HEALTH AID in TRANSITION

A Review of the United Kingdom's Approach to Transition

THE CENTER FOR POLICY IMPACT IN GLOBAL HEALTH

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Summary

1. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) does not have an explicit, published transition policy or strict criteria to govern exit or transition out of countries. There is also no distinct policy governing DFID's transition out of the health sector compared with its transitions out of other development sectors.
2. DFID has exited or transitioned to a new type of development partnership in several countries in recent years. These shifts were informed by analysis and guidance outlined in DFID's 2011 and 2016 bilateral aid reviews. However, each exit or transition decision remains context specific.
3. DFID's bilateral aid reviews and recent review of its portfolio in Ghana provide key insights into its evolving philosophy on the role that DFID intends to play in countries that have an increasing ability to self-finance their own development.
4. DFID will merge with the Foreign Commonwealth Office in September 2020, creating a single agency called the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It is unclear how much of DFID's approach to exit and transition will be retained after the merger.

Overview

The United Kingdom (UK) is the second largest government donor to global health after the United States.[1] In the 2018-19 fiscal year, the UK spent nearly 11% (US $1.67 billion) of its total official development assistance (ODA) on bilateral health programs.[2] The UK also provides significant support for multilateral health programs, such as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The primary channel of UK aid, including aid for global health, was historically the Department for International Development (DFID). In 2018, DFID spent 75% (US $13.6 billion) of the UK's overall ODA.[2] However, global health aid is provided through several UK departments, such as the Department of Health and Social Care and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Created as an independent ministry in 1964, DFID has alternated between being an independent ministry and a subsidiary of the FCO.[3] Announced in June 2020, DFID will once again become subsumed under the FCO beginning September 2020, thus creating a new agency called the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

The focus of this profile is on DFID's approach to exit and transition. However, it is unclear to what extent this historical approach will be applied once DFID merges with the FCO. Although this institutional change will have an impact on how UK aid transitions are approached in the future, understanding previous transition policies and experiences may be useful for informing new policies moving forward.

Key policies related to transition

There are two key terms DFID uses to describe overall aid transitions in its country portfolio and programming:

Exit. "*The process of phasing out DFID bilateral assistance programmed at country level. This does not necessarily mean a complete end to UK aid, which may continue through centrally managed programs, multilateral channels or via other government departments.*"[4]

Transition. Aid transition refers to a relationship where country level bilateral aid will change, but the relationship continues: "*these transitions may last several years, during which aid flows decrease, new instruments for development cooperation are introduced, and a new partnership is forged.*"[4] This transition can include shifts from certain sectors (e.g., health service provision) to other sectors (e.g., governance and taxation).[4]

DFID does not have a published policy or strict criteria to govern exits or transitions. DFID takes a context-specific approach to exit and transition. There is also no distinct policy governing DFID's transitions out of the health sector compared with its transitions out of other development sectors. Therefore, the focus of this profile is on broader organization-wide polices that influence transition or exit.

DFID transitioned or exited out of several countries in recent years. These transitions or exits were informed by analysis and guidance outlined in DFID's 2011 and 2016 bilateral aid reviews. These reviews also provide key insights into DFID's evolving philosophy on the role that it intends to play in countries that have an increasing ability to self-finance their own development. An overview of relevant portions of both reviews is provided below. More recently, in 2020, DFID conducted a review of its Ghana portfolio; Ghana is a country seeking to transition from aid. This review provides additional context and insights into how the UK government's approach has evolved and been applied since the last bilateral aid review in 2016.

DFID's 2011 Bilateral Aid Review[5,6]

The purpose of DFID's 2011 Bilateral Aid Review was to improve UK aid allocation practices by ensuring cost effectiveness, value for money, and the use of the best available evidence on effectiveness. A key aim of the review was to focus DFID's support on fewer countries where its impact could be greatest. Therefore, the review sought to establish a clear rationale for continuing and increasing DFID's presence in some countries, while also identifying where DFID should close its programs.

As part of the review, each country within DFID's portfolio was assessed against three primary criteria: development need, likely effectiveness of assistance, and strategic fit with UK government priorities. However, the review notes several other factors were also taken into consideration when determining where to focus DFID's efforts:

- settings where the need might be high but where DFID was not "*well placed to have a long term significant impact,*"
- the role that other donors play in a given country, and
- whether a country has a high or low level of aid per capita.

In total, 27 countries were selected using these criteria as priority countries for the coming years and 16 countries were selected for closure of bilateral programs by 2016. These numbers changed a little after the review was complete, bringing the total number of priority countries to 32 and closures to 17. Countries facing closure, also called exit countries, were primarily middle-income countries. For exit countries, the review noted that existing commitments would still be disbursed and implemented.

To validate the initial selection of 27 countries from the review using the aforementioned criteria, DFID used an index called the Needs-Effectiveness Index (NE-I) (Box 1) to rank countries. This is the same index that DFID used for a similar exercise when reviewing the effectiveness of multilateral agencies that it funds. For the validation process, DFID grouped all of its supported countries according to the results of the index by quartiles. Countries in the first quartile had scores indicating that aid had the potential to be the best used whereas scores in the fourth quartile indicated that aid would be the worst used. Among DFID's initial 27 priority countries, 19 were in the first quartile, two were in the second quartile, and the remainder were in the third quartile. For those countries in the third quartile that were still selected as priority countries, DFID explains that they, "*all face substantial development challenges and are ones in which Ministers believe a distinctive British bilateral aid programme can make a significant impact.*"

Inputs and formula for determining Needs-Effectiveness Index (N-EI)

Inputs for determining needs:

- Number of people living under US $2 per day
- Human Development Index Score (HDI, includes gross domestic product/capita, life expectancy, gross enrollment rates [measuring the number of students enrolled in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education], adult literacy rates)
- Fragility – a fragility index is constructed from the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy – Failed and Fragile States indicator (CIFP-FFS)

Inputs for determining effectiveness:

- World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessment (CPIA) scores

To obtain each country's N-EI score, these inputs are combined as follows: **HDI x CIFP-FFS x population living under $2 a day x CPIA**

Box 1: The Needs-Effectiveness Index

Among countries that were not selected as priority countries, DFID teams developed phased plans for exiting. This planning was conducted through the same channel as the standard "results offer" process, a process that all countries underwent to establish realistic goals and results over the following four year period. An internal guidance note, *Country Exit Guidance*, was provided to DFID country offices facing closure. However, according to a review done by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), an independent body that scrutinizes UK aid, DFID's exit guidance addressed practical problems but lacked an overarching or standardized strategy for exits.[4]

Among the countries that were not prioritized, there were two possible routes: exit or transition. However, according to ICAI's review of the process, it is unlikely that these distinct paths were presented clearly. Countries facing an "exit" would see an end to UK aid. In contrast, "transition" countries, although facing a discontinuation of grant funds from DFID, were merely shifted to a new type of relationship, albeit with different types of financial instruments and different UK government partners. The route of exit versus transition was elaborated on significantly more in the 2016 Bilateral Aid Review, outlined in greater detail below.

DFID's 2016 Bilateral Aid Review [7,8]

The 2016 Bilateral Aid Review built on the 2011 Bilateral Aid Review to reexamine the focus and reach of DFID's portfolio. The 2016 review reflects the broader, cross-government UK aid strategy announced in 2015 that outlined the role that other governmental agencies besides DFID will play as key development actors. Although DFID still remains the leading aid actor for the UK, the review notes that other departments and channels will increasingly be used to provide development support.

The review also outlines how DFID's geographic focus should evolve. Specifically, it notes it will scale up support in the Middle East, increase investments in fragile contexts, and enhance support in the Sahel. Additionally, the 2016 review clearly outlines DFID's intention to transition away from aid in countries that can self-finance their development. In particular, DFID states that it will continue to *"shift away from countries that are better able to self-finance their development, or which are ready to transition from traditional aid to different forms of UK support based on mutual interest and engaging other parts of the UK Government."* DFID defines a country as capable of "self-financing" its own development when the aggregate poverty gap (i.e., *"the amount required to bring all incomes up to the extreme poverty line"*) falls below one percent of gross domestic product. Although the review provides no specific countries where an exit or transition is planned, it notes DFID's intention to *"carefully monitor countries that continue to need high levels of support for now, but which, over time, may need fewer financial resources and more targeted technical assistance."*

This 2016 review expands on the 2011 announcement of bilateral aid exits and provides more clarity on what this shift from aid looks like. In particular, DFID notes that it will provide targeted technical assistance to supported countries as they move from primarily grant aid support from DFID into other types of support, such as development capital, in partnership with other UK departments. Additionally, DFID notes it will take a more comprehensive approach towards each of the countries it supports, identifying the most effective channels for delivery. DFID has highlighted three kinds of effective instruments to support a country as it transitions out of bilateral aid or in scenarios where DFID does not have a bilateral aid program: (i) centrally managed programs (ODA spent in one or more countries that is managed either from the UK or by another multilateral fund, such as the Global Financing Facility), (ii) cross-governmental funds, managed jointly by UK government departments (e.g., the Prosperity Fund), and (iii) multilateral partners.

Four analytical tools supported the conclusions in the 2016 review, and were explained in further detail in a technical note. Below is a summary of these tools, with an emphasis placed on their role in contributing to DFID's transition philosophy and approach. Perhaps most importantly among these tools is the aid allocation model. The model's primary purpose is to inform where DFID funds should be prioritized, but it also is clearly linked with transition decision-making. In particular, DFID states that this model provides *"implicit graduation criteria,"* since the *"ability to self-finance"* (i.e., when aid is no longer needed) is one of the four key factors of the model. Although it is unclear if the model itself has been used to trigger any particular exit or transition, these phenomena are rooted in the model's design.

Aid allocation model: This model is used to inform DFID's approach to aid allocation based on its ultimate goal of reducing poverty, particularly in places where *"extreme poverty currently affects a significant proportion of the population and is projected to persist over the medium term, and where the country itself is unable to finance the* *reduction of poverty."* In particular, the model stresses that aid should be allocated according to the results across four indicators (Box 2). The allocation model uses a new concept, called Person Poverty Years, which multiplies the number of people in poverty in a country by the number of years they are expected to remain poor.

Country poverty reduction diagnostics. A diagnostic tool used to determine how DFID can best support countries towards a *"timely, self-financed and secure (low risk) exit from poverty."* Part of the analysis includes evaluating what other development actors are doing in the country and DFID's comparative advantage.

Inclusive growth diagnostics. Examines key barriers to inclusive economic growth *"focusing on the dynamics of economic growth and transformation from a less developed to a more developed economy."* In particular, the diagnostic feeds into an assessment that explores which options DFID has to respond to these barriers, whether there is a strong rationale to act, what possible mechanisms could be used to address an issue, if there is a better UK department to support, and whether or not the multilateral system supports a given area.

Fragile states methodology. DFID commits to spend at least 50% of its budget in fragile states and regions. Fragile states are those that *"suffer external and social stresses that are particularly likely to result in violence; lack the capacity to manage conflict without violence; and neighbouring states that are especially susceptible to instability."*

Although the comprehensive results derived from applying these tools to DFID focus countries are not publicly available, some of the outputs from using these tools are reflected in short country profiles[9] highlighting DFID's strategy in a given country.

2020 Ghana Country Portfolio Review[10,11]

In 2020, ICAI conducted its first country portfolio review in Ghana. Ghana is in a unique situation compared with other transition or exit countries in that its transition from aid was self-initiated as part of its "Beyond Aid" movement. In response, DFID pivoted its support to help support Ghana in its aim to move beyond aid. DFID moved away from financing service delivery and social sector support towards broader governance issues, such as anti-corruption, tax policy and administration, and oil and gas revenue management. UK aid also began to channel funding from diverse sources (i.e., other UK government partners besides DFID) and through alternative instruments (i.e., trade, investment, centrally managed programs, multilateral support). However, DFID has not exited, nor has it expressed intent to exit, from Ghana.

1. **Present need**: defined as extreme poverty
2. **Aid effectiveness**: the degree to which aid can translate into poverty reduction
3. **Future need**: considers the permanent effect of aid on future levels of poverty
4. **Ability to self-finance**: countries that can self-finance their reduction of poverty should not receive aid to the same extent that those who cannot.

Self-finance, according to DFID, means that a country's aggregate poverty gap (the amount required to bring all incomes up to the extreme poverty line) falls below one percent of gross domestic product. This approach allows for some flexibility to a common alternative of using an income cutoff as the predominant transition criterion.

Box 2: Key indicators in the aid allocation model[11]

The UK government issued a response to ICAI's review of Ghana's experience, and either agreed or partially agreed with ICAI's assessment and recommendations. In the government's response, several comments further elaborated on DFID's transition approach. Specifically, it referred to "DFID's country typology framework." This framework is a guideline for decision-making on how UK aid should be used for the different "types" of countries that DFID supports. Specifically, the UK government outlines that all countries do not require the same level of support, but as countries become more able to "self-finance" their own development (i.e., a country gets richer and more stable), UK aid flows will reduce. The UK government explicitly mentions that it should not continue to finance service delivery once a recipient country can afford to do so itself, even if it chooses not to do so.

Transition status

Upcoming

In 2018, ICAI found that there are no transitions planned for the current spending period.[4] However, based on the language in the 2016 bilateral aid review, DFID will be monitoring countries for eventual exit or transition, although the review provided no specific trigger or timetable.

Previous

As outlined in the 2011 Bilateral Aid Review, DFID exited/transitioned out of 17 countries; two were selected in advance of the review (China and Russia), two were added after the review (India and South Africa), and one re-entered priority classification (Iraq).[6] Table 1 provides an overview of these countries and highlights whether or not there remain any active bilateral health projects in each country and the year of closure of the most recent health project. These figures do not account for funds channeled through centrally managed funds or multilateral agencies.

Transition learning

The government established ICAI in 2011 to scrutinize UK aid spending to ensure that UK aid is operating in a manner that promotes value for money. Most of the transition process successes and challenges have been captured through ICAI's review process and DFID's corresponding responses to the review.

In 2016, ICAI conducted a review on DFID's approach to transitions and exits.[4] In particular, ICAI identified five primary shortcomings with DFID's approach:

(i) management weaknesses (staffing, communications, and relationship management);
(ii) missed opportunities to use well-targeted aid investment to protect the gains from past UK assistance;
(iii) failure to capture and share lessons due to the lack of a structured learning process within DFID;
(iv) poor communication of the nature and objectives of the new development partnerships with countries; and
(v) poor communication of DFID's decisions on aid provision during and after exit and transition with both country stakeholders and the UK public.[4]

ICAI in turn provided four concrete recommendations for DFID to enhance its approach to transitions and exit (Table 2). DFID publicly responded to ICAI's review, accepting some of its criticisms and recommendations while partially accepting others.[13] This response allowed DFID to provide more context on its evolving approach to transitions. ICAI

Table 1. Overview of DFID exit/transition countries

Country	Exit/Transition	Active bilateral health projects[12]	Most recently closed DFID bilateral health project[12]
Angola	Exit	No	2010
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Exit	No	N/A
Burundi	Exit	Yes, one	Anticipated end date is 2021
Cambodia	Exit	No	2013
Cameroon	Exit	No	2010
China*	Transition	No	2011
The Gambia**	Exit	No	N/A
India*	Transition	Yes, three	Anticipated end date is 2022
Indonesia	Transition	Yes, but through the Department of Health and Social Care	Anticipated end date is 2021
Kosovo	Exit	No	2011
Lesotho	Exit	No	2012
Moldova	Exit	No	2011
Niger**	Exit	No	2009
Russia*	Exit	No	N/A
Serbia	Exit	No	N/A
South Africa*	Transition	No	2018
Vietnam	Exit	Yes, but through the Department of Health and Social Care	Anticipated end date is 2021

Source: Development Tracker as of June 24, 2020.
Most recently closed project is based on the planned end date stated in the Development Tracker.
**Denotes countries selected for exit/transition outside of the 2011 Bilateral Aid Review process, either before or after.*
***Denotes countries that, despite need, were referenced by DFID as those where DFID lacked comparative advantage.*

published a short follow up to DFID's response in 2018, noting that although progress had been made, most of the mentioned actions to improve its approach were still in the planning phase.[13] ICAI's recommendations from 2016 as well as its 2018 follow up assessment on the state of transition-related affairs are summarized in Table 2.

More recently, ICAI analyzed the UK aid approach to transition in Ghana, a lower-middle income country that itself proclaimed its vision to move beyond aid. This was the first ICAI review specific to a country portfolio. Although the review was specific to Ghana, ICAI distilled several key findings that could be beneficial for DFID's approach in other settings (Table 3). The government responded to the review, agreeing with three of the recommendations and partially agreeing to three.[11]

Transition impact: country experiences

ICAI's review of DFID's approach examined seven country case studies of exit and transition.[4] According to the review, DFID's process to date has been highly decentralized, leading to diverse experiences among countries. In general, in countries where DFID planned to exit rather than transition to a new type of partnership with other UK departments (Vietnam, Cambodia, Burundi) detailed exit planning occurred and exit objectives were clear. However, in most transition countries (China, India, South Africa) transition objectives were often muddled and the transition process suffered from communication issues. ICAI found that in most cases DFID did not manage the exit process in a way that would *"minimize the risk of development reversals and protect its past aid investments."*[4]

ICAI's review of the Ghana transition experience found mixed results, with several strengths and weaknesses in DFID's approach.[10] Specifically in the health and other social sectors, ICAI found that despite significant development progress with DFID support, there remains *"considerable risk that development gains will be lost as DFID reduces direct financing of services through bilateral channels."*[10] Underpinning this finding is the tradeoff DFID made to achieve short-term progress by circumventing the state and using other delivery channels. ICAI found that health and other social sectors saw the greatest reductions within the country budget, yet multilateral support has not fully made up for the loss, nor has DFID worked strategically with multilateral partners to ensure programming for Ghana. ICAI also found that the decisions to reduce financial support in these areas and continue funding in other sectors were not based on sufficient evidence. Unfortunately, ICAI notes that many key results achieved in the last decade are unlikely to be sustained after DFID reduces its support. The UK government, in support of Ghana's desire to move beyond aid, has encouraged funding from other departments, with alternative non-aid funding instruments. However, DFID's country team in Ghana noted that this approach can increase tensions between commercial and development interests.

Table 2. Overview of DFID exit/transition countries

	ICAI's 2016 recommendations	ICAI's 2018 follow up assessment of DFID's progress
1	Establish clear policies, guidance, and lesson learning on transition and establish a "central point of responsibility for exit and transition"	• DFID has now established a central point of responsibility and a learning hub • DFID has begun developing a set of working principles for managing transition processes
2	DFID should work together with other UK government departments to improve relationships with partner countries during transition	• Although DFID indicated that it has already started implementing this recommendation, the ICAI did not find progress in addressing weaknesses found in the review
3	Increase transparency on aid spent and on changes in aid relationships	• ODA reporting, including for other departments, is on an "improving trajectory" • ICAI recommends that DFID needs to be clearer to the public on what it means by "end financial aid"
4	DFID should consider consequences of transition for civil society organizations (CSOs)	• DFID aims to address this recommendation in its working principles on managing transitions • Reforms to CSO funding mechanisms have made access to funding more difficult for local CSOs when ending bilateral aid

Table created by authors using data from 2018 ICAI follow up of the performance review "When aid relationships change: DFID's approach to managing exit and transition in its development partnerships"

Table 3. ICAI's recommendations to DFID based on Ghana transition review

	ICAI's 2020 recommendations
1	In transition contexts, DFID should ensure that the pace of ending the bilateral financing of service delivery in areas of continuing social need must be grounded in a realistic assessment of whether the gap left will be filled
2	DFID should require portfolio-level development outcome objectives and results frameworks for its country programs
3	DFID Ghana should learn from its own successes and failures when designing and delivering its systems strengthening support and technical assistance
4	In transition contexts, DFID country offices, in coordination with the multilateral policy leads, should increasingly work to influence the department's country multilateral partners on issues of strategic importance
5	In order to strengthen the relevance of its aid programming and accountability to the people expected to benefit, DFID should include information on citizen needs and preferences, especially for the most vulnerable, as a systematic requirement for portfolio and program design and management
6	The government should provide clear guidance on how UK aid resources should be used in implementing mutual prosperity objectives to minimize risks and maximize opportunities for development

Table created by authors using data from 2020 country portfolio review "The changing nature of UK aid in Ghana"

Outlook

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced on June 16, 2020 that DFID will formally merge with the FCO in September to become one institution called the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.[14,15] The goal of the merger is to have a single UK strategy, inclusive of aid, led by the Foreign Secretary. Rumors of a merger had been circulating since Johnson became Prime Minister. There have been many criticisms of this merger, including the lack of consultation with key UK aid groups.[16,17] More than 70 British parliamentarians, including senior Conservatives, signed a cross-party letter sent to Johnson that says aid must be scrutinized following the sudden merger and that the UK must show it is *"not turning its back on the world's poorest."*[18]

The Foreign Secretary, according to Johnson, will be *"empowered to decide which countries receive – or cease to receive – British aid."*[14] During his announcement of the merger, Johnson noted that DFID's budget is four times the budget of the FCO, highlighting examples of countries where DFID spending outpaced FCO spending, despite the latter having more pressing security concerns.[19] Although DFID has not had a consistent approach to transition or exit, it has developed tools to guide its policymaking. With this integration, it is unclear whether a country's need or ability to self-finance will be a driving factor for aid provision or cessation.

Development Initiatives (DI) recently conducted an analysis comparing the levels of spending of DFID and FCO. They note that *"we are likely to see a reorientation of aid spending towards the priorities of the FCO rather than those of DFID when they merge."*[20] In particular, DI found that:

- DFID allocates more aid to low-income and least developed countries (93%) than the FCO (61%);
- DFID aid is targeted in countries with the highest poverty levels (91%) whereas the FCO spends 74% of its funds in countries where poverty is the lowest;
- DFID funds prioritize countries with the fewest resources (97%) whereas FCO funds are more evenly distributed; and
- DFID is a leader on transparency, and is considered among the most transparent donors in the world according to the Publish What You Fund Aid Transparency Index, whereas the FCO has been among the lower tier, ranked fair or poor in recent years.

In a recent appearance in front of parliament, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab noted that scrutiny of UK aid spending will be maintained or increased, but did not confirm whether or not ICAI would continue in this new era.[15] Foreign Secretary Raab during that same appearance stated that UK aid will maintain its aid levels in the poorest countries.[15] However, there is nothing binding about his commitments.

Brexit will impact the UK aid strategy, and the elimination of an independent aid agency may be one of many changes to come. With the impact of COVID-19 on the UK's economy, even if the UK does keep its commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on aid, overall aid flows are likely to shrink. In this new era of UK aid, we may see transitions and exits occur. However, these decisions may not be due to a recipient's need or ability to self-finance, but more based on politics and post-Brexit strategy.

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Methods

Our research included a desk-based review of donor websites, strategy documents, grey literature reports, and academic literature. We triangulated the findings of our desk review with key informant interviews with high-level policy personnel within each of the donor agencies. This project was screened for exemption by the Duke University Institutional Review Board as part of the study 'Driving health progress during disease, demographic, domestic finance and donor transitions (the"4Ds"): policy analysis and engagement with transitioning countries.'

The 4Ds is a project led by the Center for Policy Impact in Global Health that focuses on integrated research across four major global health transitions: disease, demography, development assistance for health, and domestic resources for health.