

Scrutiny of UK Aid after the DFID and FCO merger

by Emma Crewe, 3rd July 2020

Accountability and scrutiny are vital to effective governance. UK Government aid and development are scrutinised by Parliament (the International Development Committee and the Public Accounts Committee), related financial watchdogs (the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and the National Audit Office) and civil society (including NGOs and universities). **What happens to parliamentary scrutiny after DFID and FCO merge?**

What we need now is a parliamentary committee that looks at Official Development Assistance across departments and research funders like UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). This would mean that the UKRI could continue the work it has begun, in partnership with universities like SOAS, in encouraging UK academics to facilitate more evidence giving from the global south.

This scrutiny will act as a deterrent, a guide and a moral compass – inspiring government to spend aid funding wisely in the first place because they know that specialists are watching them. Everyone benefits if high standards of scrutiny are maintained except those who would like to cut corners.

Advantages of a specialist Parliamentary select committee on ODA:

- The accountability for aid spending will be weakened by fusing the FCO and DFID into one department if scrutiny arrangements blindly follow suit.
- One over-burdened Foreign Affairs/Aid committee would translate into weaker scrutiny which could easily compromise the UK government's accountability and capacity to learn and continuously improve through constructive challenge.
- The IDSC has developed extensive specialist expertise, networks, and contacts and makes excellent use of these to hold Ministers and officials to account. These could be transferred to a specialist committee on Official Development Assistance.
- The Committee could compare achievements of different UK government departments on aid spending (as the Real Aid Index has done, IDSC interim report, HC 215, June 2020, p.31).
- It could provide a home for the Independent Commission for Aid to report to and learn with.
- The Government should bear in mind that soft power does not come with soft responsibility.

Selected References and Resources

The Chair of the [IDSC](#) warns that such mergers in Canada and Australia did not lead to benefits and even reduced influence and soft power. The National Audit Office ([NAO](#)) expressed concern that 'reorganisations can be disruptive and costly. We have also found that the benefits intended are often poorly defined.' The IDSC's interim report on the effectiveness of UK aid concluded a merger could undermine each department's different goals, specialist expertise and ways of working (ibid p.34). The [ICAI](#) argued that the reason that DFID 'established a reputation as a leading global development agency with a strong focus on results, transparency and evaluation' is because it has been a separate specialist aid ministry since 1997. They warned that **pursuing secondary aims (e.g., to promote trade), which is more likely if DFID is no longer separate, will undermine UK government influence as a global development superpower and its ability to achieve longer-term benefits.** These problems will be mitigated by a separate scrutiny regime – that is, a Committee on ODA.

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