



Duncan Green

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## What does the UK public really think about aid? From someone who knows.

*David Hudson, an academic with years of research on public opinion on aid, responds to a UK Government Minister's recent comments about public support (or in the minister's view, the lack of it).*

I couldn't agree more with [Douglas Alexander's recent comments](#) on the government's spending on international development. And I suspect, quietly, most international development professionals would too. Indeed they should.

I'm also glad Alexander said it because it needed saying, which was: "I think we have lost the argument at various points [and] public consent has been withdrawn. And truthfully on aid, it's not just fiscally challenged, it's culturally challenged as well."

Culture is the new politics, after all.

Baroness Chapman, the Minister for International Development, has also [spoken about the importance of rebuilding the public's confidence in international development](#).

But, has the public really withdrawn its consent and confidence? Our research suggests the answer is 'Yes, but not recently, and it fluctuates'. The [Development Engagement Lab](#) (and the Aid Attitudes Tracker before that) has been tracking support for government spending on development aid for 12 years now. And guess what: in 2013 it was 43% support and 53% oppose and it's now (June 2025) 45% support and 44% oppose. So, if anything, support for aid is somewhat higher than twelve years ago.

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The key point being – and thank goodness we have this tracking data – is that the argument with the public was not lost in the past few years, it was lost somewhere around 2012-2013. Yes, the political cross-party consensus on development held right the way through to 2021, before the first aid cuts came. But that was elite opinion. In terms of public opinion, **2005 was a high point**, and thereafter it was downhill, followed by a bumpy plateau.

What were the bumps? When did people care more? Well, in one sense people always care. The public are compassionate and thoughtful. They always have been and always will be. Have a chat with a random stranger about whether they think that getting a girl into school in Bangladesh or securing antiretroviral therapy for people in South Africa who would otherwise die is the right thing to do. I suspect you will find them supportive.

But – until you speak with them – they won't care. Not because they don't, but because they are worried about everything else in their lives: the prices in the supermarket; potholes; bin collection; their children. And this is the point: **whenever the issue comes onto people's radar, they are moved**. In 2015, when **Alan Kurdi**, a two-year-old Syrian boy, was pictured dead on the beach in Turkey, support for aid and refugees jumped. In 2020, when the Government merged DFID with the FCO and cut aid from the totemic 0.7% to 0.5%, triggering a Conservative backbench rebellion, support also jumped. In 2022, after Russia invaded Ukraine, support went up.

The point being, when the public hears about injustice and the difference that support could or does make, they fully invest in international aid and solidarity. But when it's not on their radar those jumps fade away again; it's not that people don't care, they are just otherwise engaged.

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It's never been a particularly popular take, but I've always said that the ring-fencing of the aid budget in 2010 and the 2015 legislation to fix it at 0.7% of Gross National Income, without the public advocacy and making the argument why development spending is morally right and strategically important, meant that the aid budget was undefended at best and at worst, a political lightning rod.

And now (to mix a metaphor or two) those chickens have come home to roost.

So how can we re-make the argument and rebuild consent and confidence? It's not rocket science. Most people are persuaded most by these arguments:

1. There is a need, people are worse off than us;
2. We can help, we can make a difference, aid works;
3. You're right that there is waste, corruption, and loss, but overall we can improve things
4. It's the right thing to do, and there are benefits for us in making the world healthier, safer, and more secure (be specific here: vaccinations, inflation, climate change for example)
5. This does not come at the cost of our own domestic priorities, it's a small contribution, and finally
6. We are doing this with and alongside other countries, both in the global North and South, to chip in our fair share.

Too much time has been wasted on message testing, tweaking language to see whether it will land 3% better with a key demographic. Meanwhile, not enough time has been spent on collective leadership by the Government and sector, working together, and as **Jess Crombie** puts it so brilliantly, **explaining what development is for** as well as seeing the long game, beyond development.

**Niki Banks and colleagues** are absolutely right to point to the importance of shifting the power *and* the conversation onto reimagining development as solidarity. In focus groups and surveys, we've been struck by two really important findings. First, when people heard about the established way of working – funds funnelled from rich countries, international expertise, focus on delivery and efficiency – versus a shifting the power model – local expertise, shifting decision-making and capacity building – they said: "Hang on, I thought that's the way it *was already* done!" The public is totally open to moving forwards. And this is true for those on the left who want decolonisation for progressive reasons and those on the right who want to see self-sufficiency and people 'taught how to fish' (Within three minutes of any focus group, this proverb comes up).

But second – and this is also important – people hate language that uses words like decolonisation and even power, it's too confronting, it's too politicised, it's too jargony. Normal people are not like you, dear reader, we have to speak normal, please.

So where now? We have to go big. We have to be bold. Britain's progressive role in the world has to become part of the national conversation again. We need a seismic event or story to capture the public's imagination, a '**Mr Bates vs The Post Office**' or an **Adolescence** moment. We need to get people thinking and talking – we don't have to agree – but at least talking, because caring begins with talking.

## About the author

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