

Reimagine aid allocation



How DFID can educate and empower the British public to back its work and investment across global nations.

The UK has a great story to tell on international development. Since 2013 we've been one of a tiny handful of countries that spend over 0.7% of our Gross National Income (GNI) on aid, hitting a UN target set for the world's donor nations half a century ago. Only the USA provides more development funding than the UK's £12.2bn – and America's commitment is a mere 0.2%⁽¹⁾ of GNI. Britain's reputation for generosity and high-quality aid programmes create enormous goodwill in the developing world, helping to stabilise areas of conflict and reinforce relationships.

In an era when the government is squeezing public spending, some argue that “charity begins at home” and oppose overseas aid. UKIP's [2015 election manifesto](#)⁽²⁾ called for the abolition of DFID and a two-thirds cut in aid spending. Elements within the Conservative Party are also highly sceptical of foreign aid. And the Mail on Sunday has championed a [petition](#)⁽³⁾ calling for government to abandon the 0.7% target, gathering over 230,000 signatures, prompting a Parliamentary debate.

Because the public is not closely engaged in the Department for International Development (DFID's) work, the department is short of defenders when critics attack its management of funds or argue that aid weakens local economies. And as DFID's spending keeps on climbing – to £14.1bn by 2020, according to an IFS forecast – these tensions are likely to grow, especially in a time of austerity when other core public services like the NHS and the police are straining due to lack of public funding.

Yet DFID's work is full of powerful human stories, and tales of triumph in the face of adversity; of people striving to better themselves and their communities. This is raw material as vivid and compelling as that of any TV drama. Many of DFID's frontline operations would fascinate the British public, just as Channel 4's 24 Hours in A&E regularly pulls in two million viewers to observe a domestic public service. And perhaps there's an opportunity here to build public understanding of DFID's work – demonstrating its value and humanising its recipients – and to give the public an active role in that work.

Engagement with UK public

The British love watching people pitching to a panel in pursuit of their dreams (think BBC's *Dragons' Den*). They love voting for their favourites (ITV's *Britain's Got Talent*, BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*). And they're generous in response to TV appeals such as Comic Relief. Could a TV show involving viewers in aid spending decisions help to demystify the department's work, whilst improving transparency and building public empathy?

DFID has many fixed commitments and supports a wide range of policy goals, such as emergency relief and post-conflict reconstruction. But a small proportion of its budget could be set aside to fund schemes chosen by the public. Charities, development organisations, private sector companies and overseas governments could be invited to submit applications in a number of categories. These categories could cover local community building projects, to training programmes – to environmental protection, which all enhance economic development.

Selection process

Applicants and business cases would be scrutinised by DFID, testing them against public policy goals and their value in illustrating the complexities of aid decision-making. Selectors would also seek uplifting human stories – stories of visionary leaders and close communities organising to better themselves. For whilst some charity appeals deliberately tug on people's heart strings, the aim here is to foster empathy rather than pity; to challenge stereotypes of the developing world, not to play on them. So applicants would be encouraged to focus on the future instead of the past, and on solutions instead of problems. In essence, the public should be asked to choose the best of an exciting set of inspiring projects, rather than the worst of a harrowing series of hard-luck stories.

The promoters of shortlisted projects would then have a chance to pitch their ideas on national TV, answering questions put by a panel and submitted via social media. And the public would decide which of the finalists receive the available funds, either via a jury system or studio audience votes, or – much more directly – using live online polls or telephone voting.

This approach could help improve public understanding of the issues around international development and aid allocation. With applications rated by DFID on factors such as risk of failure and contribution to different aspects of international development, voters would find themselves balancing competing objectives. Meanwhile, the initiative could also boost global awareness of the UK's overseas aid work. It could help explain the value of aid spending for British interests, such as those around tackling climate change and extremism. And it could challenge stereotypes about the developing world, reducing fear of the unknown and fostering empathy.

Further benefits

The model could even help to raise extra funds for overseas aid. With government budgets under pressure, it's increasingly important that public investments are amplified: that public spending pulls in extra money from elsewhere, creating greater value for each taxpayer pound. Indeed, DFID already runs its own match-funding scheme: under UK Aid Match, the department pays out sums equal to the donations made to a set of approved charity campaigns.

In this context, the backers of bigger projects could be required to match-fund DFID's investment, promising to pay a proportion of winning schemes' costs. For smaller projects, public donations could be built into the selection process – either by charging for telephone votes, or simply by inviting viewers to donate to their favourite schemes. If the latter, the level of public donations could even help decide which projects are taken forward.

Some commentators might find all this a bit competitive for a process of charitable giving. But charities already compete fiercely to attract public donations, whilst DFID uses a rigorous selection process to allocate its own money. This programme would make such competition explicit. And that is, in a way, the point: unless it invites people into its world, DFID will never increase public understanding of either the complexity of its decision-making or the huge benefits it can create.

With the winning projects chosen and funded, a TV crew would accompany DFID assessors on visits – examining progress and learning about their problems and achievements. This would play an important role in showing how the public's involvement has made a difference; in demonstrating the value of international aid; and in exploring the challenges around making such projects successful.

Clearly, policymaking this open can only be taken so far. The vast majority of DFID's spending will always be determined by elected ministers, who must balance all the wider development, diplomatic, security and economic priorities. But as the UK's overseas aid budget grows whilst domestic public services endure a long spending squeeze, the proportion of politicians, commentators and citizens who question DFID's work is likely to grow – unless, that is, the department can build much stronger connections with the British public.

During periods of slow economic growth and public services cuts, people naturally focus on protecting those closest to them. But when connected directly with the lives and aspirations of people facing much tougher circumstances abroad, the British public has always shown enormous humanity and generosity. DFID should find ways of creating these connections, and its civil servants, auditors and development workers might just find some ideas in a very different world – that of reality TV.

If you would like to discuss this article in further detail please contact Matthew or email us at reimaginegovernment@kpmg.co.uk

1 <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/documentupload/ODA%202014%20Tables%20and%20Charts.pdf>

2 <http://www.ukip.org/manifesto2015>

3 <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/125692>

www.kpmg.com/uk/reimaginegovernment

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