

# Beyond donorship: UK foreign policy and humanitarian action

## **INTRODUCTION**

For 50 years, the UK has exerted its influence to help create and uphold the values and principles underpinning humanitarian action globally. As one of the leading financial donors to the Syria crisis, the largest contributor to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and one of the few developed countries that meet the 0.7% aid-spending target, the UK has cemented itself as a global humanitarian leader.

There are more than 164 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. As crises fuelled by conflict, disasters and displacement grow in complexity and cost, Parliament has a vital role in ensuring that the UK's life-saving assistance continues.

As the UK prepares to leave the European Union, and the government plans to adopt a renewed global foreign policy, there is an opportunity to promote the country's humanitarian reputation and leadership. This policy brief provides insights from the latest Humanitarian Policy Group report, *Beyond donorship: UK foreign policy and humanitarian action*, and offers recommendations for parliamentarians to consider.

The report explores the relationship between the UK's humanitarian and foreign policy. It is based on a literature review of published government documents, official and other scrutiny of government programmes, academic commentary, analysis of published statistics and semi-structured interviews with 40 former government ministers, current and former civil servants and representatives of NGOs and the Red Cross.

## **INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Humanitarian values can enhance British foreign policy.**

These values mean assisting and protecting civilians in crises. National security, counter-terrorism and trade deals can and should be considered together with these humanitarian imperatives without compromising the UK's strategic objectives.

The UK's response to the Ebola crisis saw ten government departments including the Department for International Development (DFID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Ministry of Defence (MoD), Department of Health and Public Health England, and the Stabilisation Unit come together to agree jointly on how to intervene in Sierra Leone. This collaborative approach meant that the UK could help stop the humanitarian crisis and meet national interest through an integrated strategy. The UK fulfilled its humanitarian commitment to assist those affected by the crisis. Its national interest was secured by containing the spread of Ebola. *Parliamentarians should continue to defend this collaborative approach in future crisis response.*

### **Upholding the UK's international humanitarian commitments is in the country's longer-term national interest.**

While it might be challenging at times to balance values and interests, domestic priorities need not inherently be at odds with the UK's humanitarian values.

Immigration has been a significant domestic policy issue in the UK for many years. The recent increase in migrants and asylum-seekers to Europe has fuelled public fears around immigration-related security threats. The UK's policy has been to support refugees within their region of origin. In the Syria crisis, the UK contributed more than £2.3 billion of humanitarian assistance, which should be applauded. However, the decision to limit the number of Syrian refugees resettled to the UK is at odds with the country's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol to protect people fleeing 'persecution and serious harm'. This restrictive resettlement policy is also causing some of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries, such as Jordan, to question why they should continue to shoulder this burden when 'richer' countries decline to do so.

To maintain the UK's reputation as a global leader, it must lead by example. By remaining true to its values and offering generous compassion to those seeking refuge, the UK can set a high standard for international behaviour. *Parliamentarians should push for upholding the UK's pledge to these global commitments in spirit and in letter, which means welcoming higher numbers of refugees to the UK.*



## Advancing the UK's economic interests should not be at the expense of its humanitarian values.

The UK arms industry is a significant part of the country's export economy, and could become even more important after the country leaves the EU. With the UK now developing a new trade policy in preparation for Brexit, there is an opportunity to ensure that trade interests do not undermine humanitarian objectives.

In Yemen, the UK has spent more than £111 million on humanitarian relief since 2015, while at the same time licensing £3.3 billion of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, a belligerent party in the war. As an active member of the Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits arms transfers to countries where there is a substantial risk of the arms being used in violation of international humanitarian law (IHL), the UK is contradicting its own policy commitment.

*As a priority, the UK should suspend arms sales for use in combat to Saudi Arabia until peace is achieved in Yemen. Parliamentarians can help to ensure the strict application of UK policies regarding export guarantees on arms sales to high-risk countries. The UK should also continue leveraging its position as a major trading partner to advocate for human rights and international humanitarian law, even if only behind closed doors.*



## Integrated policy-making and a separate international development department help safeguard humanitarian principles.

A separate Department for International Development (DFID) and Cabinet-level Secretary of State ensure that development and humanitarian principles are considered at the highest levels of decision-making. This is a rare asset compared to other countries and underlines the UK's commitment to humanitarian action.

Centralised decision-making through the National Security Council (NSC) has helped ensure that humanitarian priorities are considered alongside foreign policy, trade and national security issues. However, the challenge is ensuring that these priorities are upheld, especially in highly politicised crises like Syria and Yemen. We need to promote stronger cross-government support for humanitarian action as a global public good, alongside British security or economic interests. This means engaging other departments beyond DFID on these issues, such as the FCO and MoD.

*Parliamentarians should continue to defend a separate DFID, push the government to ensure humanitarian perspectives are given high priority in crises and be more transparent about the challenges of balancing these competing interests in decision-making.*

## PARLIAMENTARIANS CAN:

- Call on the government to take an integrated cross-departmental approach to crisis response
- Uphold the UK's commitments to International Humanitarian Law and critical international agreements, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Arms Trade Treaty
- Push for the suspension of arms sales for use in combat in Saudi Arabia until peace is achieved in Yemen
- Demand greater transparency on how the government balances competing interests in its decision-making, particularly where decisions appear to depart from humanitarian values
- Work through Select Committees to scrutinise the impact of national security concerns on humanitarian outcomes and promote humanitarian perspectives, especially in highly politicised crises
- Secure debates, table questions and challenge apparent contradictory policy statements that appear to threaten humanitarian principles
- Defend a separate Department for International Development

# HPG

## Humanitarian Policy Group

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is one of the world's leading independent research teams working on humanitarian issues. We are dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality research, dialogue and debate.

Front: Syrian refugees come ashore in Lesbos, Greece. Photo: Ben White/CAFOD.

Back: Damage caused by clashes in Taiz, Salah district, Yemen. Photo: Al-Saeed, Khalid/ICRC.



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