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On Shifting Ground

An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Ethiopia

Simon Rynn



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Contents

Executive Summary	v
I. Introduction	1
I. Background	5
UK Policy Priorities and Engagements	10
II. Overview of Selected Outcomes	15
Telecoms Sector Liberalisation	15
Support to Basic Services	17
Political Negotiations in Somali Regional State	20
Peacekeeping Training	22
Crisis Response – The Tigray Conflict	23
III. Enablers and Constraints	27
Operating Context	27
Resources	27
Strategy	28
Structure	29
Leadership	29
Relationships	30
Conclusion	33
About the Author	35
Annex: List of Interviewees	37

Executive Summary

Since 2016, successive British governments have sought to emphasise that a post-Brexit UK would be outward-looking, collaborative and influential. A series of speeches and policy statements have emphasised the pursuit of prosperity and an intention to capitalise on previous investments in overseas aid, trade, defence and diplomacy. In March 2021, the UK government published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. The document reiterated these themes and referenced East Africa for increased UK engagement.

Against this backdrop, a RUSI research team has set out to examine how the UK has deployed its development, defence and diplomacy toolkit in four countries in East Africa in support of this agenda. The project, entitled 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa', asks what factors have helped or hindered the UK in pursuing a 'Global Britain' agenda in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan. The research also tests some common assertions around the effects of Brexit, reductions in the UK aid budget, and the merger of two government departments, the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) into the Foreign & Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO).

This paper sets out the research findings on the UK's relevant engagements in Ethiopia, focusing on 2015 to the present. It finds that the UK has made some limited progress on aspects of its foreign policy agenda in the country. Examples can be found of UK action contributing towards positive outcomes, including through forging partnerships – combining defence, diplomacy and development aid – and pursuing trade and prosperity agendas.

The analysis suggests, however, that the UK has indeed been constrained by a number of internal factors: smaller and unpredictable budgets; the unplanned merger of the FCO and DFID; the absence of a detailed strategy for Ethiopia; and weaknesses with leadership. And while the UK is still regarded as a capable and relevant actor, with skilled personnel and a measure of influence in certain areas, the overall picture is one of diminished status. Aid cuts are a factor. Losing the DFID brand has also been a net negative. Leaving the EU has not presented insurmountable practical difficulties, but it is seen by many as diminishing UK influence.

The overriding limiting factor for UK action in Ethiopia in recent years has, however, been a worsening operating context since a change in Ethiopia's leadership in 2018. Initial hopes for reform and greater openness have been dashed by a series of political decisions, and the devastating war in Tigray. A severe drought across the Horn of Africa has accentuated these difficulties. Widespread insecurity, hunger and violence have resulted. Decades of socioeconomic progress, achieved in part through close partnership with the UK, have been reversed. These events have upended Ethiopia's relationship with the outside world, and the country's trajectory is uncertain.

Despite tensions and challenges, the UK has successfully maintained relationships with a range of actors through its work in Ethiopia. It has also adapted to events and made positive contributions, even with reduced resources. The UK's future strategy and approach should reflect lessons learned on the nature of the Ethiopian state, the sources and limitations of influence, and the UK's particular contribution.

I. Introduction

IN THE WAKE of the June 2016 Brexit vote, successive UK prime ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson repeatedly made reference to ‘Global Britain’. The phrase attracted widespread commentary, much of it quizzical or critical.¹ It was, however, an attempt to signal – albeit in boosterish language – a sense that the UK would remain an outward-looking country.²

In March 2021, the UK government published a policy paper, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, commonly known as ‘The Integrated Review’.³ The document recognised a more competitive global context than in earlier years but reiterated the now familiar ‘Global Britain’ themes. It signalled a wish for the UK to play a proactive role in global affairs, work in partnership with others, and better integrate foreign policy, defence, trade and international development efforts. Africa was referenced in terms of forging partnerships and pursuing shared goals such as prosperity, democracy and security. The policy paper also referenced overseas aid, while leaning strongly towards promoting trade, economic resilience and the alignment of international development with wider foreign policy. Eastern Africa was highlighted as a region for increased UK engagement.⁴ Specific references were made to Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, and in the case of Ethiopia to working in partnership ‘to further our shared prosperity goals, our democratic values and our security interests’ and to investing in ‘regional stability, moving towards closer defence cooperation with ... Ethiopia if the situation there allows’.⁵

Against this backdrop, a RUSI research team has set out to examine how the UK has deployed its development, defence and diplomacy toolkit in Eastern Africa in support of its Global Britain

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1. See, for example, Martin Kettle, ‘Like Brexit, Boris Johnson’s Vision for Global Britain is an Idea, Not a Policy’, *The Guardian*, 17 March 2021; House of Commons Library, ‘Global Britain’, Research Briefing, 6 January 2021, <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0002/>>, accessed on 20 February 2023.
 2. See, for example, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, ‘Beyond Brexit: A Global Britain’, speech given at Chatham House, London, 2 December 2016, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain>>, accessed 25 January 2023; Mara Budgen, ‘Theresa May Launches a Global Britain: Her Brexit Speech in Full’, LifeGate, 17 January 2017, <<https://www.lifegate.com/theresa-may-brexit-speech>>, accessed 12 December 2022.
 3. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).
 4. The Integrated Review refers both to ‘East Africa’ and the ‘Horn of Africa’. The term ‘Eastern Africa’ is used in this paper, as the four countries the project focuses on span the sub-regions often labelled ‘East Africa’ and the ‘Horn of Africa’.
 5. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 63. Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan are specifically mentioned on pp. 6, 46, 47, 63, 69.

agenda, looking at how it has sought to bring about positive change in the countries in which it is working while also securing secondary, largely geopolitical, benefits in the national interest at a time of domestic and international change.

Through a two-year research project, the team has sought to test some of the assertions that have been made around Brexit; the reduction in the UK aid budget from 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to 0.5%;⁶ the increases in the defence budget; and the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) from the merger of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID) announced in June 2020.⁷ The project, entitled 'Furthering Global Britain? Reviewing the Foreign Policy Effect of UK Engagement in East Africa', asks whether these structural changes have helped or hindered the progress of recent UK governments' Global Britain policy agendas in the region, while seeking to identify factors that may have contributed to or limited the UK's ability to project influence. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- How effective has the UK been in making a positive difference in relation to Global Britain objectives in the region in recent years, particularly via development aid, diplomacy and defence engagement?
- What impact have recent structural and policy changes such as Brexit, aid cuts and the creation of the FCDO had on Global Britain outcomes?
- How does the UK's approach and impact differ from those of others?
- How do UK aid priorities for Eastern Africa align with those of the region's governments, and what are those governments' expectations of and recommendations for the UK?

The research methodology consisted of a review of selected policy literature and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used to identify factors that recurrently enabled or constrained UK actions, particularly with reference to positive outcomes to which the UK was thought to have contributed. Data on UK aid, defence and diplomatic engagement in the four focal countries covering the period 2015–2022 is used as a reference point to identify UK policy objectives and trends over time. The intention is to provide an overview of the realities of UK engagement

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6. In 2020, the UK economy contracted due to the Covid-19 pandemic containment measures, contributing to a drop in aid expenditure. See Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), 'Statistics on International Development: Provisional UK Aid Spend 2020', 8 April 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistics-on-international-development-provisional-uk-aid-spend-2020>>, accessed 25 January 2023. In November 2020, the UK government announced it would spend only 0.5% of Gross National Income on official development assistance until the fiscal situation improved. See Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 'ICAI Follow-Up Review of 2019–20 Reports', June 2021, <<https://icai.independent.gov.uk/review/icai-follow-up-review-of-2019-20-reports/>>, accessed 25 January 2023.
 7. See Anna Dickson and Philip Brien, 'DFID and FCO Merger: Implications for International Development', Insight, House of Commons Library, 18 June 2020, <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/dfid-and-fco-merger-implications-for-international-development/>>, accessed 25 January 2023.

in each country over a six-year period and to identify the factors that were most salient in driving outcomes.

This paper offers the project's findings on the UK's engagement in Ethiopia. It is based on a review of key secondary sources and 58 interviews with government officials, staff from multilateral organisations, and predominantly Ethiopian interviewees from academia, civil society, media and business (see Annex).

Chapter I provides background on Ethiopia–UK relations and summarises the UK's major policy interests and its main investments in international development, diplomatic and defence engagement in the country in recent years. From within this broad portfolio of work, Chapter II highlights several examples of UK action that have contributed to positive outcomes in Ethiopia. Chapter III identifies key factors that have constrained or enabled UK action in this period. The paper concludes with commentary and analysis of these factors in relation to the project's research questions.

The paper should be read in conjunction with upcoming companion papers on the UK in Kenya, Sudan and Somalia, and an earlier publication that sets out the project methodology in depth and offers more detail on UK investments in the region.⁸ A synthesis paper that combines findings from the four focus countries will follow.

8. Michael Jones, Simon Rynn and Elijah Glantz, 'Furthering Global Britain? An Overview of UK Engagement in Eastern Africa', RUSI, 1 November 2022, <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/furthering-global-britain-overview-uk-engagement-eastern-africa>>, accessed 22 October 2022.

I. Background

ETHIOPIA IS THE most populous country in Eastern Africa, with approximately 120 million citizens alongside significant numbers of refugees.⁹ Diplomatic relations with the UK were formally established in 1841.¹⁰ In 1868, a 13,000-strong British force invaded what was then Abyssinia to free British nationals who had been held hostage by Emperor Tewodros II as a tactic to secure military aid from Queen Victoria.¹¹ From 1935 to 1936 Ethiopia fought and lost the second Italo–Ethiopian war. Its reformist emperor Haile Selassie went into exile in the UK. A British imperial force invaded again in 1940, ousting the Italian army and restoring the emperor to power in 1942.¹² He remained in power for the next 32 years, eventually being overthrown by a military junta (the Derg) in 1974 following a bitter civil war.

From 1991 to 2018 Ethiopia was governed via a system of ‘ethnofederalism’. This gave autonomy to major nationalities within a polity dominated by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the leading actor within the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition that had ousted the previous regime in 1991.¹³

Overseeing a poor and diverse population, deferring democratisation, and committed to a state-led economy, the EPRDF sought legitimacy via economic growth. Under one-time president and later prime minister Meles Zenawi, the country achieved enviable rates of growth. In the mid-2000s it became the fastest-growing economy worldwide, registering an annual growth rate of over 10% between 2004 and 2009,¹⁴ and it acted as a cheerleader for international development in global forums.¹⁵ Approximately one-third of the country’s national budget of \$9 billion came

9. Worldpopulationreview.com, ‘Ethiopia Population 2022: Live’, <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/ethiopia-population>>, accessed 10 October 2022.

10. Room for Diplomacy, ‘Addis Ababa’, <<https://roomfordiplomacy.com/addis-ababa/>>, accessed 12 December 2022.

11. Harold G Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844–1913* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995).

12. Paul B Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000).

13. For background on both groups, see *Britannica*, ‘Socialist Ethiopia, 1974–1991’, <<https://www.britannica.com/place/Ethiopia/Socialist-Ethiopia-1974-91#ref419564>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

14. IMF, ‘The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia’, <<https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/ETH>>, accessed 11 October 2022; Africa Check, ‘Yes, Ethiopia “the Fastest-Growing Economy Globally”, But it’s All in the Details’, 17 December 2019, <<https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/reports/yes-ethiopia-fastest-growing-economy-globally-its-all-details>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

15. *New Humanitarian*, ‘More Aid Needed to Meet Development Goals – Meles’, 18 January 2005, <<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/52712/ethiopia-more-aid-needed-meet-development-goals-meles>>, accessed 9 September 2022.

via foreign, mostly Western, aid.¹⁶ Seeing Ethiopia as a quintessential ‘developmental state’,¹⁷ the UK became a staunch partner to the EPRDF. The UK–Ethiopia relationship was built initially in the 1990s, on UK prime minister Tony Blair’s rapport with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Via the now-defunct DFID, the UK aligned strongly with the EPRDF’s development agenda, providing direct budget support and funding initiatives linked to government service delivery. Ethiopia at times became the largest single recipient of UK bilateral aid globally, much of it channelled via the government in support of service delivery.¹⁸ This left the UK open to criticism when the Ethiopian government fell short on human rights.¹⁹ Western donors at times tried but largely failed to use ‘conditionalities’ to push democratisation and human rights agendas.²⁰ The brief move by Western donors to pause and then restart budget support in response to state brutality linked to national elections in 2005 is one example of this.²¹

Over time, the EPRDF came to play a notable role in the formation of the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, negotiations on international development and climate change, and more. Ethiopia made a substantial investment in peacekeeping. From the 2000s onwards, Ethiopian troops were major contributors to the AU in Somalia (AMISOM), the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), and the UN–AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). The Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) received training and income, while the Ethiopian government shaped politics and security in the region.

Meles continued Ethiopia’s long tradition of diplomatic balancing, managing cordial relationships with Western and non-Western powers from the US and the UK to Russia and China. He positioned

16. Dereje Feyissa, ‘Aid Negotiation: The Uneasy “Partnership” Between EPRDF and the Donors’, *Journal of East African Studies* (Vol. 5, No. 4, 2011), p. 1.

17. See Adrian Leftwich, David Booth and Simon Maxwell, ‘Developmental States: What They are and Why We Need Them’, discussion event at Overseas Development Institute, 1 February 2006, <<https://odi.org/en/events/developmental-states-what-they-are-and-why-we-need-them/>>, accessed 15 January 2023.

18. DFID, ‘Bilateral Aid Review: Technical Report’, Annex F, 3 March 2011, p. 33, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bilateral-aid-review-technical-report>>, accessed 22 January 2023.

19. For example, the accusation that donors indirectly supported internal displacement through ‘forced villagisation’ schemes, via the DFID-funded ‘Protection of Basic Services’ programme, a £3.2-billion project administered by the World Bank and designed to increase access to health, education and water services. (UK contributions to this scheme were stopped in 2015.) See Human Rights Watch, ‘Development Without Freedom: How Aid Underwrites Repression in Ethiopia’, 19 October 2010, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/10/19/development-without-freedom/how-aid-underwrites-repression-ethiopia>>, accessed 17 October 2022; Sam Jones and Mark Anderson, ‘British Support for Ethiopia Scheme Withdrawn Amid Abuse Allegations’, *The Guardian*, 27 February 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/feb/27/british-support-for-ethiopia-scheme-withdrawn-amid-abuse-allegations>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

20. Feyissa, ‘Aid Negotiation’, p. 2.

21. See Human Rights Watch, ‘Development Without Freedom’, Summary.

the EPRDF as a US ally in the War on Terror,²² again projecting influence (including an invasion of Somalia in 2006²³), but also combating perceived security threats and opponents at home. Ethiopia also aligned with US policy on sanctions on Eritrea and the role of the International Criminal Court in Sudan.²⁴

The UK supported and cooperated with Ethiopia on all of the above. In the mid-2000s, DFID championed ambitious security sector reforms in Ethiopia.²⁵ These did not proceed, but for six years ENDF officers up to the Chief of Staff attended exchange visits and training courses on security sector management in the UK.²⁶ UK–Ethiopia security cooperation later attracted the attention of legal activists and human rights campaigners, who questioned the wisdom and appropriateness of support and training for institutions with poor human rights records.²⁷

Despite a troubling record on democratisation and human rights that included repression of political opposition, censorship and cancellation of elections, the EPRDF remained dominant until 2018. Internal population movement, uneven growth and demands for greater freedoms eventually fractured the alliance. By 2018, Ethiopia faced rising insecurity, popular protests and simmering conflicts in states including Afar, Somali Regional State and Oromia. In March, Abiy Ahmed, leader of the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, was elected EPRDF chair. One month later, he was appointed prime minister.²⁸ In December 2019, erstwhile members of the EPRDF created a new ‘Prosperity Party’ (PP) coalition, which incorporated new parties into the ruling coalition, but omitted ethnically based parties, including the now-disaffected TPLF.²⁹ The stated PP/Abiy policy agenda included increased political freedoms, economic liberalisation and privatisation of state-owned enterprises.³⁰ The poverty reduction and rural development agendas of previous EPRDF governments were jettisoned. Abroad, and by some

22. Feyissa, ‘Aid Negotiation’, p. 799.

23. Martin Plaut, ‘Ethiopia in Somalia: One Year On’, *BBC News*, 28 December 2007.

24. Abel Abate Demissie, Leulseged Girma and Jan Pospisil, ‘Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism: The Case of Ethiopia’, Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 23 June 2022, p. 7, <<https://peacerep.org/publication/fragmented-transitions-in-the-context-of-competitive-regionalism-the-case-of-ethiopia/>>, accessed 30 January 2023.

25. See Nicole Ball et al., ‘Security and Justice Sector Reform Programming in Africa’, DFID Evaluation Working Paper 23, 2007, p. 24, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67807/sjr.pdf>, accessed 12 October 2022.

26. Interview 14.

27. See, for example, Jonathan Owen, ‘Andy Tsege: Britain Helps Fund Ethiopian Regime Holding UK Activist on Death Row’, *The Independent*, 20 March 2016.

28. *Britannica*, ‘Abiy Ahmed’, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abiy-Ahmed>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

29. Goitom Gebreluel, ‘Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Wants to Change the Ruling Coalition: Who’s Getting Left Out?’, *Washington Post*, 23 December 2019.

30. David Thomas, ‘Ethiopia’s Abiy Embarks on Reform Agenda’, *African Business*, 6 June 2018, <<https://african.business/2018/06/economy/ethiopias-abiy-embarks-on-reform-agenda-2/>>, accessed 30 January 2023.

at home, Abiy was welcomed as fresh and dynamic. However, notwithstanding the high-profile release of political prisoners, he and his allies began sidelining opponents and creating space for promised privatisation and economic liberalisation. Loosening the grip of former EPRDF members, including the TPLF, was key. While taking steps to centralise governance and unlock sections of the economy controlled by TPLF affiliates, Abiy also apparently agreed with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' to act militarily against the TPLF.³¹ Meanwhile, internal rivalries and repression mounted, notably in 2020 towards Oromo opposition groups.³² In 2021, delayed national elections allowed Abiy to win popular endorsement for the PP agenda. The PP secured a resounding victory.³³ Yet significant parts of the country were unable or unwilling to participate due to boycotts and insecurity.³⁴ Allegations of manipulation were widespread.

Tigray was one regional state to boycott the national election. The TPLF had been returned to power there via a state-level election on 9 September 2020.³⁵ Although declared successful by the Tigray election commission, the federal government, which at that point had postponed elections citing the Covid-19 pandemic, considered the process to be illegal.³⁶ Tensions between the TPLF and federal government erupted into violence in November 2020. What was originally a political fight quickly grew into an internationalised civil war overlaid with harsh rhetoric, including mutual accusations of terrorism and genocide. Ethiopia's national army, the ENDF, was backed by Eritrea and Somalia, as well as by sub-national special forces and ethnic militias, in a series of battles against the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF).³⁷ Several hundred thousand have likely perished. Human rights organisations have documented atrocities and war crimes on all sides.³⁸ The Ethiopian

31. Simon Rynn and Ahmed Hassen, 'Ethiopia: What Next?', *RUSI Commentary*, 22 October 2021.

32. Amnesty International, 'Ethiopia: Authorities Crack Down on Opposition Supporters with Mass Arrests', 27 January 2020.

33. *Al-Jazeera*, 'Ethiopia: Abiy's Prosperity Party Wins Landslide Election Victory', 10 July 2021.

34. Interviews 31, 44; Ayenat Mersie, 'Ethiopians Vote as Opposition Alleges Some Irregularities', *Reuters*, 22 June 2021.

35. Medihane Ekubamichael, 'TPLF Wins Regional Election by Landslide', *Addis Standard*, 11 September 2020, <<https://addisstandard.com/news-tplf-wins-regional-election-by-landslide/>>, accessed 20 February 2023.

36. Mulugeta Gebrehiwot, 'Tigray's Elections: Test of Ethiopia's Federal Democracy', *African Arguments*, 15 October 2020, <<https://africanarguments.org/2020/10/tigrays-elections-test-of-ethiopia-federal-democracy/>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

37. The Tigray Defense Forces are formally separate from the TPLF and under the command of Tigray's regional government, appointed following regional elections. See Yonas Nigussie, 'Tigray's Resistance will Grow in the Face of Adversity', *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 October 2022, <<https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/10/26/tigrays-resistance-will-grow-in-the-face-of-adversity/>>, accessed 20 February 2023; Anna Pujol-Mazzini, 'Somali Men "Forced into Eritrean Army" Under the Impression They were Signing Up for Security Jobs in Qatar', *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2021; *RFI*, 'UN Report Says Somali Army Participated in Tigray War', 9 June 2021.

38. UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia', A/HRC/51/46, 19 September 2022.

federal government faces the most damning criticism for using collective punishment against Tigray by stopping all government services, communications and media coverage and blocking humanitarian aid deliveries.³⁹ Harassment and detention of not only Tigrayans but also other political opponents, journalists and critics has been marked.⁴⁰ Many thousands have been displaced or have faced starvation due to crippling inflation and a severe economic contraction.⁴¹

The above events have changed Ethiopia's relationship to the outside world. Security in the region has been reconfigured as Abiy brought in Somali and Eritrean forces to fight the TPLF. The UAE, Turkey, Iran and possibly China are thought to have provided military assistance to the federal government.⁴² Reports of atrocities, amplified by diaspora and social media, have drawn public condemnation from governments such as the US, the Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and the EU. Many aid donors consequently stopped (the EU, the World Bank) or reoriented programmes away from central government channels, and a US preferential trade agreement was cancelled.⁴³ While expressing concern and condemning atrocities, the UK approach has overall been more circumspect.

Violence in Tigray has ebbed and flowed since breaking out in November 2020. A humanitarian ceasefire announced by the federal government in June 2021 was not fully honoured. Hostilities broke out again in August 2022, again involving Eritrean forces. In November 2022 a cessation of hostilities agreement was brokered by the AU, with US and Kenyan support. Implementing this agreement will be hugely challenging – a resumption of violence is a plausible scenario. At the time of writing, Ethiopia's trajectory remains highly uncertain, not only due to the Tigray war but also because of the current political polarisation, unresolved grievances and conflicts in many parts of the country.⁴⁴

39. Alex De Waal, 'Steal, Burn, Rape, Kill', *London Review of Books*, 17 June 2021.

40. Interviews 37, 48.

41. For an overall assessment of humanitarian need, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Ethiopia: Situation Report', 15 October 2022, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-situation-report-15-oct-2022>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

42. Demissie, Girma and Pospisil, 'Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism', pp. 19–20.

43. The EU suspended all funding via government channels in December 2020. See Vince Chadwick, 'EU Planning €1B for Ethiopia to 2027', *Devex*, 11 July 2022, <<https://www.devex.com/news/eu-planning-1b-for-ethiopia-to-2027-103618>>, accessed 14 December 2022; Office of the US Trade Representative, 'US Terminates AGOA Trade Preference Program for Ethiopia, Mali and Guinea', 1 January 2022, <<https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2022/january/us-terminates-agoa-trade-preference-program-ethiopia-mali-and-guinea>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

44. See Jason Mosley, 'Ethiopia's Crisis Runs Deeper Than Tigray', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 18 June 2021, <<https://sipri.org/commentary/expert-comment/2021/ethiopias-crisis-runs-deeper-tigray>>, accessed 20 December 2022.

UK Policy Priorities and Engagements

This section offers a summary of the UK's engagements from 2015 to 2022 in the areas of development, diplomacy and defence in pursuit of its policy objectives outlined above.

Development and Humanitarian Engagement

For most of the past 20 years, Ethiopia has been the leading recipient of UK bilateral aid globally. Expenditure averaged around £300 million per annum between 2016 and 2020.⁴⁵ This made the UK the second-largest donor after the US (see Figure 1), contributing around 11% of Ethiopia's recorded aid income, as reported via the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (OECD–DAC).⁴⁶ Approximately 60% of the UK's bilateral aid budget has typically been channelled via central government programmes, the bulk allocated to multi-donor, multi-year funds that supported delivery of basic services.⁴⁷ The UK also made significant Official Development Assistance (ODA)⁴⁸ investments in other sectors such as drought response,⁴⁹ water and sanitation,⁵⁰ and refugee and migrant support.⁵¹ Smaller programmes have focused on human rights, peace and stability, and economic development. Examples include £6.5 million for the textiles industry, with subsidies to business parks to support their recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, and to fund TradeMark East Africa's programme to reduce barriers to trade across the region.⁵²

45. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021–2022* (London: The Stationery Office, 2022), p. 260.

46. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee is a subcommittee of the OECD concerned with progressing the international development agenda, and in particular tracking and unlocking development finance. For further information, see OECD, 'Development', <<https://www.oecd.org/development/>>, accessed 15 January 2023.

47. Interviews 9, 10. Data and descriptions drawn from respective programme annual reviews. See FCDO, 'Development Tracker', <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/>>, accessed 15 January 2023.

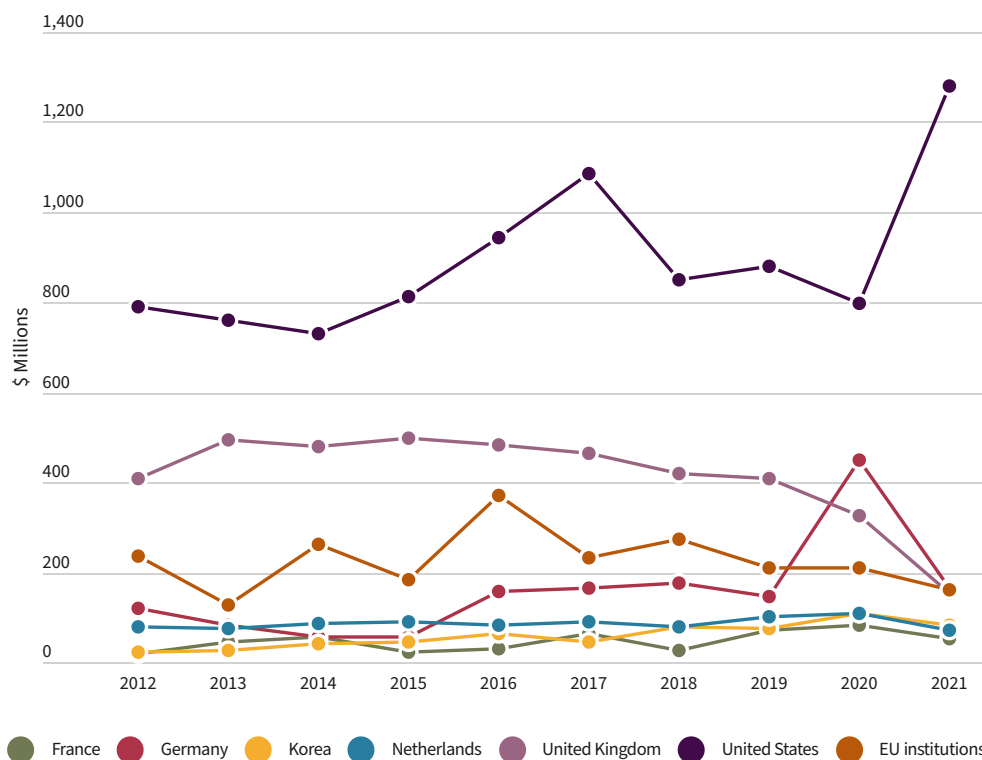
48. Official development assistance is government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. See OECD, 'Official Development Assistance', <<https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/official-development-assistance.htm>>, accessed 15 January 2023.

49. FCDO, 'Development Tracker: Ethiopia Crisis 2 Resilience (EC2R)', updated 12 July 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-301474/summary>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

50. FCDO, 'Development Tracker: Strengthening Climate Resilient Systems for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Services in Ethiopia (SCRS – WASH)', updated 20 November 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300237/summary>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

51. FCDO, 'Development Tracker: Support to Refugees and Migration Programme in Ethiopia', updated 16 November 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-205143/summary>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

52. TradeMark East Africa, 'Donors', <<https://www.trademarkea.com/donors/>>, accessed 8 September 2022.

Figure 1: Top Six OECD–DAC Donors to Ethiopia, 2012–21

Source: OECD–DAC, 'Creditor Reporting System', <<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>>, accessed 31 January 2023.

After decades of high aid allocations, from 2019 a sequence of events meant that the UK bilateral aid budget for Ethiopia began to shrink. Changing ministerial priorities brought a slight reduction in the budget from 2019 (£299 million) to 2020 (£254 million).⁵³ The Covid-19 pandemic triggered further cuts, as economic forecasts took a downturn, followed by a reduction in the aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI in November 2020.⁵⁴ By 2021, UK bilateral spending had roughly halved compared to 2019.⁵⁵ Despite briefly allocating more than the UK in budgetary terms in 2020, Germany returned to typical spending levels by 2021, as did other leading donors. The exception was the US, which markedly increased spending, mainly on humanitarian relief.⁵⁶ The remaining UK bilateral aid allocation to Ethiopia of £120 million in 2021 was £134 million lower

53. FCDO, *Annual Report and Accounts, 2021–2022*, p. 260.

54. Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 'ICAI Follow-Up Review of 2019–20 Reports'.

55. FCDO, 'Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2021', November 2022, pp. 27, 28, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1119765/Statistics-on-International-Development-Final-UK-Aid-Spend-2021.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2023.

56. Figures drawn from OECD–DAC, 'Credit Reporting System'.

than the allocation in 2020. This was the largest cut – in absolute, though not proportional, terms – of any country’s budget worldwide.⁵⁷

Reductions were accompanied by reallocations to different sectors following a series of natural disasters, shifting ministerial priorities, Covid-19 and the Tigray war. To give a sense of the changing priorities: in 2020, the UK allocated £254 million of bilateral ODA to Ethiopia. Humanitarian aid (£103 million) accounted for 40% of this budget, as compared to 15% in 2013.⁵⁸ Health accounted for £55 million, other social infrastructure and services £29 million, and government and civil society £14 million.⁵⁹ Expenditure on economic development and defence engagement (mostly non-ODA-funded) was cut to a minimum.

Diplomatic Engagement

As well as supporting international development work, the UK’s diplomatic interest in Ethiopia has historically focused on issues ranging from trade promotion to migration, counterterrorism cooperation and the Ethiopian involvement in peacekeeping. Considerable energy has also been absorbed on consular cases involving dual nationals. Diplomatic relations were tested in early to mid-2021, as Western criticism of the Ethiopian government’s blockade of Tigray and reported human rights abuses led to recriminations. As explored below, the UK has taken a lower profile approach to the Tigray war than more prominent critics, such as the EU, the Republic of Ireland and the US, which quickly paused aid packages and publicly condemned Ethiopian government actions.⁶⁰ The UK has attempted to position itself as constructively critical, while continuing to route its aid via government. Throughout the course of the Tigray war the UK has sought diplomatic engagement with the Ethiopian federal government at the highest level, lobbying for improved humanitarian access, ceasefires and talks.⁶¹ It has not invested high levels of political capital, however. For example, senior ministerial visits have been infrequent: in December 2022, recently appointed foreign secretary James Cleverly visited Ethiopia almost two years after his predecessor-but-one, Dominic Raab, who visited in January 2021.⁶²

57. FCDO, ‘Statistics on International Development’, p. 27.

58. OECD, OECD.Stat, ‘Creditor Reporting System (CRS)’.

59. Figures drawn from OECD–DAC, ‘Credit Reporting System’.

60. See, for example, EU External Action, ‘Tigray Conflict: Joint Statement by HR/VP Borrell and Commissioner Lenarčič on Massacres in Axum’, 26 February 2021, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tigray-conflict-joint-statement-hrvp-borrell-and-commissioner-lenar%C4%8Di%C4%8D-massacres-axum_en>, accessed 31 January 2023; Marie O’Halloran, ‘Ethiopia to Close Dublin Embassy as Tigray Conflict Continues’, *Irish Times*, 24 September 2021; Simon Marks, ‘US to Freeze Funding for Ethiopia as Tigray Abuses Surface’, *Bloomberg*, 28 May 2021.

61. Interviews 6, 18 and 19.

62. FCDO, ‘Foreign Secretary Promises Honest, Reliable UK Investment in Africa’, press release, 7 December 2022; FCDO, ‘Foreign Secretary Sets Out UK’s Unique Offer to East African Nations on Visit to Region’, press release, 23 January 2021.

Defence and Security Engagement

The UK government has maintained a relationship with the Ethiopian Ministry of National Defence for over two decades and has a permanent defence attaché in the country. Defence-related expenditure is below £1 million per annum, mostly drawn from regional defence and Conflict Stability and Security Fund budgets with competing priorities, among them AMISOM.⁶³ Prior to the partial withdrawal of ENDF troops from AMISOM in 2021, Ethiopia's support to the mission was the UK's principal focus. Many AMISOM troops have received training from the UK.

UK ambition on defence in Ethiopia has declined over time. From contemplating costly support to security sector reforms in the mid-2000s,⁶⁴ the UK moved from running courses for senior government officials on security sector management to halting most cooperation outside peacekeeping training during the difficult transition years since 2018.⁶⁵ Since that date, UK defence engagement has mainly focused on education and training in non-combat areas linked to the Ethiopian Peace Support Training Centre. Cooperation on counterterrorism has all but stopped.⁶⁶

63. Interview 10.

64. Ball et al., 'Security and Justice Sector Reform Programming in Africa'.

65. Interview 10.

66. *Ibid.*

II. Overview of Selected Outcomes

THIS CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS a number of outcomes to which UK action has contributed in Ethiopia, whether through international development cooperation, defence engagement or diplomacy. The examples below are drawn from interview data, with interviewees identifying cases from within the wider UK portfolio of work in the country, as outlined in Chapter I. The cases – which interviewees viewed as broad examples of success – identify and analyse key factors that have enabled or constrained the UK’s attempts to further its stated Global Britain agenda of cultivating partnerships and linking development, defence, diplomacy and trade.

Telecoms Sector Liberalisation

When the PP came to power in December 2019, following the EPRDF’s dissolution, major sectors of the Ethiopian economy were dominated by state monopolies and closed to foreign competition.⁶⁷ In 2018, DFID and Department of International Trade (DIT) teams opened discussions with the government about liberalisation and privatisation. With the UK offering a £100-million grant for economic reform,⁶⁸ the PP government committed to opening up the banking and telecoms sectors. The UK then provided technical support by funding a high-level adviser to help government develop policy options. A ‘Homegrown Economic Reform Programme’ followed, which included plans to restructure agriculture, manufacturing, mining, tourism, and information and communications technology, and open each to external competition.⁶⁹ The World Bank and the IMF subsequently announced US\$3 billion in loans to support planned reforms.⁷⁰

67. See World Bank Group, ‘Ethiopia’s Great Run: The Growth Acceleration and How to Pace it’, 2016; Jean-Pierre Chauffour and Muluneh Ayalew Gobezie, ‘Exiting Financial Repression: The Case of Ethiopia’, Policy Research Working Paper 9082, World Bank Group, December 2019, <<https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/634091576158841364/exiting-financial-repression-the-case-of-ethiopia>>, accessed 10 September 2022.

68. Interview 9.

69. Michael Dibie Ike, ‘Ethiopia Homegrown Economic Reforms’, *Africa News*, 18 December 2019, <<https://www.africanews.com/2019/12/18/ethiopia-homegrown-economic-reforms/>>, accessed 11 September 2022.

70. *VOA News*, ‘Ethiopia to get \$3 Billion Loan from World Bank’, 13 December 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_ethiopia-get-3-billion-loan-world-bank/6181035.html>, accessed 20 February 2023.

The UK embassy decided to focus on the telecoms sector, perhaps as a model for others. This had a growing domestic market and solid infrastructure, thanks to the state-owned provider Ethiotel. Regional and international competitors were theoretically available to drive down prices. The FCDO funded an Ethiopian adviser, formerly of the IMF, to support the federal government on strategy.⁷¹ The World Bank then agreed to allocate grants and loans via a multi-donor trust fund. This was for technical assistance for telecoms liberalisation, which the UK also part-funded through an economic assistance programme, the Ethiopia Investment Advisory Facility.⁷² Former DFID development staff worked closely with former FCO political staff, the ambassador and the DIT delegation that was also housed at the embassy, who provided diplomatic and lobbying support and legal advice and outreach to UK companies.

In May 2020, the Ethiopian government announced that two new telecoms provider licences would be put out to tender, establishing competition for Ethiotel.⁷³ Shortly afterwards, Ethiotel halved its tariffs and built new towers across the country. The UK then funded the World Bank to develop another options paper to move the liberalisation process forward.⁷⁴ Initial interest was shown by companies including Vodafone/Safaricom, MTN, Orange and Etisalat (UAE-owned). But tendering took place amidst news of the Tigray war. Only two bids were received, at lower values than anticipated. A bid from MTN worth approximately US\$600 million was rejected by Ethiopia. In June 2021, the winning ‘Global Partnership for Ethiopia’ consortium was awarded a licence. Its bid, with a direct equity investment quoted at US\$220 million, consisted of a mix of public and private investors: the UK’s Vodafone, with backing from the UK’s Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) Group, Kenya’s Safaricom, South Africa’s Vodacom Group, the US’s Development Finance Corporation, and Japan’s Sumitomo Corporation.⁷⁵

Viewed in terms of the UK’s own agendas on prosperity and integrated approaches, the bidding process was a success. Embassy staff note that the winning consortium likely benefited from

71. Interview 9.

72. The UK signed an ‘administration arrangement’ with the World Bank in March 2020 for a £3 million contribution. £1 million was disbursed in July 2020. The Republic of Ireland, Germany and Canada also contributed. See FCDO, ‘Development Tracker: The Ethiopia Investment Advisory Facility (EIAF) Phase II Programme’, updated 16 November 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-300588/summary>>, accessed 20 January 2023; *Ethiopian Monitor*, ‘World Bank Approves \$500m to Support Ethiopia’s Economic Reform’, 21 March 2020, <<https://ethiopianmonitor.com/2020/03/21/world-bank-approves-500m-in-to-support-ethiopia-s-economic-reform/>>, accessed 20 January 2023; Ousmane Dione, ‘Why Ethiopia Needs to Open its Telecom Market’, World Bank Blogs, 11 February 2021, <<https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/why-ethiopia-needs-open-its-telecom-market>>, accessed 8 December 2022.

73. Embassy of Ethiopia, London, ‘Ethiopia to Issue Two Telecom Licences’, 25 May 2020, <<https://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/ethiopia-to-issue-two-telecom-licences/>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

74. Interview 9.

75. For background on the UK’s CDC Group, see British International Investment, ‘Global Partnership for Ethiopia’, <<https://www.bii.co.uk/en/our-impact/investment/global-partnership-for-ethiopia/>>, accessed 14 December 2022.

longstanding DFID support to Ethiopia's industrial park development in the decade before, underscoring the value of long-term relationship building.⁷⁶ Development, trade and diplomatic engagement had been used in a joined-up way. The winning bid was also seen as distinctive due to the involvement of the CDC Group, which directly addressed the UK's prosperity agenda. And – at least on paper – the bid included commitments on women's empowerment, new technologies, access to education, the investment of more than US\$8 billion, impacting over 1 million jobs.⁷⁷

The new Safaricom Ethiopia network went live in Addis Ababa in October 2022.⁷⁸ Western hopes that Abiy's government would liberalise other sectors have not, however, materialised. The federal government's attention has for now shifted to maintaining foreign currency flows and stabilising the country's wrecked economy.⁷⁹ An early return to the liberalisation policy agenda, including moves to introduce more competition in the telecoms sector, looks unlikely. Critics, meanwhile, have noted the lack of a societal consensus on the PP's rapid privatisation and liberalisation agenda, and expressed doubts about the intentions of a government which has no shame in using policy agendas to isolate opponents. For supporters of the EPRDF government's economic model, there is also suspicion that introducing foreign competition will lead to expatriation of profits.⁸⁰

Support to Basic Services

UK development assistance to Ethiopia has a long history of providing budgetary and technical support via government institutions. Ongoing examples are: the Sustaining and Accelerating Primary Health Care in Ethiopia programme, worth approximately £288 million, delivered with the Ethiopian Ministry of Health; and a Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programme, costing £106 million.⁸¹

76. Interview 9.

77. Vodafone, 'Global Partnership for Ethiopia Welcomes Licence Award to Operate Telecom Services in Ethiopia', 24 May 2021, <<https://www.vodafone.com/news/digital-society/global-partnership-ethiopia-welcomes-licence-award-operate-telecom-services-ethiopia>>, accessed 19 October 2022; interviews 24 and 51.

78. British International Investment, 'Safaricom Ethiopia Switches on its Network and Services in Addis Ababa', 6 October 2022, <<https://www.bii.co.uk/en/news-insight/news/safaricom-ethiopia-switches-on-its-network-and-services-in-addis-ababa/>>, accessed 12 December 2022.

79. Ahmed Hassen and Simon Rynn, 'Ethiopia: An All-Out War Looks Imminent', *RUSI Commentary*, 6 May 2022.

80. Interview 30; New Business Ethiopia.com, 'Ethiopia's Privatization Urgency Sparks Debate', 19 September 2019, <<https://newbusinessethiopia.com/investment/ethiopias-privatization-urgency-sparks-debate/>>, accessed 31 January 2023.

81. FCDO, 'Development Tracker: Sustaining and Accelerating Primary Healthcare in Ethiopia', updated 16 November 2022, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-204964/summary>>, accessed 12 October 2022; ECORYS MACRO Consortium, 'Ethiopia: Multi-Annual Review of PBS Programme: Final Report', 25 June 2012, <<https://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/>>

OECD–DAC donors have taken different positions on working through the federal government of Ethiopia since the outbreak of the Tigray war in November 2020. The EU ceased budget support to the government two months later.⁸² While continuing people-focused ‘human development’ projects, the World Bank followed.⁸³ Despite reduced budgets and a reorientation towards humanitarian relief, in areas such as health, education, water and sanitation, the UK continued to provide financial aid and technical assistance to government departments. It also continued to play a strong technical role in donor–government coordination meetings. The UK stood with a minority of OECD–DAC donors including Germany, Italy and Nordic countries in maintaining support to the federal government’s programmes. It initially argued that prolonged aid withdrawals would further weaken government systems and put additional stress on a crisis-affected population.⁸⁴

The net effect of aid cuts and stoppages is difficult to ascertain in the midst of a war, drought⁸⁵ and economic contraction, but access to and quality of health and education in Ethiopia are believed to have declined as a result.⁸⁶ By continuing to work with the Ethiopian government, however, the UK attracted criticism for ‘soft-peddling’ on human rights and accountability. Questions can be also raised about the effectiveness of only one leading OECD–DAC donor using a reduced aid budget to maintain the social systems of a state with little professed interest in social services and a war to fight. The federal government did not move to replace donor funding when aid cuts were announced, prioritising above all its security agenda. Moreover, national budgeting trends since 2018 show the Ethiopian government drastically deprioritising basic services, in line with the PP leadership’s interest in the private sector and infrastructure development.⁸⁷

In addition to arguments about the rights and wrongs of maintaining government systems, UK officials defended their approach as a way of avoiding alienating their Ethiopian counterparts, and as a means of maintaining dialogue and influence at a technical and political level with the

uploads/PBS-Review-Main-Report.pdf>, accessed 20 January 2023; UK Government, ‘Project Completion Review – One WaSH National Programme’, p. 21, <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fiati.fcdo.gov.uk%2Fiati_documents%2F53458171.odt&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>, accessed 20 February 2023.

82. *Reuters*, ‘EU Suspends Ethiopian Budget Support Over Tigray Crisis’, 15 January 2021.

83. Although the decision remained controversial, the World Bank restarted full development cooperation in mid-2022. See World Bank, ‘Recently Approved Projects’, <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/projects-summary?lang=en&countrycode_exact=ET>, accessed 8 December 2022.

84. Interviews 4, 11, 40.

85. UN OCHA, ‘Ethiopia: Drought Update # 4’, June 2022, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ethiopia_drought_update_3_june_2022.pdf>, accessed 23 January 2023.

86. Interview 49; for more data on recent Ethiopian budget trends, see Cepheus Research and Analytics, ‘Ethiopia’s 2022–23 Budget’, 8 July 2022, <<https://cepheuscapital.com/ethiopias-2022-23-budget-rev1-pdf/>>, accessed 28 November 2022.

87. Cepheus Research and Analytics, ‘Ethiopia’s 2022–23 Budget’.

federal government, bilateral and multilateral donors, international financial institutions (IFIs), and indeed Tigray's leadership.⁸⁸ In early 2022, the UK sought to use its IFI board membership, alongside its bilateral donor relations, to lobby the World Bank to restart 'pro-poor' programming – on condition that the federal government showed some progress on providing humanitarian access and service delivery in Tigray, increased state expenditure on service delivery elsewhere, and worked towards a cessation of hostilities.⁸⁹ Although the political and development sections of the embassy collaborated on this, there was no significant progress for months to come. A World Bank programme worth US\$300 million was nevertheless approved at board level in April 2022, part-allocated for victims of sexual violence but also for reconstruction and water, sanitation and education support via the Ministry of Finance.⁹⁰ Critics, including the local EU delegation, were fearful that this prematurely rewarded sluggish government moves to conclude the war. However, by July 2022, the European Commission had approved €81.5 million, mostly for health and education in conflict-affected areas, to be channelled through NGOs, the UN and member-state development agencies. Its much larger (around €1 billion) multi-year development budget remains on hold due to outstanding concerns, including around human rights monitoring.⁹¹

Although the exact sequence of events allows for different interpretations, the Tigray war erupted again in August 2022. As a result, the very limited humanitarian access that had been provided to Tigray stopped. Tigray's services remained entirely cut off until December 2022, while countryside service delivery has been degraded across the board. With a new phase of the Tigray conflict in full swing, the UK hardened its position, now arguing against any new World Bank spending until a cessation of hostilities was agreed. It also reportedly lobbied against an IMF mission to Ethiopia that could potentially have unlocked a valuable foreign currency loan.⁹² The question of whether to adopt a 'politics first' or a 'development first' approach, and under what conditions development aid should restart, continues to be debated, both within and between bilateral and multilateral donors.

This example illustrates the dilemmas and limitations of delivering aid amidst conflict, and in a 'non-developmental' state. It points to the value of aligning political and technical approaches, the importance of maintaining multiple relationships, the need for flexibility, and the potential reputational costs of pursuing a minority position.

88. Interview 10.

89. Interviews 5, 20.

90. Vince Chadwick and Shabtai Gold, 'European Commission: \$300M World Bank Grant to Ethiopia "Premature"', *Devex*, 13 April 2022, <<https://www.devex.com/news/european-commission-300m-world-bank-grant-to-ethiopia-premature-103034>>, accessed 12 December 2022.

91. See Ashenafi Endale, 'Ethiopia Demands Termination of Mandate for UN Rights Experts', *The Reporter*, 17 December 2022, <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/28639/>>, accessed 14 December 2022; Vince Chadwick, 'EU Planning €1B for Ethiopia to 2027'.

92. Interview 5.

Political Negotiations in Somali Regional State

For more than two decades, an armed movement, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), has fought for self-determination for Somalis in the Somali Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia. In 2012, the Kenyan government began to mediate peace talks between the Ethiopian government and the ONLF.⁹³ The initiative followed many months of quiet background diplomacy with the involvement of UK-based NGO Conciliation Resources (CR), which advised the parties.

CR provided negotiation trainings and advice for six years, helping to develop a ‘roadmap’ for peace. In October 2018 a peace deal, the Asmara agreement, drafted with inputs from CR, was signed in Eritrea by the ONLF and the Ethiopian federal government. It put an end to hostilities and opened the door to the ONLF leadership to transition into a political party and take part in formal politics.⁹⁴ CR has since accompanied the actors, providing advice and organising learning visits and technical support to the Ethiopian Federal Reconciliation Commission formed in 2018.⁹⁵ CR also assisted in the establishment of the Somali Regional Reconciliation Commission, which is now operational.⁹⁶ CR’s work has also included supporting civil society groups with the capacity to represent victims of human rights abuses to articulate their needs within the peace process, and the inclusion of marginalised groups.⁹⁷

This work was initially funded by the UK and Swiss governments from 2012 to 2014, and later by the Swedish government. Despite strong interest from the UK embassy, funding was episodic, coming from different instruments over time with stops and starts.⁹⁸ This frustrated

93. Abdi Ahmed, ‘Kenya Hosts Peace Talks Between Ethiopia and the ONLF’, *Tesfa News*, 11 February 2015, <<https://tesfanews.net/kenya-hosts-peace-talks-between-ethiopia-and-onlf/>>, accessed 20 February 2023; International Crisis Group, ‘The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia’, Africa Report No. 184, 15 February 2012, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/kenyan-military-intervention-somalia>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

94. Conciliation Resources, ‘Negotiating Peace in Ethiopia’, <<https://www.c-r.org/where-we-work/negotiating-peace-ethiopia>>, accessed 10 November 2022; Tobias Hagmann, ‘Fast Politics, Slow Justice: Ethiopia’s Somali Region Two Years After Abdi Iley’, London School of Economics Conflict Research Programme, 11 September 2020, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Hagmann-Two-years-after-Iley-final.pdf>>, accessed 7 December 2022.

95. *The Afrinik*, ‘Establishment of a Reconciliation Commission in Ethiopia’, <<https://afrinik.com/establishment-of-a-reconciliation-commission-in-ethiopia/>>, accessed 23 January 2023. The commission was disbanded three years later when a federal-level National Dialogue Commission was set up.

96. Interview 58.

97. See FCDO, ‘Ethiopia – Human Rights and Peacebuilding Programme (HARP)’, 11 October 2021, pp. 8, 17, 21, <<https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/projects/GB-GOV-1-301191/summary>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

98. It has been funded through the UK’s Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, and through core FCO (later FCDO) funds. It is currently funded via HARP, see *ibid.*

organisational planning. Nevertheless, the involvement of a British-funded NGO gave the UK a conduit to promote a more inclusive process. Marginalised, including rural, populations have been able to participate in the regional political process, and it has been suggested that the initiative contributed to the later formation of a women's caucus in the Somali regional parliament.⁹⁹

Some have argued that the Somali region peace initiative contributed to wider peace and stability in the region.¹⁰⁰ The Somali region did see reduced violence in the wake of the Asmara agreement, and both an FCDO project completion report and an independent review assess the CR project as having made a positive contribution to stability.¹⁰¹ But key provisions of the Asmara agreement are still to be implemented, and although SRS is relatively stable compared to Oromia or Tigray, regional elections in 2021 saw a boycott by opposition parties. The Asmara agreement did not prevent a longstanding border dispute with the neighbouring Afar region from flaring up. Combined with a regional drought, this has seen significant displacement and killings. To the extent that the region has seen some progress on stability, wider political changes likely acted as enablers: a rapprochement between the Eritrean and Ethiopian federal governments; Addis's removal of a repressive regional governor, Abdi Iley, in 2018; and a change in the ONLF's leadership.¹⁰² At the same time, CR proved adroit in capitalising on these dynamics, with UK backing.¹⁰³

An indirect benefit to the UK government has been improved political access in the region. In parallel, the UK was also focusing its attention on sub-national (Somali-dominated) political entities across Ethiopia's international borders – from Somaliland to northern Kenya and Somalia's federal member states. Cross-border collaboration and the movement of goods and people across Ethiopia's international border into northern Kenya and Somaliland has also improved.¹⁰⁴ CR's work and the UK's political and financial support will only have contributed to, rather than delivered, such outcomes. The context in the Somali region and neighbouring territories remains daunting. The engagement could still have enduring effects, however. For

99. Interview 23.

100. Interview 44. See also FCDO, 'Ethiopia – Human Rights and Peacebuilding Programme (HARP), Business Case', p. 15: 'This work has contributed to the region developing into a rare "bright spot" in an overall deteriorating country context ... The clearest measure of impact has been the reduction in violence in SRS, supported by the programme as it combined technical programming with political acumen', <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fiati.fcdo.gov.uk%2Fiati_documents%2FD0000847.odt&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>, accessed 20 February 2023.

101. See FCDO, 'Ethiopia – Human Rights and Peacebuilding Programme (HARP), Business Case', p. 15. See also Itad/Altai CSSF Africa MEL Partner, 'Thematic Evaluation on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Ethiopia Case Study', May 2021 (unpublished).

102. Hagmann, 'Fast Politics, Slow Justice'; *ibid*.

103. See FCDO, 'Ethiopia – Human Rights and Peacebuilding Programme (HARP), Business Case'.

104. Interview 58.

the UK, it illustrates that combining long-term, low-key investments with political savvy and a trusted partner can bring results under the right conditions.¹⁰⁵

Peacekeeping Training

As noted above, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has long maintained a relationship with the Ethiopian Ministry of National Defence.¹⁰⁶ From 2010 to 2020, exchange visits and security sector management courses were run for senior military and political figures, including a defence minister. These are thought by the UK to have been highly regarded in Ethiopian government circles, and to have given the UK leverage.¹⁰⁷

Around 2018, MoD support moved to focus on strengthening the Ethiopian International Peace Support Training Institute.¹⁰⁸ Established in 2011, the centre was conceived as centre of excellence for training and deployment of military and civilian peacekeepers to AU and UN missions. Ethiopian military graduates receive training on a range of non-combat skills relevant for deployment in peace support operations.¹⁰⁹ Donors include Japan, Germany, the US and the UK, each of whom has invested around £1.5 million. While Germany funded a research facility, accommodation and a canteen, Japan and the UK funded the construction of classrooms and delivered training in non-combat subjects such as combating sexual and gender-based violence, strategic planning, humanitarian law and countering IEDs.¹¹⁰ UK funding supports around 90 students per annum. Post-training evaluations are positive overall, although students often ask for more practical or combat-oriented training.¹¹¹ The UK estimates that around 75% of Peace

105. FCDO, 'Ethiopia – Human Rights and Peacebuilding Programme (HARP), Business Case'; *ibid.*

106. UK Parliament, 'Ethiopia: Military Aid: Question for Foreign and Commonwealth Office', answered on 1 June 2016, <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2016-05-24/38391>>, accessed 12 October 2022; Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2018–19* (London: The Stationery Office, 2019), p. 12, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/831728/MOD_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2018-19_WEB__ERRATUM_CORRECTED_.pdf>, accessed 12 October 2022.

107. Interviews 6, 10, 14; Cranfield University, 'British Embassy in Ethiopia Holds Cranfield University Alumni Event', 16 January 2018, <<https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/press/news-2018/addis-ababa-alumni-event>>, accessed 12 October 2022.

108. UN Development Programme, 'Ethiopian International Peace Support Training Institute', <<https://www.undp.org/ethiopia/projects/ethiopian-international-peace-support-training-institute>>, accessed 23 January 2022.

109. British Embassy, Addis Ababa, 'UK Supports Ethiopian Peacekeeping', 28 February 2017, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-supports-ethiopian-peacekeeping-2>>, accessed 12 October 2022.

110. HM Government, 'Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: Programme Summaries for Africa 2019 to 2020', 6 November 2019, see, in particular, 'East Africa: Security', <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-programme-summaries-for-africa-2019-to-2020>>, accessed 12 October 2022.

111. Interview 10.

Support Training Institute graduates go on to serve in peace support operations.¹¹² Missions such as AMISOM have relied heavily on Ethiopian contributions, arguably helping to contain Al-Shabaab in southwest Somalia.¹¹³

Just as development work is sometimes claimed to aid wider foreign policy objectives, UK defence-related projects (peacekeeping training and beyond) are thought by the MoD to have offered the UK access to and influence with political decision-makers.¹¹⁴ Earlier security sector management training courses helped to open discussions about improving governance and accountability within the security sector, previously a DFID responsibility. But although the UK and Ethiopian defence ministries are still in routine contact, the Tigray war, weaker government-to-government relations and lower UK budgets make this agenda unrealistic for the medium term.

Crisis Response – The Tigray Conflict

After a slow start, the UK mounted diplomatic, humanitarian and consular responses to the November 2020 outbreak of conflict in Tigray.¹¹⁵ As part of the diplomatic response, then foreign secretary Dominic Raab met Abiy in Addis Ababa on 22 January 2021, urging an end to violence and humanitarian access and action on human rights.¹¹⁶ In May 2021, the UK Special Envoy for Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs and the FCDO Director General for Africa visited Tigray, before calling for a humanitarian ceasefire.¹¹⁷ Efforts were also made to bring pressure to bear at the UN in New York and to reach out to the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, a UK national.

At this point, the UK's humanitarian contributions were significant. For example, data from the UN's Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund Annual Report for 2021 shows UK contributions at US\$18.3 million.¹¹⁸ At embassy level, humanitarian advisers mobilised funds from crisis reserves and sought reallocations from development budgets. The UN Ethiopia Humanitarian Fund places

112. Correspondence with UK embassy, Kenya, 4 October 2022.

113. Interview 4.

114. Interview 10.

115. Interview 32.

116. House of Commons International Development Committee, 'The Humanitarian Situation in Tigray: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2019–21', 1 July 2021, <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmintdev/554/55402.htm>>, accessed 20 January 2023.

117. *Ibid.*

118. Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund, 'Annual Report 2021', <<https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/EHF%202021%20Annual%20Report.pdf>>, accessed 12 December 2022. For comparison, total EU humanitarian allocations for Ethiopia stood at €53.7 million in April 2021, see European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 'ECHO Factsheet – Ethiopia', last updated 19 April 2021, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/echo-factsheet-ethiopia-last-updated-19042021>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

the UK as the second-most generous humanitarian donor in 2021, after Germany, which spent US\$24.7 million, and ahead of the US, which spent US\$12 million.¹¹⁹ A series of UK funding announcements were made through 2021 and early 2022. In October 2021, £29 million was announced for those affected by the conflict.¹²⁰ On top of an existing allocation of £76 million in humanitarian support, in January 2022, £5 million in new funding was announced for a drought in the south, £5 million for health and education services for people affected by conflict, and £4.5 million for peacebuilding and human rights.¹²¹ The embassy meanwhile sought to maintain relations with the federal government at working and senior political levels, lobbying repeatedly for humanitarian access and respect for international humanitarian law, possibly even hoping for a mediation role for the UK.¹²²

The Tigray blockade policy and reports of battlefield atrocities drew UK ministers into public criticism of the federal government in 2021.¹²³ UK officials nevertheless counselled that ‘megaphone diplomacy’ was unlikely to work. The UK sought to build a ‘critical friend’ profile for itself in-country instead.¹²⁴ Attempts to maintain a nuanced UK position may have had benefits in private but in public, the Ethiopian government responded negatively to all critics, fostering a blanket social media campaign that denounced ‘anti-Ethiopian’ ‘imperialists’.¹²⁵ Some observers, including many Tigray activists, meanwhile suspected the UK of soft-peddalling on human rights, due to, variously, double standards, racism or commercial interests.¹²⁶

Considering the diplomatic aspects of the crisis, UK–Ethiopia relations were tested in November 2021 when Tigrayan forces advanced south from Tigray towards Addis Ababa. The UK

119. *Ibid.*

120. FCDO, ‘UK Provides Almost 30 Million to Humanitarian Catastrophe in Northern Ethiopia’, 16 October 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-provides-almost-30-million-to-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-northern-ethiopia>>, accessed 12 October 2022; Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund, ‘Annual Report 2021’.

121. FCDO, ‘“The Conflict is Causing Untold Suffering and Must End” – Minister for Africa’s Statement Following Visit to Ethiopia’, 20 January 2022, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-conflict-is-causing-untold-suffering-and-must-end-minister-for-africa-statement-following-visit-to-ethiopia>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

122. Interviews 4, 6, 19.

123. FCDO, ‘UK Statement on Developments in Tigray, Ethiopia’, 1 July 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-statement-on-developments-in-tigray-ethiopia>>, accessed 8 December 2022.

124. Interview 6.

125. The federal government-backed ‘#NoMore’ campaign organised vociferous protests and condemnation, see No More, ‘About #NoMore’, <<https://www.nomore.global/about/>>, accessed 12 October 2022.

126. Interview 33. See, for example, *Aiga News*, ‘For the Urgent Attention of the UK Media on Tigray Genocide’, 12 April 2022, <<https://aiganews.com/2022/04/12/for-the-urgent-attention-of-the-uk-media-on-tigray-genocide/>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

government drew down diplomatic staff and called on UK nationals to leave.¹²⁷ Other countries followed. The rapid process of withdrawing some 50 out of 70 diplomats from the embassy angered federal government officials and loyalists, many of whom saw the move as affirming a Tigrayan position, or pro-Tigrayan claims of impending victory.¹²⁸ The withdrawals may have been a sensible proactive measure but proved unnecessary when US diplomatic pressure and ENDF drone attacks forced a TDF retreat. UK staff began to return five to six weeks later.

The UK has since sought to maintain its 'critical friend' approach in Ethiopia, using working-level channels while seeking influence up to prime ministerial level. Lobbying for improved humanitarian access, a ceasefire and possible talks continued, bilaterally and with allies, throughout 2022. The scale of humanitarian need continued to grow, however.¹²⁹ A humanitarian ceasefire first agreed in March 2022 was not adhered to.¹³⁰ Conflict then restarted in August. At the time of writing it is debatable whether the UK approach or the more public and strident positions adopted by others have shifted federal government behaviour. Much is not yet in the public domain.¹³¹ It is too early to know whether the November 2022 agreement brokered by the AU in Pretoria and Nairobi will shift the dynamics between Tigray and Addis. The UK remains officially supportive of AU mediation efforts. Although it did not play a role in the Pretoria peace negotiations of October 2022, it may be hopeful of playing a more direct role in future, building on the 'critical friend' approach.¹³²

127. *BBC News*, 'Tigray Crisis: Britons Urged to Leave Ethiopia Over Fears Conflict May Escalate', 9 November 2021.

128. Interviews 16, 47, 52.

129. According to one UK government interviewee (Interview 6), in early 2022, Ethiopia had around 70% of the world's caseload of people living in famine-like conditions.

130. UN Sustainable Development Group, 'Ethiopia: UN Chief Welcomes Tigray Humanitarian Ceasefire', 28 March 2022, <<https://unsdg.un.org/latest/stories/ethiopia-un-chief-welcomes-tigray-humanitarian-ceasefire>>, accessed 17 October 2022.

131. Interview 5.

132. *DW*, 'Ethiopia–Tigray Peace Talks Open in South Africa', 25 October 2022, <<https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-tigray-peace-talks-open-in-south-africa/a-63554049>>, accessed 30 October 2022.

III. Enablers and Constraints

CHAPTER II HIGHLIGHTED positive examples of the UK's development, diplomacy and defence engagements in Ethiopia. Drawing on these examples and on supplementary interviews, this chapter identifies the key factors that appear to have constrained or enabled the UK's actions in pursuing the Global Britain agenda in recent years.

Operating Context

As discussed, the operating context in Ethiopia has worsened markedly since 2018. A country once seen as a strong partner for international development, a fledgling trading partner, and a regional stabiliser, is now a major stability risk due to political intransigence and miscalculation. This is a highly challenging context in which to execute UK policy objectives. Longer-term agendas that have featured prominently in UK policy, such as trade and development, now have an uncertain future.¹³³ Ethiopia's stuttering political transition means a loss of direction and vision. It has also reversed hard-won socioeconomic development gains, causing widespread insecurity, inflation, starvation and death, conditions that will pose challenges for decades.¹³⁴ The worsening context needs to be factored in when assessing the UK's progress on its Global Britain agenda.

Resources

The UK built a strong reputation for itself in Ethiopia over the last two decades, driven in large part by substantial allocations of ODA that helped to fuel impressive reductions in poverty.¹³⁵ Given the centrality of aid to the UK–Ethiopia relationship, a more than 50% budget cut has posed real challenges.¹³⁶ Reductions in UK aid budgets have registered strongly with UK partners, and at working level with government.¹³⁷ Informed Ethiopians feel the UK is losing influence as a result.¹³⁸ Reduced budgets have, however, spurred some innovative thinking, with attempts to involve such organisations as HM Revenue and Customs, Ofcom and the City of London in

133. Interviews 8, 13, 44.

134. Hassen and Rynn, 'Ethiopia'.

135. World Bank, 'Ethiopia has Made Major Strides in Poverty Reduction but Disparities, Inequality Remain', press release, 16 April 2020, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/16/ethiopia-has-made-major-strides-in-poverty-reduction-but-disparities-inequality-remain>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

136. FCDO, 'Statistics on International Development', p. 27.

137. Interviews 20, 34.

138. Interviews 16, 19, 20, 29, 35, 51.

telecoms work, and to ‘crowd-in’ World Bank funding for basic services and ‘social safety net’ programmes as a way of substituting for a reduced bilateral development budget.¹³⁹

The November 2020 announcement of the reduction in the UK aid budget to 0.5% GNI ushered in a period of ongoing uncertainty. Due to constantly shifting priorities, budgets and ministerial turnover, budgeting horizons have shrunk to one year at best.¹⁴⁰ By mid-March 2022, the 2022–23 bilateral aid budget total for Ethiopia still had not been agreed.¹⁴¹ This negatively impacts the ability to plan, deliver and maintain good relations.

More positively, as budget cuts fall on programmes, not operations, staffing levels in Ethiopia were broadly maintained by the FCDO and MoD in the period 2015–21. The number of development (formerly DFID) advisory posts has somewhat reduced. The DIT, meanwhile, has increased its presence, appointing a director to head the office in Addis Ababa and recruiting additional staff to pursue a more joined-up approach to trade and development, in line with the Global Britain agenda. Research suggests that FCDO staff are perceived by counterparts in civil society, government and bilateral and multilateral agencies as bringing valuable technical skills.¹⁴²

Strategy

In the EPRDF years, socioeconomic development, closely followed by stability and counterterrorism, was uppermost among the UK’s objectives in Ethiopia.¹⁴³ These objectives were felt to be consistent with other goals, and it was assumed that stability and poverty reduction would over time contribute to democratisation and improved governance. Post-2016, UK governments leaned further towards pursuing trade and mutual prosperity, as set out in the 2021 Integrated Review. The arrival of the 2018 Abiy government was seen as a great opportunity. Critics have accused the UK of adopting a naïve ‘blank cheque’ approach to the Abiy transition,¹⁴⁴ and in the years 2019–21, the UK approach was found wanting. Many now see the UK – and indeed other Western countries – as lacking clear objectives or a viable strategy for Ethiopia.¹⁴⁵ Certainly, the UK, despite macro-level strategies such as the Integrated Review and the FCDO’s unpublished strategy for Africa, has not had a detailed strategy to guide decision-making across all sectors of its engagement in Ethiopia.¹⁴⁶

139. Interview 9. For a list of recently started World Bank programmes, see World Bank, ‘Projects’.

140. Interview 4.

141. Interviews 8, 18, 29.

142. Interviews 9, 11, 29, 56.

143. Interview 23.

144. Interviews 8, 27, 47.

145. Interviews 41, 43.

146. Interviews 4, 7, 8, 13, 23, 24, 34, 35, 53, 55, 41. See also Sally Dray, ‘The UK’s Relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa’, House of Lords Library, 10 August 2021, <<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uks-relationship-with-sub-saharan-africa/>>, accessed 23 January 2023.

Structure

Recent years have seen incremental progress on joining up the UK's development and diplomatic efforts in Ethiopia. This is partly due to the changing country context, which for a short time appeared encouraging for foreign trade and investment. But the shift towards more integrated working across different arms of the UK government in Ethiopia was initiated by the UK government's overall post-Brexit foreign policy, later accentuated by the merger of the FCO and DFID.¹⁴⁷

The FCO–DFID merger process has not been much noticed outside UK government circles. For more than two decades, DFID built an enviable reputation for the UK in Ethiopia, with its technical leadership and generous funding, and among those Ethiopians who follow international development debates, most expect the UK's reputation to suffer as a result of DFID's closure.¹⁴⁸ Internally, although other events – for example, the Covid-19 pandemic and aid cuts – have been in play, the merger process is seen as time consuming and difficult. Business processes have had to be revised repeatedly.¹⁴⁹ Working practices are now settling down, and the concept of integrated working is becoming more normalised, regardless of formal working arrangements. Examples of this cited by interviewees include international development staff becoming better at spotting trade opportunities, and humanitarian advisers better at factoring in the political context around famine and access questions in Tigray. At the same time, interviewees note that political staff have worked more closely with development colleagues to lobby the Ethiopian government, and to lobby IFIs to link future lending to conflict de-escalation, humanitarian access and respect for humanitarian law.¹⁵⁰ Transitioning formerly separate staff into fully integrated teams, particularly with a significantly larger (former) DFID presence, is, nevertheless, taking time.¹⁵¹

Leadership

Political instability in the UK, with high rates of ministerial turnover and public questioning of politicians' integrity, has left many Ethiopians doubtful about UK leadership.¹⁵² UK ministerial attention to Ethiopia is meanwhile seen as having declined from previous years, with no senior ministers visiting between January 2021 and December 2022. This has been noticed by Ethiopians, with comparisons made with France, Canada and the US, each of which is seen as having attempted to address the Tigray war at a presidential and prime ministerial level with

147. Interviews 9, 23, 28, 29, 51.

148. Interviews 24, 24, 55, 56.

149. Interview 18.

150. Interview 5.

151. Interviews 5, 8, 9. The DIT and defence sections will retain separate reporting lines, as is the case elsewhere. Interviews 9, 28.

152. Interviews 24, 35, 53.

more consistency than the UK, via ongoing calls, visits and statements.¹⁵³ Periodic clampdowns on African migration, work permit restrictions and reports of worsening living conditions in the West are also negatively influencing attitudes towards the UK and the West.¹⁵⁴ Some Ethiopian interviewees felt, however, that Western legitimacy problems dated back as far as the 2003 Gulf War.¹⁵⁵

Relationships

The UK has maintained a range of productive relationships in Ethiopia and with regional and international partners. This includes European and Euro-Atlantic countries, from Canada to the US, Japan, and many others with whom the UK has cooperated successfully on trade, defence, development and humanitarian agendas. It also includes multilateral agencies and IFIs in relation to which the UK is both a donor and a partner.

The end of DFID, however, along with Brexit and budget cuts, has led many to assume that British influence is in decline. It is common to hear that the UK must have lost ‘traction’ by leaving the EU.¹⁵⁶ The UK has significantly reduced influence over EU aid allocations, and UK officials no longer attend routine EU cooperation meetings, such as those of the EU Heads of Mission. This has necessitated developing workarounds, meeting in other forums and communicating informally. Interviewees reflected that at times, officials have had to work harder to maintain relationships with the Ethiopian government.¹⁵⁷ Other interviewees felt that moving outside EU decision-making circles has made the UK freer in its bilateral dealings with Ethiopia and freed up time previously spent on intra-EU negotiations and administration.¹⁵⁸

The UK established a good reputation for itself in Ethiopia on the basis of DFID’s leading financial and technical role in international development. Evidence of Western donor influence over successive Ethiopian governments’ handling of sensitive issues around governance, human rights and democratisation is, however, hard to find.¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Ethiopian observers have tended to see the UK as technically competent on international development questions, but less principled than countries such as the Republic of Ireland, Denmark or Sweden on matters of human rights and democracy.¹⁶⁰

153. Interview 6. French President Emmanuel Macron and US President Joe Biden made personal interventions on the matter, see *Reuters*, ‘France’s Macron Calls for Talks to End Conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray’, 31 July 2021; *Al-Jazeera*, ‘Biden Raises Concerns About Ethiopia Conflict in Call with Abiy’, 10 January 2022.

154. Interview 46.

155. Interviews 24, 43, 47.

156. Interviews 30, 39, 40, 41, 46, 47, 50.

157. Interview 4.

158. Interviews 20, 50.

159. See, for example, Stephen Brown and Jonathan Fisher, ‘Aid Donors, Democracy and the Developmental State in Ethiopia’, *Democratization* (Vol. 27, No. 2, 2020).

160. Interviews 2, 34, 52.

Given the close alignment of the two countries' governments prior to 2020, the Tigray conflict has upended the UK–Ethiopia relationship. With the Abiy government's lack of interest in poverty reduction, the development-oriented foundations of the UK–Ethiopia relationship have been shaken. A falling aid budget only accentuated this problem. Meanwhile, muted UK criticisms of Ethiopian federal government strategy have left relations intact but strained. There has been no public acknowledgement of the UK's attempt to distinguish somewhat its own approach from more strident (for example, EU, Irish and US)¹⁶¹ positions on the conflict.¹⁶² Views may be different behind closed doors, as the apparently productive meetings between the new UK foreign secretary and Abiy in December 2022 suggest.¹⁶³ At the same time, some have drawn conclusions from the fact that a leaked Ethiopian foreign ministry re-engagement strategy towards Western actors did not distinguish the UK as having its own position on the war.¹⁶⁴

Ethiopian perceptions of external actors have been strongly influenced by the question of their position on the Tigray war.¹⁶⁵ Those sympathetic to the opposition often see external actors, including the UK, as negligent for not holding the federal government and Eritrea to account. The reasons offered vary from callous disregard to an interest in commercial deals with Ethiopian companies and the federal government.¹⁶⁶ A contrast is often drawn between strenuous Western support for, and investment in, Ukraine, and limited efforts to assist Tigray. Conversely, those more supportive of the federal government's Tigray strategy tend to condemn foreign criticism as imperialist or as embodying double standards.¹⁶⁷

Either way, the fast pace of the Tigray war seems to have wrongfooted the West at points. The US, the EU and the UK have all arguably struggled to adjust their approach to events and have changed tack more than once. For example, while the US proved a useful co-sponsor of the recent Pretoria peace talks, initial public condemnation from the US State Department in the early stages of the Tigray war was bitterly received by the federal government and not

161. Interviews 11, 28, 30, 46, 50. A statement lamenting the failure of EU member states to impose sanctions on Ethiopia from EU High Representative Josep Borrell in December 2022 led those supportive of government actions towards Tigray to accuse the EU of joining the US in a regime-change agenda. Interview 30.

162. Interviews 20, 27, 52, 56.

163. Interview 5.

164. Eritrea Hub, 'Leaked Ethiopian Foreign Ministry Document Proposes Talks to End Tigray Conflict', 28 January 2022, <<https://eritreahub.org/leaked-ethiopian-foreign-ministry-document-proposes-talks-to-end-tigray-conflict>>, accessed 19 October 2022.

165. Interview 34.

166. Interviews 27, 33, 38.

167. Interviews 23, 32, 36, 46, 56.

forgotten.¹⁶⁸ The hand of non-Western powers has probably been strengthened in comparison. Given recent tensions, Ethiopia arguably sees Russia, Turkey (a supplier of drone technology to the ENDF), and China (supportive of non-interference via the UN) as its staunchest allies.¹⁶⁹ This could change. As the history of Western and Soviet relations with Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s shows, Ethiopia can pivot quickly in favour of perceived interests.¹⁷⁰ And the UK's less strident positioning might yet bear fruit, with access maintained and relationships forged, as in the recent apparently productive discussions between the UK foreign secretary and the Ethiopian prime minister.

168. Interview 10, 36, 46, 48, 49, 56. See also Demissie, Girma and Pospisil, 'Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism'.

169. Interviews 1, 10, 16, 24, 40, 43, 47, 50, 56. See also Jason Mosley, presentation to event, 'Turkey and the Gulf States in the Horn of Africa: Fluctuating Dynamics of Engagement, Investment and Influence', Rift Valley Institute, 9 June 2021; Peter Mwai, 'Tigray Conflict: What do We Know About Drone Strikes in Ethiopia?', *BBC News*, 31 January 2022.

170. See, for example, GlobalSecurity.org, 'Ethiopia Soviet Relations', <<https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ethiopia/foreign-relations-su.htm>>, accessed 8 December 2022.

Conclusion

THE ANALYSIS IN this paper suggests that the UK has been able to make limited progress on aspects of its 'Global Britain' agenda. Examples can be found of the UK combining defence, diplomacy and development, pursuing trade and prosperity agendas and – in a more mixed fashion – forging partnerships.

The UK has been constrained by a number of factors: smaller and unpredictable budgets; an unplanned institutional merger; the absence of a focused in-country strategy; and weak leadership. At the same time, the FCO–DFID merger and ODA budget cuts spurred fresh thinking about leveraging different relationships and funding sources. But benefits around joined-up working have, at least in the short term, probably been eclipsed by losing the well-known DFID brand. Leaving the EU has not been a major constraint. It is, however, seen as reducing UK influence by Ethiopian observers, even if offering new freedoms. While the UK is still regarded as a capable and relevant actor, with skilled personnel and a measure of influence in certain areas, the overall picture is one of a relative decline in status.

The key issue, however, has been the changed operating context since 2018. Early promise has yielded to widespread insecurity, hunger and violence in Ethiopia, reversing decades of socioeconomic progress. The PP leadership has pursued zero-sum politics and turned away from poverty reduction and the 'developmental state' rhetoric of its predecessor. Ethiopia may be facing its most difficult challenges in recent history. Any shared vision for the future has gone, and the situation could worsen before it improves. It is no longer possible for external actors to 'align with' the Ethiopian government, deploying aid as a foundation for wider socioeconomic development and stability. This change, coupled with wartime conditions, also limits the immediate relevance of UK defence engagement. On the other hand, it is perhaps too early to judge the utility of the UK's 'critical friend' diplomatic stance.

Provided it is prepared to make fresh choices, despite its declining influence, the UK may be able to build on its current position. If the November 2022 cessation of hostilities holds, it will provide a basis for confidence building between Tigray and Addis Ababa. It will not, however, resolve the deeper issues, which require careful stewardship of multiple peacemaking, dialogue, reconciliation and accountability processes. The UK could, in theory, work with others in support of such efforts, providing technical leadership on a number of critical peacemaking and reconstruction questions in which it has expertise, from ceasefire monitoring to stabilisation, peacebuilding, governance, security sector reform and transitional justice. Learning from the past, however, a principled and coherent stance should be sought on these policy agendas among as broad a range of international actors as possible. While recognising the limited influence that external critics and donors, including the UK, have had on Ethiopian governments' decision-making, questions of rights, accountability, self-determination and democracy should inform clear benchmarks for working closely with or through government.

About the Author

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Annex: List of Interviewees

Interview Number	Type	Location	Date
1	UK government official	UK	9 November 2021
2	UK government official	UK	26 November 2021
3	UK government official	Kenya	4 March 2022
4	UK government official	Ethiopia	21 March 2022
5	UK government official	UK	21 March 2022
6	UK government official	UK	16 May 2022
7	UK government official	Ethiopia	16 June 2022
8	UK government official	Ethiopia	21 June 2022
9	UK government official	Ethiopia	14 June 2022
10	UK government official	Ethiopia	14 June 2022
11	UK government official	Ethiopia	14 June 2022
12	UK government official	UK	6 July 2022
13	UK government official	UK	20 July 2022
14	UK government official	UK	29 July 2022
15	UK government official	UK	3 August 2022
16	UK government official	UK	22 June 2022
18	UK government official	UK	18 March 2022
19	Bilateral donor official	Ethiopia	16 June 2022
20	Multilateral organisation official	Ethiopia	8 July 2022
21	Country government official	Ethiopia	14 June 2022
22	Country government official	Ethiopia	23 June 2022
23	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	4 June 2022
24	Academic	UK	14 April 2022
25	Employee in civil society organisation	US	25 April 2022
26	Employee in civil society organisation	UK	10 May 2022
27	Business representative	Ethiopia	12 May 2022
28	Business representative	UK	16 May 2022
29	Academic	South Sudan	19 May 2022
30	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	24 June 2022
31	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	23 June 2022
32	Employee in civil society organisation	Kenya	15 June 2022
33	Employee in civil society organisation	Europe-based	14 June 2022
34	Employee in civil society organisation	Europe-based	21 June 2022
35	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	14 June 2022

36	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	15 June 2022
37	Journalist	Ethiopia	15 June 2022
38	Political party official	Ethiopia	13 June 2022
39	Multilateral organisation official	UK	16 June 2022
40	Political party official	Ethiopia	16 June 2022
41	Political party official	Ethiopia	17 June 2022
42	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	21 June 2022
43	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	18 June 2022
44	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	22 June 2022
45	Political party official	Ethiopia	22 June 2022
46	Academic	Ethiopia	5 August 2022
47	Journalist	Ethiopia	21 June 2022
48	Business representative	Ethiopia	18 June 2022
49	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	17 June 2022
50	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	17 June 2022
51	Business representative	Ethiopia	23 June 2022
52	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	15 June 2022
53	Employee in civil society organisation	Ethiopia	24 June 2022
55	Academic	US	10 March 2022
56	Academic	Ethiopia	14 June 2022
57	Academic	Ethiopia	16 June 2022
58	Employee in civil society organisation	Kenya	9 December 2022