

TIME TO TURN AROUND: THE DECLINE OF UK PEACEBUILDING

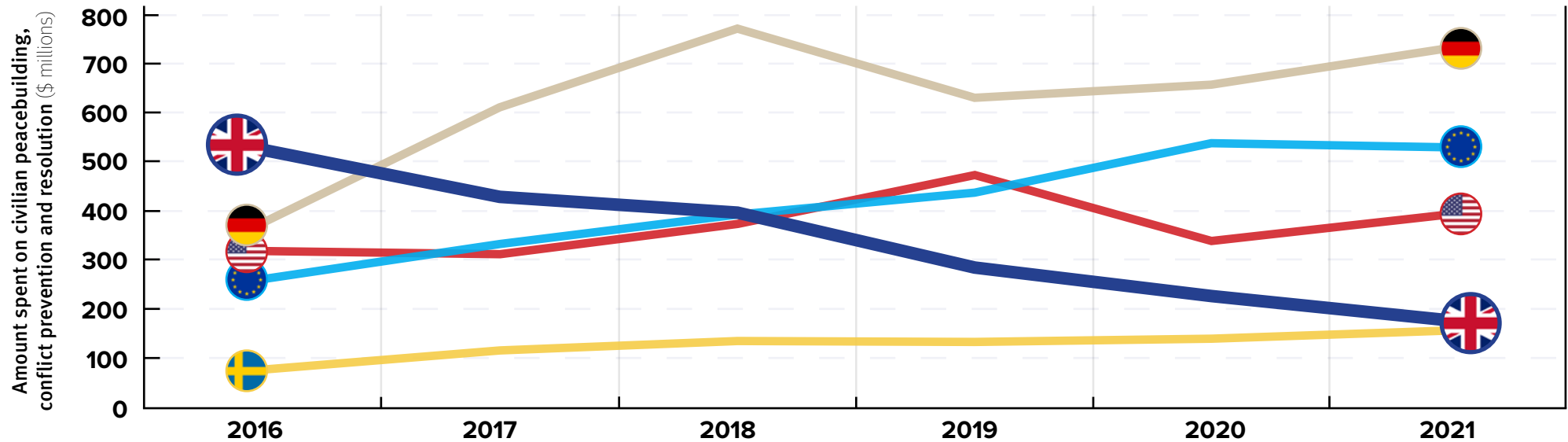
In 2016 the UK was a global leader in spending on peacebuilding and conflict prevention. According to data drawn from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the UK spent a greater percentage of its aid budget on civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution than any other donor. By 2020, it was overtaken by Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Germany, the European Union (EU), the Netherlands, Switzerland, Slovenia and Ireland despite numerous commitments to invest in tackling the causes of conflict and instability.

This decline in spending takes place within a context of rising global conflict and rising threats. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, 'the average level of global peacefulness has deteriorated for ten of the past 14 years'.

Conflicts create global security challenges that impact the UK: shrinking the pool of democratic states, increasing corruption, impacting the global economy, forcing displacement and creating conditions for transnational crime and armed groups to thrive and which geopolitical rivals can exploit.

Even as global peacefulness has declined for ten of the past 14 years, UK spending on civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution has plummeted by USD\$300 million from \$514 million in 2016 to \$184 million in 2021.

In 2016, this represented **over 4% of the total aid budget**. By 2021, **only 2% of UK overseas development assistance (ODA) was spent on peacebuilding** despite numerous government commitments and a clear global need.



Repeated UK Government spending commitments:

2015: the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review committed the Department for International Development (DFID) to **spend at least 50 per cent of its budget in fragile states and regions.**

2018: the UK's National Security Capability Review reiterated this target, stating that '**DFID will focus on ensuring that its programmes are targeted more acutely on the underlying drivers of fragility, conflict and instability.** We will increase our efforts on security and justice, which will further help reduce insecurity, serious and organised crime, and grievances that can lead to violent extremism.'

2021: the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy promised '[t]o **establish a more integrated approach to government work on conflict and instability, placing greater emphasis on addressing the drivers of conflict (such as grievances, political marginalisation and criminal economies), atrocity prevention and strengthening fragile countries' resilience to external interference.**'

2022: the UK's International Development Strategy states, 'While supporting the principles of freedom, democracy and self-determination, our development partnerships will tackle the causes of instability, conflict and human suffering', but fails to transfer the earlier commitment to spend the majority of DFID's budget in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS).

Peacebuilding works: the evidence is clear

2018: the World Bank releases [Pathways for Peace](#), which ‘demonstrates that prevention works, saves lives, and is cost-effective. It estimates that “savings” generated from prevention range from US\$5 billion to US\$69 billion a year. The study establishes that efforts must be sustained, inclusive, and targeted.’

2020: the OECD [States of Fragility report](#) states that ‘[v]iolence is cyclical and protracted, meaning that the benefits of preventing it, both in terms of lives and money saved, are significant and compounding each year. Engagement in fragile contexts should thus prioritise prevention always, development when possible and humanitarian action when necessary.’ [The 2022 OECD report](#) underscores this, concluding ‘that the business case for prevention remains strong’ but that ‘development partners have not yet embraced crisis prevention or conflict prevention at scale’.

Addressing the root causes of conflict: another story of decline

Multiple UK strategies have committed to addressing the root causes and issues driving conflict, including corruption, injustice and unequal access to services and opportunities. Yet the proportion of the UK aid budget spent on tackling these issues through ‘core and secondary peacebuilding’ declined from over 21 per cent in 2008 to nine per cent in 2020.

Core and secondary peacebuilding is an alternative measure of peacebuilding spending to the narrower OECD code ‘civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution’ which includes spending on 16 programming areas that contribute to peace, including anticorruption, gender equality, public administration, human rights and media freedom ([Institute for Economics and Peace 2017](#) and [OECD 2018](#)).

Spending on women, peace and security: right direction, wrong speed

Gender inequality is not just a gender issue. It is an impact of conflict but it is also an issue that drives conflict. For example, economic downturns lead breadwinners, usually men, to seek the perceived status and safety gained by joining security forces or armed groups. What’s more, in crisis-affected settings, women and girls face enormous barriers to meaningful participation in peace and governance processes despite the vital role they play.

The UK increased the proportion of its peacebuilding spending which supports gender equality as a principal objective from just one per cent in 2016 to seven per cent in 2019, but it still has a way to go to be on a par with other donors and to meet the [United Nations’ own 2010 recommended target of 15 per cent](#) of peacebuilding funds (data from [OECD Aid activities targeting gender equality and women’s empowerment database](#)).

7%

UK peacebuilding spend targets gender equality as a principle objective

15%

United Nations target for proportion of peacebuilding spent on gender equality

Recommendations:

- 1 Prioritise high-level peace and conflict prevention objectives within future foreign policy, development and national security strategies and fulfil this objective as stated in the 2021 Integrated Review.
- 2 Double the proportion of UK ODA spending towards ‘Civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution’, from 2 per cent in 2021 back up to 4 per cent in 2025.
- 3 Increase the proportion of peacebuilding spending focused on gender equality as a principal objective to 15 per cent, in line with UN targets.
- 4 Increase longer-term, flexible and more locally driven funding that addresses conflict drivers in FCAS.
- 5 Recommit to spending 50 per cent of ODA in FCAS and ensure that funding to FCAS is earmarked for work on conflict drivers.
- 6 Ensure that other UK interventions, including defence, diplomacy and development, do not undermine peace or contribute to conflict drivers.

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