



The Government and “Aiding and Abetting”:

A shift of funds from the
Department for
International
Development to the
Ministry of Defence?

Jonathan Foreman

March 2013

Introduction

For anyone critical of the UK's bloated aid budget, incoherent aid strategy, and Department for International Development (DfID)'s systemic faults, the announcement by the Prime Minister¹ that the government will consider shifting money away from DfID's control to the military for humanitarian projects (as suggested in my Civitas book "Aiding and Abetting"²) was a welcome development. Unfortunately the statement did not amount to an actual shift of policy and was vague about both the amount that my shifted and where it would go.

Subsequent government comments suggested that an unspecified amount of money might go to the government's "conflict pool" – a funding mechanism for conflict prevention jointly funded by the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The idea behind the pool is to fund joint stabilization efforts that will have often have a strong military component.

This may indeed be a sensible idea, and it is certainly a good thing that the Prime Minister recognizes that stability and peace are preconditions for development, growth and better life conditions in poor countries, rather than the other way round.

If the announcement was intended to test the waters concerning a shift in Britain's aid policy against the rigid ring-fencing of the aid budget, it predictably provoked an angry storm from one particular quarter. This quarter was what one might call the Aid Lobby: the various

spokespeople of the large, corporate NGOs like Oxfam that happen to be major contractors for DfID and which also play a significant role in formulating its policies.

Much of the enraged reaction was disingenuous or even dishonest, such as the cry of Mark Lawson, Oxfam's Head of Policy that "the British people expect aid to be spent on hospitals not helicopter gunships". Mr Lawson and other spokesperson wielding similar slogans presumably knew perfectly well that there had been no suggestion by the Prime Minister, (nor is there on in my book "Aiding and Abetting") that aid money be spent on weapons or combat equipment.

The Aid Lobby rhetoric was designed, as always, to oversimplify discussion of aid with crude dualities. This helps distract both the taxpaying and charity-giving public and politicians from troubling questions that have been raised about aid in general and DfID in particular in recent months.

There was however a slightly panicked edge to the hyperbolic warnings that Britain "must keep its promises" to the poor of the world by increasing its aid budget to 0.7% of GDP and that the PM's suggestion would mean paying for tanks rather than teachers. Now that various books and television programmes have tarnished the previously, and I would argue ludicrously, pristine image of foreign aid agencies and NGOs, the Aid Lobby seems to be worried that DfID's bloated budget may not be sacrosanct after all.

This would be a very healthy development to the extent that the complacent misuse and maladministration of that aid budget is an insult to both the British taxpayer and to those whom it is supposed to benefit in poor countries abroad.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/feb/21/david-cameron-aid-military>

² <http://civitas.org.uk/newblog/2013/01/aiding-and-abetting-2/>

Why the military needs its own money for aid projects

The fact is that the UK military has often engaged in humanitarian aid, both in the course of military campaigns and in the case of emergencies abroad. One little-remembered but significant example of this was the assistance given by Royal Navy ships after the catastrophic East Pakistan (Bangladesh) cyclone of 1970.

Thousands of lives were saved by the Royal Navy's helicopters flying food, supplies and medical treatment to remote, cut-off villages, in a precursor of a more famous intervention, that by the US Navy in Indonesia after the 2004 Tsunami. When major humanitarian emergencies like that take place, the forces are often asked to provide heavy lift aircraft and specialist help, but they don't get paid for it. The money comes out of the UK defence budget.

Given recent swingeing cuts to that budget, cuts that arguably have had a critical impact on the forces capabilities, it is surely only fair that humanitarian missions and humanitarian aspects of regular missions be paid for out of the Aid budget, rather than funds intended for the defence of the realm.

The disinclination of DfID and the beneficiary/contractor NGOs that lobby for its budget, to allow aid money to pay for aid when carried out by the military is mostly a function of territorial protection and plain financial self-interest, though there is also an ideological element. This anti-military element became all too evident during Britain's engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is common knowledge that in various guerilla conflicts going back more than half a century, British forces and their allies have engaged in

development and humanitarian aid work in order to "win hearts and minds" as part of a military strategy and also because development and the provision of goods like medical treatment is widely seen as a cure for the underlying causes of instability, violence and rebellion against governments like that of Afghanistan.

Unlike US military units who are given discretionary aid funds³ to pay for small aid projects at a village level, contemporary British forces have to rely on DfID to pay for and carry out such projects. This reliance has been disastrously unsuccessful.

DfID staff have often refused or been forbidden for reasons of "health and safety" to travel to the very villages that need the most help.

DfID staff have also been unwilling to work with the military because doing so would imply that they are carrying out aid in order to benefit British national interests and military/strategic goals, rather than for reasons of pure altruism. Although you might expect DfID staff to be happy with the coincidence of official British aid with British official interests, this is often not the case, especially for staff who have been recruited from NGOs and outside aid agencies with a rigid ideology of "neutrality."

The failure of DfID to provide aid in accordance with British government and military strategy and British government and military needs could be said to be a demonstration of unfitness for purpose, and certainly argues for the transfer of funds from DfID's budget to sections of the military.

How transfers from DfID to the MOD budget would benefit

³ These are known as CERP funds, short for Commanders Emergency Response Program.

Britain's ability to provide aid, while easing some of the military's budget crisis

The specialist equipment used for rescue in earthquakes and other natural disasters is expensive and beyond the reach of even the richest NGOs and aid agencies. Nor do NGO's and aid agencies have easy access to large transport aircraft like the RAF's C17 that can fly long distances and land in remote areas on short runways.

"Greater efficiencies"

Although the MOD admittedly has had many problems administering its own budget, it could nevertheless achieve much greater efficiencies and actually improve the UK's ability to help in international humanitarian emergencies if funds were taken from the aid budget and used to buy dual use equipment, such as heavy transport aircraft, hospital ships, search and rescue aircraft and even helicopter carriers.

This might well mean a breach of the 0.7% commitment, because the expenditure on dual use equipment may not technically count as aid expenditure, even if that equipment were only ever used to fly emergency medical supplies or food or equipment to people in need. This however, should certainly not dissuade the government from a step that could help to make the UK a genuine "aid superpower."

Claims that such a transfer of funds would somehow undermine the neutrality and safety of Aid

workers are dishonest and untrue

Much of the rhetoric of neutrality is dishonest or lamentably misinformed. This is particularly the case in countries like Afghanistan. The Taliban is quite explicit in its desire to expel foreigners from the country and they do not generally distinguish between uniformed military foreigners on the one hand and aid workers or journalists on the other. It's a fond delusion that the aid community's insistence on its own neutrality translates into a perception of neutrality on the part of others, or for that matter an acceptance of the very idea of neutrality.

As David Rieff has pointed out, the pretence of neutrality often represents an attempt to gloss over political realities. If for instance, you are building or paying for a girls school in Afghanistan, or employing unveiled women in public, you are, despite your protestations to the contrary, not neutral. After all one side is actively hostile to and fighting against the ideas that lie behind female education and female emancipation.

Arguably the only kind of humanitarian intervention that is both historically neutral and generally recognized as such is that of the International Red Cross. And even the IRC's activities can be problematic. After all, in any war combatants often seek to cause non-lethal casualties in order to overwhelm the medical facilities and economic capacities of the other side. An outside organization that fills in gaps in the latter is improving its ability to make war. This may, like many other forms of aid, prolong a conflict or enable one side to win more easily.

Although they do not like to admit it, or are unaware of it, many NGOs and aid agencies are engaged in forms of aid that do not descend

from the tradition founded by Henri Dunant and the Red Cross, but rather come down from the competing overtly non-neutral traditions represented by the anti-slavery movement and later Florence Nightingale.

Peacekeeping is a form of aid, and should be treated as such.

Contrary to the traditional line of the Aid Lobby, stability and security are preconditions for development and public health, not the other way round. It therefore makes sense to use some of the UK's bloated aid budget for stability operations by the military, even if some of that money does indeed pay for military equipment such as ammunition.

Many lives can be and have been saved by military actions such as Britain's intervention in Sierra Leone. And if the primary priority of Aid supporters truly is saving lives, rather than budget preservation, self-promotion or moral aggrandizement, they should seriously consider ways in which Britain's aid excess – the money that DfID has been unable to spend and monitor efficiently or effectively – could be used to help fund such military operations.

The aid budget is so bloated that Britain's aid effectiveness would not be adversely affected by such a transfer.

Contrary to the rhetoric of major NGOs like Oxfam that are major contractors of DfID and have a direct financial interest in ever-greater government aid spending, the UK Aid budget is bloated beyond the ability of the department to

administer it responsibly – even before the latest increases in Aid.

“Poor understanding of levels of fraud and corruption”

The chairperson of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, Margaret Hodge MP has lamented that “The Department's ability to make informed spending decisions is undermined by its poor understanding of levels of fraud and corruption the Department is going to be spending more in fragile and conflict-affected countries and the danger to the taxpayer is that there could be an increase in fraud and corruption” and expressed shock that even though DfID is due to spend more money in fragile, conflict-affected countries, “the Department could not even give us information as to the expected levels of fraud and corruption and the action they were taking to mitigate it.”⁴

Also contrary to the marketing rhetoric of DfID, its contractors and the rest of the NGO aid lobby, the most appealing and effective aid programmes such as vaccinations account for a tiny proportion of the overall aid spend. The pretence that this is not the case is typical of the routine dishonesty of the Aid Industry (an example of which can be heard from Justin Forsyth of Save the Children in a debate with me on the Sunday Politics programme).

Similarly, humanitarian/emergency aid – for the most part the only aid that really saves lives – accounts for only 500 million of the DfID budget out of more than 10 billion, ie 5%. And DfID is having a hard time spending that money: partly because it lacks the staff to do so efficiently. All

4

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/dfid-financial-report/>

this means that significant money could be diverted from DfID without significant affects on genuine life-saving aid operations.

The Aid agencies will no doubt continue, as they have done in recent days, to complain about the awful prospect of “breaking Britain’s promises” to the world’s poor. But as they know, this talk of “promises” – often echoed by the Prime Minister - is mere rhetorical sleight of hand, and disingenuous on multiple levels.

First of all the world’s poor are an abstraction rather than a group of people who can be addressed and receive a promise.

Secondly, if the UK were to revise its commitment to giving 0.7% GDP to aid or simply fail to meet it like other Western countries, it is absurd to think of people in the shanty towns of Africa and South Asia and poor pelting villages in the Sahel saying to each other, “I can’t believe that the British taxpayers have broken their promise to us.” To the extent that such people are aware at all of British aid and its aims, they would surely be more concerned about what actually is done and achieved, not what proportion of the UK budget is tossed in the general direction of foreign aid.