

Rapid review: The UK aid response to COVID-19

Approach summary paper

May 2021

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to be a global pandemic. Its impact around the world has been unparalleled in modern times: over three million people have lost their lives¹ and the measures taken to reduce transmission have resulted in vast social and economic disruption. The World Bank estimates that COVID-19 pushed an additional 119 to 124 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, potentially reversing years of development gains.²

During 2020, the UK aid programme was reprioritised to support the UK's international response to the pandemic and mobilise support for developing countries. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) is undertaking a rapid review of the UK's aid response to COVID-19, to assess how well the UK government has prioritised and directed its official development assistance (ODA) in response to the pandemic. This paper provides an overview of the scope and approach.

Background

The pandemic has led to a multifaceted and rapidly evolving emergency in developing countries. In some cases, healthcare infrastructure was overwhelmed. Travel restrictions and social isolation measures led to loss of livelihoods, limited access to services and caused sharp increases in domestic violence. Humanitarian supplies to existing emergencies were placed under threat, and there was extensive disruption to a wide range of development initiatives, including education and vaccinations. National economies contracted sharply, unemployment spiralled and developing countries faced sharp falls in income from tax revenues, investment, tourism and remittances, causing liquidity crises and rising debt levels. The beginning of the vaccine rollout has highlighted new challenges around ensuring equitable access in developing countries, with the world's poor at risk of being left behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred against a backdrop of considerable change in UK aid. The UK's exit from the European Union, a newly elected government, an impending Spending Review and planned Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, and the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) all contributed to uncertainty on longer-term priorities. The pandemic also had a direct impact, through its reduction of UK gross national income and therefore the aid budget.

As the scale of the pandemic became apparent, the UK government sought to demonstrate leadership in the global response. An International Ministerial Implementation Group was set up to coordinate the UK's international response.³ There were two main phases of aid reprioritisation in 2020, in May and June. By 31 August, the UK had committed a package of £797 million in central initiatives,⁴ divided across three categories: 1) providing resilience to vulnerable countries, 2) finding a vaccine, new drugs and therapeutics, and 3) supporting the economic response.⁵ There was also a major reprioritisation within DFID/FCO country portfolios, often through the redirection of existing programmes to support the COVID-19 response.

¹ *Coronavirus death toll*, Worldometer, 13 April 2021, [link](#).

² *Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021*, World Bank, January 2021, [link](#).

³ *New government structures to coordinate response to coronavirus*, UK government, 17 March 2020, [link](#).

⁴ *UK aid spending during COVID-19: management of procurement through suppliers*, ICAI, 4 December 2020, [link](#).

⁵ *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Foreign Secretary's statement on support for British people abroad*, FCO, 24 March 2020, [link](#).

Purpose and scope

This rapid review will assess how well the UK government has prioritised and redirected its aid resources in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It will explore the cross-government architecture established to manage the UK's aid response and assess the UK government's efforts to develop a coherent and strategic response across aid-spending departments. It will also consider the evidence and criteria used to inform choices about which investments and funding channels to prioritise, including how well the UK government sought to inform itself about developing countries' needs and vulnerabilities resulting from the pandemic. The review will cover the period from January 2020 to May 2021.

The review will help to inform Parliament and the public about the evidence and choices that have driven the UK government's aid response to COVID-19. It will complement three other ICAI reviews: *UK aid spending during COVID-19: management of procurement through suppliers* (published in December 2020),⁶ a review of the management of the 0.7% ODA spending target in 2020 (ongoing) and a planned in-depth review of the humanitarian aspects of the UK government's COVID-19 response. It will also complement a planned programme of work by the National Audit Office to explore the UK government's response to COVID-19. The review will provide timely insights and policy recommendations to inform the continued UK aid response to the pandemic.

Review questions

- 1. Relevance:** How credible has the UK aid response to COVID-19 been so far?
- 2. Coherence:** How coherent has the UK aid response to the COVID-19 pandemic been so far?
- 3. Efficiency:** How efficiently did the UK reallocate aid resources in response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the central and country programme levels?

Methodology

Our methodology is made up of five intersecting components:

- 1. An annotated bibliography** summarising global evidence on the impact of the pandemic on developing countries and good practices in pandemic preparedness and response, and mapping the responses of other multilateral and bilateral donors.
- 2. A strategic review** of analysis, plans and programme documents relating to the UK's aid response to COVID-19.
- 3. Key informant interviews** with the responsible UK government officials, implementing partners, civil society and academia.
- 4. Case studies** of the UK aid response to COVID-19, including three country case studies in Pakistan, Sudan and Zambia and two thematic case studies focused on health and violence against women and girls.
- 5. A sense-making workshop** with independent experts to review key aspects of the UK government's response.

Timeline

Research for this review began in March 2021, with publication expected in September 2021.

⁶ *UK aid spending during COVID-19: management of procurement through suppliers*, ICAI, 4 December 2020, [link](#).