

Cutting off Aid to India is more about Selfishness than Sense*

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Now that the UK is set to stop its foreign aid to India at the [end of this year](#), it is worth considering what message this sends not just to India but to the wider world. It can be justified as an inevitable response to changing relations between a former colonial power and its former colony, as the latter grows out of its dependent relationship. But in the current context, there is more to it.

In fact there are many good reasons to justify the cessation of foreign aid to [India](#): after all, the amounts that the UK has been sending as development aid are not only pitifully small, but pale into insignificance in relation to the Indian government's own spending on development aid and poverty reduction. While this spending is clearly inadequate in relation to the needs within India, it could also be argued that a country that hosts a growing number of dollar billionaires and seeks to become a global/regional power sending aid to other countries, should be in a position to increase its own public spending in socially essential areas.

It is also true that there were lots of problems with the nature and pattern of UK aid, not just to India but to many other poor countries, which is why it has been less successful in achieving declared outcomes such as poverty reduction. The rather small amounts of aid money often come with various strings attached. They are excessively oriented to paying for UK-based consultancies rather than developing capacities in the so-called beneficiary countries. The funds are less and less devoted to long-term finance that would allow productive transformation, and more oriented towards financing social interventions that follow whatever fashions are prevalent in the international development industry, from privatising services to microfinance to cash transfers.

The "white man's burden" still underlies a lot of the approach to Britain's foreign aid, in which donors implicitly see themselves as educating and reforming the recipients. This is increasingly resented across the developing world, especially in large and relatively faster-growing countries. Indeed, newer donors such as China try to avoid being seen as providing "aid" or "development assistance", preferring to talk of "development cooperation".

So maybe it is not such a bad thing if these little drips of money that were being provided in a rather problematic fashion do come to an end. But then, on the other hand, this also symbolises something deeply disturbing about Britain's current relationship with the world, its lack of empathy for the less fortunate and particularly the absence of any sense of accountability for its own past actions.

It's hard to avoid the impression that this more miserly attitude to foreign aid is of a piece with the general mean-spiritedness increasingly shown by the Conservative government, expressed even more starkly in the [unwelcoming attitude](#) towards refugees and other migrants. The huge fuss that is being made over relatively small numbers of refugees coming into Europe (and even fewer into Britain), when other much poorer countries in the developing world are consistently and quietly taking in many more people (even proportionate to population) without such complaint, has not gone unnoticed in the rest of the world. The appallingly ungenerous attitude towards refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, who are fleeing conditions of instability and social breakdown largely created by the botched and irresponsible military interventions of western powers, is particularly shocking because there appears to be no sense of culpability for creating that mess in the first place.

Similarly, aid to the developing world could be described at least partly as some minimal compensation by the former coloniser for the devastation and exploitation created by colonialism. But in any case, the point is to see this not as charity but as an expression of human solidarity. That lack of empathy is reflected not just in aid and financial dealings but in many other aspects of interaction between the UK and countries such as India.

So, for example, if the UK government is seriously concerned about the welfare of people in India, there is a lot that it can do, even without sending small amounts of overseas development aid. It can make sure that in the still ongoing negotiations on the EU-India free trade agreement, tighter rules on intellectual property are not enforced, as these would further raise the costs of essential medicines and restrict access to latest technologies. It can seek to provide knowledge that is currently monopolised, restricted and expensive to enable Indian producers to strive for “green growth”. It can resist investment protection clauses that privilege the interests of private capital over the human rights of people in India. It can ensure taxation agreements that do not allow companies and rich elites to evade taxes by using cross-border loopholes, and so allow the Indian government to collect taxes that could be used to provide essential public goods and services. It can stop using misplaced WTO rules to prevent India from implementing a food security law to improve nutrition indicators among its huge hungry population.

Sadly, on all of these issues, the UK government is on the other side, and aggressively so. This makes it even harder for people not to see the government decision to stop development assistance to India as something that only reflects narrow and short-sighted selfishness.

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