

# **The UK's approach to democracy and human rights**

A review

**January 2023**

**The Independent Commission for Aid Impact** works to improve the quality of UK development assistance through robust, independent scrutiny. We provide assurance to the UK taxpayer by conducting independent reviews of the effectiveness and value for money of UK aid.

We operate independently of government, reporting to Parliament, and our mandate covers all UK official development assistance.

### Overall review scores and what they mean

**GREEN**

Strong achievement across the board. Stands out as an area of good practice where UK aid is making a significant positive contribution.

**AMBER/  
RED**

Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas, with some positive elements. An area where improvements are required for UK aid to make a positive contribution.

**GREEN/  
AMBER**

Satisfactory achievement in most areas, but partial achievement in others. An area where UK aid is making a positive contribution, but could do more.

**RED**

Poor achievement across most areas, with urgent remedial action required in some. An area where UK aid is failing to make a positive contribution.

**OGL**

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The UK's democracy and human rights programming since 2015 has delivered useful results in often difficult political contexts, but has been significantly affected by budget reductions and the lack of a clear policy framework since 2020.

Promoting democracy and human rights around the world is an important objective for UK aid, particularly in light of widespread democratic backsliding in recent years. We found that the UK's £1.37 billion programming over the 2015 to 2021 period was generally relevant, as a result of good levels of staff expertise, technical guidance, access to evidence, and the ability to adjust activities in response to changes in context and lessons learned. Programmes were able to document useful results, including in difficult political contexts, especially when they operated over longer timeframes. These included making government, political, media or civil society bodies more effective, and improving rights and access to democratic institutions for at-risk groups, such as women and girls, people with disabilities, youth and, to a lesser extent, ethnic or religious minorities and LGBT+ people. Combining aid programming with diplomatic interventions often proved to be particularly effective.

However, UK aid programmes were not always able to address the key challenges identified through analysis, such as assisting journalists, human rights defenders and civil society organisations under threat from government repression. This was due to a combination of factors, such as at times low appetite for fiduciary risks or concern about doing harm to at-risk groups. The need to maintain access to partner governments led to some risk aversion, whereas some other donor countries were more willing to tolerate this risk. Sometimes it was plausible that public criticism by the UK could increase the risk to the individuals.

Repeated disruptions to UK aid since 2020 have affected the relevance and effectiveness of the portfolio, and undermined the promise of greater coherence across development and diplomatic interventions, despite the creation of a merged Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The UK lacks a strategy to operationalise the 2021 Integrated review's democracy and human rights commitments, which makes it more difficult to achieve coherence. In addition, its high policy ambition is not matched by sufficient or predictable budgets as democracy and human rights expenditure was reduced by 33% in 2020. Internationally, the UK government has been influential in donor coordination, through its combination of aid budgets, technical expertise and diplomatic influence. However, a considerable amount of expertise has been lost since the merger, and the UK government's reputation as a thought leader and reliable global actor on democracy and human rights has declined. While we award a green-amber score for the 2015-21 review period, we are concerned that the conditions may no longer be in place to reproduce these results.

## Individual question scores

### Question 1

**Relevance:** Does the UK have a credible approach to using aid to counter threats to democracy and human rights in developing countries?



### Question 2

**Coherence:** How coherent is the UK's approach to countering threats to democracy and human rights?



### Question 3

**Effectiveness:** How well has the UK contributed to countering threats to democracy and human rights?





# Executive summary

The promotion of democracy and human rights is a long-standing objective of the UK aid programme. Democracy and human rights are seen as both valuable in their own right, and a means of promoting other UK development objectives, such as poverty reduction, prosperity and peace.

Globally, democracy and human rights are under increasing pressure. The past 16 years have seen democracy backslide, with more countries becoming authoritarian than democratising. 70% of the world's population now live in countries where governments can be considered authoritarian. There are growing restrictions on civic space – that is, the ability of citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media to organise, express their views and defend human rights.

The purpose of this review is to assess how effectively UK aid has responded to the emergence of new threats to democracy and human rights on the global stage. It assesses UK aid for democracy and human rights between 2015 and 2021, together with related diplomatic engagement. The programming was delivered by the former Department for International Development (DFID) and the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), including through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), and since 2020 by the merged Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). FCDO made democracy and human rights part of its first priority in its 2021-22 *Outcome delivery plan*, highlighting how this required the combination of aid and diplomacy.

Between 2015 and 2021, the UK spent £1.37 billion in aid on support to democratic participation, elections, legislatures and political parties, media, human rights, and women's rights organisations, ranking it among the top ten donors in these areas.

We examine whether the UK has a credible approach to countering threats to democracy and human rights, how coherent its efforts have been – especially between its aid programming and diplomatic engagement – and the effectiveness of its programming. Our methodology included country case studies of the UK efforts in Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania, and four central programmes: the Magna Carta Fund, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Aid Connect and the Open Government Partnership.

## **Relevance: Does the UK have a credible approach to using aid to counter threats to democracy and human rights in developing countries?**

We find that the UK government has correctly identified the most pressing global threats to democracy and human rights. Before 2020, DFID and FCO took different but generally complementary approaches to addressing these threats. DFID had a long-standing commitment to inclusion, supported the poorest, and focused mainly on social and economic rights, rather than civil and political rights. It did not publish democracy or human rights policies, and was usually less explicit in its approach, although it funded relevant central and country programmes which we examine in this review. FCO's objectives around democracy and human rights were more explicit, as part of its commitment to a rules-based international order and the international human rights system. FCO delivered its objectives mainly through time-bound 'campaigns' on priority themes, such as media freedom, and dedicated instruments, such as the £55 million Magna Carta Fund.

However, DFID, FCO and FCDO have seen a rapid turnover of ministers since 2015, with frequent changes in the focus of aid programming and diplomatic engagement. These changes reflect the preferences of different ministers, with some strategic drift after 2019 in particular.

The UK approach is supported by high-quality technical expertise and analysis. DFID governance and social development advisers, in particular, used their in-country networks and diagnostic tools, such as political economy analysis, to understand the threats to democracy and human rights and identify politically feasible solutions. They could also rely on a range of guidance documents, and a limited but growing evidence base funded by central policy and research teams. For its part, FCO offered strong expertise on the international human rights system, and its diplomatic network, in-house researchers and legal advisers.

At the country level, UK aid programmes addressed threats to democracy and human rights by balancing changing ministerial priorities and country analysis. We find that country teams were able to 'localise' their

response – that is, translate UK priorities into locally appropriate themes and identify suitable partner organisations. Nonetheless, UK aid programmes were not always able to respond to the most pressing threats that they identified. In particular, the need to maintain access to partner governments led to some risk aversion.

UK democracy and human rights programmes promoted and protected the rights of people belonging to the most at-risk social groups, in particular women and girls, people with disabilities, and youth. The rights of people belonging to ethnic and religious minorities were prioritised in some countries, but we found few interventions for LGBT+ people – often a politically sensitive issue in partner countries. The £88 million (2012-27) Aawaz programme in Pakistan is a positive exception that promoted the inclusion of transgender people alongside other discriminated groups.

Before 2020, UK aid programmes remained relevant in often dynamic local contexts by adapting well in response to changes and lessons learned. However, since 2020, the portfolio has been less responsive to emerging democracy and human rights challenges, due to budget reductions and loss of technical expertise within FCDO.

Given the strengths of the portfolio for most of the review period, we award a **green-amber** score for relevance, while noting that, since 2020, the portfolio no longer retains its agility to respond to new challenges and deliver on the UK government's high policy ambitions.

## Coherence: How coherent is the UK's approach to countering threats to democracy and human rights?

UK support to democracy and human rights has benefited from complementary development and diplomatic interventions. We found several good examples, such as the UK's active membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council, which was complemented by £45 million in support for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights between 2015 and 2021.

Before the merger, there were adequate coordination processes in place between DFID and FCO, and their distinct approaches were generally complementary. In principle, the merged department should now be better placed to deploy its development and diplomatic tools in tandem, to promote human rights and democracy. In practice, however, this potential is yet to be fully realised. The department has not yet fully reconciled the main differences between the development and diplomatic approaches. Development assistance typically focuses on poverty reduction, has longer timeframes for social and institutional change, and works primarily on locally defined priorities. In contrast, diplomacy tends to operate with shorter timeframes and with a focus on delivering the UK's wider policy objectives.

The lack of an overarching UK policy framework on human rights and democracy makes it more difficult to achieve coherence. In 2021, FCDO started working on an 'open societies' strategy, to operationalise the UK government's *Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*. This was to have been launched in mid-2022 but has not been completed, while a December 2021 speech by the then foreign secretary, Liz Truss, offered a competing geopolitical narrative, based on the idea of a 'network of liberty'. The May 2022 *International development strategy* does not prioritise the theme of 'open societies' but refers to some of its elements such as freedom, democracy and women's rights. None of these three documents offer clear strategic direction on democracy and human rights to FCDO staff, implementing partners and other donors seeking to collaborate with the UK. With the change of foreign secretary in September 2022, discussion of a revision of the *Integrated review*, and further aid budget reductions, there is more uncertainty. In December 2022 the foreign secretary, James Cleverly, did not explicitly mention democracy, human rights, 'open societies' or 'network of liberty' objectives in his speech on a 'network of partnerships', though he reiterated his commitment to democracy and human rights in a video statement on the same day.

The UK reiterated its global commitments to democracy and human rights, such as statements at the G7 in 2021 and the Summit for Democracy in 2022. However, we find that the UK does not have the same level of cross-government implementation as some other donors, such as Sweden and the UN. For example, we did not identify evidence of significant progress through the cross-government open societies strategy board, or otherwise improved coherence of the UK's response to democratic backsliding and the closing of civic space since 2020.

UK aid and diplomatic democracy and human rights interventions were often coordinated with other governments, which enhanced their impact. The UK was a co-founder of both the Open Government Partnership and the Media Freedom Coalition, which helped create or sustained global standards. The UK government has also been influential in donor coordination at country level, through its combination of aid budgets, technical expertise and diplomatic influence.

However, the UK government's reputation as a thought leader and reliable global actor on democracy and human rights has declined in recent years. Over the review period, the UK was a recognised leader on issues such as disability inclusion, the Sustainable Development Goals' promise of 'leaving no one behind', politically informed approaches to development, and evidence on the promotion of some democracy and human rights issues. Since 2020, following aid budget reductions, the lack of a clear strategic framework and the disruption caused by the DFID/FCO merger, the UK is no longer considered a reliable partner or thought leader. In addition, perceptions of declining commitment to democratic and human rights norms within the UK affect the credibility of UK aid and diplomacy abroad. For example, the UK is at risk of being declared an 'inactive' member by the Open Government Partnership, a coalition of 77 countries which assists governments in becoming more transparent, accountable and responsive, and which has received £12.6 million in funding from the UK.

We therefore award an **amber-red** score for coherence, reflecting the unrealised promise of the merger and FCDO's declining international reputation in this field.

## Effectiveness: How well has the UK contributed to countering threats to democracy and human rights?

Democracy and human rights results are both challenging to achieve in repressive political contexts and hard to measure. We found that UK aid programmes improved their approach to measuring results during the period.

A focus on inclusion is a strength of the UK's approach. UK aid helped a range of at-risk groups, in particular women and girls, people with disabilities, and youth, and to a lesser extent minorities and LGBT+ people, to advocate for their rights, combat discrimination, participate in politics and access services.

UK aid also improved the effectiveness and inclusiveness of elections, political parties and parliaments in several countries, with a shift in most programmes away from an institutional capacity development approach and towards a greater focus on nurturing coalitions for change around locally salient democracy and human rights challenges. Over the period, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy noticeably improved its performance, including in the areas of monitoring results and generating evidence.

UK transparency projects opened governments to scrutiny by promoting the publication of information about their activities. However, transparency alone is not enough to secure positive changes in government performance, and UK aid programmes could more consistently support citizens' use of government information to promote accountability.

UK aid helped strengthen human rights organisations at global, regional and country levels. It achieved some encouraging results on media, such as improving the representation of excluded groups or testing sustainable funding models. Programmes would benefit from a more systematic approach combining the protection of media freedoms in the short term with helping the media sector develop over the longer term.

In the countries we examined, the UK government found it challenging to assist journalists, human rights defenders and CSOs under threat from government repression – in part because of fear of damaging its relationships with partner country governments. We note that some other donor countries were more willing to tolerate this risk. Support for civic space has also been affected by the UK's insistence on funding specific activities, rather than offering core funding, which is more useful in helping CSOs withstand pressure from their governments.

Across the portfolio, we found that UK aid programmes achieved good results when they worked with both governments and citizens, focused on locally salient issues, facilitated coalitions and had longer timeframes.

Since 2020, some UK aid programmes delivered less than their potential due to budget reductions during their implementation. UK expenditure for democracy and human rights was reduced by 33% in 2020 and stayed at a

similar level in 2021. In our sample, reprioritisation particularly affected central programmes and the Tanzania portfolio, although the unpredictability of funding has had an impact across UK aid's global portfolio.

Other project management challenges which reduced effectiveness include the short funding cycles and poorer results measurement of the Magna Carta Fund and the CSSF, and long delays in moving from design to implementation for large DFID programmes. The UK government could also improve the links between its central programmes and its country programmes, a weakness which undermined some centrally funded Westminster Foundation for Democracy interventions.

We therefore award a **green-amber** score for effectiveness, in recognition of some strong results over the review period in difficult political contexts, while noting with concern a trend towards programmes becoming less effective since 2020.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

FCDO should set out publicly its approach to democracy and human rights.

### Recommendation 2

FCDO should ensure it retains sufficient expertise, in particular in governance, to design and monitor its democracy and human rights interventions.

### Recommendation 3

FCDO should introduce a leaner process to design and approve smaller programmes, while ensuring that due diligence is sufficient to allow approval for longer than one year.

### Recommendation 4

FCDO should consider whether it can learn from other countries, and take more risks to support individuals and organisations facing the most serious threats from repression.

### Recommendation 5

FCDO should ensure all its central democracy and human rights programmes work closely with its overseas network where democracy and human rights have been prioritised, in particular in the case of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.



# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Democracy and human rights are under pressure globally. A rise in authoritarianism since 2006 has entirely reversed the wave of democratisation that followed the end of the Cold War. Today, 70% of the world's population live in authoritarian regimes, according to the Varieties of Democracy Institute.<sup>1</sup> Most countries have placed new restrictions on 'civic space' – the ability of citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media to organise, express their views and defend human rights.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.2 Promoting and protecting democracy and human rights overseas is a long-standing objective of UK aid, reiterated in the 2015 *UK aid strategy*, the 2021 *Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy* and the 2022 *International development strategy*.<sup>3</sup> The UK government supports liberal democracy, a political system where governments are elected through regular and credible elections, civil and political rights are respected, and parliaments, the media and civil society can hold officials to account. The UK also promotes democratic and human rights principles, which include participation, accountability, transparency, equality and non-discrimination. Democracy and human rights are considered both goals in their own right and a means of promoting other UK aid objectives, such as poverty reduction, prosperity and peace. **Box 1** summarises how they are included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- 1.3 The purpose of this review is to assess how effectively UK aid has responded to the emergence of new threats to democracy and human rights on the global stage. It covers UK aid programming between 2015 and 2021 in the following thematic areas: democratic participation and civil society, legislatures and political parties, elections, human rights, media and free flow of information, and women's rights organisations.<sup>4</sup> It examines how well UK aid policies and programmes reflect human rights and democracy principles, and how they help to protect individuals who belong to social groups at risk of persecution or exclusion, such as LGBT+ people<sup>5</sup> and members of religious and ethnic minorities (hereafter, 'at-risk' social groups).
- 1.4 The UK's efforts to promote democracy and human rights include both aid programming and related diplomatic engagement. The review therefore examines the effects of merging the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 2020 to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It covers UK aid policies and programmes delivered by DFID, FCO and FCDO, including those funded through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund.
- 1.5 The review is built around the evaluation criteria of relevance, coherence and effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> It addresses the questions and sub-questions set out in **Table 1**.

1 *Democracy report 2021: autocratization changing nature?*, V-Dem Institute, 2022, p. 6, [link](#); *Freedom in the world 2022: the global expansion of authoritarian rule*, Freedom House, 2022, p. 1, [link](#).

2 *People power under attack*, CIVICUS Monitor, 2021, p. 6, [link](#).

3 *UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest*, UK government, 2015, [link](#); *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, UK government, 2021, pp. 21-22, [link](#); *The UK government's international development strategy*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022, [link](#).

4 These thematic priorities are based on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) input sector codes used to classify official development assistance spending by official donors, [link](#).

5 The inclusive acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual and other people in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity.

6 Based on OECD DAC evaluation criteria. See *Principles for evaluation of development assistance*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1991, [link](#).

## Box 1: How this report relates to the Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs, otherwise known as the Global Goals, are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.



Democracy and human rights are most directly addressed through Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice, and effective, accountable institutions. Its targets include “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”.<sup>7</sup>

The goals relating to gender equality (SDG 5) and combatting inequalities (SDG 10) are directly linked to human rights.<sup>8</sup> The *2030 agenda for sustainable development* also calls for ‘leaving no one behind’, makes explicit references to the international human rights system and mentions democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Our review questions

Review criteria and questions	Sub-questions
<p><b>1. Relevance:</b> Does the UK have a credible approach to using aid to counter threats to democracy and human rights in developing countries?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent are UK aid programmes based on sound diagnostic analysis, clear theories of change and evidence of ‘what works’?</li> <li>• To what extent are UK aid programmes addressing the most pressing threats to democracy and human rights?</li> <li>• To what extent does UK aid focus on promoting and protecting the rights of the most at-risk groups in each context?</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Coherence:</b> How coherent is the UK’s approach to countering threats to democracy and human rights?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How coherent and coordinated are the UK government institutions involved in influencing and delivering UK aid for democracy and human rights?</li> <li>• To what extent is the UK’s use of aid to promote and protect democracy and human rights coherent with other policy areas and interventions?</li> <li>• How well does UK aid serve as a platform for partnerships and diplomatic engagement at national and international levels?</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Effectiveness:</b> How well has the UK contributed to countering threats to democracy and human rights?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent have UK aid programmes delivered results towards democracy and human rights objectives, and increased access to democracy and human rights for target groups?</li> <li>• How well have UK aid programmes developed institutional capacity for protecting and promoting democracy and human rights at national and international levels?</li> <li>• How well have UK aid programmes partnered with and supported change agents and coalitions at national and international levels?</li> <li>• How well do UK democracy and human rights programmes measure results and adapt in response to changes in context and to learning?</li> </ul>

7 Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations, September 2015, [link](#).

8 Such as SDG 5 (gender), SDG 10 (inequalities) and the SDG principles, [link](#).

9 Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, United Nations, October 2015, p. 2, [link](#).

## 2. Methodology

- 2.1 The methodology for the review involved five components, to compile evidence around the review questions and ensure sufficient triangulation of findings (see **Figure 1**). The components are explained below.
- **Literature review:** We examined 261 sources – both peer-reviewed and grey literature. The literature review examines definitions and measurement issues; global trends, threats and opportunities; and global approaches to using development assistance and diplomacy to support democracy and human rights. It summarises the main strengths, weaknesses and lessons learned from approaches used by different actors across different contexts, while outlining strengths and weaknesses in the evidence base as to ‘what works’.
  - **Strategy review:** We reviewed the UK’s strategies, policies, guidance notes and management systems in relation to the six thematic areas through interviews with UK government officials and a document review. We prepared a financial analysis of the UK’s overall democracy and human rights aid portfolio. We examined how the former Department for International Development (DFID) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) collaborated to leverage aid and diplomatic instruments, and whether a merged Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has developed and is implementing a coherent agenda. We interviewed other donors and experts to compare the UK’s approach to other organisations and to assess the UK’s current global reputation.
  - **Country case studies:** We examined three UK aid country portfolios through document reviews and field visits to Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania. We interviewed UK officials, implementing partners, partner country democracy and human rights actors (such as human rights defenders, women’s activists, journalists and politicians), government officials and independent thematic experts, as well as multilateral organisations and other donor governments. We assessed country strategies, and the relevance and effectiveness of 23 programmes or projects across the six thematic areas in these three countries.
  - **Central programme review:** We examined four priority democracy and human rights organisations or schemes funded from the UK through 19 programmes or projects: the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Open Government Partnership, UK Aid Connect, and the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy.<sup>10</sup> We undertook document reviews and remote interviews with UK officials and implementing partners. We also gathered first-hand evidence from local partners in the three case study countries.
  - **Citizen engagement:** In Pakistan and Tanzania, national partners undertook focus group discussions with a selection of members of at-risk groups who were supported by UK programmes. We collected feedback on whether UK aid programmes responded to their priorities and advanced their access to democracy and rights.
- 2.2 We reviewed 584 documents and interviewed 553 people (see **Figure 2**). A summary of all the programmes and projects we reviewed can be found in **Annex 1**. The limitations to our methodology are summarised in **Box 2**.

### Box 2: Limitations to our methodology

**Scope:** Democracy and human rights cover many themes and delivery mechanisms. We excluded rule of law and anti-corruption, which are closely related topics, because ICAI had previously reviewed them. We did not systematically review all economic, social and cultural rights, as some of them are considered in other ICAI reviews, for example on education and modern slavery. We did not consider how UK aid prioritised the poorest groups. We also excluded funding for the BBC World Service, although we did include the BBC’s charity, BBC Media Action.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The name given to FCO funding for democracy and human rights changed almost annually during the review period. We focused on the ‘Magna Carta Fund’ and use that version as a shorthand, although it is now part of the International Programme Fund. We excluded related FCO ‘rules-based international system’ funding which had some human rights objectives.

<sup>11</sup> *Review of UK development assistance for security and justice*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2015, [link](#); *DFID’s approach to anti-corruption and its approach on the poor*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2014, [link](#); *Assessing UK aid’s results in education*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2020, [link](#); *The UK’s approach to tackling modern slavery through the aid programme*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2020, [link](#).

**Sample representativeness:** Our analysis is based on three country case studies, selected for regional diversity and to cover all six thematic areas of interest, as well as a sample of global initiatives and centrally managed programmes. The sample may not be fully representative of the diverse approaches and contexts in which the UK provides aid for democracy and human rights.

**Data availability:** FCDO was not able to share the same degree of information for Magna Carta Fund and Conflict, Stability and Security Fund projects (which were mostly managed by the former FCO), compared to former DFID programmes. As the review period covered seven years, key informant interviews for the early part of the period were more difficult to arrange or generated less reliable data.

Figure 1: Our methodology

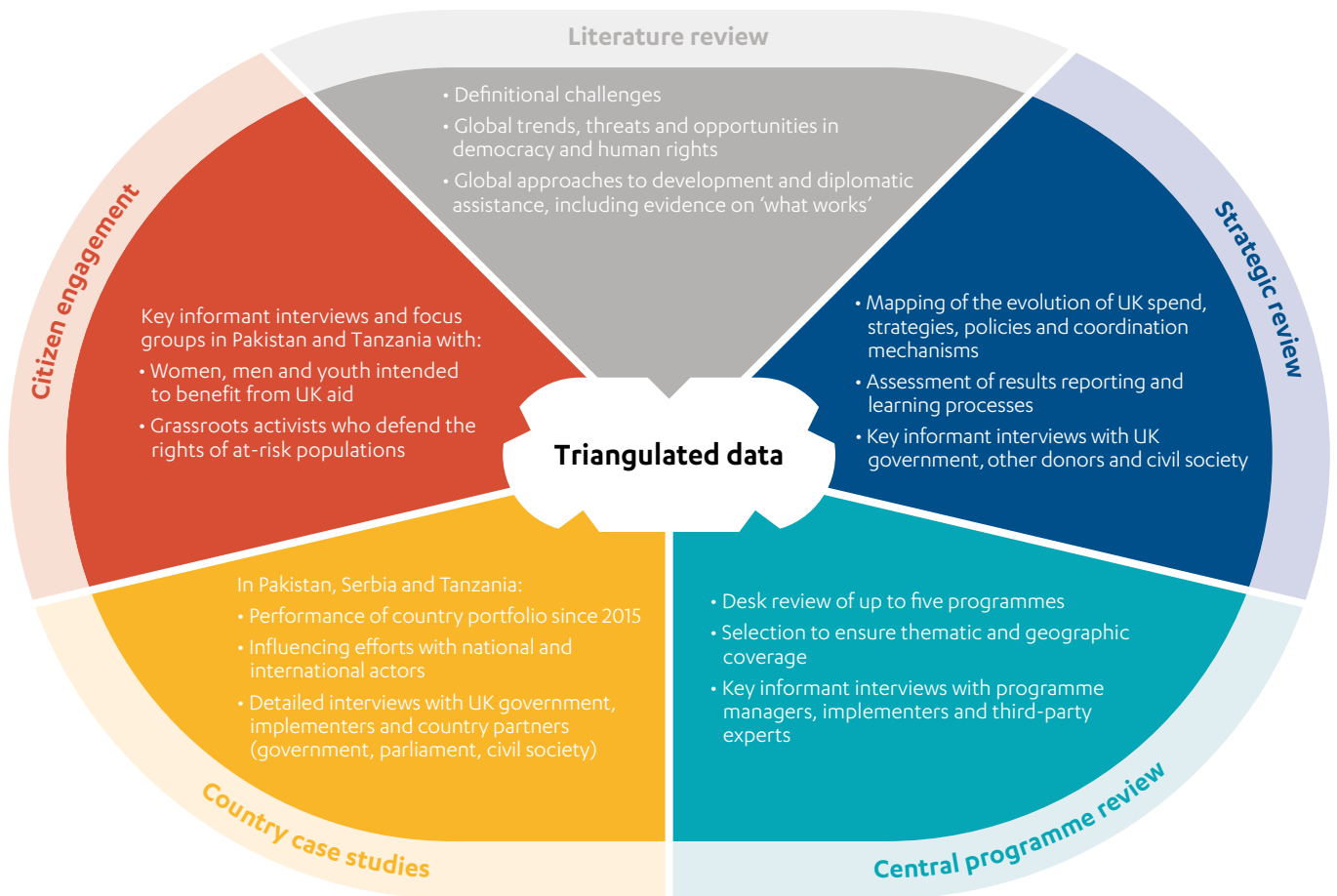
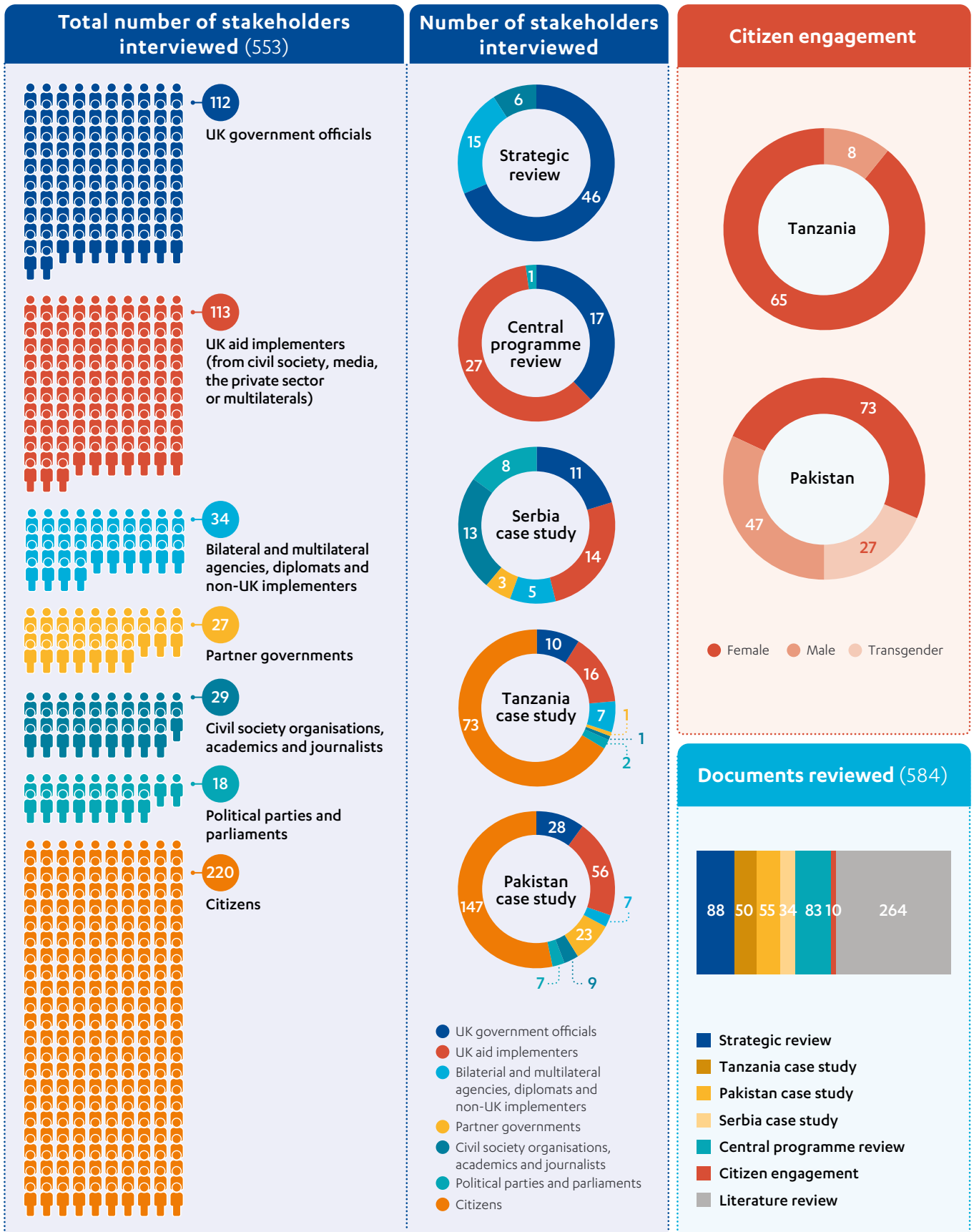


Figure 2: Number of stakeholders interviewed and documents reviewed

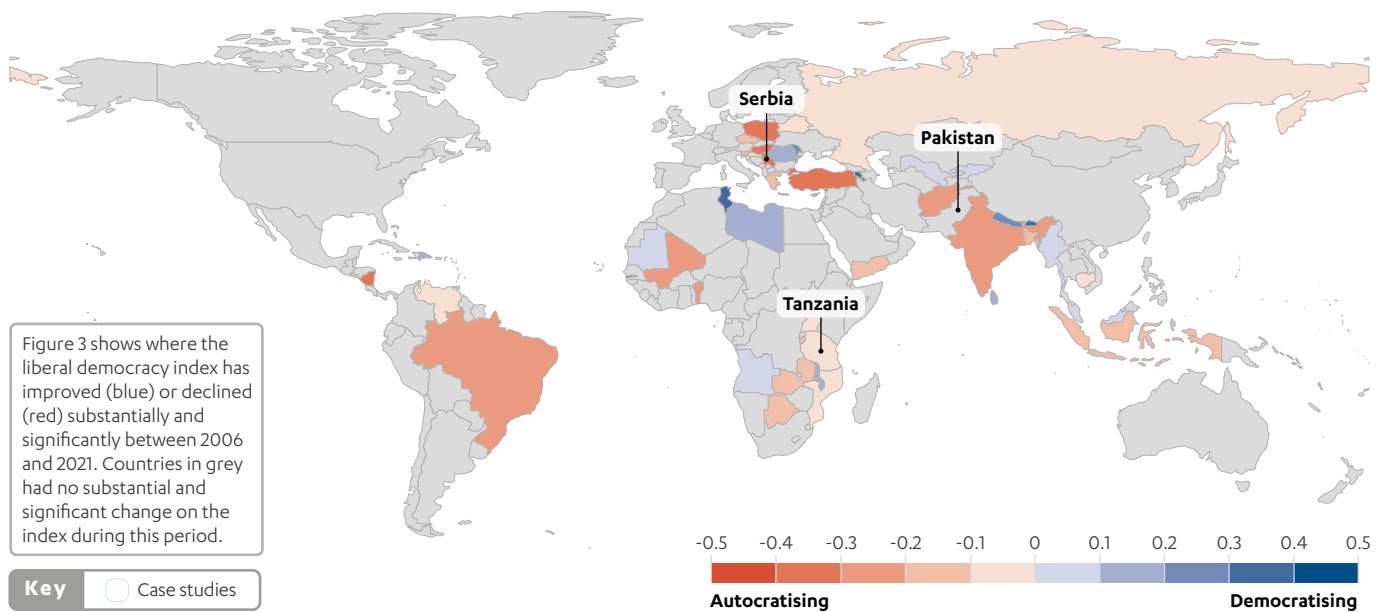


# 3. Background

## Threats to democracy and human rights

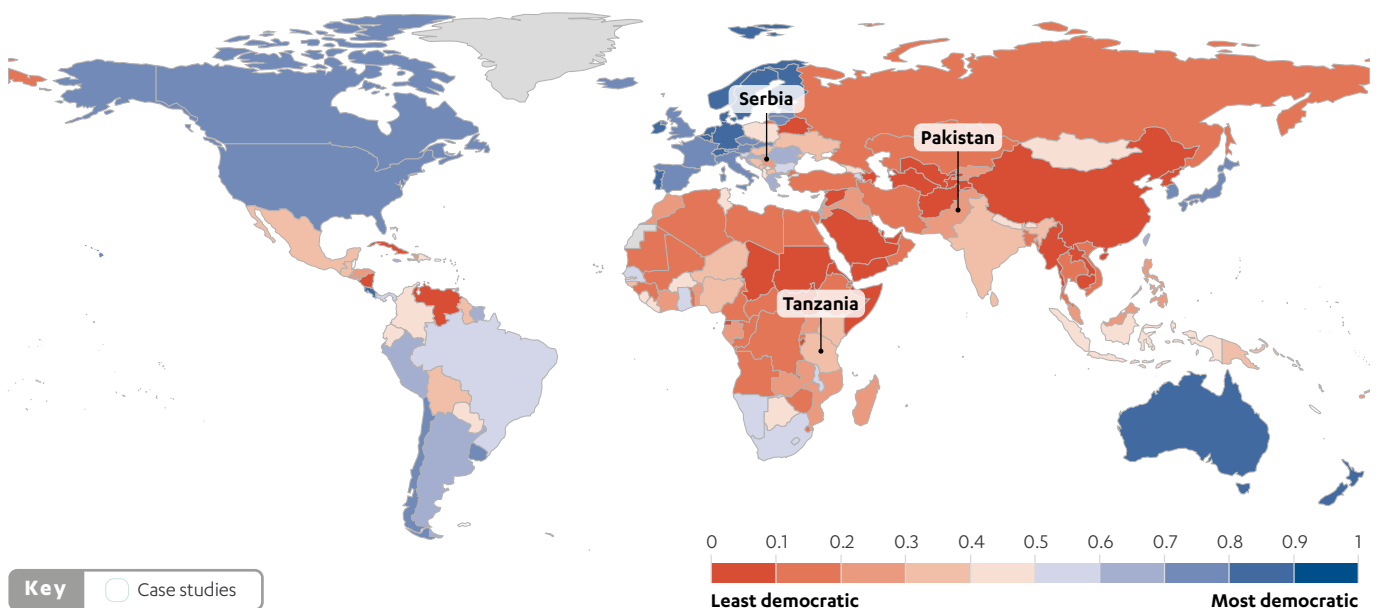
3.1 There is a broad consensus that democracy and human rights have faced increased pressure globally over the last 16 years, a trend referred to as ‘democratic backsliding’. The number of liberal democracies in the world peaked at 42 in 2012 and has now fallen to 34, representing 13% of the world’s population. The share of the global population living in countries that are becoming less democratic has increased from 5% in 2011 to 36% in 2021.<sup>12</sup> Using Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute data, **Figure 3** shows that more countries became authoritarian than democratic between 2006 and 2021, including Serbia and Tanzania, while **Figure 4** gives a snapshot of current levels of democracy, with Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania all assessed as ‘electoral autocracies’.

Figure 3: Autocratisation trends (2006-21)



Source: V-Dem country-year dataset v12, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2022, [link](#).

Figure 4: Liberal democracy index (2021)



Source: *Democracy report 2022, Autocratisation changing nature?*, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, 2022, p12, [link](#).

12 V-Dem country-year dataset v12, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2022, [link](#). V-Dem now classifies India as an “electoral autocracy”, which has significantly increased the percentage of people who live in non-democratic countries.



- 3.2 Globally, there have been growing restrictions on civic space through laws that control the funding and activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as censorship and intimidation of journalists and media houses. In 2021, the CIVICUS monitoring network assessed that 117 out of 197 countries had serious civic space restrictions. Compared with 2020, civic space ratings had deteriorated in 13 countries and only improved in one. The most affected civil society groups are those advocating for women, environmental rights, labour rights, LGBT+ people and youth.<sup>13</sup>
- 3.3 Our literature review identified other threats to democracy and human rights.<sup>14</sup> In countries that are becoming less democratic, power is increasingly concentrated in the president or prime minister. There are uncompetitive or fraudulent elections, restrictions on opposition politicians, a weakening of checks and balances (for example, through political control of the judiciary) and, in some countries, the forcible removal of civilian leaders from power by the military. The COVID-19 pandemic was another source of restrictions on civil liberties (such as curfews or social distancing).
- 3.4 There has also been a rise in the number of populist leaders who see themselves as directly accountable to the people, disregard institutions such as parliaments or courts, and exacerbate social tensions. This can be accompanied by growing political polarisation, fed by disinformation campaigns, leading to a decline in tolerance for opposing political views. In some countries, political disengagement and complacency about the benefits of democracy have contributed to autocratisation. Emboldened autocrats resist foreign criticisms, in particular from Western governments, and learn from one another, such as by copying restrictive media and civil society laws, in order to reduce public accountability and silence critics.
- 3.5 Economic factors have also undermined democracy and human rights, including the capture of the state by economic elites to promote their interests; pronounced inequalities, which prevent poorer citizens from participating fully in politics; and disruptions, such as those caused by global financial crises.
- 3.6 This review does not cover economic or private sector development programmes that address these economic and financial threats to democracy and human rights.

## ‘What works’ in the promotion of democracy and human rights

- 3.7 Support for democracy and human rights is a sensitive area for international development partners, as these issues are at the heart of national sovereignty. External support is justified on the grounds that international human rights agreements represent a global consensus.<sup>15</sup> Legally binding global or regional treaties constitute the international human rights system. However, this system is under increasing pressure from governments that reject foreign interference in domestic affairs. There are also long-standing concerns that democracy and human rights represent ‘Western values’, despite near-universal membership of the treaties.
- 3.8 There are many ways in which development organisations can support democracy and human rights, including through: policy dialogue with governments; technical assistance for the preparation and implementation of policies, laws or regulations; funding and monitoring of elections; organisational development and training of parliaments, political parties, electoral commissions, human rights commissions, media and civil society organisations (CSOs), including women’s rights organisations; and programmes designed to influence social norms and values, and change behaviours, such as in relation to the rights of women or minorities.
- 3.9 The evidence on ‘what works’ to support democracy and human rights is limited. Our literature review summarises some of the main insights.<sup>16</sup> It finds that democracy assistance can increase the prospect of democratic outcomes, but that the political context in partner countries determines the extent to which

<sup>13</sup> CIVICUS monitor, 2021, p. 6 and p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Democracy and human rights literature review*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2022, available on the ICAI website, [link](#).

<sup>15</sup> The ‘international bill of rights’ comprises the 1948 *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*, [link](#), the 1966 *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, [link](#), and the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, [link](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Democracy and human rights literature review*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2022, available on the ICAI website, [link](#).

aid will be effective. It is therefore particularly important to design flexible programmes that analyse and respond to country dynamics, understand who has the power to support or block change, and avoid imposing foreign blueprints. This approach is known as ‘thinking and working politically’). In closed political contexts, it can be challenging for donors and diplomats to collaborate with state authorities, and foreign funding for non-state organisations is restricted. Innovative approaches tailored to the context are therefore needed.

- 3.10 Some development partners use implicit or indirect approaches, such as efforts to promote participation, transparency and accountability, without mentioning human rights or political reforms. This is the approach preferred by the World Bank and some other multilateral development banks, which have apolitical mandates. By contrast, human rights-based approaches, as promoted by the UN, the EU and some donor countries, such as Sweden or Denmark, are more explicit. They see human rights as constitutive of development and seek to mainstream human rights considerations across all aspects of development and foreign policy, as well as through dedicated programmes. The literature review finds growing evidence that mainstreaming human rights is an effective approach, which can also boost poverty reduction and improve links between states and their citizens.
- 3.11 Diplomatic action can complement development assistance through positive measures, such as giving public platforms to human rights defenders or rewarding governments that demonstrate a sustained commitment to democracy and rights. Negative measures include international prosecutions and sanctions for those who commit gross human rights violations, or aid conditionality (the threat of reducing foreign aid or trade benefits in response to electoral fraud or systematic human rights violations). For diplomatic action to be successful, messages must be adjusted to the country context, represent a unified international position, and be consistent with respect for democracy and human rights in the diplomats’ home countries.<sup>17</sup>

### The UK government’s approach to democracy and human rights

- 3.12 The UK government regularly makes high-level commitments on democracy and human rights (see **Box 3**). They are seen as UK values to be promoted, both to defend the UK’s national interest and as underpinning development in partner countries.
- 3.13 The UK government uses the concept of ‘open societies’ as an umbrella term covering both democracy and human rights, along with the rule of law, free trade and property rights. This framing is not used by other development organisations.

<sup>17</sup> *Democracy and human rights literature review*, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2022, available on the ICAI website, [link](#).



### Box 3: UK government high-level policy commitments 2015-22

In the 2015 *Aid strategy* the UK government undertook to continue to promote the ‘golden thread’ of democracy, rule of law, property rights, a free media and open, accountable institutions. This included promoting democracy through specific institutions, such as the Commonwealth, and in specific countries, such as Myanmar’s democratic transition.<sup>18</sup>

In its 2019 *Governance position paper*, DFID stated that: “Open, inclusive, accountable governance is fundamental to delivering sustainable development and tackling global challenges. And it supports our national interest by contributing to international prosperity, security, and the rules-based international system.” One of its shifts was: “Being confident in our values – focusing on the beneficiaries of our work and ensuring that respect for dignity, human rights, democracy and equality are reflected in the choices we make.”<sup>19</sup>

The 2021 *Integrated review* set out how the UK would be a “force for good” in the world by supporting open societies and defending human rights, reversing the decline in global freedoms by strengthening UK domestic governance and working with allies, like-minded partners and civil society to protect democratic values, “tailoring our approach to meet local needs and combining our diplomacy, development, trade, security and other tools accordingly”. Priorities included: universal human rights, including a new global human rights sanctions regime; gender equality; effective and transparent governance, robust democratic institutions and the rule of law; freedom of religion or belief; press and media freedom; and ending the practice of arbitrary arrests and detention or sentencing of foreign nationals.<sup>20</sup>

The 2021-22 *FCDO Outcome delivery plan* includes “promoting human rights and democracy” as part of its first objective, which is to “shape the international order and ensure the UK is a force for good in the world”.<sup>21</sup>

The December 2021 foreign secretary’s ‘network of liberty’ speech no longer prioritised ‘open societies’. Instead, it set out freedom and democracy as a geopolitical vision of like-minded liberal democracies collaborating on security and trade: “When we put freedom first, we all benefit. The more freedom-loving countries trade with each other, build security links, invest in our partners and pull more countries into the orbit of freedom, the safer and freer we all are.”<sup>22</sup>

The 2022 *International development strategy* made a commitment to furthering “UK ideals, standing up for freedom around the world and supporting countries to plan for their own sustained, long-term progress and resilience”. This included support for “effective institutions” which underpin development: “from functioning markets to a free press and from a credible central bank to fair courts. Open and accountable institutions ensure systems work for everyone.” Beyond the prioritisation of women and girls, the strategy did not make democracy and human rights an explicit priority to the same extent as the *Integrated review* or the *Outcome delivery plan*.<sup>23</sup>

The UK government used multilateral events, such as the G7 in 2021 and the Summit for Democracy in 2022, to reiterate its commitments to democracy and human rights.<sup>24</sup>

On 12 December 2022, the foreign secretary made two speeches. In a video statement, he reaffirmed his commitments to human rights and democracy. By contrast, there were no references to democracy, human rights, ‘open societies’ or ‘network of liberty’ objectives in the main speech setting out his aim “to revive old friendships and build new ones, reaching far beyond our long-established alliances” by “developing clear, compelling and consistent UK offers, tailored to their needs and our strengths, spanning trade, development, defence, cyber security, technology, climate change and environmental protection.”<sup>25</sup>

18 *UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest*, HM Treasury and Department for International Development, 2015, [link](#).

19 *Governance for growth, inclusion and inclusive development*, position paper, Department for International Development, 2019, p. 3, [link](#).

20 *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, UK government, 2021, pp. 47-48, [link](#).

21 *FCDO outcome delivery plan: 2021 to 2022*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, July 2021, [link](#).

22 *Building the network of liberty*, speech by foreign secretary Elizabeth Truss at Chatham House, 8 December 2021, [link](#).

23 *The UK government’s international development strategy*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022, p. 4 and p. 21, [link](#).

24 *G7 open societies statement*, July 2021, [link](#) and UK support to Summit for Democracy, February 2022, [link](#).

25 *Human rights day speech*, video statement by foreign secretary James Cleverly, 12 December 2022, [link](#) and *British foreign policy and diplomacy*, speech by foreign secretary James Cleverly, 12 December 2022, [link](#).

## The UK aid democracy and human rights portfolio

- 3.14 We reviewed the UK aid democracy and human rights portfolio across six thematic spending areas (see **Table 2** for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) definitions). Between 2015 and 2021 (the last calendar year for which official data is available), total UK aid expenditure was £1.37 billion.<sup>26</sup>
- 3.15 Between 2015 and 2021, the Department for International Development (DFID) was responsible for 61% of the expenditure, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for 14%. The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund funded 15% of programmes (mostly implemented by FCO), and other departments or funds only accounted for 3%.<sup>27</sup> The first year of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in 2021 represents 8% of spend over the period (see **Figure 5**).
- 3.16 Democratic participation and civil society is the largest UK thematic area (36%), followed by human rights (24%) and women's rights organisations (16%). These cover a broad range of activities, usually through CSOs or specialised governmental bodies. Direct democracy assistance represents a smaller share, with funding for elections (13%), and legislatures and political parties (4%). Media and free flow of information interventions (7%) are relevant for both democracy and human rights (see **Figure 6**).
- 3.17 Following an increase in annual expenditure since 2015 (with a dip in 2018), 2020 saw a reduction of 32.8% (from £220 million to £148 million), as part of the reductions to the overall UK aid budget during COVID-19 (see **Figure 7**). This is broadly in line with reductions faced by other sectors and thematic areas. Spending remained at a similar level in 2021. Overall UK aid for democracy and human rights increased from 1.1% to 1.4% of total UK official development assistance (ODA) in 2021, indicating some prioritisation relative to other thematic areas, but it was not back to its highest level of 1.7% of ODA in 2015 at the start of our review period (see **Figure 10**).
- 3.18 While the UK reduced its expenditure over the period, OECD DAC donors spending increased slightly (see **Figure 8**). Compared with other bilateral and multilateral donors, the UK is a relative leader in democracy assistance. The UK consistently ranks among the top ten donors for each thematic area during the 2015-20 period. Including BBC World Service funding, the UK provided the second-highest amount for media and free flow of information, with Germany providing the highest. The UK was the third-highest donor for assistance to legislatures and political parties (behind the US and Sweden) and elections (behind the US and the EU), the fourth-highest for women's rights organisations and the sixth-highest for both democratic participation and human rights.

<sup>26</sup> We excluded £525 million allocated to the BBC World Service (included under 'the media and free flow of information'), as it is best characterised as 'media diplomacy' which projects the UK's soft power, rather than development expenditure.

<sup>27</sup> Other government departments include the Home Office, the Prosperity Fund, the Scottish government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Ministry of Defence. Scottish government funding is included to ensure consistency with UK aid statistics but has not been reviewed as it is outside ICAI's mandate.

Table 2: Six thematic areas examined through the review's sample portfolio

Spending area	Definition	Examples from the review's sample portfolio
<b>Democratic participation and civil society</b>	Support to the exercise of democracy and diverse forms of citizen participation beyond elections.	This covers a range of civil society initiatives, including stand-alone programmes such as the Accountability in Tanzania 2 programme (2017-22) or Aid Connect consortia. This can also refer to components of sector programmes such as education in Pakistan (which was not reviewed).
<b>Elections</b>	Electoral management bodies and processes, election observation, voter education.	UK election support is often delivered through United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) multi-donor trust funds, for example for the 2015 Tanzania elections or assistance to the Electoral Commission in Pakistan. In Serbia, the UK funded civil society elections observation.
<b>Legislatures and political parties</b>	Assistance to strengthen key functions of legislatures / parliaments. Assistance to political parties and strengthening of party systems.	This is the most sensitive form of political assistance and also the smallest for the UK and OECD DAC donors. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy is a UK non-statutory public body dedicated to assisting parliaments and political parties. Within our sample, UNDP, local NGOs and private sector companies also delivered interventions.
<b>Media and free flow of information</b>	Activities that support free and uncensored flow of information on public issues. Activities that increase the editorial and technical skills and the integrity of the print and broadcast media.	UK programmes include the Open Government Partnership, a global network of countries committed to transparency. Aid Connect funded two civil society consortia: Aswat Horra to promote freedom of expression in the Middle East and North Africa, and Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation in Kenya, Malawi and Myanmar.
<b>Human rights</b>	Measures to support specialised official human rights institutions which promote and protect civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights as defined in international conventions and covenants. Human rights defenders and NGOs. Human rights programming targeting specific groups.	In the UK aid portfolio, human rights are an element both of larger programmes (which may collaborate with some human rights institutions or support the rights of specific groups, such as Aawaz in Pakistan), and of targeted projects. We reviewed targeted Magna Carta Fund projects, such as support to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the activities of NGOs such as Reprieve, which combats the death penalty with national partners in Pakistan and Malawi, and A11, a Serbian human rights NGO.
<b>Women's rights organisations</b>	Support for feminist, women-led and women's rights organisations and movements, and institutions (governmental and non-governmental).	This is often a component of both democracy and human rights programmes, such as support for women's registration to vote or collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to combat child labour or gender-based violence in the Pakistan Aawaz programme.

Figure 5: UK thematic ODA expenditure by department or cross-government fund, 2015-21

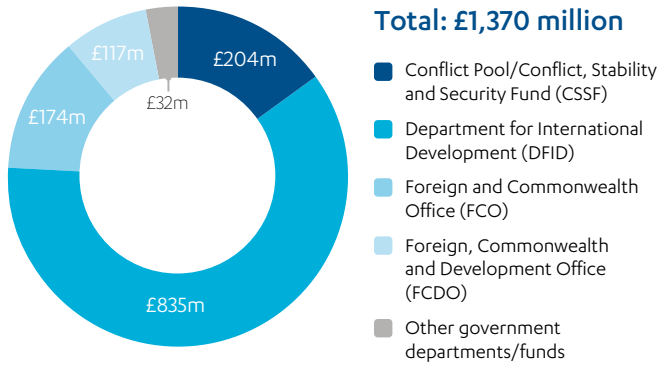
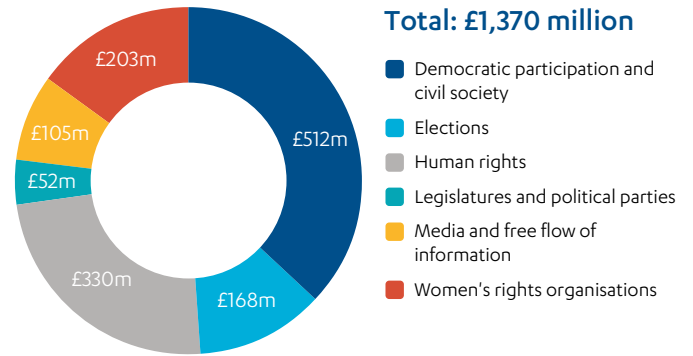


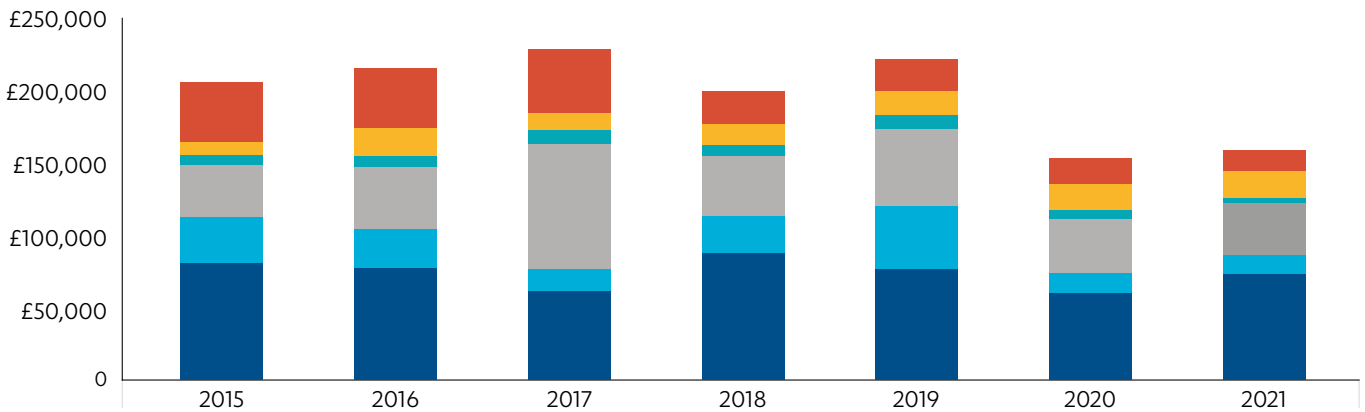
Figure 6: UK ODA expenditure by thematic spending area 2015-21



Note: DFID and FCO funding for 2015-20; FCDO funding for 2021 only; all others for 2015-21.

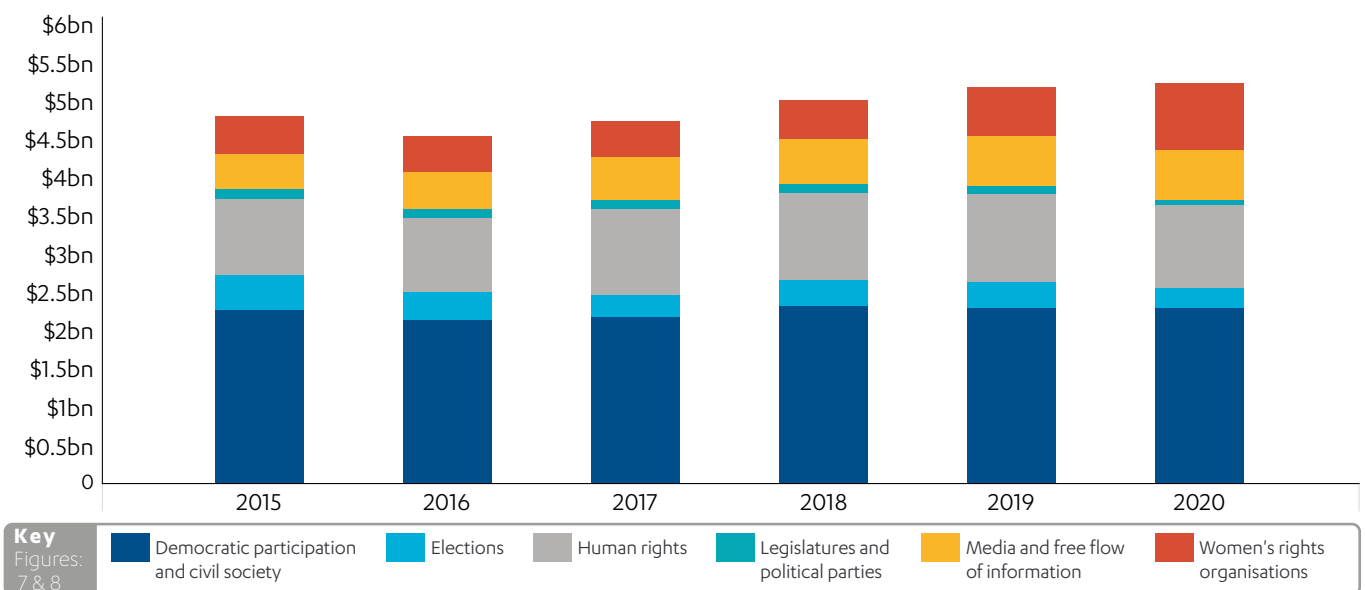
Source: *Statistics in International Development*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2015-21, [link](#).

Figure 7: UK ODA thematic expenditure trends 2015-21



Source: *Statistics in International Development*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2015-21, [link](#).

Figure 8: OECD DAC bilateral and multilateral donor thematic expenditure trends 2015-20



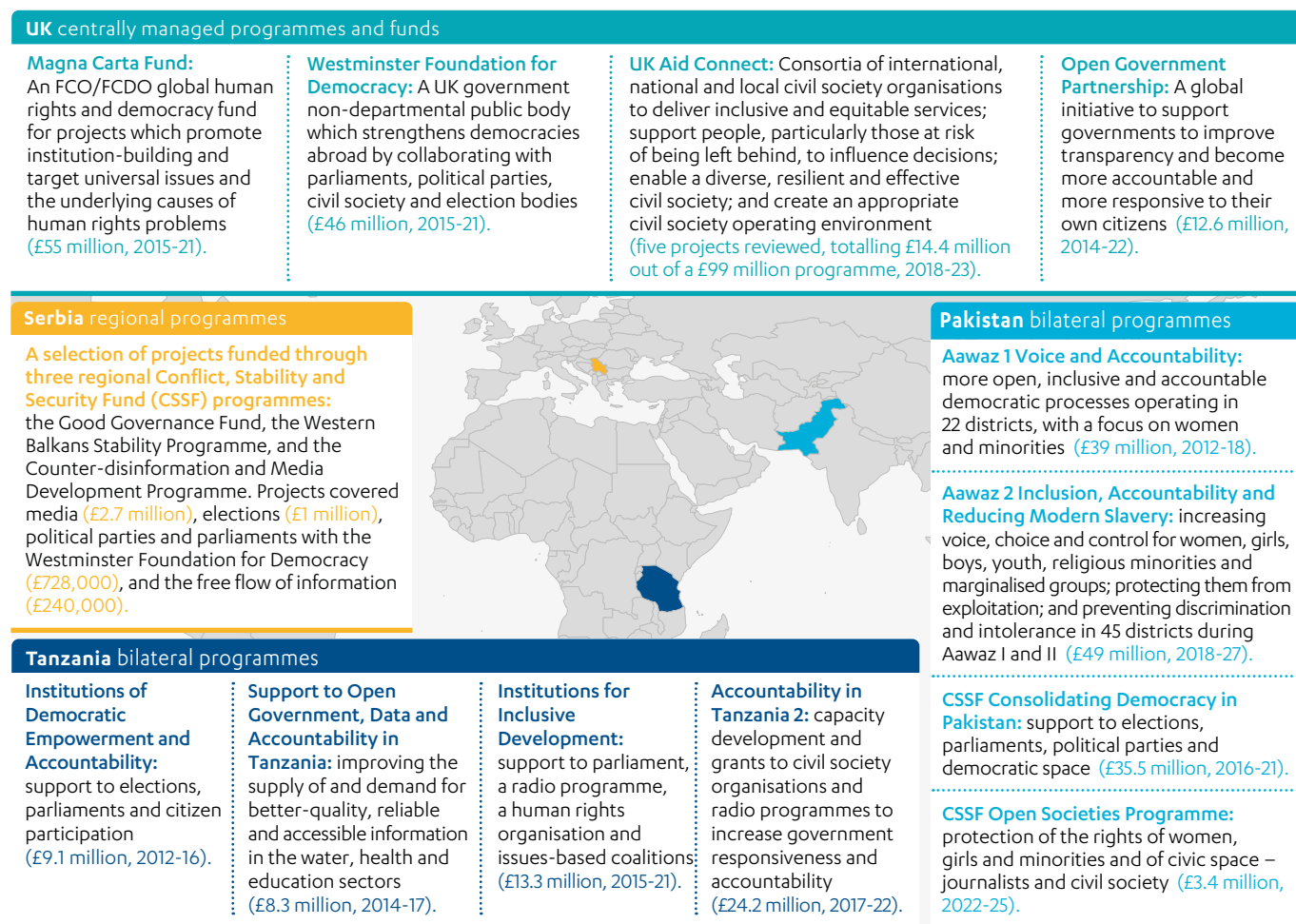
**Key**  
 Figures: 7 & 8

- Democratic participation and civil society
- Elections
- Human rights
- Legislatures and political parties
- Media and free flow of information
- Women's rights organisations

Source: *Creditor Reporting System*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed November 2022, [link](#).

3.19 We reviewed 21 programmes operating at a central level, and in Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania. The total budget of our sample is £245.7 million.<sup>28</sup> **Figure 9** provides a summary of the portfolio, with more details in **Annex 1**.

**Figure 9: Overview of the reviewed sample of programmes**



28 We reviewed 46 individual projects and programmes, but we treated as a single programme series of related projects with the same organisation, or successive phases of the same programme. The total programme budget includes expenditure which was not allocated to the six thematic areas.

## 4. Findings

### Relevance: Does the UK have a credible approach to using aid to counter threats to democracy and human rights in developing countries?

#### The UK government has correctly identified the main global threats to democracy and human rights, but its high-level commitments have suffered from some strategic drift, particularly after 2019

- 4.1 **Box 3** summarises the UK government’s main democracy and human rights commitments over the seven-year period covered by our review. They cover a range of thematic areas that were consistent with both ongoing and new threats to democracy and human rights, such as persistent exclusion and discrimination as barriers to poverty reduction, and restrictions on civil and political rights, which are the backbone of liberal democracy. However, they remain at a very high level. Only a few themes during the period, such as gender and governance, benefited from dedicated published strategies.
- 4.2 The former Department for International Development (DFID) and Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had different approaches towards democracy and human rights.
- DFID had a long-standing commitment to inclusion and non-discrimination, ‘leave no one behind’ in reference to the poorest and most excluded, women’s and girls’ empowerment, and gender equality as strategies for poverty reduction and prosperity. DFID did not publish democracy or human rights policies and was usually not explicit in its promotion of democracy and human rights, as it often had to collaborate with governments with poor records in those areas in order to implement development programmes. DFID chose to prioritise social and economic rights in its policies, such as the right to education or labour standards, over political and civil rights. It was more comfortable referring to the more neutral-sounding principles of ‘open’, ‘accountable’, ‘inclusive’, or ‘transparent’ governance, rather than democracy, which could be interpreted as imposing a Western political model.
  - FCO’s approach to democracy and human rights as foreign policy objectives was part of its commitment to a rules-based international order, including the international human rights system, where FCO represented the UK. Although it had no formal policy document on the subject, FCO’s annual human rights and democracy reports set out its thematic areas and countries of concern (including Pakistan, one of our case studies). DFID added information on its priority themes and programmes in these annual FCO reports. FCO and now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) deliver time-bound central ‘campaigns’ on themes selected by foreign secretaries. FCO’s main UK aid instruments were the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the Magna Carta Fund, whose budget doubled in 2016.
- 4.3 DFID and FCO approaches can be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory. Thanks to its human rights and legal advisers, FCO had a better understanding of the legal dimension of human rights, including the obligations of state actors. DFID programmes worked to empower the poorest and members of at-risk social groups to claim their rights and hold governments to account through political, media or social channels.
- 4.4 The preferences of UK prime ministers have shaped UK aid priorities on democracy and human rights. For example, David Cameron championed ‘open societies’, while Theresa May paid special attention to ‘modern slavery’, which she had also prioritised as home secretary.
- 4.5 DFID, FCO and FCDO have seen a rapid turnover of ministers: there have been six international development secretaries of state (SoS) between 2015 and 2020, six foreign secretaries between 2015 and 2022, and two ministers of state for development in 2022. This has resulted in frequent changes in the focus of central priorities and programmes, reflecting the preferences of different ministers.
- 4.6 For example, under SoS Justine Greening (2012-16), democracy and human rights were conceptualised by DFID in terms of processes of ‘empowerment and accountability’, which would enable poor and excluded people to gain ‘voice, choice and control’. This framing was no longer used under SoS Priti Patel (2016-17), who was sceptical of media programmes and ended core funding for civil society organisations (CSOs). DFID central initiatives instead focused on specific rights or principles, such as



people with disabilities, a new objective introduced under Priti Patel. This continued under SoS Penny Mordaunt (2017-19), who also prioritised transparency and media freedoms.

- 4.7 FCO/FCDO similarly pursued different ministerial thematic interests over the review period. For example, as foreign secretary, Boris Johnson (2016-18) prioritised girls' education and LGBT+ rights, whereas media freedom and freedom of religion or belief (especially in terms of the persecution of Christians) became campaigns under foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt (2018-19). Foreign secretary Dominic Raab (2019-21) continued these themes. There was increased funding and staffing on LGBT+ issues but the campaign faced political challenges, such as repeated delays and then the cancellation of the 'Safe To Be Me' global conference in 2022.<sup>29</sup>
- 4.8 DFID/FCDO relies on its governance and social development advisory cadres to analyse global and country contexts, identify emerging threats and opportunities, and design relevant strategies and programmes. These cadres provide complementary technical perspectives; while the former looks at institutions, the latter puts people at the heart of their analysis. Both perspectives are needed to ensure that citizens can claim their rights and state authorities can better respond to their demands. FCO/FCDO human rights advisers and research analysts provide expertise in international legal standards, the workings of the multilateral system, and individual country contexts.
- 4.9 In 2019 alone, DFID had three secretaries of state and FCO two foreign secretaries, which contributed to some strategic drift from that time onwards, as no strategic direction was agreed for long enough to be operationalised. For example, despite the 2021 *Integrated review* commitments or the December 2021 'network of liberty' speech, in December 2022 the foreign secretary did not explicitly mention democracy, human rights, 'open societies' or 'network of liberty' objectives as part of his new UK foreign policy offer.
- 4.10 In the Coherence section, we review how FCDO attempted to bring together DFID and FCO approaches under an 'open societies' framing.

### The UK approach is supported by high-quality technical expertise, diagnostic tools and analysis

- 4.11 DFID diagnostics included mandatory country-level political economy analyses to inform country strategies, and the approach is still used by FCDO in sectoral or issues-based analyses. These enable advisers to understand why democracy and specific rights are under threat and to propose politically feasible solutions (an approach known as 'thinking and working politically'). Our interviews with other donor agencies and independent experts indicate that DFID was seen as a thought leader in this more politically informed approach to development challenges.
- 4.12 When designing programmes, advisers can also rely on guidance notes prepared by central teams, such as the 2018 joint DFID/FCO guide on assistance to parliaments and political parties, the 2019 *Gender How to Note* or the 2021 *Disability Inclusion How to Note*. However, central guidance was not always produced in a timely way. For example, the UK government correctly identified closing civic space as a new challenge, but as ICAI's 2019 civil society partnership review<sup>30</sup> found, it has been slow to respond with central guidance. FCDO only issued its toolkit on the subject in 2022.

“ The strengths of DFID had to do with the fact that the organisation contained a lot of sophisticated thinking about development. Its agenda was well-grounded empirically and there was a lot of commitment in DFID to research/evidence. It was impressive. People were searching for answers in a serious way. It was a culture of thinking and applying thinking to action. The quality of DFID personnel was high in terms of intellectual capacity and professional success. ”

Implementing partner

29 The conference was boycotted by non-governmental organisations to mark their opposition to the UK government's transgender conversion therapy. See 'Safe to be me' LGBT conference cancelled after boycott', BBC news, 5 April 2022, [link](#).

30 DFID's partnership with civil society organisations, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2019, [link](#).

- 4.13 At the beginning of the review period, there was limited evidence of ‘what works’ to promote democracy and human rights, especially in the context of democratic backsliding and closing civic space. DFID rightly invested in improving the evidence base. DFID’s policy departments funded relevant research with universities and think tanks. Policy teams, heads of profession and the chief economist’s office produced evidence guides and value for money ‘best buys’, including on social accountability, elections, democracy, information and inclusion. During the review period, an external resource centre responded to staff queries and produced topic and learning guides.
- 4.14 DFID also invested in research programmes that generated evidence on aspects of the democracy and human rights agenda. For example, the Action for Empowerment and Accountability programme (£6.3 million, 2016-21), based at the Institute for Development Studies in the UK, examined social and political action in fragile and conflict-affected countries. There is some evidence that UK aid-funded research influenced some country programmes, but it has not been central to FCDO’s ‘open societies’ strategy development. DFID’s Research and Evidence Division (RED) framed the governance and development agenda more broadly than democracy and human rights. It was only following the merger, in 2022, that RED commissioned an evidence gap review on freedom and democracy and an evidence assessment on international norms and rules. FCO did not commission external evidence on ‘what works’ to support change to the same extent as DFID.

**UK aid interventions addressed the most important threats to democracy and human rights by balancing changing ministerial priorities and country analysis, but the need to maintain access to governments has caused some risk aversion**

- 4.15 We find that DFID central programmes responded appropriately both to ministerial thematic priorities and to threats and opportunities identified in individual countries. For example, Aid Connect (£99 million, 2017-24) funded civil society coalitions on a multi-annual basis, including on the central campaign themes of media freedom and freedom of religion or belief in countries or regions where they were most at risk, including in Pakistan, North Africa and the Middle East. The Magna Carta Fund (£55 million, 2015-21) requested proposals from across the FCO/FCDO network on centrally determined themes, such as media freedom, LGBT+ rights and the death penalty. FCO/FCDO teams then sought to develop one-year projects with their local partners or international organisations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Central programmes, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, were not always a priority for DFID country teams, which had the resources to fund country-based priorities, but they offered a useful source of funding and diplomatic access for FCO teams.
- 4.16 Central and country programmes made good use of local research and undertook consultations, for example with CSOs working with at-risk groups. National staff working within UK country teams were a key resource, given their local knowledge, extensive networks with state and non-state partners, and their longer period in post than UK-based advisers.

“ Before Aawaz, our voices were not heard. Our demands would get lost and, in the end, would not be catered to. ”

Religious minority participant, Mansehra focus group discussion, Pakistan

“ CHAVITA has sensitised the police and hospital through media on how to address the challenges that Deaf people face when trying to communicate with them. ”

Deaf participant, Dar es Salaam focus group discussion, Tanzania



- 4.17 As country programmes were designed around ministerial priorities, country teams had to ‘localise’ their response – that is, translate UK priorities into locally appropriate themes and identify the most suitable partner organisations. See **Box 4** for an example from Pakistan.

#### Box 4: Adapting central priorities to the local context in Pakistan

The first phase of the Aawaz programme in Pakistan (£39 million, 2012-18) focused on voice, accountability and inclusion of at-risk groups. Its second phase (£49 million, 2018-27) was required to also address modern slavery, a UK priority since the 2015 UK Modern Slavery Act. The DFID country team worked with local CSOs to unpack the elements of modern slavery in Pakistan. They identified child labour, child and forced marriage and gender-based violence, which were prevalent and were better understood by local stakeholders than the term ‘modern slavery’. They concluded that highlighting health risks would be a better entry point to campaign against child marriage.

Given the sensitivities associated with human rights in Pakistan, and the increased restrictions faced by civil society, DFID also decided to collaborate with UNICEF and UNFPA in this second phase. These partners had access to the Pakistani government, and were seen as neutral and expert organisations. Aawaz II funded these UN agencies, among other things, to undertake research to develop evidence-based approaches, such as a political economy analysis of child marriage, a gender parity report and the first survey on child labour since 2006 in Punjab.

- 4.18 UK aid programmes did not always address all the main threats to democracy and human rights identified in country analysis, despite the quality of diagnostics, practical guidance, evidence and local networks available to DFID and FCO teams. This was due to a range of factors, in particular a desire to maintain access to governments which has led to trade-offs in supporting and defending democracy and human rights. Other factors include the reduction of UK aid budgets, and practical challenges with finding the right partners in closed political contexts. We provide examples from our three country case studies below.
- 4.19 In Pakistan, during a period of democratic backsliding, growing civil society and media restrictions and increasingly populist politics, the UK government decided to deprioritise democracy objectives. The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan programme (£33.5 million, 2016-21) was extended in 2020 to respond to COVID-19 but not renewed. While it was an appropriate choice to cease funding for the electoral commission (as it had made technical progress and further UK aid would not improve forthcoming elections), this decision left FCDO without a significant mechanism to respond to political openings or further democratic backsliding. The CSSF Open Societies Programme (£3.4 million, 2021-25) provided proportionately much less for democracy initiatives with media and on civic space (£942,000). In a context of continuous aid budget reductions since 2020, FCDO in Pakistan has prioritised gender inclusion and freedom of religion or belief, rather than democracy, which is a more sensitive topic with the government, yet is needed if inclusion and human rights are to be protected on a more sustained basis.
- 4.20 The International Development Committee identified inclusion as a priority for UK aid to Pakistan, including the rights of women and girls, people with disabilities, religious minorities, and LGBT+ people. It called on FCDO to “direct its bilateral ODA spending in Pakistan strategically towards supporting marginalised groups reach their full potential” and to ensure that its programmes are “fully inclusive”.<sup>31</sup>
- 4.21 In Tanzania, the UK did not fund media freedom or media sector development programmes despite identifying media freedom as a critical issue, as it was unable to find suitable implementing partners. Our analysis found that the main civil society programme, Accountability in Tanzania 2 (£24.2 million, 2017-22) did not help the most at-risk journalists, while other donors were able to provide assistance to protect journalists, indicating a higher risk tolerance on this issue. UK aid grants to BBC Media Action helped to create platforms on local radio to hold officials to account, but did not protect media freedoms or support media sector development.

31 *UK aid to Pakistan*, sixth report of session 2021-22, House of Commons International Development Committee, April 2022, paragraphs 7 and 73, [link](#).

4.22 In Serbia, local embassy staff used their own knowledge of the context and excellent networks to develop a portfolio of projects funded through three regional CSSF programmes. This included partnerships with the government on some issues of mutual interest, such as data transparency. We found that the portfolio was relevant overall, but that the UK government, despite having a £2.7 million media portfolio, appears to have been slow to respond to the growth of hate speech and disinformation, which were well-known threats in Serbia.

### UK programmes prioritised excluded social groups, but found it harder to assist LGBT+ people

- 4.23 UK aid promoted and protected the rights of the most at-risk groups, identified through a combination of ministerial priorities and country analysis.<sup>32</sup> **Box 5** describes groups that were supported in our case study countries. The list reflects DFID's long-standing commitments to gender equality and inclusion, combined with FCO's concern with specific groups at risk of human rights violations, such as religious minorities, LGBT+ people and death row detainees. It reflects guidance requiring gender and inclusion to be mainstreamed in programme designs, as well as the UK public sector equality duty.<sup>33</sup>
- 4.24 Consultation with FCDO's international partners confirms that the UK is seen as a global leader on gender and inclusion, in particular its support for 'leaving no one behind' and defending the rights of people with disabilities, which became a DFID priority in 2017. Civil society programmes (such as Aid Connect, Aawaz in Pakistan and Accountability in Tanzania) generally find it easier to target excluded social groups than governance programmes. Civil society programmes are usually designed and implemented by social development experts who pay particular attention to poverty, gender and social inclusion, and are implemented by local civil society partners who can reach these groups.
- 4.25 However, as a result of a shift in DFID governance policy, democratic governance programmes also improved their inclusion focus. This was visible in the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) assistance to parties and parliaments, which promoted women's political empowerment more systematically after it began its combined FCO/DFID Supporting Effective Democratic Governance programme (£19.8 million, 2015-18). Inclusion became an official objective of the second DFID programme, Inclusive and Accountable Politics (£11.8 million, 2018-21). WFD also increased its focus on youth, people with disabilities and LGBT+ people during the period. The WFD Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (£3.7 million, 2019-22) prioritised the issue of distrust in politics and youth migration.
- 4.26 FCO made LGBT+ people a central priority, with support for a global equality alliance, commitment to a global conference, CSSF central funding to reform discriminatory Commonwealth legislation, Magna Carta Fund allocations and ongoing diplomatic activities. It was one of the top donors on LGBT+ issues in 2019-20.<sup>34</sup> However, the programmes in our sample generally found it challenging to support LGBT+ communities, partly because of the risk of doing harm while trying to support them. In Tanzania, legal restrictions, discriminatory statements by authorities, conservative social norms and fragile civil society groups made LGBT+ people a particularly difficult group to assist. The UK did not manage to design any relevant bilateral interventions, while other donors were able to do so, despite substantial risks to their diplomatic relationships with government. In Pakistan, programmes were able to support transgender people, who are a recognised social group, but not the wider LGBT+ community, which faces legal restrictions and social stigma. In Serbia, there were some regional activities and diplomatic engagement, but the theme was not prioritised. The Aid Connect LGBT+ consortium was slow to establish itself because of DFID's due diligence requirements, by which time funding was cancelled as a result of reductions in the UK aid budget.

32 This review examined how the rights of individuals belonging to groups at risk of discrimination were prioritised, but did not systematically examine the poverty focus of the programmes or discrimination on the basis of socio-economic indicators. FCDO analysis has shown that these groups are also likely to be among the poorest but not always, which is why it undertakes country-level poverty and inclusion analyses.

33 The 2010 Equality Act public sector equality duty requires "due regard to the need to (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act; (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic or persons who do not share it; (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it", [link](#).

34 *Government and philanthropic support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities 2019/2020*, Global resources report, [link](#).

### Box 5: Prioritisation of at-risk groups in our case study countries

The social groups assisted by UK aid programmes in our sample of country programmes usually corresponded with those identified as most at risk in consultations with local experts and communities. However, some groups and issues were seen as too sensitive for the UK aid programmes.

- Women and girls, people with disabilities, and youth were the groups most commonly prioritised by UK aid democracy and human rights programmes.
- Ethnic and religious minorities were prioritised in Pakistan.
- LGBT+ people were less often prioritised. Transgender people in Pakistan are a socially defined group, so work was feasible. The issue was too sensitive for projects in Tanzania and feasible but less prioritised in Serbia.

The following were in general much less prioritised or mainstreamed in our sample of country programmes:

- Elderly people.
- Indigenous peoples.
- Refugees, despite important refugee populations in Pakistan and Tanzania.

### Before 2020, UK aid programmes adapted well in response to changes in context or lessons learned, but there were missed opportunities for cross-portfolio learning

- 4.27 The theories of change in the programmes we reviewed were not always of high quality initially. For example, the CSSF Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan programme assumed there would be democratic political space in which to operate, whereas soon after it started the political context became more restricted. It invested heavily in supporting the conduct of elections, without investing enough in democratisation between elections – a common and well-documented weakness of electoral programmes.
- 4.28 However, theories of change and implementation strategies usually improved during implementation when programme management allowed for adaptation. For example, improvements were seen during the ‘co-creation’ phases for Aid Connect and Accountability in Tanzania 2, which gave civil society consortia time and money to undertake deeper analysis and adjust their activities. DFID designed several programmes with problem-based approaches, such as the Tanzania Institutions for Inclusive Development (£13 million, 2015-21), the WFD Western Balkans Democracy Initiative and the Pakistan Open Societies Programme. Political economy analyses during both the inception and implementation phases enabled these programmes to enhance their relevance by selecting salient issues around which to build coalitions for change.
- 4.29 Portfolios and programmes were able to adjust in response to changes in context. DFID Tanzania increased its use of political economy analysis following the election of President Magufuli in 2015, as it progressively realised that political space was closing and it would have to adjust its portfolio. In response to COVID-19, programme extensions or new activities allowed programmes to pivot.
- 4.30 We found that most programmes were able to remain relevant by learning during implementation (see **Box 6**). We found three weaker aspects of learning:
- The Magna Carta Fund was not designed or managed centrally with the capacity to learn and disseminate lessons systematically from its £55 million portfolio. This is a missed opportunity to learn about ‘what works’ within short and relatively small projects.
  - We found little evidence of learning between democracy and human rights programmes within the same country portfolios, even though they were responding to similar challenges and sometimes had the same local counterparts.
  - Central learning (between central programmes or across countries) was also weak. Apart from the 2016 empowerment and accountability macro-evaluation, UK aid has not invested in global thematic democracy or human rights evaluations, although it funded some regional thematic evaluations.

## Box 6: Ensuring ongoing relevance by generating evidence

Some UK aid programmes generated evidence on citizens' priorities. In Pakistan, Aawaz's Aagahi centres provide at-risk communities with information on their rights and connect them to social services. In Serbia, the CSSF Media for All programme (£1.8 million, 2019-23) developed an 'engaged citizens reporting' tool, an online platform through which media outlets ask their audiences about topics of interest, to guide their programming choices.

Across our sample, UK aid programmes generated evidence that was used to adjust their approach either following a mid-term review or when moving to a successor programme. In Pakistan, Aawaz II included partnerships with state authorities, which had been absent from Aawaz I, limiting the programme's ability to respond to citizens' demands. In Serbia, the larger Media for All programme scaled up learning from smaller civil society projects led by the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network. The UK government funded a £500,000 independent developmental evaluation of the Open Government Partnership, which helped its secretariat navigate political realities, analyse bottlenecks and identify suitable partners.

UK aid programmes themselves generated evidence which was used by other UK aid programmes or as global public goods. For example, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy evidence hub produces and disseminates research on issues which have been less investigated, such as the role of money in politics.

## Aid budget reductions and loss of expertise have left the portfolio less responsive to democracy and human rights challenges and not well-matched to FCDO's high-level policy ambition

- 4.31 Our interviews and document review showed that FCDO's draft 'open societies' strategy, developed during 2021 to support implementation of the *Integrated review*, had limited influence on programming. Most interviewees who tried to use it to guide their work in the absence of an approved strategy saw it as conceptually very broad, without clear delivery mechanisms and without the budgetary resources to match its ambition. From December 2021, foreign secretary Liz Truss's 'network of liberty' speech provided a different policy framing. It put freedom and democracy at the heart of a new geopolitical strategy against authoritarian states, at the same time as UK aid budget reductions left FCDO with sharply reduced funding for democracy and human rights programming. The May 2022 *International development strategy* did not prioritise 'open societies' but refers to some of its elements such as freedom, democracy and women's rights. None of these three documents offer clear strategic direction on democracy and human rights. With the change of foreign secretary in September 2022, discussion of a revision of the *Integrated review*, and a 'pause' of the UK aid programme for several months during 2022, there is more uncertainty. The Effectiveness section provides more details on budget predictability and reductions.
- 4.32 Finally, some FCDO interviewees in headquarters and in-country expressed the view that the department does not value technical development expertise to the extent that DFID did. This was also the perception of some external partners. The governance cadre seems more affected than the social development cadre: between April 2020 and April 2022, 13% of governance advisers employed in governance roles have taken up generalist positions or left FCDO. This included one-fifth of senior governance advisers and one-third of country-based governance advisers.<sup>35</sup>
- 4.33 The combined impact of the budget reductions and the loss of expert personnel is that the UK democracy and human rights portfolio is now not as well positioned to respond to its high policy ambitions, or to new threats or opportunities emerging at the international level, as it was earlier in the review period.

## Conclusions on relevance

- 4.34 During the first part of the review period, UK aid had the expert staff and systems in place to ensure democracy and human rights programmes were relevant. Programmes balanced a response to specific threats, changing thematic ministerial priorities and the need to maintain access to partner

35 Analysis based on 2021 data calculated for this review by FCDO's heads of profession team.

governments, which at times made them risk-averse. They increasingly prioritised the most excluded social groups and developed politically informed approaches, maintaining their relevance through good-quality contextual analysis and in-programme learning – although we noted missed opportunities for cross-portfolio learning. However, UK aid budget reductions and the ongoing consequences of the DFID/FCDO merger on the use of expertise make it difficult to conclude that the portfolio still retains its agility to respond to new challenges and deliver on the UK government’s high policy ambitions. Given the strengths of the portfolio for most of the review period, we award a **green-amber** score for relevance.

## Coherence: How coherent is the UK’s approach to countering threats to democracy and human rights?

4.35 We reviewed the democracy and human rights portfolio in terms of cross-government coherence (in particular the combination of development and diplomatic resources) and donor coordination.

### UK support to democracy and human rights has benefited from complementary development and diplomatic interventions

4.36 We found consistent evidence, including before the merger, that UK aid central and country democracy and human rights initiatives have benefited from the combination of diplomatic engagement and aid spending. **Table 3** provides some examples from central programmes.

4.37 UK aid and diplomatic objectives are often mutually reinforcing. UK aid programmes can ask for diplomatic support to unblock problems. This includes behind-the-scenes dialogue between UK diplomats and senior government officials to explain the negative impact of laws restricting media or civil society activities. Conversely, substantial UK aid budgets often increase diplomats’ access to governments. Smaller aid portfolios, such as the CSSF in Serbia, can also provide influence when the projects are perceived to be relevant and of high quality.

Table 3: Illustrations of the mutually beneficial diplomatic and programme efforts

Central programmes	Examples
<b>Magna Carta Fund: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)</b>	<p>The UK was an active member of the UN Human Rights Council during the review period, especially when the US was no longer a member.</p> <p>The UK was able to back up its political statements with voluntary earmarked and core funding for OHCHR, which supports the Human Rights Council and other UN human rights mechanisms (£45 million during 2015-21 coming from FCO, DFID and CSSF). The UK was one of the top ten donors to OHCHR during the period. UK aid-funded projects targeted specific improvements (see <b>Box 16</b> in the Effectiveness section).</p>
<b>Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)</b>	<p>WFD was co-funded by FCO and DFID before the creation of FCDO, which indicates how its dual diplomatic and development roles were recognised. One of the objectives of the 2015 DFID grant was to improve strategic dialogue between WFD, FCO and DFID.</p> <p>WFD both relies on and assists UK diplomatic missions. When WFD establishes a new programme, it benefits from FCDO’s political analysis of the context to identify the right issues and partners. Once WFD programmes are underway, they can provide up-to-date information and political access for UK diplomats.</p> <p>WFD provides political party assistance through UK political parties which mentor their ideologically aligned ‘sister parties’ abroad. This provides opportunities for UK politicians to better understand the challenges faced by developing countries and the value of UK aid programmes.</p>

## Coherence and coordination between DFID and FCO were 'good enough' before the merger

- 4.38 In the Relevance section, we noted that the differences in approach to democracy and human rights between DFID and FCO were generally complementary, rather than contradictory. Interviewees identified three areas of tension between development and diplomacy approaches, which the merged department now needs to address. Development assistance typically focuses on poverty reduction, works across longer timeframes for social and institutional change, and aims to support locally defined priorities. In contrast, diplomacy tends to operate with shorter timeframes and with a focus on delivering the UK's wider policy objectives.
- 4.39 Before the creation of FCDO, there were appropriate coordination structures in place in the UK and at country level to manage these complementarities and tensions. DFID and FCO each drew on the other's expertise when needed, for example in relation to elections or the workings of particular international bodies. The CSSF was able to fund interventions of mutual DFID/FCO interest, especially when they were seen as risky (from a political or security perspective) or were in locations where DFID had no country presence. **Box 7** provides examples.

### Box 7: Examples of coordination mechanisms between aid and diplomacy

Most of the **Serbia** democracy and human rights portfolio was funded through three CSSF programmes, of which only one, the Good Governance Fund, was implemented by DFID. The portfolio was managed by the UK embassy in Serbia, with well-networked local staff and support from DFID governance and economic advisers based in the UK.

In **Pakistan**, UK aid support for elections after 2016 was delivered through the CSSF Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan programme, managed jointly by DFID and FCO. Its predecessor programme had been DFID-funded, but the then international development secretary of state considered political governance too high a risk for DFID. UK aid provided funding for the **2015 Tanzania and 2018 Pakistan elections** through United Nations Development Programme multi-donor trust funds, and UK diplomats were involved in election monitoring. The decision not to fund the 2020 elections due to electoral fraud risks in Tanzania was taken jointly by DFID and FCO teams in preceding years, but FCDO staff still monitored the 2020 elections.

FCO's UK diplomatic delegations to **human rights bodies in Geneva and New York** advance UK aid gender and inclusion policy objectives. DFID advisers provided lines to take, for example at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Conversely, FCO called on DFID expertise to advance the then foreign secretary Boris Johnson's priority of girls' education.

The 2018 first global conference on **disability inclusion** was co-chaired by the UK and Kenya. It would not have been possible without close DFID coordination with FCO's diplomatic network. At Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, FCO delegates ensured progressive language on disability inclusion, pushing back against the institutionalisation of people with disabilities. FCO also appreciated DFID technical contributions on disability inclusion in cross-government forums.

## The potential of the FCDO merger to bring diplomacy and development further together on democracy and human rights has yet to be fully realised

- 4.40 At a policy level, several newly merged teams told us that they could see the potential benefits of having both development and diplomatic experts working together within a single department. For example, FCDO can advance the agendas of both predecessor departments by working on media freedom and media sector development in tandem. Teams valued FCDO's diplomatic network, which is larger than DFID's smaller network of country offices, and felt it created more opportunities for global influencing. They also noted the value of having direct access to governance and social development experts which FCO did not have.
- 4.41 However, staff believe that the consolidation of the merger since 2020 has been particularly slow, with several factors, including the COVID-19 remote working context, hindering the integration of teams.



There have been significant delays in unifying programme management, financial and IT systems. In 2022, the UK's response to the war in Ukraine took precedence over policy work. As a result, there have been few significant democracy and human rights policy coherence achievements since the merger. Disability inclusion is one positive exception (see **Box 8**).

### Box 8: FCDO disability policy integration

The 2022 *Disability inclusion and rights strategy*<sup>36</sup> illustrates how FCDO could approach its policy integration. It adopts a human rights-based approach following advice from the FCDO human rights adviser, and promotes 'rights, voice, choice and visibility' with an explicit reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It also prioritises equality and inclusion. It builds on the evidence generated by previous DFID disability programmes since 2018, and consultations with civil society disability organisations.

- 4.42 Since 2021, FCDO's Open Societies and Human Rights Directorate (OSHRD) has brought together relevant DFID and FCO departments. OSHRD has been working on a new policy framework to operationalise the *Integrated review's* democracy and human rights commitments, which are also included under the first priority of the 2021-22 *FCDO Outcome delivery plan* (see **Box 9**). Initially scheduled for completion by summer 2022, it had not been completed at the time of writing.
- 4.43 The draft strategy was used internally in guidance, for example in business planning processes, but FCDO teams and their implementing partners told us it had not provided a coherent framework. As the literature review which accompanies this review notes, the expression 'open societies' is vague: it is not always clear what the components of 'open societies' are (in particular whether economic and social rights are included), how they relate to one another, whether they can be traded off against one another, and if they represent British values or universal values. The December 2021 foreign secretary 'network of liberty' speech seemed to provide a competing geopolitical narrative. The December 2022 foreign secretary foreign policy and diplomacy speech did not explicitly mention democracy, human rights, 'open societies' or 'network of liberty' objectives as part of his vision for a new 'network of partnerships' (though he reiterated his commitments to democracy and human rights in a separate short statement on the same day).

### Box 9: FCDO's draft open societies strategy

The 2021 *Integrated review* states that the UK will "support open societies and defend human rights, as a force for good in the world. The international order is only as robust, resilient and legitimate as the states that comprise it. We will therefore support open societies – characterised by effective governance and resilience at home, and which cooperate with other countries on the basis of transparency, good governance and open markets."<sup>37</sup> FCDO's 2021-22 Outcome delivery plan also includes support for democracy and human rights under its first objective of ensuring that "the UK is a force for good in the world".<sup>38</sup>

During 2021 and 2022, FCDO worked on developing an 'open societies' strategy, which would promote freedom, democracy and open societies at three levels: (i) the international system; (ii) in partner countries; and (iii) delivering benefits for the UK. In addition to FCDO diplomatic campaigns and UK aid programmes, the draft strategy aimed to improve cross-government coherence, including across development, security, economic, trade or regulatory issues, and using the UK's 'soft power' (the international reputation of the BBC, for example).

36 *Disability inclusion and rights strategy 2022 to 2030. Building an inclusive future for all: a sustainable rights-based approach*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022, [link](#).

37 *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, UK government, 2021, p. 44, [link](#).

38 *FCDO outcome delivery plan: 2021 to 2022*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, July 2021, [link](#).

One challenge faced by the strategy was how to bring together a broad spectrum of overlapping issues and distinct approaches:

- specific human rights rooted in international law (such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, equality and inclusion of specific groups)
- a governance approach supporting ‘open’, ‘accountable’, ‘transparent’, ‘inclusive’ and ‘effective’ institutions (media, civil society, rule of law, anti-corruption, public finance).

It was also not clear whether ‘open societies’ covered the entire governance agenda or only those aspects of the governance agenda related to democracy and human rights.

4.44 The strategy development was overseen by a cross-FCDO and cross-government steering committee, chaired by a director general, which last met in February 2022. It has not been accompanied by new delivery mechanisms.

“ The main impact [of the merger] has been paralysis in FCDO with collapse of capability. [...] Despite the potential to strengthen the UK’s approach to democracy and human rights, we are still waiting for government to show a fully integrated approach. ”

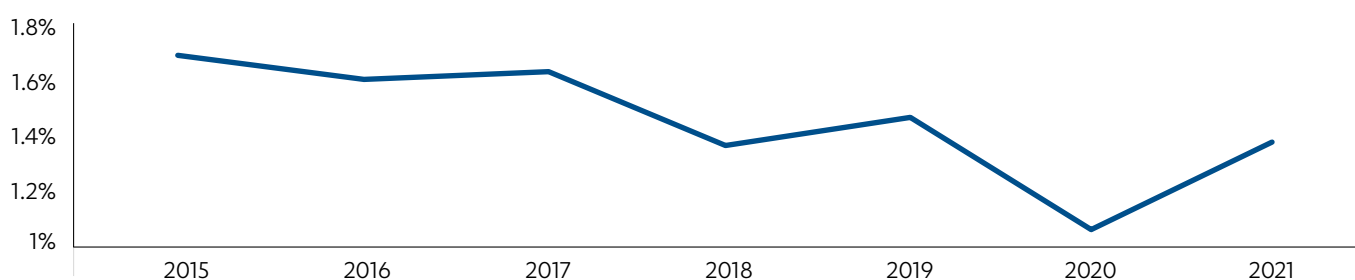
UK aid implementing partner

4.45 Since the creation of FCDO, at country level, separate DFID governance and FCO political teams have usually been merged into joint governance and political teams with responsibility for both (i) governance development policy and programmes and (ii) political reporting and influencing. While newly configured teams might be headed by either former DFID or former FCO staff, they now report to ambassadors or high commissioners, who may or may not have much development experience. These newly merged teams create the potential for more coherent approaches, with greater attention to diplomatic dimensions in UK aid than before. We heard that, at times, this can be at the expense of considerations such as poverty impact, longer timeframes and local priorities.

4.46 The challenges of COVID-19, several rounds of budget reductions and delayed financial allocations since 2020 have put extreme pressure on the overseas network. This slowed the process of developing more coherent country strategies and balancing the main areas of potential tension noted in **paragraph 4.38**. Teams were also aware that they would have reduced budgets to implement newly merged approaches. In 2021, FCDO Tanzania’s overall budget was reduced by 66%. FCDO Pakistan’s annual budget went from £462 million in 2016 to £92 million in 2021, though with only a 9% reduction for ‘open societies’ as the large Aawaz programme was protected, retaining its budget but spread over a longer implementation period.

4.47 Nonetheless, in the context of overall official development assistance (ODA) reductions, democracy and human rights spending seems not to have been as affected as other sectors. Overall, UK aid spending on democracy and human rights as a share of overall UK ODA decreased between 2015 and 2021 (from 1.7% to 1.4%), but they seem to have been protected relative to other sectors in the last year for which spend data is available (1.4% in 2021, up from 1.1% in 2020) (see **Figure 10**).

Figure 10: UK aid democracy and human rights spend as share of total ODA 2015-21



Source: Statistics in International Development, 2022.



## The UK does not systematically implement human rights objectives in its policies and programmes to the same extent as other donors

- 4.48 Governments and multilateral organisations that have formally adopted human rights-based approaches to development assistance are more explicit than the UK and have more systematic implementation mechanisms. They have dedicated strategies and funding for human rights programming, and also mainstream human rights considerations across all their operations, with cross-government coordination structures (see **Box 10**).
- 4.49 The UK government is less systematic in mainstreaming human rights in the implementation of its UK aid policies and programmes. Former DFID did not have a formal human rights policy. It paid attention to human rights in some policy areas, such as the right to education or sexual health and reproductive rights. Country teams only undertook country-level human rights assessments if they were providing budget support direct to governments, which became a much less significant aid instrument during our review period. In DFID and now FCDO, only gender, disability and other forms of inclusion (associated with the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination) are mainstreamed, including through mandatory assessments and gender equality and disability policy bilateral expenditure markers.<sup>39</sup>
- 4.50 FCO/FCDO human rights advisers are called upon to advise other policy teams or country teams, but there are too few advisers to cover all policy areas systematically. Diplomats need to balance human rights with other policy considerations, such as security or trade.
- 4.51 Only some FCDO teams working on issues of interest across government are mandated to consider human rights systematically (such as the joint arms export control team, or mandatory overseas security and justice assessments in all programmes engaged in the security or justice sectors). These processes aim to ensure that human rights risks are managed, rather than positively contributing to their realisation in partner countries.<sup>40</sup> One exception is the new global human rights sanction regime set up in 2020, in addition to existing country-specific regimes. The objective is to deter gross human rights violations, and hold perpetrators to account, by imposing travel bans or asset freezes, in collaboration with HM Treasury.
- 4.52 The ‘open societies’ policy process, as a sub-strategy of the *Integrated review*, could have provided a new robust framework to consider and ensure a more systematic implementation of UK government responses to global human rights and democratic backsliding. However, we did not find evidence that the cross-government Open Societies Steering Board, charged with overseeing the implementation of the ‘open societies’ agenda, had made significant progress before it held its last meeting in February 2022. As the time period was too short, we did not review how the UK implemented its commitments made at the February 2022 US-led Summit of Democracy to pursue the ‘network of liberty’ objectives of promoting freedom and democracy through specific security, technology and trade initiatives, as part of a new geopolitical approach.

### Box 10: Summary of other donors’ approaches to democracy and human rights

**Sweden** is a bilateral donor that has adopted a human rights-based approach and systematically integrates democracy and human rights into both its foreign policy and development programmes. It has mechanisms in place to ensure human rights are consistently considered by all government departments, including those responsible for foreign policy, security, development and trade – from steering documents to delivery. It is the top OECD DAC 2015-20 donor for women’s rights organisations, the second for assistance to legislatures and political parties, the third for human rights, and the fourth for media. Human rights were made a central objective for Swedish foreign policy under a 2003 law, and constitute one of five mainstreamed themes across Swedish aid. The Swedish aid agency (Sida) is separate from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but receives policy and funding priorities from the Ministry, which consistently prioritises human rights, democracy and rule of law – constituting 25% of Swedish aid expenditure. Swedish embassies host both Swedish diplomats and aid officials. The former Swedish government adopted a ‘feminist’ foreign policy and

39 “All programmes (and policies) must consider and provide evidence on how their interventions will impact on gender equality, disability inclusion and those with protected characteristics”, *FCDO programme operating framework*, May 2022, p. 16, [link](#).

40 “Rule 1: Portfolios, programmes and the projects within them, must be consistent with all relevant UK legislation and regulatory requirements. Risks to human rights, international humanitarian law and reputational risks to HMG must also be considered”. *FCDO programme operating framework*, May 2022, p. 15, [link](#).

launched a global ‘drive for democracy’ in 2019 to counter authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, with 100 ‘democracy talks’ across the world. Sweden was one of the initiators of the World Bank’s human rights trust fund. It provides core funding to UN bodies and to non-governmental organisations in countries with declining civic space, as it is aware of the limitations caused by project-based funding. In some of our case study countries, Swedish diplomats and programmes were seen as more vocal and willing to take risks than those of the UK.

The **US** government, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in particular, have promoted democracy consistently for many decades, most recently with the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal. The US is the top OECD DAC 2015-20 donor for democratic participation, elections, legislatures and political party assistance, the second for human rights, and the third for media. USAID’s Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance has more than 100 experts who develop policies and guidance and can be deployed to support country teams. Organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute receive substantial funding. USAID is increasingly focusing on ensuring that democratic institutions and processes respond to citizen and community needs and generate tangible benefits. It also makes regular use of political economy analysis.

The **UN** has embraced a human rights-based approach since the late 1990s, with a common inter-agency understanding agreed in 2003. Its specialised agencies are mandated to promote the rights associated with specific conventions, such as UNICEF and children’s rights or UNESCO and media freedoms. The UN Development Group’s human rights working group, chaired by OHCHR, is a coordination structure to ensure policy coherence by mainstreaming human rights across the UN system. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has had a policy on human rights and development since 1998, and its current strategic plan includes effectiveness indicators for human rights and human rights-based approaches. It promotes the core principles of accountability, participation and transparency, and ‘democratic governance’ rather than specific models of democracy. It is mandated by the UN system to provide electoral assistance and is the fourth-highest OECD DAC 2015-20 funder for elections. The UK is the one of the largest donors to UNDP election trust funds (providing 11.5% of global funding over 2004-21). DFID also seconded governance advisers to UNDP’s democratic governance division.

The **World Bank** considers that its Articles of Agreement limit its ability to engage with human rights and democracy explicitly since these prohibit political activity and require that the Bank should not be influenced by the political character of its members. It adopts an ‘indirect’ or implicit approach by promoting principles – such as meaningful participation, citizen participation, attention to vulnerable groups, and government transparency. It also adopts a ‘do no harm’ approach, which requires it to pay attention to human rights issues such as forced labour in supply chains or gender-based violence in schools. Trust funds on human rights and social accountability have financed technical assistance and global research on issues such as disability or LGBT+ people. Its 2016 environmental and social framework includes human rights principles and pays attention to specific rights, such as for indigenous people. It is the third-highest OECD DAC 2015-20 donor for women’s rights organisations.

### UK aid and diplomatic democracy and human rights interventions were often coordinated with other governments, which enhanced their impact

- 4.53 The UK government has combined aid and diplomatic efforts to create and sustain new global platforms. **Box 11** provides illustrations from the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and Media Freedom Coalition, which the UK co-founded. The OGP created new global transparency standards, with incentives for like-minded countries to resist the global backsliding trend.

#### Box 11: UK aid-funded global democracy and human rights platforms

The **Open Government Partnership** (OGP) is a multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from national and sub-national governments to promote open government, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance. It includes 77 countries and 106 local governments – representing more than two billion people – and thousands of CSOs.

The UK became one of the founding members under prime minister David Cameron. UK aid co-funded the secretariat and the implementation of action plans in member countries. The UK Cabinet Office coordinates the implementation of UK national action plans. UK ministers and the UK's diplomatic network encouraged priority countries to join, including Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania. Tanzania and Pakistan left the OGP, in 2017 and 2022 respectively, as their political leaders became less committed to the OGP agenda.

The **Media Freedom Coalition** is one of the achievements of the UK's diplomatic human rights campaigns. It was set up as an outcome of a UK-led global conference for media freedom in 2019. It is a coalition of 52 countries which advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists. Serbia is a member and is represented by an adviser to the president. In priority countries such as Pakistan, UK and other diplomats raise media freedom issues. UK aid, initially through the Magna Carta Fund, co-finances the Global Media Defence Fund, which is managed by UNESCO and supports legal protection for journalists, investigative journalism and strategic litigation.

International partners that we interviewed believed the coalition had raised awareness and improved joint action on this topic, at a time when media organisations are under threat globally. Some countries and organisations were sceptical at first, and concerned that the coalition might be duplicative of other multilateral forums. They now feel that it has proven its added value, mostly as a platform for coordinating diplomatic engagement. However, an independent review rated its performance as **amber/red**, and made a number of recommendations, such as providing more funding for the sustainability of the media sector (a longer-term development rather than a diplomatic priority).<sup>41</sup>

- 4.54 The UK government has also been influential in donor coordination at country level, through a combination of substantial aid budgets and the technical expertise of its advisers, which few other development agencies were able to match. For example, in Pakistan and Tanzania, the UK set up and chaired the democratic governance coordination group.
- 4.55 In the context of increasing populism, political polarisation and resistance to Western interference, constructive diplomatic engagement became more challenging during the review period. Diplomatic interventions are more credible when they are coordinated and consistent over time. We heard evidence from FCDO and other diplomats in Pakistan, Serbia and Tanzania of both public and behind-the-scenes diplomatic interventions that were effective in advancing objectives in relation to media freedom, non-governmental organisation (NGO) regulations, freedom of religion or belief and the death penalty.
- 4.56 In our case study countries, we found that the UK was a valued actor within diplomatic communities. We were told that there has been some loss of joint working as a result of the UK's departure from the EU, although coordination continues to occur outside EU structures. In line with our finding above that UK aid does not mainstream human rights systematically, we heard that diplomats and local stakeholders usually saw the UK as neither the most vocal nor the quietest diplomatic mission on democracy and human rights issues, but as balancing a range of priorities.
- 4.57 FCDO does not systematically attempt to measure the effectiveness of its diplomatic interventions on democracy and human rights. While it is difficult to attribute results to diplomatic interventions, considerable work has been done within UK programmes on how to monitor the results of influencing efforts, which could be drawn on to give FCDO more feedback on its performance.

### The UK government's reputation as a thought leader and reliable global actor on democracy and human rights has declined since 2020

- 4.58 Interviews with UK aid partners at country or global levels confirmed that the UK had a strong international reputation as a thought leader on several elements of the democracy and human rights agenda. They mentioned in particular UK leadership on people with disabilities, 'leave no one behind', 'thinking and working politically', the Open Government Partnership and the Media Freedom Coalition. UK aid implementers valued the collaboration with the UK not just because of the funding, but because they

41 *Reset required? Evaluating the Media Freedom Coalition after its first two years*, Mary Myers et al., Foreign Policy Centre, 2022, [link](#).

could learn from cutting-edge approaches, especially through interactions with technical advisers. For example, UNICEF sought UK feedback on its own disability inclusion strategy and USAID had learned from DFID on political economy analysis.

4.59 However, since 2020, as a result of aid budget reductions, a lack of clear strategy and the disruption caused by the merger, the UK is no longer considered a reliable partner or thought leader. Reasons include:

- The disruptive effects on partners of UK budget reductions and programme closures.
- A lack of transparency around the timing and size of aid budget reductions, and the lack of a clear justification for which programmes would be reduced, ended or protected.
- Confusion among partners as to whether reductions in UK aid were intended to express disapproval of democratic backsliding in, for example, Pakistan or Tanzania.
- A lack of understanding of the UK's 2021 reference to 'open societies', and what this means for future UK aid priorities or the UK's global thought leadership.
- A perception that the UK now prioritises geopolitics over development.

“ It is unfortunate to have a weaker UK voice at a time of democratic backsliding. ”

“ Colleagues have mentioned how they have experienced the gap in funding from the UK resulting from aid cuts – left huge hole especially in Africa – and the difficulties of navigating a space where one of their biggest partners is not as present as they had been in previous years. ”

Diplomats and aid officials from countries other than the UK

4.60 In addition, perceptions of the quality of democracy and human rights in the UK affect the credibility of UK aid and diplomacy abroad, and the UK's 'soft power' as noted in the *Integrated review*. This is especially the case for actors such as WFD, which operate by sharing experiences from UK legislatures and political parties. During the review period, some of the UK's domestic policies and practices have come under question from academic and other experts. Human Rights Watch, which is used as a reference by the UK government when it assesses democracy and human rights situations abroad, expressed its concerns that the UK's democratic fabric was being eroded, concluding: "It matters because weakening the democratic fabric at home undermines the UK's important efforts to support and promote human rights, independent courts, and democracy overseas."<sup>42</sup> The UK is a co-founding member of the Open Government Partnership, but is now at risk of being designated an 'inactive member' because of transparency failings (see **Box 12**).

### Box 12: The UK could be declared 'inactive' by the Open Government Partnership (OGP)

The OGP independent reporting mechanism assesses OGP member states on their progress with implementing commitments made in their national action plans, and checks compliance with minimum standards that all members must meet. The mechanism has concluded that the UK government had not met minimum action plan standards for three consecutive cycles. The UK government has been under a 'procedural review' since 2021. Under OGP rules, the OGP's Criteria and Standards Subcommittee, in consultation with the Support Unit, may recommend 'inactivity' when a country acts contrary to the OGP process on numerous occasions and in different ways.<sup>43</sup> In December 2022, the Subcommittee decided to maintain the UK under review, required it to provide evidence of how it was meeting minimum standards by June 2023, and expressed its concern that the UK, as a Steering Committee member, should lead by example. The UK could join El Salvador, Malawi and Malta in being found 'inactive'.

42 *Britain's democratic fabric is being eroded by Boris Johnson's government*, Benjamin Ward, Human Rights Watch, October 2020, [link](#).

43 *Letter from the Open Government Partnership to the UK government*, August 2022, [link](#) and *Criteria and standards monthly call summary*, Open Government Partnership, 1 December 2022, [link](#).

After reviewing the UK's 2021-23 action plan, the OGP independent reporting mechanism concluded that "many commitments had activities removed or significantly reduced in ambition, without further explanation or consultation with non-government stakeholders [...] The ministerial approval procedures did not allow for stakeholders to be given feedback around how or why the changes were made before the deadline for action plan submission (31 December 2021). Unlike the previous action plan, the commitments in the fifth plan did not list any civil society partners that would support their implementation, indicating a change in the level of civil society-government co-ownership over the plan."<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusions on coherence

4.61 We found that complementary UK development and diplomatic interventions on democracy and human rights can be beneficial. Before the merger, there was 'good enough' coordination between DFID and FCO, with room for improvement. The potential of the FCDO merger to bring diplomacy and development further together on democracy and human rights has yet to be fully realised. There is confusion as to the UK's current policy priorities, particularly in respect of 'open societies'. The UK government's reputation as a thought leader and reliable global actor on some aspects of democracy and human rights has declined in recent years, as a consequence of UK aid reductions and concerns over how these were implemented. We therefore award an **amber-red** score for coherence, reflecting the unrealised promise of the merger and FCDO's declining international reputation in this field.

## Effectiveness: How well has the UK contributed to countering threats to democracy and human rights?

4.62 In a global context of backsliding on human rights and democracy, it was difficult for UK aid programmes to make progress, but our review did identify some achievements.

### Measuring and aggregating results on democracy and human rights is challenging, but UK aid programmes improved their approaches over the period

- 4.63 There are significant challenges in measuring the results of aid programmes on democracy and human rights. Programme indicators often seek to capture changing public perceptions on politically or socially contested issues, such as the fairness of elections or changes in tolerance towards women and minorities. These changes can take years or decades to emerge. UK aid programmes often target individual steps within long and complex theories of change – for example, adoption of a new law or better funded media – making it impossible to link the interventions, even if successful, with improvements in quantitative measures of democracy and human rights.
- 4.64 Aggregating results across FCDO's portfolio is also challenging, as democracy and human rights programming covers a range of themes. While DFID tracked progress towards two high-level results (on elections and accountability) during 2011-15, it did not attempt to do so during 2016-20. FCDO's 2021-22 delivery framework measures the number of journalists to have benefited from the Global Media Defence Fund. This indicator relates only to one programme, while the UK aid portfolio is much broader. By contrast, FCDO measures its progress with inclusion through targets across a wide range of health, education and social protection programmes.<sup>45</sup>
- 4.65 In response to these challenges, several UK aid programmes successfully developed innovative approaches to measuring results. Aawaz in Pakistan has a credible methodology to track changes in behaviours, knowledge and attitudes, using a regular survey to track the results of its approach which uses change agents, information, safe spaces and legislation. WFD used UK government funding to improve its monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, which led to greater effectiveness (see **Box 13**).
- 4.66 The Magna Carta Fund and the CSSF, which usually fund annual projects, have the most room for improvement in their approach to monitoring and evaluation. Their results frameworks sometimes

44 *United Kingdom Open Government Partnership action plan review 2021-2023*, August 2022, [link](#).  
45 *FCDO outcome delivery plan: 2021 to 2022*, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, July 2021, [link](#).



confuse activities and outputs, while overclaiming on wider results given the short duration of support. Some partners complained that the reporting burden had increased (with monthly reports), but we did not identify corresponding improvements in results measurement. In practice, as the same CSOs are often funded through a series of projects over multiple years (such as media and elections monitoring NGOs in Serbia, or Reprieve globally), FCDO reviews could capture results and lessons over these longer periods.

### Box 13: Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) investment in evidence

As a non-departmental public body, WFD is funded through an unearmarked grant in aid from FCO/FCDO, which totalled £20.5 million between 2015 and 2021. In addition, DFID provided it with £21 million in central funding between 2015 and 2021 through two successive programmes. WFD also competes for UK and international grants and contracts for thematic and geographic projects.

To track results, WFD had in the past relied solely on quantitative output indicators (such as numbers of politicians trained), which did not provide a meaningful picture of its results. The DFID programmes provided WFD with the resources and technical support to improve its monitoring, evaluation and learning capacity. In 2018, WFD introduced a new approach better suited to capturing changes in political behaviours and systems, using ‘process tracing’ and ‘outcome harvesting’ to provide a deeper understanding of changes in complex systems. DFID support also enabled WFD to invest in research partnerships and produce high-quality analysis on issues such as how to amplify women’s voices in politics. During the period, WFD also invested in systematic political economy analyses to ensure all its programmes were based on solid understanding of their contexts.

Overall, WFD has significantly improved how it prioritises its democracy support, tackles exclusion, manages its programmes in adaptive ways, measures programme performance, and refines its future choices.

### UK aid helped a range of at-risk groups, but could have done more for those facing state repression or multiple sources of discrimination

4.67 Despite challenging political contexts, we found evidence of improved access to rights across the portfolio, in particular for women and girls, who were systematically included in UK aid programmes, but also for youth, people with disabilities, and (in Pakistan) transgender people. The UK aid programmes we reviewed enabled these groups to:

- Obtain national identity cards or be registered at birth in Pakistan, which is a pre-condition to accessing other rights and services.
- Take part in elections by registering to vote in Pakistan, receive civic and voter education in Tanzania, and monitor the fairness of elections in Serbia.
- Be active in political parties, stand as candidates for elections, and represent their constituencies as elected politicians at local or national levels in Pakistan, Tanzania and Serbia.
- Lobby government for changes in policies and practices – for example, in Tanzania for safer market access for women, in Pakistan for the inclusion of people with disabilities in social protection schemes and for transgender people’s right to work, and in Serbia to highlight youth emigration.
- Work as journalists, so they could report on behalf of women or LGBT+ people in Pakistan and Serbia, or take part in community radio programmes in Tanzania.
- Access tailored services, such as education for Deaf people using a unified Tanzanian sign language (see **Box 14**) and advice on land rights for women in Tanzania, or phone cards and tablets for Roma children to access education during COVID-19 in Serbia.
- Increase their awareness of sources of discrimination and community violence, for example involving men in discussions on violence against women in Pakistan.

## Box 14: How Tanzania unified its sign language and made it an official language

The Institutions for Inclusive Development (I4ID) programme operated in an increasingly repressive political context in Tanzania. It aimed to ‘think and work politically’ by identifying promising initiatives that targeted important problems that would be less sensitive for government, and by supporting local coalitions that could negotiate lasting solutions with officials.

I4ID collaborated with Tanzania’s national charity for Deaf people, CHAVITA, to raise awareness of the barriers to decent education for Deaf children. The issue had become politically salient when journalists reported that all the students in the country’s only secondary school for Deaf children had failed their exams. CHAVITA collaborated with education experts and persuaded the Ministry of Education to pilot exams with sign language-aware examiners. As there were several sign languages in use due to the legacy of foreign assistance, CHAVITA facilitated consensus on a unified sign language. Through behind-the-scenes advocacy, which I4ID facilitated by paying for sign language interpreters, CHAVITA’s coalition eventually convinced the prime minister to recognise sign language as an official language, making it one of only 41 countries to do so. In interviews, CHAVITA representatives said that I4ID’s way of working was central to this success, creating a “partnership where everyone has the space to contribute”.

“ After successfully raising awareness with the parliament, we now see sign language interpreters on parliamentary sessions aired live on TV to also address the needs of people who are Deaf. We now also see a few local TVs that have recruited sign language translators. ”

Deaf participant, Dar es Salaam focus group discussion, Tanzania

4.68 There were fewer documented results for religious and ethnic minorities or LGBT+ people, which are more sensitive issues. Nonetheless, we identified the following:

- We heard from transgender people in Pakistan how they had become more confident to claim their rights as a result of participating in Aawaz village forums, and from forum members how they understood transgender people better. However, UK aid was not supporting other LGBT+ communities in Pakistan.
- Aawaz and Aid Connect’s two projects on freedom of religion or belief contributed to improved perceptions of minorities and the prevention of community conflicts. In Pakistan, we met women and men from religious minorities who had been able to prevent or resolve disputes in their communities through the Aawaz programme.

“ Aawaz has worked to hold meetings and give training to the transgender community. They worked to get a place for them to live... ”

Transgender participant, Mansehra focus group discussion, Pakistan

“ The transgender community being a part of the village forum made us aware of their issues and helped us understand them better. ”

Male participant, Mansehra focus group discussion, Pakistan

4.69 We found that programmes tended to benefit specific groups based on local analysis and in response to central UK government priorities, but that they did not yet systematically target people suffering from overlapping disadvantages (such as women and girls who live with a disability and are also from a religious minority). In addition, UK aid funding for women’s rights organisations, which are best placed

to defend women's rights, declined over the period (from £43.5 million in 2017 down to £22 million in 2018, with the UK falling from the top OECD DAC donor in 2017 to the tenth donor by 2020) as several dedicated programmes ended and were not replaced.

- 4.70 Magna Carta Fund or CSSF projects were usually smaller in size than DFID programmes, more targeted and able to take on more risks. They were able to assist victims of human rights violations, such as death row prisoners in Pakistan or Tanzania, or victims and survivors of modern slavery globally through OHCHR. Aid Connect was the only DFID programme we reviewed which protected journalists and human rights defenders at scale, but its funding has been sharply reduced. Some programmes had to pull out of countries or radically adjust activities when the UK government considered the risks too high.

### **UK aid improved the effectiveness and inclusiveness of elections, political parties and parliaments in some countries, with a shift away from institutional capacity development approaches**

- 4.71 The UK remains one of the few donors willing to finance support to elections, political parties and parliaments. (It is the third-highest OECD DAC donor for 2015-20 on these themes although they represent the lowest UK thematic spend areas). UK funding through UNDP multi-donor trust funds improved the capacity of electoral commissions in Pakistan and Tanzania, while civil society election-monitoring programmes in Tanzania and Serbia enhanced the transparency, accountability and integrity of elections, and safeguarded citizens' electoral rights. Programmes in Serbia and Tanzania improved parliaments' capacity to scrutinise national budgets, including Serbia's response to COVID-19.
- 4.72 We identified a shift away from support for institutional development (such as the functioning of parliamentary committees or training for politicians) towards more politically informed approaches, which our literature review identified as likely to strengthen existing strategies. For example:
- Some programmes improved interactions between political bodies and citizens, which helped make them more transparent and accountable, even in increasingly authoritarian contexts. This included successfully encouraging parliaments to seek views from citizens and civil society groups in Pakistan and Tanzania.
  - There was also greater attention to inclusion. Instead of UK parties working only with ideologically aligned parties in developing countries, they also assisted cross-party coalitions of women parliamentarians in several regions.
  - WFD in the Balkans adopted a problem-based approach. High rates of youth emigration are undermining regional economies, and the programme encouraged youth to take part in politics so politicians would address this pressing issue.

### **The UK government achieved some encouraging results on media, but could take a more systematic approach both to media freedoms and to media sector capacity development**

- 4.73 The UK government responded to threats to freedom of expression through a new global campaign on media freedom. This was reflected in annual funding on media and free flow of information, which increased from £8.7 million in 2015 to £18.8 million in 2016. Apart from CSSF Serbia (see **Box 15**), the media projects we reviewed were small, or they were delayed or cut short due to ODA budget reductions, especially the two Aid Connect projects that include work with the media. Documented results in difficult contexts include:
- Media freedoms: the Media Freedom Coalition and Aid Connect defended journalists around the world who were harassed or detained.
  - Media sector development: sustainable funding models for traditional media and social media were piloted in Serbia, with mixed results (see **Box 15**).
  - Representation of vulnerable or minority groups in the media: the Open Societies Programme in Pakistan helped women and transgender journalists publish stories, thereby reducing their stigmatisation. It also led to women-led digital start-ups.
  - The use of media to inform citizens and promote accountability: the 'engaged citizens reporting' platform



in Serbia encouraged participation (see **Box 15**). In Tanzania, BBC Media Action radio programmes reached 9.2 million people who could question local leaders.

- 4.74 Media programmes tended to work on one of three themes rather than address all three dimensions: media freedom, media sector capacity, and citizen participation and state accountability through the use of media. However, media outlets and journalists not only need freedoms to operate, but also require improved capacity, such as sustainable funding, which is under threat globally in an era of social media. In this way, they can hold governments to account or report on issues of most relevance for citizens. UK aid projects could more systematically address these different aspects of the media environment: both media freedoms and media sector capacity.

### Box 15: Results from Serbia's media portfolio

The media are operating in an increasingly repressive political context in Serbia. We reviewed a CSSF £2.7 million portfolio that contributed to media freedom, media capacity and citizens' use of media outputs.

The Balkans Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) (£883,000, 2015-23) established a solid model to support the digitalisation of media outlets. It engaged in continuous capacity building and training with impactful results – for example, changing editorial policy to be more at the service of citizens.

The Media for All consortium led by the British Council (£1.8 million, 2019-23) scaled up BIRN's approach. It introduced new business models to make the sector more financially sustainable, which were adopted by some media outlets. It also promoted the 'engaged citizens report', an online platform to help media consult their audiences about topics of interest. It is also a tool for citizens to report any issues or areas of concern in a safe and secure way. It has been used beyond the usual media audience and has created opportunities for much wider participation.

UK-funded media projects developed a strong regional Western Balkans approach, which has allowed flexible opportunity to address common democracy and human rights threats in the region.

### Transparency projects opened governments to scrutiny, but could more consistently support citizens' use of government information

- 4.75 The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is a global platform where governments engage with CSOs at global, country and local levels on issues such as open contracting and beneficial ownership.<sup>46</sup> OGP national action plans are developed by governments, with civil society participation. The UK provided funding for their implementation through a World Bank trust fund, which has been slow to disburse. There is no overall assessment of how the OGP improved citizens' use of state information or how citizens' feedback was used by governments, but there are some positive case studies. For example, in Nigeria, following police brutality which led to massive protests in 2020, civil society groups and the government used OGP mechanisms to reform the police and give civil society a role in the process under the OGP national action plan. The FCDO Nigeria bilateral governance programme also supported OGP actions in Nigerian states, an excellent but rare example in our sample of good links between central and country programmes.
- 4.76 Other UK aid projects which promote free flow of information and government transparency did not always link the state and citizens adequately, due to design issues or political constraints. They tended to help state authorities provide public information, but did not always pay enough attention to citizens' use of information, which undermined the potential impact on accountability. For example:
- In Serbia, the CSSF enabled the government to make pollution data available under the CSSF Open Data, Open Opportunities project implemented by UNDP (£240,000, 2017-20). But this topic was seen as relatively uncontroversial and the data were not used by CSOs working on these issues.
  - In Tanzania, DFID Support to Open Government, Data and Accountability in Tanzania (£8.3 million, 2014-17) assisted first the World Bank to help the government make health, education, water and

46 Beneficial ownership transparency requires "disclosure of the individual(s) who ultimately controls or profits from a business". See Open Government Partnership, [link](#).

sanitation data public (which were of priority interest to DFID and politically acceptable to the government), and second the regional civil society transparency organisation Twaweza to encourage use of these data. In 2017, the government left the OGP under which this programme had been designed and, in a context of closing civic space and political persecution, Twaweza focused on its own agenda.

### The UK government helped strengthen the international human rights system, but found it challenging to assist civil society organisations under threat

4.77 In response to global pressure on human rights, the UK was able to protect and strengthen the international human rights system. In addition to active UK diplomatic participation in human rights bodies, UK aid strengthened some core international bodies, such as OHCHR, and helped civil society groups to bring public interest litigation before regional courts. **Box 16** provides examples from the Magna Carta Fund.

#### Box 16: Magna Carta Fund support to OHCHR and Reprieve

We reviewed a few Magna Carta Fund projects (totalling £688,000 between 2019 and 2021) which contributed to strengthening **OHCHR**, including its early warning and prevention capacity. The projects improved OHCHR's emergency response teams' capacity to provide timely information, including tracking the impact of COVID-19 responses on the most vulnerable groups. This information was then used by the UN to respond to human rights violations globally.

We reviewed Magna Carta Fund Reprieve projects in Pakistan and Southern Africa (£373,000, 2016-20). In Tanzania, Reprieve supported lawyers to make use of the **African Court on Human and People's Rights** to abolish the death penalty on the continent. In response to a case brought by Reprieve partners, the Court ruled in 2019 that the mandatory death penalty was contrary to African Charter rights to life, to dignity, and to fairness and due process, and ordered Tanzania to amend its penal code.

- 4.78 At country level, human rights activities included the preparation of new laws, regulatory frameworks or national action plans. These lay the ground for governments to protect human rights better, if they are implemented and citizens are aware of their rights. We saw evidence of implementation of new laws in Pakistan around gender-based violence and transgender issues. UK aid also assisted national human rights institutions and provincial women's rights commissions, but the results were less evident.
- 4.79 FCDO does not prepare an overall assessment of the Magna Carta Fund, which is a dedicated instrument for human rights projects. In a 2020-21 end-of-year assessment of the overall International Programme Fund (of which the Magna Carta Fund is part), 77% of 71 democracy, human rights or rules-based international system allocations (which can include several projects) were rated as having achieved their policy outcomes in full, which seems an implausibly high rate (indicative of the measurement issues noted in **paragraph 4.63**).
- 4.80 In the Relevance and Coherence sections, we found that UK aid and diplomacy were not always able to assist journalists or human rights defenders under threat. One reason is the potential risk of doing harm if they become associated with the UK. In addition, the UK government was not always willing to accept and manage these risks, which could undermine its access to partner governments if the initiatives were not successful, whereas some other governments were less risk-averse. The International Development Committee's 2022 enquiry into UK aid to Pakistan also noted the restrictions faced by civil society, the media, human rights commissions and women's rights commissions, and called for FCDO to continue to designate Pakistan a human rights priority country and engage through diplomatic and development means on these issues.<sup>47</sup>
- 4.81 Support for civic space and human rights defenders has also been affected by UK aid's limited appetite for fiduciary risk, which has increased due diligence burdens, and its shift away from supporting the development of CSOs through core funding. Experts note that this approach, which earmarks funding against specific activities, makes it harder for CSOs to withstand government persecution, and therefore

47 *UK aid to Pakistan*, sixth report of session 2021-22, House of Commons International Development Committee, April 2022, [link](#).

goes against the policy objective of responding to civic space restrictions. This echoes a finding from a previous ICAI review, on DFID's civil society partnerships.<sup>48</sup> While the UK works extensively with national or local CSOs as implementing partners in our case study countries, it does not systematically support their organisational capacity development (see **Box 17**). We found the same situation at a global level: Aid Connect had the potential to sustain CSOs while promoting innovation in repressive contexts; however, its budget was severely reduced due to ODA reductions and funding was linked to specific activities rather than core support.

### Box 17: Managing fiduciary risks in Tanzania's reduced civic space

Apart from a series of grants to a regional East African transparency organisation, Twaweza, the UK aid programmes we reviewed did not provide core or programmatic funding to civil society. Earmarked projects, with UK aid contributions attached to specific activities, are easier to monitor but do not enable organisations to develop or adjust to adversity to the same extent.

In Tanzania, over the previous ten to 20 years, DFID and other donors had established national intermediary organisations to fund and develop the capacity of legal, media and civil society organisations. DFID ended its co-funding for two of these organisations abruptly for fiduciary and administrative reasons in 2015 and 2019, at a time when they were needed more than ever to sustain civil society in the face of political repression.

The successor Accountability in Tanzania 2 programme, which funded issue-based civil society coalitions, did not replace these national intermediary bodies (although it funded one of them until 2019). UK aid used an international private sector managing agent to reduce its fiduciary risks, which CSOs did not appreciate as it created an additional layer of management in place of a direct relationship between FCDO and Tanzanian bodies. In addition, the programme was slow to start, and ended in 2022, with its budget severely reduced from £42 million to £24 million.

### UK aid programmes achieved good results when they worked with both governments and citizens, focused on locally salient issues, facilitated coalitions and had longer timeframes

- 4.82 Programmes were successful when they worked both with citizens to claim their rights and with state authorities to respect and promote these rights, in keeping with a human rights-based approach. In Pakistan, the Aawaz programme evolved between its first and second phases. Aawaz II includes collaboration with state authorities to develop policies and systems to respond to the demands raised through Aawaz village, district and provincial forums (see **Box 18**).
- 4.83 Programmes generally made more progress when they identified specific issues that were important to national or local stakeholders, and supported coalitions to negotiate and implement practical solutions, rather than more institutional approaches such as the Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan programme. We mentioned several problem-based programmes in the Relevance section. **Box 14** above on Tanzania's official sign language provides a detailed example.
- 4.84 The most successful programmes we reviewed, such as Aawaz, brought together different actors to form local coalitions, including state and non-state organisations, to address targeted issues. However, coalition building takes time, and results were adversely affected in a number of cases when programmes ended early as a result of UK aid budget reductions (as we saw with Aid Connect overall and its Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (£4.9 million, 2018-21) project in particular, or Accountability in Tanzania 2 as described in **Box 17**). Other programmes created non-formal thematic coalitions, and were able to influence state officials (such as WFD in the Balkans, or Reprieve around the death penalty in different countries).
- 4.85 Most of the programmes that were able to demonstrate achievements had received UK aid for five or more years (often through successive phases, including a series of annual Magna Carta Fund or CSSF projects). This meant that they could develop a deep understanding of their sector, establish trust with local partners, adapt their approaches and make incremental progress, which over a longer period led to more impressive results. This includes support to civil society for elections monitoring in Serbia,

48 DFID's partnership with civil society organisations, Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2019, [link](#).

parliamentary or sister-party assistance with WFD or long-term multi-donor funding for Twaweza in East Africa, which helped its survival during a difficult period. Programmes in our sample that lasted for four or fewer years usually found it more challenging to demonstrate credible results, such as data transparency in Serbia or Tanzania, or Aid Connect projects which were cut short.

- 4.86 The International Development Committee's 2022 enquiry into UK aid to Pakistan reached similar findings. In particular, it recommended that FCDO in Pakistan should focus its aid on longer-term programmes, rather than shorter-term projects, and should deliver its programmes through or with local organisations and communities.<sup>49</sup>

### Box 18: Pakistan Aawaz Punjab Provincial Forum

The Aawaz programme has established a structure of village, district and provincial forums in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab. These forums enable grassroots communities to raise issues which government officials at district and provincial levels can address.

In Haripur, KP, we heard that Aawaz referred 400 people living with disabilities to the district social welfare department, and that 200 people with disabilities had received their domicile certificate, which will allow them to access government jobs and social protection.

In Lahore, the capital of Punjab, we met with the provincial forum, which is attended by highly respected civil society representatives and government officials. The forum served as a platform to raise issues from the grassroots to government, but also facilitated coalitions on specific issues between civil society and officials. It contributed, for example, to the Punjab Social Protection Authority developing a policy to protect transgender people in Punjab.

### Results were undermined by UK aid budget reductions and weaknesses in project management

- 4.87 UK aid budget reductions during 2020 and 2021 severely affected a number of central programmes and the Tanzania portfolio. We identified a reduction of 15% (£37.5 million out of our portfolio sample budget of £245.7 million). For example, in April 2021, Aid Connect was reduced by 28%, from £138 million to £99 million. One of its projects, Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID), was cut three times (from £7.6 million to £4.9 million), and as a result, the grantee, Christian Aid, had to deliver on its own rather than through its consortium partners from developing countries. The Aid Connect learning component was not funded. The Accountability in Tanzania 2 budget was reduced from £42 million to £24 million, resulting in a reduction in the scope and ambition of the programme. The Institutions for Inclusive Development programme was ended early. Neither programme could deliver at scale, and both were less able to respond to an improved political context in Tanzania during 2022. A few programmes were protected, such as the Serbia CSSF portfolio as the UK sought to demonstrate its commitment to the region. In Pakistan, Aawaz II and the Open Societies Programme maintained their budgets, but with a longer implementation timeframe, thereby reducing their annual expenditures.

“ In very different contexts, the perception of [UK aid] broken promises, lack of resources, and the urgent need to address continuing discrimination against the target populations of this programme has evoked responses ranging from resignation to anger. ”

Consortium member, ECID evaluation

- 4.88 Delayed FCDO decisions on how to allocate its reduced budget have affected all programmes since 2020. This caused uncertainty and limited the ability of teams to turn their context analysis into relevant and effective interventions. The Magna Carta Fund usually funds annual projects, but often takes until

49 UK aid to Pakistan, sixth report of session 2021-22, House of Commons International Development Committee, April 2022, [link](#).

several months into the year before allocating its funding, which further reduces the time available for implementation. The 2020-21 Magna Carta Fund overall budget was reduced to £7 million, from £10.6 million in preceding years. FCDO delayed allocation decisions until September 2020, which left very little time for implementation. For example, by the time the project documentation was completed and approved, the OHCHR £400,000 Regional Emergency Response project only had three months to deliver.

4.89 We identified other systemic programme management issues that are consistent with findings from other ICAI reviews:

- The CSSF and the Magna Carta Fund operate mostly on an annual basis. Every year, FCDO project managers seek and negotiate new project proposals. The advantage is that projects can respond to the latest changes in the human rights or political context. However, in our small sample, we found that funding was given to the same organisations for successive years for similar activities. This is highly inefficient, for both FCDO and its grantees, and detracts from the quality of programming. Most of our interviewees would prefer multi-year funding and complained of the high monthly reporting burden caused by the annual cycle.
- A number of larger programmes faced challenges with contracting and inception, which delayed implementation. Due to procurement delays, there was an 18-month gap between Aawaz I and the start of the British Council Aawaz II component with citizens (which represents 40% of Aawaz II). Accountability in Tanzania 2 and Institutions for Inclusive Development had long inception periods before activities started (partly due to recruitment issues), and the latter was terminated early. CSOs in Tanzania did not appreciate grants being managed by an intermediary company, and would have preferred to work directly with UK officials, as they had done previously. In addition, in Tanzania the UK ended its participation in some multi-donor programmes on fiduciary grounds which seemed stricter than other donors’.
- Links between central and country programmes were often sub-optimal, with missed opportunities for complementary working. In the context of continuing UK aid reductions, improving the relevance and responsiveness of central programmes to the priorities identified in partner countries is essential. For example, WFD receives central funding for its country activities, while FCDO country teams also select implementers on a competitive basis for their democracy programmes (and do not always select WFD). At times, WFD struggled to gain access to FCDO when another democracy programme was also active. Conversely, it was not always able to respond to FCDO country teams which wanted its support but which did not have UK aid resources to fund WFD activities. UK political parties, funded through WFD, also have a great deal of independence in where and how they offer technical assistance, which may not align with WFD or FCDO country or thematic priorities.

## Conclusions on effectiveness

4.90 Democracy and human rights results are both challenging to achieve in repressive political contexts and hard to measure. We found that UK aid programmes improved their approach to measuring results. We identified examples of good delivery, with successful programmes building effective coalitions, working on locally salient issues and operating with longer timeframes. They provided effective support for women, youth, and people with disabilities, but less consistently for minorities, LGBT+ people, journalists and human rights defenders. There were also good results from support for elections, parliaments, political parties, media, transparency and human rights.

4.91 Since 2020, some UK aid programmes delivered less than their full potential due to budget reductions once implementation started or unpredictable funding allocations. Effectiveness was also undermined over the full 2015-21 period by annual funding cycles, delays in moving from design to implementation, or low risk appetite. Links between central programmes and country teams could be improved.

4.92 We award a **green-amber** score for effectiveness, in recognition of some strong results over the review period in difficult political contexts despite the difficulties of measuring results, while noting with concern a trend towards programmes becoming less effective in the past two years.

# 5. Conclusions and recommendations

## Conclusion

- 5.1 UK aid democracy and human rights programmes are usually relevant, as a result of staff expertise, technical guidance, access to evidence, and the ability to adjust as the context changes or in response to learning. Programmes balance a response to specific threats, changing thematic ministerial priorities and the need to maintain access to partner governments. They increasingly prioritise the most excluded social groups.
- 5.2 We found that complementary UK aid development and diplomatic interventions to support democracy and human rights have been beneficial. Although the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) merger clearly had potential to improve coherence, it has not yet been fully realised. Internationally, the UK government's reputation as a thought leader and reliable global actor on democracy and human rights has declined in recent years.
- 5.3 Some UK aid democracy and human rights programmes were able to document results in repressive political contexts, especially when they operated over longer timeframes. This included improving the realisation of rights and providing greater access to democratic institutions for some at-risk groups, and making some government, political, media or civil society bodies more effective. Our review also identified a shift towards more politically aware, as opposed to capacity development, approaches, which improved effectiveness.
- 5.4 UK aid programmes were not always able to address the priorities identified through analysis. This was due to a combination of factors, such as at times low appetite for fiduciary risks, concern about doing harm to at-risk groups, or not wanting to lose access to partner governments. Effectiveness was also affected by delays in setting up large programmes, by short projects which were repeatedly extended with increasing reporting burden, and by sub-optimal links between central and country programmes.
- 5.5 Disruptions to UK aid since 2020 have affected the relevance and effectiveness of the portfolio, and undermined the promise of greater development and diplomacy coherence since the merger. High policy ambition is not matched by sufficient or predictable budgets. FCDO lacks a clear strategy which FCDO teams and external partners can use in the context of ongoing official development assistance (ODA) budget reductions. Governance experts who play essential roles for the relevance and effectiveness of programmes are moving into generalist positions or leaving the organisation.
- 5.6 Our recommendations below focus on how FCDO can build on the strengths we have identified, and overcome some of the challenges it has faced since 2020.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** FCDO should set out publicly its approach to democracy and human rights.

### Problem statements:

- The global decline in democracy and human rights is set to continue, and creates a more difficult operating context for all UK aid programmes in future years.
- After two years, the merger of the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office into FCDO has not yet led to a coherent strategy or a more consistent approach to democracy and human rights.
- The 'open societies' strategy, which attempted to improve both coherence and consistency, has not been finalised and published, and has not guided strategic choices or policy coherence within FCDO or improved cross-government coordination.
- The 'open societies' narrative is not well understood by the UK's development and diplomacy partners, and therefore does not help UK international influencing at a time of reduced financial clout.



**Recommendation 2:** FCDO should ensure it retains sufficient expertise, in particular in governance, to design and monitor its democracy and human rights interventions.

**Problem statements:**

- FCDO is losing or not using its technical expertise on this agenda.
- FCDO senior management are not seen by staff to value technical expertise to the same extent as DFID did.
- The UK's thought leadership and international reputation on democracy and human rights policy and programmes has declined, partly because its experts are less visible.

**Recommendation 3:** FCDO should introduce a leaner process to design and approve smaller programmes, while ensuring that due diligence is sufficient to allow approval for longer than one year.

**Problem statements:**

- Supporting democracy and human rights in backsliding contexts is very difficult, and needs to be adapted to the circumstances of partner countries.
- Conflict, Stability and Security Fund or Magna Carta Fund annual projects are less effective at supporting ongoing partnerships and longer-term change. Repeated annual projects and heavier reporting than in previous years entail high staff and partner inputs.
- By contrast, former DFID large multi-year programmes could be slow to get started (at the design, contracting or inception stages) and as a result miss opportunities.

**Recommendation 4:** FCDO should consider whether it can learn from other countries, innovate and take more risks to support individuals and organisations facing the most serious threats from repression.

**Problem statements:**

- FCDO programmes are not always able to support democracy and human rights defenders or organisations facing political repression.
- The level of risks faced by these individuals and organisations, and the opportunities to assist them, will be very context-specific and not suited to centrally determined assessments.
- One of the barriers has been, at times, the UK's relatively lower risk appetite compared to other development partners.
- Another barrier has been the limited use of core or programmatic funding for civil society organisations, which experts and other donors have found an effective response to restricted civic space.

**Recommendation 5:** FCDO should ensure all its central democracy and human rights programmes work closely with its overseas network where democracy and human rights have been prioritised, in particular in the case of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).

**Problem statements:**

- Overall ODA budget reductions mean the UK government will have a reduced budget for years to come to fund programmes that respond to the main global or country democracy and human rights threats or opportunities.
- Ministerial priorities do not always align with what country partners identify as priority or feasible interventions for the UK.
- Central programmes have not always been well integrated with the portfolio of country posts, leading to missed opportunities and poorer value for money.
- WFD country programmes do not always have close working relationships with FCDO country posts which do not fund WFD activities and which may have separate democracy programmes.
- WFD does not always have a working relationship with FCDO's embassies and high commissions which do not have democracy programmes but where democracy is a priority.

## Annex 1: Summary of reviewed programmes

<b>Pakistan Programme</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Budget if live or total spend if closed</b>	<b>Objective of programme</b>
<b>DFID Aawaz I</b>	March 2012 - May 2018	£39,100,000	Provide poor women, men and minority groups in 4,500 villages in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab with tools to (1) help them resolve local disputes peacefully, (2) work with local government to improve service delivery and (3) get more poor women involved in decision making at local, district and provincial levels.
<b>DFID Aawaz II</b>	August 2018 - March 2027	£49,142,613	Support Pakistani society and government institutions that work to increase voice, choice and control for marginalised groups, protect them from exploitation and prevent discrimination and intolerance at all levels. The programme has a focus on child labour, gender-based violence, child and forced marriage, and intolerance against minorities and other socially excluded groups.
<b>CSSF Consolidating Democracy in Pakistan (CDIP)</b>	April 2016 - March 2021	£33,500,000	Promote progress towards achieving a democratic system in which government institutions are more capable, parliament is more accountable, and the state as a whole is more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Pakistani people.
<b>CSSF Open Societies Programme (OSP)</b>	April 2021 - March 2025	£3,400,000	Support Pakistan to become a more open society, in which the rights of vulnerable groups are better respected and protected, civil society – including a freer media – is better able to hold the government to account, and the state is better able to provide services to citizens.
<b>Serbia Programme</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Budget if live or total spend if closed</b>	<b>Objective of programme</b>
<b>CSSF Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability (CRTA) elections projects</b>	August 2016 - March 2022	£1,045,812	Support accountability and transparency as established guiding democratic principles by (1) establishing mechanisms that inform, educate, and enable citizens to hold representatives to account; (2) supporting the integrity of electoral processes.
<b>CSSF Media for All</b>	2019 - March 2023	£1,810,017	Support (1) media outlets to become more financially resilient and work in accordance with adopted policies, including on gender in the workplace and (2) media outlets and professionals to produce quality, relevant, gender-sensitive content that attracts and engages new audiences, including women and marginalised groups.

CSSF Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Serbia (BIRN) projects	December 2015 - March 2023	£882,761	Promote and enhance democracy in Serbia through publication of articles, holding public debates and creating online platforms to strengthen understanding of the democratic process.
CSSF Good Governance Fund Open Data – Open Opportunities, Serbia	September 2017 - March 2020	£240,570	Support the government of Serbia to effectively implement the Open Data Action Plan and Open Government Partnership Action Plan in a participatory manner.

Tanzania Programme	Timeframe	Budget if live or total spend if closed	Objective of programme
DFID Institutions of Democratic Empowerment and Accountability (IDEA)	February 2012 - December 2016	£9,134,080	Provide support in strengthening Tanzania's key democratic institutions of parliament, constitution and elections through enhanced organisational capacity and effective citizen participation by 2016.
DFID Support to Open Government, Data and Accountability in Tanzania (SOGDAT)	March 2014 - March 2017	£8,305,636	Improve the supply of and demand for better-quality, reliable and accessible information through promoting open government data and citizen-state mutual responsibility. This will benefit ordinary citizens and those who represent them by having reliable evidence on the quality and equity of water, health and education sector service delivery.
DFID Institutions for Inclusive Development (I4ID)	September 2015 - June 2021	£13,337,696	Strengthen democratic institutions and governance in Tanzania by working with parliament, political parties, civil society and the media to improve capacity and strengthen accountability mechanisms, promote institutions and political processes that are more inclusive, and foster economic growth that provides more benefits for poor people.
DFID Accountability in Tanzania Programme 2 (AcT2)	May 2017 - December 2022	£24,235,643	Empower Tanzanian citizens and strengthen civil society by providing grants and capacity building support to selected civil society organisations, to increase the accountability and responsiveness of government.

### Centrally managed programmes

Partner or fund: Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)

Programme	Timeframe	Budget or spend	Objective of programme
FCO/FCDO grant in aid	2015-2022	£18,168,224	WFD is a UK government non-departmental public body and receives core government funding.

<b>DFID/FCO Supporting Democratic Effective Governance (SEDG)</b>	April 2015 - March 2018	£9,250,000 (This is the total DFID budget without the FCO grant in aid component)	Build democratic culture and practice in parliaments and political parties that will support inclusive and effective governance.
<b>DFID Inclusive and Accountable Politics (IAP)</b>	August 2018 - December 2022	£11,789,913	(1) Enable WFD to strengthen inclusive, open and accountable political systems to deliver sustainable development outcomes in FCDO priority and ODA-eligible countries; (2) Enable independent monitoring and evaluation of WFD, improving its programmes implemented by UK political offices to improve programme performance.
<b>CSSF Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (WBDI)</b>	2018 - April 2022	£5,000,000	(1) Enable under-represented groups (women, youth, and people with disabilities) to be more strongly represented in policy and institutions; (2) Ensure that parliament scrutinises government performance more closely and increasingly adopts policies and laws based on evidence; (3) Ensure that political parties increasingly function as intermediaries for citizens to represent their views to and in government.

Partner or fund: **Aid Connect (DFID)**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Budget or spend</b>	<b>Objective of programme</b>
<b>Aid Connect Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN)</b>	August 2019 - September 2023	£3,890,043	Create an expert and research-informed international support network of parliamentary and belief leaders, who are dedicated to promoting freedom of religion or belief in their national and local communities. FoRBLN works in Bangladesh, The Gambia, Ghana, Malawi, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda.
<b>Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID)</b>	October 2018 - September 2023	£7,282,649	Address how poverty reduction efforts can actively redress religious inequalities, support inclusive, religiously diverse communities, and promote the benefits of interdependence among people beyond religious and non-religious lines. CREID works in Egypt, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan and Syria.
<b>Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development (ECID)</b>	August 2018 - September 2021	£4,955,262	Contribute to the poverty reduction, realisation of rights and improved wellbeing of over 2 million people, with a focus on the most marginalised, including (but not limited to) women and girls, LGBT+ people, ethnic minorities and people living with HIV. ECID worked in Myanmar, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

<b>Aswat Horra (Free Voices)</b>	May 2019 - August 2022	£3,021,585	Promote freedom of expression (FoE) by working towards three key objectives: 1) to develop evidence and learning for effective approaches to safely promote FoE and pioneer new approaches to keeping Egyptian, Lebanese and Libyan civil society organisations free and independent; 2) to build the organisational capacity and resilience of civil society organisations to support work on FoE effectively and safely; 3) to advance advocacy planning and delivery that promotes FoE and increases collaboration between local groups and activists.
<b>Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency Enhancing Civic Transformation (PROTECT)</b>	December 2018 - November 2023	£6,497,536	Foster open societies based on expanded and protected civic space. PROTECT works in Kenya, Malawi and Myanmar.

Partner or fund: **Magna Carta Fund (FCO)** (part of the International Programme Fund)

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Budget or spend</b>	<b>Objective of programme</b>
<b>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) projects on regional emergency response and conflict prevention; UN voluntary trust fund on contemporary forms of slavery</b>	Combined FY2019-20 and 2020-21	£688,620	Strengthen OHCHR's capacity to prevent and respond to serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including in the context of COVID-19; and, at the same time, support the wider UN effort to become more effective in anticipating, preventing and responding to crisis and conflict.  Manage grants to civil society organisations which work directly with the victims of sexual slavery or forced marriage, child soldiers, child, bonded or forced labourers, and other victims of contemporary forms of slavery, by providing, for example, legal assistance, shelter or healthcare.
<b>Reprieve projects (Pakistan and Southern Africa)</b>	June 2016 - March 2020	£373,945	Uphold the rule of law and the rights of individuals by building the capacity of institutions, lawyers and grassroots organisations and developing support for the abolition of the death penalty.
<b>Initiative for Economic and Social Rights in Serbia (A11) projects</b>	October 2018 - March 2019 and 2020-2021	£61,000	Increase awareness of human rights standards and offer innovative and effective approaches to their implementation in Serbia.  Provide support to the most vulnerable Roma and other populations during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia, through information sharing and direct support in accessing personal documents, water, sanitation, electricity and education.

Partner or fund: **Open Government Partnership (DFID)**

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Budget or spend</b>	<b>Objective of programme</b>
<b>Support to Open Government Programme (SOGP)</b>	February 2014 - March 2018	£1,470,000	Support governments to become more transparent, more accountable and more responsive to their own citizens through meaningful open government reforms.
<b>Supporting Open Government and Transparency (SOGAT)</b>	June 2018 - March 2022	£11,163,000	Drive open government reforms at the country level by responding to the increased demand from countries to support the design and implementation of locally owned open government reforms through their national action plans.





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