

The UK development agenda, the White Paper, and the SDGs

Introduction

UK international development policy is in a period of uncertainty – a new set of independent reviews were launched in November 2024, following swiftly from the 2023 review that led to the UK international development White Paper (November 2023). Taking the SDGs as our lens, this paper outlines findings from our analysis of the 2023 UK International Development White Paper and proposes a 10-point framework to analyse future development policies and reviews. The White Paper was designed to present a consensus policy position on the role of the UK in international development. Much was made of cross-party cooperation in developing the White Paper, though there were areas that the current governing party (then opposition) highlighted needed greater attention.¹ The Minister at the time, Andrew Mitchell, noted the need for a consistent approach to international development running until 2030 and stated ‘in the unlikely event that [the Conservative Party] is not in government after the next election, any other Government would, I hope, build on it to make it a huge success’.

The subsequent election of the Labour Government, and appointment of Anneliese Dodds as the Minister for Development, has not led to a rapid change in the UK’s International Development agenda. The Minister stated, in October 2024, that she values the White Paper, especially as ‘a diagnosis of the problems we face and how UK development can help meet them’.² She then identified that there was a challenge in prioritisation, strategy, and planning to achieve the aims of the White Paper, and said that this was the motivation for setting up the 2024/5 Development Review, led by Baroness Minouche Shafik.

The analysis was conducted by Sightsavers and Newcastle University,³ and focuses on the 296 commitments in the document, analysing (i) their *alignment with the SDGs*, and (ii) the *specificity* of these commitments (in terms of quantified ambitions, time horizons, funding, existing initiatives identified, and ownership).

This paper uses, as its lens on UK policy, the SDGs agreed in 2015. The SDGs are important because they provide an (albeit imperfect) long-term, normative framework for sustainable development. The goals and targets of the SDGs focus on three pillars of sustainable development (social, environmental, and economic), and are underpinned by the principles of *universality* (that is, they apply to all countries), *indivisibility* (the goals and targets are linked and cannot be achieved in isolation), and the pledge to *leave no one*

¹ Hansard records the cordial exchanges between the Minister, Andrew Mitchell, and Shadow Minister, Lisa Nandy, during the Commons Statement on the White Paper on 21 November 2023: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-11-21/debates/17FFF91C-74DB-43CE-8944-63A2C996C5AC/InternationalDevelopmentWhitePaper>

² Anneliese Dodds speech at Chatham House, 17 October 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-development-speech-at-chatham-house>

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behind in their implementation.⁴ Developed through a highly consultative inter-governmental process facilitated by the UN, the SDGs articulate the international consensus on sustainable development. They do not hide from complexity and are built on the inextricable link between extreme poverty and inequality, climate change, and conflict.

At the core of our analysis is an effort to count and catalogue the “we wills” (we term these “commitments” in what follows) in the White Paper. We identify 296 of these. Comparing the count to the FCDO’s own list, there is a small margin of error in this number, depending on how phrasing is interpreted. A first phase of research analysed each commitment, identifying up to two proximate SDG targets and goals (to allow for commitments to address multiple SDGs). In a second phase of research, we reviewed the detailed text of the commitment, in context, to see whether it identified responsible actors, timescales, specific initiatives (whether UK or multilateral), specific ambitions (in terms of % reduction, say), funding sources, partners and costings. Counting the results of each of these analyses, and laying them over each other, allows us to present a picture of which SDG targets are addressed by the commitments; whether the commitments are specific in the above respects; and *where* these more or less specific commitments fall across the SDGs.

The White Paper and the SDGs

There have been almost annual UK development reviews, integrated reviews, white papers, etc. since the SDGs were agreed in 2015. These have all aimed to show coherence with the SDGs to some extent, and the latest White Paper is clearly stronger than the others in this respect. The centrality of the SDGs is established in the foreword by Lord Cameron (who, of course, has his own specific history with the SDGs). In the text of the White Paper, achieving the SDGs is framed as a key motivation.

However, though the SDGs are referenced frequently in the White Paper, the SDGs are often treated in general terms, and the White Paper is not structured around the SDGs or how the UK’s international development agenda will help achieve them. The White Paper is discursive and wide-ranging, with mentions of SDGs scattered across its discussions and commitments. This gives rise to the main research question we addressed in our research – how do the commitments of the White Paper align to the SDGs?

Outlining our findings, we develop ten critical insights into the White Paper. The first eight insights arise from our analysis of the fragmented and complex picture of priorities offered in the White Paper commitments, and reflection on how an SDG-lens could identify priorities more clearly. The last two insights reflect the questions at the root of the challenges we find with the White Paper’s alignment with the SDGs - and which remain important for current and future reviews. *First*, is the role of White Papers or development reviews *strategic*, in generating direction and justifying key choices, or is it more *presentational*, in identifying what the UK does and showing how these thematic priorities can be brought together within a (loose) cohesive framework? *Second*, what does the UK want from international development frameworks like the SDGs?

From these critical insights emerge a clearer account of the task for current and future reviews. Taken together, this paper finds that the UK’s approach to development has been left *underdeveloped* in the White Paper. To respond to these absences and challenges, the

⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

closing section of the paper transposes these ten elements into an agenda for the current and future reviews, and a framework for evaluating their alignment with the SDGs.

Findings

1. Not recognising the centrality of SDG 17 is a missed opportunity

The commitments demonstrate a strong, high-level alignment to the agenda of SDG 17 (“Partnerships for the Goals”) with its focus on global means of implementation for the SDGs. Of the 296 commitments in the White Paper, we found that 140 had a focus on SDG 17. Nearly half of the commitments, then, were about partnership as a means of achieving international development policy objectives.

This overall alignment reflects two key aspects of the White Paper. First, the general emphasis in the White Paper around partnership, respect and local engagement. This emphasis is clearly spelled out early in the document, with its commitment that ‘we will build on UK strengths and shift our approach to partnerships, prioritising mutual respect’. This commitment is in line with the OECD DAC agenda on localisation and the wider recognition of international development actors as only one component driving sustainable development. There is very little analysis in the White Paper about the changing context of development assistance, including the relatively small role of ODA in global finance and the reduction in the UK’s ability to shape the policy of other countries, though this should matter for what a UK partnership approach could achieve.⁵

Second, the White Paper prioritises discussion of ‘means of implementation’ – e.g. global financial reform and science partnerships. SDG 17, similarly, is primarily about the structural changes needed to achieve the other 16 SDGs. It focuses on the finance, trade, technology, capacity-building, and systemic issues needed to create the conditions for the success of the agenda. Hence, the strength of alignment is to be expected. Despite this overlap, there is a difference in treatment of the wider agenda beyond SDG 17. SDG 17 comprises just over 10% of the SDG targets, indicating just how much more detail and specificity is addressed to particular thematic areas beyond global partnership. In the White Paper, however, the SDG17-aligned commitments constitute 47% of all the commitments made, indicative of far less breadth and detail in other thematic areas, as we discuss below.

Though there is systematic alignment between the commitments of the White Paper and targets of SDG17, there is only one mention of SDG 17 itself in the White Paper. The relationship between the UK international development priorities and SDGs goes unexplored and unremarked-upon. More precisely, if Goal 17 sets out an agreed suite of global means to realise sustainable development, where the UK is *not* aligned with that agenda (and

⁵ These are not intended to be contentious statements – notwithstanding the continued role of the UK on the UN Security Council, significant role on the governance structures of organisations like the World Bank, membership of the G7 and G20, etc. – even those who present the most positive perspective of the UK’s global influence must agree that this influence has reduced over the past 20 years. This is particularly the case given the reduction in ODA: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9224/>

therefore not taking advantage of global partnerships) is just as interesting as where it is, and this is not addressed.

2. There is a lack of specific, measurable, and timebound commitments

A major finding of our analysis is that though there are many commitments, these remain relatively vague and aspirational. Only 25 of the 296 commitments have dates attached; only 10 mention specific levels of finance attached; and only 20 commitments have specific numerical ambitions (this includes proportions, such as ‘halve’). The spread of these specific commitments across the SDGs is marginally skewed towards environmental and governance goals. Few of these specific commitments are new: the White Paper largely identifies and restates existing commitments around each of the themes.

The most specific elements – in terms of funding and ambition - are found around SDG 13 (climate funding), and to a lesser extent SDG 16 (transparency, illicit flows in Overseas Territories) and SDG17 (e.g. the role of British International Investment - BII). Of the commitments with dates, 6 commitments specify dates in 2024 and a further 8 specify dates in 2025-26.

The relative absence of timescales and concrete targets is not necessarily problematic if the White Paper is only a statement of intent. However, without greater specificity, the Paper is incomplete as a strategic approach for the UK. In particular, this poses a challenge for accountability: there is no clear approach to how successes and failures will be identified and addressed. In the current context, this yields two questions:

First, there is the issue of whether the timebound 2024 commitments have been achieved, and whether the commitments due in 2025-6 *will* be achieved. Or, whether these concrete, short-time-bound commitments are now set aside (e.g. in the context of the ongoing review).

Second, the relative absence of specificity does show the level of planning needed as an urgent follow-up step: these kinds of broad and vague commitments must be translated to a clearer plan that addresses priorities and processes, allocates ownership of this agenda to agents, and so identifies routes for accountability.

3. Commitments are especially absent around the ‘traditional’ development agenda

This analysis considers ‘traditional’ development as including poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, and water and sanitation - the subject matter of the Millennium Development Goals. ‘Traditional’ development is broadly represented by SDGs 1-6, although each goal is an evolution of the previous articulation of success in the MDGs – for example, SDG 3 includes targets on malaria, TB, HIV and neglected tropical diseases (as in the MDGs), but also addresses the systemic changes articulated in a target on Universal Health Coverage.

Of the 296 commitments in the White Paper, 57 align with the ‘traditional’ development SDGs, which is less than 20% of the commitments. Of these 57, we assessed only 4 as having specific, numerical aims. Does this imply a shift away from the ‘traditional’ development agenda? If so, it is not a shift that is addressed directly in the White Paper. Beyond the White Paper, there is still a significant focus on this agenda – for example in the

work of the UK's non-governmental organisations, and within public perception of ODA and its role. Therefore, there are legitimate questions about the implications of this shift, and whether this shift has support beyond the FCDO.

Our mapping of the SDGs onto the White Paper commitments extends this analysis, showing that some SDGs and SDG targets – that again reflect apparent areas of UK interest – are largely unaddressed in the White Paper commitments. For example, we find only one commitment on the themes covered by SDG 11 (cities); 4 commitments addressing on SDG 14 (oceans), even though we find 16 focusing SDG 15 (land-based ecosystems); and 2 commitments on SDG 6 (water and sanitation), despite a whole section of the Paper on water.

These findings pose two questions:

First, does the absence of these themes show a lack of strategic coherence (given prominent UK work in these areas) or risk undermining UK activity? The SDGs are helpful here. They show the breadth of elements that the UK policy could address. But they also highlight that these absences could undermine objectives in other related areas, given the indivisibility of sustainable development challenges.

Second, there needs to be greater clarity on this apparent shift, whether it is indeed the UK's new direction, and whether capabilities exist within FCDO to support it. The 'traditional' development agenda has been a significant part of the FCDO's work (and that of the Department for International Development before it), and there should be an analysis of whether the capacity of the FCDO is aligned with the new direction.

4. 'Leaving no one behind' - the dichotomy between discussion and action

The pledge to 'leave no one behind' is one of the guiding principles of the 2030 Agenda. Lord Cameron, as co-chair of the UN panel on the future of development, played a key role in articulating the principle and its eventual inclusion of in the 2030 Agenda, and the UK heavily promoted 'leave no one behind' through a policy paper and accompanying it with various initiatives (such as helping initiate the Inclusive Data Charter). The principle is at the heart of the UK's relationship with the SDGs.

This is reflected at a general level in the White Paper: there is a reaffirmation of "leave no one behind" as a "guiding value" (para 2.14); SDG 10 (reduced inequality) features prominently in our analysis of themes from the SDGs (in part due to the target on reform of global financial institutions, SDG 10.6, mapped 6 times). There is also a chapter on ensuring opportunity for all, framed around reducing inequality through measures that might address 'left behind' populations – e.g. social security (6.81) or digital inclusion (8.19). Though prominent at a general level, *specificity* on how the UK will address inequality, and commitments that explain how it will guide UK activity, is lacking.

The White Paper includes a brief synopsis of the focus the UK has on certain populations, notably women and girls, supporting LGBT rights activists, and disability inclusion. Yet very few commitments address a wider set of disadvantaged populations such as people with disabilities, older people, or indigenous peoples. The closest the White Paper gets is to state that 'proven solutions will be scaled up, reaching those most at risk of being left behind, such

as women and girls with disabilities, LGBT people, adolescent girls, and religious or belief minorities' (6.4). It is not clear if this is intended as a commitment, what it means, and whether the FCDO will be held accountable for it. Beyond this, no commitment mentions wider disadvantaged populations, whilst 13 reference women and 1 supports LGBT rights. The coverage of 'left behind' populations itself, then, leaves some such groups behind.

In terms of specificity, in the White Paper section on equality and autonomy, there is only one commitment which includes a measurable element (6.17). The UK has a series of development strategies addressing aspects of inequality – a Women and Girls strategy, a Disability Strategy, but the question of coherence between these strategies and the White Paper; and of who else is considered 'left behind' and how these populations matter for UK development efforts.

The FCDO faces the question, then, of whether, and how, this 'guiding value' will be reflected in practice - especially in the context of the upcoming World Social Summit that focuses on issues of social inclusion and justice.

5. It is not clear who will deliver this agenda of collaboration and partnership, across and beyond government

Our analysis finds that only 20 of 296 commitments identify specific UK agents of delivery other than FCDO (and these are mostly BII and UK Export Finance). There is almost no reference to other government departments. However, a large proportion of ODA is spent by other government departments, and it is clear that actions by one government department can bolster or undercut actions taken by another. This question of *policy coherence* – so prominent in the SDGs – is left unaddressed in the White Paper.

In terms of agents and partners beyond UK government, science, business, intergovernmental organisations (including development banks), and other governments are most prominently mentioned as collaborators – overall, we find 151 commitments mention or strongly imply at least one: there is clearly a focus on these organisations. However, if the agenda is one of local leadership, listening, and partnership working, this distribution of owners and partners prompts the question of whether local groups and civil society should feature more prominently as partners.

Again, the underdeveloped discussion in the White Paper prompts two issues:

The **first** concerns the scope of the current review – or any future one: should it consider all the ways in which government action does and could bear on international development, and what 'whole of government' action in support of development looks like? If not, how will this issue be addressed?

Second, if local leadership and partnership is the basis of the UK approach, this prompts an urgent need for specificity on how this will work in practice

International frameworks and national reviews - what does the UK want?

Our findings in respect of the White Paper, help to frame expectations for the current and future reviews. But they also highlight two larger questions that matter for the direction of UK international development policy.

First, the problems with the White Paper highlight the question of what the purpose of a development review is. Though the White Paper makes choices about what will and won't be focused on, these choices are implicit rather than explicit.

It is entirely legitimate – indeed, the job of strategy - to make policy choices, but accompanying the long list of aspirations is a lack of transparency about the choices that have been made in presenting this as the UK strategy, and the drivers for those choices. The White Paper aimed to set the direction of UK development work, but without really spelling out what the UK will do – and, crucially, what it will no longer do – and why. Without an account of what drives the choices made, it is hard to determine what the White Paper does beyond advertising the kinds of broadly positive contributions the UK could make. Part of the solution must be that current and future development reviews should be clear on where they cohere with previous policies and where they recommend a break in policy direction.

Second, though the SDGs are clearly a concern for the White Paper, it is equally apparent from our analysis that there has not been a systematic engagement with how UK development priorities impact across this global agenda. *Ad hoc* mapping against SDG goals and themes has not translated into a comprehensive approach to the UK's contribution to SDG implementation. At present, as exemplified by the White Paper, the UK's approach to the SDGs is about how activities can be mapped to the SDGs in a way that justifies existing priorities, rather than looking to the SDGs to provide strategic direction. This is one especial example of a choice that is not articulated in the White Paper. As it stands, it might well be that the UK's priorities would be no different even if the SDGs were absent. Would it be better for the UK to actively reorient its strategy towards the SDGs, giving the SDGs a role in guiding or changing UK development policy? Or, should the focus remain on how the SDGs can justify, and benefit from, the UK policy we have? The White Paper does not ask, let alone answer, these questions.

Answering these questions will become increasingly important in the run up to 2030, as it directly impacts both what the UK will want from a post-2030 development agenda. Of course, what the UK has done, or not done, about the SDGs at home and abroad in past years also matters for its legitimacy in seeking to influence the post-2030 negotiations.

We would argue that an approach which engages seriously with the SDGs as a framework for strategic direction would allow greater clarity in the UK contribution to the international efforts on sustainable development, providing greater coherence to the approach taken by those strategies. For example, SDG 17 should have more prominence in future development reviews, because it is the global context for the UK's objectives; this is clearly implied in the White Paper but should be made explicit.

In addition, the UK could identify areas that a post-2030 development framework should address. For example, there are 4 ‘we wills’ that we have not been able to align with an SDG or SDG target – all focused on the UK’s provision of humanitarian assistance. The UK’s humanitarian assistance is clearly important and valuable, and it is important for the White Paper to address this aspect of the UK’s work. The lack of a relevant SDG is perhaps something the UK could champion addressing in the negotiations of what development agenda will follow in 2030.

A 10-point evaluative framework for UK international development reviews

Our evaluation of the White Paper presented here can be drawn together into an agenda for the current review, and a wider approach to how we should evaluate the success of any future review.

Our analysis yields a 10-point framework of points that a review should address:

1. **Identify *how* the UK’s approach to international development fits into the global framework of SDG 17.** For the current review, given that UK international development clearly fits into SDG 17, this needs greater attention.
2. **Identify specific, timebound objectives that advance the overall aims of UK international development**
3. **Create a clear accountability framework to track and communicate progress towards stated commitments.** For the current review, it should address whether specific White Paper commitments dated to 2024 and 2025 have been/will be met.
4. **Address and articulate the coherence and breadth of the UK’s account of international development**
5. **Consider to what extent the UK’s approach to development is changing, and reflect on the priorities and capacities that must accompany any change of direction**
6. **Identify specific objectives that translate the guiding value of ‘leaving no one behind’ into a guide for action, for a wider range of disadvantaged groups**
7. **Consider how the ‘whole of government’ is involved in international development and the need for policy coherence in support of international development objectives**
8. **Set objectives, targets and guidelines on how an ethos of local leadership and partnership should guide UK development practice, particularly on local and national SDG priorities**
9. **Identify and justify key choices about strategic approach. Be prepared to defend these choices in SDG terminology**
10. **Reflect on how the UK should align to international development frameworks and how this shapes the UK’s position on a post 2030 framework**

This evaluative framework reflects the international SDG priorities, but it is nationally and temporally adapted – and it could be further adapted and interpreted to reflect changes in national context. The critical SDG principle that it builds on is that the SDGs are universal,

but nationally owned. Any national policy or assessment should be responsive to national context - but not *determined* by it, this being a criticism we have articulated of previous UK development reviews.

Conclusion

Without updates and accountability, the relevance of the White Paper will decrease over time. There is a growing risk that it fails in its stated purpose to show how the UK will contribute to the achievement of the SDGs right from the outset. For this relevance to be maintained in the run up to 2030, the current development review needs to be clear on what success looks like – and how this success will be determined and communicated.

Furthermore, development reviews should avoid the lack of clarity over leave no one behind. As noted in our findings, there are significant challenges with how the White Paper addressed integration of this principle into decision-making. To be clear, the principle of leave no one behind is hard; but the lack of specificity, measurability and deadlines, means that it is easier to avoid difficult decisions, and harder to establish accountability. This risks perpetuating marginalisation, and undermining the principle itself. As we set it out here, the task for the current and future reviews is vital and daunting: the UK's development policy is itself underdeveloped, and the SDGs offer an important way in which it can be tested, enhanced and framed.