



The DFID-FCO Merger: Long-Term Thinking and the Role of Civil Society

Oxford Research Group

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On the 16 June, the UK Government announced that it would merge the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID) and create a new department called the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. While there have been rumours that this might happen for a while, the announcement suggested the changes could happen as early as September.

In his speech announcing the move, Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised it would help the UK Government to deliver on national interests abroad. But a number of prominent experts and commentators have already expressed concern about the decision, including a rare intervention from former Prime Minister, David Cameron, opposing the merge.

ORG's own research has also identified several risks that may arise from this shift. Notably, DfID has often provided a longer-term view of conflict-affected countries than those presented by other departments, such as the FCO and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). Removing this perspective could see a greater prioritisation of short-term national interests, like value for money and seeking to gain influence, over long-term objectives of stability and peace. This may prove self-defeating, as our research has shown that a focus on short-term interests can contribute to protracted conflict abroad and increased threats to UK national interests.

National interests over peace and stability

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UK national interest seems to be at the core of the suggested merger. In a statement in the House of Commons on Tuesday, Johnson emphasised that DfID could help the UK to “project the UK abroad” and get more for taxpayers’ money if it was rolled into the FCO. However, there is a danger of the UK solely pursuing these short-term, national interests at the expense of broader efforts to build peace and stability.

Many experts interviewed by ORG have argued much of this long-term thinking happens within DfID. One expert told ORG that DfID takes “a more structural approach to national security issues”, acknowledging that issues like terrorism and migration have no quick fixes and require long-term, political solutions. [Abby Young-Powell, of Devex](#), said that a similar move in Australia to roll aid into the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade “resulted in a loss of strategic vision for the role and use of aid.” If DfID is merged with the FCO there is a real danger that this happens in the UK too.

This could have serious implications for the UK’s own national security. In the short term, it could add to discontent among civilians where the UK is engaged in military interventions, and provide groups like IS with recruitment material to re-form and pose threats again in the future. In fact, this is arguably already happening in some parts of [the Middle East and Africa](#).

In the long term, it may create the very instability and chaos in which countries like Russia (and their mercenaries) thrive and Western countries struggle to engage. As a CSIS briefing noted: “[As competitors seek to discredit, corrupt, and alienate security actors that do not accord with their interests, partner legitimacy will be an important source of resiliency.](#)” These dangers may be exacerbated if the longer-term perspective of DfID is lost.

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This speaks to research by ORG, which has highlighted that improving coherence across government does not mean departments should homogenise and lose their individuality. Each brings unique and valuable expertise, and forcing them to align could mean these skills are lost. This has been reiterated by others since the announcement yesterday. For example, Chief Executive of Oxfam, Danny Sriskandaraja, emphasised that “The Foreign Office may be excellent at diplomacy, but it has a patchy record of aid delivery and is not as transparent as DfID”

The need to work with civil society groups

Likewise, there is a risk that the UK will lose DfID’s commitment to civil society engagement, particularly in conflict affected countries. After Johnson’s announcement in Parliament many MPs asked how many civil society groups had been engaged in this decision. Unfortunately, despite many organisations expressing concern when the prospect of a merger was first mentioned at the end of last year, it does not seem these concerns were meaningfully considered. This reveals that, in spite of repeated commitments to be more receptive to civil society both in the UK and abroad, the UK Government is once again reluctant to engage with “those who offer fresh perspectives and critical feedback”. This does not augur well for the prospects of the Government consulting civil society groups during the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.

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