Aid and UK Security: What is the relationship?

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On 16th September Andrew Mitchell MP, Secretary of State for International Development, made a speech about conflict and development at the Royal College of Defence Studies. In this speech he argued that as part of the government's Strategic Defence Security Review (SDSR) there should be a reassessment of the UK's response to overseas conflict which puts development at the heart of an integrated approach that both protects the world's most vulnerable people and protects the UK from external threats. The emphasis on linking the work of DFID with the MoD and FCO further cemented the view that this policy explicitly links security with development.

However, this should be seen as part of a bigger issue relating to how security problems in poor countries affect their growth. As he said:
'Tackling conflict overseas is very much in our national interests – even in a time of financial consolidation. But it is also in the interests of the world's poor. In too many parts of the developing world prosperity will remain a distant dream unless and until we succeed in tackling many of the conflicts that block development. It is surely no coincidence that no fragile country has yet achieved a single Millennium Development Goal, the UN-agreed lodestars for UK development assistance.'

This potentially represents an important development in to the future of development policy. At a time when the UK is contemplating an end to overseas aid to India, there are similar stories across a number of middle income countries where overseas aid is relatively unimportant, highlighting a need for concentration in those countries where aid can have the most impact. Given this, why not prioritize conflict-affected countries? After all, eight out of ten of the lowest human development index–ranked countries have been recently, or are, at war. All ten of the top ten failed states in the world are experiencing conflict and eight of them are in Africa. Major root causes include a heady cocktail of dysfunctional governance; political, economic, and social inequalities; extreme poverty; economic stagnation; poor government services; high unemployment; and environmental degradation.

Ignore these countries and they will fall even further behind the majority of countries, but focus on them properly and they could stop being political and economic vacuums where predatory forces take power. Adding a security dimension to overseas aid could affect strategic decisions about allocation either in determining that security should be seen exclusively in UK terms and therefore development should support it, or that security is seen in the UK and overseas in broader terms and hard security is only part of the threat. This latter requires a series of hard decisions and a clear agenda setting out priorities in the area where development and security overlap.

By highlighting this conflict-development link, therefore, the UK may be in a better position to show that aid money helps keep Britain safe. An agenda based on a broader definition of security and its relationship to development could set out a new strategic logic for UK aid that could make sense both for the UK and for the poorest and most vulnerable.

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