



By: Kevin Watkins

Minimizing harm—the first step in rebuilding an aid consensus



In 2015, the United Kingdom's then-prime minister, David Cameron, stood before the United Nations General Assembly and **challenged** other donor countries to follow the UK's lead and back the newly-minted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for eradicating poverty with their aid money. "We haven't just achieved the UN's 0.7% [aid-to-GNI spending] target, we've enshrined it in law," he declared.

That was then. As heir to an extraordinary bipartisan consensus forged under the post-1997 Labour government, Cameron's Conservative government had established Britain as the most generous aid donor in the G7, and one of just four countries to meet the 0.7% aid target.

Now, a Labour government has torn up the remnants of that consensus, joined a global attack on aid, and set a course that will leave the UK among the world's least generous countries.

The fact that a UK government led by the Labour Party, with its long tradition of internationalism and solidarity, has all but abandoned its leadership role on an issue encoded in its DNA illustrates the political forces shaping a new world order, notably US President Donald Trump's view of international cooperation as a zero-sum game played by losers.

But it also challenges development advocates in the UK to focus on strategies aimed at minimizing harm and rebuilding the case for aid.

A new consensus has taken root

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer **announced** the decision to cut foreign aid and channel the savings to an expanded defense budget ahead of a meeting with Trump.

The aid budget is set to fall from 0.5% to 0.3% of GNI – the lowest level since the late 1990s.

After **removing** the roughly one-quarter of the

official development assistance spent on refugees in the UK, Britain will **slip** from ninth to 22nd in a ranking of countries' ODA as a share of GNI.

While there has been opposition to the aid cuts, a new consensus has taken root.

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Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch **applauded** the decision to convert ODA into defense spending. The far-right Reform UK party's election manifesto called for the aid budget to be halved.

When Jenny Chapman, Britain's development minister, delivered ODA's death warrant, she **told** a parliamentary committee in May that "the days of viewing the UK government as a global charity are over."

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The human toll of the cuts

The UK is hardly alone. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which **accounted** for more than 40% of all humanitarian aid in 2024, has been dismantled.

In Germany, the world's second-largest donor, Chancellor Friedrich Merz's new government will **reduce** an already-diminished aid budget.

France is set to slash ODA by 40%, while the recently collapsed right-wing government in the Netherlands, a longstanding member of the 0.7% club, has decreased aid spending by more than two-thirds.

The human toll of the cuts is already starting

to emerge. The demolition of USAID has left acutely malnourished children without food, HIV/AIDS patients without antiretroviral drugs, and clinics unable to treat deadly diseases like childhood malaria.

Trump's suspension of aid could result in 14 million additional deaths

According to a recent study, Trump's suspension of aid could result in 14 million additional deaths, including 4.5 million children under five, by 2030. Cuts by the UK and other donors will inevitably add to these human costs.

An already chronically under-financed humanitarian aid system now confronting famine threats and food emergencies from Sudan to Gaza and the Sahel has been pushed to the brink of collapse: **less** than 10% of the 2025 UN appeal is funded.

The political currents fueling the attack on aid vary across countries. In the US, nihilistic anti-multilateralism has been a driving force.

In Europe, fiscal pressures have interacted with right-wing populist narratives linking aid to migration, pressure on public services, waste, and corruption.

The aid consensus crumbled

What is striking in the British case is the speed with which the aid consensus crumbled. That consensus was forged above all by Gordon Brown, first as Chancellor and then as Prime Minister.

It was under Brown's leadership that the UK set the 0.7% aid target, supported the development of global health funds – Gavi, the Vaccines Alliance and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria – and led debt-relief efforts for Africa.

After 2010, when the Conservative

government's Chancellor George Osborne launched a series of austerity budgets slashing public services and welfare spending, the aid budget was off-limits.

While overseeing a surge in child poverty in the UK, Cameron co-chaired the UN committee that produced the SDGs and the pledge to “leave no one behind.”

Decimating the aid budget was a case of political opportunism

Cracks began to appear during Boris Johnson's premiership. After making the ill-judged decision to fold the Department for International Development into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Johnson “temporarily” reduced foreign aid to 0.5% of GNI, citing the COVID-19 crisis. Starmer now cites Russian security threats to justify deeper cuts.

But the claim that there was no alternative strains credibility. After promising not to increase taxes, Labour entered office donning a voluntary fiscal straitjacket and has had to make avoidable public-spending cuts.

But decimating the aid budget – **described** by Foreign Secretary David Lammy as an exercise in “progressive realism” – was also a case of political opportunism. Weak public support for aid linked to skepticism about its efficacy made ODA an easy target.

Tough choices must be made

So, what can be done to rebuild an aid consensus? The first priority is to minimize harm. Maintaining the UK's £1.9 billion (\$2.6 billion) commitment to the World Bank's International Development Association is critical because every dollar contributed can leverage \$3-4 of financial support for the poorest countries.



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The UK could also make the most of a shrinking aid budget by channeling more humanitarian aid through local actors, rather than bureaucratic UN agencies.

Still, tough choices must be made. There is a strong argument to protect spending on life-saving programs, such as child nutrition, vaccinations, and HIV/AIDS, and for minimizing cuts in areas where the UK is a global frontrunner, like girls' education and social protection.

Even with a diminished aid budget, the UK could exercise greater leadership. With debt-service costs now crowding out spending on essential services in many low-income countries, Starmer's government could demand comprehensive debt relief at this month's UN International **Conference** on Financing for Development.

Ultimately though, the case for aid must be fought and won in a public square increasingly dominated by right-wing populists.

Political leaders in the UK and across the West need to communicate the hard truth that global challenges like climate change, war, and poverty require international cooperation.

And they need to tap into the deep reservoirs of generosity, solidarity, and moral concern that define public sentiment even in the midst of our troubled times.

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