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COMMENTARY

A 'distinct UK offer': The geographies of the FCDO's International Development Strategy 2022

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Abstract

On 16 May 2022, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) produced its first International Development Strategy. This commentary explores the geographies of the strategy in more depth, highlighting three key areas: firstly, the dominance of a 'UK approach'; secondly, its focus on country and bilateral programmes; and, finally, the rise of diplomatic, commercial and technological spaces for development. The commentary concludes that this development strategy produces an imaginary of a more isolationist, independent, sovereign Britain, with development used as a vehicle for a geographical nationalistic re-branding. These geographical imaginaries are used to legitimise aid to a domestic audience and to enhance Britain's position in the development sector. This emphasis in turn asks further questions about governmental thinking on development – importantly, what is lost, neglected and dismissed through this focus on a 'distinct UK approach'?

KEYWORDS

Britain, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, geographies, international development

1 | INTRODUCTION

On 16 May 2022, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) published its much postponed first International Development Strategy (IDS). The FCDO was created by the incumbent Conservative government when it merged the Department for International Development (DFID) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2020. The current Conservative government has also presided over a (potentially temporary) reduction in the 0.7% rate of gross national income (GNI) dedicated to overseas development assistance (ODA) to 0.5%, articulated as a response to Covid-19 and the fiscal situation. Whilst these changes were not wholly unexpected, they provoked significant criticism (Bond, 2020; Honeyman, 2020), with commentators reflecting on the destructive speed and scale of the cuts and subsequent turmoil across the sector (Baldoumas, 2021; Worley, 2022; Worley & Alcega, 2021).¹ The release of the International Development Strategy builds on the Integrated Review (FCDO, 2021), which set out a vision for engagement beyond the European Union (Price, 2018). The strategy is also situated in a shifting development sector, including the rise of 'new development actors', challenging domestic landscapes and changing patterns of poverty and inequality (Mawdsley, 2015).

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There has been much discussion about what this new strategy may mean for development and how it is governed, conducted and operationalised (Hope & Outram, 2022; Popplewell et al., 2022; Worley, 2022). This brief commentary aims to apply a geographical lens to the strategy paper, focusing on the ‘wheres’ of the strategy and the spatialities it expresses, imagines and represents. Geographers have longstanding engagement with development policy, detailing trends including the advance of ‘One World Conservatism’ (Noxolo, 2012), the securitisation of development and developmentalism of security (Pugh et al., 2013), aid in the ‘national interest’ (Mawdsley, 2017) and the rise of growth led by the private sector (Mawdsley, 2015, 2017). This paper will begin by providing an overview of the contents of the strategy, before moving on to explore its spatialities in more depth, highlighting three key areas: firstly, the dominance of a ‘UK approach’; secondly, its focus on country and bilateral program; and finally, the rise of diplomatic, commercial and technological spaces for development. The commentary concludes that this International Development Strategy represents an exercise in nation-branding and an opportunity to promote the potential offered by an imagined sovereign, independent and isolationist yet ‘Global Britain’ in the development context.

2 | THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2022: AN OVERVIEW

The thirty pages of the International Development Strategy provide an overview of the UK government's plan for this area of work. The executive summary places the strategy in line with UK foreign policy, with an emphasis on ‘free markets, free trade, effective institutions, free speech and shared technology’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 5). The key themes through which ‘development’ will be delivered are articulated as sustainable economic growth and prosperity, freedom for women and girls, humanitarian assistance, and climate change, nature and global health.

Chapter 1 details how UK development strategy will ‘help countries get the investment they need to grow secure, open, thriving economies’, particularly through trade policies and partnership agreements (FCDO, 2022, p. 8). Providing freedom for women and girls is the second objective and is discursively connected to wider goals ‘from economic prosperity to security’, with the UK’s approach centred around the ‘three Es – education, empowerment and ending violence’ (FCDO, 2022, pp. 11, 12). There is detail on the UK’s humanitarian work, with emphasis on the possibilities for technological solutions to make ‘humanitarian responses faster and more effective’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 14). Climate change and biodiversity loss are positioned as the government’s top international priority, with the strategy including an increase in climate finance contribution, measures to ensure UK bilateral ODA is ‘nature positive’ and linking health with environmental concerns through the promotion of a ‘One Health’ approach (FCDO, 2022, pp. 18, 19). The second chapter reflects the shifting spatialities of the UK’s approach to development, which will be discussed in more detail below. Chapter 3 focuses on the delivery of development and makes repeated reference to the desired temporalities of development interventions, with an emphasis on speed and agility (FCDO, 2022, pp. 27–28). The remainder of this commentary will focus on the spatialities expressed through the strategy, starting with the ‘distinct UK offer’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 20).

3 | THE GEOGRAPHIES OF THE STRATEGY

3.1 | A ‘distinct UK approach’

Perhaps the ‘standout’ geography of this International Development Strategy is the focus on the UK itself. As with previous approaches to development (see, for example, DFID, 2009, 2015), this strategy positions development as something that is in the national interest, with the potential to enhance the economy and security of the UK: ‘Our financing model ... will deliver for people here in the UK – investments abroad will generate export opportunities in the UK, creating jobs right across the country’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 8). It also articulates development as ‘symbolis[ing] UK ideals’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 11), particularly in reference to ‘women and girls’. ‘Women and girls’ have long been one of the primary subjects of the UK’s development strategy, often positioned, as they continue to be here, as key to economic prosperity and security (Wilson, 2019).

Whilst there is a continuation of the longstanding history of development in/for the national interest (Mawdsley, 2015, 2017), the vision articulated here extends this discourse, utilising the strategy to promote an approach to development that is positioned as inherently British. Detailing the advantages of ‘Britishness’ is not new to UK development strategising. The 2009 Green Paper: ‘One World Conservatism: a Conservative agenda for international development’ articulated the benefits of Britain’s (post)colonial relations, with Noxolo (2011, p. 510) commenting that the ‘strong invocation of

empire throughout the Green Paper gives a sense of historical leadership'. The 2022 International Development Strategy continues to recognise 'our friends and family in the Commonwealth' (FCDO, 2022, p. 7) and acknowledges Small Island Developing states (FCDO, 2022, p. 26), yet explicit references to empire are less prominent. This strategy articulates 'Britishness' through Britain's perceived unique post-Brexit² position in the world, and it is through this uniqueness that development can be enhanced. Throughout the document there are references to the 'UK offer'³ with the distinctiveness of this 'UK offer' revolving around 'a whole of government approach' (FCDO, 2022, p. 4). This whole of government approach will 'help to channel world class UK expertise, business, civil society networks, research partnerships and technology capability towards development outcomes' (FCDO, 2022, p. 4). This also sees the integration of defence, diplomacy and development activities with greater emphasis placed on the role of the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces in 'identifying and addressing the root causes of instability, as well as helping partner nations build their own security and resilience capabilities' (FCDO, 2022, p. 6), operationalising the ongoing and increasing securitisation of development. The 'compelling offer from the UK to developing country partners' (FCDO, 2022, p. 7) then reflects this cross-departmental approach to development with the UK bringing 'powerful economic and political tools to our development partnerships: aid, diplomacy, trade, investment, expertise and influence' (FCDO, 2022, p. 7).

This 'distinct UK offer' is embedded in British sovereignty and post-Brexit positioning. The perceived advantages of leaving the European Union are articulated explicitly in relation to trade:

Since leaving the European Union, we have full control over our trade policy and will use it to support long-lasting development ... This year, Department for International Trade and FCDO are launching a new Developing Countries Trading Scheme, using our independent trade policy to give better access to UK market goods from low- and middle-income countries, through a set of simpler, more generous trading arrangements than those in the UK's current arrangements.

(FCDO, 2022, p. 10)

The perceived independence of trade and economic policy enabled by Brexit is explicitly linked to the ability of the UK to facilitate the development of low- and middle-income countries, with specific examples describing how 'as an independent trading nation, the UK can build on previous success' (FCDO, 2022, p. 10). The independence of this economic policy is also connected to the ability to 'move quickly in support of a coherent geopolitical approach' and the ability to join up 'trade and investment policies, energy and science policies, technical expertise, and the access to capital we can provide as a global financial centre' (FCDO, 2022, p. 27). The strategy is infused with echoes of the discursive logics of Brexit, with the narrative of 'taking back control' echoing much of the political discourse about the benefits of leaving the European Union (Agnew, 2020). This time it is not only the UK taking back control; through its development interventions it is facilitating other countries to do so: 'Ultimately our strategy is about unleashing the power of people and countries to take control of their own future' (FCDO, 2022, p. 4). But where will the UK help to unleash this power? It is to the wider geographies expressed in the International Development Strategy that this paper will now turn.

3.2 | (Any)Where else?

Whilst perhaps the most obvious spatiality of the strategy is that of Britain itself, it also provides some details on the wider geographies associated with this vision for international development. The African continent remains at the forefront of this narrative, following longstanding development sector engagement with the continent accelerated by New Labour's development interventions (Honeyman, 2019). Described as 'developing country partners', the strategy expresses the wish for the 'UK to be African countries' trade and investment partner of choice' (FCDO, 2022, p. 25). Relationships with 'key strategic partners' 'whose influence is felt across the continent' are prioritised, 'such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya and Ghana' (FCDO, 2022, p. 25). The images used in the document reflect this focus, including the construction of a solar home system in Kenya and the use of drones to collect coronavirus samples in Ghana. Africa, and certain strategic countries in Africa, then remain a key focus for development interventions.

The Indo-Pacific region⁴ is described as 'critical to the UK, to our economy, our security and our values' (FCDO, 2022, p. 25), with bilateral partnerships with India and Indonesia and the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) security alliance seen as crucial. Also of note is the space given to 'a secure and resilient Europe', with development partnerships, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, aimed at 'supporting private investment in resilient, sustainable infrastructure; stepping up to support those affected by conflict; and helping over the long term to build those economic

and social freedoms' (FCDO, 2022, p. 26). Whilst British engagement and financial commitment to Ukraine increased following the 2014 annexation of Crimea,⁵ the discourse of this strategy moves from the aim to 'uphold the sovereignty, integrity and capacity of Ukraine' as outlined in the 2015 UK Aid strategy (DFID, 2015, p. 12) to British involvement to 'reshape the architecture that will underpin future European security' (FCDO, 2022, p. 26). Intervention in Ukraine is then connected to a wider geopolitical project and articulates the 'centrality of a secure and resilient Europe'⁶ to the UK's interests (FCDO, 2022, p. 26).

The spatialities of development interventions described within the strategy are operationalised through a shift towards country and bilateral programmes, with a commitment to 'substantially rebalance its ODA investments from multilateral towards bilateral channels' as a way of supporting countries to be 'open, free nations' (FCDO, 2022, p. 22). Bilateral partnerships are articulated as a way of allowing the FCDO to focus on 'UK priorities and control exactly how taxpayers' money is used to support these' (FCDO, 2022, p. 22). There is a sense that the shift to bilateral partnerships is part of the 'taking back control' message, and about the ability of the UK to enact development interventions with the partners of its choice in 'agile' and 'innovative' ways. Bilateral partnerships are associated with a key temporality⁷ of the 'UK approach', that of speed, including making quick and effective decisions, delivering programmes more quickly and speeding up the grants process (FCDO, 2022, p. 28). The desire to be quick and responsive in the context of rapid geopolitical change is also articulated as a reason for the shift towards bilateral partnerships. The focus on country programmes may also resonate with the localisation agenda, with the strategy placing emphasis on 'people and governments being able to determine their future' (FCDO, 2022, p. 20). The strategy also details the continued commitment of the UK to multilateral partnerships, such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the Green Climate Fund but caveats this involvement with the desire to push for reforms of multilateral systems to 'improve value for money' and so that multilateral systems are 'fit for purpose in today's world' (FCDO, 2022, p. 22). There is a single mention of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the commitment to multilaterals is couched in critique, perhaps opening up the possibility for greater rejection of multilateral cooperation in the future. This shift towards bilateral partnerships presents a more individualistic, sovereign (and perhaps nationalistic) approach to development, a move away from global bodies to strategic partnerships with countries of the UK's choosing. With bilateral partnerships dominant, it is important to consider the spaces through which these relationships will be operationalised – a subject to which this commentary will now turn.

3.3 | Diplomatic, commercial and technological spaces

The final spatiality associated with the International Development Strategy I wish to comment on here is the types of spaces through which development is imagined and operationalised and the actors associated with this. Whilst there are mentions of state, civil society and voluntary sector spaces, significant attention is paid to diplomatic, commercial and technological spaces in the planning and delivery of development interventions. Diplomatic influence is positioned as one of the UK's key capabilities, with the strategy putting forward the possibility of putting 'our diplomatic power to work raising global ambition and securing international commitments' and using 'our diplomatic capabilities to push the international system to act ahead of conflict and climate shocks and famines' (FCDO, 2022, pp. 11, 14). The UK's diplomatic network, spanning 178 countries, is seen as way of achieving 'global impact', and the move towards country partners outlined above will 'give authority to our Ambassadors and High Commissioners, development experts and partners across government to take quick and effective decisions' (FCDO, 2022, pp. 25, 27–8). Perhaps connected to a loss of geographical reach following Britain's exit from the European Union (Lightfoot et al., 2017), it could be argued that the emphasis on Ambassadors and High Commissioners as development actors reflects the desire to move towards country programmes, but also the desire for greater control through the (extended) networks of the state, with diplomatic networks widening 'Global Britain's' developmental reach. Ambassadors and High Commissioners are also seen as key to the enhanced temporalities of the strategy; giving greater authority to these actors is part of the desire to make 'it quicker to get programmes delivering on the ground' (FCDO, 2022, p. 6). Increased engagement for the UK's diplomatic network within the development space then appears to also have been justified by their ability to compress space and time.

Economic growth (not poverty reduction) is at the centre of the strategy, with trade, investment and other commercial vehicles placed at the heart of driving this growth. There is emphasis on technological, scientific and commercial spaces (and the intersections between them) to drive this growth. A significant facet of the UK offer is its perceived expertise. The expansion of the use of this expertise is seen as crucial to help governments 'pursue resilient and sustainable economic growth, including high potential sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture, trade, technology, green cities and infrastructure, building on existing UK expertise, evidence and technology in these sectors' (FCDO, 2022, p. 9).

'UK expertise' is to be deployed to develop higher education, and examples are given throughout the strategy of how 'UK expertise' in science and technology is driving development. The images included reflect this focus, featuring, for example, data collection around Pitcairn Island and green building solutions in Malawi. Text boxes seem to glorify 'UK expertise' with examples including Liquid Telecom, which was established in the UK in 2005 and received a British International Investment fund of \$220 million to develop Africa's digital infrastructure. The strategy states that 'we are a science and technology superpower and home to world-leading institutions across government and our prestigious universities' (FCDO, 2022, p. 22) and articulates the desire to establish new Centres of Expertise devoted to "what works" evidence, and technological solutions' (FCDO, 2022, p. 22). The focus is then firmly on the spheres of science, technology and innovation with little attention paid to the social and political dynamics of such interventions and limited mention of the civil society sector, civic space, human rights or social justice.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

The UK's Government's International Development Strategy 2022 can be considered as a continuation of previous trends within UK development policy, particularly since the 2010 election. Key themes reverberating through these documents are the importance of development 'in the national interest', the securitisation of development, the focus on economic growth and 'women and girls' and the emphasis on value for money. As Noxolo (2011, p. 510) comments, this strategy continues to reflect a 'more aggressive era in British development practice'. This commentary has focused on the spatial shifts of the strategy; its 'UK offer', country and bilateral programmes and the changing spaces through which development interventions are operationalised. As with previous UK development approaches, attention is focused on the African continent, and now also towards Ukraine and the eastern borders of Europe. Civil society seems to have been relinquished as a key space for global development, in favour of scientific, technological and commercial spaces.

Perhaps the most striking geography of the strategy is its projection and representation of Britishness. Whilst development has long been seen as an exercise in the national interest, this latest strategy uses development as a vehicle for promoting the perceived benefits of increased national sovereignty. The strategy is rife with British exceptionalism, whether this is in our 'distinct UK approach' or as a 'science and technology superpower' or as 'a global financial centre' or in the prominence of the British diplomatic network. This exceptionalism is often placed within the context of Britain's exit from the European Union; the strategy reflects, in its own way, much of the similar rhetoric – the importance of the ability to trade independently, the desire to reduce bureaucracy, taking back control and discomfort with multinational bodies. There are some direct links between leaving the European Union and UK development policy, particularly in connection with trade, but Brexit has also provided the opportunity to enhance existing (Conservative) development trends that focus on economic growth, the private sector and the national interest (Lightfoot et al., 2017).

The strategy then promotes a very particular version of the UK within the world, projected as a global power in control of its own destiny and its ability to facilitate the destinies of others. It is a Britain that is suspicious and critical of global bodies and global cooperation, and there is a sense of the possibility of British retreat from such institutions. Paradoxically it is also a global Britain that can forge new links and partnerships free of its European ties. With whispers of empire, development work is to be primarily operationalised through the UK's diplomatic networks, country programmes, British Centres of Expertise and facilitated by the UK as an independent trading nation. In this International Development Strategy, the might of the (British) nation-state has become the key scale of interest, reinforcing borders and fostering alliances with strategic partners. Rejecting globalism, this development strategy then produces an imaginary of a more isolationist, independent, sovereign Britain, with development used as a vehicle for a geographical nationalistic re-branding. With some evidence that support for foreign aid is diminishing (YouGov, 2020), it is through these geographical imaginaries that aid for development is being both legitimised to a domestic audience and being used as an opportunity to promote the potential offered by this newly found sovereignty for the development sphere. This emphasis in turn asks further questions about governmental thinking about development – importantly, what is lost, neglected and dismissed through this focus on a 'distinct UK approach'?

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The International Development Select Committee is collecting evidence regarding the impact of ODA cuts, see: https://houseofcommons.shorthandstories.com/IDC-future-of-uk-aid-written-evidence/index.html?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=tweet&utm_campaign=future%20of%20uk%20aid
- ² El-Enany (2020) argues that Brexit is not separate from, but rather intimately connected to, empire.
- ³ The repeated use of the term ‘offer’ reflects the way development is being positioned, as something competitive and for consumption. This language also reflects the FCDO merger and more widely the increasing exposure to and relevance of South–South partnerships (my thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for this point).
- ⁴ The rise of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a (constructed) geopolitical region reflects anxieties about the increasing influence of China (see Cannon & Rossiter, 2018; Metcalf, 2014; Pan, 2014 for further debates) – my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
- ⁵ For more details on bilateral aid to Ukraine, see: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1294916/uk-bilateral-aid-ukraine/#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20the%20value%20of%20developmental%20aid%20from,reached%20a%20peak%20of%2031.6%20million%20in%202016>.
- ⁶ It seems important to note here that ‘a secure and resilient Europe’ is positioned as foundational to the UK’s global role.
- ⁷ Whilst speed and responsiveness are seen as key to aspects of development, the idea of ‘patience for long-term change’ (FCDO, 2022, p. 21) is also significant within the strategy.

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