

Beyond donorship UK foreign policy and humanitarian action

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Key messages

- For much of the past half century, the UK has exerted its influence to help create the rules and standards that underpin the formal humanitarian system. As the world's third largest humanitarian donor, it is well positioned to lead the humanitarian system through a period of rapid change.
- The UK is facing increasingly complex crises impinging on its national security, particularly in the Middle East, and its impending departure from the European Union (EU) is creating new imperatives for trade. In this context, its reputation as a 'good' humanitarian actor and its role as a leader in the field is at risk if 'aid in the national interest' does not encompass a principled humanitarian approach.
- The UK has the potential to develop a model of principled, smart humanitarian action that is both true to its values and in line with the UK's role as a major global player with multiple, competing interests.
- Making such changes requires a shift in approach and culture within the UK government when it comes to humanitarian principles and priorities, and open acknowledgement that supporting international humanitarian priorities in word and deed is in the UK's longer-term national interest.

Since the end of the Second World War, British foreign policy has been driven by the UK's status as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), its close relationship with the United States on political and security issues, its colonial legacy and its uneasy relationship with mainland Europe, culminating in June 2016 with the referendum decision to leave the European Union (EU). More recently, both foreign

and security policy have been dominated by the repercussions of the attacks in the United States in 2001, in particular the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of Islamic State (IS). Concerns around the terrorist threat posed by IS and other extremist groups have meshed with public unease at the social and economic consequences of mass migration.

The UK has been a major humanitarian actor, both in terms of policy leadership

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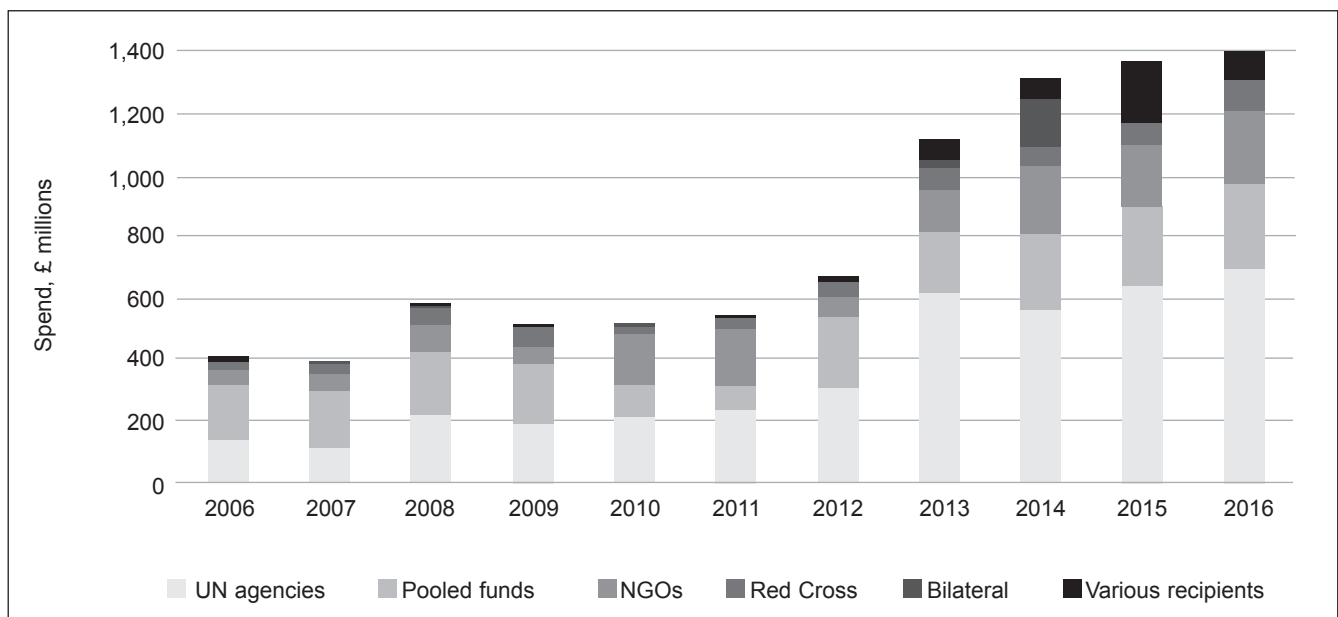
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Photo: The first UK-funded humanitarian flight arrives in Cebu, Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. © Simon Davis/DfID



FIGURE 1: UK HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE, 2006–2016



and in the scale of its financial and other assistance. The country was at the forefront of the diplomatic conferences leading to key treaties including the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the three Additional Protocols, the 1997 Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention, the 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention and the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty. The UK has also been a prominent supporter of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative, the Sphere standards and a range of measures intended to strengthen the UN-led international humanitarian system. It was the leading donor behind an expanded Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), and supported country pooled humanitarian funds and the cluster system. It was also an active member of the coalition driving negotiations around the Grand Bargain between donors and agencies announced at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. The UK is the only G7 economy with legislation enshrining the UN spending target of 0.7% of gross national interest (GNI) on overseas aid, which it met in 2013.¹ In 2016, the UK was the world’s third-largest bilateral donor, providing £1.42 billion in assistance (more than triple the level of a decade before).²

Structurally, there have been important changes in recent years in the way the UK government manages its humanitarian assistance, alongside other areas of

policy. As part of a wider push towards more integrated government responses, foreign, security and development policy-making has been centralised through a National Security Council (NSC), usually chaired by the Prime Minister. Such structural changes may produce better-coordinated responses to crises, but also risk undermining the humanitarian principles the government says it supports. Although government policy statements reassert a commitment to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, as well as International Humanitarian Law (IHL), in the context of the country’s exit from the EU there is also a growing emphasis on ‘aid in the national interest’, leading to concerns that a ‘principled’ approach to crises is being compromised.

There have also been changes in how the UK allocates its aid. Following the 2008 financial crash and deep cuts to budgets across government, the Department for International Development (DFID) has sought new ways to implement its programmes, including the increasing use of private sector contractors for stabilisation and reconstruction in fragile states. Meanwhile, the reliance of some large NGOs on UK government funding can compromise their role as advocates for humanitarian causes. The military’s involvement in humanitarian crises accounts for a relatively minor part of the UK’s overall humanitarian spend, but is magnified by media coverage, and is generally met with scepticism by NGOs and academic commentators. Both are out of proportion to the actual contribution that the UK military makes to humanitarian assistance.

1 UK Government, Policy Paper: Official Development Assistance, 2015 <https://www.gov.uk>.

2 United Kingdom, Government of, 2015, OCHA FTS, 2017, <https://fts.unocha.org/donors/2917/flows/2015>.

Multiple foreign policy objectives

Humanitarian action is just one of the UK's many foreign policy objectives. Like any other government, British foreign policy encompasses considerations of national security, economic interests, aid and traditions of working in different alliances. These various interests – and values such as being a 'good' humanitarian donor – can be in conflict with each other, and depending on the crisis, humanitarian considerations may be accorded a lower priority than others. As a major donor, but also as a major global player, how the UK resolves these tensions – and capitalises on areas where other foreign policy interests can support humanitarian action – has significant implications for international responses to crises.

Decisions on UK responses to humanitarian crises rest on an uneasy combination of the severity of the crisis, judgements about the UK's comparative advantage, public opinion and press coverage and the economic and political interests involved. This research found little evidence to suggest that responses to sudden-onset natural disasters were driven by wider foreign policy interests. The same can be said for many protracted crises in Africa, for example in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. The balance of UK responses to UN appeals or how money is channelled also showed little evidence of a significant foreign policy bias in UK allocations. The UK contributes two-thirds of its humanitarian aid through unearmarked pooled funding or via UN agencies, where spending decisions are largely outside of its control. Officials and former ministers interviewed for the study dispute claims of national interest negatively influencing humanitarian decision-making, and argue that differing responses to crises reflect differing levels of humanitarian need. The study did, however, find evidence of greater UK interest and influence in those crisis countries with which it has historical or colonial relationships, shared linguistic and cultural ties and a greater existing diplomatic and development presence.

Tensions between different objectives

Despite little evidence of a foreign policy bias in the UK's response to natural disasters and many protracted crises, there are an increasing number of complex situations where multiple national interests, including counter-terrorism, arms sales and migration, coincide with humanitarian crises. The tension between

principled humanitarian action and other, competing policy objectives is particularly acute in the Yemen conflict. The UK has spent more than £111 million on humanitarian relief since 2015, while at the same time licencing £3.3bn of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, a belligerent party in the war. As Riyadh's second-largest arms supplier, the UK has received considerable criticism following reports of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by the Saudi-led coalition. In 2016, a parliamentary committee recommended that the UK suspend the sale of arms which could be used in Yemen, but a judicial review by the UK High Court found in July 2017 that the government's decision to issue export licences is legal. As the UK leaves the EU, the pressure to find new arms export markets is only likely to increase.

The UK also has a number of competing humanitarian and political objectives in the Syria crisis. These include opposing President Bashar al-Assad, defeating Islamic State, achieving regional stability and preventing, or at least reducing, migration to the UK. These objectives themselves are hard to reconcile even before humanitarian considerations are added to the mix. The UK has provided more than £2.3bn of humanitarian assistance to Syria and surrounding countries since 2012, but has declined to take in its share of refugees due to perceived wider domestic opposition to immigration.

Similar tension is evident in stringent counter-terrorism legislation, which targets political organisations and statements glorifying terrorism. Some aspects cause particular concern for humanitarians, in particular countering the financing of terrorism by restricting banking facilities and the perceived threat of criminal liability for aid actors should any assistance fall into the hands of proscribed groups. This restricts legitimate Islamic charities from operating, limits engagement by humanitarian organisations with listed individuals and groups and makes remittances harder to send to countries in crisis.

Conclusions and recommendations

The UK's position as an important humanitarian actor – and one to whom other states look for policy leadership – risks being undermined by the sometimes negative impacts of its wider foreign policy priorities. The risks are highest where the UK is actively involved in a conflict; where national security considerations prevail; and where domestic drivers

around migration trump a deep-seated sense of British values around charity. Where national interests are pre-eminent, decisions and actions in crisis response should be underpinned by an explicit and transparent consideration of humanitarian values and principles. It would be naive to expect that politics can be relegated to a secondary position, but institutions, policies and culture can all play a part in minimising, mitigating or managing negative foreign policy influence.

The UK has a comparative advantage in its ability to project a response internationally through civilian and military assets, the size of its aid budget and its deep partnerships around the world. But it needs to act with and through others. Supporting and working through the multilateral system and with like-minded (and not-so-like-minded) donors, the UK should be a forceful advocate of principled humanitarian action. With a new UN Secretary-General, and a UK government committed post-Brexit to an outward-looking foreign policy, there should be an opportunity to develop a longer-term view of how the UK should engage with the world. The UK has the potential to develop a model of principled, smart humanitarian action that is both true to its values and in line with the country's role as a major global player.

Making such changes requires a shift in approach and culture within the whole of the UK government when it comes to humanitarian principles and priorities, and open acknowledgement that supporting international humanitarian priorities in word and deed is in the UK's longer-term national interest.

To this end, the UK government, through all relevant departments including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), DFID and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), should consider the following recommendations:

Recommit to the humanitarian endeavour and humanitarian principles

- The UK government should reiterate its commitment to humanitarian principles forcefully and often, including that humanitarian aid should not be used as an instrument to pursue national security concerns. The government should assert the independence of the humanitarian endeavour generally, and provide evidence of the independence of UK humanitarian aid specifically, consistent with the humanitarian principles that the government says it supports.

- Interested institutions, including the NSC, FCO, MoD and DFID, should explicitly and transparently incorporate humanitarian considerations into decision-making in crisis contexts.

Increase the transparency of humanitarian policy and decision-making

- The UK government should be transparent about how it decides between multiple and competing interests, and where these decisions depart from stated values. Apparently contradictory policy statements asserting support for the humanitarian principles and the use of aid to promote national security need to be challenged and changed.
- The UK government should build evidence for and highlight the positive ways in which a joined-up government response improves humanitarian outcomes, and where it can put them at risk. Linked to this, the UK should be more transparent about the costs and benefits of different government departments' involvement in humanitarian responses, including the UK military.
- The UK needs a more engaged public debate about its commitment to a values- and rules-based international system. This would include discussing when it makes sense to support humanitarian interventions, and the extent to which the UK relies on and invests in the multilateral system in responding to crises. UK NGOs need to lead this debate – and without penalty when they are also receiving UK government funds.

Review humanitarian implications of national security-based decisions

The UK government should urgently review certain national security decisions that either exacerbate humanitarian crises or make humanitarian responses more difficult. Specifically, the UK government should:

- suspend sales of arms for use in combat to Saudi Arabia until peace is achieved in Yemen;
- find solutions to the restrictions counter-terrorism measures place on British charities and remittances; and
- revisit the limits on accepting legitimate refugees who want to come to the UK.

In holding the government to account on these issues, the UK parliament's International Development Committee should review the impact of national security concerns on humanitarian outcomes.