



Adolescent girls at a youth centre, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023

UK ODA cuts: how do they impact adolescent girls?

Authors¹: Megan Devonald, Silvia Guglielmi and Nicola Jones

Introduction

Official development assistance (ODA) is defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as government aid with the explicit intent to promote the economic welfare and wellbeing of developing nations (OECD, 2023). It is considered to be a gold standard metric gauging the typology, amount and sector of foreign overseas aid spent in low-and-middle income countries (LMICs) and in contexts of humanitarian crises. As such, it is critical to monitor and track changes in ODA over time to ensure that no population is left behind.

Despite the UN General Assembly adopting a commitment for high-income countries to give 0.7% of national income in aid, in 2020, the United Kingdom (UK) government announced that it was reducing overseas aid spending from 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5%. As a result, some countries have seen significant reductions in ODA funding. For example, Ethiopia experienced the largest decrease (a 53% reduction) in overall funding, Somalia saw a 51% decrease, and Yemen a 48% decrease and these countries are simultaneously undergoing serious humanitarian crises. (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), 2021). In 2022, a third of UK ODA was spent on supporting refugees in the UK (three times

¹ The authors would like to thank Anthony Davis, Chanju Mwanza, George Ayres and Heather Knight from Plan International UK for their helpful and insightful comments on a first draft of this policy brief

the amount spent in 2021 and 12 times the amount spent in 2015), further reducing the proportion of the aid budget spent overseas (Loft, 2023). The UK government's own equality impact assessment of the cuts to ODA noted that the most vulnerable and marginalised people will be most severely impacted, with large reductions in funding to programmes targeting women, girls, and people with disabilities (FCDO, 2023a). This is despite the recent International Women and Girls Strategy (2023–2030) highlighting the UK's commitment to leave no one behind and focus on educating girls, empowering women and girls and ending gender-based violence. Although it has been announced that the ODA budget will increase in 2024 (Merrick, 2023), the cuts have already been described as having devastating consequences (Landale, 2023). Drawing on the GAGE precursor report to this publication, it is evident that women and girls are typically the most disproportionately affected by budget cuts, and adolescent girls as a cohort remain at particular risk of being further neglected in policy and programming (Devonald et al., 2023a).

In order to better understand the impacts of recent budget cuts on adolescent girls, this briefing draws on data from our recent review (Devonald et al., 2023c) of investments in adolescent girls. This analysis estimated the amount of gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA for 10 bilateral donors, including the UK. For the purposes of this brief, we focus only on the findings for investments by the UK which the data underscores requires particular attention given that it is the country with the largest cuts in both absolute and percentage terms. It is critical to shine a spotlight on the UK's ODA as the UK has been a major provider of ODA over the past decades across LMICs. It has also been one of the leading providers of funding to gender- and adolescent-targeted programming (2023a). For instance, several sub-Saharan Africa countries demonstrate high rates of reliance on the UK for their health systems (McDade et al., 2022) and evidence shows that due to the UK's recent cuts over nine million women and girls will miss out on access to contraception and close to four million fewer girls will be able to receive a decent education (UK Parliament, 2022).

Methodology

To map investments focused on adolescent girls, we reviewed data from the largest donor ODA tracking dataset, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Creditor Reporting System (OECD-CRS), at the global level from 2016 to 2021. We selected the top 10 bilateral donors addressing gender equality (Canada, European Union (EU) institutions, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the United States (US)) for all LMICs (Donor Tracker, 2019). We selected ODA that has gender equality as a principal or significant objective of the project/programme² and then used keyword searches of project titles and long descriptions in the OECD-CRS database for age-specific terms to identify funding that goes towards adolescent- and youth-specific projects/programmes. For more information on the methodology, see Devonald et al., 2023a.

For the purposes of this briefing, we explored the 2020 and 2021 data from the UK to identify some of the impacts of the recent funding cuts on gender- and adolescent-targeted programming.

² To identify ODA that supports gender equality and women's rights, OECD-CRS uses a three-point scoring system to screen projects. A score of 0 (not targeted) is given to projects that have not been found to focus on gender equality; a score of 1 (significant) is given to projects that have gender equality as an important objective but where it is not the main aim of the project; and a score of 2 (principal) is given if gender equality is the main objective of a project and is fundamental to its design and results. Projects/programmes that have not been screened are left blank (GENDERNET, 2016).

Results

Key findings

- Funding for gender and adolescent programming has faced significantly higher cuts (33%) than the reduction to the overall aid budget (21.1%).
- Humanitarian aid targeting adolescent girls in fragile contexts was significantly hit: the sectors most severely affected by UK funding cuts were emergency response, development food assistance and disaster prevention and preparedness.
- Other key programme cuts included those targeting adolescent girls' education and access to sexual and reproductive health, undermining key aims in the UK's 2023 International Women and Girls Strategy.
- The UK has fallen from the top provider of gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA (from 2016–2020) to the fifth in 2021.



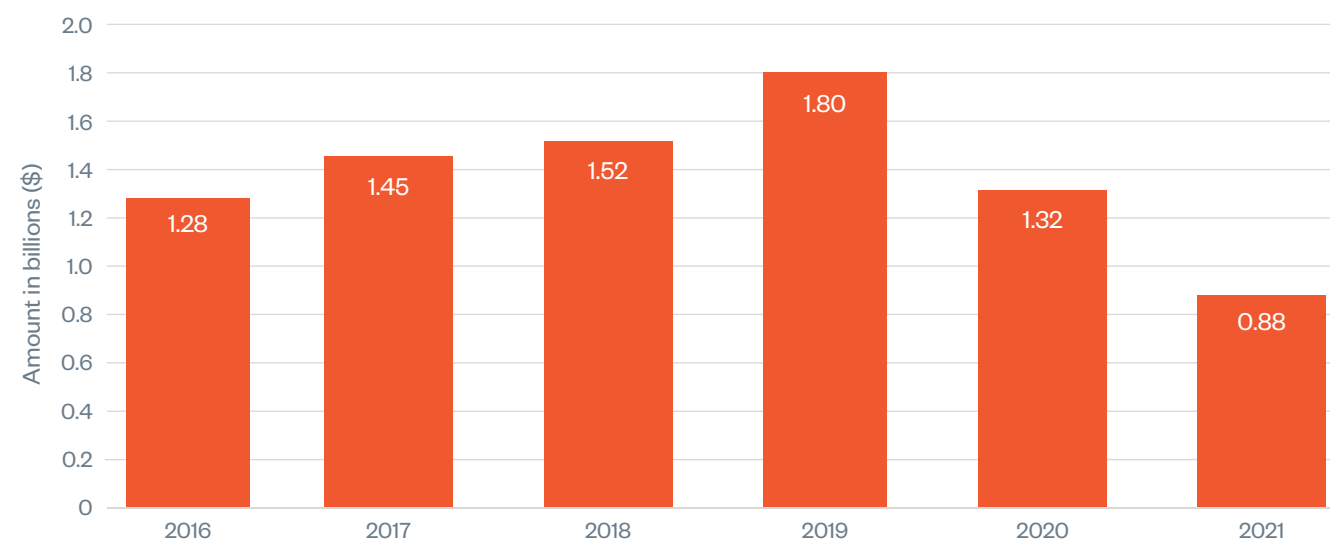
Our results show that the reduction of overseas aid from the UK in 2021 has had a large impact on gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA. Following on from a positive upward trend from 2016 to 2018, the amount the UK spent on ODA targeted to adolescent girls decreased from \$1.32 billion in 2020 to \$0.9 billion in 2021³ – a substantial 33% decrease (see Figure 1).

This is a larger decrease than the overall budget reduction (of 21.1%), highlighting that programming targeting adolescent girls has been especially negatively impacted by the cuts (FODO, 2021). Although in previous years (2016–2020) the UK was the top provider of gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA, the recent cuts mean it has dropped to 5th place in 2021.

Which sectors have been most impacted?

The UK's strategy for international development focuses on life-saving humanitarian assistance and the protection of women and girls (FCDO, 2022). Despite these stated priorities, out of the gender- and adolescent-targeted funding identified in our initial review (Devonald et al., 2023c), we found that the sectors most severely affected by funding cuts were emergency response, which decreased from \$219 million to \$41 million (a striking 81% decrease) and development food assistance, which was completely cut (see Table 1 for more details). Cuts in humanitarian assistance are occurring within the context of rising global humanitarian needs. The UN has estimated a 25% increase in the amount of people in need of humanitarian

Figure 1: Amount of gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA provided by the UK, 2016–2021



³ Data on the OECD-CRS database is provided in US dollars (\$) to ensure consistency with this and our full cross-donor report we have kept the figures in this brief in US dollars. Conversions to Pound Sterling (£) should use a 0.7364 exchange rate for 2020 data and 0.7412 for 2021 data. See: <https://www.oanda.com/currency-converter>.

Table 1: Overview of the amount and percentage of UK gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA by sector and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), 2020 and 2021

SDG	Sector	Amount 2020 (\$ millions)	Amount 2021 (\$ millions)	Total amount per SDG 2021 (\$ millions)	% Change
SDG 4 Quality education	Education, Level Unspecified	117	104	400	-11%
	Basic Education	154	117		-24%
	Secondary Education	102	62		-40%
	Post-Secondary Education	70	117		68%
SDG 3 Good health and well-being	Health, General	26	16	128	-38%
	Basic Health	47	12		-75%
	Population Policies/Programmes & Reproductive Health	155	100		-35%
SDG 1 No poverty	Emergency Response	219	41	79	-81%
	Other Social Infrastructure & Services	43	38		-13%
SDG 5 Gender equality	Government & Civil Society-general	112	77	77	-31%
SDG 6 Clean water and sanitation	Water Supply & Sanitation	21	20	20	-4%
SDG 13 Climate action	Reconstruction Relief & Rehabilitation	3	3	18	-17%
	Disaster Prevention & Preparedness	10	1		-91%
	General Environment Protection	15	14		-7%
SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions	Conflict, Peace & Security	16	12	12	-23%
SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth	Trade Policies & Regulations	6	1	4	-80%
	Banking & Financial Services	3	1		-58%
	Mineral Resources & Mining	12	1		-90%
	Construction	1	0		-72%
SDG 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Business & Other Services	6	3	4	-45%
	Industry	0	1		415%
	Transport & Storage	0	0		-100%
	Communications	1	0		-100%
SDG 7 Clean and affordable energy	Energy Policy	5	1	1	-86%
	Energy generation, renewable sources	2	0		-95%
SDG 15 Life on land	Agriculture	7	1	1	-89%
SDG 2 Zero hunger	Development Food Assistance	2	0	0	-100%
Other	Other Multisector	182	136		-25%

aid in 2023, and warned that the available funding does not match these increased needs (Alexander and Loy, 2022). Disaster prevention and preparedness programming was also significantly impacted with a 91% decrease. Cuts to these sectors are especially concerning considering the climate crisis and its impacts on women and girls (Devonald et al., 2022; Seller, 2016) as well as the disproportionate gendered impacts of the recent global hunger crisis. The latter includes women and girls eating less and last, facing heightened protection risks such as sexual and gender-based violence and child marriage, and the removal of girls from school (Wright et al., 2023).

ODA cuts have also impacted other sectors deemed essential for supporting young people to develop their capabilities: basic health saw a 75% decrease (from \$47 million in 2020 to \$12 million in 2021) and adolescent-focused sexual and reproductive health saw a 35% decrease. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) has warned that the UK's cuts have led to the closure of the UK-funded Women's Integrated Sexual Health Programme in multiple countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Pakistan), risking increased unintended pregnancies, early motherhood and early school leaving for adolescent girls (Worley, 2021). Additionally, and notwithstanding the unfolding global learning crisis exacerbated by disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (World Bank, et. al., 2022), basic education saw a 24% decrease in funding and

secondary education saw a 40% decrease. At the midpoint of the Agenda 2030 and as the UK's own commitments to education include the launch of the Declaration on Girls' Education in 2021, endorsed by the G7, which aims to get 40 million more girls in school by 2026 in LMICs and 20 million more girls reading by age 10 or the end of primary school, these cuts harm the achievement of global agendas. Girls from poor and marginalised groups, children with disabilities, those in conflict-affected contexts, remote and rural communities, and those in the poorest quintile face additional constraints on their ability to fulfil their right to education. Cuts to primary and lower secondary education risk further undermining these rights to quality education, which can have intergenerational, societal, and economic consequences.

By contrast, there appears to have been a focus on preserving funding for higher education and employability skills. Post-secondary education was one of the only sectors that saw an increase (68%), from \$70 million to \$117 million. The top sub-sector in 2021 was 'multisector education and training',⁴ which mainly included funding to the British Council for programming that aimed to strengthen English language teaching and employability skills. This increased from the third highest in 2020 and only faced a slight reduction in funding (from \$128 million in 2020 to \$127 million in 2021) – a marginal decrease compared to other sectors.



Adolescent girls fetching water, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023

⁴ Multisector education and training is included within the 'Other multisector' category in Table 1.

Where has programming been cut?

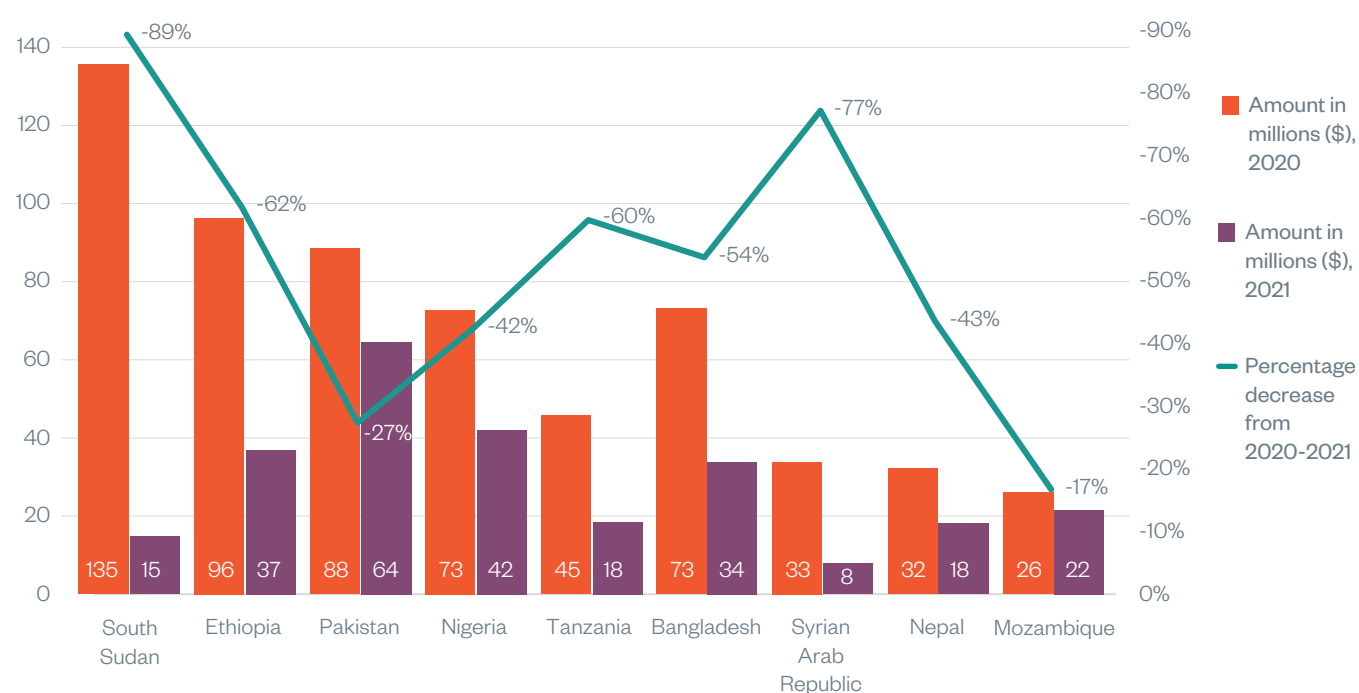
Programming targeting adolescent girls in fragile and humanitarian contexts has been especially impacted by the UK aid cuts (see Figure 2). South Sudan experienced the largest cuts in programming targeting adolescent girls. It saw a reduction in funding from \$135 million to \$15 million. These cuts mainly impacted support to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which was providing life-saving food, shelter and health services. Other countries also experienced large cuts. Syria saw a 77% decrease, mainly impacting the Syria Education Programme which provides education services for up to 400,000 young people. Ethiopia saw a large reduction too, from \$96 million to \$37 million, which mainly impacted sexual and reproductive health programming and the emergency response. This significantly impacted Ethiopia's overall ODA, which fell from \$299 million in 2020 to \$255 million in 2021, the lowest amount from 2016-2021. In Bangladesh, UK support decreased from \$73 million in 2020 to \$34 million in 2021, which had a large impact on the strategic partnership between BRAC and the UK government, which aimed to support 600,000 girls to access decent education and key health services. The director of BRAC has highlighted that these cuts will leave many girls without an education and without access to family planning (McVeigh, 2021). Our findings also highlighted a lack of investments from the UK going to adolescent girls directly, with only one programme in 2020 including a girl or youth-led component (Devonald et al., 2023b).

The UK did increase ODA to some sectors, however. For example, programming for young people with disabilities increased from \$34 million in 2020 to \$43 million in 2020, mainly due to investments in the Teacher Effectiveness and Equitable Access for All Children (TEACH) programme in Zimbabwe, which targets the poorest and most disadvantaged school learners, including those with a disability.

How does the UK funding trajectory for adolescent girls compare with that of other bilateral donors?

There have been significant changes in the landscape of bilateral ODA flowing to adolescent girls' wellbeing globally. In 2021, the top three gender-and-adolescent donors by amount were Canada, followed by Germany and France, compared to the UK, Germany and France in 2020 (Devonald et al., 2023c). Largely due to its Feminist International Assistance Policy prioritizing gender programming, Canada increased its gender-and-adolescent-targeted ODA from \$1.02 billion in 2020 to \$1.22 billion in 2021, making it the top donor of gender-and-adolescent-targeted ODA. By contrast, and as highlighted throughout this brief, the UK was one of only three countries in the list of top donors that decreased its investments in gender- and adolescent targeted ODA between 2020 and 2021 – and was the country which registered the largest absolute decrease.

Figure 2: Gender- and adolescent-targeted UK ODA, 2020-2021, by recipient country



This downward shift in the UK also contrasts with other major donors. While trends from previous years (2016–2020) followed an overall downward trend in the amount of gender-and adolescent- targeted ODA provided by the US, this trend reversed in 2021, with a modest increase from \$0.67 billion to \$0.74 billion. EU institutions increased their investments from \$0.82 billion to \$0.95 billion, in line with their Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025), which aims to ensure that 85% of new EU actions contribute to gender equality by 2025 (European Commission, 2020).

When exploring the proportion of donors' gender- and adolescent-targeted ODA i.e. the percentage it represented between 2020–2021 of a donor's' total ODA, the UK is also the only country in the top five donors to show a decrease in this metric. While the top five gender-and adolescent donors by the percentage of donor's ODA remained the same between 2020 and 2021 (Canada, Sweden, Norway, UK and France), the UK was the only bilateral donor to drop in the percentage of its investments.

Conclusions

The UK's recent International Women and Girls Strategy (2023–2030) aims to target investments towards the key life stages for women and girls, including adolescence (FCDO, 2023b). Adolescence is a key life stage, where interventions can have significant impacts on addressing poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2017). Yet our findings show that the UK's recent aid cuts have had substantial negative impacts on adolescent girl-targeted programming in 2021. Moreover, one of the strategy's key principles is supporting those impacted by crisis and shock, including conflict and the climate crisis. Despite this, two of the sectors that were highly impacted by the UK's ODA cuts were emergency response and disaster prevention and preparedness, and the countries that were hardest hit were predominantly fragile and humanitarian settings.

Although UK ODA is set to increase in 2024, unless concerted action and at-scale funding is invested to address the impacts the cuts have already had on the most marginalised adolescent girls in low-income contexts, the commitments of the International Women and Girls Strategy are unlikely to be realised. Cuts to education and reproductive health services are already having substantial implications for adolescent girls' current and future trajectories, and large investments are needed to reverse these impacts. Finally, it is important to draw on emerging evidence, including from longitudinal studies such as the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) and Young Lives programmes, to inform future investments and identify the best approaches to transforming adolescent girls' trajectories.

References

- Alexander, J and Loy, I. (2023). Key takeaways from the UN's record-breaking tally for 2023 humanitarian needs. The New Humanitarian. (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/12/01/financing-appeals-OCHA-global-humanitarian-overview>)
- Devonald, M., Jones, N., Iyasu Gebru, A. and Yadete, W. (2022) 'Rethinking climate change through a gender and adolescent lens in Ethiopia' *Climate and Development* (<https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2022.2032568>)
- Devonald, M., Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N. (2023a) *Investing in adolescent girls: mapping global and national funding patterns from 2016–2020*. Report. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (www.gage.odi.org/publication/investing-in-adolescent-girls-mapping-global-and-national-funding-patterns-from-2016-2020)
- Devonald, M., Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N. (2023b) 'Resourcing girls directly: what does the current funding landscape for girl-and youth-led organisations look like?' Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (www.gage.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Resourcing-Girls-Directly-1.pdf)
- Devonald, M., Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N. (2023c) *Investing in adolescent girls. Key changes in the bilateral donor funding landscape - 2021 update*. Report. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (<https://www.gage.odi.org/publication/investing-in-adolescent-girls-key-changes-in-the-bilateral-donor-funding-landscape-2021-update/>)
- Donor Tracker (2019) 'At a glance. Funding trends'. Berlin: Donor Tracker ([https://donortracker.org/sector/gender-equality#:~:text=Top%20donors,Japan%20\(US\\$244.2%20billion\)](https://donortracker.org/sector/gender-equality#:~:text=Top%20donors,Japan%20(US$244.2%20billion)))

- European Commission (2020) 'A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025'. Brussels: European Commission (<https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/682425/en>)
- FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2021) Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133445/Statistics-on-International-Development-Final-UK-Aid-Spend-2021.pdf)
- FCDO (2022) The UK government's strategy for international development (www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-governments-strategy-for-international-development/the-uk-governments-strategy-for-international-development#chapter-3-delivering-development-in-partnership)
- FCDO (2023) Equality impact assessment – International Development Committee (<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41098/documents/200208/default>)
- FCDO (2023) International Women and Girls Strategy 2023–2030 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1141525/international-women-and-girls-strategy-2023-2030.pdf)
- GENDERNET (2016) Handbook on the OECD-DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker. Paris: OECD-DAC network on gender equality (www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/Handbook-OECD-DAC-Gender-Equality-Policy-Marker.pdf).
- Landale, J. (2023) 'UK foreign aid cuts: thousands will die as a result, says report'. BBC News, 2 August (www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-66378364)
- Loft, P. (2023) *The UK aid budget and support for refugees in the UK in 2022/23*. Commons Library Research Briefing. House of Commons, UK Parliament (<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9663/CBP-9663.pdf>)
- Loft, P. and Brien, P. (2022) 'Reducing the UK's aid spend in 2021 and 2022', research briefing. London: House of Commons Library (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9224/>)
- McDade, K. K; Mao, W. and Ogbuonji, O. (2022) 'The UK's foreign aid cuts: implications for financing health systems globally'. *The Lancet Global Health*, 10 (1) ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(22\)00149-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(22)00149-8))
- McVeigh, K. (2021) 'UK aid cuts to Bangladesh NGO a "gut punch", says charity head'. *The Guardian*, 14 June (www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/14/uk-aid-cuts-to-bangladesh-ngo-a-gut-punch-says-charity-head)
- Merrick, R. (2023) 'UK's bilateral aid spending to rise sharply after 3 years of cuts'. Devex, 18 July (www.devex.com/news/uk-s-bilateral-aid-spending-to-rise-sharply-after-3-years-of-cuts-105914)
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2023). Official development assistance (ODA). (<https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/official-development-assistance.htm>)
- Sellers, S. (2016) *Gender and climate change: a closer look at existing evidence*. Global Gender and Climate Alliance (<http://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/GGCA-RP-FINAL.pdf>)
- UK Parliament. (2022) UK aid spending: Statistics and recent developments. House of Lords Library. (<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-aid-spending-statistics-and-recent-developments/>)
- UNICEF. (2017) The adolescent brain: a second window of opportunity. A compendium. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (www.unicefirc.org/publications/pdf/adolescent_brain_a_second_window_of_opportunity_a_compendium.pdf).
- World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO et al., (2022). The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update. (State of Learning Poverty 2022.pdf (unicef.org))
- Worley, W (2021). UK aid cuts: IPPF clinic closures will mean 2.7 million unsafe abortions. Devex. (<https://www.devex.com/news/uk-aid-cuts-ippf-clinic-closures-will-mean-2-7-million-unsafe-abortions-99444>)
- Wright, A., Gallinetti, J., Fergus, I., Hirata J., Rivett. Beyond Hunger: the gendered impact of the global hunger crisis. Woking: Plan International.