In October, the UK Comprehensive Spending Review increased the budget for the Department for International Development (DFID). Andrew Mitchell, the Secretary of State for International Development, told The Lancet: “The spending review has put flesh on the bones of our commitment to increase the development budget to 0·7% of the gross national income by 2013”. This increase means the UK will join only a handful of countries to meet its UN obligation on foreign development aid.

Accompanying this increase, DFID is “fundamentally changing the way in which we spend the development budget, with critical changes in everything we do”, Mitchell continues. “Aid spent well creates miracles”, he says, “but in the current financial climate, we have a particular duty to show that we are achieving value for money”. DFID’s administration costs will halve, and a new Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) will assess development impact, improve aid accountability, and report publicly.

David Peretz, chair of the outgoing Independent Advisory Committee on Development Impact, has urged Mitchell to ensure sufficient resources and training for ICAI, and a coherent strategy for DFID to improve its track record in lesson-learning.

DFID’s overall goal will remain the elimination of poverty and delivery of clean water, sanitation, basic health care, and education to the world’s poorest people, assures Mitchell. But, aid will be targeted for the greatest effect: top priorities are states affected by or emerging from conflict; livelihoods and wealth creation; and a specific health focus on malaria, and on maternal and child health.

“It is above all conflict which condemns people to live in poverty”, Mitchell told The Lancet after his recent visit to Sudan. “If you live in a refugee camp in Darfur, it doesn’t matter how much access to money or to the architecture of the development you have, or to trade or wealth creation, for as long as there is conflict you are going to remain poor.” Poor people in conflicted countries “lose out twice over”, he says, as conflict also disrupts or prevents development efforts.

“militarised aid is the wrong tool to promote development in the long term...”

Over the next 3 years, the proportion of the DFID budget for conflicted states will increase from 22% to 30% (about £3·4 billion), while aid to Afghanistan will increase by 40%. Baroness Verma, the government spokesman on International Development, told parliament in July that “using the UK aid budget to secure progress in Afghanistan is the number one priority for the Secretary of State”. The National Security Strategy, published Oct 18, specifies action to align development objectives with national security concerns, especially in Afghanistan.

Making progress in Afghanistan, one of the world’s least developed countries, will be a major test of DFID’s new principles and practices. Current estimates suggest armed opposition groups control or significantly influence over half the country—many analysts suggest that armed opposition groups have shadow governments in all provinces. Almost half of Afghans live in poverty, and maternal, infant, and mortality rates in children younger than 5 years are among the highest in the world. Instability and the accompanying ethnic and cultural issues also adversely affect many other development indicators, including gender disparities.

Helping to address conflict “must be central to our aid policy if we are to help end global poverty”, Mitchell pointed out at the launch of the National Security Strategy. “We must reassess our response to overseas conflict—putting development at the heart of an integrated approach that supports the world’s most vulnerable people and protects Britain from external threats.”

Responding to concerns over the increasing links between development and security objectives in Afghanistan, Mitchell told The Lancet that “defence, diplomacy, and development are much better wired together than they have ever been before. We see this particularly in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams [PRTs].” But, as summarised in the recent country report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Fragile States Principles Monitoring Survey: “In Afghanistan, the assessment that international engagement is overly dominated by short-term security objectives at the expense of a more needs-based approach sends out a powerful call for behaviour change.”

Many national and international NGOs, such as Oxfam and Afghanaid, have repeatedly called for such behaviour change. “As political pressures to ‘show results’ in troop-contributing countries intensify, more and more assistance is being channelled through military actors to ‘win hearts and minds’ while efforts to address the underlying causes of poverty and repair the destruction wrought by three decades of conflict and disorder are being sidelined”, notes Quick Impact, Quick Collapse, a report by eight NGOs. Actions called for include an end to militarised aid—both the military funding and delivery of development projects and the alignment of aid with security objectives. Increased

UK aid—security, scrutiny, and the challenge of Afghanistan

Increased UK aid spending is being accompanied by fundamental changes in the priorities and processes of the Department for International Development. Kelly Morris investigates.
UN coordination of aid delivery, local ownership of programmes, and plans to phase out the military dominated PRTs are urged.

The UK Government denies any militarisation of its aid budget in Afghanistan, while Mitchell personally dismisses the concept as “slack analysis”, noting that no UK aid money is channelled through the military. A DFID spokesperson clarified that most British aid goes through the Afghan Government and multilateral organisations, such as the UN, adding that: “it’s absolutely focused on poverty reduction and building capacity for sustainable development”. Yet this year, international military forces are projected to deliver over US$1 billion of humanitarian and development aid, more than the Afghan national annual budgets for agriculture, health, and education combined. These funds will mainly be disbursed by PRTs, which have been described as lacking necessary civilian leadership, despite civilian representation.

Aid and development projects delivered by military personnel and structures, including PRTs, are described as potentially wasteful, ineffective, and harmful. Such projects often involve short-term, feel-good solutions, such as building a school or hospital, rather than sustainable local development programmes, such as basic primary health care or community-based education. “Militarised aid is the wrong tool to promote development in the long term: most projects are often poorly executed, inappropriate, and do not have sufficient community involvement in design and implementation to make them relevant to local needs or sustainable”, Farhana Faruqi-Stocker, managing director of AfghanAid, told The Lancet.

Other key concerns include the targeting of military-related projects by armed opposition groups. Local staff and aid workers—particularly those linked to military forces or military objectives—are no longer perceived as impartial, and a number have been killed. Another practice that puts civilians at risk is the authorised use of aid as an incentive—as rewards of cash, food, or other necessities—by military commanders to extract information. And in a country independently ranked as the third most corrupt in the world, militarised aid also has potential to contribute to the deepening corruption culture and violations of basic human rights, due to its high dependency on the local powerbrokers, which bypasses government structures.

Most Afghans consider poverty, unemployment, corruption, and weak governance to be the main drivers of conflict. “Without addressing effectively these challenges, there can be no sustainable improvement in security and a lasting peace for Afghans”, says Faruqi-Stocker. Mitchell agrees, reiterating that UK aid for Afghanistan will be spent according to DFID’s core principles. Specifically, he says, aid will be spent on training police and helping build capacity; vocational training for the many people who missed basic schooling; health; and livelihoods. “We seek to build up the provision of services and livelihoods in districts, particularly in Helmand”, he says.

“The UK Government, through DFID, has made generous contributions through rural development, security and justice, and health and education sectors”, says Faruqi-Stocker. She urges DFID to double its assistance to national priority programmes that are showing evidence of positive impact at the national level, “and focus less resources on Helmand—one of the most food secured, resource rich, and affluent provinces of the country”. Aid from many major donor countries is criticised for being heavily distorted in favour of insecure areas, where troops are located. Such drastic disparities lead to uneven development and could exacerbate conflict.

NGOs and rights’ groups argue strongly that Afghan’s needs and interests must be at the heart of efforts to redefined its strategic priorities, and aligning them with the government of Afghanistan’s declared priorities—what Mitchell describes as “taking forward our common aims and aspirations with the Afghan Government”.

Any signs of agreement are encouraging and necessary—with insurgency increasing, basic services are being eroded, and access by aid workers to those in need is restricted. 29 aid agencies warned in November of “the growing reliance on an increasingly dangerous variety of quick fixes” due to the constraints on military operations to show rapid results. As international forces begin to hand over the responsibility for security to the Afghan Government, more can and must be done to minimise harm to civilians, according to the report Nowhere To Turn by Oxfam International in Afghanistan.

Since the UK government has committed to long-term development assistance, Faruqi- Stocker advocates that the UK “must also set an example to other governments by prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable and poor Afghans”. She also notes the powerful case for a longer term investment in the national and international NGO sector. Mitchell asserts that “long after the last British serviceman or woman leaves Afghanistan, development will still be pursued vigorously”.

Kelly Morris