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The Future of UK Aid: They are asking for partnership; we offer them critique and nostalgia.

*Lauren Anderson reflects on the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) current moment of instability and argues that the sector must respond with greater strategic confidence and concrete solutions.*

Last Tuesday the International Development Committee held an evidence session on the future of UK aid. It should have been routine: officials explain reforms, NGOs outline the consequences, MPs nod gravely. Instead, it became something far more revealing.



Because what unfolded was not just a clear admission that the FCDO is in crisis – it was a prime opportunity for the aid sector to assert its value. And it squandered it

## A Department Restructuring Itself Into a Void

The first half of the session was essentially the civil service union sounding the alarm. What they described was an FCDO undergoing 25-30% staff cuts with no business case, no clear structure, and no visible ministerial direction. New directors are reportedly being asked to design their own restructure in real time like a choose-your-own-adventure without a map.



Critical directorates like humanitarian and human development don't even have directors in post. The overseas network is in flux. Staff themselves don't know where vital functions like conflict, atrocity prevention, human rights will land, or if they'll land at all.

Then came the kicker: the UK Development Minister, **Baroness Chapman** reportedly asked for the session and... didn't attend.

The message could not have been clearer: the internal crisis is deeper than many of us realised and the next six months stand to be a write-off as the department tries to get a grip.

## And Then Came the Sector's Turn... and We Held Back

The second half of the session was supposed to be the NGOs' time to shine: clarity, solutions, vision. To meet that uncertainty with leadership.

But rather than stepping into that space, there was a rehash of familiar tropes.

When **BOND** opened by criticising the cuts, it was understandable – but it also misread a room that was begging for solutions. And when referring to a future return to 0.7, Scottish Conservative MP **David Mundell** rightly pushed back: *"We're not talking about 0.7. We're at 0.3. And that's not going to change any time soon."*

He wasn't being hostile. He was asserting political reality. When we keep arguing from the world we want, not the world we are in, we risk looking out of touch. Not because we're wrong on substance, but because it makes us sound like we're in denial of the political moment. Accepting reality is not endorsing it. But refusing to speak to it makes us sound unserious.



## A Missed Chance to Show Our Value

What was most striking was not what we said, but what we didn't.

At one point, the Chair asked directly how the FCDO should work with NGOs during this period of internal upheaval. The question was bounced to an academic (odd), who understandably said she couldn't comment.

And then – silence.

This was the opening. A huge, blinking sign saying: *"We don't know how to work with you. Tell us."* And we didn't take it.

With FCDO openly admitting it has no strategy, no structure, and fewer staff, this was the moment to say:

- *"Let us help."*
- *"We can bridge this expertise gap."*
- *"We can help stabilise the system."*

The pattern repeated when Sarah Champion asked about public engagement. She described pupils hungry for global insight and asked what NGOs could provide. The panel offered broad statements about education funding. She pressed: *"But can't you provide us with resources?"*

Another invitation to contribute constructively – and one that could have been seized more fully.

The committee wasn't asking for a moral argument, these guys are already on our side. They were asking for tools, clarity, partnership, leadership. And this is where the frustration lies. Because the sector *can* offer that. But we often hesitate, as though positioning ourselves as part of the solution is overstepping.

At a sector working group meeting with the FCDO a few weeks ago, we asked how we could work together better in response to the struggles we've had in gaining access, and their response was: *"We need to get around tables together, have these hard conversations and re-build trust"*.

What this screams to me is that the trust is broken because MPs and FCDO officials are asking the same quiet question: "What is the point of you?".

Not because they doubt the moral case for aid, but because they're not hearing how we can operationally help fix a system in flux.

They are asking for partnership. We keep offering critique and nostalgia.

It's also worth noting that BOND did try to bring in some sector self-reflection – pointing out that NGOs themselves need to change, address internal power structures, and rethink how they work. And that's true. We do need that reckoning. But the way it came across in the hearing also felt symbolic of something wider happening across the progressive space: we are so focused on not getting it wrong, so attuned to our own flaws, that we hesitate to step decisively into the fray. Self-

awareness matters, but self-critique can't become self-silencing – not when a government department is effectively signalling: *"We don't have the answers. Help us."* This was a moment that called for clarity, confidence and leadership, not retreat

## Acknowledging the Context: Burnout and Sector Strain

And to be fair to ourselves, this has been a brutal time to work in aid.

For two years we've watched the worst humanitarian catastrophes in generations unfold while our advocacy collides with the dead hand of political indifference. We've faced cuts, restructures, redundancies, shrinking civic space, and a government freezing us out. Everyone I know in this sector is exhausted. Burned out. Running on fumes.

We are fighting for survival – organisationally, politically, emotionally. And that desperation has consequences. Mandates compete. Coalitions fray. Organisations retreat into their silos. Everyone is stretched thin and terrified that if they don't shout loudly about *their* issue, *their* crisis, *their* corner of suffering will disappear entirely from parliamentary or donor consciousness. Or their remaining pocket of funding will evaporate.

But MPs are feeling that disjointedness. Officials feel it. It leaks into evidence sessions like this one. Recognising that is precisely why we need to shift how we operate now.

Because exhaustion doesn't remove the need for strategy. It makes it more essential.

## This Moment Is Screaming for Strategic Confidence

The FCDO's internal confusion isn't just a crisis, it's an opportunity. This is a department unsure of its structures, priorities, and internal processes. It is signalling, intentionally or not, that guidance is needed. And guidance is what NGOs are meant to be good at:

- deep expertise,
- evidence from the field,
- continuity beyond electoral cycles,
- public engagement capabilities.

And I know many of us did offer that in our written submissions. But it's not 20 essays that rebuild these relationships or demonstrate our worth, it's how we navigate these face-to-face conversations and how we respond to the political moment. That means offering concrete, operational guidance, like:

- *"Here's how to structure this directorate so it works."*

- *"Here's where you're losing critical expertise."*
- *"Here's what needs to be preserved in-country."*
- *"Here's what we can take on while you stabilise."*

If we want influence, we must earn it by meeting this moment head-on. That means confidently positioning ourselves collectively as problem-solvers in the restructure and building a narrative centred on what aid delivers now, not what it used to. This is how we move from sounding nostalgic to sounding indispensable. And that's the credible route back to 0.7 – showing what aid tangibly achieves. Rebuilding trust with officials and the public. Positioning ourselves as the partners government can't afford to sideline.

### About the author

#### Lauren Anderson

Lauren Anderson is a strategic advocacy professional with seven years' experience shaping humanitarian and foreign policy campaigns. She has worked with NGO's leading coalitions influencing UK and international decision-makers on crises in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon. Lauren focuses her efforts on shifting political narratives and building more principled, inclusive responses to conflict and crisis.

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