



Narrative values: UK engagement with overseas "aid"

September 2026

Introduction

Following the cuts to UK aid funding in February 2025, and the shift in the political landscape over the last year, the need to engage the British public in the value and importance of overseas aid is more urgent than ever. This report provides a baseline set of knowledge from which to develop a response to this pressing issue.

This report includes:

1. **Scoping:** A systematized report detailing key findings from existing research about the British public's engagement with narratives about overseas aid from the last 18 months.
2. **Analysis:** Insights and suggested pathways informed by the findings to help guide a narrative response.

A note on terminology.

This report uses the term "aid" throughout because this is the word that has been commonly used by most research and insights data we have looked at. We believe that the word "aid" is outdated, colonial and inaccurate and no longer use it our communications, and will not be featuring it as a term in any of the narrative campaigning or public facing work that will follow this report.

And on timings.

This report was compiled in mid-2026, ahead of Andy Burnham's appointment as Prime Minister and Kirsty McNeill's appointment as Minister for International Development & Africa in July 2026. References to government narrative therefore reflect the previous administration's framing rather than that of the current one. However, public attitudes shift slowly, and given that the new administration has had limited time to make any meaningful impact in this area so far, the findings and their implications remain valid.

The project was led by Maryam Mohsin, Head of Media, Communications and Events at Bond, and funded by the Gates Foundation. Research and insights were developed and delivered by Jess Crombie, narratives ethics researcher at London School of Economic and the University of the Arts London, and Founder and Lead Consultant at Narrative, Ethics and Story Strategy, with research supported by Jiaqi Zheng, Research Assistant. The insights and suggested pathways suggested are from the analysis by Jess Crombie and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Gates Foundation.

Scoping research: key findings

The British public's attitudes to UK government overseas "aid" spending were the main area analysed within the data set. This reflects the alarming policy context in which the work was commissioned — namely, the cuts to the UK's official development assistance (ODA) budget in February 2025 — and the need to understand and respond to the public narrative around those cuts.

The Development Engagement Lab (DEL) dashboard data, British Foreign Policy Group (BFPG) surveys and other grey literature, which form the backbone of this synthesis, are themselves oriented toward government spending and policy which is why this dimension is most thoroughly evidenced in the full scoping report.

The research also draws on data about individual charitable giving and public engagement with development charities, including from the Charity Pulse 2026 and DEL behavioural engagement indicators, to provide a

fuller picture of how the British public relates to overseas aid more broadly.

These two modes of engagement — government spending and personal giving — are treated as complementary rather than competing lenses. Together, they paint a picture of a public that may not draw a distinction between these two areas, and who retain moral concern about global poverty but whose active engagement, whether through political support or personal donation, is under pressure.

Within these two areas, 10 key findings emerged:

Public support: scale and limits

1. Public support is stable but shallow.

Around 45% of the British public support maintaining or increasing the aid budget. However, aid ranks low among spending priorities and is politically vulnerable when domestic pressures rise (Bond, 2025; BFPG, 2025).

2. Engagement is declining.

The proportion of the public donating to development charities fell from around 20% in early 2024 to 14–15% in 2025, and 38% of the population is now classified as "totally disengaged" from global poverty issues (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

Who supports aid and why

3. Support is divided by age and politics.

Around 68% of people aged 18–24 express support for aid, compared with 36–40% of those aged 55+ (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). Among Labour/Liberal Democrat voters, 60–64% are supportive, compared with just 10–12% of Reform UK voters (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025).

4. Specific programmes outperform abstract aid.

Support rises significantly when aid is

tied to tangible causes, such as education, vaccines, clean water and women's and girls' rights. These issues attract broad cross party backing, even among aid sceptics. For example, 55% of the public support using UK aid to fund education in developing countries, rising to 74% among 18–24-year-olds (Send My Friend to School, 2025; Adam Smith, 2025; More in Common, 2025).

Barriers to support

5. Effectiveness scepticism is the core problem.

Only 18% of people believe UK aid is effective, and trust in development NGOs sits at around 29–30%. This suggests people can care about global poverty while doubting that aid actually works (Bond, 2025; Adam Smith, 2025; DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

6. Misperceptions about spending fuel opposition.

The public, especially right-leaning voters, consistently overestimate how much of the national budget goes to aid, feeding the perception that the UK spends "too much" (YouGov, 2025).

- 7. The “distance problem” is persistent.** Only 43–47% of the public believe events in developing countries affect people in the UK, making development feel geographically and personally irrelevant (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025).

Messaging and framing

- 8. Language and framing are decisive.** Framing aid as “international development” or “humanitarian relief” builds more support than “charity”. Negative framings, like presenting the UK as a “cashpoint in the sky”, actively undermine public trust (Bond, 2025; ICAI, 2024).
- 9. Incoherent messaging erodes credibility.** When aid is simultaneously justified through poverty reduction, migration control, trade promotion and national interest, its purpose becomes muddled and public trust weakens (Lazel and Petrikova, 2025; ICAI, 2024).

Trust and institutions

- 10. NGOs face a trust crisis — yet have a clear opportunity to address this.** In the UK trust in the institutions of public life (Business, Government, NGOs, Media) sits near the bottom of a global list and firmly within the <distrust> category (Edelman, 2026). And while, globally, 72% of people think NGOs should act as “trust brokers” between divided groups, the opportunity for building back trust that has been suggested by those taking part in this survey themselves, only 44% think they are currently doing this well (Edelman, 2026). Alongside this, trust in NGOs has seen the slowest decline in a field of falling trust, so while this picture is certainly not positive, the fact that NGOs are seen as potential active agents of hope shows a possible route towards changing this picture.

Please see the full scoping report for the data synthesis that led to these findings.



Analysis

The key findings from this scoping exercise are not new revelations about the British public. However, gathering and reviewing them in this way does allow us to see the key challenges and opportunities emerging, which can help us to reframe the narrative about UK aid.

These challenges and opportunities can be summarised as arising in the areas of:

Trust

Values

Government
alignment

Narrative
focus

Trust: the biggest barrier and best opportunity

Trust emerges as the biggest overall theme in this data set. It plays a fundamental part in some of the core barriers to UK public support for international aid – namely, declining trust in its effectiveness, how it is funded and where the money actually goes. British people's trust in aid has been falling for some time, and this data set confirms this continuing trend. Initially, this appears to be a bleak picture – and it must be acknowledged that it is far from a positive one¹ – but the evidence does show a clear way of building trust.

Firstly, the sector is building on a foundation of still comparatively high trust levels. Edelman analysed public trust in four areas: business, government, the media and NGOs. The only area to grow in public trust in the UK is business, and while trust has fallen in NGOs, it has been a slower decline compared with government or the media. Out of the four public institutions, NGOs are the second most trusted, at a trust-level that is only 1% below business.²

Incidentally, a 2025 white paper by Focaldata³ (not included in the scoping report but of relevance here) found that both overseas aid and climate action still sit on a bedrock of goodwill, with broad public support in principle. However, support is eroding in practice due to converging factors, including zero-sum thinking, a growing distrust of elites and governments, political polarisation and the increased covariance of divisive political issues. Secondly, the decline in trust is identified as being due to the narrative focus which those communicating

about overseas aid (which in this analysis includes NGOs and the FCD0) have chosen to prioritise. These narratives include poverty reduction, migration control, trade promotion and national interest, and are fundamentally misaligned with the interests of British people who care simultaneously about domestic issues (e.g., cost of living) and international issues that relate to needs that they themselves have (e.g., water, shelter, education, women's rights).

This is not new information. But it may not have been acknowledged or framed in this way loudly enough. When we view campaigns such as Veterans Can's recent [Aid is Britain's First Line of Defence](#) through the lens provided by this data set, we see we see the government and NGOs use different narratives about aid than those the British public prefer and which they are more likely to engage with.

It is in closing this gap that the opportunity to build trust lies.

¹ According to the Edelman Trust Barometer's 2026 report, globally a notable shift has occurred: for the first time, business is now viewed as more ethical than NGOs, with business's ethics score rising four points to 20 while NGO sell two points to 17. This is a significant development worth flagging —NGOs have historically held a moral authority advantage over business, and that appears to be eroding.

² Edelman Trust Barometer's 2026 trust scores - Business (51%), NGOs (50%), Media (39%), and Government (36%).

³ Focaldata's report - 'Foundations at Risk: Why support for philanthropic ventures like overseas aid and climate action is crumbling across the West – and how to fix it'.

Focaldata's⁴ message testing was able to identify a clear path to rebuilding support for aid: by refocusing on the basics — food and clean water, disaster relief and disease treatment — rather than higher-level needs or academic debates about aid itself. This directly echoes what our scoping research found: that communicating about specific, relatable programmes outperforms abstract discussions about aid across all demographics.

There are, of course, multiple ways to ensure that narratives about real-world, needs-based support are prioritised. However, this is not a proposal to return to older ways of communicating which embed saviouristic narratives about “us” and “them” or simplify the complexity of aid. But it is a recommendation to enable communications that align with the documented interests and values of the British public – by demonstrating tangibly what it is

their support enables.

Trust may be our biggest barrier right now, but it is also the area with the clearest opportunity for change. NGOs remain more trusted than the government and the media in the UK. There is also a clear, evidence-based messaging strategy available to rebuild public trust, and therefore support.

Narrative Alignment and the values gap.

We know from this data set that the British public value fairness. Even in times of straitened living conditions in the UK across many demographics, there is still support for aid that provides more equitable standards of living for people in other countries.

The dominant values that the scoping report uncovered were:

Moral concern and fairness. Around half of the public express concern about poverty in poorer countries, suggesting a persistent moral intuition that suffering matters and that something should be done about it. This sits alongside a strong sense of fairness — people want to know that aid actually reaches those who need it, and scepticism rises sharply when they feel donor interests are being served over recipients’ needs.

Effectiveness and accountability. The public consistently want to know that their money works. The very low figure of 18% believing that aid is effective cannot be taken as evidence that people do not care. Rather, it indicates that people care but remain unconvinced that aid is delivering effectively. There is a strong

implied value around not wasting resources, which connects to a broader sense of civic responsibility about public spending.

Tangible, practical help. The programmes that attract the strongest support — clean water, vaccines, education, food, disaster relief — reflect a values preference for immediate, concrete, visible help over abstract development theory. People respond to human needs they can picture. As before, aligning with this values this is about impact and evidence rather than about saviouristic narratives.

Protecting “the vulnerable”. Programmes focused on those who are perceived to be vulnerable – women and girls, children and the poorest countries attract the broadest cross-party support. Some of this sends up red flags for those of us who have been working to change narratives for decades to end the

⁴ Focaldata's report - [‘Foundations at Risk: Why support for philanthropic ventures like overseas aid and climate action is crumbling across the West – and how to fix it’](#).

saviouristic stories of giving or teaching, rather than partnering and knowledge sharing. But what it really boils down to is that people want to understand how their money makes a difference. There is a clear values thread around supporting people perceived by the public to face particular risks or barriers, especially children.

Reciprocity and mutual benefit when provided with evidence of the benefits. Support rises when aid is framed as good for Britain as well as for recipients. But it needs to be framed alongside evidence of that mutual benefit. This is not purely self-interest — it reflects a values preference for relationships of mutual respect and partnership over charity or paternalism (which the FCDO framing⁵ does try to tap into) and which the new Minister for International Development Kirsty McNeill has spoken publicly about wishing to focus on during her term in this role

Pride and international standing. Implicitly, people respond positively to the idea of Britain

playing a responsible role in the world. The "cashpoint in the sky" framing shared by Boris Johnson in 2020 during his speech announcing the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is rejected; not just because it is negative, but because it conflicts with a values sense of Britain as a capable, respected global actor.

What is notably absent from the evidence is any strong values thread around global interdependence or shared responsibility — the framing that policymakers favour. The public moral intuition is closer to "help people who are suffering" than "we are all connected". This is a significant gap between institutional values and public values. However, the reason this value gap exists is not because aid spending is failing to make a real difference to people's lives. It is because we are not identifying and transparently communicating where aid money has gone or will go and what impact it has had.

Transparency is revealed in either being involved in taking action, or in communicating that action. As the majority of the UK public cannot see or experience this themselves, they need to have this action clearly communicated to them so that they can see and believe what is happening.

This gap is therefore a narrative problem.

This narrative situation has become more acute recently due to the "Gaza effect" – a term now **used** to capture the way that reporting from inside Gaza by people living through the genocide rather than by external journalists has reshaped the public's expectations of what authentic, immediate storytelling can be. Off the back of a decade of user generated storytelling, by people sharing their lived experiences in real time to the world, came reporting from Gaza. While too many politicians downplayed or even denied what was happening, those with any interest in this conflict (which was the majority of the UK population; **polling from 2024** found

that 70% of the British public were in support of an immediate ceasefire) were able to switch on any social media platform and find evidence – in the form of images, videos and testimony – of how awful things really were.

They did not have to wait for information to be mediated by news media, governments or NGOs, they were able to seek out and find their own information. And because they had found it themselves, they trusted it more (there is plenty of evidence linking action to belief – see Kris de Meyer's **Action-Belief triangle**).

Radical transparency is what is needed now, in order to ensure that what is going well is revealed alongside what is not going so well.

⁵ The framing described is "good for Britain, good for the planet and good for the people of the world" which was communicated in the 2023 report 'Why is International Development so Important Now?'

See Kirsty McNeill's inaugural speech, hosted by the New Economics Foundation, on the 14 September 2026 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-international-development-and-africa-speech-at-the-new-economics-foundation>

The UK public are no longer satisfied with passively absorbing broadcast facts and data or even human stories, they are capable and

equipped to find out their own information and are more likely to trust it if they do.

Our role as a sector is not to abstractly reassure that everything is going to be ok or that their money is being well spent. Our role is to expose the process – in detail, with honesty, and include wrong turns as well as right.

We can learn about how to do this from those looking at how to counter public perceptions of AI-driven mis- and disinformation by “exposing the process”. This is the theory that if you expose the steps and actions taken to deliver any outcome, you help to build trust that it was a real process. The perceived gap that

we see right now in values is false; created by the narratives that we share rather than the actual values that are held. By telling different stories in a more transparent way we have an opportunity to demonstrate our shared worldviews.

Government vs public alignment: the “non” in NGO

A knock-on effect of the narrative alignment gap between the public's preferred narrative (“help people who are suffering”) and the government's preferred narrative (“we are all connected”) without taking the actions outlined above, is that when the NGO sector aligns too closely with government framing, our claim of being non-governmental is undermined. When this undermining happens in an environment where trust in the institution of government is falling faster than any other, this alignment links us to the least trustworthy of all the public institutions.

This data also shows that those who work in aid strategy are more likely to reproduce and share narratives that align with the UK Government's framing. However, these strategists (in which I include myself) are, due to our proximity and immersion in this topic, not broadly representative of the UK public, and while they have more power and influence than your average voter or donor, we must be cautious of following this as a truth for all.

We know that the relationship between UK-based NGOs and the government is complex and that as a sector we rely on state funding, but the balance between government narrative alignment and British public narrative alignment is currently leaning too far towards the former and contributing to falling trust in the latter. Ultimately, this situation undermines our objectives and could be remedied with NGOs being prepared to communicate more boldly about their values and aims, even though these are not aligned with the UK government.

Storytelling and audience prioritisation: 0.???% and the right-of-centre

Our alignment to the government's narrative focus over the public's leads us down two other strategic directions which are failing to build public trust and support for aid.

Firstly, we are using up valuable attention currency on explaining percentages of aid spending. The evidence suggests that using abstract percentages to correct misperceptions of how much the UK spends on aid is a dead end. This is because most people have no real sense of the total government budget, so figures like 0.7% or 0.3% are effectively meaningless to them.

Secondly, we may be looking in the wrong demographic direction when it comes to who we want to target. The data shows that left-leaning and younger demographics are already the most in favour of overseas aid: 60-64% of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters are supportive, as are 68% of 18-24-year-olds. We have surmised that these groups do not need convincing in the same way as other groups, and so the challenge of rebuilding public support after the aid cuts has naturally oriented communications towards harder-to-reach, more sceptical audiences, such as older voters, right-leaning demographics and those who prioritise

national interest. There is some evidence of framing that reinforces this approach. National-interest arguments linking aid to security, migration control and economic opportunity can broaden support among more sceptical audiences, and the most effective messaging combines moral and national-interest framings.

However while this shift in communications strategy is not about deliberately deprioritising heartland supporters, our current adoption of government-aligned national-interest language, when taken alongside the research's other findings, suggests we are alienating the people whose moral intuition aligns most naturally with our mission as a sector. This is because the data shows it is unsafe to assume that the centre-left, younger and urban heartland will automatically stay supportive. Concern about development is falling and donations are down. Even among more sympathetic groups, aid sits low in their mental list of priorities (as UCL's DEL describes, their "engagement battery" is low).

Rather than focusing energy on shifting more sceptical audiences, the priority should be to bring this potential base much closer in, with narrative and storytelling that clearly aligns with their values, demonstrates a strong sense of right and wrong and shows that the sector cares about the same things they do, in concrete and emotionally resonant ways.

Table 1. The range of narratives on aid currently being shared in the UK

	Preferred language	Story focus	Narrative
UK government	Mutual interest Technical	Data driven, larger scale	Aid is: • a partnership. • beneficial to us by helping defend this country. • an inconsistent message, simultaneously important and something that we cannot afford to do
UK NGOs	A mix of the above and the below, leaning more towards emotional and values driven.		
UK public	Emotional Values driven	Human centred, smaller scale	Aid is: • tangible • necessary • a moral responsibility • expensive • taking away from the UK • needed far away.

Recommendations

Based on this analysis, we have created a series of recommended tactics. We have included examples to bring each tactic to life, provided not because we think they are exactly what NGOs should be doing, rather they help to illustrate how NGOs might approach each of these areas.

There are five tactics grouped under two key areas: building trust and communicating values. We will need a concerted and coordinated effort across our sector for any of these approaches to work. Not everyone will communicate in

the same tone of voice, on the same channels or using the same media, but we do need to coordinate what we are saying. A clear set of messages that everyone communicates together is critical.

Figure 1. Word cloud, based on evidence-based key narrative tactics which are most likely to engage the British public on aid



Tactic 1: Prove that NGOs are trustworthy

This is often described by the sector as “demonstrating impact” – but what we actually need to do is show that we can be trusted. This tactic is both short and long term. We need to tell stories that prove the positive impacts of aid spending to help nudge the current dial, and we need to tell these stories regularly and consistently to build up longer-term trust. This is not a quick fix, but it is the foundational bedrock of engagement.

Suggested actions

1a) Prove that aid is beneficial to the UK public, or don't make that claim

The report shows a persistent “distance problem”: only around 43–47% of the British public believe that what happens in developing countries affects people in the UK. The current strategy often responds by asserting that “aid benefits all of us” through security, economic opportunity or climate stability. However, the same polling finds that people are unconvinced by some of these claims. The majority do not believe aid significantly reduces irregular migration or materially improves UK security outcomes, and development issues consistently trail domestic concerns like the economy

and immigration. Given this context, simply repeating that aid “benefits everyone” without proof risks sounding like empty rhetoric.

To have a chance of influencing the British public to engage with the “aid benefits everyone” narrative we should either give concrete examples that show how aid has positively affected people in the UK – for example, by linking specific programmes to health security, lower prices, job creation or improved climate impacts in named UK places – or avoid making this claim at all.

1b) Hand narrative control over to those with lived experience

Our audiences are used to hearing directly from people living through whatever the story is about; that is how they see stories every day on their social media feeds and on YouTube. We do share stories from people with lived experience, but these stories tend to be tightly mediated by the producing NGO or framed in the NGO's voice.

This suggested action is not only about producing stories that put people experiencing a situation front and centre, with the voice of the NGO a quiet or even silent partner, it is also

about handing control of story production to people who are living that experience. Examples of this include stories from people such as [Bisan](#) in Gaza (I'm Still Alive on AJ+) who report from humanitarian crises, and [fundraising materials](#) created using methodologies like [Contributor Centred Storytelling](#).

This will mean storytelling that is not always <on brand> or that does not deliver multiple carefully worded policy messages, but what it will be is authentic, believable and transparent.

Releasing our grip on narrative control would help to share stories that feel more authentic to audiences for whom that style of storytelling is more standard than anything else.

1c) Keep stories real

Tangibility (what the UK public find engaging and believable) is the biggest driver in whether or not British people will support overseas aid. Telling tangible stories does not have to translate into traditional, paint-by-numbers, 'need/solution' storytelling. Such stories can be humorous and poke fun at traditional stereotypes, like Tearfund's [We Built This Town](#). Or they can be creative, like [Save the](#)

[Children's collab](#) with 10 children from Gaza and photographer Misan Harriman. But they have to show real people being affected by aid in a real, tangible way.

Mutual aid benefits at a global economic scale are important for policymakers, but for the wider public, it's the human impact that touches and engages the most.

Tactic 2: Demonstrate our shared values with our "heartland" audience

As we have seen from the scoping research and the analysis in this report, we have a narrative values gap. The two narrative positions about aid are both true - people are in need and aid does benefit us all. However, the current stories being told tend to support the mutual benefit framing, rather than showing that both truths are separate parts of the same whole.

The data shows that the majority of the UK public prefer a value-driven narrative rather than a data-driven one, and the stories we are telling do not demonstrate that we share values with our heartland supporters.

Suggested actions

2a) Be bold in communicating what we believe in

The people who are communicating values best today are those who are not afraid to be bold, to talk to those who share their values and who do not worry too much about those who oppose those values. We see this in politicians like Mark Carney, whose Davos speech went viral after he dared to name Trump's tactics as neocolonialism, Zohran Mamdani, who nailed his values to his campaign and provided a safe space for all those New Yorkers who are despairing at Trump's second term, and even Nigel Farage, who provides a political community for those whose values fall to the

further right. What these politicians share is a willingness to state clearly what they believe in and what they don't. It is by communicating these values authentically and clearly that they persuade those who share them to align with their cause.

Our mandate, even our duty, is to try and engage as many of the British public as we can. But by trying to engage everyone we may be providing a space which does not align with anyone's values closely enough.

By being less "vanilla", we might turn off some of those who currently feel hostile or prejudicial towards us and the people we seek to support. But we are more likely to move closer to those who share our values and believe in our actions.

2b) Become hope brokers in a time of hope deficit

The Edelman report frames NGOs as having both an obligation and an opportunity to act as “trust brokers”. Globally, 72% say NGOs are obligated to help bridge divides and facilitate trust-building between groups who distrust each other, but only 44% think NGOs are currently doing this well, which leaves a large expectation–performance gap (Edelman, 2026).

There is an opportunity for NGOs to step into the hope deficit that exists and provide a space for people to take actions that help them feel hopeful. Examples exist, like [A Million Acts of Hope](#), but there is room for a joined up, more mainstream approach, not only in terms of

2c) Prioritise listening over talking.

An idea that is designed to demonstrate values and build trust is the “campaign as conversation”; to move away from a traditional one-way broadcast model in which the sector simply tells people what to think or do. Instead, the campaign should listen as much as it speaks, creating opportunities for people to share their experiences, concerns and perspectives and allowing these to inform how the campaign develops.

This means communicating in accessible, human language rather than sector jargon; starting from the values, experiences and existing understanding of the people we want to engage; and testing and adapting our approach based on evidence and what we hear. Crucially we need to be influenced by our audiences as much as we are attempting to influence them. It should help people see how international issues connect to their own lives and values, without requiring them to understand the sector or adopt all of its language.

The aim is to build trust and a genuine, ongoing relationship with the audience, creating routes for people to participate, contribute and ultimately take action through coalition partners and shared campaign moments.

action but also in terms of narrative.

A good example of this is the British Red Cross’ [Bridging Divides](#) initiative. This project is designed to unite people who feel divided to find out how they can make a difference together. It is at once an encouragement for better communication even with those with whom we do not agree, a space to find out how you can take action and a reminder to audiences that the British Red Cross is part of the wider Red Cross family in which conflict negotiation is a core role. It is also a way for the British Red Cross to prove its usefulness in a time when many are feeling hopeless.

The most well known example of this type of campaign is Zohran Mamdani’s mayoral campaign – ‘[The Mayor is Listening](#)’. Mayor Mamdani launched an initiative which focused on genuinely listening to New Yorkers, hearing their personal stories, their visions for the city, their concerns and their needs. This was designed to build trust and connection, and to present the new idea of a ‘radically available’ approach to governing. The types of tangible approaches he organised included a [12 hour long conversational event](#) as well as more targeted doorstep conversations.

This approach is becoming more common within the NGO sector. A good example is CARE International UK and the [Protect Progress coalition](#). This campaign was spearheaded by CARE International UK earlier this year, along with 20 other organisations in coalition, and called for the government to protect progress on gender equality, to stop the further roll back of rights and protections. While not every element of the campaign was intended to be conversational, there were [some good examples of social media content and actions](#) which invited conversation and collaboration from their audience.

Appendix 1: Scoping Report

Objective

Using existing grey literature, synthesise the existing knowledge to better understand the British public's attitudes to overseas aid.

Research questions

1. How supportive is the British public of the UK giving overseas aid, and how does this support vary across social groups, aid types and locations of aid?
2. What is understood as the "purpose" of overseas aid? UK aid vs charitable giving. What should our role be in international aid scenarios? Partner? Expert support? Lead?
3. What benefits and harms do people associate with UK overseas aid and NGOs?
4. How does language affect support? For example, when aid is framed as "overseas aid", "international development", "humanitarian relief" or "global poverty reduction"?
5. What are the motivators for British public support of overseas aid?

Summary of findings

Overall, public support for UK overseas aid is stable but limited, and highly conditional. Around 45% of the public support maintaining or increasing the aid budget, which is broadly consistent with attitudes during the 0.7% of GNI era, but aid ranks low among spending priorities and is politically vulnerable when domestic pressures rise. Confidence is weakened by scepticism about effectiveness: only about 18% of people think UK aid is effective, and trust in development NGOs is low, making it possible for people to care about global poverty while doubting that aid "works". People consistently express moral concern about global poverty — around half say they are concerned about poverty in poorer countries, and around half think NGOs and international institutions can make a difference — but this sits alongside awareness of potential harms. Critics highlight risks such as inflating local prices, weakening local institutions, policy incoherence with trade or arms exports, and aid serving donor interests more than recipient interests, all of which feed into doubts about fairness and effectiveness.

Support is unevenly distributed: younger adults, higher socio-economic groups and Labour/Green/Liberal Democrat voters are much more supportive than older adults, lower socio-economic groups and Conservative/Reform voters, and backing is stronger in more globally connected metropolitan areas. Misperceptions about cost are widespread, especially among right-leaning voters who overestimate the share of public spending going to aid. Only around 43–47% of the public believe events in developing countries affect

people in the UK, creating a persistent "distance problem".

Support rises significantly when aid is tied to specific, easily understood and relatable purposes rather than presented in the abstract. Programmes focused on women and girls, education, vaccines, health, clean water and humanitarian assistance attract broad, cross-party backing and are seen as relatively uncontroversial. For example, the majority of the British public support using UK aid for education overseas, with particularly high

support among young adults and Labour voters. More than half support increasing aid to Gaza where suffering is visible, especially younger respondents.

The report shows a gap between policy framings of aid and public understanding. Officially, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) now frames aid as an instrument for “ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change”, rooted in interdependence, partnership and mutual respect, and increasingly linked to climate finance, treaty commitments and diplomatic influence. Official Development Assistance (ODA) is positioned as distinct from charity, with an emphasis on partnerships and UK expertise, yet the public tend to see development more narrowly as distant humanitarian assistance and charitable support for people “in need”. Development issues rank well below domestic concerns such as the economy, immigration and war/conflict. Concern about basic needs in developing countries has fallen to its lowest recorded level in the available Development Engagement Lab (DEL) data. This indicates that, while people recognise poverty as a moral problem, they do not generally see development as central to UK security or prosperity.

Language and framing are shown to be key determinants of support. Government

communications have moved away from pure “charity” language towards “international development”, “shared global responsibility” and interdependence, stressing that development is “good for Britain, good for the planet, and good for the people of our world”, and linking aid to managing migration and climate risk and increasing economic opportunity, all of which is good. Negative frames, such as presenting the UK as a “cashpoint in the sky” or focusing on “accounting tricks” and “administrative adjustments”, can feed perceptions of waste, paternalism and lack of transparency. However, mixed and often incoherent messaging, where aid is simultaneously justified in terms of poverty reduction, national interest, trade promotion and migration control, can blur the purpose of aid and weaken both policy coherence and public trust, especially when rhetoric is not matched by either funding allocations or evidence of impact.

Taken together, the evidence depicts a British public that retains a strong moral intuition in favour of helping people in poorer countries, but whose support for overseas aid is constrained by low relevance, low trust, doubts about effectiveness and fairness and a sense that development is distant from everyday UK concerns.

Detailed results against research questions

Q1. How supportive is the British public of the UK giving overseas aid, and how does this support vary across social groups, aid types and locations of aid?

Overall, the literature suggests that British public support for overseas aid is stable but limited, and highly conditional.

Around 45% of the public support maintaining or increasing the aid budget, a level broadly consistent with attitudes during the period when the UK spent 0.7% of GNI on aid (Bond, 2025). However, support is relatively shallow because aid ranks low among government spending priorities, particularly compared with domestic issues, making it politically vulnerable during periods of fiscal pressure (Bond, 2025; BFPG, 2025). Public confidence is also weakened by scepticism about effectiveness. Only 18% of respondents believe UK aid is effective, revealing a significant credibility challenge for

policymakers (Bond, 2025; Adam Smith, 2025).

Variation across social and political groups

Support varies substantially across age, socio-economic status, political identity and geography. Younger people are consistently more supportive of aid spending and more likely to favour restoring the UK aid budget, while older voters are more likely to support reductions (BFPG, 2024; BFPG, 2025). DEL dashboard data reinforces this pattern: over 60% of 18-24-year-olds are supportive of aid, reaching 68% in January 2025, compared with 36-40% of those aged 55+ (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). Middle-aged groups show greater volatility: in early 2024, 54% of 45-54-year-olds

were supportive of aid, which fell to around 39–40% in 2025.

Both higher socio-economic groups and Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat voters tend to be more supportive of overseas aid. Research on UK foreign policy attitudes also suggests that support tends to be stronger in more globally connected metropolitan areas, such as London. In contrast, Conservative and Reform UK voters show higher levels of scepticism (BFPG, 2024; BFPG, 2025). These differences reflect broader ideological divides over whether foreign policy should prioritise humanitarian values or national interests. DEL data reflects similar partisan divides: around 60–64% of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters are supportive of overseas aid, compared with around 29–30% of Conservative voters and around 10–12% of Reform UK voters (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). Socio-economic differences are also evident: support among higher socio-economic groups (ABC1) is typically around 49–51%, compared with around 36–40% among lower socio-economic groups (C2DE) (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025).

Support does not vary dramatically across gender. Men are more likely to prioritise economic growth and prosperity (43% vs 36% of women) and women are more likely to prioritise human rights and humanitarian concerns (23% vs 16% of men) (BFPG, 2024; DEL GB Dashboard, 2025) but these variances are small.

Public attitudes are also influenced by misconceptions about aid spending. Surveys show that the UK public consistently overestimate the share of the national budget devoted to aid, with Conservative and Reform UK voters particularly likely to rank aid as a major spending category despite its relatively small proportion of overall expenditure (YouGov, 2025). These misperceptions contribute to the perception that the UK spends “too much” on aid. In parallel, DEL tracking shows that overall support for maintaining or increasing the UK aid budget has fallen from 52% in January 2024 to around 45% throughout 2025, suggesting that perceptions about spending levels may influence attitudes toward aid policy (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

Variation across aid types

Support is much stronger for specific, tangible programmes than for overseas aid spending in general. Programmes focused on women’s and girls’ rights, health, vaccination, clean water and sanitation receive particularly strong backing from the public (Adam Smith, 2025; More in Common, 2025). For example, support for protecting child vaccination programmes such as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization spans the political spectrum, including among voters who are otherwise sceptical of aid spending (More in Common, 2025).

Education is another widely supported area of aid. A YouGov poll commissioned by Send My Friend to School (2025) found that 55% of the public support using UK aid to fund education in developing countries, rising to 68% among Labour voters and 74% among people aged 18–24. Overall, global education programmes are seen as one of the least controversial and most consistently supported forms of aid spending.

Humanitarian assistance also commands relatively strong support. For instance, 52% of the public support increasing aid to Gaza, rising to 71% among 18–25-year-olds, illustrating how support can increase in response to visible humanitarian crises (BFPG, 2024). This aligns with broader engagement patterns observed in DEL data, where issue visibility and public engagement fluctuate in response to global events, with spikes in attention often linked to conflict or humanitarian crises (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

Variation by location and purpose of aid

Public attitudes also vary depending on where aid is directed and what objectives it serves. Support tends to be stronger when aid is framed as addressing humanitarian crises, health protection or assistance to the countries most in need of support, such as lower-income countries, small island developing states or fragile states (ICAI, 2024). Conversely, aid framed primarily as long-term development assistance attracts less enthusiasm, particularly when domestic economic pressures are high (BFPG, 2025).

More broadly, the literature shows that public support increases when aid is associated with clear benefits for the UK, such as improving global health security, strengthening trade relationships or enhancing the country's international reputation (BFPG, 2024; More in Common, 2025). However, the public remain sceptical about some policy claims, with majorities unconvinced that aid reduces irregular migration or significantly improves UK security outcomes (BFPG, 2024).

DEL survey data also highlights the challenge of connecting global development to domestic concerns. Across 2025 waves, only 43–47% of the British public believed that what happens in developing countries affects people in the UK (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). This suggests a persistent “distance problem”, where development issues are seen as geographically and politically remote.

Taken together, evidence suggests support for aid is strongest among younger and higher socio-economic groups, for humanitarian, health and education programmes and when aid is clearly targeted at perceived “vulnerable” populations or linked to tangible UK benefits. Overall support for maintaining or increasing the aid budget has stabilised at around 45% since 2024, while donations have declined from around 20% of the public making donations in early 2024 to around 14–15% in 2025 (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

Low trust in effectiveness, misperceptions about spending levels, and the prioritisation of domestic issues continue to constrain broader public backing for aid (Bond, 2025; BFPG, 2025; Adam Smith, 2025).

Overall public response to charitable giving and engagement (rather than UK government spending).

In the UK, overall institutional trust is low. The UK Trust Index (which measures average trust in the four main global categories of business, government, media and NGOs) is 42, placing it firmly in the “distrust” band and near the bottom of the 28 countries surveyed (Edelman, 2026).

Comparatively, globally, NGOs are modestly trusted (58% say they trust NGOs to do what is right). Trust in NGOs is essentially flat

year-on-year, unlike business which has seen small trust gains. For the UK specifically, NGOs are part of a low-trust ecosystem where no institution has strong legitimacy, and income-based gaps in trust are pronounced (Edelman, 2026).

Among people with an “insular trust mindset” (70% globally), NGOs are less trusted than business, and trust in NGOs falls sharply if people imagine those institutions being led by someone different from them in values, facts, problem-solving approach or background. This dynamic is highly relevant to UK NGOs, given the UK's low Trust Index and high levels of perceived grievance and division (Edelman, 2026).

The Edelman report frames NGOs as having both an obligation and an opportunity to act as “trust brokers”: globally, 72% say NGOs are obligated to help bridge divides and facilitate trust-building between groups who distrust each other, but only 44% think NGOs are currently doing this well, leaving a large expectation–performance gap (Edelman, 2026).

When asked what would make NGOs effective trust brokers, people prioritise roles that translate between groups and de-escalate conflict (e.g., helping distrusting groups understand each other, establishing local mediation, avoiding vilifying rhetoric), suggesting that for UK NGOs, long-term, locally rooted relationship-building and visible bridge-building between “sides” are central to rebuilding trust (Edelman, 2026).

Public willingness to give, however, looks relatively resilient, with many charities maintaining or increasing fundraising income despite economic pressures. Charities themselves highlight trust and confidence as key enabling conditions for charitable giving and as something that enables charities to try new tech or fundraising formats. Story-led, platform-specific content and tools that make “the ask” easier (e.g., social media, WhatsApp communities, digital journeys) are seen as increasingly important. Economic and organisational constraints (e.g., cost of living, capacity, data/tech concerns) also shape what charities think is realistic in terms of supporter growth and innovation (Enthuse, 2026).

Q2. What is understood as the “purpose” of overseas aid? UK aid vs charitable giving.

The purpose of overseas aid in UK policy is framed primarily as an instrument of international development and global cooperation. The FCDO emphasises that UK development policy is grounded in interdependence, arguing that it is “no longer possible...for a country to determine its future alone” and defining the purpose of aid as “ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change”(FCDO, 2023).

Within this framework, ODA differs from charitable giving: while charities rely on voluntary donations and mechanisms such as Aid Match, ODA represents state-led funding with the formal objective of “eradicating poverty”. The UK therefore stresses a shift away from a hierarchical donor-recipient model and “towards partnerships of mutual respect”, positioning itself as a partner and convenor and as providing expertise in areas such as finance and science (FCDO, 2023).

However, analysis by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) highlights tensions within this framing, noting that UK aid is increasingly presented as a tool of climate leadership, treaty compliance and diplomatic influence, exemplified by the UK’s positioning during Cop26 as “first among equals”. At the same time, shifts toward multilateral development banks, concessional loans and accounting reclassifications suggest a growing use of aid as a leveraged financial instrument, revealing tension between aid as solidarity-based partnership and aid as strategic financial and geopolitical policy (ICAI, 2024).

Public opinion data suggests that these policy framings are not always reflected in how the British public understand the role of overseas aid. DEL tracking surveys show that development issues generally rank below domestic economic and security concerns in the

public agenda. Across 2024–2025, the issues most frequently identified as important by the public include economic crises, immigration and war or conflict. For example, in June 2025 46% of the British public expressed concern about immigration and 43% about war (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). In contrast, in November 2025 only 18% expressed concern about basic needs in developing countries, the lowest level recorded in the dataset.

This suggests that while development policy emphasises global interdependence, the public tend to prioritise domestic issues and immediate security concerns. A further challenge lies in what DEL research describes as the “distance problem”: many members of the public do not perceive a strong connection between global development and their own lives. Survey data shows that only 43–47% of the British public believe that events in developing countries affect people in the UK (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025).

At the same time, concern about poverty remains relatively stable, with around 50–52% of the public expressing concern about poverty in poorer countries across the 2024–2025 surveys (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025). This indicates that while people recognise global poverty as a moral issue, it is not always understood in terms of broader economic or geopolitical interdependence.

Overall, the evidence highlights a gap between the policy framing of overseas aid as a tool of global partnership and shared interests and the public perception of development as a distant humanitarian issue. While policymakers emphasise cooperation, diplomacy and long-term development partnerships, public understanding often centres more narrowly on humanitarian assistance and charitable support for “people in need”.

Q3. What benefits and harms do people associate with UK overseas aid and NGOs?

People associate both benefits and harms with UK overseas aid and the work of NGOs, reflecting debates about effectiveness, fairness and strategic priorities.

Perceived benefits

Reviews by the ICAI note that overseas aid

enables the UK to maintain humanitarian and climate commitments under fiscal pressure (ICAI 2024). Aid is often framed as both a moral responsibility *and* a strategic investment, particularly in areas such as education, health and climate resilience.

Public opinion research supports this view in specific policy areas. For example, a survey by Send My Friend to School (2025) found that 35% of respondents believe that investing in girls' education overseas benefits the UK, compared with 10% who believe it harms the UK, while roughly half of Labour voters view such investment as having positive domestic effects. Humanitarian assistance is also widely recognised as beneficial, particularly in crisis contexts where aid programmes can deliver immediate life-saving support.

Survey data suggests that the British public continue to recognise the importance of addressing global poverty. Across the DEL tracking surveys, around 50–52% of the public report being concerned about poverty in poorer countries (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025). In addition, around half of respondents believe that organisations such as NGOs and international institutions can make a difference in reducing poverty, indicating continued belief in the potential role of development institutions.

Perceived harms

At the same time, critics highlight several negative consequences linked to UK aid and NGOs. One analysis argues that aid programmes have sometimes “inflated local prices” and “weakened local institutions,” while also creating tensions in bilateral relationships when projects are perceived as externally driven (Lazel and Petrikova, 2025).

Transparency is another concern. Public opinion

data also indicates a degree of scepticism about the effectiveness of aid programmes. DEL surveys show that only around 18–19% of the British public believe that development aid is effective, while trust in development NGOs remains relatively low at around 29–30% (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025). These perceptions suggest that although many people recognise the moral importance of addressing global poverty, they remain uncertain about whether aid programmes deliver meaningful results.

Evaluations by ICAI (2024) also warn that recent shifts in UK aid policy, such as reduced funding for sectors like education and health, greater reliance on loans rather than grants for lower-income countries and declining attention to gender equality, risk weakening oversight, transparency and equity within development programmes.

The evidence suggests that the public recognise clear humanitarian and moral benefits of overseas aid, particularly in areas such as health, education and emergency response. However, concerns about effectiveness, transparency and unintended economic or political consequences continue to shape public perceptions of aid and INGOs. While roughly half the public express concern about global poverty, relatively low levels of trust in development organisations and limited belief in aid effectiveness indicate that scepticism remains an important constraint on broader support for overseas aid (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

Q4. How does language affect support? For example, when aid is framed as “overseas aid”, “international development”, “humanitarian relief” or “global poverty reduction”?

Literature shows that language plays a role in shaping public perceptions and support for UK overseas aid. Different framings carry distinct connotations and influence whether the public views aid as charitable spending, strategic policy or a shared global responsibility.

1. From charity to shared global responsibility

Government narratives increasingly avoid framing aid as simple charity. Instead, “international development” is presented as a national effort involving the government, civil society and the private sector (FCDO, 2023).

The UK government’s policy paper *Why is International Development so Important Now* (FCDO, 2023) frames development as mutually beneficial and interconnected, describing the UK’s international development policy as “good for Britain, good for the planet, and good for the people of our world”.

This framing emphasises global interdependence and practical benefits, including reducing instability and migration (“Our international development can reduce the drivers of migration”).

The UK government also presents aid as financially catalytic, with the claim that “Every £1 million... releases more than £5 million.”

This narrative shifts the focus from charity to investment and shared global outcomes. The government also frames development as unavoidable cooperation, arguing that: “We are part of the whole, like it or not.”

Such language positions development as a necessary response to global interdependence (FCDO, 2023).

2. Negative framing that undermines support

Language can also influence how aid policies are perceived by the public, although the evidence is often indirect. For example, Bond (2025) notes that describing aid primarily as “charity” or portraying the UK as a “cashpoint in the sky” can contribute to narratives that frame aid as wasteful or paternalistic, potentially weakening legitimacy.

Similarly, the ICAI (2024) review highlights how technical bureaucratic terminology, such as “administrative adjustments” or “scrubbing”, can obscure how funds are allocated, making aid spending harder for the public to understand. Critics sometimes characterise such practices using phrases like “accounting tricks” or “moving the goalposts”, reflecting broader concerns about transparency and trust. Rather than demonstrating a direct causal effect, these examples illustrate how the language surrounding aid policy can shape interpretation and credibility.

3. Moral vs. national-interest framing

Research suggests that both moral and national-interest narratives influence public support, but their effectiveness differs depending on context.

- Moral arguments emphasising poverty reduction, humanitarian relief and global justice remain highly persuasive.
- National-interest arguments linking aid to security, migration control or economic opportunities can broaden support among more sceptical audiences.

Evidence suggests the most effective messaging combines both elements, presenting aid as morally justified while also demonstrating clear benefits for the UK and measurable outcomes (Adam Smith, 2025).

4. Political rhetoric and narrative coherence

Language also reflects broader policy debates about the purpose of UK aid. Some analysts argue that UK development discourse has become inconsistent, with aid simultaneously framed around poverty reduction, national interest, trade promotion and migration control (Lazel and Petrikova, 2025). This creates ambiguity which can weaken both policy coherence and public legitimacy.

Post-Brexit rhetoric such as “Global Britain” has been described as an “empty signifier” aimed primarily at domestic audiences rather than providing a clear development strategy (Lazel and Petrikova, 2025). Similarly, policy narratives around “illegal” or “irregular” migration have been used to justify large in-donor refugee costs, which accounted for 38% of UK ODA in 2022, further shaping how aid is perceived domestically.

Critics argue that when aid is framed primarily in terms of UK geopolitical or economic interests, projects tend to be less successful. In contrast, framing aid relationships in terms of partnership, local ownership and humility can strengthen legitimacy and sustainability (Lazel and Petrikova, 2025).

5. Narrative alignment and credibility

Finally, language influences or undermines trust when there is a gap between rhetoric and implementation. While official rhetoric often emphasises support for women, girls and the states most in need of support, discrepancies between messaging and actual financial allocations can undermine credibility and public confidence (ICAI, 2024).

Across the literature, language is shown to be a key determinant of public support for aid. Framing aid as international development, humanitarian relief or global cooperation tends to strengthen legitimacy by emphasising shared challenges and relatable outcomes. In contrast, language that portrays aid as charity, opaque bureaucracy or purely self-interested policy can weaken public trust.

However, language only has legitimacy when it is backed up with evidence - overall support is strongest when narratives combine **moral purpose, clear results and credible alignment between rhetoric and policy** (FCDO, 2023; Bond, 2025; Adam Smith, 2025; ICAI, 2024; Lazel and Petrikova, 2025).

Q5. What are the motivators for British public support of overseas aid?

Public support for UK overseas aid is driven by a combination of moral, strategic and economic motivations. According to the UK government's policy paper *Why is International Development so Important Now* (2023), aid is justified through several interconnected arguments. These include security, where instability abroad is framed as having direct consequences for the UK; climate interdependence, based on the idea that "climate change does not respect national boundaries"; economic opportunity, where developing countries may become future trade and investment partners; and migration management, with aid seen as a way to address the underlying drivers of migration.

Public attitudes toward specific aid sectors further reinforce this support. Survey evidence from *Send My Friend to School* (2025) suggests that global education, **particularly girls' education**, is one of the most widely supported and least controversial areas of UK aid spending. Education programmes are widely perceived to generate both humanitarian benefits and longer-term development outcomes. For example, 55% of the public support using UK aid to fund education programmes in developing countries, with support rising to 68% among Labour voters and 74% among people aged 18–24. This suggests that programmes linked to education, health or gender equality may resonate more strongly with the public than general aid spending.

DEL survey data also highlights additional motivations related to moral concern and belief in institutional capacity. Across the 2024–2025 surveys, around 50–52% of the British public report being concerned about levels of poverty in poorer countries (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025). In addition, approximately half of respondents believe that development NGOs and international organisations can make a difference in reducing poverty, indicating that belief in institutional effectiveness remains an important driver of support.

However, the DEL dashboards also identify several barriers that limit stronger public motivation for overseas aid. One key challenge

is the "distance problem". Many members of the public struggle to see how global development relates to their own lives. Across the 2025 surveys, only 43–47% of respondents believe that events in developing countries affect people in the UK (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). This perceived weak connection between global poverty and domestic outcomes can reduce support for aid policies.

Competing domestic concerns also influence motivation. The issues the British public most frequently identify as important include economic crises, immigration and war or conflict. For example, in June 2025, 46% of the public described immigration as a pressing concern, and 43% were particularly concerned about war and conflict (DEL GB Dashboard, 2025). In comparison, concern about development-related issues was significantly lower. In November 2025, only 18% felt that basic needs in developing countries was a pressing concern, the lowest level recorded in the dataset.

Behavioural engagement indicators further illustrate these constraints. While engagement fluctuates over time, the proportion of British people who have donated to development charities has declined from around 20% in early 2024 to around 14–15% in 2025, suggesting that financial engagement with development causes has weakened (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025). At the same time, the share of the population classified as "totally disengaged" reached 38% in November 2025, indicating that a significant portion of the public does not actively engage with global poverty issues.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that support for overseas aid is motivated by moral concern for global poverty, belief in institutional action and recognition of shared global challenges such as climate change and security. However, this support is constrained by low perceived personal relevance, competing domestic priorities and declining engagement with development issues, which together limit the strength and consistency of public backing for UK overseas aid policies (DEL GB Dashboard, 2024–2025).

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