

# Charity begins at home as far as international aid is concerned, says study

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Reflecting a nationalist populist turn in the UK, international development aid must now demonstrate its contribution to the 'national interest' rather than benefitting those in need in Africa.

That's according to a new study, led by the University of Portsmouth, which showed that a nationalist and populist shift in UK politics over the past decade has resulted in [development](#) policy and projects having to justify their contribution in terms of 'the national interest'. This shift has also led to a reduction of aid to Africa and the merging of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth office, which has left the UK without an international development minister.

The researchers analyzed nearly 30 key UK policy documents from 2000-2020, including government white papers, reports and evaluations, speeches from international development ministers and International Development Select Committee documents.

They found that during the 2000s development policy was focused on using aid, particularly in North and West Africa, to tackle poverty and conflict in order to provide better 'security' to poor communities in these regions. However, from 2010 the UK Government increasingly stipulated that aid must further the national interest and counter perceived risks to the national interest from, for example, instability and migration.

In the 2000s, for example, migration was framed as a challenge for fragile states, rather than as a threat to UK security. The narrative around migration changed significantly in the 2010s, particularly from 2016, reflecting the spike in 2015 of people seeking refuge in Europe and the nationalistic turn of the Brexit campaign. Migration was recast as a 'direct threat to the UK' demonstrating the shift in the approach to development and aid during this period.

Dr. Melita Lazell, Principal Lecturer in Political Economy at the University of Portsmouth, said, "This move aligned with a rising nationalism in the 2010s and dovetailed with neoliberal ideology as

market principles were expanded in the distribution of aid. The UK [private sector](#) may have reaped some benefits in the short term, but at the expense of increasing insecurity."

Countering this domestic focus, in the run up to the Brexit vote, the UK promoted itself as a 'global leader' in international development to leverage authority within international institutions and relations. Development policy became a political tool to demonstrate the UK's post-Brexit soft power vision and amplify the 'Global Britain' brand narrative.

However, the 'nationalization' of aid has now had economic and institutional consequences in the UK, which have downgraded the future UK contribution to African development; there will be less money, fewer projects and a narrower focus on the national interest, while a neoliberal development model will remain. Melita added, "It has also undermined the UK's ability to use its international development reputation to influence international norms and conventions at a time when its reach has been undercut by its exit from the EU."

The study is published in the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*.

**More information:** Melita Lazell, UK aid to Africa: 'nationalisation' and neoliberalism, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2023.2166026](#)

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