaponised by far-right anti-solidarity rhetoric and confused public support for aid. We call for the UKG to urgently separate these two issues. Similarly, framing aid and defence as competing priorities in budget decisions has deepened public confusion and limited democratic choice, preventing British taxpayers from supporting both security and global justice as complementary investments in a safer, fairer world.

4.3 SWIDN CSO members report no decline in public support in 2025, despite cuts to UK aid, the cost of living crisis, and the prominence of far-right, anti-solidarity media narratives. We suspect this contrasts with the experience of larger INGOs and the perceptions of the FCDO. This further highlights the need for the FCDO to engage with and invest in partnerships that reflect the diversity and depth of UK civil society.

4.4 The UKG should better manage public understanding of how government aid functions — not as charity, but as a long-term investment in global justice, in which the British State has historically played a significant and sustaining role. This can be done through fostering a more informed public conversation about aid and celebrating that the British public has long been part of sustaining work for global justice, of which they are also beneficiaries, since we live in an interconnected world.