Why the UK must respond to crisis and conflict

Today two billion people live in countries where development is undermined by fragility, conflict, and violence. By 2030, it is projected that 46% of people living in extreme poverty will be those living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, up from 17% today. More and more people affected by conflict and crises urgently require food, water, shelter and other assistance to survive. New and ongoing conflicts force ever greater numbers of people from their homes. There is an urgent need for the UK to continue to prioritise its lifesaving work on crisis and conflict.

20 million people are currently facing starvation and famine in Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria. The UN has called this “the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations.” One person every three seconds was displaced in 2016 as a result of war and persecution, bringing the global number up to 65.6 million refugees, asylum-seekers and internally-displaced people (IDPs) at year end, compared to 59.5 million just 24 months earlier.

The conflict in Syria has now entered its seventh year, and the conflict in South Sudan has seen the fastest-growing levels of displacement. In Yemen the total number of suspected cholera cases has hit 500,000 with nearly 2000 people dying since the outbreak at the end of April. The international community needs to respond to these crises by providing immediate assistance to meet people’s needs as well as supporting long-lasting, political solutions to the drivers of conflict.
Key challenges

The key challenges to humanitarian action are outlined below. This briefing recommends that the UK government works to address these issues as part of a comprehensive response to conflicts and emergencies:

Shrinking humanitarian space

The space for humanitarian NGOs working in highly insecure environments is becoming increasingly restricted. In 2016, 101 aid workers were killed, 98 wounded and 89 kidnapped. Civilian facilities like hospitals and schools are also increasingly targeted. Humanitarian assistance must be delivered based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. These “humanitarian principles” are vital for ensuring access to those most in need, acceptance by armed actors, and the safety of aid workers. The risks to aid workers, and their ability to deliver aid, are heightened when this work is perceived to be motivated by political, economic, military or other considerations.

When governments talk about humanitarian aid being used as a tool against terrorist groups, it contributes to this negative politicised perception, so governments must avoid blurring these objectives. The use of military assets to support the delivery of humanitarian assistance also has implications for the perceptions of the independence, neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian aid, potentially undermining access and workers’ safety. It is critical that military assets are used in line with UN guidelines on the use of foreign military and civil defence assets in disaster relief.

Civic space, human rights, and inclusive peace

Globally, the space for those who defend human rights, speak out for justice, or challenge violent actors and repressive governments, is in continuous decline. The UK government and parliamentarians have an important role to play in challenging this, defending basic rights and freedoms, and upholding international norms and standards. This also means making foreign policy decisions that reinforce and do not undermine human rights.

The UK should also push for the inclusion of civil society in local, national and international peace processes, making sure that women, youth and other marginalised voices are part of the discussion. Too often, elite deals are agreed that do not take into account the needs of wider society, decreasing the prospects that agreements will be sustainable in the longer term.

Funding gaps

Ongoing and new crises left an estimated 164.2 million people in 47 countries in need of international humanitarian assistance in 2016. The amount of funding going to UN-coordinated appeals rose by 12% in 2016, still leaving a 40% global shortfall. Future humanitarian funding will need to be increased to meet growing global needs.

The ways in which funds are delivered must also change. Experience illustrates the importance of predictable, timely and flexible multi-year funding to enable partners to prepare for and respond to recurrent humanitarian crises. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) many donor governments, including the UK, made commitments to deliver multi-year humanitarian funding as part of the Grand Bargain to reform humanitarian financing, which included improved access to funding for local actors.
Civilian protection

There has been a collective failure to provide meaningful protection to civilians during conflict. Evidence from Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan, where civilians continue to suffer appalling human rights abuses, highlights the need to urgently prioritise civilian protection. This requires insistence on compliance with International Humanitarian Law (“the laws of war”), International Human Rights Law and International Refugee Law by all conflict parties and their supporters, and a greater emphasis on civilian protection in UN peacekeeping missions.

Children, older people and disability in crises and conflict

Nearly 28 million children have been forced to leave their homes because of conflict and more than half of the world’s refugees are now children. More than 245 million children are estimated to be living in conflict zones, with implications for their education and development, as well as peace and stability in the longer term. In addition to risks of death and injury, children caught up in conflict are often exposed to further exploitation and violence at unprecedented levels, including recruitment by armed groups, sexual abuse, trafficking, forced labour and child marriage.

Globally, one in eight people are over the age of 60, 15% are living with some kind of disability, and 26% of the world’s population are aged 14 or under. Children, older people and people with disabilities of all ages face significant barriers in accessing humanitarian assistance and often require special protection to ensure their safety and well-being during emergencies. For example, older people have high mortality rates from noncommunicable diseases due to interruptions in treatment, and their malnutrition risks are often poorly understood. Ensuring appropriate and accessible assistance, and consulting those affected on the design and delivery of relief, is critical to the accountability and effectiveness of assistance.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

A decrease in security due to crises leads to increased vulnerability to all forms of sexual and gender-based violence for men, women, girls, boys and sexual and gender minorities. Addressing conflict-related sexual violence has been prioritised by the international community, reflected in specific international frameworks and initiatives to address it (such as the UK’s Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative), but there is much to be done.

Effective crisis response must be informed by sound gender analysis to help ensure that responses are appropriate, needs-based and context-specific. This is crucial for ensuring that the right services are available for survivors of SGBV, or those more at risk. Working in partnership with a diverse range of local and national organisations, including women’s rights, children’s rights and LGBTI organisations, is vital to effectively preventing and responding to SGBV. The UK can support these organisations, for example, by providing accessible, long-term, flexible funding.

Women’s rights in peace and conflict

Women play multiple and varied roles in conflict, including as combatants and peacemakers. They are often marginalised from peace processes, despite evidence showing that peace agreements are more sustainable when women are included. Funding to support women’s rights in conflict is extremely limited and local women’s rights organisations, despite the front-line support they provide, receive little support.

The UK has made numerous commitments to supporting women’s participation as part of a gender-sensitive approach to responding to conflict and crisis. It is crucial that the UK government is encouraged to deliver on these commitments, including supporting women’s rights organisations and pushing for women’s inclusion in peace processes.
Urban humanitarian response

Rapid global urbanisation poses major challenges for humanitarian response, with increasing numbers of people displaced by conflict heading for cities, towns and villages rather than traditional camps. DFID has been a global leader in addressing this issue. Dealing with more humanitarian crises in cities and responding effectively to the needs of urban residents during crises requires urgent attention, commitment and funding.

Conflict sensitivity

Working in fragile states is complex – external interventions, whether humanitarian, development or wider engagement (i.e. diplomacy, defence or the private sector), will always have an impact on conflict dynamics. Part of effective support for fragile and conflict-affected states is making sure that it is “conflict sensitive”, which includes being informed by a good understanding of the context to “do no harm”, and where possible, promote peace. The UK government should be encouraged to strengthen its promotion of conflict sensitivity, making sure that it is well-informed by a strong conflict analysis, both in its own work and that of its implementing partners.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding

The UK government has long recognised the value of a preventative approach to addressing conflict, whether through crisis diplomacy when tensions are high, or investing in programming to address the issues that are at the root of conflict. The UK government should continue to support programmes, diplomatic work or other activities that seek to address the issues that cause or drive conflict, informed by a solid understanding of the context and needs of local people. This also means continuing to invest in local peacebuilding activities, including tapping into the potential of community leaders, women’s and youth groups, to provide the space for reconciliation and prevent further escalations of violence.

The role of the UK

The UK has committed to spending 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on aid to help alleviate global poverty, and to focus 50% of DFID’s budget in fragile states and regions. The government has also committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include a specific set of goals and targets related to building peaceful, just and inclusive societies (set out in Goal 16).

The UK also endorsed the “Grand Bargain” to improve humanitarian financing at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, and can play a leadership role in its implementation. In 2017 – 2018, consultations and negotiations will take place to agree on a Global Compact on refugees and a Global Compact on safe, orderly and regular migration. This is an important opportunity for the UK to work towards global responsibility sharing and to ensure better protection for refugees and migrants.

Following the 2017 general election, joint ministerial posts were established between DFID and the Foreign Office, presenting the opportunity to increase the coherence of UK policy towards particular conflicts and crises. However, more clarification is needed on how these posts will work strategically to improve the UK’s response in these challenging contexts, and avoid politicising aid in the pursuit of objectives other than the alleviation of poverty and suffering. The UK has also established several cross-government funds, including the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), overseen by the National Security Council, which is intended to address conflict and promote stability; it was subject to a recent parliamentary inquiry and is undergoing a rapid review. The National Security Council produces strategies for all of its focus countries which guide the work of the CSSF and other government funds; their objectives, concerningly, are not currently shared with implementing partners or parliament.
Key recommendations

In response to the challenges detailed above, we urge the UK government to:

- **Promote respect for humanitarian principles**
  The UK must ensure continued support for principled, impartial and independent humanitarian response. This means taking precautions not to blur the lines between the UK’s political and military objectives, and ensure its commitment and responsibility to impartially meet humanitarian needs. Through diplomatic channels and political pressure, the UK government must continue to push for humanitarian access to ensure assistance reaches those who need it.

- **Create an enabling environment for working in complex contexts**
  The UK should support those who are willing to push for change and stand up for human rights and basic freedoms. Recognising that the UK has legitimate security concerns, they must also work to ensure that international NGOs working for peace and responding to crisis are able to work in complex environments. Where appropriate they must also be in contact with armed groups, without fear of falling foul of UK anti-terror legislation.

- **Adequately fund humanitarian response**
  The UK Government must maintain its proud tradition of humanitarian funding, and work to increase its flexibility and responsiveness. The fast and generous contributions to address food insecurity and famine in Somalia, South Sudan, Yemen and the Lake Chad Basin are examples of the leadership role the UK must take. In addition, continued financing must be found to assist those displaced by conflict, and support smaller local organisations to respond.

- **Promote civilian protection**
  The UK government should use its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to take a lead in demanding full compliance with international law by all parties to conflict, and also ensure that UN peacekeeping missions are given strong mandates to protect civilians and receive adequate funding and resources.
• Support inclusive peace and responses to crisis and conflict
The UK government should champion the meaningful consultation and participation of diverse voices, including women, young people and other marginalised groups, in national and international peace processes, and in the design of crisis response. Continue to mainstream gender, including the prevention of sexual violence, in UK aid, foreign and development policy. Provide support for women’s rights organisations as part of the UK’s commitments on women, peace and security.

• Prioritise conflict sensitivity
The UK must ensure that aid, and other interventions, are delivered in a way that takes into account conflict dynamics, so that interventions increase the prospects for peace and at minimum ‘do no harm’. This should be informed by regular context analysis.

• Invest in conflict prevention
UK policy on fragile states should include commitments to prevent conflict, be joined-up across Whitehall, and based on a shared vision for sustainable peace. The two new joint ministerial posts shared between FCO and DFID should be used as an opportunity to articulate a clear and comprehensive approach to peace and stability, including through the work of the CSSF.

• Implement the SDGs
The UK should lead on implementing the commitments to peace in the Sustainable Development Goals, with an emphasis on Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies and the goals that intersect with it (such as Goal 5 on gender).

• Protect the pro-poor focus of development assistance
The UK government must ensure that cross-government strategies and plans are transparent and accountable to parliament, and that aid priorities are not set by narrow national security objectives.

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